

A blue-tinted silhouette of a person with their hair in a bun, sitting at a desk and working on a laptop. The person's head is turned slightly to the right, and their hand is on the keyboard. The background is a solid blue color.

Education in a Pandemic

Learning from Illinois Students &
Caregivers to Plan for the Road Ahead



DECEMBER 2020

The current moment demands this kind of listening.

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Dear Education Partners,

We are all focused on figuring out how to recover from the effects COVID-19 is having on our school communities. The social, emotional, health, and academic impacts of this crisis are profound and will reverberate for years to come. We owe it to the next generation to rise to this moment by recognizing the significance and scale of the issues at hand and committing the resources and taking the actions necessary to address them. Otherwise, we risk allowing these events to haunt our students well into their future.

It has been inspiring to witness the degree to which parents, educators, and front-line workers have gone above and beyond to serve their students and their communities. Educators, school staff, and community members across Illinois continue to work together to ensure that students and families are supported emotionally, academically, and beyond as the pandemic persists.

Their efforts do not go unnoticed, and along with families across the state, we offer our heartfelt thanks and appreciation.

Despite herculean efforts on the ground, this pandemic has heightened deep-seated and systemic racial and socioeconomic inequities. Limited access to technological devices and broadband has hindered many students' ability to engage in remote learning. Too many parents have had to choose between either not going to work or leaving children unattended at home because they could not access or afford child care.

To inform the work ahead, it is important to hear from those who have been directly impacted by school disruptions: students, parents, and caregivers in cities, suburbs, and rural areas across the state.

With the help of community and district partners, we organized focus groups and conversations with over 120 students, parents, and caregivers across Illinois. We would like to thank the Chicago Urban League, Educator Advisory Council, Illinois 60 by 25 Network, Illinois

Student Assistance Commission, Equity First Superintendents, Illinois PTA, League of United Latin American Citizens, and the Faith Coalition for the Common Good, all of whom helped bring together students, parents, and caregivers with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

At a time characterized by rapidly shifting circumstances, perhaps the only certainty is that this pandemic will leave many challenges in its wake. Among those challenges is the disruption to learning, social discourse, civic development, and well-being experienced by our children and young adults. It will take focused and creative leadership to develop a state-wide learning recovery plan and to ensure that equity is at its center. While every student in the state has been impacted by this pandemic, its effects are not being experienced evenly across lines of race, income, language, and need.

As you read this report, we hope the voices of our young people, parents, and caregivers will stay with you. For us, they fortify our resolve to look and plan ahead and to work not only to meet immediate needs but to find ways to rebuild better and stronger. With their experiences as our guide, we look forward to working with you to ensure our students' future.

Sincerely,



ROBIN STEANS

President, Advance Illinois

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Illinois' public school system serves nearly two million students from pre-K through twelfth grade in over 850 districts. In the spring of 2020, Illinois was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic, changing what school looks like for children and families across the state, from Chicago to Carbondale. Even as educators—teachers, school staff, and school and district leaders—work tirelessly to keep students engaged and learning throughout this crisis, disruptions caused by the pandemic are impacting students' educational experiences.

Central to Advance Illinois' approach is a commitment to keeping students at the center of our policy design and advocacy work. In keeping with that practice and to understand what Illinois' school communities are experiencing in this moment and what they will require in the long term to recover and rebuild, we hosted a series of focus groups in the fall of 2020 with high school students and parents/caregivers of students of all ages. Participants hailing from communities across Illinois and representing the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity of the state shared their experiences and described what they anticipate they will need in the years ahead.

This report reflects our findings from those conversations.

We first asked students and caregivers how the pandemic is impacting their communities. They shared how lack of access to child care has been a barrier both to maintaining caregiver employment and to student learning. Increased financial insecurity in the wake of business closures and pandemic-related job loss has increased stress and placed additional demands on students and caregivers alike. Concern about access to basic resources like food, health care, and mental health supports is widespread. It is within this context that students are currently learning. Three primary themes emerged as students, parents, and caregivers described the kinds of student needs that schools will have to address in the wake of this crisis; these make up the main sections of this report.

- **First, students, parents, and caregivers anticipate that significant supports will be required to address students' social-emotional needs.** Participants across focus groups shared worries about the impact of isolation and trauma, called for increased school-based counseling and mental health supports, and stressed the importance of intentionally embedding social-emotional learning in school culture.
- **Second, students and caregivers expect a need for time and resources dedicated to ensuring students' academic progress in the years to come.** They expressed a desire for clear information that can help schools and families understand student progress and areas for improvement in core academic subjects. Parents especially asserted the importance of knowing how their students are performing and progressing in relation to grade-level standards.

- **Third and finally, all participants worry that inequities in access to resources will cause some students to fall behind,** damaging their chances of gaining the skills and knowledge necessary to continue on to college and career.

These findings, coupled with specific suggestions from focus group participants, lend themselves to the following recommendations for state leaders as they plan for the road ahead:

1. **Invest in Resource Equity** - Investing additional state funding for education and distributing both state and federal dollars equitably will be key to ensuring our public schools have the resources and supports they need to address the increased academic and social-emotional needs of students in the wake of COVID-19.
2. **Treat Academic and Social-Emotional Learning as Two Halves of the Whole Child** - When it comes to supporting learning recovery, students need both content-specific academic supports and ongoing social-emotional and mental health supports. A state plan and distribution of resources to enable recovery from the current crisis must meaningfully address both subject-matter mastery and building trauma-responsive schools.
3. **Create a Comprehensive Recovery and Rebuilding Approach that Takes the Long View** - Students and families recognize this is not a "quick-fix" situation. Recovering from this crisis will require focus and decisive action not just during this school year, but over the next several school years. Therefore, the state should work with diverse stakeholders to develop a bold and comprehensive long-term plan for educational recovery and building back better.
4. **Prioritize Clarity & Consistency** - Families want to know what happened. We must understand the impact of this pandemic on student learning in order to effectively support Illinois' students and families in the process of recovery. To do so, the state must collect and provide students, parents, and school communities with valid and reliable data on student learning.
5. **Make Up for Lost Time** - While there is no easy consensus on the best approach to address the disrupted learning, there is widespread understanding that students need opportunities to get back on track. As our schools and communities recover and rebuild, we need to provide all students additional time and support - extended day and/or year, summer programming, year-round schools, intensive tutoring - to address this unparalleled social-emotional, mental health, and academic crisis in a thoughtful, research-based manner.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

We are living through the biggest public health crisis of our lifetime.

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the daily routines of families across the globe, caused the deaths of over a million people, and created economic and societal ripple effects that will be felt for years to come.

Among the ripple effects, the pandemic forced the closure of Illinois' school buildings for the last third of the 2019-20 school year—rushing districts into remote learning with little time to plan and widely varying access to critical resources across the state's 852 school districts. While no official statewide data are available, leaders and teachers across the state reported lagging attendance and engagement in school following the abrupt transition to remote schooling. With districts and schools implementing variations of

in-person, hybrid, and remote learning models during the 2020-21 school year due to the ongoing pandemic, it is clear students are experiencing a major, extended disruption in their learning environments and supports.

If left unaddressed, the effects of the pandemic have the potential to further widen existing inequities. Students from low-income households and Black and Latinx students are far less likely to have access to a laptop or high-speed internet than their higher-income and White peers, making it difficult for them to engage in remote and hybrid learning.¹ Without targeted efforts to combat the learning loss and address the trauma being unevenly experienced across the state, Illinois runs the risk of compounding inequities during crisis recovery.

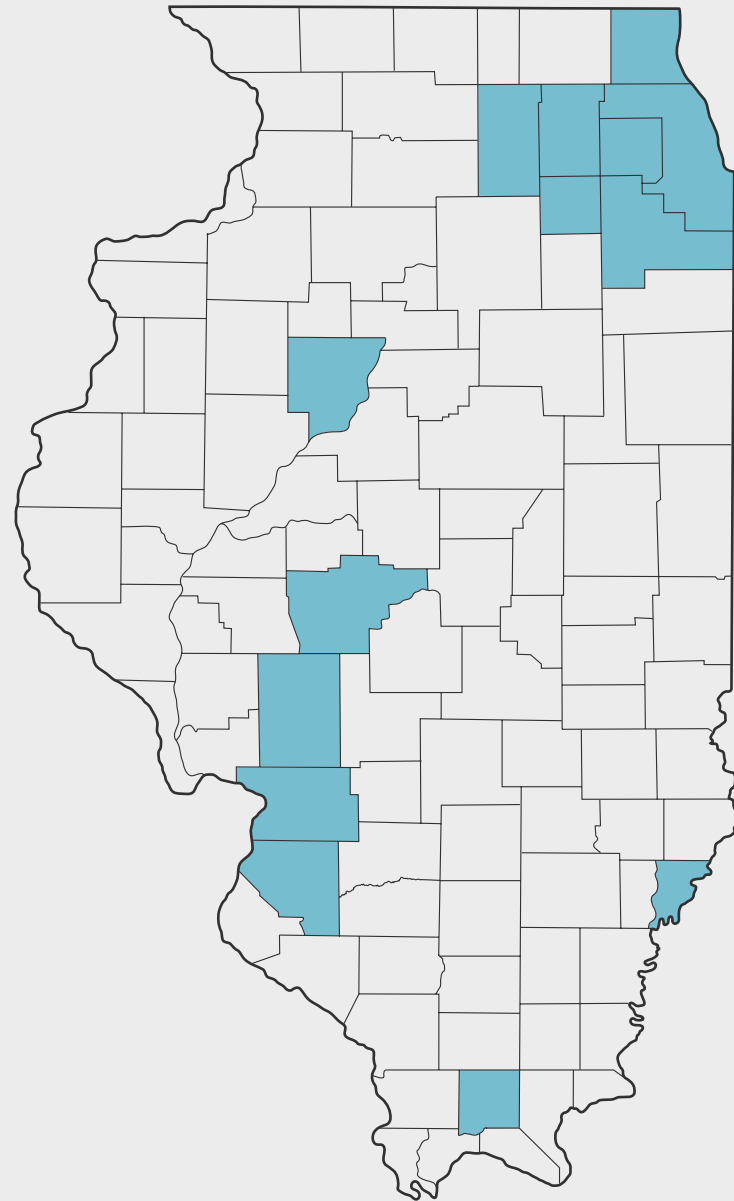
1. Advance Illinois Analysis of 2018 American Community Survey. IPUMS USA: Version 10.0[dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TExSSutzDuZCue2exwxQCjJsgcJN5Gq/view>

Learning from Illinois Students, Parents, and Caregivers

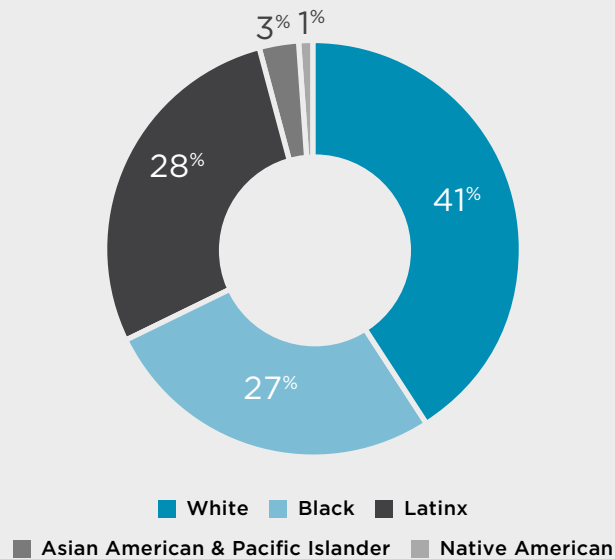
The most impactful and equitable education policy is designed with students at the center. At the core of Advance Illinois' approach to policy development and advocacy is a commitment to blending research, data analysis, and community engagement to design student-centered solutions that improve outcomes and close opportunity gaps. In order to find ways state policy can empower Illinois' students and families to recover and rebuild from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we first needed to hear from those students and families. ***The current moment demands this kind of listening.***

So, throughout September and October of 2020, Advance Illinois hosted virtual focus groups in English and Spanish with more than 120 public school students, employees, parents, and caregivers in rural, urban, and suburban communities from across the state to better understand how their schooling experiences have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

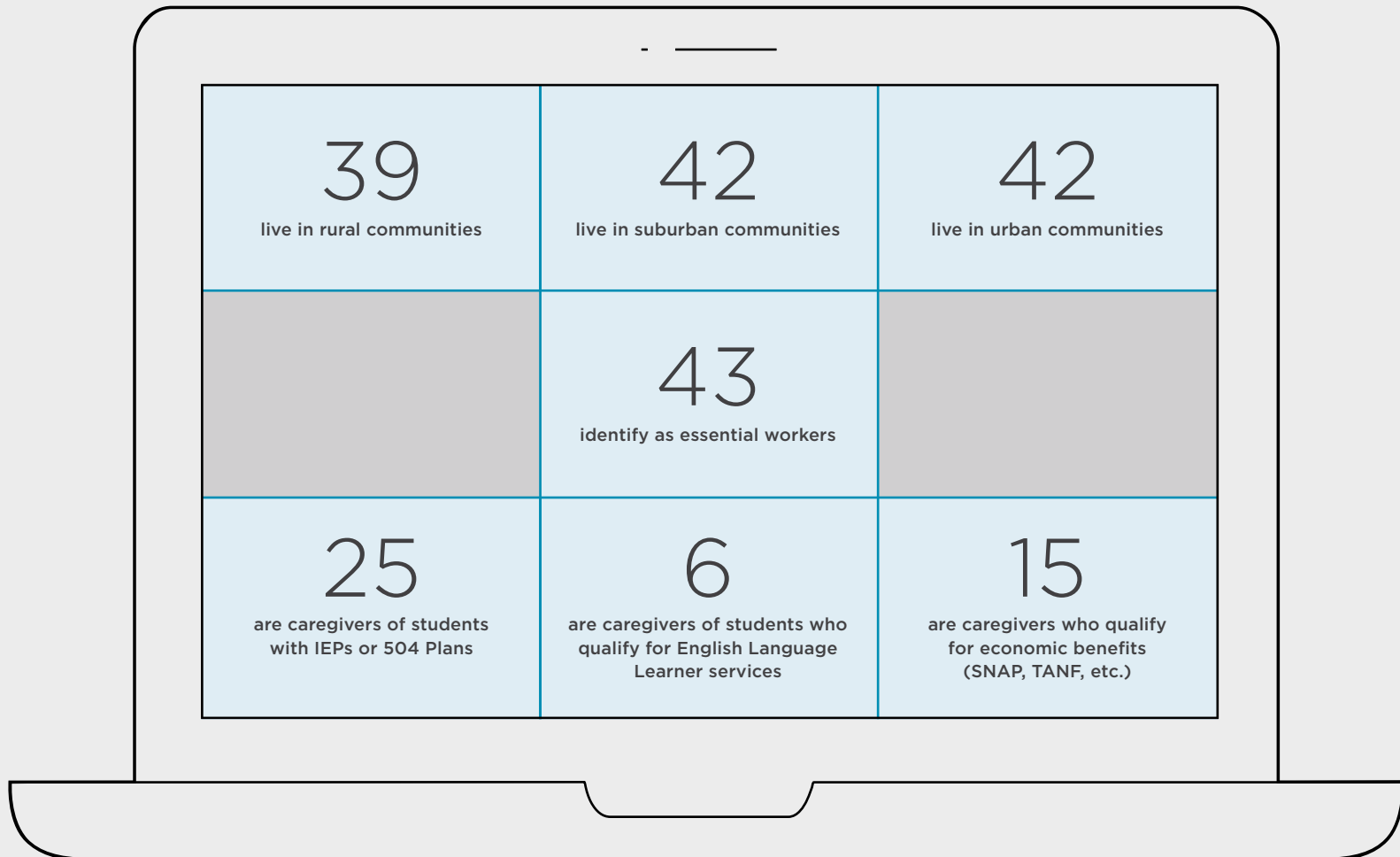
FOCUS GROUP COMMUNITIES ENGAGED



RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY OF ALL FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS



123 total participants



Understanding the Challenges Ahead

Ever since school buildings across Illinois shut their doors in mid-March, the educational experience across the state has changed dramatically – for students and educators alike. Our focus group discussions provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the complex realities facing public school families.

Participants represented families enrolled in remote, hybrid, and in-person school formats since the start of the 2020-2021 school year with a range of opinions, beliefs, and messages for policymakers as they plan for the road ahead. As an organization committed to educational equity statewide, Advance Illinois plans to use the insights gained during these conversations to advocate for public policy that promotes learning recovery and meets the needs of diverse communities across the state.

For safety reasons, the focus groups were conducted virtually. We acknowledge that this may have prevented some voices and communities from engaging, particularly those most isolated at this time due to lack of access to technology and/or sufficient connectivity. While we suspect it is likely that these communities share many of the concerns expressed by those who were able to participate, compounded by the impacts of the digital divide, this is an assumption. Future investigations into the impact of COVID-19 on schooling would ideally find a way to reach these communities as well.

Hybrid Learning: A combination of both remote and in-person learning. Generally, a student attends school in-person a few days out of the week, and the remainder of the week is spent learning remotely.

Remote Learning: A student is only interacting with teachers and schoolwork through an online platform, or through printed out packets, but never in-person with a teacher or students.

In-person Learning: A student is physically present inside the school building with teachers and students.

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A big concern I have for my community is the vulnerable families—English Language Learners and those having financial problems. There are some systems in place to help them, but I wish there was a way we could ensure they were being reached and a way the community could help them.

Suburban Caregiver

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We need to make the system more equitable—there are great teachers, there are great schools, but not everyone can access them, and COVID-19 has made the difference in schools so much more obvious. We need to close the gaps... so it's not because of your zip code or how well you test.

Urban Parent

A Debt of Gratitude to Educators

Across all focus groups, participants expressed overwhelming gratitude for educators. Whether students' experiences were positive or challenging, there was a shared acknowledgement of the unprecedented demands currently being placed on educators and school leaders. Participants were quick to highlight examples of educators going above and beyond the call of duty to help struggling students and find creative ways to support students and families.

We also heard, however, that without meaningful state guidance and support, no amount of heroism or creativity on the part of school staff and administrators can fully address the current, unprecedented level of need, let alone do so equitably. It is with the utmost respect and gratitude for the work of Illinois' educators - across all roles, schools, and communities - that we outline the experiences of students, parents, and caregivers in order to advocate for increases in resources and supports as well as responsive policies to undergird the work of excellent educators.

Communities are struggling with financial instability and lack of child care and health care.

Education does not exist in a vacuum. The broader experiences of students and families impact how they interact with – and what they need from – the public education system. With that in mind, we began each focus group discussion by first asking participants how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their communities.

Across race, cultural identities, income levels, and geographies, participants reported strikingly similar experiences. The top three concerns they shared included challenges securing child care, financial instability brought on by business closures, job loss, reduction in work hours, and inconsistent access to affordable and convenient health care. Students and their guardians described how these three critical challenges affected their communities, contextualizing the return to school for fall of 2020.

Lack of Access to Child Care

Caregivers and students most often named lack of access to child care as the primary pandemic-related challenge facing their community. The shift to remote or hybrid learning in many districts has increased demand for the supervision of school-aged children during their parent's or caregiver's working hours. This need has been compounded by a lack of care options for younger children as safety concerns and lack of funding has led to closures of early childhood education and care centers. Some participants who identified as essential workers or who work outside of the home noted that child care providers expressed concern about the parent/caregiver's job increasing the risk of exposure to COVID-19, making child care impossible for some families to find.

As a result, families described a greater reliance on older students to supervise younger siblings, and some students said their schedule is organized around caring for younger siblings in their household during the day and completing their own school day asynchronously each evening. Some participants reported they had lost a job, are forced to leave students home alone, or must take students to work with them because childcare is not available, all of which impact student learning.



I work in health care and my husband works in a prison—we couldn't take off. My kids' schools were closed, but we still had to work. We didn't want to expose my parents, and our daycare center closed but still required us to pay tuition. I didn't think we would survive the stress. It felt like panic every morning.

Suburban Caregiver



Our community is hungry. There are a lot of people who don't know where to get help, where to get food. And then there are food pantries and organizations set up to help that don't know how to find the people (in need). It's like they don't know how to connect. They used to connect through schools—the social worker, the teachers, word of mouth. But now the connection is broken.

Urban Caregiver

Increased Financial Insecurity

Across communities and stakeholders, financial insecurity is another critical challenge created, or in many cases exacerbated, by the pandemic. All focus groups discussed small business closures and related ripple effects in their communities, including loss of individual jobs, less access to services, and struggling local economies.

Job insecurity was most commonly described as a concern in urban and suburban focus groups, and some students in these focus groups reported they, or students they know, have taken on

household responsibilities or jobs outside of the home to offset their parents' loss of income. Participants noted that child care, food, and cleaning services have been most impacted in rural and urban communities and expressed concern for undocumented workers, who may disproportionately rely on these sectors to support their families.

Barriers to Accessing Health Care and Mental Health Services

Access to affordable, convenient COVID-19 related health care emerged as another challenge for families across communities. Across focus group discussions, families lacked information about what resources were available and were not certain how to obtain various kinds of aid, including physical and mental health care.

In rural communities, participants noted that long distances or wait times to see a provider could force students to miss school for up to 14 days, the required quarantine period after COVID-19 exposure, if no COVID-19 test or doctor's clearance could be obtained.

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If someone has to be tested, it takes forever—you would have to drive at least 30 minutes, and I don't even know how long it would take to get an appointment. We don't have access to those things here.

Rural Parent

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A lot of people got the virus, and we saw how they lost their jobs, and people were very afraid of how much it would cost to go to the doctor. We can't get sick—you get a tickle in your throat, and you are just so scared because no one can afford the doctor.

Urban Student

In addition to physical health concerns, participants noted an increase in demand for mental health services and a decrease in access to them. The isolation, financial strain, and related challenges of the pandemic exacerbated mental health issues for many without adequate resources in their communities.

Students and caregivers described schools as community hubs where information, resources, and referrals had been available prior to the pandemic. In some cases, schools continued to provide access to meals even as buildings were closed, raising questions about how to take advantage of the central role schools play even as circumstances on the ground shift.

THE INCREASED NEED FOR SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

Students feel isolated
and disconnected.

Across all focus groups, parents, caregivers, and students expressed concerns about the long-term impact of disrupted schooling on the social, emotional, and mental health of students. Caregivers and parents across communities described a “low-level depression” in some students, observing an apparent disinterest in connecting with friends, disengagement in school, low levels of energy, and changes in sleeping and eating habits. Those with younger school-aged students described concerns about the impacts of limited socialization, increased screen time, and reduced physical activity on their students’ development. Eighth through twelfth grade students shared similar concerns, describing friends and classmates who were “depressed” or “stressed out” by isolation, limitations on activities, or other pandemic related challenges.

A Strong Call for Increased Access to Counseling

The most commonly named priority for future school years was increasing counseling capacity and school-based mental health and wellness programs to ensure all students have access to much-needed counseling and social-emotional supports. While students, parents, and caregivers noted that some counselors have been available by appointment, most noted obstacles to connecting with counselors, including that counselors have limited capacity, few students self-advocate for counseling services, or students are disallowed from seeing counselors during instructional time when they are most likely to request support.

As students navigate the return to school and continue to experience the aftershocks of pandemic-related trauma, participants predicted significantly higher demand for counseling in the years ahead. Many advocated for a higher student-to-counselor ratio. Participants also advocated for dedicated social workers to conduct wellness checks on students and proactively provide referrals and direct services to families. Put another way, it is clear students and caregivers not only believe more resources are needed to support students, but that schools and staff should actively reach out to young people rather than waiting to be contacted.



I heard a kid in my class ask a teacher if he could go to the counselor, and the teacher said no. He couldn't miss class. I watched the kid cry in class, and they just ignored him. I think our teachers need to know kids are depressed and need someone to talk to. And that might be the only time you can talk to someone, is during the time you are at school.

Rural Student

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The kids are going to need support to process what has happened and how they have changed. They have been so isolated, they have missed out on so much, so much loss. And what about the kids? Some people are in homes that are falling apart, aren't safe, and aren't being fed. These kids will all need counseling.

Suburban Caregiver

Students Feel Socially Distant and Disconnected

Given the dramatically reduced opportunities for students to socialize and connect with educators and peers, another priority for the coming years is facilitating socialization and student reconnection. ***While all students, parents, and caregivers described feelings of isolation and disconnection, many participants shared that altered schooling formats—from remote schooling to in-person schooling with safety measures in place—deprioritize student connection in ways that may have lasting social-emotional impacts.***

Participants reported low engagement in remote classrooms, lag times in email communication, and lack of access to one-on-one communication with teachers that has prevented students from asking questions or interacting with staff. Surprisingly, students in hybrid and in-person learning formats echoed these frustrations. They noted that safety measures limit their ability to meet with

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I'm not sure my teachers even know who I am. Before, I would have been in my classrooms before class to ask a question, and I would have known things about my teacher, and they would have known things about me.

Urban Student

teachers outside of class, and the elimination of labs and class discussions has impeded their ability to engage with classmates and develop a deeper understanding of class content. As a result of this disconnection, many high school students advocated for extended access to informal time to meet with teachers, counselors, and other support staff to help them navigate school.



When you have children with special needs like ADHD who need that interaction to burn off that extra energy, sitting in front of a PC all day builds up unneeded mental anguish. I have students in three programs in our house and they are all struggling.

Urban Caregiver

Prioritizing Social-Emotional Learning & Development

Across focus groups, parents and caregivers recommended developing concrete strategies to meet the heightened social-emotional needs brought on by the pandemic. Participants asked that high-quality social-emotional learning curricula be intentionally embedded into the school day in addition to activities and events in which students connect with peers to further social development. Parents and caregivers with early elementary students advocated for increased time within the “normal” school day to focus on developmental milestones only accessible through in-person instruction and to ensure students have time to master appropriate social skills.

Participants described the social-emotional learning priority as more than just an issue of curriculum or counseling access. Across



This has all lowered their morale: they aren't seeing their friends. They don't have anyone to talk to, they didn't go to graduation, they aren't playing sports—I tried to encourage them, but they are missing everything they look forward to as teenagers—spending time with friends, going out and doing the things you get to do in high school.

Rural Caregiver

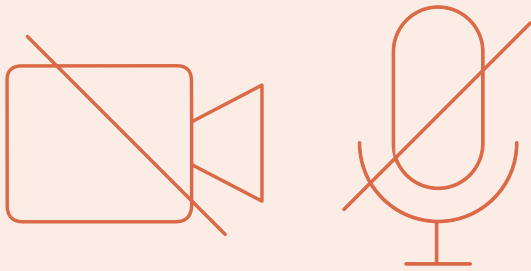
grade levels, there was consistent focus on the need for clubs and traditions students are now missing.

From class trips to graduation ceremonies to sports, students and their guardians described how these aspects of school shape identity, motivate engagement, inform career interests, position students to be competitive for college, and teach them to be functional citizens in their community. Participants made plain they believed these educational cornerstones should be considered as fundamental and preserved in coming years.



It has been like a shock. We are a village; it's always been about community—football games, the events we come together for. But now it's like we are all separate. The things we thrive on have all been cancelled. And that creates a lot of stress.

Rural Student



Cameras and Voices Off

The most common challenge students and caregivers named in remote and hybrid schooling has been a lack of student engagement. Students engaging in remote instruction reported that they neither see nor hear their classmates — resulting in low energy, low-level academic content, and low interest class periods. **Many have reported they have never seen the faces nor heard the voices of the majority of their classmates this school year, which has left them feeling disconnected and unmotivated.**

With some students participating from vehicles, parents' workplaces, spaces shared with siblings or other students, or in living situations that students do not want to share, many feel vulnerable and preserve their agency over this vulnerability by keeping their microphones and cameras off. Others have issues with internet connectivity or devices, which create consistent challenges to connecting successfully. As a result, the dominant culture in many remote Illinois classrooms has become one where student voice is lacking and teachers are pivoting to lesson plans predicated on an absence of student participation.

Most student participants reported it is not currently unusual to go all day in school without speaking, a vast departure from how classrooms functioned prior to mitigations to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

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I realize that when the teacher asks the people to answer something, it just takes forever for people to answer—students don't want to talk. When we are in person we have discussions, but now online, the teachers block us from being able to look up other things. So, she asks a question and everyone just sits there forever. And then she eventually just gives us the answer...Now you just watch the clock and wait for it to count down.

Suburban Student

Dedicated academic supports and time are needed for students to recover and prepare for college and career.

Since March, Illinois public schools have adjusted to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Some are fully remote, with students and teachers communicating exclusively online or via worksheets. Others are maintaining in-person instruction, with procedural modifications to reduce the risk of disease transmission.² Adding to the complexity, many districts are employing hybrid models that provide a blend of remote and in-person instruction.

The shift to these various learning formats meant a steep learning curve for many teachers, and has created ongoing issues for educators, students and caregivers. Participants listed the new skills their teachers have been asked to master in a short period of time - from security measures connected to “Zoom bombings,” to pedagogical best practices for remote learning in synchronous and asynchronous platforms, to in-person instruction that excludes many of the strategies teachers previously relied on as classroom cornerstones.



I have advanced Chemistry class, and we're supposed to do a lab after each class, but we've never been able to do it this year. If you want to be a chemical engineer, or if you might want to find your career passion by doing the hands-on, you'll never get access the way it is now. We're doing an honors English class for college, and we just don't discuss the books. We only read them and write responses to them.

Rural Student

Impacts of Modified Instruction on Student Learning and Mastery

Focus group participants expressed mixed perceptions of how adjusted schooling has impacted the quantity and quality of instruction and their access to rigorous coursework. While participants widely reported that the quantity of work has significantly increased since the spring, all involved agreed the rigor and complexity of schoolwork has been significantly lower than it was prior to the pandemic. Independent work is now more often focused on practice and review rather than preparing students for high-level classwork. In all settings, students reported a shift to teacher-centered instruction and away from interactive class discussions and experiential learning, the sort of instruction that fosters greater engagement. As a result, participants described schoolwork that is easier and/or more focused on recall than critical thinking.

Synchronous Learning: Instruction and learning in which a group of students is engaging in learning at the same time.

Asynchronous Learning: Instruction and learning that does not happen at the same time and in the same place for everyone. There are a variety of methods, but in all cases the student has the freedom to complete an assignment or access instructional material at a time and place which works for them.

2. Procedural modifications to in-person schooling intended to prevent the spread of COVID-19 include requiring staff and students to wear masks, increasing distance between desks, regularly sanitizing buildings and materials, temperature checks, and limiting the number of students in hallways or common areas.

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My kids are talking to me about what they are doing, but it doesn't sound as high level as what I would expect. I think in school [students] connected more, what they did was just higher level. They did more hands-on activities; they talked more about the work. There was so much more exploring and critical thinking they were doing then.

Urban Caregiver

Students and caregivers described the use of applications and teacher exercises that are “like online worksheets,” requiring short answers or allowing students to explain or demonstrate concepts without analyzing or deeply exploring them. Many students across all learning formats noted that the ability to ask teachers questions in real time is challenging. Reduced class discussion and limited opportunities to discuss content with teachers is depriving students of the opportunity to engage in and master complex material and concepts.

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We have a Spanish class, but now we never speak Spanish to each other. We watch recordings and then record videos. In science, we do a worksheet at the end of a lesson with pictures of the lab on it instead of the lab.

Rural Student

Students who reported ongoing access to rigorous coursework often credited individual teachers with taking extraordinary measures to present engaging content, from teachers who delivered biology lab materials to their homes to early education teachers who scheduled one-on-one conferences with each student to practice math fundamentals. These examples were acknowledged as models of educators who knew how to use available technology, had access to resources, and understood pedagogical strategies that fit the specific format in which they had been asked to teach.

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We have a teacher who puts the science labs out on her front porch for us to come pick up every other week. She has a list of students who can't get them, and she drives around drops them off. So, everybody does the labs, everybody has materials. No one has an excuse to not participate, and she makes sure everyone has what they need.

Urban Student

Moving forward, participants recommended that teachers receive training around how to engage students in the specific instructional format in which they would be teaching, be given supplemental resources to implement their curriculum in student-centered ways, and be afforded student-teacher ratios that allow them to meet with students individually and in small groups to check for understanding and address questions.

Measuring Academic Growth and Readiness

Students, parents, and caregivers were asked to discuss how they develop an understanding of student growth and academic performance under normal circumstances. In a poll, participants reported they most often relied on school-generated reports that show their students' performance in relation to state learning standards. Caregivers described this type of information as coming most often from the MAP, or Measurement of Academic Progress, administered in grades K-8, or from teacher feedback. Students described information on academic progress as generally coming from grades on individual assignments and classes.



The MAP testing gives us a comparison to other kids and how they perform against grade level expectations and shows us how they grow each year. It's not the end all be all because not everyone tests well, but it's one tool of many that works well so we can see how they are improving on their path.

Suburban Caregiver

Although many participants felt there was too much emphasis on standardized testing and/or wanted to ensure testing was not used for punitive purposes during the pandemic, most acknowledged the importance of reliably assessing what students know and how they are growing during this time so that instruction can be targeted. Parents and caregivers made it clear that when schools shared how and why they used assessments, they would advocate for their continual use as a measurement tool.

MAP (Measurement of Academic Progress): A computerized adaptive test which helps teachers, parents, and administrators improve learning for all students and make informed decisions to promote a child's academic growth.



I look at just a variety of things that come home—the state standard test. It's interesting to see where he is along with people from other areas, but it's nice to know from the teacher personally if he's learning what the teacher is looking to teach. It's always good to get more information than you need so you get the whole picture.

Rural Parent

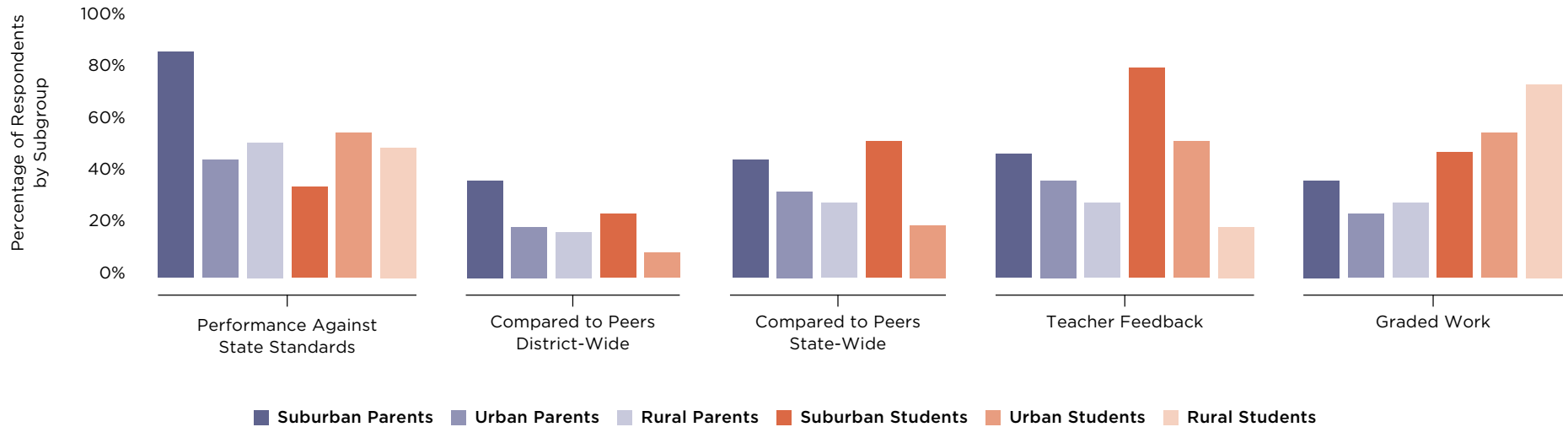
Across focus groups, the most frequently discussed measure of student growth and readiness was teacher feedback. Many participants value the use of online platforms for real-time frequent and individualized updates and recommended families be provided with training on using the platforms in their home language. Participants whose schools do not track grades online recommended these tools be put in place across the state moving forward to minimize transitions in case of ongoing schooling challenges. In addition, many advocated for the platforms to be leveraged not just to track grades, but also to house student work samples and feedback on student assignments.



I am a little concerned about academic loss because of the grading adjustments they are doing. At the end of last year they did a grading adjustment where they couldn't get a grade lower than the previous quarter regardless of what they did. So that doesn't tell me what [my child] learned.

Urban Caregiver

PREFERRED TYPES OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE DATA



Across groups, participants acknowledged a disconnect between grades and mastery of learning standards. Some students noted that they satisfactorily completed coursework following school building closures last spring without having addressed key content. Additionally, differences in grading policies across schools and districts raised concerns for students as they considered their competitiveness for college. There was a shared concern among participants about college preparedness and persistence. In light of these inconsistencies and concerns, it is clear that an external, more objective measure of growth and mastery of standards to inform instruction and intervention will be critical moving forward.



We asked the principal how grades this year would affect us for college, and they said they didn't know. We aren't sure now how to get ready for college. It just doesn't feel clear how our district is addressing our records and how that sets us up to compete against other students. Especially if one district is giving out As and easy work and another district is giving us six hours of homework and a zero when we can't get online.

Rural Student

Looking Ahead: Is extended instructional time the answer?

In the spring of 2020, school buildings closed without an infrastructure in place to provide high-quality remote instruction to all students. Survey data suggest that in some cases, a quarter of all students were not participating in schooling at all during this time. Even for students who were able to participate, teachers reported low levels of engagement and were unable to cover significant amounts of new content. Given this information, students essentially lost a third of the 2019-20 school year. Student, parent, and caregiver descriptions of current challenging learning conditions suggest that students would benefit greatly from additional time in the future dedicated to getting back on track academically and social-emotionally.

To understand their perception of additional future in-school time as a tool to support student learning recovery, focus group participants were asked about their interest in extending instructional time for the 2021-22 school year. Of 97 poll respondents, the majority saw value in extended time in school. Participants were then asked to share what form they preferred additional time to take: whether it be extending the school day, the school year, making the school week longer, or transitioning to a year-round schooling model. Only 14 percent of respondents expressed a preference for lengthening the school week, a quarter of respondents expressed a preference for extending the school day, another quarter preferred moving to a year-round calendar, and 36 percent preferred lengthening the school year.

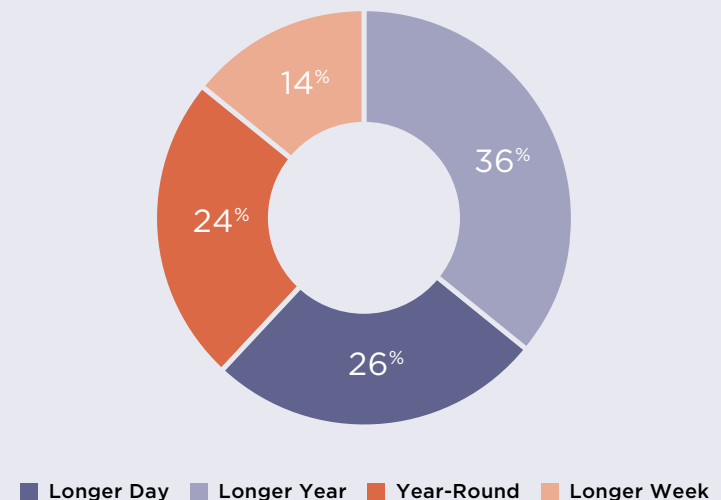
Families who expressed an interest in extended instructional time were adamant that additional time would be most valuable if applied when students return to attending school in-person. Participants suggested that additional time be leveraged to assess student mastery to identify gaps in content knowledge. Once identified, instruction could be used to focus on closing those gaps.

“

If we look at adding time, it has to be when we are back to a real school—kids able to work in groups, have discussion, participate in labs. The level of the work now isn't there, so they need more time when they come back to rebuild the habits, connect with teachers, practice being critical thinkers.

Urban Parent

PREFERENCE FOR EXTENDED TIME IMPLEMENTATION BY PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS



Recovery and rebuilding requires a consistent emphasis on equity.



Impacts of the Digital Divide

Across focus groups, participants noted that the effects of the pandemic on schooling have exacerbated existing inequities within and across schools and districts. In rural communities, lack of access to internet connectivity and sufficient technology for all students is an enduring challenge. Many families were forced to participate in remote learning from cars in order to access hotspots and several reported continual challenges around connectivity. Similar challenges were echoed by participants in urban and suburban focus groups, with technology emerging as the most frequently named barrier to instructional access, even in locations where hybrid and in-person schooling have resumed. Though higher income households could afford upgrading internet service or buying additional devices, students from low-income households increasingly face an opportunity gap without access to these resources.



It's not just that the Chromebooks they gave us don't work. Our schools are dilapidated. The HVAC is falling apart—we've been fighting to get that fixed for a decade before COVID-19. In higher tax districts they don't worry about the dust and the mold and air pollution. They can't just give money to selective admissions schools and be done. Our kids don't have anything they need, starting with air to breathe.

Urban Caregiver

Funding Disparities More Apparent than Ever

Participants also noted that in spring 2020 and during the current semester, resource availability appears to be largely dependent on the affluence of each school and district. Some caregivers described schools that provided new Chromebooks, hotspots, art materials, and daily meals for students. Other caregivers had no access to internet or devices and relied on community food banks. Families whose students attend schools with the fewest resources noted that their schools were in disrepair and would require significant resources to be able to be sufficiently cleaned for students to return to in-person schooling. These issues, which have disrupted and adjusted schooling, are exacerbating inequities for some of the state's most systemically disadvantaged students and are negatively impacting their ability to learn during this time.



The internet is okay where I live, but only one person can be on at a time. Other kids near us don't have access to internet at all. They have to drive to the church for the hotspot, and they had to buy a Chromebook. I had to show them how to use it. It wasn't something the school did.

Rural Student



We never have the dollars we are supposed to have. Our buildings are old, our textbooks are old. We are lacking so many things and lagging behind. We need equity in funding. I know it's a big city and there's only so far tax dollars go, but when you see how big the divide is between what kids have access to, it's not right.

Urban Caregiver

Inequitable Access to Rigorous, Engaging Coursework

Likewise, students described disparities in their experiences in terms of rigor and engagement. Students participating in Advanced Placement (AP) and dual enrollment coursework, as well as in selective enrollment and magnet programs, frequently gave examples of teachers providing more rigorous applications of content and checking for understanding, and/or having access to robust discussions and labs. Participants in general education coursework without an honors or advanced designation more often described coursework as lacking opportunities for practical application, providing limited engagement, or requiring assignments centered on low-level, individual practice. Students in advanced courses identified the existence of an external assessment, such as an AP test, or pre-set curriculum as guiding course pace and content and a possible explanation for greater rigor.

“

My friend is in a foundational course and she is struggling. They just watch the videos and there is no way to ask the teacher. They get no face time in that class—just one hour to check in each day. They need to be able to ask questions of the teachers.

Rural Student

Students in selective enrollment and magnet programs also reported greater levels of engagement and access to resources. Caregivers in urban focus groups described significant differences between selective enrollment and neighborhood schools, advocating for more equitable access to the resources and curricula implemented in higher-performing schools. As one participant noted, “they already

know how to do great schools, and they do it for kids who luck into them with the testing process or the lottery. Now they need to grow them so all kids get great schools. You use the same formula everywhere. We should all be able to get great schools.”

“

School is to learn. Taking what’s happening into consideration is good, but in some classes, it feels like I went back a few grades. I literally took 4 tests in under 10 minutes and still got 90s... But the students who are in AP classes, they are still piling the work on because they have to be ready for that test at the end no matter what.

Urban Student

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All education needs to be equal—not where some areas don’t have the proper technology and other areas have an abundance of technology. They need to make an equal playing field—like they are teaching some kids how to be laborers and some other kids how to program the robots or develop things...If we all pay our taxes, you need to invest in all these schools equally.

Urban Parent



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Our students and families deserve intentional supports.

What we heard from participants has provided rich and powerful insights into the educational needs of Illinois' families and communities. These conversations make it abundantly clear that in the years to come, students will need unprecedented academic and social-emotional supports to master the knowledge and skills to succeed in college, career, and beyond in the face of the barriers created by COVID-19 and its impacts. To meet that need, our state must have a plan to ensure that every classroom, regardless of zip code and selectivity, is equipped to support all students. The following recommendations lay out actions state leaders, including legislators, the governor's office, and the Illinois State Board of Education can take to ensure students' needs are met.

Recommendations

- 1 Invest in Resource Equity** – Students and caregivers who participated in our focus groups were acutely aware of the dramatic differences in access to resources that exist both within and between school districts. They expressed the greatest concern for students in districts that lack sufficient funding to provide trainings and supports for educators, devices and internet connectivity for students, and critical services for students with special needs. The state already has a mechanism in place to combat these inequities in the form of the Evidence-Based Funding Formula (EBF). To build back better when it comes to our education system and to close opportunity gaps as we do so, funding the formula is necessary. That starts with appropriating \$350 million for the EBF in FY22. Federal stimulus funding will also be indispensable for supporting learning recovery. The state should advocate both for the inclusion of meaningful education aid in any federal package and targeting such funding to the state’s highest need school districts. Investing both state and federal dollars equitably is key to ensuring our public schools have the resources and supports they need to address the increased academic and social-emotional needs of students in the wake of COVID-19.
- 2 Treat Academic and Social-Emotional Learning as Two Halves of the Whole Child** – Students and caregivers sent a clear message during focus group discussions that students need both content-specific academic supports and ongoing social-emotional and mental health supports. Their testimonies demonstrated clearly that the two are inextricably intertwined, and state guidance and resources to support students through the current crisis and on to future success must elevate and address both simultaneously. When it comes to academics, it means finding ways to reintroduce academic rigor into classes, across all learning formats, and providing targeted supports to help students master grade-level standards. To prepare students for college and career success, a focus should be placed on strategies that elevate acceleration rather than remediation. At the same time, supporting recovery for the whole child means providing all schools with the resources to embed social-emotional learning and trauma-responsive practices in their everyday operations. To do so, the state can start by providing a clear state-level definition of what trauma-responsive education looks like and then build on that foundation by establishing educator supports like universal trainings and communities of practice focused on trauma-responsive practices.
- 3 Create a Comprehensive Recovery and Rebuilding Approach that Takes the Long View** – As state leaders work to meet the moment and attend to the immediate health, economic, and educational needs of Illinoisans of all ages, it is critical that we look to the future and begin to put in place structures that support recovery and long-term rebuilding. Absent statewide strategies and resources, learning recovery across Illinois is at risk of being fragmented, inconsistent, and fundamentally inequitable. The state could prevent that by identifying and seizing opportunities to create common expectations and frameworks for recovery. Though focus group participants described their current circumstances and immediate needs, they also shared a common acknowledgement that recovering from this crisis will require focus and decisive action, not just during this school year, but over the next several school years. The state should work with diverse stakeholders to develop a bold and comprehensive long-term plan for educational recovery – one that considers how we can build back better. The long-term nature of this pandemic and its impacts has become ever more apparent, even as “COVID-fatigue” heightens our desire for normalcy. The state bears a special and important

responsibility to make sure we resist the temptation to return to business as usual. Instead, we have an obligation to create and support a thoughtful, serious plan to ensure students emerge from this pandemic academically, socially, and emotionally on-track.

4 Prioritize Clarity and Consistency – In order to effectively support Illinois’ students and families in the process of recovery, we must understand the impact this pandemic is having on student learning. With over 850 public school districts – widely diverse in funding levels, geography, and local context – the impact of the pandemic on student learning and the ability of school communities to address these needs will be predictably varied as well. Illinois has been nationally recognized as a leader for its commitment to annually collecting and clearly communicating education data in its state report card. In keeping with tradition, the state should continue to prioritize the collection of information on key metrics that can provide an understanding of the impact of the pandemic on our students’ learning. This includes student access to educational resources, student participation and engagement, and academic growth and proficiency in core subjects. Last year, states were unable to administer end of year assessments that would otherwise provide pivotal insights into student mastery of skills and knowledge. This assessment data plays the critical role of illuminating educational inequities and equipping advocates and policymakers with information vital for protecting the civil rights of Black and Latinx students, students from low-income households, students with special needs, and English Language Learners. The state cannot afford to let the academic progress of its students become a black box. Instead, it should work to provide students, parents, and school communities with valid and reliable data on students’ learning to the extent possible.

5 Make Up for Lost Time - Despite heroic efforts on the part of educators and school and district leaders, most students experienced sporadic instruction after an abrupt and unplanned shift to remote learning in the spring of 2020. Students and caregivers report that very little learning occurred in key academic subjects during that time. Several months into the fall of the 2020-21 school year, most public schools in the state are still providing remote instruction or a mix of in-person and remote classes. Even for schools providing primarily or fully in-person schooling, the pandemic’s impacts on local economies and the logistics and resources required for health and safety precautions are impacting all school communities. As our schools and communities recover and rebuild, students will need additional time to address this unparalleled social emotional, mental health, and academic disruption in a thoughtful, research-based manner. While there were decidedly mixed views on whether and how to add time for academic and social and emotional supports - extended day, year, summer programming, year around schools - the sense of having lost ground and the need to find significant ways to help students recover it, infused every conversation.

While we all dream of the day we can “go back to normal,” we know simply returning to in-person schooling is not enough. We are in a middle of a crisis with unprecedented and far-reaching consequences. Absent dramatic, sustained, and intentional interventions, we run the risk of losing a generation of students. While our communities have many needs right now, in order to support our children to get back on track to success, we must invest in creating and maintaining a road to recovery for all students and families. We hope the input of students and caregivers featured in this report helps shape that transformative work, and we look forward to working with policymakers, education leaders, and partners across the state to design and implement an equitable plan for learning recovery.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Advance Illinois extends its gratitude and appreciation to all those who had a pivotal role in the development of this report. We would like to acknowledge Dr. Kristin Moody of Evolve Network for facilitating our focus groups and Jessica Ramos for leading this effort and work to engage diverse community members, Seth Thompson and Melissa Figueira for helping engaging our participants and compiling findings, and the Advance Illinois team for supporting this project. A special thanks to the more than 120 parents, caregivers, and students across Illinois who shared their perspectives and lived experiences to inform our work on statewide learning recovery and rebuilding, which prioritizes equity for Illinois students.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Our work ahead will require the collaboration of parents, students, community leaders, educators, advocates, and decision-makers to ensure Illinois students are supported in the recovery and rebuilding from the pandemic. We hope you continue to join us in the fight to advance educational equity now and in the years to come.

ABOUT ADVANCE ILLINOIS

Advance Illinois is an independent policy and advocacy organization working toward a healthy public education system that enables all students to achieve success in college, career, and civic life. Since its founding in 2008, Advance Illinois has become a nationally recognized thought leader in education policy advocacy.

At Advance Illinois, we develop data-informed policies to support student success; build leadership and community partnerships and coalitions; and elevate the education narrative with the goal of furthering equity and pushing the state to achieve its goal of 60 percent of adults holding a post-secondary degree or credential by the year 2025.

Among other significant accomplishments, Advance Illinois was the architect of a five-year campaign that resulted in the enactment of a new, more equitable school funding formula. Along with our partners in this effort—including Funding Illinois' Future, a coalition of more than 200 school districts, school superintendents, and community and faith-based organizations—we helped fix Illinois' worst-in-the-nation school funding formula in 2017.

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