

A photograph of a student from behind, wearing a light blue shirt and carrying a large orange backpack. They are holding several books under their left arm. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a fence and trees.

Exploring Intersectionality

Understanding Student Identity to Promote Equitable Social, Emotional, Cognitive, and Academic Development During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

Meeting the COVID-19 Pandemic Moment to Affirm and Support All Students With Disabilities

All young people have the potential to learn and thrive if they are exposed to positive developmental relationships and environments, including through our education systems. But our nation's education systems are being tested and strained like never before. If there ever was a time to understand, affirm, and leverage the assets of all young people, and especially students with disabilities, in order to help them emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic stronger and more prepared for life and school, that time is now. This is especially true for students with disabilities whose identities intersect with other diverse communities who are often systemically marginalized. These include students of color and students from low-income families, who are often more negatively impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.¹ Indeed, the economic, social, and learning challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic reinforce knowledge, including from the science of learning and development, about how important it is to ensure that all students experience belonging, safety, and support in order to learn.

Circumstances have significantly and rapidly shifted to establish a new set of truths for young people and their education:

- The pandemic forced the entire nation to shift to virtual and distance learning almost overnight.
- The most harmful consequences of that shift are being experienced most profoundly by systemically marginalized young people and their families, including by students with disabilities.
- These consequences are often further exacerbated for young people with disabilities whose identities also intersect with other marginalized communities, including students of color, students learning English, and students from low-income families, as the rapid transition to virtual learning left school systems unprepared to teach and support these students.
- Virtual learning is likely to go on for an extended period.

A Challenging Transition to Distance Learning

For students with disabilities, many of whom require and benefit most from skilled, in-person, evidence-based, and individualized instruction as well as from mental health and behavioral supports, distance learning² is too often a poor and inadequate substitute.^{3,4} Further, the challenges, instability, loss, and isolation of the COVID-19 crisis have resulted in stress for students and families. Schools must figure out how to address students' social, emotional, and cognitive development in addition to academics.⁵

It's always critical for education systems and educators to gather information on and center student experiences, both positive and negative. This allows them to make decisions that will enable all students to thrive — now more than ever. It's important that educators engage authentically with students and families in order to illuminate and attend to the unique strengths and needs of students with intersectional marginalized identities so that their needs are prioritized and met with urgency in the process of design and decision-making. This helps to ensure that these students are not lost in the chaos of the current moment or retraumatized by schools' response. Additionally, a focus on the learning and development of students with disabilities whose identities intersect with other systemically marginalized communities will also build structures and habits that can improve education for *all* young people.

Having One's Identity Recognized and Affirmed Is Central to the Ability to Learn

Every person has multiple intersecting identities. For example, someone may be a daughter, a student, a person with ADHD, a tennis player, a Black person, a girl from the Caribbean, and/or a person learning the English language. The science of learning and development has found that the pathway to learning and thriving is enabled when all of the intersecting facets of a person's identity are recognized, understood as intersectional, and affirmed by and central to the context⁶ (relationships, experiences, environments, and cultures) that is intentionally designed and provided by education systems, schools, and the adults who work in them.

While the United States ostensibly aspires for all young people to become college- and career-ready, as evidenced in the significant focus on this goal within the Every Student Succeeds Act,⁷ U.S. public schools were not designed to promote learning and thriving for all. These systems were predicated on a one-size-fits-all model that centers whiteness, ableism, and affluence and still fails to recognize the centrality of unique identities and individual context to learning.⁸

By and large, our education systems continue to expect that the vast majority of young people will conform to the expectations of the education being offered, rather than making it the responsibility of adults or systems to ensure that young people's identities are known and that education is personalized so that every student can meet their potential. Further, despite longstanding federal civil rights protections for students with disabilities⁹ and in order to maintain white privilege and power, education systems constructed explicit barriers to success, often specifically based on young people's identities. The adoption of English-only policies, exclusionary discipline policies, tracking based on identity, and the inequitable distribution of resources across schools are just some examples of how these barriers have historically manifested and continue to the present day within education systems. These barriers, in turn, create a funnel that rewards the most privileged, for whom education systems were designed, while denying opportunities to and often actively punishing those who are different from that norm. These are not just COVID realities. They are historical realities that the COVID crisis has only magnified.

For example, in the rapid transition to distance learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many education systems have automatically privileged students with access to the internet and their own up-to-date computers and devices, as well as those who were supported to quickly understand and engage in new distance learning platforms and programs. However, other young people with different intersectional identities, whose identities are from communities that are systemically marginalized, have more often found their challenges with COVID-19 exacerbated and their access to quality educational experiences compromised.

"It is important to see the humanity of every person I encounter.... To label and sort and codify and quantify the narrow slice of people who get the American dream is detrimental to our society."

*Jazmyne Owens, Manager,
Education & Health Policy,
National Urban League*

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) refers not only to the multidimensional identities that people carry throughout their lives, but also to the ways that those identities present opportunities and challenges to thriving in our world, including in the education system. The concept of intersectionality is useful as a lens through which to see and appreciate why and how certain young people are afforded opportunity in education while others are not.

As COVID-19 moves education out of the classroom and into virtual settings, the likelihood increases that districts, overwhelmed by this shift, turn to a model that adheres even more strictly to a one-size-fits-all model. Providing instruction to students via a virtual platform is new for most educators, who are still learning not only how to teach via a virtual platform but also how to meaningfully differentiate instruction to attend to different students' strengths and needs in a virtual setting.¹⁰ Continuing a one-size-fits-all approach during the COVID-19 pandemic will only serve to further narrow the funnel — leaving behind even more young people. Those left behind disproportionately include the same student populations who are more likely than their peers to experience the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, including students with disabilities whose identities intersect with other systemically marginalized communities.

"It is crucial to rethink the way school has been done in the past to ensure students' needs are met when school begins again in the fall."

*Cynthia Robinson-Rivers,
Head of School, Van Ness Elementary*

The Compounding Effect on Student Identities in the Time of COVID-19

With respect to students with disabilities, applying an intersectional lens to their experiences in school clarifies how they are often further denied opportunity within learning environments that continue to operate primarily under the one-size-fits-all model. Indeed, the data are clear that students with disabilities are disproportionately underserved relative to their peers.¹¹ However, those young people's identity as disabled is not the only identity that can be used to marginalize them and deny them opportunity and success, both explicitly and implicitly, by education systems and individuals. Other identities are routinely subjected to systemic marginalization — that is, they are forced to grapple with additional barriers to accessing an effective and equitable education — within education systems. These might include identifying or being perceived as (but not limited to) a student of color; an immigrant or refugee; a person learning the English language; female; or LGBTQ+.

When a student has intersectional identities that are marginalized, not only are their needs even less likely to be met, but they also often pay a "cognitive tax." The lack of affirmation of their identities, a low sense of safety and belonging, and a justified fear of being further labeled and marginalized force them to constantly scan for threats to their identity. The scanning and fear add to their cognitive load and create barriers to focus and learning. This cognitive tax has likely increased for many systemically marginalized students due to the increased stress, loss, trauma, and isolation during COVID-19. Many education systems were not designed for the affirmation and support of intersectional identities and the contexts in which young people learn (e.g., the home, the community, the school, the classroom, the peer group, etc.). Today's classrooms and virtual settings often continue to operate in ways that attend to preferences of the privileged and deny the needs of students with other identities.

COVID-19 had and continues to have the most significant impact on the students least privileged by current education systems, including students with disabilities. Knowing this, any educational response should emphasize connection with and supports for these students. This includes efforts to build relationships with these students and understand their strengths as well as areas where they may need additional support. By knowing who students with disabilities are, including the multiple identities they carry, and by providing learning experiences that leverage learners' strengths and agency, education systems will be better able to meet their needs both during the current crisis and after it has subsided.

Trust is the antidote to stress because relationships that are strong and positive cause the release of oxytocin and this not only helps children manage stress, it activates the limbic system, and also offsets the damaging effects of cortisol and produces resilience to future stress.

*Pamela Cantor, M.D., Founder,
Turnaround for Children*

The Urgent Need for Integrated Social, Emotional, Cognitive, and Academic Development

High-quality teaching and learning experiences should be designed to promote academic mastery while building and strengthening crucial social and emotional mindsets, habits, and skills. This is critical to promoting young people's social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development and to addressing the challenges they face. These challenges may include possible trauma created by the COVID-19 crisis, which disproportionately impacts young people who carry intersectional identities, especially students with disabilities.¹²

The Aspen Institute's Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (SEAD) found that "[t]eaching students the skills and providing settings that build their efficacy and self-control, providing them with supportive adult relationships, and directly addressing their physical, emotional, and mental health needs can buffer against the negative effects of stress. It also gives young people a set of tools that provide on-ramps to learning."¹³

This point is particularly salient in the present context. Schools will have to convince kids to socially distance, to wear masks, to be subject to frequent temperature checks, to be unable to play with their friends. In the place of the safe, nurturing environment they may have left in March, they will return to a cold, highly regulated space. Knowing this, focus needs to shift from hierarchical discipline to a supportive and nurturing approach that recognizes the stress of this situation and its effect on learning.

Ensuring that these approaches are embedded in designs for learning during COVID-19 and going forward will better attend to the identities, contexts, and needs of all students and enable them to learn and thrive.

One caveat: While many social-emotional learning (SEL) programs focus on important skills and habits that relate to young people's behavior and self-management in learning settings, SEL is sometimes used in a way that can ultimately reinforce negative stereotypes about certain students, especially those with intersectional identities. In such situations, SEL can be seen "as a sort of savior — one that transforms [marginalized] students from being unmotivated, loud, lazy, and uninterested students into motivated individuals suddenly enthusiastic about school..."¹⁴ Further, when used to "fix" young people's behavior, SEL maps onto existing systems of oppression in learning settings to become, as Dena Simmons of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence put it, "white supremacy with a hug,"¹⁵ a strategy to be used specifically for Black, brown, and other marginalized young people, including students with disabilities, to control their bodies and choices, to make them "quiet enough to learn."¹⁶

"The way that SEL has been used in the past is to put the burden back on marginalized students in ways to blame them for the systemic racism that exists in the school."

*Nancy Duchesneau,
P-12 Research Associate,
Education Trust*

Instead of using SEL to manage discipline issues, it is most powerfully and productively developed as a component of an educational approach designed to meet the needs of the whole child, including providing whole-child social, emotional, cognitive, and academic supports and culturally competent developmental relationships. This reality must permeate the context of the regular academic and enrichment curriculum for young people. When woven into the fabric of academic instruction as well as the overall school and learning environment, SEL becomes not just "another thing for teachers to do" but fundamental to how young people are taught and supported — allowing them to explore mindsets, habits, and skills like taking responsibility, making tough choices, and working collaboratively with others at the same time as they are building important academic knowledge and skills. As noted by the Aspen Institute SEAD Report, "When challenging work is coupled with high expectations and high levels of support, and when students are actively working and cognitively, socially, and emotionally engaged, this produces greater motivation, stronger identity development, and deeper learning."¹⁷ The urgent need created by this pandemic to effectively engage in integrated social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development makes it imperative that schools overcome any challenges to doing so appropriately.

Actions to Promote Equitable Social, Emotional, Cognitive, and Academic Development During a Pandemic and Beyond

During this pandemic, it is crucial that the decisions and actions of districts, schools, and teachers center on creating positive and productive student experiences, with the aim of delivering students the relationships and routines they need to support their resilience.¹⁸ These actions should be intentionally designed to meet the holistic needs of the most marginalized students, which are often students with disabilities, students of color, students who are learning the English language, and students from low-income families. Following are a set of broad recommendations to better support equitable learning and development during COVID-19, particularly for students with disabilities and other marginalized identities. These recommendations should be considered in addition to meeting students' legally protected educational rights, which are still required through the current

crisis.¹⁹ Further, to support student success in this unprecedented shift to distance learning, educators should be provided the resources and professional development to make the necessary adjustments. For more specific recommendations, please see the companion briefs for district leaders, school leaders, and families at the end of this resource.

- 1. Work to know and celebrate students' intersectional identities, including their personal and educational assets and needs, when designing effective learning experiences.** Uncover the ways students are experiencing the pandemic, in particular because of their intersectional identities, and seek to identify their unique assets and needs for learning and thriving. Use this knowledge to inform the ways resources are deployed, teachers are assigned, supports and interventions are provided, and instruction is delivered, with an eye to how they will serve (or otherwise deny) those students who are most marginalized in current systems and most impacted by COVID-19. This requires an intentional approach to learning and more dedicated attention to students' social and emotional needs at the beginning of the school year. Proactive design and implementation of a vision that prioritizes students' social, emotional, and trauma-informed needs — and that incorporates families' input in the creation of that vision — is essential to setting them up for success in the present context.
- 2. Provide timely and accessible communication with students and their families, and prioritize asset-based, culturally competent family engagement.** During such a challenging time for everyone, provide timely, accessible, culturally responsive translation and interpretation services, with bidirectional communications with students and families to ensure that students' basic needs are being met. Ensure that students' mental, physical, social, and emotional health is attended to; that they are given high-quality instructional support; that their civil rights are being protected; and that students and families know where to go for help. As circumstances change daily, students and families should not have to wait for days or longer to receive translated or accessible materials or culturally responsive translation and interpretation services. Additionally, for students with disabilities during distance learning, parents and family members may serve as the primary in-home educator and are now responsible for supporting student learning in a more hands-on approach than in the past. Connecting with parents and families to learn what may or may not be working for a student (at home and at school) and providing families with supports as they work with their child is an important component of COVID-era effort that should not be overlooked.
- 3. Address barriers to effective distance learning.** Use proactive student and family engagement and data on students' and families' experiences during the pandemic to help remedy barriers to effective distance learning. These include lack of access to technology devices (such as laptops and tablets) and broadband internet; social isolation and disruption of trusting relationships to support learning; and the experience of trauma, which disproportionately impacts students with disabilities, students of color, students who are learning the English language, and students from low-income families. Provide professional development for educators to improve technology use, culturally responsive and sustaining practices, and anti-racist approaches to teaching and learning. Applying a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach could help address barriers to effective distance learning, including by providing learners with multiple means to engage with academic material.²⁰ It is essential that master schedules and instruction be designed (through means such as teacher-led videoconferences and virtual student advisories) to provide students the foundation of relationships and routines they need to navigate the broader challenges they may be grappling with. Lastly, ensuring that students receive accommodations as needed and, in the case of students with disabilities, as legally required, will further diminish barriers that may pose challenges to effective distance learning. This includes amending IEP/Section 504 plans to meet students' emerging needs, using information gleaned from distance learning experiences during the spring of 2020.
- 4. Adapt multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) to support students who may struggle during COVID-19.** Recognize the needs of students as individuals, including where they may be struggling academically, socially, and/or emotionally in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Work to provide students with supports to address those needs or connect students and families with resources that may be available to support them (see Action 6 below). While there may be base-level support that all students receive, there should also be more substantial supports available to meet the needs of individual students who may face additional challenges during distance learning. Schools and teachers may need guidance on how to adapt multi-tiered

systems of supports to a distance learning setting, but the need for such systems is likely greater now than ever before in light of COVID-19 and prolonged educational disruption.

5. Create school cultures that cultivate a sense of belonging and wellness for young people and adults alike.

To grapple more effectively with the significant disruption that students and adults are experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, expect, prioritize, and resource effective approaches to intentionally building stronger developmental relationships, routines, and resilience. Developing this type of (virtual) school-wide culture with appropriate, effective, and culturally responsive and sustaining practices will cultivate trust and a sense of belonging and wellness for students, families, and educators within socially distant settings. This includes intentionally integrated social, emotional, and cognitive development as part of academic learning.

6. Collaborate and partner with national, state, and local organizations to provide whole-child supports.

Use information about students' intersectional identities and their social, emotional, cognitive, and academic needs to identify and partner with national, state, and local organizations that can help districts and schools support students and families who are experiencing new or exacerbated life challenges, such as economic hardship, health problems, increased stress and/or trauma, food insecurity, and/or housing insecurity or homelessness. These organizations may include community-based organizations or out-of-school-time programs, health clinics, food pantries, and other social service providers. Recognize the unique strengths that these organizations can bring to the table and their trusted presence within communities and students' lives. Additionally, ask families and students who those trusted partners are for them. In order to meet the needs of all students, in particular students with disabilities, consider intentionally including these community-based organizations in school-based or district-wide plans to improve education and meet student needs.

¹ Data collected on COVID-19 cases and deaths indicate that communities of color, including Black and Latinx communities, are disproportionately contracting and dying from COVID-19. According to The COVID Tracking Project at *The Atlantic*, Black people are dying of COVID-19 at 2.4 times the rate of white people. Additionally, data show that the confirmed cases within the Latinx community are disproportionately greater than the proportion of the Latinx individuals in the majority of states. For more information, see "The COVID Racial Data Tracker." The COVID Tracking Project, *The Atlantic*, 2020, covidtracking.com/race. Accessed 26 Aug. 2020. See also Godoy, M., & Wood, D. What do coronavirus racial disparities look like state by state? *NPR*, National Public Radio, 15 May 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/30/865413079/what-do-coronavirus-racial-disparities-look-like-state-by-state>. According to a report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on August 28, 2020, American Indian and Alaska Natives are experiencing COVID-19 rates 3.5 times greater than among non-Hispanic white persons. See: COVID-19 among American Indian and Alaska Native persons — 23 states, January 31–July 3, 2020. *Weekly*, 69(34). 1166–1169. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6934e1.htm>. It should also be noted that while data is being tracked for the members of the Asian community as a whole, this data largely fails to account for the differing experiences of the many individuals who comprise the Asian community. In doing so, it likely overshadows significant differences in the impact of COVID-19 within the Asian community.

² When this brief refers to distance learning, this also includes virtual instruction that is delivered by educators to students through technology.

³ Camera, L. Schools struggle to educate students with disabilities amid pandemic. *US News & World Report*, 15 Apr. 2020. <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2020-04-15/schools-struggle-to-educate-students-with-disabilities-amid-pandemic>

⁴ Cipriano, C., Rapport-Schlichtmann, G., & Brackett, M. A. (2020). Supporting school community wellness with social and emotional learning (SEL) during and after a pandemic. Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, The Pennsylvania State University.

⁵ Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development Early Childhood Household Survey Project, Center for Translational Neuroscience at the University of Oregon. *Medium*, May 5, 2020. <https://medium.com/rapid-ec-project/the-forgotten-households-dfd2626098c7>

⁶ Research in the science of learning and development has found that identity develops in human beings in response to the relationships, experiences, environments, and cultures — their individual context — that people encounter in their lives, particularly in their younger, more formative years, and also again during adolescence. For more see, Cantor, Pamela, et al. Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(4). 307–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649>

⁷ Alexander, L. Every Student Succeeds Act. 10 Dec. 2015. S. 1177.

⁸ Labaree, D. F. (2012). *Someone has to fail: The zero-sum game of public schooling*. Harvard University Press. pp. 112–117.

⁹ Protecting Students With Disabilities. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html#:~:text=Section%20504%20is%20a%20federal,in%20the%20United%20States%20.%20.%20>

¹⁰ A survey conducted by *Education Week* reinforced that “[i]n-person interactions play a key role in education” and found 82 percent of teachers felt they are more effective in schools, and less than half of teachers (48 percent) have taught live, online classes since the pandemic closed schools. However, “[a]mong teachers who do teach live classes, the majority (59 percent) spend less than one hour per day doing so.” Available at: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/06/03/most-educators-want-schools-to-stay-closed.html>

¹¹ Lipscomb, S. (1 May 2017). Closing the gap: Improving outcomes for students with disabilities.” *Mathematica*. <https://www.mathematica.org/commentary/closing-the-gap-improving-outcomes-for-students-with-disabilities>

¹² Hill, F. (18 April 2020). The pandemic is a crisis for students with special needs. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2020/04/special-education-goes-remote-covid-19-pandemic/610231/>

¹³ National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. (2019) From a nation at risk to a nation at hope. The Aspen Institute. p. 20.

¹⁴ Lichtenstein, D. (31 August 2016). How to bring SEL to students with disabilities. *Greater Good Magazine*. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_bring_sel_to_students_with_disabilities

¹⁵ Mada, M. J. (15 May 2019). Dena Simmons: Without context, social-emotional learning can backfire. *EdSurge*. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-05-15-dena-simmons-without-context-social-emotional-learning-can-backfire>

¹⁶ Lichtenstein.

¹⁷ National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, p. 17.

¹⁸ Tools to help schools and districts implement approaches that support students’ social, emotional, and academic development include “Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Roadmap for Reopening School,” from CASEL (available at: <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SEL-ROADMAP.pdf>) and Resources and Examples compiled by the Learning Policy Institute (available at: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/issue/covid-19-resources#sel>).

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, and Office for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. (2020). Supplemental Fact Sheet Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Preschool, Elementary and Secondary Schools While Serving Children with Disabilities. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/rr/policyguidance/Supple%20Fact%20Sheet%203.21.20%20FINAL.pdf>

²⁰ For more information on Universal Design for Learning, see “The UDL Guidelines” at <http://udlguidelines.cast.org/>



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