



“As we recover from this public health and education emergency, we must build *toward* an education system that places equity at the center so that all students—and especially those most impacted by the pandemic and by systemic racism and other injustices—have the support and opportunities they need.”

Rebuild and Reimagine: Restarting School with Equity at the Center

Affecting Transformative Change: Actions for District Leaders

While the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all families and communities, it has particularly devastated students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, youth in foster care, unhoused students, students with disabilities, and other historically marginalized children and youth. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated long-standing systemic inequities in education. Concurrently, we have seen the strength of our students, families, and school staff as they have taken on new roles in their homes, schools, and communities.

“The pandemic has forever altered our understanding of how schools could and should operate, and a major infusion of funding has opened the door to new possibilities. As we recover from this public health and education emergency, we must build *toward* an education system that places equity at the center so that all students—and especially those most impacted by the pandemic and by systemic racism and other injustices—have the support and opportunities they need.” (*Rebuild and Reimagine: Restarting School with Equity at the Center*)

Our current circumstances and the infusion of stimulus funding provide the education leaders an opportunity to rebuild and reimagine schools that center holistic needs of students. This document highlights a collection of key recommendations¹ that district leaders can **implement right now** to respond to the needs of their students and families. It also includes suggestions for **longer-term actions** that, if implemented, will help our school systems to center equity so that every student is truly supported to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically.

■ How should my district address the need for reconnection and healing as students return in-person and throughout the school year?

District leaders have many important priorities to ensure that students and staff return to on-campus learning safely. While local health departments are providing guidance related to health and safety, it is equally important that students and staff have the time and opportunities to reconnect and heal so that students can develop socially, emotionally, and academically.

Some actions that districts can take **right now** include:

- Take approximately six weeks over the summer or at the beginning of the school year to offer students, families, and educators a **restorative restart that centers students' social emotional wellbeing**. During this time, educators and staff should prioritize restorative practices, grounded in the [science of learning and development](#). (Read more [here](#) and [here](#).) Restorative practices may include:

- As a first step, institute a **day of healing** to establish safe and supportive learning environments and to memorialize loss and suffering as a result of the pandemic and racialized violence. In all conversations centered on healing, prioritize an anti-racist intersectional frame. (Read more [here](#).)
- Connecting 1:1 with every family and every student, for instance through virtual **home visits**. (Read more [here](#).)

Some actions that districts can take this year to affect **transformative change** include:

- Center relationships. Districts can revamp time in the **master schedule for relationship-building**, such as through advisories or small cohorts. Additionally, provide training for staff on how to build and nurture restorative environments. (Read more [here](#) and [here](#).)
- Strengthen regular and multilingual engagement with families, students, and educators by establishing family advisory councils or other structures as a part of the district's formal decision-making process. (Read more [here](#).)

▪ What should my district prioritize as we plan for expanded learning time?

Recovering from schooling disruptions will require short and long-term investments in evidence-based methods to efficiently and effectively accelerate learning while also fostering trusting relationships and providing enrichment opportunities.

Some actions that districts can take **right now**, include:

- Develop **summer learning opportunities** that prioritize the students with the greatest social emotional and academic needs, including fun and engaging learning activities that are of interest to students and align with the school's curriculum. (Read more [here](#) and [here](#).)
- Consider **strategic staffing for expanded learning** to allow for small learning cohorts focused on academic acceleration for those students with the greatest need. The cohorts should be paired with enrichment programs, preferably outdoors, in partnership with child and youth community-based organizations. Prioritize partnering with organizations whose staff reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of your students. Explore with local teacher preparation programs opportunities to create pathways for expanded learning time staff to enter the teaching profession as part of a "[Grow Your Own](#)" strategy to prepare more teachers from the community. (Read more [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

Some actions that districts can take this year to affect **transformative change** include:

- Create **individualized action plans** to meet the whole-child needs of every student. Establish teams that include the student and their family to monitor progress towards students' social, emotional, and academic goals. Use data from local and state academic assessments, along with student wellness screenings (see recommendation below), to assess student needs and measure progress. (Read more [here](#).)
- Consider **high-dosage tutoring and mentoring**. **Tutoring** is an evidence-based strategy for supporting and accelerating learning. High-quality **mentoring** has proven to be effective in fostering trusting relationships between students and adults and in building positive social, academic, and life skills and [racial and ethnic identity](#). (Read more [here](#).)

▪ How can my district tend to the social emotional wellness of our students and staff?

[Research](#) shows that students perform better academically when schools meet their social, emotional, and mental wellness needs. Education leaders must continue to work swiftly to prioritize social emotional wellness as they plan for the upcoming academic year.

Some actions the district can take **right now**, include:

- Address **whole child needs**. Conduct regular student wellness screenings. Identify and address social, emotional, and behavioral issues affecting students, especially since the pandemic has increased student feelings of [stress, anxiety, and depression](#). Schools should regularly administer universal screeners, analyze those data, and connect identified students to support teams and appropriate providers. (Read more [here](#).)

- Institute a streamlined process for students and adults to report mental health concerns. ([See this example from Davis Joint Unified School District.](#))
- Create time and space for staff to come together to strengthen their relationships, reflect, and problem_solve together. For example, schedule dedicated time in meetings to share personal and professional experiences and identify new approaches to current challenges. (Read more [here.](#))

Some actions that districts can take this year to affect **transformative change** include:

- Provide ongoing **mental health supports**. Following the administration of student wellness screeners, connect all students identified as needing counseling or other mental health services with support teams and appropriate providers; adhere to tiered intervention and follow-up protocols. Ensure that this process, and the available services, are clearly explained to families in multiple languages and through various modes of communication. School and district staff should develop or deepen partnerships with community-based organizations or county mental health/behavioral health providers to coordinate care. They should also take time to personally connect students with providers, including social workers, mentors, and others. (Read more [here](#) about a new partnership between Sacramento County Office of Education and the Sacramento County Department of Health to provide school-based mental health services and to reimagine schools as “centers of wellness.”)
- Ensure lessons and materials are **relevant and affirm students’ identities**. Motivation and engagement are key components of wellness and are necessary preconditions for attendance and academic success. However, to feel fully engaged, [students need to be centered](#) in a learning environment that is culturally relevant and helps to [nurture their identity and agency](#). Educators should receive training in facilitating developmentally appropriate activities that prompt reflection and connection to students’ identities, interests, and the events happening in their communities and beyond, including the [pandemic](#) and incidents of [bias and racialized violence](#). (Read more [here.](#))
- To build healthy communities for educators, establish **educator affinity groups**ⁱⁱ – including racial affinity groups -- to increase the wellness and retention of teachers, especially teachers of color. (Read more [here.](#))

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ. Recommendations have been curated from *Strategies to Solve Unfinished Learning* (from The Education Trust and MDRC), *Rebuild and Reimagine: Restarting School with Equity at the Center* (www.reimaginecaschools.org), and *From Crisis to Opportunity: Recovering California’s Commitment to Equity* (from The Education Trust-West).
- ⁱⁱ. Farima Pour-Khorshid, “Cultivating Sacred Spaces: A Racial Affinity Group Approach to Support Critical Educators of Color,” *Teaching Education* 29 (February 2019): 318-329.