How State Leaders Can Stand Up for the COVID Generation of High Schoolers

Families need better data on students' academic progress; students need meaningful learning experiences and better information on postsecondary options.

Travis Pillow and Robin Lake

With billions of dollars in lost economic activity and untold squandered human potential, COVID-19 threatens to leave an enduring legacy.[1] Especially at risk are students who have been least visible in the discourse about learning recovery and have the least amount of time to catch up: those currently enrolled in high school.

By one measure in an NWEA study, students who finished grade 8 during the 2022–23 school year faced a steeper climb to academic recovery than younger students. They would need an additional 7.4 months of learning in reading and 9.1 months in math to return to pre-pandemic achievement levels.[2] That is a daunting amount of ground to make up in four years of high school, especially since the study found that older students had lost ground between fall 2022 and spring 2023.

By another measure—the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)'s study of long-term trends—the pandemic and school closures wiped out decades of educational improvement among 13-year-olds. Even more concerning: The gaps between the highest- and lowest-scoring students appear to have widened, especially in math.[3]

An analysis by researchers at Stanford and Harvard University found the real impact varied depending on who students were and where they lived. Those who

attend predominantly Black, Hispanic, or low-income school systems lost more progress than their peers, and the consequences could follow them for life.

Research by the Center on Reinventing Public Education has revealed an important reason for this slow-motion train wreck: School system leaders remain trapped in crisis mode. They are fighting to address declines in the quality of core instruction, which is diverting their attention from efforts to accelerate learning or deliver targeted support to students who need it the most.[4] Yet districts still have $190 billion in federal pandemic relief at their disposal. In the coming years, that funding will expire as school systems face a perfect fiscal storm of rising costs and declining enrollment, leaving leaders with fewer resources to aid recovery.

Millions of students are thus poised to graduate high school less prepared for college and the workforce than they would have been otherwise. Long before the pandemic, the situation was already dire: A quarter of high school freshmen were enrolled in remedial classes to fill gaps in their academic preparation, and less than four in ten students who enrolled in remedial classes completed their degrees on time.[5] But for this COVID generation of high schoolers, it is worse.

It is not too late for state education leaders to highlight these students' needs, restore opportunities the pandemic stole from them, and design a system that does right by future generations.

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Highlight Student Progress and Mastery

The national conversations about learning loss and tutoring have focused disproportionately on younger students. In 2022, NAEP reported historic learning losses in fourth and eighth graders. Researchers tracking pandemic recovery more closely relied on assessments like MAP and iReady.[6] Schools and districts use these assessments multiple times during the school year to monitor their students' progress and help prepare for state assessments in the spring. As a result, these assessments have yielded more frequent snapshots of pandemic recovery than state assessment systems typically allow. Reports based on these interim assessments have also focused heavily on grades 3 through 8. This emphasis on elementary and middle school results is enshrined in federal policy, which requires public schools to test students annually in elementary and middle school, but just once in high school.

With just a single year of high school results, there is a dearth of clear, actionable data about which high schools are equipping students for success after graduation and how these students are recovering from the pandemic. The most widely cited measure of high school success—graduation rates—fluctuated dramatically during the pandemic as states loosened requirements. For example, the share of ninth graders in the District of Columbia who were projected to graduate high school jumped by six percentage points during the pandemic.[7] But the share expected to complete postsecondary education within six years fell by the same amount.

A national survey of rising and actual high school seniors conducted by ACT found that nearly half of all students—and even larger proportions of low-income students—had reconsidered some aspect of their college or career plans during the pandemic years.[8] Others are graduating with gaps in their learning that will threaten their progress in college. However, as we compiled data for our forthcoming State of the American Student 2023 report, we discovered a lack of systematic data about how cohorts of students most affected by the pandemic are faring after high school graduation.

The first step to solving this problem is to shine a light on it. Some states, like Indiana and Louisiana, have set up transparent dashboards that report students' progress throughout their educational journey—from third grade reading scores to college readiness to employment. Indiana also reports on sustained employment and median earnings for graduates who remain in-state, which suggests consistent reporting on outcomes for students who cross state lines after graduation remains a data gap even for states that have made strides toward tracking longer-term outcomes.[9]

Students and families deserve clear information that can help them decide which college and career training programs are effective. State leaders need actionable insights into how students fare after they leave high school so they can design more effective support systems. Such systems should include meaningful measures of how well-prepared high school students are for life after graduation, such as Indiana's reports

on college and career readiness and the percentage of students earning meaningful credentials recognized by colleges and employers.

The public should be able to get a more nuanced picture of the complexity of students' needs. For example, rather than reporting outcomes for students with disabilities as a single category, those with autism and those with hearing impairments should be disaggregated, so leaders can see which of these students are receiving adequate support in planning for postsecondary transitions, as is required by federal law, and which of these students are enrolling in college and participating in dual enrollment and career training.

Helpfully, the U.S. Education Department's Institute for Education Sciences has launched a new initiative to help states develop new and better longitudinal data systems. The time is ripe to invest in systems that link student records across high school, college, and tax and census information so policymakers have as much visibility into how students fare after leaving school as they do while they are enrolled.

Gathering and reporting data may not be enough to drive action. Schools and districts are likely to need help making sense of what the data show. States can help districts connect with universities and nonprofit researchers who can help interpret the data their improved systems collect.

Provide Actionable Information to Families

Reporting results for students and subgroups is not enough. Every parent deserves an honest accounting of how the pandemic affected their child's learning and what they can do to recover. Right now, an honesty gap is hampering pandemic recovery.

The majority of parents surveyed by Pew Research Center in September 2022 predicted that the pandemic's impact on their children's learning would only be temporary.[10] A survey by the advocacy group Learning Heroes found that nine in ten parents believe their child is performing at or above grade level in school.[11] The same survey found that nine in ten parents in Washington, DC, say their children are prepared to succeed in college, while SAT scores say just two in ten students in the District are college ready.[12]

Given this disconnect between parent beliefs and performance data, it is no wonder that parents also reported limited interest in tutoring and afterschool and summer programming to help their children catch up.[13] For too long, the conversation about accountability in public education has focused on holding schools accountable for outcomes and neglected giving parents and teachers actionable information about where students stand and what can help them improve.

Some states are creating tools to close the honesty gap. Virginia is building a dashboard designed to help parents see where their students stand and identify areas they can target with tutoring or interventions. Building such tools is not just essential for pandemic recovery. It can also upend the negative politics around school accountability, where educators often feel blamed. Assessments and rating systems that provide useful information to parents and educators will be more likely to win their long-term support.

Provide Flexible Support

Surveys also point to a growing skepticism of American students and parents about the value of a four-year college degree.[14] For the typical student, a four-year college diploma has a lifetime value that far exceeds its cost: an estimated $1.2 million on average.[15] But the value of a specific degree for a specific student depends on their choice of major and the institution they attend.[16]

And the reality is that students must navigate an opaque system built on false assumptions with fragmented support and limited information. Missteps can leave them saddled with debt that follows them for life. For example, a study of Chicago Public Schools graduates found it is more common for a student to transfer from a four-year to a two-year institution, even though pathways are typically designed around the opposite assumption.[17]

The students frequently cited inconsistent, impersonal advising from offices designed to help them navigate the system. Amayrani, a first-generation college student, described an experience that was all too typical: "It was like when you go to a store, you take a ticket, that's really pretty much how they go, you get a different person each time."[18]

Students should have clear information on the effectiveness and long-term economic value

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of different college and career pathways. They should have mentors and advisors who get to know them and help them make informed decisions about where to attend, what financial aid is available, and how their choice of education or career options might affect their future earnings. And states should look for financially sustainable ways to expand upon what states like Connecticut did during the pandemic and offer scholarships designed to fill gaps in students' existing financial aid.

Build the System Every Student Deserves

The typical high school experience is not working for far too many students. Students report feeling less engaged with their education as they progress from middle to high school.[19]

However, making high school more relevant—and helping students explore college and career possibilities while earning meaningful credentials—appears to be one of the few true opportunities for fruitful bipartisanship in an education policy landscape crippled by polarized politics. In our 2023 State of the American Student report, Jared Polis, Colorado's Democratic governor, and Aimee Guidera, Virginia's education secretary appointed by Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin, highlight steps their states are taking to blur the lines between high school, college, and career preparation.[20] They are ensuring that every student graduates with meaningful college or workforce credentials.

State boards of education may have limited authority to force high schools, higher education institutions, and workforce training providers to create that system. But they are uniquely positioned to shine a light on the needs of the COVID generation and the possibility of a better future for all young people. ■

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