

# Reimagine and Rebuild

# Restarting School with Equity at the Center

This brief was developed by California-based family and student engagement organizations, associations representing educators and system leaders, research institutes, and civil rights and equity groups. The recommendations arise from the evidence that has collectively emerged from focus groups with educators, parents, and students; polls and surveys of stakeholders; a deep review of the literature; and original research conducted on COVID-19's impact on schools and students.



Advancement Project California • Association for California School Administrators • Attendance Works • California Association of African-American Superintendents & Administrators • California Collaborative for Educational Excellence • California Collaborative on District Reform • California Partnership for the Future of Learning • California State PTA • California School Boards Association • California Teachers Association • Californians for Justice • Californians Together • Center to Support Excellence in Teaching, Stanford • Children Now • Coleman Advocates for Children & Youth • Community Coalition • The Education Trust–West • Faith in Action East Bay, PICO California • Families In Schools • Inland Congregations United for Change, PICO California • InnerCity Struggle • Learning Policy Institute • National Center for Urban School Transformation • National Center for Youth Law • Opportunity Institute • Orange County Congregation Community Organization, PICO California • Parent Institute for Quality Education • Parent Organization Network • Partnership for Children & Youth • PICO California • Pivot Learning • Policy Analysis for California Education • Public Advocates • Sacramento Area Congregations Together, PICO California • Teach Plus California • True North, PICO California • Turnaround for Children • UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools • USC Rossier Center on Education Policy, Equity and Governance

**COVID-19** has been hard on all students, but it is having particularly devastating impacts on students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, youth in foster care, students experiencing housing insecurity, students with disabilities, and other marginalized children and youth. The pandemic has exposed long-standing systemic inequities in education with resulting gaps in opportunity and academic achievement. In addition, many affected students have experienced additional trauma as the pandemic has cost lives and livelihoods in families already vulnerable and on the edge. School staff have also experienced [greater stress](#) and burnout this year. At the same time, we have seen students, families, and school staff adapt to and take on new roles in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods—reminding us of the resilience and resourcefulness of our communities and the public education system.

With virus spread beginning to abate and schools gradually reopening their doors to some form of in-person instruction, many students, families, educators, and community partners are ready to think about what school will look like when things are “back to normal.” But the truth is, the old “normal” was underserving California’s most vulnerable children and youth. The pandemic has forever altered our understanding of how schools could and should operate, and a major infusion of funding has opened the door to new possibilities. **As we recover from this public health and education emergency, we must build toward an education system that places equity at the center so that all students—and especially those most affected by the pandemic and by systemic racism and other injustices—have the support and opportunities they need to achieve their potential.**

This rebuilding and recovery must begin by nurturing students’ and educators’ social and emotional well-being to support academic progress. But it should go farther by reimagining, collaboratively, the very systems in which students learn. We must strengthen the foundation of our education system and all child- and family-facing systems in order to eradicate systemic racial and other inequities; to build trust between and among students, families, staff, educators, district leaders, and elected officials; and to strengthen systems for continuous improvement. By redesigning schools to be [restorative places](#)—where students feel safe, known, supported, and fully engaged in learning—we can lay the groundwork for long-term systemic transformation.



## The Big Idea: Restorative Restart

There is one bold move districts can make in the coming months to begin rebuilding an education system that works for each young person. **Every California district should take approximately 6 weeks over the summer or at the beginning of the school year to offer students, families, and educators a restorative restart.** During this time, district and school leaders and staff should prioritize the following restorative practices, all grounded in the science of learning and development, and then continue to expand these practices year round:



### 1. Center Relationships

Prioritize building and nurturing relationships of mutual support and high expectations among students, families, and educators.



### 2. Address Whole Child Needs

Identify the unique social, emotional, mental health, language, and academic needs of every student; develop plans to address those needs.



### 3. Strengthen Staffing & Partnerships

Invest in staff and deepen community-based partnerships—including during summer and out-of-school time—to address students' individualized learning and mental health needs.



### 4. Make Teaching & Learning Relevant & Rigorous

Support educators to prioritize equity; racial, cultural, and linguistic relevance; rigor; and the highest priority standards in curriculum and instruction.



### 5. Empower Teams to Reimagine & Rebuild Systems

Lay the groundwork for long-term systemic transformation via collaboration and cocreation among racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse students, families, educators, and community partners.

Educators and policymakers alike want to rebuild students' skills and knowledge as well as close widening achievement gaps quickly. But this will only be possible if we make an upfront investment in relationships and student, family, and educator well-being—and if we make teaching and learning relevant and engaging.





## Actions for Equity

How to begin? There are several evidence-based, equitable actions district and school leaders and staff can undertake in the months ahead. While most districts and schools already implement some of these restorative practices, most also have room to strengthen the implementation of others. Every school and district needs to evaluate its strengths and areas for growth in order to develop a plan for action. Once these practices have begun, education leaders—along with school staff, families, students, and other community stakeholders—must sustain and take further action to transform their schools and systems for equity, permanently.

For this restorative work to happen, staff must be supported. Over the past year, educators have been forced to learn and practice new teaching methods, and have faced the daunting prospect of reaching and engaging students in a virtual world—all while managing the stress the pandemic has imposed on their personal lives. In order for educators to be healthy, whole, and compassionate in their work with students and families, districts must create time and space for educators to build relationships, collaborate with one another, and practice self-care.



I've heard many people say that we must go back to 'normal' and focus on the education of students first. But the prepandemic 'normal' neglected the mental health and education of our Black and Brown students."

– JULISA  
STUDENT, EAST SIDE UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT



## 1. Center Relationships

Prioritize building and nurturing relationships of mutual support and high expectations among students, families, and educators.

**Connect one on one with every family and every student.** There are a variety of ways in which staff can build connections with families, including through virtual or in-person home visits—[a proven strategy](#) for building partnerships, trust, and communication between families and educators. One-on-one meetings help families support student learning and help educators empathize with and engage students; these relational practices in turn have been shown to [improve attendance and academic outcomes](#). Staff, including multilingual family liaisons, should receive training in home visits and should connect with every family at least once at the beginning of the year to establish relationships; to learn about students’ and families’ hopes and goals for school; and to identify family needs. Teachers or advisors should also have a [one-on-one meeting with every student](#) to build trust and [educator–learner partnerships](#).

**Create dedicated time and space for relationship building and reengagement.** Stable, positive, and supportive relationships help students [overcome adverse experiences and are a necessary foundation for cognitive development and learning](#). Schools and districts must create dedicated time and space during the day for [relationship building](#) among students and adults. This can be in the form of class meetings, advisories, structured breakouts, collaborative projects, [outdoor](#) and experiential learning, [recess](#), arts-based learning, and play. This may demand that schools redesign their master schedules, allocate staff differently, and make other structural changes to support ongoing relationship building.



**Implement positive and restorative discipline practices.** Students must feel physically and psychologically safe returning to school, without fear that they will be subject to punitive, exclusionary, and racially or otherwise discriminatory discipline systems and practices. Staff should receive support on how to create safe and positive school climates and classrooms. Districts should provide training on how to establish shared community agreements and norms; foster authentic communication and trusting relationships; and implement evidence-based [restorative justice](#) practices as well as other positive behavioral interventions. These might include “reentry conferences” and [community-building circles](#) in order to address conflict and repair harm. Schools should also eliminate the presence of security and police on school campuses.



## 2. Address Whole Child Needs

Identify the unique social, emotional, mental health, language, and academic needs of every student; develop plans to address those needs.

**Conduct regular student wellness screenings.** School staff must identify and address social, emotional, and behavioral issues affecting students, especially since the pandemic has increased students' feelings of [stress, anxiety, and depression](#). During the restorative restart, school staff should administer [universal screeners](#), analyze the resulting data, and then connect identified students to support teams and appropriate providers as well as adhere to tiered intervention and follow-up protocols.

**Assess student learning and review data on attendance, engagement, grades, and stakeholder perceptions about school conditions and climate.** School leaders and staff should select and administer diagnostic assessments that offer teachers and school leaders sufficient information to guide instructional planning, while ensuring that assessments are used in a low-stakes way that [does no harm](#) to students (e.g., are not used to hold students back or to track them away from college-preparatory courses). Staff should gather and review data beyond test scores, including information on each student's attendance and engagement in the prior year; transcripts of grades and course-taking patterns; and information on every student's access to technology, if required for distance learning. Staff should also review results of surveys and plan for more expansive use of family, student, and educator [surveys to measure school conditions and climate](#).

**Create an action plan to meet the individualized whole child needs of every student.** These plans could take one of several forms. Cross-functional school-level teams could use an [Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#) (MTSS) framework to identify students' needs and provide them with the appropriate level of academic, language, and social-emotional support or intervention based on those needs. Or, school or district staff could develop [Individualized Learning Plans](#) that make academic pathways and instruction appropriate for and personalized to every student's needs, interests, strengths, and goals. Teams of trusted school staff must be assigned to monitor these plans and advance each student's social, emotional, language, and academic progress through schoolwide and classroom-level planning and individualized supports. These plans should be informed by one-on-one student and family conversations as well as by comprehensive reviews of student attendance history; course-taking and academic performance data; social-emotional well-being assessments; and family and student surveys.







### 3. Strengthen Staffing & Partnerships

Invest in staff and deepen community-based partnerships—including during summer and out-of-school time—to address students' individualized learning and mental health needs.

**Pair students with high-dosage tutoring and mentoring.** [Tutoring](#) is an evidence-based strategy for supporting and accelerating learning; high-quality mentoring has proven to be effective in fostering trusting relationships between students and adults as well as in building positive [racial/ethnic identity](#) in addition to social, academic, and life skills. This may be especially true when students are matched with tutors and mentors of the [same race](#) or cultural background. Well-trained and prepared staff should provide intensive tutoring (2–3 times per week) that is connected to students' classroom learning. Ongoing mentoring—including both student-to-adult mentoring and peer mentoring—should be provided to disengaged or disconnected middle and high school students.

**Provide mental health supports.** Following the administration of student wellness screeners, school staff must connect students identified as needing counseling or other mental health services with support teams and appropriate providers as well as adhere to tiered intervention and follow-up protocols. School and district staff should develop or deepen partnerships with community-based organizations or county mental health/behavioral health providers to coordinate care and should take time to connect students personally with out-of-school providers, including social workers, mentors, and others.

**Offer expanded learning opportunities.** Schools and districts must work in partnership with child-, youth-, and family-serving community-based organizations in order to engage students and address their academic, language, social, emotional, and physical needs. [Expanded learning opportunities](#), including during summer and out-of-school time, should be hands on; fun and engaging; student centered; and complementary to classroom learning. These might include project-based learning, maker activities, service learning, outdoor exploration, play, arts education, and other forms of deeper learning. For older students, these activities should also focus on real-world connections and should help students develop skills that will be useful in college and/or in careers.

**Staff up to support student reengagement.** Prolonged shutdowns and school closures have left young people socially isolated. [As many as 160,000 California students have disappeared from school](#) and many more have been [chronically absent](#). Districts need to hire and support dedicated staff and/or community partners to help find, build relationships with, and reengage these students and their families in nonpunitive ways. These staff, liaisons, and community partners—who should reflect the racial, ethnic, and linguistic make-up of the students they serve—should work with families and students to address barriers to school attendance rather than escalating consequences associated with truancy. They should also help connect students and families with community-based wrap-around services. School staff should receive training and support on trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches for reengaging students in the classroom.



## 4. Make Teaching & Learning Relevant & Rigorous

Support educators to prioritize equity; racial, cultural, and linguistic relevance; rigor; and the highest priority standards in curriculum and instruction.

**Advance racial equity in curriculum.** School and district staff, along with community partners, should ensure districts have selected [high-quality](#) and culturally relevant curriculum. They should engage students, families, and staff in the process of reviewing and [evaluating curriculum for cultural responsiveness](#), including making certain that instructional materials and [books](#) allow students of all racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds to feel safe, acknowledged, and respected.

**Advance racial equity in teaching.** Districts and schools should provide all educators with [professional learning experiences](#) to reflect upon their own identities and biases as well as with concrete [strategies and tools](#) for addressing racism, privilege, and bias in their classrooms. They should also increase the diversity of educators and staff to mirror the racial, ethnic, and linguistic make-up of the students they serve.

### **Offer students choice and voice in their learning.**

Motivation and engagement are necessary preconditions for attendance and academic success, but to feel fully engaged, [students need to be at the center](#) of their own learning. Curriculum and lessons must feel relevant and rigorous; students should be encouraged to explore topics of interest independently, with peers, and through projects. During the restorative restart, educators should lead and support developmentally appropriate activities that prompt reflection and connection to students' identities and interests as well as to events happening in their communities, the country, and the world—including the [pandemic](#) and incidents of [bias and racialized violence](#). Students should also be engaged as collaborators in establishing norms, rules, and activities for their learning experiences and schools.



**Focus on priority standards and lessons to support student learning.** To ensure rigor and to [accelerate rather than remediate learning](#), educators should teach all students [grade-level content](#). This may require that schools and districts identify the [highest-priority content](#) and lessons that can be compressed or deemphasized. It will also require collaboration among educators, particularly at the secondary level, to ensure students are not overwhelmed by competing assignment deadlines and priorities across classes. Educators should provide support as needed to [help students learn prerequisite content](#) that was either untaught or is not yet mastered.





## 5. Empower Teams to Reimagine & Rebuild Systems

Lay the groundwork for long-term systemic transformation via collaboration and cocreation among racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse students and families, educators, and community partners.

**Create restorative restart and transformation teams so that this work is systematized and continues long term.** Districts and schools should create diverse teams that include both a core group of academic, mental/behavioral health, student services, data analysis, human resources, and family engagement experts as well as a broader group of stakeholders including underrepresented students, family members of color, educators, labor representatives, and community partners. These teams should plan for the restorative restart and then continue meeting throughout the school year in order to shift the system’s focus from pandemic response to a sustained priority on building equitable, antiracist, restorative schools for all students.

This long-term work might include building towards a comprehensive [community schools](#) vision or [redesigning high schools](#) as engaging, student-centered places that better prepare students for meaningful college and career opportunities. A key role for these teams will be evaluating whether programs and approaches have been effective at meeting students’ needs, modifying plans as needed, and determining how to fiscally sustain highly effective programs into the future. To ensure the success of these teams, districts need to invest resources and time in relationship building, collaborative planning, and capacity building for participants.



**If you aren’t listening to families, you aren’t listening to children. We need our schools to really engage and listen to the community. That began during the pandemic but needs to continue as we go back.”**

– MYEISHA  
PARENT, OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT



## What Districts and Schools Must Do Now

To lay the groundwork for this restorative work to happen in the months ahead, school and district leaders should prioritize the following actions:

1. Plan for how these activities are going to be supported by the **district's budget** and be identified in the [Expanded Learning Opportunities Grant Plan](#) and the [Local Control and Accountability Plan](#) (LCAP).
2. **Recruit and hire the people—including paraprofessionals, pupil services personnel, tutors, mentors, and paid family and community liaisons**—needed to provide the student-centered supports described in this brief. This could be a win-win for students *and* the community: high school and college-age youth, family members, and community members could earn wages or stipends while sharing their experience and knowledge as well as building new skills; students could benefit from deeper support, mentorship, and connections to their communities. These new hires and partners should reflect the racial, ethnic, and linguistic make-up of students in the community.
3. **Invest in staff capacity building.** Paid professional learning time should include experiences that address content specific to trauma-informed and healing-centered practices, restorative justice practices, culturally responsive and antiracist teaching practices, relationship-centered schools, family engagement practices, and other [whole child practices](#) grounded in the [science of learning and development](#).
4. **Create the conditions for staff to be successful.** Districts should provide educators with dedicated paid individual planning and group collaboration time as part of the school schedule. Districts should also establish the systems and technologies needed to facilitate resource and knowledge sharing; invest in strengthening relationships among staff through retreats and other team-building activities; and devote resources to programs and practices that support staff health and well-being.

5. **Plan for and purchase the technology, supplies, and materials needed to support student-centered assessment, teaching, and learning.** This includes purchasing technology (devices, formative and diagnostic assessments, online learning programs); culturally relevant books for school libraries; play equipment for recess and outdoor education; art supplies; and more.
6. Establish agreements and/or create new [partnerships with expanded learning partners](#) to deepen learning and engagement during summer and out-of-school time.
7. Establish agreements and/or create new partnerships with **community-based service providers and behavioral health providers**, including county mental health offices, in order to expand access to whole child services.



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As students return to classrooms, educators need to have time and take time for building relationships because it will make learning so much better in the long term. Our students are living through a pandemic and are going to need social and emotional supports. If teachers are pressured to focus on standardized testing, I worry relationships and social-emotional learning will suffer. We need principals, the school board, and the state to help teachers make this a priority.”

– SHELLY GUPTON  
FIFTH GRADE TEACHER, ELK GROVE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT;  
MEMBER, CALIFORNIA TEACHERS ASSOCIATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS





## Resources to Support a Restorative Restart and School Transformation

Our federal and state governments have made and proposed **major investments in education**. California K–12 schools have received or are slated to receive roughly \$28.6 billion in federal funds between spring 2020 and spring 2021 to address pandemic response and learning loss. On top of that, Governor Newsom and the legislature have provided \$7.1 billion in state funds to support learning recovery. It is not clear whether this **combined \$35.7 billion—roughly \$5,400 per pupil—**will be enough: California schools have long been [underfunded](#), and some researchers estimate that the [pandemic's cost](#) to large urban school districts could be as much as \$12,000 per pupil over 5 years.

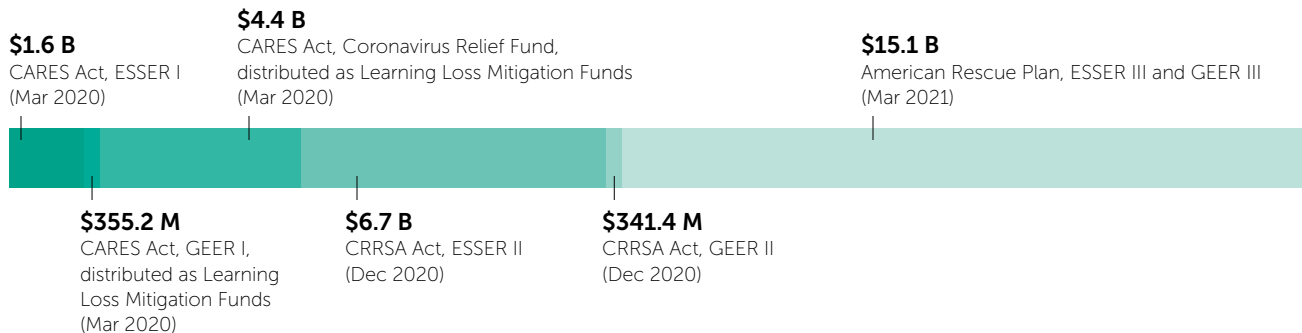


There has never been a more important time for us to focus on relationships and racial equity than in this moment. Our students are depending on us to walk with them and to help them have hope for the future.”

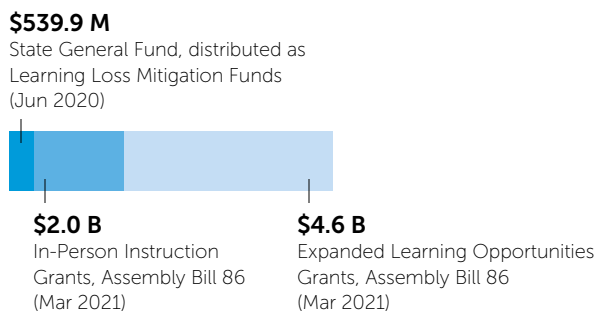
– DR. JILL BAKER  
SUPERINTENDENT, LONG BEACH UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

## California K–12 education has received \$35.7 billion in state and federal pandemic aid in 2020 and 2021

### Federal Total: \$28.6 Billion



### State Total: \$7.1 Billion



#### Acronyms

CARES: Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security  
 CRRSA: Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations  
 ESSER: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief  
 GEER: Governor's Emergency Education Relief

These education investments are in addition to significant state and [federal investments](#) in poverty reduction, childcare, mental health care, broadband infrastructure, and other needs facing our children and communities.

A large enough infusion of resources could help schools and districts accelerate progress in a manner similar to how the New Deal helped the economy recover and strengthened the U.S. social safety net after the Great Depression as well as how the Marshall Plan helped rebuild Western Europe after World War II. But resources are just one element needed among many. **Feeding more resources into the same system will not fundamentally change experiences and outcomes for students if we don't use resources differently—to transform education as we know it.**

To augment these resources, state leaders and statewide partners must provide **training, tools, technical assistance, and other capacity-building opportunities** for district and school leaders as they plan for a restorative start to school and for long-term transformation. They must also ensure **transparency** around how funds are used so that students, particularly those most vulnerable, benefit from the additional investments. Perhaps most importantly, state leaders and partners must work with districts to **name and then dismantle policies that sustain racial and other inequities**, and that serve as barriers to the types of restorative practices and transformational changes described here and needed by every California student.

# Going Deeper

Watch for additional resources from partner organizations—evidence-based practices, planning guides, and other practical tools—designed to help education leaders plan for a restorative restart and build toward system transformation at [www.reimaginecaschools.org](http://www.reimaginecaschools.org).

