The COVID Moment: Education Turned Upside Down

The economic, social, and learning challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have elevated and amplified persistent health, racial justice, and economic inequities within our country, especially for students with disabilities and students from other systemically marginalized communities. That’s the reality schools, districts, and states must contend with in the 2020–21 school year. In crafting an effective response to this reality, center these approaches:

1. **Meet each student’s foundational needs, so students can effectively focus on social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development.**
   Since all learning is a social and emotional process, students will bring the realities they are facing with COVID-19 and broader social injustice into their schooling. To help students learn, be sure to assess and address every student’s strengths; their need to experience belonging; their physical, emotional, and identity safety; and what kind of support they have.

2. **Without stereotyping, understand and act on the knowledge that the impacts of the crisis have often been deeper for students with intersecting, systemically marginalized identities (see sidebar).**
   This crisis, while experienced by all learners, is heightened for students with disabilities, students whose home language is not English, students who are Black and/or have other marginalized racial and ethnic identities, students who are from low-income families, and those who face instability in their home learning environments. When these facets of young people’s identities intersect, they can present opportunities and risks for deeper social, emotional, and mental health needs. These needs must be understood and addressed through active conversation and collaboration with students and their families.

3. **See and build on students’ strengths and assets.**
   Students with intersectional identities are not defined by their challenges. They, their families, and their communities must be deeply understood and respected in a holistic way that encompasses not only needs but also individual potential as well as strengths and assets that matter to their identities.

Understanding and Addressing Intersectional Needs

Every young person has multiple identities. For example, one young person may be a daughter, a scholar, a person with ADHD, a tennis player, a Black girl, and an English language learner. Educators need to know and understand their students. The pathway to learning and thriving is enabled when all facets of a young person’s identity are affirmed and their needs are met (e.g., occupational therapy provided for a student with a disability, translation provided for a student learning English, culturally relevant curriculum provided for a student of color, etc.).
4. **Attend to the inherent limitations of distance learning.** Distance learning can be a challenging medium for meeting human needs, but it’s the present reality for millions of students. Schools, districts, and states need to be explicit in effectively using technology to know, understand, and affirm their students, leveraging each student’s assets and meeting their needs. Education technology cannot be used as a replacement for human interaction, but as a tool to help students and adults communicate, monitor progress, and represent information in different ways.

When those of us who work with and for young people understand their intersectional identities and integrate social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development, we can help address the challenges that young people face, like trauma created by the COVID-19 crisis. This trauma disproportionately impacts young people who carry intersectional identities that are typically marginalized in school settings. It’s only when we’ve addressed these challenges that we can help learners come out of this crisis stronger and more prepared for success.

**Question for Reflection:**
Do you know how individual students with disabilities, students of color, English language learners, and other systemically marginalized students in your district have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis?

**As a school leader, you can prioritize the unique experiences of our most marginalized students and then intentionally work to help them to learn and thrive by having clear answers to the following questions and taking the following actions:**

**Key Questions for School Leaders**

1. How have you and your teams engaged with students and families throughout the pandemic? Do you know the challenges students with disabilities and their families are facing and what resources they have access to? Have you considered how your school might better support them?

2. How are you and your school cultivating strong relationships and a sense of belonging through distance learning? Do your materials celebrate the backgrounds, cultures, identities, and histories of all your students?

3. How are you supporting administrators, educators, other student support personnel, and out-of-school providers? How are you building their capacity so they can seek to know and act on their students’ assets, interests, challenges, needs, and aspirations?

4. Have you considered how social-emotional learning and whole-child approaches can advance equity and help your school meet its obligations under special education law for students with disabilities?

**Key Actions School Leaders Can Take to Support Students With Disabilities**

1. **Implement school-wide systems of intervention and support that recognize and celebrate students’ intersectional identities, including their personal and educational assets and needs, and that develop a sense of belonging and wellness.** Priority actions include:

   • **Design instruction and curriculum** that is responsive to students’ identities, honors their identities and history, and cultivates a sense of belonging.

   • **Use proactive family engagement, attendance procedures, and data from other outreach and intervention systems** to make regular, affirming connections with all students, especially students with disabilities and marginalized young people, in order to understand how they’re experiencing life and learning during the pandemic.

   • **Work as a school and community team** — including teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, all other student support personnel, and out-of-school providers — to develop plans with students and families to implement universal and targeted supports tailored to affirm students’ intersectional identities and to provide the relationships, experiences, and resources they need to learn and thrive.
2. Intentionally build the capacity of all school-based personnel, including educators and student support personnel, to support student learning and development by effectively integrating social, emotional, and academic development into all teaching and learning experiences. Priority actions include:

- Provide educators with effective professional development and resources for building positive developmental relationships and supportive contexts for learning that all students need. These include supports such as Universal Design for Learning and multi-tiered systems of supports that address students’ academic, social-emotional, and whole-child needs through culturally responsive teaching, with a particular focus on addressing the individual strengths and challenges of students with disabilities through virtual and other innovative means.

3. Develop a plan and encourage staff to regularly reach out to students and families, share accessible information, identify challenges related to distance learning or other areas, and ensure that student and family needs are being met. Priority actions include:

- Ensure that all communications from the school are provided simultaneously in the family's home language. Offer easy pathways for students and families to ask for help, including individual outreach by teachers, counselors, social workers, and other student support personnel.

- Engage families in regular discussions so key school personnel deeply understand how to address the many compounding and exacerbating challenges that individual students and families, as well as groups of students, are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Ensure that families know which staff to go to for which issues so no individual staff member is overwhelmed and families don’t feel disempowered.

For more information, visit [www.ncld.org](http://www.ncld.org) or contact NCLD via email: [info@ncld.org](mailto:info@ncld.org)
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