COMMENTARY

Evidence to Inform Recovery
PACE's Response to COVID-19

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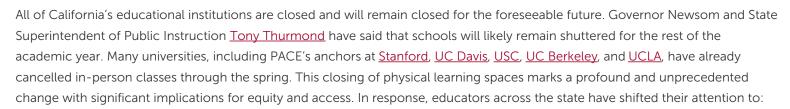
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All of California's educational institutions are closed and will remain closed for the foreseeable future. Governor Newsom and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond have said that schools will likely remain shuttered for the rest of the academic year. Many universities, including PACE's anchors at Stanford, UC Davis, USC, UC Berkeley, and UCLA, have already cancelled in-person classes through the spring. This closing of physical learning spaces marks a profound and unprecedented change with significant implications for equity and access. In response, educators across the state have shifted their attention to:

- Facilitating students' learning at home—including virtual learning and parent/family education—and making sure all households have computers and access to the internet;
- Ensuring that students receive the necessary non-instructional supports schools provide, including social and emotional supports as well as food and, in the case of higher education, housing; and
- Supporting students with special needs, those learning English, and those who were receiving special education or mental health services at school.

PACE, through our partnerships and publications, will support these real-time efforts to the greatest extent possible. Our goal is to document existing approaches and highlight best practices, and to bring real-time research evidence into local and state decision-making. However, the bulk of our work over the coming weeks and months will be focused on building towards recovery.

When students come back to school, whether in preschool, K–12, or higher education, they will bring with them an incredibly high level of need. In the most dire cases, students will have experienced trauma as issues of housing access and food insecurity are compounded by grief, loss, and even abuse. Students returning to school, whenever that may be, will need a variety of supports to address emergent academic, health, and psychological needs.

Moreover, COVID-19 is already exacerbating inequities in learning opportunities for California's students. Some students have access to academic instruction and enrichment activities during this time. Others, particularly those already behind and underserved, will lack such opportunities and may suffer without the supports educational institutions provided to them and their families before the crisis.

We believe our educators are up to the challenge—in the past several weeks, they have demonstrated their capacity to be innovative, flexible, and proactive in serving rapidly evolving public needs. But our institutions and systems will need guidance and resources to understand and respond to the barely imaginable challenges they will face.

PACE's network of researchers across the state is ready to work with policymakers and education leaders to bring evidence to bear in helping California's systems become stronger to support students in the aftermath of the crisis. None of us knows what the future holds, but we expect our work to focus on the following:

- **Data.** When our educational institutions reopen, many students will come back to school very far behind. This will make data even more important to diagnose student needs and develop differentiated instructional plans. But our educators will have very little data in hand since there will be no standardized testing in K−12 and some districts along with many institutions of higher education are not assigning course grades. As a state, we need to develop and utilize intake assessments, formative assessments, and real-time indicators that enable educators and system leaders to identify and respond to students' academic, language, health, and social-emotional needs.

- **Student support.** Schools, colleges, and universities need to be equipped with evidenced-based approaches to address myriad student needs. How can we support students' academic and social-emotional needs during the transition back to school? How can educators diagnose and respond to the trauma that students may have experienced during their time away? What are best practices for accelerating student learning after periods of extended learning loss? What supports are most effective for students in vulnerable populations (e.g., students learning English, with disabilities, living in poverty, in foster care, or without consistent housing)? How can we increase student attendance and engagement to maximize instructional time?

- **System capacity.** Now more than ever, educational organizations need to provide comprehensive supports for students and their families. This will necessitate collaboration and integration among various agencies (e.g., education, health, and social services) and alignment in early childhood, K−12, and higher education. Our work in this area will explore how proven approaches such as [Multi-Tiered Systems of Support](#) and [community schools](#) could be scaled up, and we will identify promising practices in how schools and districts are working together with their various stakeholders, including labor partners, school boards, and community-based organizations, to better serve students and families. We will also help to clarify the changing roles of actors at different levels and across different "systems" in supporting improvements in student outcomes in this new context, and to identify the workforce capacity necessary to meet growing student needs. Finally, we will support the development of better mechanisms for educators and system leaders to test the efficacy of interventions and to build an understanding about what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

- **Resources for education.** With the stock market in free fall and millions out of work, funding for education—which is heavily dependent on personal earnings from stocks, bonds, and interest—is likely to dip, and, in K−12, unfunded district pension obligations will continue to grow. This is likely to trigger budget cuts at all levels, along with layoffs and reductions in critical student services. California's education system is already among the nation's most underfunded, and these cuts will come at a time when our institutions need more money, not less, to serve our state's children and youth. Our work in this area will explore options for making sure California's education in California is sufficiently funded (e.g., through reallocating existing funds or raising new revenues), setting the conditions for local and state leaders to make good use of existing resources and building public support for greater education funding. We will also explore issues around college affordability and funds for the expansion of early childhood education to ensure that more of California's students have access to educational opportunities, even in the midst of economic hardship.

These are not new challenges and we already know quite a lot about what needs to be done to address them. The COVID-19 crisis places the existing weaknesses of California's education system in much sharper relief and greatly increases the urgency with which these weaknesses must be addressed. It is not enough—and is not realistic—to expect that we will return to "normal" (which was already far from what we expect from our educational institutions) when the crisis is over. We will need to think differently about how we organize and manage our state's education system to make the best possible use of significantly fewer resources in

the face of greatly increased needs.

To support these needs, we plan to use a multifaceted approach to quickly generating new knowledge. This will include:

- Reviewing research literature for lessons on evidenced-based practice and both short- and long-term recovery efforts after disasters in California (e.g., wildfires), other states (e.g., Hurricane Katrina), and other countries (e.g., civil wars, refugee crises) and highlighting best practices emerging from other places for coronavirus response.
- Conducting original data collection and/or analysis to understand problems of performance, to learn about statewide implementation of new approaches, and to document promising practices.
- Piloting new approaches and tools with system leaders and sharing them more broadly.
- Analyzing possible policy options to assess potential benefits, risks, and costs.

It is our mission to serve as an important source of evidence and knowledge for the state's educators, policymakers, press, and public. To this end, we will be disseminating information via this new PACE commentary feature in addition to our normal offerings: publications (policy briefs, practice briefs, reports, and working papers), videos, and events (webinars until we are able to resume in-person meetings).

Our network is prepared to help support policy and practice across California, so please reach out to info@edpolicyinca.org if you have knowledge needs that PACE evidence can inform. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners all working together is the only way we can come out of this crisis stronger. Together, we can leverage education as a force for recovery.

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