Executive Summary

We are failing the Covid generation. It's time to adjust course.

Three years after the start of the pandemic, Covid-19 is continuing to derail learning, but in more insidious and hidden ways. Things are far from normal, even though students are back in school.

As we reported in the first State of the American Student report in September 2022, pandemic school closures led to unprecedented academic setbacks for American students. They exacerbated preexisting inequalities and accelerated the youth mental health crisis. At the same time, we documented pandemic bright spots, innovations, and discoveries that could allow us to overcome the underlying rigidities, inequalities, and dysfunctions that have long plagued U.S. public education and that revealed themselves disastrously during the pandemic.

We called on state and local leaders to get serious about using data to identify students with the steepest learning losses and to track and publicly report on academic recovery efforts. One year later, several states are setting a new precedent for transparency and accountability, including Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Virginia. Texas, Tennessee, and Colorado have launched admirable tutoring efforts. These are important starts, but more is needed to meet this moment.

In this second edition, we provide updates on the well-being of students, as well as indicators of the overall health of the system, including data on teachers, enrollment, and finances.

Although they were back in school this year, the kids are still not alright

- On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), math and reading scores for fourth and eighth grade students reached record lows in 2022. One-third of students in both grades can't read at even the "basic" achievement level—the lowest level on the test.

- 16 million students were chronically absent (i.e., missed more than 10% of school days) during the 2021-22 school year, twice as many as in previous years, according to Attendance Works.

- More than 8 in 10 public schools reported stunted behavioral and social-emotional development in their students because of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to the May 2022 IES Pulse survey. Nearly half reported an increase in threats of physical attacks among students.

Of the greatest concern are older students who have the least time to catch up

This year, we pay special attention to the state of students who are nearing graduation or have already graduated from high school. They have had the least time to get back on track and deserve our urgent attention. As of this writing, four graduating classes of high school students have been affected by the pandemic, approximately 13.5 million students. Although the peculiarities of our testing system mean we know less about these students than their younger counterparts, we do know too many are struggling academically, socially, and emotionally. Especially alarming indicators include:

- ACT college admission scores are the lowest since 1991 (19.8 average).

- It will take the average eighth grader 7.4 months to catch up to pre-pandemic levels in reading and 9.1 months in math, according to NWEA.

- While graduation rates are up, so is grade inflation, making it likely that many students exited the system unprepared for college and careers.

- 57% of teenage girls in the U.S. felt persistently sad or hopeless, and 30% seriously considered suicide, according to the CDC's 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report.

- Undergraduate enrollment at public universities and community colleges dropped 7% from 2019 to 2023, with enrollment in two-year colleges declining the most dramatically.

Inequities continue to grow. Although national data are scarce, state and local data on the state of older students are alarming. On just about every indicator (including NAEP scores, course grades, absenteeism, grade retention, and mental health challenges), the negative impacts of the pandemic are worse for more vulnerable students.

The traditional pathways to college and careers were already not working for too many students. The pandemic made everything worse.

Our K-12 education system leaves to chance almost every aspect of the transition from high school to college or careers. Most students are on their own to discover their interests and talents and to select a career pathway aligned to them. Few receive guidance on how to change careers and reenter training or postsecondary education programs when their interests and priorities shift. Not surprisingly, students and families are increasingly questioning the value of a high-tuition, four-year degree.

K-12 responses have been inadequate

Strategies for catching students up are falling short. Only two in 100 students are receiving the kind of high-impact tutoring that makes a difference, according to researchers at USC. One in 5 students graded their schools D or F in mental health supports, individualized instruction, and feeling excited about learning, according to Gallup's Spring 2023 survey. Teachers, who have a daily presence in the lives of young people, reported rates of stress that were nearly two times pre-pandemic levels. A recent report from CRPE found that not only did student learning regress during the pandemic, so did the quality of teaching and the ability for the school systems studied to simultaneously hold high instructional expectations and provide strong support for all students.
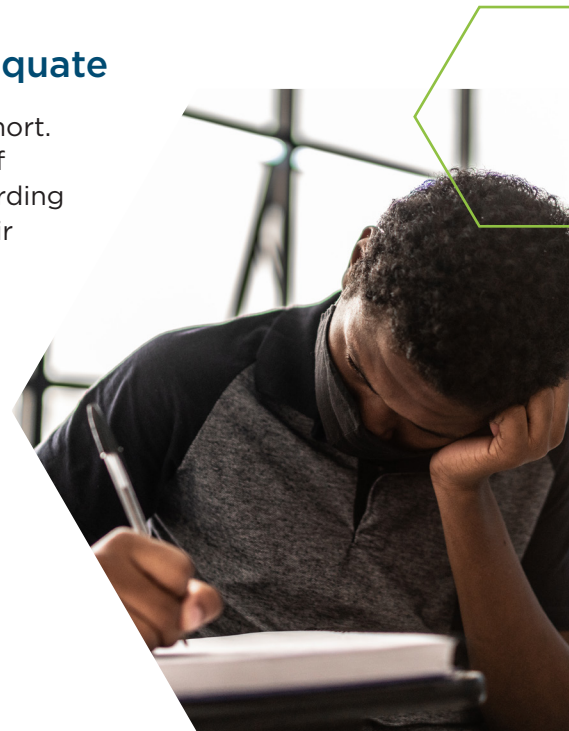
Why we must act now

The challenges are likely to get more difficult for at least four reasons. First, nearly $200 billion in federal pandemic relief funding will expire in January 2025, while student enrollment has plummeted, which means local schools will have less funding.

Second, this fiscal cliff will come on top of an already challenging environment for educators, which has worsened since the pandemic, including an uptick in teacher turnover in the 2022-23 school year and steep declines in the number of people training to become teachers.

Third, societal changes are ratcheting up the demands on the next generation of students. Employment opportunities will shift quickly, requiring adaptability and constant retooling. Automation (including AI) will affect everyone, but middle-class jobs will be harder to find, making it more difficult to overcome the disadvantages of poverty.

Fourth, most parents and the public are alarmingly unaware of the severity of these challenges, which makes it tougher for policymakers to respond with the necessary boldness. For example, a survey by Learning Heroes showed that about 90% of parents believe their child is performing at grade level or above, despite reams of data to the contrary.

There are some bright spots

Some schools, school systems, states, and postsecondary institutions are demonstrating what's possible when leaders are willing to rethink outdated approaches and center instruction and support on what students need most. The full report profiles schools that provide competency-based education to pregnant, parenting, and underserved students, that help students explore career interests and non-college options, and that offer AI-themed curricula, more project-based learning, and dual enrollment with local colleges, among other innovations. Colleges such as Arizona State University, City University of New York (CUNY), and New York University are rethinking how to better serve their students, while states such as Colorado and Virginia have bold plans to ensure that every high school student graduates with an associate degree and an industry-recognized credential—part of a deliberate strategy to blur the lines between high school and postsecondary success.

However, given the magnitude of the current crisis, we need many more such examples of hope and innovation. To that end, we asked 14 experts from various sectors and perspectives to weigh in with examples of what is possible and proposals for moving forward.

Addressing immediate recovery needs

- Jake Anders (Associate Professor, University College London) on researching Covid-19's long-term effects on educational and career trajectories

- Aimee Guidera (Virginia Secretary of Education) on high standards, innovation, and closing the "honesty gap"

- Kevin Huffman (CEO, Accelerate) on delivering more "high-impact tutoring"

- Thomas Kane (Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education) on ensuring we have the right dosage of interventions

- Cara Pangelinan (Research Analyst, CRPE) on what students are telling us

- Keri Rodrigues (President, National Parents Union) on parents' demands for better, more accurate information

- Aaliyah Samuel (President and CEO, CASEL) on closing "relationship gaps"

Building better pathways to college and career

- David Adams (CEO, Urban Assembly) on organizing schools around real-world themes

- Robin Lake (Director, CRPE) on why it's the perfect time to redesign the New American High School

- Marie Mackintosh (President and CEO, EmployIndy) on modern apprenticeships and related efforts to make high school more relevant

- Kristie Patten (Counselor to the President, New York University) on what autistic students can teach us about focusing on assets, not deficits

- Jared Polis (Governor of Colorado) on blurring the lines between high school and postsecondary learning

- Joanne Vogel (Vice President of Student Services, Arizona State University) on redesigning everything, from dorm rules to instruction, to better support incoming students

- Chelsea Waite (Principal Researcher, CRPE) on how New England states are rethinking the "college for all" paradigm

Recommendations: We must adjust course

Positioning the "Covid generation" for success requires immediate action and an orientation toward the future. For starters, we urge local, state, and federal leaders to:

- **Offer transparency regarding the effectiveness of schools in ensuring that every child is on track to master core skills.** Otherwise, there's no urgency and little trust. Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Virginia are leading the way.

- **Invest in a national youth intervention strategy** that develops, tests, and promotes new interventions (such as strengthening adult-student relationships) and innovative methods (such as AI technology) for struggling adolescents and young adults. Invest, too, in scaling already proven interventions, like high-quality tutoring and mentoring.

- **Invest in high school and college mastery programs** to ensure disruptions wrought by the pandemic and the youth mental health crisis do not derail any young person's aspirations. Community colleges that have lost enrollment in recent years might offer tuition-free (state and federally subsidized) gap-year programs that allow students to finish their high school degree and begin earning college credits or industry credentials. States, cities, and school districts could invest in outreach programs like CUNY Reconnect, as well as provide funding and flexibility to support working students while they complete their degrees.

- **Support research to track the Covid generation's progress.** The United Kingdom offers a good model and Gallup has a new poll that tracks student views on education, but more data is needed.

- **Rethink high school to career pathways.** We need to go beyond pilots for more career-relevant high schools that blur the lines among high school, college, and careers, taking cues from Colorado and Virginia. An essay by Colorado Governor Jared Polis shows how such a "blurring strategy" is central to his state's education and workforce approach. Two other promising approaches: New York City's Urban Assembly offers students multiple pathways to postsecondary success, and EmployIndy supports a modern apprenticeship program and other efforts to engage Indianapolis youth.

- **Invest in a New American High School.** As CRPE's Robin Lake argues in her essay, "Rather than seek to provide a comprehensive set of learning experiences under one roof, the New American High School would connect students to meaningful work in their communities and expert knowledge around the globe. It would support young people to do meaningful work that makes real contributions and leads to meaningful credentials in the adult world. Rather than sorting students into tracks or marshaling all of them toward a single objective, it would provide every student adult guidance and technological support to understand their own conception of a good life, as well as the support, connections, knowledge, and skills to pursue that life—and change course where necessary. It would prepare students to thrive, collaborate, and innovate in a rapidly changing world. Yes, students would still study Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Newton, but in a more relevant, contemporary context."

The students are counting on us to act. Jaylen Adams, a rising eighteen-year-old freshman at Columbia University, says it well: "Schools have kind of become social-political battlegrounds. I think the issue really needs to be redirected to students as a whole and what's best for them."

She's right.

Jaylen—and her millions of peers—deserve nothing less.