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# The American Rescue Plan

## EDITOR'S NOTE

The pandemic is still raging over a year later. In this Spotlight, subcategorize the unprecedented digits K12 will have available and delve into what can be done to support the most vulnerable.

See What the Huge COVID-19 Aid Deal Biden Has Signed Means for Education, in Two Charts ..... **2**

How COVID-19 Will Make Fixing America's Worst-Performing Schools Even Harder ..... **3**

School Budgets: Why They're Not As Bad As Predicted..... **7**

How to Talk About Next School Year Presents a Big Test for Education Leaders..... **10**

Miguel Cardona Unveils Summer Learning Partnership, Releases Some COVID-19 Aid ..... **12**

## OPINION

Strategies for Supporting LGBTQ Students ..... **14**

When Does Educational Equity Become Educationally Unethical? ..... **16**

Published on March 11, 2021

# See What the Huge COVID-19 Aid Deal Biden Has Signed Means for Education, in Two Charts

By Andrew Ujifusa

President Joe Biden has signed the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, which will provide a fresh round of coronavirus relief for schools as an unprecedented infusion of federal aid for K-12 education continues.

The legislation includes approximately \$129 billion to help students and educators deal with the various impacts of the pandemic; most of that money (about \$123 billion) is part of a stabilization fund for elementary and secondary education that’s distributed through the federal Title I formula for disadvantaged students. Local school districts will receive at least 90 percent of that stabilization fund, but they must earmark one dollar out of every five for learning recovery programs.

The bill includes “maintenance of equity” provisions that in general are designed to prevent or minimize state and local cuts to schools serving relatively large shares of students from low-income households.

Through this and two previous COVID-19 relief bills enacted in March and December of 2020, public schools have received approximately \$195 billion in aid from the federal government. That’s nearly twice the \$100 billion K-12 education received in the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, commonly known as the stimulus, to counteract the effects of the Great Recession.

In partnership with the Learning Policy Institute, Education Week has created an interactive database about the American Relief Plan’s main education provisions. Using Congressional Research Service data, it provides estimated per-pupil funding figures by state, funding for local learning-recovery efforts by state, and other details.

“This historic legislation is about rebuilding the backbone of this country,” Biden said when he signed the legislation Thursday.

In a speech evening marking one year since the declaration of the coronavirus pandemic, Biden lamented “the loss of learning” and other effects COVID-19 has had on children.

Biden said that thanks to the American Rescue Plan, as well as his efforts to accelerate the vaccination of teachers and other



President Joe Biden signs the American Rescue Plan, a coronavirus relief package, in the Oval Office of the White House on March 11, 2021.

## How the \$129 Billion Federal Infusion for Education Will Work

The majority of the American Rescue Plan’s funding for elementary and secondary education will go to local school districts. States must also set aside money for priorities like learning recovery and services for homeless students.

### Breakdown of K-12 Funding to States

Minimum Grants to LEAs	\$109,777,320,000
Minimum Learning Recovery Grants	\$6,098,740,000
Summer Enrichment	\$1,219,748,000
After-School Programs	\$1,219,748,000
Administrative Costs	\$609,874,000
Remaining Funds	\$3,049,370,000
Homeless Students	\$800,000,000
Special Education State Grants	\$2,580,000,000
Private Schools	\$2,750,000,000

Total Emergency Fund Amount: \$128,554,800,000

SOURCE: Learning Policy Institute analysis of Congressional Research Service calculations



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school staff, “We can accelerate the massive nationwide effort to reopen our schools safely and meet my goal ... of opening a majority of K-8 schools in my first 100 days in office. This is going to be the number one priority of my new secretary of education, Miguel Cardona.”

At the most basic level, the American Rescue Plan reflects Biden’s COVID-19 recovery blueprint, in which he called for \$130 billion for K-12 education.

As the legislation worked its way through Congress, lawmakers included the mandato-

ry support for learning recovery efforts, created dedicated funding streams for summer enrichment, after-school programs, private schools, and special education.

The bill also includes \$350 billion for state, local, territorial and tribal governments, and \$7 billion for the federal E-Rate program to provide students with internet service and internet-connected devices.

Supporters of the American Rescue Plan say it will support urgent K-12 priorities. But critics have questioned whether schools truly need additional federal aid. ■

### See American Rescue Plan Education Funding for Each State

In partnership with the Learning Policy Institute, Education Week has created an [interactive database](#) about the American Relief Plan’s main education provisions. Using Congressional Research Service data, it provides estimated per-pupil funding figures by state, funding for local learning-recovery efforts by state, and other details.



Published on March 23, 2021

## How COVID-19 Will Make Fixing America’s Worst-Performing Schools Even Harder

By Daarel Burnette II

Six years ago, barely a third of the students at East High School, in Rochester, N.Y., graduated on time. Students were being suspended at a rate of more than 2,000 each year. More than half were chronically absent, and more than three-quarters couldn’t meet the state’s academic benchmarks.

In 2015, at a time when East High—one of the city’s oldest and biggest—had been deemed New York state’s worst-performing school, the district’s board let the University

of Rochester take the reins.

The arrangement, which involved overhauling the staff, curriculum, and school climate, has proven mostly successful—and came at a sticker price of more than \$36,000 per student.

By the 2019-20 school year, more than 78 percent of students had graduated on time, fewer than 68 had been suspended in a school of 2,000, and the majority of its freshman had met the state’s academic benchmarks.

“This school was struggling mightily. It was a bleeding wound, and the district needed to do something fast,” said Eamonn Scanlon,

the Education Policy Director for the Children’s Agenda, a local advocacy organization that’s analyzed the district’s spending. “This community made a concentrated effort and gave the school more money than any other school in the district, and the results show.”

Now, however, the coronavirus pandemic threatens to reverse the school’s progress. The Rochester School District, which funnels money to East while it remains under outside management, is in severe fiscal distress due to management missteps and the decline of the state’s sales and income tax revenue, which the district is heavily reliant upon. The school



East High School in Rochester, N.Y., is the site of “The Legacy Project: The Eyes of our Ancestors,” an art installation by Rochester artist Shawn Dunwoody.

took a 20 percent funding cut last year.

Until February, the school had been in full remote-only learning, which upended its ambitious academic agenda. Adding to the disruptive atmosphere, Rochester has been the site of massive Black Lives Matter protests over the police killing of a Black man and the pepper-spraying of a 9-year-old Black girl in 2020.

When the pandemic ends, it will not be cheap for East’s staff to get students, many of whom have checked out during the school’s remote learning offerings, back up to speed. While the new American Rescue Plan funnels nearly \$130 billion into K-12 nationally to deal with fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the inadequacies and structural funding problems that have plagued districts such as Rochester will remain.

“With all the progress that we’ve made, we know that it’s slowed,” said Shaun Nelms, who holds the title of the superintendent at East, which has an upper and lower school and serves grades 6 to 12. “Everything we’ve done in the last five years to build this academic plan, to build a sense of family to build staff, that preparation, has got us through these difficult obstacles. COVID was our opportunity to see if this model works.”

The precarious fate of East High School’s turnaround mirrors the fiscal pressures on many of the nation’s worst-performing schools.

These schools are scattered across urban, suburban, and rural settings alike. In many cases, they are filled with low-income students of color. And for the most part, they are heavily reliant on a volatile mix of sales and income tax revenue and, sometimes, philanthropic grants.

There’s no shortage of research-backed ideas on how to help them. But when, and if, administrators manage to craft, pay for, and jump-start a successful school turnaround model, the money often disappears before the staff can claim victory.

The widespread disruption of in-person schooling during the pandemic and the concurrent economic turmoil has made the situation even more precarious for these schools. They illustrate how America’s byzantine school finance system compounds, rather than assists, the nation’s fitful efforts to provide all students with an adequate and equitable education.



— Mike Bradley for Education Week

### How money fueled a school’s turnaround

Despite districts collectively receiving billions of dollars in compensatory revenue from federal and state lawmakers through Title I and other programs, the nation’s worst-performing schools still struggle to financially break even with their better-performing counterparts, according to an Education Week analysis.

Using newly available public data compiled by Edunomics Lab, a research center based at Georgetown University, Education Week examined the 2018-19 school year spending amounts of almost 1,000 of the worst-performing schools in Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Texas, and Wyoming, as identified by their state agencies under the Every Student Succeeds Act.

In four of the five states, more than a third of the worst-performing schools had less to spend on students than the average school in their state.

In the fifth state, Georgia, almost half of the worst-performing schools spent less on students than the average school in their state.

In other words, even though these schools serve students who are conclusively harder and more expensive to educate, they’re starting at an economic disadvantage.

The cause of this upside-down pattern of spending is two-fold, experts say.

Federal and state governments are often not sending enough money to make up for districts’ anemic local property tax revenue. Local administrators also often use the extra money they receive for academic intervention programs at these low-performing schools to

“We’re not just throwing money at the project, we’re taking money and carefully placing it where it’ll produce a better life for kids.”

**STEPHEN UEBBING**  
PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION,  
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Shaun Nelms, superintendent of East High School in Rochester, N.Y., is aiming to keep the school's turnaround effort on course amid the pandemic's disruption.

patch holes in their overall budgets.

Chronically low spending can result in high teacher and principal turnover, inefficient curriculum and insufficient wrap-around services.

This could help explain the mixed results from President Barack Obama's initiative under the School Improvement Grant program to spend more than \$7 billion on the nation's worst-performing schools.

"Was it actually \$7 billion extra, or was it filling in gaps caused by the recession?" asked Terra Wallin, EdTrust's Associate Director for P-12 accountability and special projects, who helped the department design and execute its SIG program in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009. "It's wrong to suggest that there was no return on investment."

### K-12 Spending: How It Stacks Up for the Worst-Performing Schools

Education Week examined per-student spending at every school in five states selected by the Edunomics research lab at Georgetown University based on data newly required under the Every Student Succeeds Act. [This graphic](#) shows how spending at the lowest-performing schools in each of those states compares to the average per-student spending by school statewide as reported under ESSA.

### The pandemic squelches momentum

The pandemic has further warped states' efforts in several ways.

ESSA gave states more autonomy to chose a turnaround model, as long as it was research-backed, and the law allowed states to consider accountability measures other than just test scores in identifying low-performing schools.

The federal government today spends more than \$14.3 billion under Title I on schools that serve low-income students. ESSA requires states to set aside around 7 percent of their Title I spending to turn around their lowest-performing schools. That amounts to about \$1 billion a year for more than 6,000 schools nationwide.

But the percentage of schools identified



— Mike Bradley for Education Week

as the worst-performing in each state varies widely, resulting in money being stretched across many schools or concentrated in just a handful. For example, Florida in 2018 identified more than 69 percent of its schools as under-performing; South Carolina, by contrast, identified only 3 percent in the same year.

States began identifying those schools in 2018 and are required to reevaluate which schools qualify as the worst-performing every three years. That new list would have been due this summer, but because of the pandemic, the federal government waived that requirement for a year.

As for the money that's already been spent, it's hard to tell whether it's been used effectively because there's little recent data, partly because of the pandemic's disruption to standardized testing. Similarly, it'll take even more data to figure out which crop of schools have yet to be identified but need to be.

"This has thrown everything off track because many of these schools were just trying to survive, literally trying to keep their virtual doors open," said Wallin. "They're much less focused on evidence-based intervention."

### How money made a difference in Rochester

Researchers increasingly point to the impact targeted revenue increases can have on academic outcomes at the school level.

East High School is an example. In 2015, the then-struggling school was separated from the district, placed under university control, and made the recipient of millions in fed-

“

This has thrown everything off track because many of these schools were just trying to survive, literally trying to keep their virtual doors open.”

#### TERRA WALLIN

EDTRUST'S ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR P-12 ACCOUNTABILITY AND SPECIAL PROJECTS



eral turnaround grants. By the fall of 2019, almost every marker of academic outcomes had risen, and the school's culture had improved, according to available data and studies conducted on the school.

Administrators in Rochester attribute their success over the past several years to consistent, adequate, and careful spending used for a tailor-made curriculum, intense teacher recruitment and retention strategies, and in-school and out-of-school wraparound services for students.

"You have to have sustainable, predictable revenue, and it has to be intentionally and strategically spent on what the evidence tells us makes a difference," said Stephen Uebbing, a school of education professor at the University of Rochester, who guided a handful of professors and students in crafting East's turnaround model. "We're not just throwing money at the project, we're taking money and carefully placing it where it'll produce a better life for kids."

Uebbing, who led New York's Canandaigua district for 18 years before retiring in 2006, said the turnaround proposal was built on both best practices supported by research and on sufficient funding. He also said such funding "needs to be equitable, not equal funding. It needs to reflect the level of needs for the kids we're working with."

East had been one of Rochester's flagship schools into the 1960s. But it started losing ground due to demographic shifts, failed integration efforts, and disinvestment from the school board, according to Nelms. Community tension was on the rise. Three days after a campaign visit from President Richard Nixon in 1971, a fight broke out between Black and white students in the cafeteria at a time when the school was attempting to comply with a voluntary integration plan. Families left the school in droves.

Over the next several decades, meanwhile, the district implemented an elaborate school choice model and invested more in its magnet programs than in neighborhood schools such as East. The school's offerings suffered as a result, Nelms said.

By 2015, just 5 percent of the neighborhood's students chose East, which now, like the district at large, is made up mostly of Black and Latino students. Almost 1 in 5 of its students are English-language learners, and more than 1 in 6 students have a learning disability. In addition to just a handful of students at the school meeting state benchmarks, there was high turnover among the teaching staff, morale was low, and the school lacked a cohesive curriculum.

Discipline—and the way it was adminis-



—Mike Bradley for Education Week

tered—was also a problem. Any adult in the school—including police officers, cafeteria workers and hallway monitors—could issue suspensions and they often did, suspending students for days at a time for talking out of turn, not abiding by the dress code, and running in the hallway.

All of that culminated in the district's decision in 2015 to put the University of Rochester in charge of turning around East. The university in turn tapped Nelms, a former assistant superintendent in the district, to lead the school.

By setting up the arrangement with the university, the school became eligible under the state's accountability system for millions of dollars of state and federal improvement grants.

Nelms along with the group of professors at the University of Rochester conducted several studies to identify the school's needs. Faculty members were required to reapply for their jobs and, if hired, given a 9 percent raise.

In the 2015-16 school year, Nelms started adding hours to the school day, at a cost of \$2 million a year, and developing customized education plans for each student. Students also were given two courses of math and two courses of English/language arts.

The school spent another \$150,000 rewriting the curriculum, and half a million dollars on consultants from the university who offered more than 20 days of professional development, observed classes, and collected data.

It hired seven social workers, 11 guidance counselors, and two nurses, as well as an outside nonprofit to revise its discipline practices. And after learning that some students in the

Most classrooms at East High School have large television displays connected to teacher workstations.

neighborhood were afraid of enrolling because of violence nearby, East increased bus transportation for all students.

By 2017, the results were promising. More students had started enrolling. Discipline incidents plummeted from 1,629 in 2015 to 332 in 2019. The passing rate on 9th graders' state English/Language Arts exam climbed from 30 percent in 2015 to 60 percent in 2019.

By the start of the 2019-20 school year, just a few months before the pandemic, the school was one of the district's fastest-growing in terms of academics.

### New pressures threaten to unravel East High's progress

But the University of Rochester management regime couldn't spare East from the district's financial woes.

In 2019, the district's chief financial officer mistakenly hired too many special education teachers, resulting in a \$45 million shortfall. While the state bailed the district out with a loan, administrators still had to lay off more than 100 teachers and staff members.

The school board voted in 2020, after the start of the pandemic, to cut 20 percent of East High School's budget. Nelms also reduced professional development, ended some con-

tracted services with University of Rochester, and laid off some support staff.

Nelms said he expects Rochester this year to restore many of the cuts in a budget process. And while the state plans to make some cuts to its overall K-12 spending, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, has proposed to restore a long-term loan the state has promised Rochester to help balance its budget.

Rochester stands to receive more than \$200 million from the newest flood of federal COVID aid this year, according to local predictions. But the district's CFO has warned of potential layoffs.

Still, Nelms said, "Now that we have a clear plan in place, it's much easier to identify where new money has to go."

Both Nelms and Uebbing also are convinced that the school's spending needs will decrease over the coming years. The district spent a lot of money training teachers on classroom management and restorative practices, which they project will reduce costly discipline cases. Enrollment is expected to rebound, bringing in more per-pupil revenue. And with teachers having written the school's curriculum, the administration hopes to spend less on professional development in that area.

"If you want to make a difference, you have to invest in that difference," Uebbing said. "In the long run, it'll make a better life for these kids."

But the school's supporters and others in the community are well-aware of how fragile its turnaround remains, especially at a time when the pandemic continues to destabilize local budgets nationwide.

"A big point of contention here for the last couple of years is this thought that, 'Why does East get more money than my school?' and 'How can we take away from that?'" said Scanlon, of the Children's Agenda advocacy group. "But if you do that, East is no longer what it is." ■



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Published on March 19, 2021

## School Budgets: Why They're Not As Bad As Predicted

By Mark Lieberman

**P**rojections from economists last spring painted a grim picture of what the recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic might look like, with schools facing cuts even more devastating than those that followed the 2008 economic downturn. Teacher layoffs, delays to much-needed construction projects, and

cancellations of programs that provide extra support to students were all on the table.

Fast-forward to nearly a year later, and the outlook in many places is markedly improved.

Some state revenues have stabilized or even slightly grown year over year, thanks to an influx of federal relief funds and a smaller-than-expected drop in sales tax collection.

Not all states have weathered the pandemic unscathed, though. States that rely heavily on tourism, like Hawaii and Nevada, or revenue

from the oil and gas industries, like North Dakota and Texas, are facing substantial losses and pondering significant cuts. That could prove particularly troubling for districts in those states that lie in low-income areas and rely heavily on state funds. State-level debates over school budget cuts are raging in New Jersey and Wyoming.

Even school districts in financially healthy states can hardly breathe a sigh of relief just yet.

Extended school building shutdowns and remote learning technology challenges have compounded inequities in access to high-quality learning and set back many students' academic achievement by at least several months. Far more public school students than usual nationwide have dropped off their home district's radar, either switching to private or charter options or disappearing from view altogether. Even as COVID-19 vaccines roll out, the still-rising death toll and more contagious virus variants stand in the way of a return to normal in-person interactions.

For districts with a high volume of federal Title I funding, the three sets of federal stimulus funds over the last year could go a long way toward addressing some of those concerns. But some school funding experts regard Title I as an imperfect and outdated system for dispensing aid to the students and schools that need it the most.

The uneven distribution of financial harm from the pandemic is a familiar story for the nation's public education system, which is rife with systemic inequities. The federal government supplies less than 10 percent of K-12 school districts' budgets; the rest comes from a blend of state and local funds that differs greatly from place to place. Districts with low property values tend to rely more heavily on state funds, which means they depend on the whims of the economy to drive spending.



“You might hear something like, ‘It’s only a 5 percent cut to education.’ But that 5 percent is much more meaningful to a district that can’t tap local resources,” said Michael Griffith, a senior school finance researcher and policy analyst for the Learning Policy Institute. “It’s the kids that need help the most that tend to get hurt the worst.”

School finance is notoriously tricky to parse in the best of times. During a pandemic that has brought no shortage of strife and uncertainty, understanding how schools are doing and where their greatest needs lie is an even more pressing challenge.

Here’s a look at some of the crucial facts to know about where schools stand financially as the current school year wraps up.

### How much revenue did states lose because of the pandemic?

Most states’ current revenue stacks up to less than what they were expecting before the pandemic. For some states—Ohio, Vermont, and Kansas among them—the current revenue is only a hair lower than expected. In other states, though, pre-pandemic predictions far outpaced reality. New York, Alaska, Nevada, and Texas each came in more than 10 percent below expectations.

Even so, many economists in the early days of COVID-19 expected these numbers to look far worse for states. Federal funds directed to state and local governments to fill those gaps partially account for that positive outcome, but they don’t tell the whole story.

### Why did some states lose less money than some analysts projected last spring and summer?

A conveniently timed 2018 Supreme Court decision deserves some credit. In *South Dakota v. Wayfair*, judges ruled 5-4 that states can collect sales taxes on online purchases, even if the online vendor doesn’t have a physical location in the state where the items were purchased. During COVID-19, with much of the country homebound and many brick-and-mortar stores closed, online purchasing soared, and states reaped the benefits.

Many states have also been spending cautiously and making more liberal use of rainy-day funds in the aftermath of the Great Recession. That meant they were better positioned for an emergency on the scale of the pandemic than they might have been otherwise.

Finally, economists have pointed out the unusual nature of the current recession,

“The only thing that we have that’s an experience like this are hurricanes. A hurricane comes through, wipes out a couple districts, they have to close and need remediation to help get kids up to speed. This isn’t a couple districts. This is a national issue.”

**MICHAEL GRIFFITH**  
SENIOR SCHOOL FINANCE RESEARCHER  
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which has confounded expectations for the typical trajectory of an economic downturn. Some have called the economic recovery as “K-shaped” with high-income people getting back to normal more quickly while low-income people suffer disproportionately.

Low-wage jobs that require working in public have been the hardest hit by the pandemic, while higher-wage workers have more easily transitioned to remote work. People with high incomes naturally contribute more tax revenue to the states, which means school budgets haven’t lost as much of their state backing as they might have.

### Why did some states lose so much more than others?

CDC guidelines have urged Americans against unnecessary travel since last year. States like Hawaii, Florida, and Nevada that center their economy on tourism revenue have naturally taken a big hit. Hawaii, for instance, saw a 17 percent drop in year-over-year revenue during the period between April and December, according to Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center data.

States like California, which rely heavily on capital gains revenue, have been buoyed by the relatively resilient stock market of the last 12 months. California’s April-December revenue during 2020 was 1.2 percent higher than during the comparable period in 2019, according to the Urban-Brookings data.

States with economies centered around natural resources, like Wyoming, North Dakota, and Alaska, have suffered significant financial losses. But there too, prospects are mixed and subject to change: Revenue forecasts in North Dakota and Alaska have recently improved thanks to rising oil prices.

### How badly did schools need relief from the federal government?

In a recent survey by the Association of School Business Officials International, a membership organization for K-12 finance decision makers, 55 percent of respondents said the two federal stimulus packages in 2020 were not enough to meet their unprecedented financial needs during the pandemic.

An analysis of school district budgets from Georgetown University’s Edunomics Lab shows evidence that schools with a high percentage of students learning in-person are spending far more overall than schools that have stuck with full-time remote learning for most students. The Biden administration is urging the safe reopen-

ing of most school districts as quickly as possible, which means even the districts that have managed to save money working remotely may need to shell out more before long.

Atypical pandemic-era expenses for in-person schooling include more substitute teachers to make up for teacher absences due to illness or quarantine; more nurses to assist with COVID-19 screening efforts; and personal protective equipment like masks and hand sanitizers to prevent the spread of the virus.

Some critics of the latest federal relief package have pointed to statistics noting that many districts haven't spent significant portions of the federal money they received last year. Those numbers may be deceiving, though. If a district is using some of those funds to keep staff on the payroll for the rest of the year, the full scope of that investment wouldn't show up on a report on how much money has been spent so far.

"If you're living paycheck to paycheck, you're not going to spend every cent of your paycheck on the day you receive it," said Elleka Yost, the director of advocacy for ASBO.

### How will the American Rescue Plan, passed by Congress and signed by President Joe Biden this month, differ from last year's stimulus funds?

It might be too early to tell exactly how the latest federal relief will play out. The funds from the previous relief package are still trickling out, even as many schools continue to grapple with the short-term calculus for re-opening buildings.

Districts spent much of the early federal relief money on short-term COVID mitigation measures like masks and cleaning supplies, as well as digital devices and hotspots to improve the quality of remote learning experiences for students, according to the ASBO survey.

Now that some of those immediate concerns are out of the way, district leaders will turn to longer-term considerations: How far behind have students fallen? What's the best way to get them up to speed? Which essential but previously underfunded initiatives are worth the investment now, and which ones can wait?

Spending the federal money will require some ambitious thinking, given the lack of precedent for the present conditions. But it will also necessitate some caution and long-term planning, school funding experts say.

Some districts may be wary of investments that lead to long-term costs, like payroll for new staff members or maintenance costs for construction projects, they might not be able

to pay for once the federal funds run out in a few years. Schools are still feeling the effects of the aftermath of the 2009 federal stimulus plan—when the money ran out, budgets shrank, and many still haven't recovered.

Ambitious projects like constructing a new building with more room for students to spread out, or installing an upgraded ventilation system as health experts have long advised, involve complicated, multistep processes for procurement and implementation that will pose logistical challenges. Governments may need to step in and offer relief from those burdens, like longer deadlines and less paperwork, if those projects need to be turned around quickly as responses to the COVID crisis.

The American Rescue Plan says districts must spend the relief funds by September 2023. An obscure law called the Tydings Amendment gives districts another year beyond that if the funds aren't spent by then.

Given the longer timeline than for last year's federal stimulus money, state elected officials might look more closely at putting their stamp on what purposes federal funds can be used for before they go to districts. Already, Republican state lawmakers in Wisconsin are pushing for CARES Act funds to be reserved for districts offering in-person instruction. North Carolina divided up a previous federal allocation into a number of categories for districts to spend within.

In addition to its education-specific portion, the American Rescue Plan is also sending \$350 billion in fiscal aid to state and local governments. Some are already crowing about the opportunities to fund overdue projects and fill budget gaps. It's unclear how much schools will benefit from that windfall, though. In February 2021, a nationwide CivicPulse survey of more than 500 local policymakers, only 8 percent said they plan to use future federal relief funds for K-12 schools.

### How will this year's drop in student enrollment affect districts' budgets going forward?

Most districts are seeing enrollment declines that are far steeper than usual. More than 80 percent of schools consulted in the ASBO survey reported enrolling fewer students this school year than last school year. Of those, nearly a quarter said enrollment dropped by more than 5 percent—far above the typical average enrollment decline.

Both before and during the pandemic, some states have adopted "hold harmless" policies that continue to fund school districts based on

earlier, higher enrollment numbers. Advocates for those policies have criticized funding models where money follows the student, pointing out that many of schools' costs are fixed no matter how many fewer students enroll.

Some states, like Louisiana and South Carolina, don't currently have policies for waiving cuts for enrollment declines, though. Texas is holding districts harmless for enrollment declines only if 80 percent of students are learning in person. Some relief that is currently on the books might not last once the pandemic is over.

### What challenges lie ahead?

Even amid an economic crisis that has kept tens of millions out of work and unable to afford basic expenses like food and rent, the national household savings rate is at an all-time high, as people wait breathlessly for normal life to return. Some economists believe a massive boom in spending could be on the horizon and a thriving economy along with it. Others worry that such a rapid change in spending habits could accelerate inflation.

In the early days of the pandemic, many observers predicted a massive, nationwide exodus of teachers from the profession. Early indications suggest those projections may have been extreme, but burnout and demoralization among school workers remains a significant concern that could affect schools' ability to expand staffing in the future to help students get back on track.

Perhaps the most confounding challenge is the lack of certainty about what the future will hold. The pandemic has upended even the most confident budget predictions and forced considerable introspection among policymakers and experts about how schools are funded and what will be necessary to stem a crisis that could define K-12 learning for generations of students.

"The only thing that we have that's an experience like this are hurricanes. A hurricane comes through, wipes out a couple districts, they have to close and need remediation to help get kids up to speed," Griffith said. "This isn't a couple districts. This is a national issue." ■

### ► Pandemic Damages Most States' 2021 Revenue Projections

Pandemic Damages Most States' 2021 Revenue Projections. State by State [Interactive Chart](#) Showing Percent Change in General Fund Revenues Compared to Pre-Pandemic Estimates.



# Helping 700,000 students transition to remote learning



*How the second largest school district in the U.S. is relying on Amazon's sourcing, engineering, and delivery expertise as they shift from in-person instruction to virtual classrooms.*

As schools around the world rapidly migrate to online learning environments, education institutions need access to technology solutions. Los Angeles Unified, the second largest school district in the U.S., turned to Amazon for help with supporting parents, students, and faculty during this urgent transition.

Amazon Web Services (AWS) quickly deployed its [Amazon Connect](#) service—a cloud contact center—for the school district to field IT questions and provide remote support on a variety of topics while working from home. With AWS, Los Angeles Unified has launched five contact centers to serve as resources for families. Los Angeles Unified is using Amazon Connect to handle high volumes of incoming calls from across the school district, and route to appropriate remote staff members. These Amazon Connect contact centers also enable parents and other callers to connect with an IT help desk, the mental health hotline, their school principal, and other support hotlines.

**"Amazon is providing brainpower and a can-do approach to help us provide learning to students and support students and families in need."**

Austin Beutner - Los Angeles Unified Superintendent

Amazon is also helping to facilitate remote learning by providing students at 1,386 schools in more than 30 municipalities across 730 square miles with the technology needed to connect to online learning tools. Amazon is donating its delivery services to support contactless, doorstep deliveries of Los Angeles Unified-issued devices directly to tens of thousands of students' homes, offering critical support to Los Angeles Unified families who may have limited access to transportation and are under stay-at-home orders. In addition, amidst shortages and increased demand, Amazon Business acted fast with a global supplier to source 132,000 noise-reducing headphones to deliver to all high school students in the district for minimizing distractions at home. Amazon Business similarly equipped Los Angeles Unified contact center staff members with headphones to ensure they have the tools they need to be effective.

"Helping students, parents, and schools alleviate some of their challenges as they transition to remote learning is one of the most important things that Amazon can do to help during the COVID-19 crisis," said Kim Majerus, Leader, U.S. Education, State and Local Government, AWS. "Los Angeles Unified is the second largest school district in the nation, serving a large and diverse community. Amazon is focused on providing students, faculty, and staff with technology to support successful learning environments during this unprecedented time."

"We work with Amazon in several areas," Los Angeles Unified Superintendent Austin Beutner said. "Amazon is helping us get things done. The mental health and family hotlines were up and running within just a few days. The same quick response is being used to strengthen Schoology—the knowledge sharing platform our educators use to provide lessons to students. Amazon is also helping connect all of our students online with the delivery of devices to students at home. And, the headphones will help to eliminate distractions while students are working online. Amazon is providing brainpower and a can-do approach to help us provide learning to students and support students and families in need."

Amazon, Amazon Business, and AWS are working with K-12 school systems and higher education institutions around the world to support online learning during this unprecedented time of sustained school closures. [Learn more](#) about how Amazon is supporting its employees, customers, and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Published on April 12, 2021

# How to Talk About Next School Year Presents A Big Test for Education Leaders

By Andrew Ujifusa

**Y**ou're a state education official. It's August 2021. A big TV news station has given you a few minutes of air time to talk to the public about the upcoming school year after all of the stress and heartache caused by the coronavirus pandemic. What do you say?

From the federal government on down, officials have struggled time and again during COVID-19's disruption with trying to help the public understand the circumstances determining when schools open and how changing conditions impact school operations. Now they face difficult choices in terms of discussing the next school year. Should they confidently plan for all school buildings to be open, and make this expectation clear to the public? How should they discuss what students need from schools and others?

Shifting knowledge and new evidence about how the virus can and does affect schools has made clear messaging harder. And in many if not most places, schools will still look, feel, and operate in atypical ways next year. But state and local leaders will play a big role in framing what will help students most and what the public should expect from schools, in the next year and beyond. And whether schools have held traditional classes all, some, or none of the time in the 2020-21 academic year will affect how they do it.

Addressing lost learning opportunities remains a policy as well as a rhetorical priority for many educators and public officials. Yet ignoring students' emotional health in the name of rapid academic remediation, or failing to acknowledge families that might want to stick with virtual classes next year, could backfire.

In the end, ensuring that schools reintegrate and care for students in a variety of ways, while not proclaiming and acting as if things are "back to normal," could be a key test of leaders' rhetorical and strategic dexterity.

"This is probably the most complicated issue that folks have dealt with since segregation," said Terry Holliday, Kentucky's former education commissioner and an ex-president of the Council of Chief State School Officers. "It's so complex because no matter what you do, people



—Leo Patrizi/E+/Getty Images

are not going to think that's a good idea."

Some states might also have to stress that their strategies won't be rigid and that being responsive to circumstances might involve shutting down schools again if the virus has a resurgence. Uncertainty remains about how disruptive or dangerous coronavirus variants will be in the future. It could be hard to leave aside those and other concerns that the pandemic will continue to generate in school communities.

"In the absence of information, people make stuff up," said Stephen Pruitt, the president of the Southern Regional Education Board, which works with 16 member states. "The public will not get too scared if it feels like their leadership has a plan. There needs to be a good solid plan, but there's got to be a recognition that you may have to call an audible."

Yet if adult COVID-19 vaccinations become commonplace and restrictions ease or disappear, discussions about the biggest priorities for schools could undergo a corresponding shift, especially as tens of billions of dollars in federal aid flows to schools to address students' needs. Even talking about state standardized test scores from this year could easily prove to be uniquely challenging.

Some of the priorities leaders shared on

communicating clearly in the current climate are (or at least sound) straightforward: Point to data. Find local messengers people already trust. Don't act frantically. Don't understate the situation, but also don't carelessly use deficit-driven language about "loss." And don't promise silver bullets.

But none of those strategies in isolation reduce the scope of what schools are facing.

In addition, talking to the public as if disadvantaged students and families of color haven't been hit especially hard by the pandemic could prove to be tone-deaf or worse. A recent study estimated that 40,000 children in the U.S. have lost a parent to COVID-19, and that Black children have been disproportionately affected by these deaths.

"You acknowledge that the hardships of the pandemic have not been uniform. Where infection rates were highest, where the deaths were greatest, where the economic hardships were greatest—that's where resources needed to be [focused]," said Pedro Noguera, the dean of the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education. "Every community's not the same. The fears are not the same."

State and local K-12 leaders don't have to focus on just masks, making up lost learning time, or other things that will make daily



school experiences difficult, unprecedented, or uncertain.

“Part of what will make people more likely to return is to say: It’s not going to be like it was,” Noguera stressed. “It’s going to be more supportive. It’s going to be more engaging for kids.”

In addition, school officials could emphasize how the upcoming year will provide positive experiences in familiar ways.

“It’s also important to say: We are going to do sports, we are going to have social events,” said Dr. Amber D’Souza, a professor at Johns Hopkins University’s Bloomberg School of Public Health. “What are the things we are going to be able to do this fall that perhaps we didn’t do last fall?”

### There’s a new constituency for school news

Ohio was the first state to shut down all its public schools in response to the pandemic on March 12, 2020. The state’s health director at the time, Amy Acton, became a hero to some and a pariah to others for the health restrictions she supported early in the pandemic. And earlier this year, Gov. Mike DeWine, a Republican, prioritized vaccinations for educators in exchange for schools agreeing to resume some form of in-person learning by March 1—and threatened to halt those vaccinations if schools kept their doors shut.

So what has Ohio Superintendent of Public Instruction Paolo DeMaria learned from his state’s rollercoaster of headlines and controversy? In essence, he said, he’s focused on coordinating his department’s response with other state leaders—before making that hypothetical speech on TV, for example, he said he’d want to consult with Ohio health officials—but otherwise hasn’t tried to grab the megaphone. Instead, he’s focused on being a conduit of information to district leaders.

“The most trusted communicator about what’s going on in a child’s school is a child’s teacher, then a child’s principal, then a local superintendent,” DeMaria said. “The state is pretty far down in the fourth or fifth position.”

That approach is backed up by at least some public opinion polling, which has found a relatively high degree of public trust in local school leaders to make the right decisions during the pandemic.

But COVID-19 has also shifted how leaders must think about and respond to the news cycle.

“New information will come out quickly, and we have to respond quickly in ways schools and school boards aren’t really used to,” said Ryan Stewart, New Mexico’s secre-

“

The most trusted communicator about what’s going on in a child’s school is a child’s teacher, then a child’s principal, then a local superintendent. The state is pretty far down in the fourth or fifth position.”

**PAOLO DEMARIA**

OHIO SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

tary of education.

When New Mexico announced its plan for schools to fully reopen in person the week of April 5, and gave districts a few weeks’ notice, at least a few local school officials said they were taken off guard by the news. One local school board president, for example, said the state’s decision for a full reentry into classrooms this month made proper social distancing in schools impossible.

Stewart acknowledged that some districts might have felt that this heads-up gave them too little time. But he also expressed confidence in his communications strategies, which include weekly calls with district and charter school leaders and focus groups to see where local schools stand. Both Stewart and DeMaria put building a strong information pipeline to districts as a top priority.

The Ohio education department’s “Reset and Restart” website includes resources including districts’ plans for extended learning and guidance on everything from career-technical education to nutrition. That work, focused on this academic year, will inform the districts’ approaches to sharing information about next year; there’s already a section about remote learning for 2021-22 that highlights options that districts will be able to offer families that are already available under current state law.

Indeed, many state leaders are still discussing some form of remote learning as an important priority, even though they recognize that just because students are doing

well in virtual classes that doesn’t mean they are getting counseling or other services they need, said Jeremy Anderson, the president of the Education Commission of the States.

Such considerations can also help leaders keep in mind that so many parents (willingly or not) have gotten a new and intimate understanding of how their children’s schools work.

In terms of who’s paying attention to public rhetoric and messages about schools, “it’s not the same constituency as it was before,” Anderson said.

### Being careful with common phrases is key

That’s related to another issue: being quick to combat inaccurate or misleading claims. DeMaria said one area where his department has been proactive is spelling out the role of his department and local districts on social media.

“We learned some lessons this past year to be precise about what is being put on the table as a state mandate, versus what are recommended practices, for which there is some flexibility,” he said.

There’s not much dispute that the pandemic has broadly affected where students stand academically. Yet using phrases about this issue casually, or without much thought, can also have unintended consequences or create new divisions.

DeMaria said rattling off “learning loss” too often in the wrong environments sends “signals that kids are quick to pick up on that somehow [they’re] at fault here.” Pruitt said talking about “unfinished learning” is a strong and precise message because, “You can’t lose what you didn’t have.”

And Anderson said he stresses the phrase “opportunity to learn” when discussing students’ pandemic-driven needs, instead of language that’s defined by shortcomings.

But care with language shouldn’t bleed over into timid decisions, some say. And not all officials have the same patience for striking a balance between in-person and remote learning.

In early April, California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat who’s faced a backlash to how he’s approached school reopening, said he expects schools to return to full-time, in-person learning in the fall.

Making it clear to the public that schools will be open in the fall is the right rhetorical strategy in general, said Douglas N. Harris, a professor and chair of economics at Tulane University.

“There’s a little bit of uncertainty about where things are going, but not a lot,” Harris said. “Bad headlines aside, things are going to

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Bad headlines aside, things are going to get safer and safer, and they were in many cases already safe to begin with.”

**DOUGLAS N. HARRIS**  
PROFESSOR AND CHAIR OF  
ECONOMICS, TULANE UNIVERSITY

get safer and safer, and they were in many cases already safe to begin with.”

But black-and-white approaches could generate friction among families that might still be skeptical of in-person learning. New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, said in March there should be no remote-learning option for students in the fall. Harris, however, stressed that states should not abandon or scoff at students who are well-served by remote learning, and that leaders can use lessons from virtual classes to improve school experiences next year.

### Finding partners, from doctor's offices to churches

Perhaps no single government agency has been the subject of more scrutiny during debates about safely reopening schools than the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As its guidance has evolved—in response to new scientific evidence, its supporters have said—detractors at different points have called CDC guidance to schools too cautious, too cavalier, and tainted by politics. And after the Biden administration released and then revised recommendations to schools about key issues like social distancing earlier this year, some might fear that further revisions to such guidance could be confusing or unhelpful.

Yet all that doesn't necessarily mean key decision makers have decided to tune out Washington. DeMaria and Stewart, for example, said they would continue to consider new information from the CDC if any becomes available; DeMaria noted that his health department's recommendations are “largely

based on the CDC recommendations.”

Even with all the CDC guidance and pandemic experiences schools can draw on, there are still scenarios where there's no established roadmap to follow. For example: Will encouraging or mandating COVID-19 vaccines for students, assuming they're widely available for all relevant age groups later this year, trigger any significant skepticism or resistance?

D'Souza, of Johns Hopkins University, thinks not, even if the people who will help ensure widespread vaccinations work in doctor's offices and not schools.

“We are able to achieve high rates of vaccination for standard childhood infectious immunizations,” she said. “Ultimately, when it becomes available, when there is the data for parents to be able to review with their pediatricians, I believe there will be high uptake.”

Just as doctors can be the key voice on student vaccinations, having partners in communities who have authority with different audiences can be a crucial strategy for setting expectations for what schools do next.

D'Souza highlighted the role faith leaders can play, for example, as well as people of different political persuasions: “Having a unified national message is often helpful, I find. But it is critical to have trustworthy messengers at every level.”

And leaders can also draw on preexisting education-focused coalitions and other state agencies to spread important messages. In New Mexico, Stewart said he's worked with his state's departments for Indian Affairs, African-American Affairs, and Early Childhood Education and Care, as well as the outside group Graduation Alliance, specifically to try to re-engage students who have dropped off the radar. That sometimes comes down to knocking on families' doors. “That's a major effort that will be ongoing for awhile,” Stewart said.

In the end, it's unlikely a few minutes of TV air time before the next school year will allay all concerns and clarify everything about what to expect. But imagining himself giving that August speech on TV about the next school year, Holliday said he would address three big issues: how much ground people's children's have lost, children's social-emotional state, and the things schools are doing and will do next year to address these priorities.

And he had a final warning for leaders in their messaging.

“Don't get too complicated,” he said. ■

*Published on March 24, 2021*

## Miguel Cardona Unveils Summer Learning Partnership, Releases Some COVID-19 Aid

By Andrew Ujifusa

**T**he U.S. Department of Education will join governors and state education chiefs to help create plans for summer learning and enrichment programs serving students hurt most by the coronavirus pandemic.

The Summer Learning & Enrichment Collaborative will assist states, school districts, and others in planning how to use new relief funds, including the \$1.2 billion earmarked for summer enrichment in the American Rescue Plan, the COVID-19 relief package signed by President Joe Biden. (That earmark represents 1 percent of the package's K-12 education aid.) The partnership, which includes the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, is set to launch in April 2021.

The department announced the new summer collaborative ahead of the agency's National School Reopening Summit, an event highlighting how schools can reopen safely for in-person learning. The agency also announced that Cardona would go on a “school reopening tour” in the weeks following the summit.

Also, in advance of the summit, the department announced the release of \$81 billion in American Rescue Plan K-12 funds to states. That represents about two-thirds of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding for states and school districts.

A department letter to states about the release of this money says that in order to access the remaining third of their allotted ESSER money, states must submit a plan describing how “ESSER funds will be used to safely return students to in-person instruction, maximize in-person instruction time, operate schools, and meet the needs of students, and that addresses other requirements” of the relief package.



The American Rescue Plan does not explicitly say that states must develop and submit plans to resume and maximize in-person learning in order to access any funding. However, many of the allowable uses for the money deal with reopening school buildings, and lawmakers spoke frequently about how the package would help get students back into classrooms. Cardona and President Joe Biden have emphasized the importance of schools resuming traditional instruction.

When Congress debated the American Rescue Plan, some lawmakers supported amending the legislation to somehow make additional federal K-12 relief contingent on schools resuming face-to-face instruction. But these efforts failed.

All the same, there's no authority in the law for the department to ultimately withhold funds due to dissatisfaction about plans for in-person learning. States won't necessarily have to be very detailed in additional information they submit to access the remaining funds. And it's common for states to submit applications to access federal aid agreeing to certain conditions.

The Education Department says it plans to make an application for the remaining funds available. Separately, the American Rescue Plan requires school districts to publish plans to resume in-person learning within 30 days of receiving aid.

The rescue package requires states to award districts their share of the funds within 60 days of getting it from the Education Department. In total, states and school districts are getting roughly \$122 billion in ESSER.

### Educators are grappling with summer strategies

What to do during the summer months has quickly become one of the biggest priorities for education officials and others.

"The Collaborative will build and deepen partnerships across states, districts, and among educators, parents, philanthropy, and nonprofit partners to scale up and sustain successful programs," the department said in a statement announcing the partnership.

Although the department has put a focus on how schools and other groups can help students this summer, some districts have already set plans for the warmer months in motion. And some states are taking action: In North Carolina, for example, state lawmakers have advanced a bill requiring to provide 30 days of summer learning. Attendance is one of several concerns for educators, however, when



Education Secretary Miguel Cardona speaks during a tour at Benjamin Franklin Elementary School, Wednesday, March 3, 2021 in Meriden, Conn.

it comes to summer school programs.

Districts are considering a range of approaches for the summer and beyond, from virtual tutoring and extending the 2020-21 school year, to increasing access to highly-rated teachers and adding days to the school calendar in the 2021-22 academic year.

Recent studies have shown that approaches such as tutoring can be effective, although they can prove quite expensive. Researchers have also looked at how extended-learning academies, utilizing small class sizes and teachers who passed a competitive application process, can help students.

The American Rescue Plan funding doesn't limit summer learning funding to traditional approaches like summer school. Indeed, some share the belief of Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., that recreation and enrichment, not academics, should be the priority for many students this summer after a difficult year for children, parents, and educators. Murphy lobbied for dedicated summer-enrichment aid to be included in the American Rescue Plan, and recently requested that the Education Department release guidance for summer programs.

Data released by the department about how students are learning during the pandemic found that as of January 2021, 43 percent of 4th graders and 48 percent of 8th graders were learning full time from home. But there are also very large disparities in the amount of live

teaching different students are getting every day. Biden has said he wants most K-8 schools open and providing in-person learning five days a week by April 30, 2021, but his administration's expectations on this front have shifted and led to backlash.

### Miguel Cardona Sends Two-Thirds of American Rescue Plan Aid to States

The Biden administration has announced awards totaling two-thirds of the American Rescue Plan's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) aid to states. The U.S. Department of Education made the money available on March 24, 2021. Most of that money must go to school districts, and states in turn must award this money to districts within 60 days of receiving it from the U.S. Department of Education.

Below see the American Rescue Plan ESSER funding made available to states on March 24, as well as the total that each state will ultimately receive. ■

### ▶ Miguel Cardona Sends Two-Thirds of American Rescue Plan Aid to States

For more state-by-state information on the \$81 billion awarded to states, see [Education Week's in-depth chart here](#).



## Making education always available, personal, and lifelong for everyone

K-12 school and district leaders are facing great uncertainty as we look toward the 2021-22 school year. They are working to address a myriad of issues including student learning loss, preparedness for remote teaching and learning, personalizing learning to improve student outcomes, closing the homework gap for students who lack reliable and safe internet access, and supporting student mental health. In addition, leaders are looking to make smart choices informed by their own data.

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Sincerely,

*Mike Hofherr*

Mike Hofherr  
Director Education Strategic Business Development  
Amazon Web Services



"At AWS, we are committed to partnering with K-12 schools and districts as they work to build a stronger digital future that supports all students."

-- Mike Hofherr, AWS



## OPINION

Published on April 11, 2021

## Strategies for Supporting LGBTQ Students

By Larry Ferlazzo

*The new question-of-the-week is:***What can teachers do to most effectively support LGBTQ students?**

**W**e teachers need to support all our students, including those who are LGBTQ.

This support is especially needed now as some politicians and others are specifically targeting transgender students for harassment.

Today, Jennica Leather, Silvina Jover, and Jennifer Orr share their suggestions.

You might also be interested in a previous post, [Six Ways Educators Can Support LGBTQ Students During COVID-19](#).

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**The thing teachers can do to most effectively support LGBTQ students is just to love them.**

Jennica Leather  
Education Week

**Love in the Classroom**

*Jennica Leather has been teaching English for 15 years and has been an EL coordinator for seven. She teaches at her alma mater, El Toro High School in Lake Forest, Calif.:*

The thing teachers can do to most effectively support LGBTQ students is just to love them.

Let me tell you what that looks like in

my classroom. The way this starts is by including pride decor and art on the walls of my classroom. Seeing that will hopefully show them that I am most likely an ally. I say “most likely” because some students will understandably not be convinced by a few posters. So I back that up with my words. My Getting to Know Me presentation for the first day includes my preferred pronouns. It also includes a picture that says “People are people” in rainbow colors. I share with them my “motto”: It does not matter to me which pronouns or name you use, what you like to wear, your favorite colors or foods, or who you love. I care about how you treat others and how you treat me.

Supporting LGBTQ students in my classroom also looks like giving them various ways to share their preferred name and/or pronouns. I have had loud and proud students who share that information on day one as I read off the names on my attendance sheet. Last year, I added a question on the questionnaire they fill out for me that asks for their preferred name, pronouns, or any other information they find important for me to know. This also looks like a sincere apology when I mess up a pronoun or name. When appropriate, I apologize in front of the whole class, but I also apologize personally. Teachers are human, and our students understand that and actually appreciate our ability to

admit to our mistakes and be sincere in our apologies.

This also looks like doing my best to avoid using gendered pronouns while teaching. Much like teaching classes of English-learners helped me stop saying “mom and dad” when I tell students to do things like get their syllabus signed, I have been learning to avoid saying “ladies and gentlemen” or anything similar when addressing the class. It has been a struggle to unlearn the use of gendered pronouns and language, but I know it makes a difference to students who don’t feel like they fit inside of those groups or who have friends who don’t fit inside those groups. When a student of mine brings a friend to my classroom for Tutorial or during a rainy lunch period, I am honored because I have learned that often means they know that their friend will feel welcome in my room when they might not feel welcome in other places.

I have had several students who shared with me that they identified as transgender, but the one who stands out the most is the one whose journey began during the time period he was in my class. He started the year as a girl, returned from the long Thanksgiving weekend with shorter hair, and then returned from winter break with an even shorter haircut and a completely new wardrobe. He started writing his chosen name next to his dead name on his assignments. One day I wrote a little note on his paper: “You don’t need to write your old name on your paper. I know who you are.” His mother later told me that moment was significant because I was the first teacher to accept him. She thanked me for helping him through that time in his life. But I don’t feel like I did anything special. All I did was love him for who he was. That’s it.

Our LGBTQ students are no different from our other students. They love some classes and hate others. They probably procrastinate too much. They laugh and love. They have struggles we know nothing about. They want what we all want: to feel like they matter in the world. Support them the same way you do all your students, by getting to know them. Be there for them through their struggles and celebrate their victories.

**“I also have the trans flag because I have loved ones who are trans, and sharing my own story makes my students feel safe, too.”**

Silvina Jover  
Education Week

## Classroom Libraries

*Silvina Jover is a bilingual social studies teacher in Las Vegas. Originally from Uruguay, she has been an educator and advocate for immigrant students and their families in the U.S. for the past seven years:*

Building a classroom community should be at the top of our priorities as educators; without it, even the best-crafted classroom-management plan will, at some point, fail. Although it is an ongoing process, we need to be intentional about it at the very beginning of the school year. It is about relationships, and these can only be created by making connections and developing our emotional intelligence and our students’.

Being intentional when building a community translates into choosing activities that will create the necessary space for each of us and will allow us to talk about ourselves, about our identity. These activities can only succeed in an environment that is also well-thought to convey its feeling of being a safe space for all our students.

In terms of the environment, symbols and books tend to dictate the personality of my classroom. Whether you are a member of the LGBTQ community or an ally, have the corresponding symbols close to your door so your students know they are walking into a space that will not judge them. The rainbow flag is a good place to start in terms of symbols, but remember that it is not the only flag that represents the LGBTQ community. In my “identity corner,” I also have the trans flag because I have loved ones who are trans, and sharing my own story makes my students feel safe, too.

The second element that creates our classroom environment is our library. My high school doesn’t have a library (I have no comments!), so I decided to invest on my own. It has been growing little by little and it has become a bilingual library, too. I teach social studies, but those are not the only types of books we have. I’ve been intentional when selecting the books I bring and, thinking about our LGBTQ students, I look for books either written by a member of the community or that narrate the stories of characters who are going through the discovery of their own identity as LGBTQ or

already identify as such. Multiculturalism and diversity in the literature that we introduce to our students is important. Even if you only have a few coffee-table books to display, make sure to have one that tells the history of the queer community in the U.S., for example.

Regarding activities that allow for community building, there are many out there from games to journaling; the show and tell that the little ones like to be part of is definitely an activity that allows you to talk about identity even with that age group. Because I teach high school, we do the “adult” show and tell—The Identity Bag. After some background conversation and ice-breaker activities, I let my students know they will have homework (oh, no!). The Identity Bag is literally a bag (I use those brown paper bags) that I ask my students to decorate and then put inside three elements that represent who they are (hence, homework). The following class we create a circle and share the stories behind these elements. It is during these times that the more shy LGBTQ students may let you know about their preferred pronouns and probably other details. We need to honor this request as it refers to who they are ... their identity!

Overall, creating a space that is not only welcoming but relevant to our students who identify as members of the LGBTQ community, or are in search of that space, is the first step in building an inclusive classroom community. And the challenge is maintaining it.

**“My classroom library has books with characters in the LGBTQ+ community”**

Jennifer Orr  
Education Week

## Picture Books

*Jennifer Orr is a national-board-certified elementary teacher in the suburbs of Washington. She is a mother of two and an obsessive buyer of children’s books:*

I am a mother of two teenagers and I am an elementary school teacher. What my children’s friends need in the way of support may look very different from what my students need. There are young children in the LGBTQ+ community living as themselves, and they definitely need very visible support. I think, however, that many young children are not yet openly in the LGBTQ+ community for many different reasons. That doesn’t mean they need our support any less.

As in all things that may be challenging in a classroom of young children, I turn to books. When a child is able to see themselves in a book, in whatever way that might be, that is powerful. My own white, straight, cisgendered, able-bodied daughter, who I would think sees herself in books regularly, was superexcited in elementary school to get an American Girl magazine because the girl on the cover had glasses and braces, just like my daughter. I had no idea those two things made her feel as different as they did. Representation in books, magazines, movies, ads, games, and more is critical for kids.

So my classroom library has books with characters in the LGBTQ+ community. When I began teaching more than 20 years ago, this wasn’t true. Partly because such books were hard to come by and partly because I was afraid of pushback from the community. Over time, I decided that risking the pushback was worth it in order to be sure all of my students saw these characters in books. (It should be noted that I have not had any pushback.) There are also more and more books every year with characters in the LGBTQ+ community.

*And Tango Makes Three* was one of the first I bought and is now one I often read to my class. It’s a picture book based on a true story of penguins in the Central Park Zoo. *I Am Jazz* is another picture book, an autobiography by a transgender girl. These two books are wonderful as they are true stories and written in picture-book form for young kids. However, I also want my students to see characters in the LGBTQ+ community in books that are just about kids being kids. They don’t only have to see books that are focused on better understanding of what it means to be in the LGBTQ+ community. *The Misadventures of the Family Fletcher* is a chapter book about a family with two dads and four boys. It’s a story of brothers and school and friendships, and the kids happen to have two dads.

Having these books available in your classroom library for students is just one step, albeit a small one. But for many kids in the LGBTQ+ community, they may never have seen such characters in a book before. Meeting these characters in the pages of a book as they read in your classroom offers them some support, some affirmation of who they are.

Thanks to Jennica, Silvina, and Jennifer for their contributions! ■

*This is the first post in a two-part series. The second piece can be found [here](#).*

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—Mandel Ngan/Pool via AP



## OPINION

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# When Does Educational Equity Become Educationally Unethical?

By Rick Hess

**R**ecently, in the midst of a short, charming interview, an award-winning 2nd grade dual-language teacher casually offered an offhand comment that gave me pause. She said, “With gentrification, there are many more affluent families in the neighborhood who are attracted to the benefits of bilingual education. It takes a conscious effort on my and the school’s part to make sure that our dual-language classrooms serve our Latinx families and put their language needs first.” The teacher later added, “Latinx children are diverse and have varying needs,” and explained, “I teach for equity, not equality.”

The interview clearly revealed a thoughtful, committed educator. But that’s what made these quotes jump out for me. I appreciated the teacher’s acknowledgment that children are diverse and have varying needs, and that some children will require more teacher time than will others—but I found disconcerting the suggestion that those determinations should be grounded in ascriptive characteristics rather than the needs of each learner.

In the course of an hour, day, or year, teachers will inevitably spend more time with some students than others based on their learning needs. Given that, I have zero problem with a dual-language teacher saying that her students who are struggling to master English need more of her time and attention. Where I do get deeply concerned is when that determination is framed not as a matter of what learners need but in terms of ethnic or racial identity.

After all, it’s not just “Latinx children [that] are diverse and have varying needs”—the same can be said, I firmly believe, of all children. Indeed, efforts to improve schooling over the past half-century were built on the foundational premise that learners are different and that educators should strive to meet the needs of each of their students. Whether it travels under the guise of individualized education programs, multiple intelligences, differentiated learning, personalization, student-centered learning, the whole child, or much else, this understanding has guided school improvement for decades.

Although the goal of meeting the needs of each learner may be wholly aspirational, it provides a moral compass for the profession

and a clear basis for explaining exactly why it’s a moral failure when some kids get systematically shortchanged. And, while we’re miles from where we need to be, this goal has allowed schools to become far more attuned to the varied needs of students today than they were a generation ago.

The interview quotes struck me as they did because they seem reflective of an emerging notion of “anti-racist” equity that rejects this moral postulate by actively encouraging educators to pick and choose which students to favor based upon ascriptive characteristics. Take, for instance, Ibram X. Kendi’s assertion in the hugely successful *How to Be an Antiracist* that “if discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist” and that “the only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination.” When educators embrace this philosophy (presuming, of course, to know precisely which kinds of “discrimination” are justified), then discrimination becomes not only ethically defensible—but a moral imperative.

I do hope that those enamored of Kendi’s vision have fully considered the implications of his addendum: “The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.” After all, I’m not sure who really wants to embark on a future which invites an endless, spiraling cycle of retaliatory discrimination—all turning on who decides what constitutes “equitable” discrimination at a given moment. I think tomorrow’s students and teachers just might damn us for pursuing such a course. The thing about professional norms is that they can be easy to take for granted and more fragile than we realize.

Ultimately, I fear that today’s avatars of “equity” and “anti-racism” aren’t as focused as they should be on the ethical and practical implications of the professional code they’re birthing. After all, I’d think it would be self-evident that the push for equity stumbles into a truly gruesome place when educators are being trained or directed to shortchange some students based on how they look or where they live.

Finally, for those who think I’m raising a red herring, or that I’m distorting or misunderstanding a healthier, more general principle, I’d welcome an explanation as to what I’m getting wrong. Indeed, I’d find such an explanation deeply reassuring. Because, as things stand, I’m deeply troubled by a vision of educational equity which seems to raise profound ethical concerns. ■

*Rick Hess is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the director of the think tank’s Education Policy Studies.*

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