

COMMENTARY

To Keep Students Safe and Learning, California Needs Strong State Leadership



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When schools reopen this fall, they will look dramatically different than they did before the pandemic. Whether in person, online, or some combination of the two, it will be critical that each student receives rigorous instruction as well as the academic, social, and emotional support they need to thrive.

That will be a far cry from the emergency education most districts offered in the spring. Data reveals [wide variation](#) in how distance learning was implemented, in large part because of [students' varied access to devices and Wi-Fi](#). To their credit, our state leaders have been working to [address this digital divide](#).

But the variation was also due to local decisions about [curriculum and instruction](#), the speed with which districts [ramped up their virtual learning](#), and differences in efforts to meet the needs of [English learners](#), [students with disabilities](#), and students who were behind academically. With [distance learning here to stay](#) for the time being, at least in some form and for some students, our expectations should be higher. We need to ensure quality across our roughly 1,000 school districts and we need to prioritize equity.

Already the health and [economic impacts of COVID-19](#) have disproportionately affected [low-income](#), [Black](#), and [Latinx](#) families, and these students have also been the ones least likely to receive high-quality education during closures. As a result, we should expect these students' learning to be [seriously impacted](#); in the fall, they must receive good instruction, regular interactions with teachers, and supports that address their academic, psychological, and social and emotional needs. But [evidence from the spring](#) tells us that many school districts will not do this without a stronger state role.

Our state leaders, including the legislature and the governor, must therefore set clear statewide expectations for the teaching, learning, and student support—whether online or in person—that must happen during this time.

They can begin by shifting the conversation back to the core purpose of school: learning. For good reason, our state leaders have spent significant time in recent months focused on logistical issues like connectivity, cleaning, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and sanitization. State leaders must now also support rigorous, engaging, relationship-centered, and personally relevant teaching

and learning by investing in [professional learning](#) and resource sharing—and by detailing for parents, educators, administrators, and students an inspiring vision for this new era.

BALANCING STATE REQUIREMENTS WITH LOCAL CONTROL

The California Department of Education’s new 62-page [guidebook](#) for school districts is detailed and specific on issues of public health and safety, recommending specific social distancing protocols and safety measures, such as masks and temperature checks. The guidance related to teaching and learning, however, is loose, offering questions to ask and avoiding clear recommendations. While guidance is critical, a few bright-line requirements are necessary. In setting these, the state can create the right balance between tight expectations for *what* all districts must do as well as regulatory and statutory looseness regarding *how* districts implement requirements.

The state should establish minimum expectations for districts that will ensure every child has access to a minimum level of quality education and to equitable services during this time of school disruption as a result of COVID-19. In particular, the state should:

1. **Establish a minimum amount of instructional time.** This spring, [we saw huge variances in instructional time](#) from district to district. Going forward, there should be minimum expectations for how much learning time schools provide as well as how much of that time should include teacher-to-student direct instruction and 1:1 or small group support.
2. **Require that districts administer some form of diagnostic assessment and create a statewide instrument.** Experts and practitioners [anticipate](#) that students will return to school with significant unmet learning needs. While educators can develop their own assessments to diagnose and address these gaps, it would be far more efficient for the state to design and pay for districts to use a high-quality, Common Core-aligned [assessment tool](#).
3. **Require every district to adopt instructional continuity plans.** Developed in consultation with families, these must clearly communicate how teaching and learning will happen. They should address how every student group will be effectively served, including English learners and students with disabilities; how instructional quality, depth, breadth, and engagement will be maintained in the case of in-person learning, distance learning, and hybrid approaches; and how districts will provide social, emotional, and mental health supports for students.
4. **Advocate for and secure significantly more funding.** This should include federal coronavirus relief funding, additional federal resources to support student mental health, and funds to address the digital divide. It should also include a plan for how to secure more state and local dollars by reprioritizing state spending and closing loopholes for big businesses and corporations.

CONCLUSIONS

These are not original ideas: similar recommendations have been made by [a coalition of equity advocates](#), [administrators](#), [parent groups](#), and others. With broad consensus and urgent need, our state leaders must take swift and bold action.

At the same time, local flexibility is critical and, indeed, is a hallmark of California education. The state must loosen requirements in certain areas in order to ensure that school and district leaders can design approaches that best fit their local context. To this end, state leaders can lift class size caps, relax limitations on the hours and responsibilities of afterschool staff, offer teachers early retirement incentives, and provide additional flexibility in terms of when and how workforce reductions are conducted, so that high-poverty schools are protected from the disproportionate impact of layoffs.

Our educators and local education leaders have demonstrated extraordinary leadership and resilience during an unprecedented time of challenge. Their work, and the educational opportunities of our students, must be supported by strong state-level leadership. Local control does not mean there is no role for the state—it is quite the opposite. Firm state direction ensures equal expectations for what is provided to all California students. It also ensures equitable opportunities for California’s six million students, the majority of whom are students of color.

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