



**Los Angeles County
Office of Education**

Serving Students ■ Supporting Communities ■ Leading Educators

RISING FROM COVID-19: Recovery, Resilience and Acceleration





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OVERVIEW



Los Angeles County is home to 80 public school districts and more than 350 charter schools that serve nearly two million children. These districts and schools employ 154,830 education staff and hold budgets that collectively total \$18.1 billion. Across the county, school closures and extended periods of distance learning caused by COVID-19 have disrupted every element of education and have led to alarming setbacks in student wellbeing and learning. As an initial step in understanding these challenges, Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) conducted a preliminary needs assessment with a sample of district and charter school leaders. Guided by the emergent themes in that body of qualitative data, this publication details components of a three-pronged approach to support districts, educators, students and families:

- **Advocacy:** Leverage Los Angeles County's position as the country's largest regional education area to support and inform policy decisions.
- **Direct Support:** Provide direct resources and support, including professional development, communications, best practice sharing and partnership networks.
- **Educational Transformation:** Harness the learnings from this crisis to reinvent education with a focus on equity and supporting the whole child.

LACOE has published this document to provide an overview of the leadership that local, county and state agencies can provide in supporting learning recovery from COVID-19. The approaches outlined here can be used as a model for collaborative leadership. This paper will be shared with Los Angeles County's district superintendents and education leaders, California's 58 county superintendents, elected officials and other key education stakeholders to support the need for knowledge and the creation of a path forward.



CONTEXT

Understanding Short-Term and Long-Term Needs

“The needs have always been wide-ranging, but the range has grown even more during this time.”

—Dr. Michele Bowers, Superintendent, Lancaster School District

School closures and extended periods of distance learning caused by COVID-19 have disrupted every element of pre-K through 12th grade education and have led to alarming setbacks in student well-being and learning.

Mitigating loss and creating opportunities for learning acceleration will look different for each student and require a diversity of innovative strategies. This work must balance the duality of enacting short-term mitigation tactics that meet immediate needs with developing long-term approaches that ensure COVID-19 does not have a disproportionate and lasting effect on student wellness and achievement.

Existing research on the impact of extended school closures due to natural disasters provides evidence for the need to create well-articulated systems of both academic and social-emotional support. Data from Hurricane Katrina and a 2005 earthquake in Pakistan show that the impacts of crises lasted far beyond the period of school closure. In Pakistan, students lost three months of school; summative assessments administered four years later indicated that students were still one and a half years behind in their learning.ⁱ When Hurricane Katrina caused 6-12 months of in-person learning disruption, many students returned more than two years below grade level.ⁱⁱ



“Efforts need to be in the form of three-year investments. We will need a long timeline to support academics and mental health.”

—Annabelle Eliashiv, Chief of Staff, Green Dot Public Schools California

As a first step in addressing learning needs in Los Angeles County, LACOE convened five listening sessions that engaged 20 district superintendents and charter school leaders.ⁱⁱⁱ Participants reflected a sample of districts and charter schools diverse in size, geographic location, grade level and student population. An inductive thematic analysis identified nearly 200 qualitative data points that included information about ongoing activities, gaps, challenges and considerations for future. This initial needs assessment produced three areas of focus: advocacy, direct support and innovative best practices.

Cutting across these high-level themes are three contextual frames. The first is a focus on equity. Across districts, school closures are compounding the accumulated inequities facing the most vulnerable students; breaking this cycle will require intentional action. The second is an expansion of the definition of learning to include a social, emotional, academic and mental health focus. District leaders have made it clear that the inequities and traumas of the past year must be addressed in order to support academic gains. And finally, a call to use intentional language that moves away from a deficit-based notion of learning loss towards more asset-based concepts of recovery, resilience and acceleration.



ADVOCACY

The districts and schools in Los Angeles County vary in size, location, community density and structure. Of the county’s 1.4 million K-12 students, 1.2 million are students of color and more than 1 million are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged. In addition, 305,000 students are English learners, 178,000 receive special education services and 90,000 are experiencing homelessness or in foster care.

The size and scope of education in Los Angeles County positions the region to play an important role in fostering collaboration and elevating policy discussions. Additionally, the diversity of Local Education Agency (LEA) features and student populations provides a multi-perspective approach to advocacy that is rooted in inclusiveness and equity.

“[It would be helpful if] the county stays on top of what’s being proposed [at the state level], and can provide feedback to districts in advance.”

—Dr. Darin Brawley, Superintendent, Compton Unified School District

Funding

Governor Newsom has affirmed that “learning is non-negotiable.”^{iv} In support of this statement, his 2021-22 state budget proposed a historic level of funding for schools. This was a significant first step in what must be an ongoing commitment to provide adequate funding for schools. However, in order to fully realize strong educational outcomes for all students, several key principles must be established.

First and foremost is an ongoing commitment for funding over multiple years. With the educational consequences of the recent pandemic, it is clear that restoring youth to pre-pandemic levels will require educational compensation over several years. A single summer or even a single year of intervention will not accomplish this goal.

Second, there is a need for flexibility in both expenditures and timelines. At the onset of the pandemic, the most successful schools were those that were able to quickly assess the needs of their communities and reallocate funds to meet those needs. Some required large purchases of technology, while those schools that already had one-to-one laptops may have needed to invest in social-emotional services or increase staff and case managers. School funding must allow for this flexibility. Schools require funding for additional staff such as psychological services and mental health, extended learning opportunities and tutoring, curriculum adoption and technology, just to name a few concerns. Using state and federal funds to buy down deferrals could enable this flexible funding. Allowing local control of expenditures ensures that those who can best assess the needs of their communities will have the resources to meet those needs. Furthermore, providing this flexible funding without deadlines will ensure that the funds are spent in the most effective manner possible and removes the inefficiencies of a “use it or lose it” mentality, which can lead to funds being spent capriciously.

And finally, education leaders are requesting increased, dedicated funding that will enable them to serve the needs of the most vulnerable students, including those who are members of special populations cohorts. School funding needs to be reflective of the fact that schools will have diverse short-term and long-term pandemic-driven needs that must be met through a commitment to equity.

Special Populations

As a December 2020 McKinsey article noted, “The pandemic has forced the most vulnerable students into the least desirable learning situations with inadequate tools and support systems to navigate them.”^v

Targeted, evidence-based strategies and an equitable allocation of resources is critical to ensuring students who need the most help are not left behind. There will need to be dedicated attention to students who are members of special populations (as designated by the California Department of Education, which includes students with disabilities, English language learners, socio-economically disadvantaged students and students experiencing homelessness or those in foster care), with even more intense focus on students who fall into multiple special population categories and face compounded challenges. LEAs must also expand their interpretation of special populations and be prepared for an increase in youth who will need additional, long-term support. Data must be gathered and analyzed to understand the challenges facing student cohorts with varying needs (e.g., at-risk youth, students who have experienced trauma or bullying, students with DACA status, students who face persistent systemic racism, college-bound students, younger children whose entry into public education has been delayed).

Creating Efficiency and Removing “Red Tape”

Districts are looking for a convener and advocate to help cut through red tape and create more efficient pathways for timely action. Areas of focus include:

- Advocacy at the regional, state and national levels to ensure an educational perspective informs decisions related to economic stimulus packages, health initiatives and workforce development.
- Recalibrating time-consuming and cumbersome processes related to funding distribution, accountability and credentialing. For example, creating a single metric for attendance and engagement reports and streamlining or waiving assessment requirements.
- Advocating for an appropriate separation of assessment and accountability implications related to standardized testing for the 2020-21 school year. While districts want to use existing assessment tools to understand learning outcomes and needs, there is significant concern that tying in-home assessment results to student, school and district accountability metrics will compromise the integrity and usefulness of the data.

“For data to be used productively, policies should support the decoupling of assessment from high stakes purposes such as school ratings and teacher evaluation...and support flexibility in testing.”

—North West Evaluation Association (NWEA)^{vi}

- Creating workforce flexibility—As schools assess the needs of their communities and strategies to mitigate the educational impacts of the pandemic, there is a need for additional staff. One way to meet this need is to create workforce flexibility by:
 - Expanding the courses applicable to each type of teaching credential
 - Expanding options for emergency and temporary credentials
 - Removing limits to the use of retired employees



DIRECT SUPPORT

In addition to advocacy, educational leaders identified areas in which they need direct assistance - primarily in communications, professional development, academic and social-emotional resources and staff support. Local education agencies (LEAs) should not have to embark on school reopening in isolation, and county-level offices can leverage partnerships and communities of practice to develop innovative educational strategies while lessening the logistical burden on districts.

Communication

County offices of education play a central role in both providing forums for information sharing and networking, as well as developing communication tools and templates that districts can easily adapt to meet their unique needs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, LACOE has developed critical communication channels that bring together district superintendents, level-alike peers across districts and external partners. Across the board, district leaders have found this support incredibly helpful and have requested that LACOE continue these communication efforts moving forward.

COVID-19 has required LEAs to increase the prevalence of communication with students, parents and communities, as well as to implement new communication tactics. Many districts have seen the positive results of these efforts and have expressed the desire to continue these new, best practices. However, information regarding educational guidelines, community health, legislative updates and scientific research is bountiful and ever-changing. Even with dedicated communications staff, vetting materials and staying current is a challenge. Throughout the past year, LACOE has reviewed information and created community letters, LEA briefings and other templates for school leaders to use as they strive to keep

their communities updated with accurate information. This county-level support not only informs school and district leaders of current news and information, but allows them to spend more time using vetted information to guide conversations with their stakeholders.

Identifying and Sharing Best Practices

“We need to know what others are doing and share resources.”

—Lillian Maldonado French, Superintendent, Mountain View School District

A critical challenge facing districts and schools is to determine which strategies and actions will best help students recover and accelerate in their learning. Districts are looking for help to vet the multitude of tools and tactics available and create a repository of these options that includes recommendations based on the specific criteria for success associated with each resource. As part of this work, district leaders are looking to the county office of education to create and manage networking opportunities that allow districts to benefit from the resources and expertise of their peers without overwhelming logistical bandwidth. Districts have expressed significant support for these county-level collaborative efforts.

Now more than ever, public education must support the “whole child” through academic, behavioral, social and health services. According to a survey conducted by the Youth Liberty Squad of ACLU SoCal, 32% of youth who were not receiving mental health services pre-pandemic feel that they may now need services. While 65% of youth respondents reported their mental wellness at 7 or higher (out of 10) prior to the pandemic, less than 40% rated their current mental state at the same level.^{vii} Frameworks such as Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), which are already in place in many school districts and charter schools, provide a comprehensive three-tiered framework to address varying levels of academic, behavioral and social-emotional need brought on by the pandemic. Recognizing that there is no quick fix to reverse lost learning, district leaders understand the value that MTSS can bring to the current educational recovery journey and seek support in how to systematically implement these coordinated care practices. LEAs are looking for help to integrate social and emotional learning throughout curricula and instruction, as well as support for increased staff, including counselors, psychologists, social workers, case managers and more.

While there has been a strong focus by foundations and university research partners regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on students, districts have also brought to light the need to understand the diverse challenges that are affecting staff. In addition to resources related to instruction, district leaders have requested resources to better understand and address staff burnout and anxiety related to distance and hybrid learning, as well as reopening.

During the initial needs assessment, district leaders identified several areas where they had already begun to develop and implement best practices, including:

- Academic Interventions (general and targeted for special populations)
- Social Emotional Learning
- Multi-tiered System of Support implementation

- Using data and universal assessments to understand gaps and drive decisions
- Hybrid teaching strategies/transitioning back to in-person teaching
- Family and community engagement
- Staff support to address burnout and anxiety
- Summer school structures that address academic and social-emotional issues
- Extended school year options (e.g., Saturday school, after school programs)
- Dropout prevention

The next step in this process is expanded engagement with district leaders and the creation of networks to share and enact best practices. As schools prepare for varied timelines of transition from remote and hybrid learning to in-person instruction, professional development and best practice networking will be crucial. Resources to address trauma and support social and emotional development for both staff and students will be a critical first step in creating environments conducive to learning.

Professional Development and Direct Educational Support

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented extraordinary challenges to educators in implementing instructional programs. These include learning how to adapt to online teaching, working to support student well-being, understanding implications on data collection and assessment, and navigating community concerns and uncertainty. With COVID-19 guidance evolving and changing constantly, educators and school leaders require additional support in order to have the right information, at the right time, to make the right decisions.

“Every teacher will encounter students with larger gaps. We need training on how to structure classrooms differently under these circumstances.”

—Dr. Maribel Garcia, Superintendent, El Monte City School District

Educational leaders have requested continued professional development in a variety of areas, including:

- MTSS interventions
- Instructional and operational best practices
- Transitioning between distance, hybrid and in-person instruction
- Inclusive and equitable educational practices
- Instructional support for special populations
- Navigating Accountability and Reporting Measures (CAASPP/ELPAC/LCAP/SPSA)

Below are a few examples of direct support that has been requested by district and school leaders:

- Negotiating bulk prices on curricula, equipment and services
- Additional staff support for tutoring, mental health and mitigation specialists
- Information and support for vaccination rollout



EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

“It is time to use the huge disruptions caused by this pandemic to reinvent our systems of education. The question is: How we can harness these understandings as we necessarily redesign school? How can we transform what has not been working for children and for our society into a more equitable and empowering future?”

—Linda Darling-Hammond, Abby Schachner, and Adam K. Edgerton, Learning Policy Institute^{viii}

As the journey to recovery begins, LEAs must grow from experience and provide all teachers and students with the resources, training and technology necessary to ensure that COVID-19 does not have inequitable and long-term effects. The challenges facing the education sector are significant, but this moment presents an undeniable opportunity to affect system-level change.

As outlined above, one area of support that districts have requested is the vetting and curating of existing resources and best practices. However, district leaders have also expressed that the existing strategies and solutions are not enough. At a systems-level, leaders are looking for new approaches that change how education is structured, funded and delivered. As part of this, they are also looking for support in how they can identify and leverage the new skills children have learned through remote learning to improve educational outcomes.

The challenges at hand are too great for one organization to solve alone, and it will take input at all levels and across all sectors to transform education. The multi-sector partnerships that LACOE has created, both prior to COVID-19 and in response to the pandemic, can serve as a foundation for bringing together public agencies, institutes of higher education, foundations and the private sector to think outside of the box and develop strategies for the future. Of particular importance will be deepening partnerships with community colleges and institutes of higher education to support cohorts of graduating high school seniors, including first-generation college-bound students, who face a challenging transition.

“[Consider a] shift to a year-round calendar for children. Reimagine what public education looks like.”

—Lauren O’Neill, Executive Director, Odyssey Charter Schools

An additional area of focus must be to develop strategies that better integrate services that support the whole child. Disruptions caused by COVID-19 have magnified the critical importance of mental, emotional and physical health - now is the time to infuse a whole child approach into all aspects of education.

And finally, the opportunity to reimagine education must prioritize approaches that serve under-resourced communities and students who have historically been left behind. By collectively investing in strategies that surround the most vulnerable students with the resources they need to succeed, educators will build a blueprint that improves outcomes for all students.



NEXT STEPS

“We have to make sure that we are systemic, we are organized....We are looking to [move] from triage to transitional to transformative.”

—Lilia Fuentes, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, Pomona Unified School District

This initial needs assessment provides a foundational understanding of the priority areas for action: advocacy, direct support and educational transformation. Moving forward in these three directions will require additional engagement and feedback from all LEAs in Los Angeles County. To achieve this, LACOE will continue to convene district leaders, educators and content experts to proactively identify opportunities for advocacy, identify best practices, offer training and informational sessions and support implementation. This work will also be supported by bringing together external partners, including higher education and community leaders, to develop and pursue outside-the-box strategies that catalyze learning acceleration with urgency, intentionality and equity.

Advocacy

LACOE will engage with regional, state and national leaders to ensure an educational perspective is included in decision-making. LACOE will coordinate with other county offices of education and regional entities to identify future challenges and proactively champion innovative, inclusive and equitable solutions.

Direct Support

LACOE will continue to create and offer professional development for educators, facilitate communication channels and peer networks and provide communication materials and templates. Additionally, LACOE will leverage peer networks to gather, share and help districts implement existing best practices, with specific attention to identified areas of high priority: student engagement, social and emotional learning, academics, special populations, family and community engagement, operations and logistics and funding opportunities.

Educational Transformation

LACOE will build upon existing multi-sector partnerships to move beyond the implementation of existing best practices and explore opportunities to reshape the education system. These efforts must challenge conventional thinking, engage new partners and deliver equity.

Each community and school will face its own challenges and individual timeline for action. However, all districts must take a long-term approach to this work, because the impacts of the pandemic will continue to reverberate years after schools resume normal operation. LACOE is committed to continual engagement with district leadership to ensure educators across Los Angeles County have the resources and support they need to mitigate losses and accelerate student well-being and academic achievement. Stemming from the belief that children are better served when local and county-level entities work together, LACOE's *Power of One* model can drive collective action. It offers a roadmap for leveraging cross-district and inter-agency relationships to champion the voices and meet the needs of students, families and educators.

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LACOE Data Notes

Data was collected through five listening sessions held from January 4-8, 2021. Participants included:

Kevika Amar, KIPP Charter	Colleen Hawkins, Saugus Union SD
Michelle Bowers, Lancaster SD	Lillian Maldonado French, Mountain View SD
Vicente Bravo, Da Vinci Charter	Maria Martinez-Poulin, Whittier City SD
Darin Brawley, Compton USD	Richard Martinez, Pomona USD
Vivian Ekchian, Glendale USD	Michael Matthews, Manhattan Beach USD
Annabelle Eliashiv, Green Dot Public Schools California	Melissa Moore, El Segundo USD
Lilia Fuentes, Pomona USD	Helen Morgan, Hawthorne SD
Maribel Garcia, El Monte City SD	Lauren O’Neill, Odyssey Charter Schools
John Garcia, Jr., Downey USD	Alfredo Rubalcava, Magnolia Charter
Betsy Hamilton, Lawndale Elementary SD	David Vierra, Antelope Valley Union High SD