

# REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS: Post-pandemic recovery and renewal

August 2024

In our ongoing effort to support post-pandemic recovery and renewal, the [Evidence Project](#) at the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), with generous support from the [Walton Family Foundation](#), seeks to fund research in three areas:

1. Interventions to support learning recovery,
2. understanding and addressing the root causes of chronic absenteeism, and
3. how districts are confronting difficult financial forecasts.

## Proposal Call and Areas of Interest

In all three areas, we aim to support research that tackles critical research questions on crucial issues, leading to innovative and effective policies and interventions to improve student success. Through this RFP, we aim to issue up to \$3 million in grants, each of up to \$500,000. Grants may continue for up to 18 months (ending no later than June 30, 2026).

Through this RFP, we are open to the full range of research methods and disciplinary perspectives. However, we are most interested in supporting:

- Projects that delve into the root causes of issues or examine issues from multiple angles. As such, we prefer projects that examine multiple interrelated research questions.
- Projects that not only provide statistics to describe the impacts of the pandemic but also evidence that “humanizes” what has happened—positive and negative—for students (especially students affected most by the pandemic). As such, we prefer projects that include quantitative and qualitative methods (or other methods where appropriate) that bring real-life examples of the impacts and insights into the hows and whys of these impacts.
- Projects that prioritize products with actionable findings and those that directly inform policymakers and the general public through, for example, commentaries and short research briefs. We are interested in both 12- and 18-month projects.
- Projects that identify promising or proven practices for improving student learning experiences coming out of the pandemic. In particular, we are interested in studies that test several hypotheses about the most cost-effective and high-yield strategies to address challenging problems school districts face: chronic absenteeism, learning loss, and finances.
- Projects that focus on students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic or from historically marginalized groups.

## *Interventions to support learning recovery*

Academic achievement remains below pre-pandemic levels, with growth in the 2023-24 school year falling short in nearly all grade levels. On average, students need at least four additional months of schooling to catch up on learning lost during the pandemic.

Simultaneously, the implementation of many “learning acceleration” strategies (approaches that provide targeted support to fill gaps in student knowledge, including tutoring, extended learning time, and small group instruction) has stalled. According to a 2022 nationally representative [survey](#) of K-12 schools, only about 1 in 10 students actually gets high-dosage tutoring. Meanwhile, 30% of students attended a summer school program in 2021—though only 7% of those students attended summer school to remediate low grades, and 10% of students attended to catch up on lost learning time.

Obstacles to these and other learning acceleration strategies are increasing. A pandemic-era broadband subsidy program [ran out of funding](#) in June 2024, leaving over [three million students](#) with limited online access. [Staffing challenges](#) coming out of the pandemic continue, posing a disproportionately negative impact on students from marginalized groups. And ESSER and other federal recovery funds that fund many districts’ interventions are sun setting later this year.

In summary, pandemic recovery is far from over. Still, existing acceleration interventions for learning recovery (e.g., tutoring, summer programming) have encountered substantial implementation challenges, such as limited staff capacity, technology challenges, and low student interest. As a result, much smaller numbers of students have accessed them than was initially anticipated; the impact on the students most harmed by the pandemic remains unclear. Plus, new obstacles are emerging. We see several gaps that research should fill, namely:

- What are the challenges districts are currently facing when implementing interventions? For instance:
- What are the barriers to widespread adoption and implementation of acceleration interventions, and, more importantly, how and where are systems overcoming them?
- What are the most promising efforts (from states, foundations, etc.) to support implementation? Is there evidence that they are working?
- What are effective ways to address low student and family enrollment through known intervention offerings like tutoring and summer school?
- What are promising new recovery interventions, and will they be more effective? For instance:
- To what extent is technology, including generative AI interventions, helpful in supporting recovery?
- What other innovative approaches are districts undertaking to reach the students most harmed by the pandemic and support recovery efforts?

We are requesting proposals that seek to answer these questions and help students make up for learning lost to the pandemic. Illustrative studies in this area include:

- A multi-site case study of district recovery intervention efforts, including quantitative impact studies and qualitative investigations of the successes and challenges impacting students most affected by the pandemic.
- An implementation study on how new generative AI tech tools are helping teachers to work more effectively and efficiently. This project could delve into how multiple school systems are adopting and scaling up a new tool that provides real-time coaching to teachers.

## ***Understanding and addressing the root causes of chronic absenteeism***

Chronic absenteeism (defined as “students missing at least 10 percent of school days, or 18 days in a year, for any reason, excused or unexcused”) has reached crisis levels, all but locking in pandemic-related learning losses. Rates have nearly **doubled** from 16% to 30% of students since pre-pandemic days: an estimated 6.5 million more students experienced chronic absence than in pre-pandemic school years. And during the 2021-22 school year, two-thirds of enrolled students attended a school with high levels (20-29%) or extreme levels (30%+) of chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism is even higher in districts with higher populations of **students of color** and **students experiencing poverty**.

Research before and during the pandemic shows that chronic absenteeism is associated with worse student outcomes. Chronic absence in **preschool** is associated with lower early literacy, numeracy, and social development, and chronic absence in **middle** and **high school** is associated with lower rates of high school graduation. Meanwhile, students who are in classes or schools with high levels of chronic absenteeism are at **greater risk** of lower academic achievement due to peer effects.

The work of remediating chronic absenteeism and other pandemic-related harms is incomplete and perhaps about to get more difficult: early evidence suggests that families are **less concerned** than before the pandemic about the frequency of their child’s absences. This highlights a potential culture shift towards families seeing school as “**non-mandatory**,” a shift well-documented in the media.

While there is a breadth of research available on the scale and prevalence of chronic absenteeism and its impacts on students pre-pandemic, there is little research exploring the current root causes of absenteeism, its connection to other systemic issues, and the current practices/policies underway to improve attendance.

- We see several research gaps that we hope to fill through our subgranting process:
- Coming out of the pandemic, what are the root causes of chronic absenteeism? How, if at all, do these causes vary across various student groups, regions, and states?
- How, if at all, is chronic absenteeism related to broader issues of student disengagement and mental health?
- Are current chronic absenteeism interventions effective in shifting student and parent attitudes about the importance of daily attendance?
- Once systems have identified the root causes of absenteeism, what, if any, changes do they make to their interventions? Are these changed interventions more effective?
- How are school systems trying to reduce chronic absenteeism through interventions that aim to make school more flexible and relevant for all students (e.g., personalization, etc.)? Do these strategies have the intended effect of increasing attendance?

We are requesting proposals that begin to answer these questions and, ultimately, help students want to attend school. Illustrative projects include:

A regional research-practice partnership that works to identify root causes of chronic absenteeism and tests whether or not various approaches—both traditional, like truancy court, and nontraditional, like evening school for students who have to work—can address these root causes.

A qualitative study that utilizes interviews and focus groups with students and parents across the country to understand their attitudes towards the relative importance of school to their lives, the applicability of school, daily attendance, and how the pandemic may have shifted both.

A series of small studies that examine the impact of initiatives focused on making school more relevant and engaging for students as possible remedies for chronic absenteeism.

## *How districts are confronting difficult financial forecasts*

Many US school systems are experiencing simultaneous financial challenges. On the revenue side, federal funds to support students' pandemic recovery (ESSER) are winding down, and enrollment declines mean many districts are receiving less funding from their states, especially as [hold-harmless policies](#) that allow districts to use previous student enrollment numbers for funding purposes become increasingly costly. On the expenditure side, many school systems increased the number of staff to support pandemic recovery, and few states require districts to budget more than one year in advance or to put money into an emergency fund. Further, new school choice policies in many states are exacerbating enrollment and expenditure challenges. This status quo spells trouble for many districts as spending is up and income is down. There is little research on how systems can reduce budgets and expenditures with minimal political upheaval.

From here, we see the following research gaps:

- How are districts (and states) planning to reduce expenditures? How do these plans vary by state or student population served? Are there ways to reduce expenditures while preserving student experiences and learning while reducing costs?
- What informs or drives district decision-making on how to reduce expenditures? Are they using cost-benefit frameworks? What data do they have on program effectiveness? What is the role of politics in these processes?
- What successful strategies (political and/or budgetary) have districts used to reduce expenditures/increase revenues?
- Regarding planned school closures or consolidations, what lessons can be learned about minimizing harm to students via closure strategies? What harm is done to students if districts fail to close under-enrolled schools?
- We request research proposals that delve into how school systems can reduce expenditures while preserving student learning experiences. Illustrative projects include:
  - A comparative case study of closing or consolidating schools in right-to-work states vs. states with more union presence.
  - A survey that tracks district decision-making processes and then matches the results with budget data on cost-cutting efforts.
  - A nationwide study that tracks the learning acceleration strategies that school systems have retained after their ESSER funds expired.
  - A mixed methods study of the student- and teacher-level impacts of remaining in under-enrolled schools.

## Application Process and Requirements

You may not submit a full proposal without first submitting a Letter of Interest (LOI). **Two-page LOIs are due on August 30, 2024, at 6 p.m. Pacific Time.**

LOIs will be reviewed internally by CRPE staff and contractors, and full proposals will be invited no later than **September 9, 2024**. Your two-page LOI (single-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman) should include the following:

- Organization
- Name and affiliation of all PIs and co-PIs
- Project title
- Proposed grant period
- A brief narrative containing:
  - Motivation/need for the proposed research
  - Research questions
  - Description of data and methods
- Any relevant plans to achieve maximum impact (e.g., dissemination, partnership)

Material beyond two pages will not be considered.

### Please submit your LOI as a PDF file using this link.

Invited full proposals are due **October 7, 2024, at 6 p.m. Pacific Time**. Proposals are limited to 10 pages (single-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman), plus appendices (described below). The full proposal plus appendices should be combined into one PDF document and uploaded through the RFP portal. Proposal reviews will be conducted internally by CRPE staff and contractors.

The proposal narrative should include the following:

- A description of the research questions and how they will address pressing needs in policy and practice. Where appropriate, proposals should also build upon relevant disciplinary literature.
- A comprehensive research plan: The proposal should discuss in detail the methods that will be used to answer each research question posed, along with the types of data to be collected. Proposals should clearly describe the measures, instruments, and procedures to be used in the data collection process and the technical adequacy of the measures, if appropriate. The research plan should also include specific plans for how the collected data will be analyzed to answer the research questions. The proposal should describe the participant sample (including characteristics of individuals and schools/districts as applicable), the rationale for sample selection, and the investigator's access to the sample.
- A focus on equity and inclusion: Research proposals should describe how the research will prioritize the needs of historically marginalized students, leverage equitable research practices, and/or be responsive to the needs and wishes of schools and communities involved in the research. To support researchers, CRPE has developed a [toolkit](#) for approaching research with an equity lens. This resource contains modules with recommendations and best practices for various stages of the research process.
- A plan for sharing the research and results: Proposals should include a strategy for dissemination and transparency of the research and for reaching a broad audience with the project's findings.

- A project timeline that includes three milestones and progress updates at six-month intervals for the project's duration. Milestones should include 1) a fully executed contract, research plan, and timeline; 2) a mid-point progress report; 3) public-facing research deliverables.

The following appendices are required:

- **Appendix A:** An abstract of no more than 200 words on one single-spaced page describing the research question(s) and plan.
- **Appendix B:** Biographies and qualifications of named research team members (no more than 1 page per named team member).
- **Appendix C:** References in APA or any standard format, no page limit.
- **Appendix D:** Figures and tables that cannot fit in the narrative, no more than five pages total.
- **Appendix E:** Budget and budget narrative: All proposals should include a justification for the duration and level of funding requested, with more detailed elaboration in the budget narrative

### ***Grantee expectations and restrictions***

We expect all funded projects to abide by the following expectations:

- Grantees are expected to produce at least one public-facing deliverable (e.g., commentaries, blogs, briefs).
- Each team may be expected to participate in at least one virtual convening of funded projects.
- Each team will be expected to participate in informal quarterly updates with CRPE and complete a short final report describing their project's outcomes.
- All publications and presentations based on the project will acknowledge CRPE and the Walton Family Foundation.
- Budget totals should be less than \$500,000. These amounts are inclusive of up to 15% indirect cost charges, under the Walton Family Foundation's [indirect cost policy](#). We strongly encourage applicants to carefully consider their budget and its appropriateness for the scope of work proposed.
- Projects proposed may not be longer than 18 months in duration. Due to the terms of the grant from the Walton Family Foundation, there will be no opportunity for no-cost extensions, so we encourage researchers to be realistic about what they can accomplish and spend during the grant period.
- PIs and Co-PIs may hold no more than one active research grant from these funds. (This restriction does not apply to the administering organization; organizations may submit as many proposals as they like as long as they are for different projects and have different research teams.)
- PIs and Co-PIs may not submit more than one research proposal at a time.

### ***Eligibility***

Proposals must be for academic research projects that aim to study education. Proposals for activities other than research are not eligible (e.g., program evaluations, professional development, curriculum development, scholarships, capital projects, etc.). Additionally, proposals for research studies focused on areas other than education are not eligible.

Principal Investigators (PIs) and Co-PIs applying may include individuals with an earned doctorate in an academic discipline or professional field or appropriate experience in an education research-related profession.

The PI must be affiliated with an administering organization. Grants may not be awarded directly to individuals. Examples of eligible organizations include non-profit or public colleges, universities, school districts, research facilities, and other non-profit organizations with a 501(c)(3) determination from the IRS. Proposals will only be accepted from the U.S. All proposals must be submitted in English, and budgets must be proposed in U.S. Dollars.

### ***Subgranting timeline***

Full proposals are due **October 7, 2024, by 6:00 p.m. Pacific Time**. We anticipate funding decisions will be made by November 4, 2024, to enable grant start dates as early as January 1, 2025.

### ***Questions***

For substantive questions about the grants program or about potential research projects, contact Morgan Polikoff at [polikoff@usc.edu](mailto:polikoff@usc.edu). For technical questions about budgets, contracts, or logistics, contact Natalie Mayfield at [nmayfie1@asu.edu](mailto:nmayfie1@asu.edu).