

THE STATE OF THE AMERICAN STUDENT: FALL 2022

Executive Summary

A GUIDE TO PANDEMIC RECOVERY AND REINVENTION

The pandemic was a wrecking ball for U.S. public education, bringing months of school closures, frantic moves to remote instruction, and trauma and isolation. Kids may be back at school after three disrupted years, but a return to classrooms has not brought a return to normal.

This [report](#) draws on data the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has collected and synthesized during the pandemic. It outlines the contours of the crisis American students have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic and begins to chart a path to recovery and reinvention for all students—which includes building a new and better approach to public education that ensures an educational crisis of this magnitude cannot happen again.

What follows are highlights of the primary findings and recommendations.

Students lost critical opportunities to learn and thrive as a result of the pandemic. The state of American students as we emerge from the pandemic is still coming into focus, but we know the following:

- The typical American student lost several months' worth of learning in language arts and more in mathematics. New [NAEP scores](#) reveal historic achievement drops.
- Students suffered crushing increases in anxiety and depression. Hundreds of thousands lost loved ones and were forced to mourn in isolation.
- Students poorly served before the pandemic were profoundly left behind during it, including many with disabilities who were cut off from essential school and life services.

This deeply traumatic period threatens to reverberate for decades, robbing a generation of its potential and exacerbating existing inequities. The academic, social, and mental-health needs are real, they are measurable, and they must be addressed quickly in order to avoid long-term consequences to individual students, to the future workforce, and to society.

The averages mask dire inequities and widely varied impact. Some students are catching up, but time is running out for others. Every student experienced the pandemic differently, and there is tremendous variation from student to student, with certain populations—namely,

Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, as well as other vulnerable populations—suffering the most severe impacts.

- The effects were most severe where campuses stayed closed longer. American students are experiencing a K-shaped recovery, in which [age](#) and [income-based achievement gaps](#), which existed before the pandemic, are widening even further.
- At the pace of recovery we are seeing today, too many students of all races and income levels will graduate in the coming years [without the skills and knowledge needed](#) for college and careers.
- More than [one in 360 U.S. children](#) lost a parent or caregiver to Covid-19. Children from racial and ethnic minority groups were, by far, more likely to lose a caregiver than white, non-Hispanic children.

The situation could be significantly worse than the early data suggest. What we know at this point is incomplete.

- The data and stories we have to date are enough to warrant immediate action, but there are serious holes in our understanding of how the pandemic has affected various groups of students, especially those who are typically most likely to fall through the cracks in the American education system.
- We still know too little about the learning impacts in nontested subjects, such as science, civics, and foreign languages. We know little about students with complex needs, such as those with disabilities and English learners.
- The evidence we have to date may understate inequitable impacts or underestimate the long-term effects on students.

The harms students experienced during this pandemic can be traced to a rigid and inequitable system that put adults, not students, first.

- Despite often heroic efforts by caring adults, students and families were cut off from essential support, offered radically diminished learning opportunities, and left to their own devices to support learning.
- Too often, politics, not student needs, drove decision-making, and students with the most complex needs suffered the most, as they always have.
- Despite efforts from many well-meaning adults, students with complexities and differences too often faced systems immobilized by fear and a commitment to sameness rather than priority setting, prioritization, and problem-solving.

Diverse needs demand diverse solutions, and certain pandemic discoveries paint a path toward a better way. During the pandemic, vital building blocks began falling into place that could help make seemingly far-off visions of educational transformation a reality.

- Some students thrived outside of traditional school and classroom settings. Parents and teachers also discovered or rediscovered new ways to connect and engage with young people.
- Informal pandemic pods, virtual IEP meetings, and new connections between schools and community members showed a more equitable, joyful, and individualized education system is not only necessary but also possible.

- Freed from the routines of rigid systems, some parents, communities, and educators found new ways to tailor learning experiences around students' needs. They discovered learning can happen any time and anywhere. They discovered enriching activities outside class and troves of untapped adult talent. These were exceptions to an otherwise miserable rule—and they can inform the work ahead.

We must act quickly, but we must also act differently. The pandemic revealed a U.S. education system that was unprepared to deal with uncertainty, to meet diverse student needs, to respond quickly in a crisis, to overcome adult-centered political dynamics, and to marshal strong leadership on behalf of student interests. This pandemic was no one's fault, but the response was.

The kids aren't all right now, but many weren't all right before. As we look toward recovery and rebuilding, we must be clear-eyed about what this generation of students is owed. We must commit to rebuilding a system that's more flexible and prepared for future crises, more open to adopting new practices, and better prepared to deliver on the potential of future generations. Achieving that will require an ambitious national vision, goals for rebuilding, and a commitment to tracking progress. It will require bold leadership to build new constituencies for change across the education, health care, business, faith, and civic communities.

The work is far from over.

Important next steps include the following:

- Districts and states should **immediately use their federal dollars** to address the emergent needs of the Covid generation of students via **proven interventions**, such as well-designed tutoring, extended learning time, credit recovery, additional mental-health support, college and career guidance, and mentoring. The challenges ahead are too daunting for schools to shoulder alone. Partnerships and funding for families and community-driven solutions will be critical.
- By the end of 2022-23, states and districts must commit to an **honest accounting of rebuilding efforts** by defining, adopting, and reporting on their progress toward 5- and 10-year goals for long-term student recovery. States should invest in rigorous studies that document, analyze, and improve their approaches.
- Education leaders and researchers must adopt a **national research and development agenda for school reinvention** over the next five years. This effort must be anchored in the reality that the needs of students are so varied, so profound, and so multifaceted that a single system can't possibly meet them all.
- Recovery and rebuilding should **ensure the system is more resilient and prepared for future crises**. School systems must be equipped to deliver high-quality, individualized pathways for students and build on practices that show promise.

This is the first in a series of annual reports CRPE intends to produce through fall 2027. The inaugural report provides an initial account of the damage done and debts owed to students, a roadmap for organizing research and community action around the most pressing concerns, and a call to act on what the data tell us. We hope every state and community will produce similar, annual "state of the student" accounts and begin to define ambitious goals for recovery.

The implications of these deeply traumatic years will reverberate for decades unless we find a path not only to normalcy but also to restitution for this generation and future generations of American students. Addressing immediate learning loss is essential, but the long-term goal of recovery must be far more ambitious. If the pandemic exposed a brittle, fragile, and deeply

inequitable public education system, let's aim for what author [Nassim Talib](#) defines as an “antifragile system”—one that is far better as a result of shocks like a pandemic, not just capable of surviving those shocks.

If students need a richer array of mental-health support, mentoring, and social connections, let's find permanent ways to weave them into the school and neighborhood fabric. If families of racial minorities have lost trust in schools' ability to treat their communities with respect, let's cement ways to listen and respond more openly. If high school students need hope, direction, and practical skills, not a crushing load of AP exams, let's reimagine the programs and pathways we're offering them. If students with hidden talents finally thrived during the pandemic with more one-on-one support or activities that tapped their interests, let's help schools offer more individual attention.

Everyone has a role to play. CRPE is committed to helping community members, policy makers, and the media hold school systems and public officials accountable for these needed recovery and rebuilding efforts. We've helped collect and spotlight [promising uses of federal recovery funding](#), we're continuing to gather and share the latest [pandemic-related data on schools and families](#), and we're studying the [practices of innovative schools](#) that might hold promise for replication and expansion.

The road to recovery can lead us somewhere new. In five years, we hope to report that out of the ashes of the Covid-19 pandemic, American public education emerged transformed: more flexible and resilient, more individualized and equitable, and—most of all—more joyful.

CRPE
REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

ASU Mary Lou Fulton
Teachers College
Arizona State University

CENTER ON REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION
CRPE.ORG

©2022 CRPE
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.