Unfinished business: What must come next for public education, five years after pandemic shutdowns

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CRPE REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Five years after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, student achievement levels are in free fall. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results released in late January 2025, fewer than one-third of students nationwide scored at proficiency levels in reading and math. Achievement gaps by race, income, and other student characteristics have grown. Post-pandemic, the average student remains less than halfway to full academic recovery, with only 56% of fourth graders performing at grade level in math, down from 69% in 2019.

Whatever may be causing this current decline in student achievement (whether lower teacher quality, looser accountability standards, or out-of-school factors like rising income inequality or increasing social media use), it did not start during the pandemic, but well before, in the early 2000s. Right now, many schools and districts are attempting a return to a broken status quo in the wake of the pandemic's chaos, but a "return to normal" is precisely what we must avoid.

Over the past five years, we at CRPE have watched as the pandemic showed us exactly how the education system's rigidities, hardwired inequalities, political nature, resistance to evidence-based practices, and inability to respond to individual student needs halted the progress of a generation of K-12 students. In a companion paper, we examine exactly what went wrong during the pandemic and why. In this paper, we discuss the problems we anticipated pre-pandemic and propose solutions for the present—and the utter urgency of implementing them immediately.

CRPE's pre-pandemic work

CRPE was founded in 1993 to understand and address barriers to excellence at scale in public education. We studied the policies and political structures that impeded high performance and proposed ideas to preserve fairness, access, and public stewardship.

We followed the tenet that public education is a goal, not a particular set of institutions. We have always believed that all current assumptions about the current public education delivery model must be examined in service of student success and family preferences.

Thinking Forward: Two years before the pandemic, CRPE published "Thinking Forward: New Ideas for a New Era of Public Education," a set of papers calling for a new approach to systemic reform that challenged even our previous assumptions. In these papers, we highlighted the need for innovation and adaptability in response to looming challenges, including those related to technological advancements, demographic shifts, and socioeconomic inequalities. We concluded that these dynamics would bring "change as the new normal" and force shifts in education.

We called for a more responsive and resilient public education system to prepare students for the opportunities and challenges of the future. We envisioned flexible learning models with which schools would adapt to highly varied student needs. We called for policymakers and educators to address systemic barriers that prevent marginalized students from accessing high-quality learning opportunities, to experiment with new teacher staffing models, to rethink high school to be more tightly linked to career and college, to expand choice, and to leverage technologies to align with more customized learning. We also proposed ways to rethink accountability, funding, and staffing to align with this vision.

Then, in March 2020, the moment for true resilience, innovation, and adaptability arrived. In many ways, it was the start of change as the new normal.

CRPE's pandemic rapid response research

The Northshore School District, just north of Seattle, became the first school district in the country to cease in-person instruction and move to remote instruction. Just miles away, what were thought to be isolated Covid cases in a local nursing home were spreading throughout the region. In the weeks after, the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic, and most of the nation's schools closed. Some took more than 18 months to offer fully in-person instruction again.

CRPE immediately pivoted to document how school systems, communities, states, and the federal government dealt with the resulting educational crisis. Our goal was to be helpful at a time of great need. We tried to be sense-makers and evidence synthesizers. From 2020 to 2022, we produced close to 100 briefs, analyses, and expert consensus papers on how the pandemic and school closures impacted student learning and well-being.

At the start of each school year, beginning in 2022, we have reported on the State of the American Student. In these reports, we have documented what students and families need and want coming out of the pandemic, how the education system has and is responding, and what leapfrog innovations can help ensure that our education system can, like the phoenix, emerge stronger and more resilient from the ashes of the Covid-19 pandemic.

What might have been (but wasn't)

We were by no means the first to insist that the goal of pandemic recovery should be not returning to normal. "Normal," said teachers, school and district leaders, students, and their families, had not worked. While the pandemic wrought chaos in schools and worldwide, our research revealed a glimpse into what public education could be.

When parents had to choose how to keep their students learning "off the grid," they created learning pods where students benefited from more individualized and joyful small-group instruction. Parents and especially teachers reported loving these alternatives. Some of these learning pods specialized in serving students of color, who benefited greatly from racially affirming, community-connected learning. The murder of George Floyd and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement made this an especially salient time for dealing with questions of race and identity.

Community groups stepped up to provide learning centers, building on their trust and relationships with students and families. Microschools that used innovative staffing and hybrid learning models were born. Some students, notably those with learning differences, seemed to thrive outside the regular classroom.

Many schools, especially parochial schools, reopened quickly and found ways to keep students safe. Other schools, such as charter schools, found ways to keep students engaged and used novel staffing and instructional strategies to limit learning loss.

However, none of these strategies became dominant, and the public education system did not become nimbler, more responsive, or more adaptive. Though there were glimmers of what a new and better normal could look like, an opportunity was lost.

Why didn't things change?

There are many reasons why the system did not overhaul itself—and why students have not recovered their lost learning—and they lay the groundwork for what it will take to move forward. Though we explore these in more detail in our companion paper, a few of them are listed here:

- **Schools did not have the incentives, freedom of action, or capacity to prepare teachers to give students the personalized instruction necessary to recover lost learning.** They were also overwhelmed with a rapid succession of challenges. As a result, despite much talk of not returning to standard mass instruction, most schools have done so.
- **States and the federal government left districts to fend for themselves, providing little or no leadership.** At the same time, schools grappled with complex health and safety solutions, wildly varying student learning needs, and intensive student and adult mental health concerns.
- **Politics, not science, drove too much decision-making.** Teachers unions fought closures and then reopenings. Schools became the focal point for national debates over masks and vaccinations. Recriminations about school closings have continued years after students returned to classes.
- **Federal aid went to districts with few to no strings attached.** The money seemed to help as long as it lasted but was ineffective in addressing some of the pandemic's most pernicious problems. In some cases, districts' use of temporary federal money created permanent spending commitments, which led to insolvency. For example, despite fears of an exodus of teachers, public education now employs more teachers than ever in the same roles as before.

What we believe: The current education system cannot deliver what students need

Schools are now struggling with many serious problems that current solutions are not addressing, including:

- Stagnating or declining test scores for all but the top performers
- Wildly varying student academic needs within schools and classrooms
- Disruptive student behavior, chronic absenteeism, and rising student mental health issues, all of which interfere with instruction and learning
- Parent complacency about learning loss, likely due to misinformation about how their children are performing academically
- Low teacher morale and burnout

- Public loss of confidence and trust in public education

These problems are real, yet often too sensitive, overwhelming, and polarizing for easy discussion. But ignoring them won't make them go away.

While it is easy to blame the adults who work in schools or districts for these challenges, CRPE's diagnosis is different. We believe the education delivery system is badly overmatched by the problems confronting it. It simply cannot deliver the results we need for today's students, much less tomorrow's.

The system was designed to provide one-size-fits-all solutions while expecting the adults in schools to somehow find the time, energy, and ideas to provide the differentiated support that students, regardless of their circumstances, need to succeed. This system was designed under the assumptions of a crumbling social contract: that schools are where learning happens, that students and teachers will come to school, and that marginalized families will trust and wait for schools to serve them better. The pandemic showed how unrealistic these hopes were.

More money for the core of schooling could help, but it is unlikely given the advent of the new presidential administration, the end of federal stimulus funds, tightening state budgets, and enrollment declines. Teacher union demands also drive up costs and, if met, will make schools more expensive, not better.

As we move into an era with resource constraints caused by enrollment declines and rising costs, we can't simply expect schools to do more. Teachers don't have the time or the bandwidth to do everything; classrooms need to become more sharply focused on teaching and learning. Students also need access to extracurricular enrichment and, in many cases, emotional support and therapy, but that access cannot be substituted for teaching and learning. Local governing bodies need to work alongside neighborhood- and community-serving organizations to support students when they're not in school.

What must happen next: A call to action

Looking back on the prognostications put forth in our "Thinking Forward" series, we still see them as directionally correct. However, we would amend them somewhat, given our observations from the pandemic and the passing of seven years. We offer the following design principles for a new public education system.

- **Elementary and secondary schools can and must flex to meet students' unique needs.** A system designed for sameness will necessarily fail to serve most students, as most students have some unique needs. We have argued that the best way to begin to customize learning is to "design for the margins"; crafting solutions for students with the most complex needs will lead us to develop systems that flex for all students' unique needs. There are many successful ways to do this, from breaking down traditional programmatic barriers to adding advanced coursework, adopting instructional strategies such as universal design for learning, and creating individualized learning pathways that match student needs and interests. Such a customized approach would not be radical. It would finally deliver on the promise of special education, creating individual learning solutions for every child. This would vastly improve special education, which is costly and ineffective and would improve outcomes for all students.

- **Developing career pathways and tighter links to higher education must be a high priority.** High schools, in particular, must change so that every student graduates with a concrete postsecondary plan that preserves as many choices and opportunities in adulthood as possible. Readying students for individualized postsecondary plans means more than just having them pick a career pathway, do an internship, or apply to college. All schools must prioritize the early and ongoing development of durable skills—such as creative and critical thinking, communication, and leadership—and foster the development of relationships and social capital that will act as bridges to future opportunities. By middle and high school, students should be expanding their awareness of postsecondary pathways and getting frequent, increasingly in-depth experiences in career paths that interest them. Early college opportunities should be universal so that any high school student ready for college-level work can begin earning credits and adjusting to the expectations of higher education.
- **Recognition that emerging technologies (e.g., generative AI) offer the opportunity to shape new, more personalized solutions but also carry existential threats** (e.g., students learning from biased sources and misuses of technology that fail to teach children how to think and operate independently). Education must shift quickly to adapt to these realities, but so far, it is not doing so.
- **Experimentation with new schooling models must include new approaches to teacher roles, work in teams, and reduced reliance on teachers working in isolation.** Money must be untied from contracts and mandates so schools can pursue effective instructional methods and better uses of teaching talent and learning materials when they become available. Educators of the future can best customize solutions for all students if they specialize and if they can leverage each others' specialized expertise by working in coordinated teams. The future of teaching could look radically different, with schools tapping new sources of teaching expertise in the community, online, via vetted generative AI tools, and even across schools in a coordinated network.
- **Choice among schools is necessary—but not magic.** Families must be empowered to find matches for their children and to allow innovative approaches to prove themselves. States and the federal government should ensure that private school choice programs, like vouchers and ESAs, report basic performance outcomes, participate in NAEP (national testing), and put in fair enrollment protections for families. States should also expand public school choice programs, like public charter schools, and allow school districts to create their own choice programs free of regulatory constraints to compete with private schools.
- **Students must be able to escape schools that do not work for them, and more effective district-run and charter schools should be expanded and imitated.** New voucher and ESA plans must be paired with valid parent information, fair admissions, and oversight against fraud or broken promises.
- **Publicly funded schools must be held to account for whether the children entrusted to them all learn.** Parents need to know whether children are learning, and teachers need to know if their instruction is effective. Rich assessment data that measures individual mastery of subject matter and allows for fair comparisons is needed. Accountability systems should guarantee that all students meet basic subject competencies by tenth grade. Schools that fail to meet this goal require

intervention plans based on evidence-based practices to ensure that no child is stuck in an environment where they are not learning.

- **Joyful, welcoming, affirming schools must not be treated as a trade-off for rigorous academics.** The pandemic underscored the urgent need for schools where students feel known and cared for and where well-being is a priority. However, learning cannot be left to the wayside: Schools need strategies that enable each student to achieve what can feel challenging, not strategies that make what's challenging easier. Many states, districts, and classroom educators have taken their foot off the gas on high expectations for students—easing graduation requirements, making it easier for students to earn good grades, excusing frequent absences, and prioritizing social-emotional learning curricula over core academics. This academic easing began well before the pandemic, with states and the federal government walking away from previous commitments to accountability systems and interventions for low-performing schools and districts. The gas pedal eased up more during the depths of the pandemic and school closures when so many students experienced deaths in the family, household income disruptions, and social isolation. But the pendulum has swung too far away from the core business of schooling. It's time to get to what research shows works best for students: high expectations paired with strong support. The argument that schools must be either joyful or rigorous is a false dichotomy.
- **Evidence-based instructional practices and a standard of care for educators should be the expectation for every public school—especially for those serving students identified with special needs.** In the year 2025, there are established best practices about effective instruction in general and specific instructional strategies for teaching students to read and write effectively, learn computational skills, and regulate their behavior in productive ways. America's dedicated educators deserve to be taught these best practices and to work in schools that support and oversee their use in classrooms. As with the medical profession, educators should be expected to follow a recognized standard of care. The standard should be set in core subjects only and only where there is a clear scientific consensus around them. A national panel should set the standards and update them when new research merits. Schools and educators could request exemptions to try new methods with safeguards in place for students.

Leadership at the state and local levels will be essential

More challenges are coming. Schools will struggle to adapt to and capitalize on the potential of AI. International disease transmission and climate change could lead, respectively, to another deadly pandemic and emergency relocations of students due to fires, hurricanes, extreme temperatures, and other weather events. Change is inevitable. Change is the new normal.

Several groups have put out visions for the future with many common elements to ours—Hoover Institution's "Ours to Solve, Once and for All," Rennie Center's "Condition of Education Action Guide", and Fordham Institute's "A bridge back to bipartisan education reform" are some notable examples. Proposals are a start, but nothing will change without strong leadership. At a time of political chaos in Washington, assertive federal leadership on education is unlikely. Initiative and steady improvement will depend on local and state-level actors.

Yet many school boards and district administrations are pot-bound by politics and turf protection. If schools are to change as much as needed, leaders must emerge who are willing to take on the political fights, sell a new vision for education, build coalitions, and make investments to bring them to reality. Higher-level elected officials, including mayors, county executives, state legislators, and governors, must press for change, not look the other way. States are the only entities that can provide the needed combination of flexibility and accountability for districts and schools.

A reasonable place to start is in the largest cities, where needs are the most pronounced, and financial stresses will force changes that might otherwise be politically impossible. State and local leaders should collaborate on bold actions that enable profound changes. Governors and state education chiefs, as well as local superintendents, school board members, and mayors, should pursue initiatives that leverage both evidence-based practices and innovations in school design, instructional methods, use of school time, school and district staffing, teacher roles and teaming, and use of technology. These initiatives should be paired with rich but clear information for parents about how their children are performing, as well as a performance oversight function that identifies schools—including those pursuing innovations—that are and are not working for children. Transformation initiatives should invest in new approaches, abandon new or existing schools where children are not learning, and create more promising options.

The portfolio model: an integrated vision for a new public educational system

CRPE has written a great deal about portfolio governance for public education, which rethinks school districts as flexible sponsors of schools and allows schools to differ according to student needs. Since "Thinking Forward," we also deepened our belief that schools can essentially be portfolio managers of personalized pathways for students. Acting as a form of ESAs (education savings accounts) for public schools, students could use their public dollars to participate in apprenticeships, enrichment programs, tutoring, mental health supports, and other programs but still receive core academics in their assigned schools.

"Portfolio" is a metaphor, not a strict model. States and localities might find their own ways of freeing up money, teacher assignments, and student assignments so schools can pursue coherent and possibly novel approaches to teaching, learning, and student support. States can find ways to up local actors, whether new school boards, mayors, or other entities, to make room for ideas from outside the district establishment and to engage quality independent providers.

States and localities don't have to start from scratch. They can look to small school initiatives like those that produced results in New York City, Denver, and New Orleans, as well as initiatives in Colorado, Delaware, and Indiana to retool high schools to be much more career-connected and future-ready. There is also the teacher staffing initiative showing promise in Mesa, Arizona, the reading and math implementation initiative that produced the so-called Mississippi Miracle, and school design initiatives that include intensive tutoring.

The examples above are places to start, not stop. All the systems mentioned have yet to fully meet their goals for students. They have not addressed the underlying challenges before us today, like chronic absenteeism or how to make emergent technologies assets, not threats.

Our most important message is that schools need more than increased funding or less regulation. They need strong and attentive support from their states, especially when the federal government is relinquishing authority and oversight. Declarations of emergency will not be enough, nor will universal prescriptions negotiated in the state capitol.

Our students can and will learn if given the chance. However, that will require profound change, including the transformation of their learning experiences, teachers' roles and the use of technology, and school district missions. No one looking honestly at how pandemic closures led to such disastrous results for students and how stuck schools are in their old habits could come to any other conclusion. The new reform agenda must be forward-looking and untethered to past allegiances yet still grounded in what has and has not worked in the past.

The young people attending our public schools are not getting what they deserve: a fair shot at achieving their dreams, economic mobility, and preparation for the living wage jobs of the future. The pandemic has shown that the current public education delivery model is too constrained to meet student needs and that bold yet responsible new approaches are possible. There is no justification for doggedly staying the course. However, policymakers must be willing to allow schools to pursue new ideas. They need to pay attention and act on evidence about what works for students and what does not. Our students' futures—and, in many ways, our country's economic and social future—depend on it.

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a nonpartisan research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation. Since 1993, we have studied innovative, evidence-based solutions to improve public education. We believe public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—rather than a set of institutions. From this foundation, we strive to understand and advocate for necessary changes in policy and practice to meet the needs of every student.

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