

How Schools Adapt during the Pandemic Can Reshape Adolescent Learning Experiences for Generations

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Many New England leaders knew high schools needed to change before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The region is home to pockets of schools and systems that lead the nation in instructional innovations like proficiency-based learning and anytime-anywhere learning, buoyed by forward-looking state leaders and nonprofit organizations. These efforts are finding new urgency now, as students have faced continued disruptions to their learning, fallen behind on coursework, and faced mounting mental health challenges.

We're working with a team of researchers to scan the New England landscape for educators and system leaders who, despite difficult circumstances, are finding ways to address students' immediate challenges during the pandemic. We want to know whether their efforts could also lay the groundwork for more durable improvements to the high school experience.

Our early work, including initial interviews with school and system leaders, suggests some efforts to reinvent schools before the pandemic have helped schools to navigate the current crisis, and these disruptions have created new openings for forward progress.

Efforts to move forward in the pandemic are isolated. They have been messy. The solutions haven't always worked. But we have seen examples where the pandemic has created an opportunity to test new ideas and expanded educators' vision of what high school learning could look like.

Two central questions loom: Will school systems' adaptations add up to meaningful improvements in the high school experience? And will these improvements last beyond the crisis?

A long-standing need for change

Even before the pandemic, America's high schools struggled to meet the needs of their students.

Graduation rates [have never been higher](#), but the value of a diploma has [declined over the past four decades](#). Despite a growing focus on academic standards, a third of the nation's high schoolers still score below basic on national math and reading assessments. [Only about half](#) find what they learn relevant and enjoyable.

For years, school districts have faced a crisis of disengagement. The U.S. Department of Education [reports](#) one in five high school students were chronically absent during the 2015–16 school year—meaning they missed 15 or more days.

All of these statistics are more dire for students living in poverty and students of color.

The pandemic upended this untenable status quo. Schools across the country shut their doors. Some have yet to reopen them. Others have lurched between in-person and remote learning while leaders grappled with inconsistent guidance and surging community infections.

These disruptions have only made matters worse for students. Many students have disengaged. An *Education Week* survey found teachers, on average, reported that 13 percent of high school students are absent each day—approximately twice the pre-pandemic rate. Even when students log in, teachers report teaching to black boxes, uncertain if students off-camera are paying attention at all. Students are hurting. The [Centers for Disease Control](#) reports that mental health hospitalization rates for children 12 to 17 years of age increased 31 percent.

Our focus groups with New England students have deepened our understanding of these national numbers. Students tell us they are weary. They miss seeing friends, playing sports and performing in front of a crowd, and planning and attending school events. They are exhausted from juggling constantly shifting schedules, keeping focused amid distractions, staying alert to safety precautions, and managing much more of their time and schoolwork on their own. To them, school has become much harder and less gratifying.

This painful reality has attuned educators and school leaders to students' varied needs like never before.

Crisis creates a new opening for change

A Connecticut superintendent we recently spoke with explained that, before the pandemic, the district's long-struggling high schools had made some progress using blended learning to weave live instruction with technology-supported independent work and individualized support to close the district's opportunity gap, but had yet to make the deeper changes necessary to truly structure school around students' varied needs. The pandemic changed that. The district is now rethinking fundamental assumptions about how students spend their time and how students show their academic progress. The superintendent explained the crisis "has given us permission to be able to put these systems in place without having a cadre or coalition of traditionalists oppose these practices."

This superintendent's experience is far from the norm. Simply getting through the day remains job one for many overstretched teachers and leaders. But we have found isolated cases where the unprecedented disruption to business as usual created new openings to remake high school—especially for educators and leaders who were looking to make changes before the pandemic.

New England's schools have long been at the vanguard of learning approaches that allow students to advance at their own pace through coursework—exemplified by [New Hampshire's decades of state-led initiatives](#) encouraging districts to promote students based on their demonstrated mastery of the material and not simply time spent in class. One Maine principal we spoke with explained how beneficial it was to have a similar model in place last spring. As a result:

When we closed down, we knew this is where [this student] was in algebra II, this is where [that student] was in biology. We were able to, at the end of the year, group kids based upon where they finished, and start up courses with cohorts of kids for the start of the 2020–21 school year.

Another superintendent noted that the notion of blending live instruction and independent work time to personalize learning was not new for the district, but the pandemic gave these concepts new meaning and importance. In his words, “[Teachers and leaders] now had to strategically apply it.”

The pandemic also compelled districts to rethink grading practices. In our study of 80 school district reopening plans across the region, 41 percent reported that they have recommended or required some modification in their grading policy. One district has taken the position that students should not fail classes, but instead receive “incomplete” grades, along with support and opportunities to build the necessary skills and complete work successfully. Another district found the pandemic deepened teachers’ understanding of the root causes of failing grades, from missed instruction to a lack of technology access. This district encouraged teachers to examine disparities in the grades they award, as well as instructional strategies to address them.

In our interviews, some educators worried that issuing incomplete instead of failing grades removes a powerful lever they have to motivate students, would leave them without important information to understand students’ academic progress, and could lead to greater inequality. Others see refusing failure and rooting out the source of failing grades as the first step to advancing a more personalized and proficiency-based mindset in high schools.

Whether this new focus on grading moves toward leniency and less information or toward a new path to more equitable opportunity and a commitment to student success will depend on whether schools build flexible systems that allow students to make progress at their own pace, recognize students’ understanding of content and not just time spent in class, and provide teachers with training and time to truly reflect on their students’ needs and provide them with individualized support.

Encouragingly, some schools and districts in the region have recognized the importance of meeting a wider range of students’ and families’ needs—including basic needs like nutrition and housing, educational needs like technology and help with remote learning, and social-emotional support. In response, they built new systems and partnerships to meet these needs. One superintendent explained that the pandemic forced his district to think systematically about the different needs of students and families and develop multiple approaches to meeting them:

We created a system to meet students at their different needs, whether it be delivering devices, delivering resources and supports to students in an individual manner, [meeting] essential elements of basic needs, or delivering devices and foods and hotspots.

Some districts have partnered with community organizations to provide basic needs and to make connections with the students the district has struggled to reach. As a response to the pandemic, Hartford Public Schools formed a new partnership with the University of Connecticut School of Social Work to create [HPS Heals](#), in which graduate-level social workers provide risk assessments and counseling to students. The pandemic intensified the urgency for mental health services, spurring the district to look for a partner to meet the need.

These efforts, if seen for their lasting potential and not just as an emergency response, open up the possibility that families, students, and community institutions can join school systems as true partners in learning.

Albert Einstein is credited with saying “in the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity.” We can see that some schools and districts are seizing this opportunity, but education systems have always been slow to change and more prone to [tinkering](#) than transformation. It’s not yet clear if these crisis adaptations will translate into meaningful systemic innovations—much less durable improvements in meeting students’ academic and developmental needs.

Will high schools change for good?

When the immediate crisis passes, school systems will be under much pressure to return to what is familiar and normal. Pandemic fatigue and the push to quickly address the pandemic's negative impact on students' well-being and academic progress could create a [recipe for school systems to seek refuge](#) in the familiar, which would jeopardize innovations.

However, some leaders are recognizing the opportunity to make lasting improvements. Superintendents in a [recent survey](#) made clear that some of the changes they have made during the crisis will not go away.

To increase the odds that innovation prevails in the face of rising fatigue and pressure, we must better understand the adaptations schools and systems have made. We must understand if and how these adaptations are [shifting the fundamental priorities and structures](#) of schools.

CRPE and our research partners at CRPL, The Christensen Institute, The Education Trust, and SRI International are taking up this line of inquiry with New England's high schools, asking:

1. What new instructional, support, and resource strategies are high schools using? What practices do high schools shed? What facilitated these changes?
2. Do these new strategies improve students' learning and school experience?
3. Do these new strategies provide for more equal access to learning opportunities?
4. Are schools and systems elevating the voice of students and parents in unprecedented and productive ways?
5. Are new contributors—community partners, parents, students—seen with equal value to the traditional educators and school leaders?
6. Which state and local policies are aiding schools in implementing new strategies?
7. Critically, do these new strategies become a new way of doing work in schools? Do they replace less effective strategies? Do they become embedded in the policies, systems, resource allocation strategies, and norms of high school learning and adolescents' experiences?

The answers and insights we gather from our *Think Forward New England* fieldwork will help us to understand how high schools can use this moment to redesign our high schools and create a better learning environment for adolescents.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.