

Insights from a Conversation on the Education Landscape

August 18, 2020



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Background

On Tuesday, August 18, 2020, AIR hosted an invitation only convening to focus on ***Resources for Recovery: A Conversation on the Education Landscape***. We were pleased to engage a diverse group of state and local education leaders and practitioners with our content experts in a rich dialogue through facilitated small group conversations.

Based upon the areas of interest that were expressed by participants, the conversations were organized around the follow six topics. To see the highlights from each groups' conversations, click on the topic below.

1. [Equity in education](#)
2. [Student and community well-being](#)
3. [Special populations](#)
4. [Remote and blended learning](#)
5. [Finance and school reopening](#)
6. [Data and accountability](#)

If you are interested in specific resources to support your work moving forward, this Hub also hosts [a collection of AIR's Resources for Recovery](#), organized by content areas, as well as a list with links to all of the [current and formerly funded support centers that AIR operates](#). These centers continue to work to support communities and post all the resources they create at no charge.

If you are interested in participating in our ongoing conversations, please contact Trish Brennan-Gac at tbrennan-gac@air.org.

Equity in Education

Equity in education was the single most popular topic that was proposed for discussion by meeting registrants. During the small group discussion, participants agreed that there weren't necessarily new inequities brought about by the impact of COVID-19, rather, there was a sense that long-standing equity issues have become more visible. There is greater public awareness of the precarity that many students and families face. The group expressed the hopeful perspective that this increased awareness has led to a greater shared urgency to address systemic inequalities. Not only that, there seems to be more openness to reimagine what the post-pandemic education system might look like, rather than seeking a "returning to normal."

In their conversation, the education equity group raised and discussed a number of recurring themes:

- **Moving beyond crisis management.** Addressing educational inequities requires a long-term view. Currently, most state policymakers and district leaders are operating in "triage mode" – trying to quickly manage crises as they emerge – and are not thinking about how to lay the groundwork for large-scale change. However, some states are trying to move beyond crisis management, towards rethinking policy shifts that can begin to address systemic inequities in the long term.
- **Cross-systems collaboration.** Addressing systemic inequities requires cross-systems collaborations and solutions. Society has placed heavy responsibilities on the shoulders of educators and school administrators, but they alone cannot bring about the changes needed. For example, while county officials often lack authority over K-12 education, they often make critical investments in early childhood services, which need to be in close collaboration with local education agencies.
- **Evidence-based practice.** There is a call for more research-informed educational equity practices. Leaders at the school, district and state levels are looking for evidence-based guidance.
- **Need for tools and resources.** There is a need for practical, hands-on tools and resources to support and address equity throughout the education system. Frameworks are important; so are toolkits and roadmaps that can be used at the building and community level.
- **Need for positive examples.** Leaders at all levels are looking for good examples. Where are the schools, communities or states engaged in addressing systemic inequities, that have positive stories to share?

Resources

The newest addition to AIR's Resources for Recovery series is focused on Equity and Access: Connecting With ALL Students and Families. Updated monthly, the latest version is available [here](#).

Remote and Blended Learning

In the remote and blended learning group, the conversation quickly centered on broadband access. The discussion encompassed equity, access, teacher anxiety, resources, and the challenges faced by the most rural districts. The sentiment expressed by the group was that getting devices to students and teachers is relatively easy, but a device without reliable Internet access “is just a paperweight.” This issue in particular emphasized the importance of addressing underlying factors and social determinants that lead to inequities in access to education. Looking forward, the group also saw hope emerging from a disrupted landscape. As one participant noted, “Since we can’t do the ‘old’ normal, we are pushed to innovate and change at an unprecedented pace and in new ways to get to the ‘next’ normal.”

Other themes that emerged from this group’s conversation included:

- **Changing teaching conditions.** There are ongoing concerns about the mental health and well-being of both teachers and their students. A higher number than expected are leaving teaching this year; those that remain often face a steep learning curve as they adapt instruction to new modalities and working with virtual technologies. Inservice and pre-service teaching experiences have been disrupted.
- **Student engagement.** Providing access to rigorous content and keeping students engaged was cited as a challenge at all levels. This is seen as particularly difficult in the early grades, as well as in career and technical education programs. Across grade levels, even excellent students may struggle to learn in a virtual setting.
- **Parent engagement and support.** Remote and hybrid learning programs are heavily dependent on parents as partners. Capacity to support education in the home is seen as key to successful online learning. Parent needs vary widely, and educators are scrambling to both make meaningful connections with parents and provide resources to help them be successful.
- **Special populations.** Ensuring students with disabilities and students learning English are meaningfully included in remote instruction, has been a challenge. These populations have differentiated learning needs and require differentiated resources to be successful.
- **Silver linings.** Remote instruction has also provided unforeseen flexibilities that educators hope to leverage even beyond the pandemic. E-learning pods are being created for parents, teachers and administrators are offering virtual “office hours” for students and families, and professional collaboration is taking place across geographic boundaries.

Resources

The newest addition to AIR’s Resources for Recovery series is focused on Remote Learning. Updated monthly, the latest version is available [here](#).

Students and Community Well-being

The small group that met to talk about community well-being quickly agreed that addressing social-emotional needs is a high priority in the current environment, and potentially the highest priority among educators. When everyone in the school community is consumed by anxiety and facing some level of trauma, the mindset amongst educators becomes, as one participant stated, “Maslow before Bloom.” Participants spoke of unprecedented efforts needed to meet the holistic needs of children right now as part of the school experience.

Group discussion focused on new and innovative practices and opportunities to address community well-being as the school year reopens:

- **Cross-agency collaboration.** Participants spoke of implementing collective impact approaches that will bring together education and other child-serving systems. Other districts are investing in communities in schools models where basic needs (clothing, nutrition, health services) are provided collaboratively at the school site.
- **Scheduling flexibility.** Virtual instruction has allowed for innovative scheduling opportunities. Some schools have added advisory periods to focus on social-emotional learning. Others permit teacher “office hours” outside the regular school day. Many schools are building in additional breaks during remote learning schedules, recognizing that it is difficult for children to stay on camera or on a screen for long periods.
- **Innovative instructional practices.** As teachers collaborate to develop online learning experiences, some districts are promoting greater integration between subject areas. In other locations, school counselors, psychologists and/or social workers are developing and delivering virtual lessons alongside classroom teachers.

Resources

The newest addition to AIR’s Resources for Recovery series is focused on Supporting the Well-Being of the School Community. Updated monthly, the latest version is available [here](#).

Special Populations

The group focused on special populations discussed numerous challenges to providing educational services to English learners and students with disabilities in a remote environment. Keeping special populations visible was cited as perhaps most important, and the group felt that extra effort must be taken to ensure that special populations are not lost in the shuffle as schools and districts focus on general education students in preparing for a safe return to campus and/or shifting to remote and hybrid instruction. While expressed as a concern, the group did consider and offer that this disrupted environment also presents an opportunity to transform systems, as existing inequities are high-lighted and states and districts are pushed to innovate to meet the needs of all students.

In their conversation, the special populations group raised and identified a number of recurring themes:

- **Equity.** Ensuring special populations continue to be supported during a disrupted learning environment is of primary concern. When accountability systems are suspended and resources are tapped, it is challenging to ensure that students who need particular accommodations and supports are provided for.
- **Curriculum and materials.** Creating meaningful virtual learning opportunities for students with disabilities, and ensuring English learners have resources they need in their home language, are common challenges. For families without reliable Internet access, there is also a need to provide physical curriculum materials. There is no “one size fits all” approach and educators are searching for evidence-based approaches.
- **Family engagement.** Reaching students and families who may be struggling to access instruction is a particular challenge for underserved populations. During remote and hybrid instruction, parents and guardians are the primary supporters of learning in the home and are asked to be even more hands-on with English learners and students with disabilities. However, working more closely with families during this time of disruption has resulted in “a whole new level of parental engagement” in some places and can provide insights and valuable connections that will be of continued value in the future.
- **Flexible staffing.** Some districts have hired additional bilingual aides whose sole role is to communicate with Spanish-speaking families to provide more support for virtual learning programs. Others have hired additional aides to attend virtual classes with students. In some locations, districts are collaborating with early childhood providers to form “learning pods” for the youngest students.
- **Need for flexibility of implementation:** Strong policies are critical to ensure consistent support for special populations. At the same time, schools and districts differ tremendously in terms of local context and their capacity to deliver on remote learning opportunities. Representatives from states and large districts spoke of the need for monitoring systems that allow for greater customization at the school level in order to meet community needs.

Resources

The newest additions to AIR’s Resources for Recovery series address [special education](#) and [English learners](#). Updated monthly, the preceding links will take you to the latest versions.

Finance and School Reopening

As states and districts navigate the beginning of the new school year in the face of a pandemic, education leaders are grappling with intertwined logistical and financial considerations. Participants in the finance and school reopening group noted that practitioners and policymakers alike are pushed to make funding and school reopening decisions with inadequate data about the populations they are serving, and with reduced budget inputs that are nonetheless expected to cover multiple new expenses. Health, safety and equipment needs; the required availability of multiple (remote/in-person/hybrid) programming options; ensuring access to education for underserved populations without broadband access; and determining how to assess and mitigate learning loss were the four categories noted as particularly challenging for tight budgets.

In their conversation, the finance and school reopening group raised and discussed a number of recurring themes:

- **Budgeting priorities.** Given tight state and local education budgets, and finite material resources, there is a need for guidance in terms of how to prioritize resource allocation to achieve the greatest impact.
- **Public/private partnerships.** Many districts and states are pursuing public/private partnerships in order to provide Internet connectivity at a reduced cost for families. At the local level, some schools are creating partnerships with businesses and community organizations to share funding and expenditures.
- **State systems of support.** At the state level, there is a trend towards state systems of support for distance learning, MTSS (multi-tiered systems of support) and provision of virtual special education services, all of which can be difficult for small and/or rural districts to support on their own.
- **Benefits of distance learning.** On the positive side, some states and districts are beginning to consider remote and hybrid learning programs as an innovation worth continuing. Some districts faced with teacher shortages have been able to leverage remote instructors to support distance learning, and early feedback is that online learning works better for some students and families than fully in-person models.

Stakeholder engagement. All participants noted the increased involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in conversations about school finance and reopening considerations, which is seen as a positive development at the local level.

Data and Accountability

The absence of state assessment data from spring 2020, and the potential loss of the same data in the spring of 2021, has created pressure to rethink state data and accountability systems. Participants in the data and accountability discussion group noted there is broad recognition of the need for change, while agreeing that there isn't a clear sense of what new accountability systems might look like. There is, however, an opportunity to recast how accountability is considered, towards a system that builds from the ground up – and is thoughtful about the appropriateness of accountability measures at each level of the system, rather than being driven from the top down, which is often viewed (and treated) as punitive, rather than constructive.

In their conversation, this group raised and discussed a number of related themes and identified key questions for moving forward:

- **Addressing learning loss.** At the local level, schools across the country are grappling with the twin challenges of assessing and mitigating learning loss following a disrupted spring semester, and are looking for guidance related to online assessment practices and data systems to track student performance.
- **Identifying schools for support.** States and districts are looking for opportunities to discuss and learn from experts and the experiences of others, about which data sources are most helpful to consider in accurately identifying schools in need of improvement. One key question that emerged is whether there early warning signals that might appear even before state test results emerge.
- **School-level continuous improvement systems.** Educators are curious about the idea of creating and focusing on a district- or school-level accountability system to support what teachers need to know, in order to make a difference at the classroom level. A key question is what metrics should be included to support continuous improvement.
- **Data that reflect remote learning.** The group raised a number of important questions related to measuring and monitoring performance during remote learning: For example, is it possible to accurately measure social-emotional learning, and/or mental health? How can districts accurately measure student attendance and engagement? How can (or should) data from this period of remote learning be utilized for accountability purposes?
- **Redefining student success.** The absence of high-stakes tests provides an opportunity to broaden the definition of student success, including the possibility of moving towards a competency-based system.