

The State of the American School District: Policy Recommendations for the Road Ahead

In the face of unprecedented academic, personnel, and student and staff wellness challenges over the last 20 months, public school districts, charter management organizations, and state education agencies have taken dramatic steps to expand their scope of services.

“We have learned that education systems, whether at the district or state level, actually can be flexible if we’re given the ability and the room to be flexible,” Tennessee Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn said during a November webinar held by the American School District Panel (ASDP).

ASDP is a nationally representative standing survey panel of public school leaders comprising more than 950 public school districts and charter management organizations. The ASDP partners—Center on Reinventing Public Education, RAND Corporation, Chiefs for Change, the Council of Great City Schools, and Kitamba—created the survey panel to ensure that decisions about education policy are informed by the leaders tasked with putting it into practice. To date, the panel has contributed to four surveys, six case studies, and a webinar bringing together district, state, and community leaders that shed light on how public schools are navigating the COVID landscape and planning for pandemic recovery.

Survey results and the experiences of district and CMO leaders to date confirm that significant shifts have already occurred, including dramatic increases in technology deployment and mental health services (see box, below). However, concerns about future funding once federal aid expires could jeopardize these gains. “Districts’ scope of activities is growing,” Heather Schwartz, RAND Corporation senior policy researcher, said at the November webinar. “The big question is whether they can financially sustain these new services after the federal stimulus funds phase out.”

This brief highlights five key takeaways from ASDP’s research that have implications for state policy and practice.

Key Takeaways

Parents don’t want to return to the status quo. Many students and parents had negative experiences with remote learning during the pandemic, but that doesn’t mean they want school to look the same as it did before March 2020. “There’s not a family we spoke to that wants to go back to normal,” said Lakisha Young, co-founder and CEO of [The Oakland REACH](#), a parent-run organization founded in 2016 with the mission to “make the powerless parent powerful.”

A winter 2021 survey of ASDP leaders found that significant numbers of parents have “strongly demanded” changes that include a greater emphasis on social-emotional learning, more frequent communication between teachers and parents (particularly in majority-minority districts), fully remote schooling options, and technology support. Significant numbers of parents in urban districts also want more personalized attention and before- and after-school care.

The current moment presents an important opening for policy shifts that allow schools and districts greater flexibility to meet student and family needs. “I’m excited that we have a conversation in our country the likes of which many of us have been trying to push for years,” said Kira Orange Jones, vice president of the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. “I believe we’ve come to a moment where people can agree that things need to change, and structures and systems need to be redefined and reinvented, and therefore there’s a real opportunity to actually address those things.”

Key Survey Findings, Summer 2021

Short-term funding is driving expansion of staff and services, but many districts anticipate hard times ahead: Most respondents (71 percent) in the summer 2021 survey anticipated net increases in their budgets during the current year, in large part due to federal aid. Most districts plan to increase staff, in many cases to above pre-pandemic levels. But there’s a catch: More than one-third of participating districts, and just over half of urban districts, anticipate a funding cliff when federal funding expires.

Pandemic-driven technology shifts have led to lasting changes: The pandemic rapidly accelerated districts’ ongoing technology initiatives. The share of districts offering 1:1 initiatives in grades 6-12 doubled from 42 percent to 83 percent and tripled in the elementary grades, from 24 percent to 71 percent. And the share of districts offering permanent, standalone virtual schools increased ninefold, from 3 percent to 26 percent. This shift is most pronounced in urban districts, 48 percent of which are now offering virtual schools, compared to 7 percent before the pandemic. Many districts also have created systems for home-based Internet and technical support.

Districts are trying to address student social and emotional needs. Social-emotional learning and mental health represent the second most significant growth area, behind technology, among participating districts. Seventy percent of surveyed districts are offering mental health programming, with nearly 20 percent adding these services as a response to the pandemic. Surveys also saw growth in trauma-informed practices—now in place in more than half of districts nationwide—and supports such as weekend meal service for students and families.

Academic interventions saw only modest growth. While COVID-related learning loss has been often cited as an issue, few survey participants said they were adding significant funding in academic interventions. However, most districts already offered academic interventions like tutoring before the pandemic, and may have expanded them since.

Based on a survey of 292 district superintendents or their proxies, conducted in June-July 2021. Responses are weighted to be nationally representative.

Districts need partners to help them meet the growing range of student needs. Even as they expand mental health and other nonacademic supports, schools and districts need meaningful partnerships with community organizations to fully meet student and family needs. District leaders are facing shortages in qualified mental health professionals, and some also rely on community organizations to help them find the students who disappeared during the pandemic and reconnect them with school and supports.

“It sounds nice in soundbites to say we need more SEL, we need more mental health.... The soundbite is not hitting the ground in reality,” said Baltimore City Schools CEO Sonja Santelises. “When kids have not been doing school for 20-plus months, [our] dependency on people who know what life looks like outside of school has become more pronounced.”

Many districts have historically worked with a wide range of community-based organizations (CBOs), but they also can leverage new kinds of partnerships to coordinate services in more comprehensive ways. In Oklahoma, for example, Tulsa Public Schools partnered with a community organization that offers services outside the school day to develop an extended learning strategy. The [Tulsa City of Learning](#) coordinates the efforts of a wide range of community partners to provide services, including summer and after-school tutoring and engagement activities.

These new or expanded partnerships involve addressing longstanding barriers—both spoken and unspoken. In some cases, it may involve starting from scratch.

“Our families for 18 or so months [during the pandemic] were the teachers and facilitators of our children’s education,” said Young, whose organization built a parent-led hub of academic and socioeconomic supports for families in spite of state regulations that hindered its efforts. “We need systems to... break out of how they think that CBOs work. We don’t work that way anymore. We’re ready to take over and partner... it’s our babies and our choice.”

Sustainable services that supplement district efforts can mitigate the funding cliff. Most districts are using federal aid to increase services during the pandemic, but the so-called funding cliff when COVID-19 aid expires could be all the worse due to enrollment declines and increased hires. State policy can help ensure federal funds are used in sustainable ways: “There’s a unique opportunity to infuse a set of catalytic one-time resources into our systems, and yet we recognize that’s not going to happen in perpetuity,” said Louisiana’s Jones.

The unprecedented levels of federal funding represent a “process of incredible opportunity, but incredible responsibility,” Nick Simmons, senior advisor to U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, said during the November webinar. He urged states to supplement federal funding with programming that supports district efforts, as Connecticut did by using state funds to deploy 20,000 student laptops, 50,000 home internet connections, and 50 social workers during the pandemic.

“That collaboration is really important, because it can make 2 plus 2 equal 5,” said Simmons, who had previously served as a policy advisor to Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont.

Likewise, Colorado lawmakers allocated \$9 million in spring 2021 to launch the [I Matter website](#) to provide youth with mental health screenings, therapy, and referrals to crisis services. The state’s office of behavioral health hired 32 mental health providers to staff the program.

Additional federal aid targeted at states and cities also provides an opportunity for intergovernmental efforts centered on community-based organizations. State policymakers can play a role as gatekeepers for this funding by insisting on meaningful input from families—

and ensuring that districts plan “with, for, and by families,” Schwinn said. “If we’re not putting them at the forefront of the creation process, we’re totally missing the point.”

Young put it succinctly: “You don’t want to hit those fiscal cliffs. You have to start partnering with CBOs.”

Big bets at the state level could yield big dividends. State education agencies can drive change at scale by getting a critical mass of districts on board for new programming and interventions. The Texas Education Agency, for example, invited districts to apply for funding to add days to the school year, and many are using the funds to partner with community organizations to do so through summer, extended school day, and winter break programming.

The Tennessee Department of Education has focused on an opt-in approach, with between 60 percent and 85 percent of districts participating in high-dosage tutoring, phonics, free AP courses, innovative high schools, and other initiatives. As a result, more than 150,000 students are receiving high-dosage tutoring—the largest state program of its kind in the country, according to Schwinn.

“From the department’s perspective, we’re doing a lot of incentivizing.... and making sure our General Assembly sees the impact of the federal dollars coming in,” she said. If districts can continue to make the case in a cohesive way, she anticipates improved student outcomes and long-term financial sustainability for these programs. “That doesn’t happen if we see 147 different plans going in different directions.”

Districts need support—and guardrails—on virtual schools and online learning. State policy and services have not kept up with the proliferation of district online offerings, which presents implications for quality and equity. With nearly one in five districts—and nearly half of urban districts—creating standalone virtual schools, state education agencies should consider developing higher-quality open-source content specifically designed for online instruction and consistent policies and monitoring programs to achieve greater consistency and better outcomes at scale.

Ensuring Sustainable Change

State policymakers have a critical role in ensuring that districts get help to meet growing needs, that funding cliffs don’t leave students and educators stranded, that parents and community organizations are treated as partners and co-creators, and that federal and state investments yield sustainable changes. To do so, they also need to create systems to monitor rapid changes in areas like virtual schools, mental health services, and academic recovery services and share best practices to ensure they scale.

“Things are moving so fast, there’s no capacity for learning unless we create it,” Jones said.

Without that understanding, the very real potential and public support for lasting improvement in schools and districts could become another lost opportunity. As Santelises put it: “There’s a lot that’s been shifted, and I think we’re still trying to see how much of it is going to shake out to be long-term shifts in districts and schooling, and how much is just going to be an incremental blip.”

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