



Choosing a Return to Better

Moving Beyond Normal in the Commonwealth's
Return to School and Learning

Introduction and Guiding Principles

The Challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant consequences for people everywhere. The loss of life, the threats to personal and family health and economic security, and the continuing uncertainty and disruption have ensured that the impacts of this crisis will be felt for years to come.

In March of this year, Massachusetts schools closed as a necessary and understandable precaution to prevent the community spread of the virus. As has happened across the country and in other parts of the world, these closures have threatened the progress and success of students, disrupting student learning and, in many places, widening existing achievement and opportunity gaps.

The impact is likely most significant among Black, Latinx, and low-income students. A recent [analysis](#) by McKinsey and Company determined that the nation's students, on average, could fall behind in their learning by almost 7 months, with 10 months lost for Black and Latinx students, and over 12 months for low-income students. As schools continue to grapple with pandemic-related disruptions, the stakes could not be higher.

The negative impacts of COVID-19 have the potential to exceed those that occurred in the Great Recession, when student achievement in both math and English Language Arts was significantly reduced, especially in the higher grades. Also, the effects of the recession were *not* distributed equally; school districts that served more economically disadvantaged and minority students were harder hit.

According to the [Brookings Institute](#), the cost to the United States in future earnings of 4 months of lost education is \$2.5 trillion—12.7% of annual Gross Domestic Product. The interruption in student learning due to COVID-19 will have a long-term economic impact on individuals as well as employers unless we act urgently and innovatively to deliver high-quality instruction in this new school year and beyond.

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The Charge

The Massachusetts Competitive Partnership and the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education have come together to support an effort to enhance and improve education in a way that takes advantage of this moment to effect change that is long-lasting, embraces innovation and technology, and changes the trajectory for students in ways that the status quo never will.

Business leaders are engaged and listening, and are hoping to contribute to the debate and the development of these kinds of innovative solutions. Making sure that Massachusetts retains its competitive edge in educational and economic terms is a goal that, if achieved, will greatly benefit students and their families as well as the businesses that will provide the jobs and energy the Commonwealth needs.

As we develop a response strategy to the educational disruption, we can learn from the recovery from the Great Recession, when the vast majority of jobs went to those with at least a college degree. Some pre-COVID jobs will never return, and new jobs—that previously didn't exist—will be created that will likely require new and higher level skills and knowledge. **Regardless of whether students are in school or learning remotely, our schools must deliver high-quality education to each and every student this school year.**

The Choice

It is our collective responsibility to ensure our children get the education they need and deserve. There is no better place than here, in Massachusetts, to pave a new path forward—one that will not only provide immediate solutions to short-term challenges but also resolve long-standing, systemic obstacles inherent in our public school system.

The Commonwealth has been a leader in public education since the founding of the nation's first public school, Boston Latin, in 1635. It was the collective vision and perseverance of many stakeholders that established the foundation on which we have built one of the strongest public education systems in the country—if not the world. It is with the same tenacity and entrepreneurial spirit that we must tackle the obstacles COVID-19 has presented.

Although we understand there is no one-size-fits-all approach to tackling these obstacles, we must, together, create a new vision upon which every child has equitable access to learning—whether physically in a classroom, or virtually. For this reason, we are calling on ourselves and others, from educators to administrators and parents to innovators, to come together and **embrace a common set of principles and strategies for re-activating high-quality learning experiences and creating a culture and set of practices based on a newfound flexibility and innovation. We must seek not a return to normal, but an advanced and new system of teaching and learning that meets the demands of a new economy and fully prepares students to take their place in it.**

The Guiding Principles

We believe that the return to school and learning in the fall of 2020 must be conducted within the context of certain key principles: that equity be the lens for all decision making; that students' individual needs be the focus for action; and that data collection and transparency characterize the approach to all communication and decision making.

EQUITY

To ensure equity of opportunity for all students, we must address the practical issues of closing the digital divide and addressing the health and safety needs of those most affected by the pandemic. More importantly, we must put equity at the forefront of our decision making and prevent the disruption of school closures from exacerbating existing achievement and opportunity gaps. We must also ensure that instruction and curricula are relevant to the current national moment regarding social justice and systemic racism and adjust accordingly to meet student need in advancing collective understanding and acknowledgment of the challenge and opportunities for change.

The San Antonio Integrated School District in Texas is responding to the learning loss experienced by many children with a comprehensive strategy to help students and teachers identify individual learning needs. The district is using data on student engagement and fall assessment results to help teachers develop individualized support plans for each student. The district created a tracker app that allows teachers and staff to track students' adult interactions, homework assignments, and class participation. Any teacher who works with a student can see what progress that student is making and whether additional help is needed. (Center on Reinventing Public Education)

STUDENTS' INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

District plans should prioritize special needs, English Language Learners, low-income, and high-needs students. Diagnostic assessments of student progress and learning loss must be conducted immediately, and personalized learning plans must be developed and implemented to get students back on track.

South Carolina is requiring all schools to administer the MAP® Growth™ diagnostic assessment when the students return to school in the fall and again in December. They will use MAP Growth scores and student demographic data to determine the

impact of prolonged school closures and interrupted learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will use assessment data from MAP Growth assessments to demonstrate the extent to which student achievement was affected, and evaluate if this impact varies across student subgroups, grades, and schools. Tracking academic growth once students return to school will allow schools to compare different approaches to addressing the gaps across the state and identify what's working.

DATA COLLECTION AND TRANSPARENCY

In the midst of such an unprecedented disruption in learning time, the state and educational leaders must prioritize the gathering of information about whether students are on track and on grade level, and commit to sharing true and accurate information with parents and communities. That means districts should be utilizing diagnostic assessments throughout the school year to measure student progress, and the state must administer the annual MCAS assessments that are an objective and consistent tool for determining whether students are meeting grade level expectations. A commitment to administering spring assessments also sends the right message to districts that we must maintain high expectations for all students. Assessment and data collection will strengthen our immediate response to the current challenge, and sharing data and results will be necessary to build confidence and inform policy decisions and changes necessary for short- and long-term success.

These principles embody important approaches to the return to school and learning that should be the foundation for the strategies that can move us beyond a return to the status quo and restore and enhance the state's competitive position in education and in the economy. They also reflect the good work and thought leadership of many local and national organizations; as such, we have chosen to embrace them without further elaboration, to avoid redundancy and to allow for a presentation of strategies that will provide the Commonwealth the opportunity to do more than return to normal—an approach that will seek to take advantage of this disruption to improve the state's efforts to incorporate equity, college and career readiness, and innovation and flexibility into a system of education in need of change.

State/National Context and Recommendations

Our recommendations are grounded in our understanding of the current challenges and opportunities present in Massachusetts regarding a return to school and learning as well as our review of the responses to school disruption in states and districts across the country and elsewhere.

Areas of Focus

To facilitate a return to better, this paper focuses on some immediate, short-term, and long-term actions and initiatives that state and school district leaders, with support from businesses, parents, and others, should consider to achieve the following:



Close the Digital Equity Gap

This includes equipping every student with a device and connectivity and improving remote learning, while expanding digital literacy and growing computer science instruction for all students.



Prioritize College and Career Readiness

This includes facilitating a quicker turnaround of competency-based skills acquisition, expanding Early College and access to credentials, and connecting more students to work-based learning opportunities.



Promote Innovation and Flexibility

This includes restoring learning rapidly and efficiently by removing barriers to flexibility in scheduling, staffing patterns, and collective bargaining agreements; investing in technology; and, adopting new strategies for teaching and learning.



CLOSING THE DIGITAL EQUITY GAP

Massachusetts justifiably prides itself on its uniqueness in a number of categories: as a hotbed of technological capacity and advancement; as a place of innovation and creativity; and as a national leader in student academic achievement. Despite these achievements, we recognize that the state's competitive position in these areas is dependent on continued improvement and a dedicated effort to meet the challenges before us to maintain that competitiveness; some of these challenges are inherent and others have been laid bare, and potentially exacerbated, by the pandemic. Closing the digital equity gap for students and families should be a goal aligned with our strengths and our interests.

ON THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

- In Massachusetts, according to a survey conducted this past spring, an estimated 15% of all students (approximately 150,000 out of nearly 1 million students statewide) lacked a personal device or computer, prohibiting them from fully participating in the remote learning models implemented by districts in the spring.
- Additionally, about 9% of students and families lacked home internet connectivity, further exacerbating the digital divide.
- The combination of these two factors was even more acutely felt in urban districts, where as many as 30% to 40% of students could not participate in any online learning and instruction. Many students in rural districts were similarly limited due to internet connectivity issues.
- Further, many students, families, and teachers lacked the necessary technical support that would have allowed them to utilize the devices and platforms to which they had access. Many teachers and school personnel had no experience or training in delivering instruction online or from a remote location.
- Early in the disruption, many efforts were made to address digital divide issues. Many school districts distributed Chromebooks to students, with Boston attempting to get 20,000 of them to students in April, after schools had closed. Providers like Comcast and Verizon created programs to offer limited free or discounted internet service and increase service speed. Some districts collaborated with private sector partners to create hotspots in underserved communities to increase connectivity, including parking buses equipped with hotspots in high-density, low-income neighborhoods.



In April, Holyoke Public Schools in Massachusetts and the Holyoke Mayor's Office initiated a program with Comcast, funded by the city, to provide 6 months of free internet service to families of public school students who were previously without service, after which families could cancel the service or subscribe for \$9.95 a month. Comcast offered 60 days of free service and free installation to new Internet Essentials customers, while Verizon offered Fios at reduced prices.

- In July, the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) established a matching grant program to support school districts with the purchase of devices, technology, equipment, and connectivity for students, committing nearly \$33 million in state funds to leverage an additional \$18 million in local dollars to close the digital divide.
- Even with state funding assistance, many Massachusetts districts have had supply chain issues, which is also affecting schools nationally, delaying purchases until after the start of school. State education leaders facilitated a bulk purchase for districts that enabled devices to be delivered to districts and students by late September/early October. Other districts may have to wait until November for their devices to be delivered and distributed to students. In any case, the school year started with many students unable to access the virtual classroom.
- The science of the pandemic suggests that the need for remote learning may continue, either continuously or episodically, through the entire 2020-21 school year.

- As the new school year begins, and despite districts' best efforts to address the state's digital divide issues, the state still lacks a quantifiable measurement of how wide the divide remains, where gaps remain, and what plan can be developed to finally and completely bridge the divide.
- Closing the digital divide by ensuring that every student has a personal device, connectivity at home, and the technological familiarity and support they need, is necessary not just to meet the current school closures but to address what has long been recognized as the "homework gap," where students who lack devices and connectivity at home are at a serious disadvantage in their learning process compared with their peers.

ON REMOTE LEARNING

- When schools closed on March 15, many schools and districts were understandably caught off guard and ill-prepared to make a swift and effective pivot to remote learning. Other districts and/or schools within districts had advanced technology investments or remote learning platforms that allowed them to be better equipped to meet the school closure disruption.
- DESE suggested, initially, that districts and schools not teach new content but focus with students on going deeper into subjects already learned during the school year to date.
- There were significantly wide disparities between districts and schools within districts regarding their plans and approach to delivering instruction.
- Many schools lost contact with students, to varying degrees, and many families reported inconsistent or no contact from schools in the weeks and months after schools were closed. Nearly 20% of Boston Public School students—approximately 10,000—failed to log in to a single virtual learning platform during the spring school closures. Experiences sometimes varied within families as siblings had regular contact with, and live instruction from, teachers while their brothers and sisters did not. Feedback from parents suggests that charter schools were generally better positioned to maintain regular contact with students and families than traditional public schools.
- Teachers also faced challenges delivering robust remote learning programs for their students; they often lacked the tech support or training necessary to deliver meaningful online content to their classes.
- State education officials released new guidance in the last week of April that, for the first time, suggested that "new content" be delivered to students going forward. Student experiences varied widely, often within the same district or even within the same family, based on device access, connectivity, district remote learning plans, and teachers' access to technology and their ability and willingness to transition to online teaching.
- Collective bargaining agreements with teachers' unions posed a challenge to implementation of remote learning plans as many unions insisted that the shift to remote learning created a change in working conditions that required negotiations. In some districts, these agreements determined teachers' daily contact requirements with students and the use of live, synchronous instruction rather than independent work.
- DESE required all districts to submit three plans for a return to instruction this fall: one for a full in-person return, one for completely remote instruction delivery, and one for a hybrid of the two. About 30% of districts opted to start the year fully remote, including some of the largest districts, such as Boston, Worcester, and Springfield.
- Recent DESE guidance on remote learning identified standards to which districts should be teaching, offered direction to ensure that students have regular contact with teachers, required the taking of attendance to ensure student engagement, and recommended that, to the extent possible, districts use common platforms to ease the burden on parents who have multiple school-age children. Compliance with this guidance isn't mandatory; as such, we will likely see wide variations in district plans and student opportunity this fall.
- Because many students are still unable to "connect," and because many teachers still lack the robust training and skills needed to facilitate this new mode of instruction, the challenges become even more obvious. Many teachers are also dealing with legitimate concerns not only for their own health and safety, in the case of those at high risk for COVID-19, but also for their children in terms of their daytime care and learning needs.

ON DIGITAL LITERACY

- The challenge of engaging students virtually has created a renewed focus on digital literacy skills generally and the need to enhance and expand computer science instruction for all students as necessary for their success in a 21st-century economy.
- Nearly 25% of all jobs in Massachusetts involve some level of computer science competency. The Department of Higher Education estimated that there are 17 job openings in IT/computer science in Massachusetts for every graduate with a related bachelor's degree. Half of all job openings for programmers are in fields outside of technology, such as health care, manufacturing, and finance.
- However, approximately half of all Massachusetts public school students attend a high school that does not offer a single computer science course. Of high schools offering Advanced Placement (AP) courses, only 37% offer AP Computer Science.
- Careers in computer science and technology offer better-than-average wages but still lack diversity, signaling that the need to do more to create access to these opportunities is a social justice imperative.
- Like other states, Massachusetts is challenged by a lack of trained teachers to deliver computer science instruction and a lack of progress at integrating computer science into the K–8 curricula.
- Unlike other states, Massachusetts has not made the commitment to significantly expand computer science instruction in the form of a high school graduation requirement or significant funding to train teachers to deliver content.
- In Massachusetts, over one third of the state's high schools don't offer a single foundational computer science course and less than half of the state's high schools that offer Advanced Placement courses do not offer a computer science option.
- Massachusetts does not require computer science to be taught at the high school level, unlike 20 other states. In fact, in 2018, Massachusetts teacher preparation programs did not graduate a single new teacher prepared to teach computer science. (code.org)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Assess the extent of the digital divide and close gaps.

DESE should conduct a comprehensive survey, in cooperation with districts, of technology needs and, with support from the governor and legislature, acting in concert with local school districts and private partners, must lead an aggressive effort to ensure that all students have the personal devices, connectivity and tech support they need to be fully engaged and successful in their learning. This will allow the state to fulfill both the short-term need for universal student access to virtual and remote learning and the longer-term goals addressing the homework gap and the inequality of opportunity that comes with a lack of devices and home internet access.



In August, the Massachusetts legislature passed, and the governor signed into law, a borrowing bill authorizing \$50,000,000 in grants for schools to ensure students have devices and internet connectivity. The legislation contains strong language in support of equity and long-term innovation: “[G]rants shall be used to ensure fair and equitable access to technology across the commonwealth and to address the needs of vulnerable populations.....;” and, criteria for the grants shall include, “the commitment of the public school or district to improve the efficiency and productivity of education through the use of technology, to deliver statewide online assessments, to provide student access to individualized and rigorous digital learning experiences and to ensure that educators and administrators have the knowledge and skills to develop and implement digital learning curricula.”

Improve the quality of remote learning.

DESE must follow up its summer guidance to districts with a continued effort to ensure that remote learning plans are of high quality and are focused on delivering standards-based instruction, that schools' remote plans include live daily instruction and contact with teachers, and that schools and districts work to identify students who aren't participating and actively seek to re-engage them. DESE must develop ways to ensure compliance with minimum threshold elements of district plans and state expectations.



Rhode Island is requiring districts to submit evidence of comparable levels of rigor between online and in-person instruction. California has required, by passing legislation, that remote instruction include daily, live interaction. Louisiana requires districts to conduct student assessments and to develop individualized plans to get students back on track.

Promote flexibility in teacher/staff assignments and support educators in new roles.

DESE and school districts must be innovative during this disruption and consider utilizing teachers and staff in ways that best serve students, such as identifying teachers accomplished in certain subject areas to produce content for large groups of remote learners with synchronous follow-up by regularly assigned classroom teachers, using unassigned teachers and staff in support roles such as leading small group instruction designed to get kids back on track, or reassigning teachers based not on seniority but on competence with certain instructional platforms or other measures. This flexibility should be employed not just for remote learning scenarios but for hybrid and in-person models as well.

Teachers' needs for additional professional development to deliver remote instruction must be prioritized and districts should consider ways to assist teachers and essential staff with their own childcare needs or parental responsibilities.



In Little Rock, Arkansas, the school district created a year-long training opportunity for teachers and parents called **Tech Tuesdays** where all can learn to become familiar with the tech tools and platforms in use and parents can access and view their student's class activities, assignments and grades within the platform.

Develop a plan to deliver computer science instruction to all of the state's students.

The Commonwealth, either through legislation or regulation, should require that every high school in Massachusetts offer at least one computer science course. DESE should also ensure that districts plan to integrate computer science into the K-8 curricula across all grade levels and relevant subject areas. DESE should identify the costs of training and certifying the teachers necessary to fulfill this goal, and the legislature and governor should commit to funding it.

Assess student progress and share information with families and communities.

During these unique and challenging times, administering assessments to measure student progress, or lack thereof, and sharing information gathered from assessments with parents and communities is imperative. We agree with the Commissioner that we must continue to administer MCAS assessments, which provide objective and consistent data that can be acted on to address gaps in achievement. Data collected from assessment should be disaggregated to identify disparate impacts among and between groups of students and districts. The Data Advisory Commission, established in the Student Opportunity Act, should be appointed and convened immediately.



PRIORITIZING COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

Massachusetts has long recognized that it is not enough to simply ensure students graduate high school. In our high-skill economy, most of the jobs that drive the state's economic competitiveness and provide family-sustaining wages require education, training, or structured work-based learning beyond high school.

Preparing students for and supporting their transitions to college and the workforce is an essential mission of our K-12 education system, a task made more difficult and more critical in light of COVID-19. These disruptions also create opportunities to accelerate innovative changes that were already starting to take hold.

- COVID-19 has induced a recession and driven Massachusetts' unemployment rate higher than anywhere else in the country.
- Simultaneously, it has accelerated trends related to automation, remote work, and the growth of the online economy. Many of the jobs that benefit from these trends are higher skill and higher wage.



A recent [report](#) by ExcelinEd and Burning Glass identified some of the immediate and potential longer term impacts to labor markets by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there will be some variation from state to state, changes in employment demand will be influenced by whether various industries and careers involve critical workers, require physical proximity, and comprise a risk of automation. A push for greater digital literacy for all students is supported by the knowledge that COVID-19 labor impacts are likely to require greater employment in the following areas: STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), education and training, and information technology.

- In past recessions, the market for higher skilled jobs has enjoyed a quicker and more robust recovery than the jobs accessible to those with only a high school diploma.
- Simultaneously, the disruption to in-person learning has set learning back, widened opportunity and achievement gaps, and made the type of hands-on and experiential learning needed for career readiness more difficult.
- The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates, necessary for student access to many forms of financial assistance for college and a strong indicator of students likely to enroll in college, were down this year, and some students report delaying or scaling back their plans to attend higher education as a result of the pandemic.
- Internships, apprenticeships, and work-based learning experiences have been curtailed or canceled as businesses struggle to survive and many work sites are closed or operating under capacity limits.
- Moving college and career readiness resources online can expand access. Classes that some schools might struggle to sustain due to low enrollment could attract larger numbers of students, making such offerings financially feasible at a system level.
- Similarly, a scaled approach to remote instruction could enable a district to offer richer, more robust instruction to more students. For example, one highly effective teacher could coordinate and deliver instruction remotely for hundreds of students, working with a team of other educators to provide additional small group support, whether in person or online. ([Education Resource Strategies](#))

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure a rigorous curriculum.

The Commonwealth needs to expand access and ensure fidelity to a rigorous course of study across schools and districts in the Commonwealth by universally adopting MassCore and supporting and expanding AP courses, including by allowing registration across districts when a desired AP course is not available in the student's home district, to ensure continued alignment between what students are learning and what they will need after graduation.

Expand Early College.

The state should maintain and expand Early College programs by continuing to provide state financial support for program development and initiation; longer term, the state should monitor the success of Early College graduates in college and in the labor market.



Early College programs in Massachusetts are showing great promise in closing equity gaps. Two thirds of students who enroll in Early College in Massachusetts identify as Black or Latinx. **New data** show that students who participate in Early College programs enroll in college within 6 months of graduation at a **20 percentage point higher rate** (76% vs. 56%) than their state peers. Importantly, **89%** of Black Early College students enroll in college within 6 months of graduating high school compared with **64%** of their Black school peers, and **72%** of Hispanic Early College students enroll in college within 6 months of graduating high school compared with **45%** of their Hispanic school peers and **48%** of their Hispanic state peers.

Greatly expand career-connected learning opportunities.

DESE should encourage, and districts should adopt, new and expanded ways of increasing work-based learning opportunities. Legislators should create, and the administration should support, a state budget line item for sustaining Innovation Pathways planning and initiation activities. MassHire career centers should be engaged as supplementary providers of virtual skills assessments, career awareness, and training to high school students.

Massachusetts should expand opportunities for students to earn industry-recognized credentials tied to employer demand and in high-growth fields by providing a financial incentive to high schools for each student who earns one. This can be achieved either through legislation or via the state budget process. In addition, Massachusetts should work, through the Workforce Skills Cabinet, to engage the state's business leaders and others to produce forward guidance on how employment by occupation and industry in Massachusetts may change because of the pandemic. The state should also ensure Innovation Pathways programs, credentials initiatives, and Chapter 74 programs all adapt accordingly.



In Massachusetts, Burlington Public High School offers a "Flipped Internship" in which industry mentors meet with one or small groups of students weekly to share their career experiences and pathways and guide seniors through their work on a technology-related capstone project or certification program. The program was initiated by two engineers from MITRE and offers students the unique opportunity to get computer science career-related work experience. For the 2020-21 school year, all mentor meetings will be held virtually.

Commit to data collection and transparency.

The state must commit to collecting and publicly releasing annual “to and through” data on the postsecondary pathways of current students, disaggregated by demographics and student participation on college and career readiness programming, while also agreeing to publicize a common set of success metrics for college and career outcomes for the Innovations Pathways and Chapter 74 programs.



PROMOTING INNOVATION AND FLEXIBILITY

The COVID-19 pandemic is necessitating a reinvention of teaching and learning that could serve as a defining moment in education that brings about sustainable improvements. The 20th-century industrial model on which our current education system is based doesn't work during this pandemic, and it no longer meets the needs of students in the 21st century and beyond. Just as our lives, homes, businesses, and entertainment have been transformed by technology and innovation, so too must our schools. We need a new education model that is as flexible, collaborative, and innovative as the students/citizens it must educate and graduate. In 2014, the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education released [The New Opportunity to Lead: A Vision for Education in Massachusetts in the Next 20 years](#), a report that laid out a plan to modernize our schools. It stated, "If Massachusetts could foster and accelerate the rate of adoption of high-quality innovation now, it could build a system that incorporates continual evolution as part of its very DNA." That assertion is true now more than ever and, given the adapting we must do to meet this moment, we should take full advantage of the opportunity to invest our time, energy, and resources into lasting change.

- Walk into almost any school or classroom today and you'll find it looks much like it did 20 or 30 years ago—with the exception of maybe a white board or a few computers.
- Despite new technologies that enable computer games to simulate real-world situations or shopping sites to generate personalized options, math and science lessons remain flat and without relevant context that motivates students to learn.
- If we're serious about closing the achievement gap, we need to design schools around personalized learning systems that address the particular needs of individual students.



In Massachusetts, the Melrose Public School District is more than 4 years into breaking from traditional schooling and implementing a competency-based education model. A [Hechinger Report story on the initiative states](#), "*Competency-based education demands a shift away from traditional teaching, testing and grading. Students get more control over what and how they learn and take more responsibility for their progress. Teachers define specific competencies students should master and support them toward proficiency, even if it takes a while. Teachers also change their grading policies. Students don't get extra points for doing homework or participating in class. Competency-based education demands that teachers separate 'habits of learning' from academic achievement.*" The district credits the new model with rising science MCAS scores. As students take more control over their learning, the district is monitoring how many more students take upper-level courses, how many pursue independent studies, and how many take advantage of nontraditional learning opportunities.

- Such a shift in how we teach and learn has particular relevance in addressing the current challenge of getting students back on track while positioning us for a stronger, more flexible and innovative approach to advancing learning for the future.
- State and national polls show that parents want to see something better than the status quo emerge from this educational disruption; they are seeking new and better school models that could be more effective in preparing students for success.
- How can creative flexibility and innovation be used to meet the challenge currently facing schools and students to restore lost learning quickly and advance instructional achievement?
- How can the use of, and investment in, technology in the current moment lead to new ways to learn going forward based on competencies in subject matter and not the time a student spends in the classroom or place-based instruction?



Uncommon Schools, a nonprofit manager of K-12 charter schools, leveraged its best teachers to quickly produce high-quality instructional content for elementary students within the network and beyond. They largely relied on a coordinated, asynchronous instruction plan for K-8 online learning. The primary vehicle was a 20-minute, prerecorded instructional video for each lesson delivered by teachers chosen due to their effectiveness in that lesson's content selected on data and instructional leadership. Students then reviewed the lessons synchronously with their regularly assigned teachers. ([Bellwether Education Partners](#))

- There are hundreds of examples of schools and school districts using technology to allow students, regardless of where they live, to receive their learning from subject matter experts anywhere, from higher education institutions or even other schools or districts.
- Systems need to become more adept at constantly generating, identifying, and scaling innovation and creating a culture that supports this innovation. At present, many school districts lack the capacity to innovate, and some districts actively discourage it.
- Teacher unions need to adapt to technology-based education and recognize the power of digital, blended, and personalized learning practices as powerful tools in meeting students' 21st-century needs.
- The key challenge is learning how to create structures and relationships within systems where information and ideas flow in all directions and leaders at all levels rise above the increasingly sterile debates of recent years.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Remove barriers to innovation that exist within regulation, past practice, and collective bargaining agreements.

Both DESE and school districts should encourage innovation and remove impediments to it and allow teachers the flexibility and incentive to play new, sometimes temporary roles and take on new responsibilities ([Education Resource Strategies](#)).



The Henry County, Georgia, school district has created an Evening Remote Learning Program that runs from 4:00 to 7:00 to allow families the flexibility they might need to support their remote learners at home. ([CRPE](#))

Modernize the way we use time, resources, personnel, and technology to expand the boundaries of classrooms and meet individual student needs.

DESE should build on this moment and the quick shift to new teaching models and support, encourage, and incentivize school and district efforts to change and update how resources are used and allocated to reimagine educational place and structure. Schools should create new teaching roles and teaming structures, paying more for jobs that have more responsibility and require more skill ([Education Resource Strategies](#)). Districts should leverage new remote learning capabilities to extend the school day and academic year. New innovations could include recruitment of top scholars to lecture on important topics and curriculum themes, expansion of an available library of asynchronous material/instructional videos at all levels, and implementation of blended learning models and personalized instruction.

Districts and schools should enable classrooms to become bastions of rapid innovation where personalized instruction becomes the norm and where students progress as they master relevant knowledge and acquire skills with innovative tools that permit them to learn anytime and anywhere. Educators must make lessons more relevant and engaging using new technologies.



In Los Angeles, schools are utilizing substitute teachers, aides, and other staff outside their usual roles and schedules to hold small group instruction with students to provide academic support as a supplement to remote learning and to advance progress in addressing learning loss. (CRPE)

Encourage schools to forge partnerships with community organizations, businesses, and colleges and universities to connect the classroom with the worlds of work and higher education.

Districts should be measured on their willingness and ability to develop deep, lasting partnerships that facilitate real-world connections and seek to close opportunity gaps for all students.



DISTRICT TAKES ACTION

In Baltimore, rising ninth graders whose transition to high school has been disrupted will be matched with a mentor from the University of Maryland who will establish a relationship with them to strengthen academics and assist in their transition to high school. (CRPE)

Looking Ahead

Many other state and national organizations have offered important thought leadership in a number of relevant areas, and it is our hope, and belief, that the concepts contained herein complement the work of others and support the efforts of teachers, educational leaders, and public officials in their attempt to overcome issues and challenges unimaginable just 9 months ago. A level of grace and understanding should be applied to assessing the collective response thus far.

Nonetheless, we strongly urge all parties, including the state's business leadership, to collaborate to leverage this moment and make Massachusetts' public education system stronger and more resilient. How we respond to the challenge at hand will have a tremendous impact on our collective future success as a community and as a Commonwealth.

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