



## Affecting Transformative Change: Questions for Families and Other Advocates to Ask Their District Leaders

While the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all families and communities, it is most deeply impacting students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, youth in foster care, unhoused students, students with disabilities, and other marginalized children and youth – as well as their families. The pandemic has exposed and worsened inequities in education. At the same time, we have seen the strength of our students, families, and school staff as they have taken on new roles in their homes, schools, and communities.

“While many are eager for a return to normal, the old ‘normal’ was under-serving California’s most vulnerable children and youth. As we recover from this public health, racial justice, and education emergency, we must build *toward* an education system that places equity at the center so that all students, and especially those most affected by the pandemic and systemic racism, have the support and opportunities they need.” (Rebuild and Reimagine: Restarting School with Equity at the Center)

This document provides a list of questions for families and other advocates to ask their school and district leaders. It also shares related suggestions for how leaders can take action to support students now and reimagine how schools can better support them in the future. This resource highlights a collection of key recommendations<sup>1</sup> for districts as they implement immediate actions to respond to the needs of their students and families, while also implementing actions to transform school systems to truly center equity to ensure that every student is supported to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically.

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*Rebuild and Reimagine: Restarting School with Equity at the Center*

### ■ How is the district addressing the need for reconnection and healing as students return in-person and throughout the school year?

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

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

- Take approximately 6 weeks over the summer or at the beginning of the school year to offer students, families, and educators a **restorative restart**. During this time, educators and staff should prioritize restorative practices, grounded in the [science of learning and development](#). (Read more [here](#) and [here](#).) Restorative practices may include:

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

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

- Center relationships. Change the **master schedule for relationship-building**, such as through advisories or small cohorts. Additionally, provide training for staff on how to build and nurture restorative environments. (Read more [here](#) and [here](#).)
- Create regular and multilingual opportunities to engage with families, students, and educators through **family advisory councils** or other groups as part of the district's formal decision-making processes. (Read more [here](#).)

▪ **What type of summer learning and additional learning opportunities is the district planning and how will these help students socially and academically throughout the next year?**

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

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

- Develop **summer learning opportunities** that prioritize the students with the greatest social emotional and academic needs, including fun and engaging learning activities that are of interest to students and align with the school's curriculum. (Read more [here](#) and [here](#).)
- Consider how to use teaching and program **staff for expanded learning** to allow for small learning cohorts focused on academic acceleration for those students with the greatest need. The cohorts should be paired with enrichment programs, preferably outdoors, in partnership with children and youth community-based organizations. Prioritize partnering with organizations whose staff reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the district's students. (Read more [here](#) and [here](#).)

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

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

▪ **Learning and separation from teachers and friends have been very challenging for many children and youth, as well as for teachers. What is the district planning to do to support students', teachers', and staff's social emotional health while supporting students' academic development?**

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

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

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

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

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

- Provide **mental health supports**. After doing wellness checks with students, staff should connect students identified as needing counseling or other mental health services with support teams and appropriate providers and adhere to tiered intervention and follow-up protocols. School and district staff should develop or deepen partnerships with community-based organizations or county mental health/behavioral health providers to coordinate care. They should also take time to personally connect students with providers, including social workers, mentors, and others. (Read more [here](#) about a new partnership between Sacramento County Office of Education and the Sacramento County Department of Health to provide school-based mental health services and to reimagine schools as “centers of wellness.”)

**Ensure lessons and materials are relevant and affirm students’ identities.** Students must feel motivated and engaged in order to attend school regularly and be academically successful. However, to feel fully engaged, [students need to](#) have access to learning opportunities that are relevant to their cultures and identities. Educators should receive training in facilitating developmentally and culturally appropriate activities and materials that allow students to reflect on, and make connections to, their identities, interests, and events happening in their communities and beyond - including the [pandemic](#) and incidents of [bias and racialized violence](#). (Read more [here.](#))

- To support teachers and other staff, establish **educator groups** that allow educators to meet based on common identities<sup>ii</sup> – including race – to increase wellness and to encourage teacher retention, especially among educators of color. (Read more [here.](#))

## ENDNOTES

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