

Charting a Path to COVID Recovery for All Young People



Across our nation, educators, school and district leaders, families, and students are focused on the difficult task of COVID recovery — working to keep children safe, address the losses caused by the pandemic, and accelerate learning for each and every young person. Recovery will happen, but it will take significant time and investment. There is a real risk that our shared interest in moving past the pandemic will create a false mindset that we can quickly “return to normal” in our schools and move linearly toward recovery. This mindset and approach will fail our young people.

To chart the best, fastest course for recovery, we must understand the full depth and breadth of the crisis, adopt a strategy that is both urgent and long-term, and address the needs of each and every young person.

Over the last two years, our nation’s students, their families, and their educators, have faced unprecedented traumatic events and challenges, including loss of loved ones at home, increased stress and violence in communities, significant disruptions in schooling, fear for their health and the health of those they love, increased demands to support their struggling families, and the whiplash of constant and unexpected change. These challenges have exacerbated long standing inequities and widespread system failures, with the greatest impact falling on students of color, students with disabilities, students living in poverty, and other marginalized youth who today comprise a majority of our public school population. At the same time, students and the adults who help them learn and develop have displayed amazing adaptability, working tirelessly to create connections, engagement, and joy in the face of crisis.

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Nonetheless, in many school districts around the country, leaders are struggling with foundational issues: How can we find those young people who have disappeared from school enrollments? How can we address chronic absenteeism? How can we support students' mental health and meet their basic, as well as their educational needs? How can we address rapidly shifting shortfalls in our educator workforce and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the adults in our systems? How can we foster safety and belonging in our schools and other settings so that children can learn and grow?

A key priority in the response and recovery effort is to keep schools open — maximizing the connections and relationships that accelerate learning and development while also ensuring the health and safety of our students, families, and educators. The emergence of Coronavirus variants complicates this task. Yet even if we are able to deal swiftly and effectively with new challenges, the reality we must address is that the pathway to recovery will be long and uneven. The science of learning and development can help us understand why that is true, as well as show us what we must know and do to effectively navigate that path.

The science of learning and development tells us that every child has incredible potential and is highly resilient from early childhood through adolescence. So we know that recovery is possible. But the science also tells us that learning and development are deeply integrated, relational, and dependent on context. It is not possible to recover from traumatic events and accelerate students' academic progress without establishing strong relationships, addressing mental health and mindsets, providing rich learning experiences, and fostering supportive environments where children feel safe and can thrive. Today, our young people are dealing with unparalleled challenges that can endanger their academic and life success. In order to learn, every young person needs to feel accepted, valued, and supported. To achieve an accelerated and full recovery, we must adopt a both-and approach to recovery that builds on the strengths of young people and attends to the reality of integrated learning and development.



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Further, we must recognize that the reality is that many of our young people are not served well by an attempt to return to “normal.” The necessity of operating differently in light of the pandemic has given us the opportunity to understand that we are capable of doing things differently. We don’t have to — and shouldn’t — fall back on prior actions, assumptions, systems, and norms that fail too many children.

The good news is that there is much we can do to chart the best, fastest pathway toward equitable, successful pandemic recovery — and a high-quality education — for all children based on the science of learning and development. We call here for three initial, immediate actions:

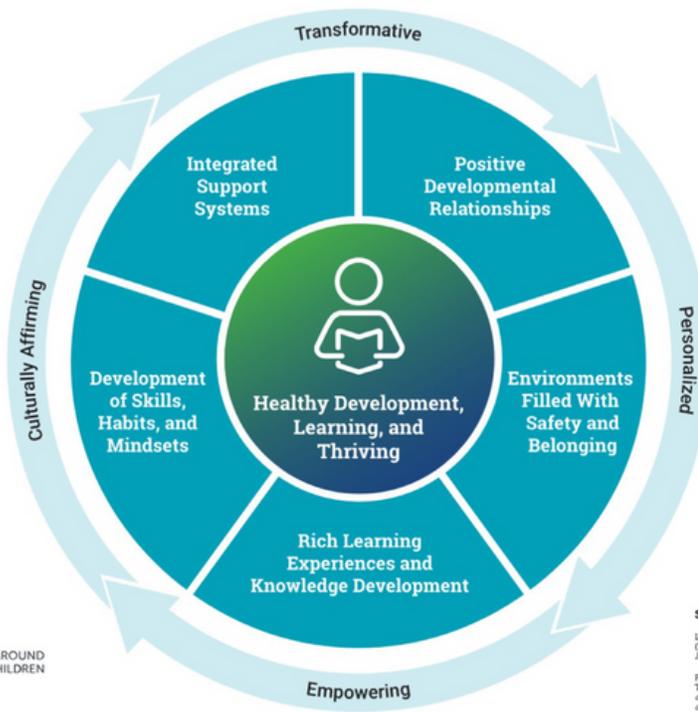
First, we must commit to adopting a shared mindset that the pathway to accelerated recovery is many years long and is not linear. It will require a sequenced, comprehensive, targeted, and flexible approach to supporting young people’s academic, social, emotional, and health needs. Only through these efforts can we accelerate recovery. Further, this pathway must be designed not to “return to normal” but to fundamentally shift our education systems to be aligned with what we know about how children learn and develop and what each and every child needs to achieve their full potential. We must both fill holes created by the current crisis *and* plant seeds for a better future. This will require a new shared vision of learning and development that meets the needs of *all* our children, a new agenda to move towards it, and sustained resources and capacity targeted toward greatest need and impact. We must seize this as a time for investment that can yield incredible returns — and is essential to the future of our nation.

Second, to address immediate challenges and accelerate learning and development, we must provide educators and state and local leaders across the nation with the best information we have from existing evidence and continuously improve that information over time. Educators in all settings are frontline workers with the future of our country in their hands. Just as medical professionals need guidance based on best evidence, educators need the best, actionable, evidence-based guidance possible regarding what works for whom in what contexts, as well as the time to plan, innovate, and redesign as they put that evidence to use. This will both help educators and families make the tough choices they face every day, and accelerate COVID recovery.

Third, as an immediate and ongoing priority, we must focus on redesigning and aligning our schools and other learning environments so that they are able to support student recovery and accelerate learning and development. There is a lot we know from the science of learning and development about what this means and how to do it.

We must work intentionally to build positive relationships that enable healing and learning; create safe and inclusive settings that foster belonging and are culturally affirming; provide integrated supports that align systems and address each student's needs; and deliver rich, meaningful educational experiences that can maximize student learning across a range of knowledge, skills, and habits of mind. Research and results are clear about what makes great learning environments. This knowledge has been summarized in a set of principles for **schools** and **community-based settings** that provide a framework for building better conditions for learning and development for all.

Essential Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design



Sources:
 Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children. (2021). *Design principles for schools: Putting the science of learning and development into action*.
 Forum for Youth Investment (with Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children). (2021). *Design principles for community-based settings: Putting the science of learning and development into action*.

Throughout this school year, the majority of schools and youth-serving programs have been open and working toward COVID recovery, all while coping with the ruthlessness of the ever-changing pandemic and dealing with one disruption after another. It is imperative that decision makers understand what's happening to America's young people right now and commit to a mindset that responds with both urgent attention to immediate needs and long-term commitment to the resources, flexibility, and time that real recovery and redesign require. Together we can learn from this experience, chart a path to an inclusive recovery, and build systems and provide supports that enable all young people to thrive.

Signed By

AASA - The School Superintendents Association, *Dan Domenech and Morton Sherman*

All4Ed, *Deborah Delisle*

American Institute for Research, *David Osher*

Aurora Institute, *Susan Patrick*

Bank Street College of Education, *Shael Polakow-Suransky*

Big Picture Learning, *Andrew Frishman and Carlos Moreno*

California AfterSchool Network, *Heather Williams*

USC Center for Affective Neuroscience, Development, Learning and Education (CANDLE), *Mary Helen Immordino-Yang*

Camille A. Farrington*, *Managing Director and Senior Research Associate University of Chicago Consortium on School Research*

Center for Mental Health in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, *Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor*

Chiefs for Change, *Mike Magee*

City Year, *Jim Balfanz and Jonathan Mathis*

Cleveland Metropolitan School District, *Eric Gordon*

Collaborative For Academic Social, and, Emotional Learning (CASEL), *Dr. Aaliyah A. Samuel and Dr. Robert Jagers, Dr. Ally Skoog-Hoffman*

Committee for Children, *Jordan Posamentier*

Connecticut After School Network, *Michelle Doucette Cunningham*

EducationCounsel, *Bethany Little and Scott Palmer*

Education Reform Now, *Shavar Jefferies*

EL Education, *Ron Berger*

Forum for Youth Investment, *Mishaela Duran*

Global Science of Learning Education Network, *Bob Wise*

Healthy Schools Campaign, *Rochelle Davis*

Keasha Starks*, *The School District of Palm Beach County*

KP Catalysts, *Karen Pittman and Merita Irby*

Learning Policy Institute, *Linda Darling-Hammond*

Mass Insight Education & Research, *Susan F. Lusi*

Melissa Ferrante*, *Sacramento Unified School District*

Melissa Kim*, *Deputy Chancellor, District of Columbia Public Schools*

Mississippi Department of Education, *Carey Wright*

National 4-H Council, *Jennifer Sirangelo*

National Association of State Boards of Education, *Paolo DeMaria*

National Center on Education and the Economy, *Jason Dougal*

National Equity Project, *LaShawn Routé Chatmon, Kathleen Osta, and Linda Ponce de Leon*

National Urban League, *Hal Smith*

Next Generation Learning Challenges, *Andy Calkins*

Partners in School Innovation, *Derek Mitchell*

PERTS, *Dave Paunesku*

Results for America, *Michele Jolin*

Richard Lerner*, *Director, Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts University*

Ronald Dahl*, *Director, Institute of Human Development - UC Berkeley*

Rural School and Community Trust, *Robert Mahaffey*

SchoolHouse Connection, *Barbara Duffield*

Statia Paschel*, *Director of SEL & CP&I, Austin Independent School District*

Teach Plus, *Lindsay Sorbel*

The Education Trust, *Denise Forte*

The Leadership Academy, *Nancy Gutierrez*

The Opportunity Institute, *Maria Echaveste and Winsome Wait*

Transformative Learning Solutions, *Zaretta Hammond*

Turnaround for Children, *Brigid Ahern and Pamela Cantor, MD*

Voices for National Service, *AnnMaura Connolly*

**Titles and affiliations for individual signatories are for identification purposes only. Signatories are acting as private citizens.*