

# Running fast but not getting far: Five years of studying the pandemic's impact on education

The Evidence Project

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## INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, student achievement levels remain “dismal” and adult approval of public schools is at its [lowest point in decades](#). For nearly all student groups, but especially those who have been historically underserved, recovery remains unfinished business and a generation of American students is at risk of never catching up.

However, during the past five years, pandemic recovery has, arguably, been the focus of the entire U.S. educational system, backed by nearly \$200 billion in federal funding. The question, then: why is there so much pandemic recovery work left to do? What were the key factors during and after the pandemic that impacted students so negatively? How did we end up here? After five years of concentrated research at CRPE, we have some answers to those questions to help show the way toward a full recovery. In this brief, we draw on a wide array of research, including CRPE’s own, to examine three key areas:

- **Crisis response.** In the early days of the pandemic, districts struggled to fulfill their core mission of instruction. States and the federal government left districts to fend for themselves, providing little or no leadership while districts and schools grappled with complex health and safety solutions, wildly varying student learning needs, and student and adult mental health concerns. Too often, politics and fear drove decision-making. Teachers’ unions aggressively represented their members and schools became a focal point for culture wars. Reopening chaos further disrupted instruction, impacting student learning.
- **Recovery.** As schools moved out of remote and hybrid instruction and back to fully in-person classes, challenges overwhelmed ambitious “learning acceleration” plans; tutoring and other strategies similarly struggled to gain traction. Schools did not have the incentives, freedom of action, or capacity to prepare teachers to give children the kinds of personalized instruction required to recover lost learning. Bright spots and pandemic innovations, such as learning pods, were rare.
- **What now and what next?** In the five years since schools began to close, districts have struggled to catch students up from pandemic-related learning disruptions. The federal aid that went to districts helped as long as it lasted but did not fully address student learning losses. And now, most districts have returned to their pre-pandemic approaches to instruction while continuing to confront declining attendance and enrollment, budget deficits, labor conflicts, and unstable political support. The current federal climate will also pose new, unknown challenges for states and school districts.

For a full recovery, the public education system—from the federal government to individual classrooms—needs an infusion of new ideas and approaches. Educational leaders need to start asking and answering hard questions about how to rescue the pandemic generation.

## METHODS & DATA

As news of the Covid-19 pandemic spread in early March 2020 and schools started to close, CRPE saw an immediate need to **track how districts were responding**. From 2020 to 2023, we tracked a sample of 100 large and urban districts across the country serving nearly 10 million students.

While the specific districts tracked changed over time, the sample focused on large and urban districts throughout. We searched their websites and social media pages, tracked superintendents' announcements, scoured local news reports, and read board meeting minutes to report on their activities. We reviewed everything, from which districts reported providing computers, Wi-Fi hotspots, and food to families to which districts were training teachers for remote instruction, among many other measures. For the next three years, we supplied unique real-time data and helped the field make sense of the pandemic's effects on schools and students in the face of a volatile and politicized national conversation.

Our annual **State of the American Student** reports have summarized how students have continued to fare. Through our Evidence Project collaboration with the Walton Family Foundation, we've published the findings of over 50 working groups and 13 consensus panels and sponsored over \$3 million of original research on the pandemic's impact on students.

As part of our collaboration with RAND on the **American School District Panel**, we have repeatedly surveyed a nationally representative sample of district leaders about their responses to student and school needs during and after the pandemic. Between 2021 and 2024, CRPE also followed up annually with a subsample of districts, conducting in-depth interviews about school reopenings, plans to restore lost learning (and their amendment over time), challenges posed by student and teacher emotional needs and absenteeism, adjusting to the end of special pandemic funding, and the post-pandemic problems of enrollment decline, a looming fiscal cliff, and political change.

This brief draws heavily from those in-depth studies but also incorporates findings from many other researchers investigating post-pandemic learning loss and district response. To identify other research, we conducted web searches by topic and reviewed the websites of other organizations tracking schools' pandemic response. Though the topics we cover are extensively researched, our own studies cover a relatively small number of districts and the other studies we reference use diverse methods, samples, and databases, some national and some focused on particular states and localities. Thus, our evidence might not catch all the variations of district challenges and responses. Readers concerned with particular districts should ask questions and check local records.

## CRISIS RESPONSE

### Districts provided relief for families but stalled on remote instruction

When districts had to close schools in March 2020, the transition to remote schooling was rocky and, in some places, chaotic. As we reported at the time, “Districts are focusing first on basic needs: health, safety, nutrition. . . . [They] seem unsure how to address technology and internet access, but some are moving ahead. . . . Few districts have comprehensive distance learning plans in place yet.” Food was the easiest for most districts to provide, in part because the USDA [speedily cleared regulatory barriers](#). Teachers and district employees were quick to take on new responsibilities for family support. By the end of the 2019–20 school year, many [districts](#) and [schools](#) had figured out how to get devices and hot spots [for most of their students](#). This was a bright spot in many districts’ early pandemic response.

Though relatively unconstrained when it came to delivering food and devices, districts struggled with their core task: instruction. Districts were [simply overwhelmed](#) by the complexity of creating remote learning systems and were further blocked by pre-pandemic regulations, contracts, job descriptions, and compliance mentalities. For example, in March 2020 some districts did not start remote schooling—which was the only thing they could do for students at the time—as they feared being accused of civil rights violations for not serving students eligible for [special education services](#) that required 1:1 instruction. [Taking attendance](#) was another example—many [districts got hung up](#) on how to create consistent rules for counting students present during remote instruction.

At the end of the 2019–20 school year, [many districts](#) relied on packets of worksheets and public access [television shows](#). These allowed no direct teacher-student interactions; students had to pace themselves, and many disengaged. Few districts ([around 15%](#)) required teachers to monitor their students’ progress. Some [private](#) and [charter schools](#) quickly provided live, all-day, interactive instruction, but few traditional public schools did the same.

### By and large, states and the federal government left districts to fend for themselves

Compounding challenges for district leaders on how to proceed, there was a general [lack of leadership](#) from state boards of education and the federal government about how districts and schools should respond to evolving circumstances. The [U.S. Department of Education](#) and [state departments of education](#) were slow to provide guidance about instruction, [quarantining](#), disease control, response to mental health issues, and services to students eligible for special education. In many cases, states [lacked sufficient capacity](#) to provide [timely and specific](#) guidance. District leaders struggled with this [lack of clarity](#). The resulting confusion and uncertainty trickled down to principals, teachers, and, eventually, students and families.

Later, state departments of education relieved schools from the burdens of [student testing](#) and performance-based accountability for the 2020–21 school year, and in some cases waived requirements for [high school graduation](#). These testing and other

regulations were difficult to reinstate until the 2021–22 school year (or later), delaying the restart of many state accountability programs. [Tennessee](#) and other states mounted tutoring programs to help students who had missed key facts or skills, but most states emphasized waivers and fiscal supplements, leaving [instructional decisions to districts](#). Schools and districts with strong external nonprofit or university partners could get assistance, but others worked with little help.

### **Politics and fear of infection complicated returning to in-person instruction for many districts**

When it was time for school to start in August 2020, many localities had spent the summer planning for a complete return to normal in-person instruction. But with outbreaks rising, the expectation of normalcy was unrealistic. Many districts had [not settled](#) on their approaches to instruction, infection control, or support for students and teachers traumatized during the earliest days of the pandemic.

As a result, [politics](#), not science or objective disease threats, primarily drove many decisions about how long to keep schools closed. Schools became the focal point for [national debates](#) over masks and vaccinations. [Red localities](#) were more likely to reopen schools in September 2020 and keep them open, fueled by widespread skepticism about federal masking and separation guidance, as well as less organized teacher opposition. In contrast, children and parents in [big cities](#) were more likely to be traumatized by family deaths and neighborhood disorder. City [teachers' unions](#) also [aggressively](#) represented their members who feared returning to school before vaccines were widely available. All these factors contributed to late and unstable school openings. Wide geographic variation in what schooling looked like for students on any given day was common in the first 18 months of the pandemic.

When schools reopened, either with full or hybrid schedules, [teachers](#) and [parents](#) were [nervous](#) about Covid contagion. Many districts were forced to [temporarily re-close](#) some or all their schools—despite what they had planned to do—due to outbreaks or rising rates of infection in their communities. Students often shifted between in-person and remote (sometimes entirely self-paced) instruction. Parents faced unexpected childcare requirements and difficulties meeting their job obligations. [Teacher absenteeism](#), whether due to illness or caring for children at home because schools were closed, was also high.

Many districts could not [hire enough substitutes](#). When faced with high teacher absences, central office administrators and principals [coped](#) by combining classrooms and filling in for absent teachers. According to RAND's [nationally representative survey](#) in Spring 2022, nearly 90% of district leaders reported they had to change their operations.

## Reopening chaos further disrupted instruction and impacted student learning

The pandemic continued to disrupt [schools and classrooms](#) throughout the 2020–21 school year. The quality of instruction varied widely. As we [reported](#) in October 2020:

For students who do connect online, the actual learning experience appears incredibly varied. Students are getting more access to live instruction than in the spring (typical plans we analyze set aside about three to four hours a day). What happens during those hours also varies widely. The experience of a remote student enrolled in a self-paced virtual academy, versus a remote student in a live, remote, teacher-led class, versus a remote student live streaming a live class that a teacher is delivering to other students in person, are all quite different. And these experiences are all dramatically different than that of a student attending school in person, which is disproportionately more likely for higher-income students.

Students attending school in-person could have one teacher one day and another the next; teachers also had different combinations of students depending on the day. In those circumstances, educators hoped to give students some instruction but did not think they could compensate for lost learning. As the leader of a small school district said,

"A couple of schools are dealing with vacancies, so they know students are not getting the instruction they need. Another school has a ton of first-year teachers. They know they're not getting the instruction they need."

Reports that teachers and principals were worn out to [the point of burnout](#) were frequent.

The earliest evidence suggested that student [learning loss](#) was much [greater than expected](#). A CRPE-led [consensus panel](#) reviewed 22 reports using data primarily from the 2020–21 school year. It concluded that, on average, children at all grade levels had suffered significant delays in learning and that the degree of those delays was closely related to the amount of time they had spent out of school or in remote instruction (this pattern held [internationally](#) as well). Consistent exposure to in-person instruction mattered more than students' race or income when it came to learning delays. However, low-income students and students of color spent the most time in remote instruction on average and, therefore, lost the most learning. In this way, closures worsened preexisting inequities.

## RECOVERY

### Challenges overwhelmed ambitious learning acceleration plans

District leaders had ambitious plans to restore lost learning. The core of their [strategy](#) was acceleration: teaching all students a subset of essential grade-level content and providing instant help to those who had missed key ideas or skills. District leaders renounced remediation, or assigning coursework below grade level to students who had lost learning.

At first, district leaders were [confident](#) their schools could switch to acceleration, but acknowledged that it might not be enough. Recognizing the depth of loss some students experienced in the pandemic, some leaders intended to provide intensive teacher training around new complementary roles of grade-level instruction and instant intervention, as well as to forge new partnerships with community groups for other student support.

In Spring 2021, we noted that districts with preexisting [coherent instructional systems](#) (standards-based curricula aligned to teacher training and assessments of student progress) would find it easier to follow the acceleration strategy. But almost immediately, even those districts [struggled](#) due to continued and [compounding challenges](#) such as:

- **Insufficient teacher preparation.** Few districts had been able to train teachers in the skills required for acceleration, because of low capacity and low availability of substitute teachers, which meant that teachers would have had to receive professional development outside of normal work hours—something district leaders reported teachers resisted.
- **Inflexibility based on regulations, collective bargaining agreements, and ingrained habits.** Aside from charter schools, districts had to petition states for specific waivers for schools that wanted to try new approaches to instruction or changes in teacher roles (e.g. working in teams).
- **Little data or tracking for student learning gaps.** Due to the lack of regular student assessment in both 2019–20 and 2020–21, districts could not give teachers much help in [anticipating student needs](#). Teachers discovered in real time the differences in students' preparation and found that individual students had unpredictable gaps in their learning.
- **Challenging classrooms.** District leaders acknowledged serious problems with student behavior. Student [social emotional issues](#) (some that existed pre-pandemic and others created or exacerbated by pandemic isolation, trauma, and screen overuse) and inability to settle into classroom routines challenged both teachers and learners. School and district leaders [tried to help teachers](#) address student needs under the broad heading of social emotional learning (SEL), but this took time and resources that could otherwise have gone toward [enhancing academic instruction](#).



Learning acceleration also encountered a number of compounding challenges related to teacher staffing that existed prior to the pandemic but were worsened by “the great resignation” starting in the 2021-22 school year. [Many districts](#) had [high vacancy rates](#) and found they were hiring “greener” staff. As a district leader [told us in 2021](#),

“It’s not that we necessarily lost more people than we would in the normal year...it’s because there were significantly fewer applicants in the workforce, or people who wanted to teach, [or] have never taught before and so didn’t quite understand what they were getting themselves into.”

### **Tutoring and other strategies encountered similar challenges; “bright spots” were rare**

Federal aid from the American Rescue Plan/Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) went to districts [with few restrictions](#) between March 2020 and March 2021, with districts required to spend the money by September 2024. Once learning acceleration had proven too difficult to implement in the face of ongoing challenges, districts moved toward other research-based strategies, like [high-dose tutoring](#) and [extended learning](#) (e.g. summer school and after school), for students most in need.

However, [tutoring](#) and [extended learning](#) programs also proved [difficult to implement](#) at the level required to see the positive impact on student learning showcased in research. While ESSER had provided districts with the necessary funds, many found it difficult to [staff the programs](#) due to shortages in the qualified labor pool. Initiatives to develop tutors from [new sources](#) cropped up, but aligning students’ tutoring and extended learning time with the information from teachers—such as individual learning gaps and the content they were currently teaching—was also hard. [Attendance](#) in these interventions also [tended to be low](#). Few parents [expressed interest](#) in summer school or tutoring for their children, possibly due to pandemic-related burnout or a lack of understanding about the extent of learning loss. Most [research](#) suggests that these challenges prevented students from receiving the “dosage” necessary to produce the increases in learning promised by the research.

Districts also used federal recovery funds to [hire more staff](#) focused on meeting students’ mental health needs. While many students had been struggling with their mental health pre-pandemic, upon the return to in-person schooling their needs were immediate. [Districts responded](#) by hiring counselors and adding elements to curricula to support student social emotional health and well-being.

Districts also used their ESSER funds to pay for one-time expenses, such as [facility improvements](#) and [upgrading curricula](#) to high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) designed to align instruction with standards. While [some districts](#) saw the adoption of HQIM as a way to raise the quality of teaching in all schools, curriculum adoptions could stoke internal conflicts. Implementing new materials meant teachers had to spend significant time on professional development—[some district leaders reported](#) that this was a challenge for teachers still recovering from burnout.

[Some districts](#) (and [one state](#)) [found ways](#) to recover learning losses. They are by and large following the same playbook as everyone else: providing tutoring, adopting HQIM, developing teacher capacity, and building leadership pipelines, among other approaches. Preliminary research suggests that what set them apart was their ability



to navigate barriers that defeated other districts. Their strategies included:

- Building on existing resources and programs
- Leveraging external partnerships to increase capacity and provide teacher training
- Using ESSER funds to provide stipends to teachers for filling staffing gaps
- Building data systems that easily and reliably identify students who need the most extra help
- Retaining leaders with vision and commitment to these initiatives.

### Teachers and parents liked learning hubs and pods, but districts didn't continue supporting them

Early in the pandemic, some districts and communities pursued innovative approaches like learning hubs, homeschooling, and learning pods when faced with prolonged closures or remote-only options. These approaches helped combat isolation, provide childcare, and ensure quality instruction.

Some learning pods were organized by districts and staffed by regular teachers but many were started by families in historically underserved communities and staffed with unconventional teachers. In our survey of 152 families and 101 instructors who participated in pods during the 2020–21 school year, over two-thirds of families cited at least one tangible benefit for their students, such as higher engagement in learning or feelings of belonging. Pod instructors reported gaining professional freedom and supportive relationships with families.

Once schools reopened again, districts withdrew their support for pods and learning hubs despite continued parent interest; researchers at the University of Southern California found that, if offered, 25% of parents would have enrolled their children in a pod. As CRPE reported in August 2021, only 37% of the pods we identified in 2020 continued operating through the 2021–22 school year. Most succumbed in the absence of school district support, citing concerns about instructional rigor, insufficient support services, and unsustainable costs for families. Another group that tracked pandemic learning pods summarized the phenomenon: “Despite the moment that pods had during the pandemic, once in-person learning became more available, there was a snapback of about eighty-five percent.”

## WHAT NOW & WHAT NEXT

### **Student achievement remains far too low, chronic absenteeism is still too high, and challenges keep racking up**

The lost learning problem remains unsolved. Research has begun to show [federal pandemic fund spending](#) helped [students recover](#) in [some ways](#), albeit slowly. However, those who lost the most learning are not catching up. Learning losses are now showing up in [NAEP scores](#), [SAT and ACT scores](#), [college readiness](#) and [performance](#), and [international comparisons](#).

As CRPE reported in our 2024 [State of the American Student](#) report, reading and math scores remain well below pre-pandemic levels for nearly all categories of students but especially for historically marginalized students, English language learners, and students with disabilities. Older students continue to graduate with significant learning gaps, while younger students not in school during the pandemic also show learning delays. Continued [student absenteeism](#) and disengagement complicate efforts, as students learn less if they aren't physically in school.

The sudden temporary increase in federal funding also [created challenges for districts](#). While many districts tried to spend the temporary money on one-time expenses, in some cases they used the funds [to hire staff](#)—creating permanent spending commitments that may lead to insolvency.

School districts in some localities might yet master these challenges. But in those that are still faltering, including many of the big cities CRPE has profiled over the past five years, it is [highly unlikely](#) that schools can make up [learning deficits](#) before affected students leave school. Students who did not enter school until after the pandemic, meanwhile, may also be hurt by continuing turmoil. While there are districts and schools that have found [ways to recover learning losses](#), they are a distinct minority.

Unless the vast majority of schools can find ways to become much more effective, it is likely that inequalities and inequities that existed before the pandemic will continue and in some cases worsen. A decade's graduates are likely to leave school more unprepared for work and higher education than those educated before the pandemic.

### **Can public schools adapt in the face of new hurdles and few straightforward answers?**

The pandemic changed our world, including the conditions of work, the ways people use their leisure time, and even our political system. [Challenges](#) from student mental health and attendance problems to parental and community discontent show no signs of abating. The pandemic exacerbated inequities that predated it, worsening gaps between the educational haves and have-nots.

Early in the pandemic, district leaders recognized that student needs would require more flexible and personalized instruction. Schools tried to meet student educational and mental health needs and, for a while, tried to change instruction via learning pods, learning acceleration, and interventions like tutoring and summer school.

But as described in the sections above, many districts, overwhelmed by a succession of challenges and without straightforward evidence of what has worked, have found their way back to pre-pandemic habits—especially efforts to centralize control of instruction, with teachers working alone in their classrooms.

Further, new challenges keep coming. Revenue shortfalls, driven by enrollment declines, are especially causing pain now that federal ESSER funds have expired. Mismatches between district incomes and the salary demands from teachers' unions salary [may lead](#) to further district shutdowns. The need to adapt to lower revenues, and in extreme cases to [close schools](#), is leading to community conflict and movements to [fire superintendents](#) who provided steady hands throughout the pandemic.

The Trump administration's attack on the U.S. Department of Education will also create challenges. At the time of this publication, changes in federal program structure, requirements, and funding are underway—the Department of Education was [just cut in half](#). Districts will likely face less federal money, obfuscation around how to best serve students with special needs, and new pressures to shift funding away from current beneficiaries.

In this turbulent environment, state and district leaders need to ask whether they can adapt by reallocating resources and redeploying talent in order to meet students' needs. They need to consider ideas that were abandoned early in the pandemic—and ask for state and civic leaders to support these initiatives. For example:

- [Teaching all students at grade level but intervening quickly when a child shows evidence of missing a necessary idea or skill](#)
- [Reconfiguring school staffing so some teachers are instantly available to help students who are falling behind](#)
- [Establishing learning pods for students who resist returning to the regular classroom and recruiting community partners to support the teachers who staff these pods](#)
- [Closely tracking student progress and promptly informing parents, teachers, and school leaders about whether students are making normal progress](#)
- [Providing alternatives for students who are not learning well in their current schools](#)

These moves are heavy lifts and unlikely to happen unless state officials seriously consider major waivers of regulations and teacher unions allow experimentation with new teacher roles and school staffing rules. For districts to deliver greater personalization and better learning opportunities for students most in need, leaders will need to deliver a lot more than eternal optimism and good intentions. They must ask key questions—and researchers should be prepared to help answer them:

- [What worked and didn't work over the previous five years?](#)
- [How are the students most in need going to receive extra time and attention?](#)
- [What skills and new work habits do teachers need to implement?](#)
- [What kinds of support and mentoring do teachers need to change their approaches?](#)
- [Who will resist change and what incentives will help them adopt new practices?](#)

- What can be done to get students out of schools that are not adequately serving them and into environments that offer better learning opportunities?
- How much money available to public schools can be reallocated to necessary changes, and what new spending is needed?

The answers to these questions are likely to be daunting and will require a great deal more from school systems and their communities than has become the norm. They might also require the creation of options that are beyond district capacity, including new uses of technology and new public education providers. However, maintaining the status quo amounts to accepting learning losses and inequities (and their eventual economic consequences) and harm to an entire generation of students.



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