

Forward Together: Pandemic Lessons for Effective Teaching Practices

School, District, and State-Level
Policy Recommendations



Teacher Feedback Shows a Need for Expanded Support Systems

Despite their love for teaching, educators have had a tough time during the pandemic. In January 2021, the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) and Understood commissioned the CERES Institute for Children & Youth at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development to examine general educators' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on their experiences teaching students with learning and attention issues. [The survey](#) pointed to a need for supports and resources to address educator burnout, student disengagement, and unfinished learning.

Our Approach

Two national surveys were administered:

- A sample of 1,251 general education teachers completed survey 1 in March 2021.
- A second sample of 1,160 general education teachers completed survey 2 in May 2021.
- [Understood Educator Fellows](#) participated in focus groups to offer suggestions for survey design and provide deeper insights to emerging themes.

A Call to Action



Data suggested that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a misalignment in the resources available to teachers, as well as a huge increase in the number and complexity of tasks teachers are responsible for. This has contributed to and exacerbated teacher stress and burnout. It is imperative that policymakers provide increased funding for educator supports, create robust systems of technical assistance and professional development, and enhance data collection to support educators in serving all students, especially those with disabilities. The influx of federal funds sent to states and districts creates an opportunity to invest in programs and initiatives that will support educators to meet the increasing demands of their profession.

Policy Recommendations for School, District, and State Leaders

Addressing Teacher Stress, Burnout, and Well-being

1. Focus on the essentials (e.g., power standards).

Many teachers feel overwhelmed with the lack of time to meet expected learning standards. States can help districts streamline and focus learning by identifying critical standards needed for academic success. Content experts working with state leaders should review state standards and reduce redundancies in learning, while also emphasizing the integration of prerequisite skills with grade-level content. States should reinforce that all students should be held to these standards, rather than modifying expectations for certain subgroups that were disproportionately impacted by changes and disruptions caused by COVID-19.

Survey responses showed:

- **72%** of teachers report that they don't have enough time to teach everything they're expected to teach
- **69%** feel there are too many standards they're expected to meet
- **58%** feel burned out
- **64%** report that it's difficult to meet all their students' needs

2. Provide wellness resources to educators and focus on workplace culture.

To effectively address students' social, emotional, and mental health needs, educators must first address their own well-being. For example, the [District of Columbia](#) has recently created an initiative that includes a toolkit and self-service platform designed to embed school-level capacity building in

educator wellness now and beyond the pandemic. States, districts, and school leaders should support teachers in prioritizing their own mental health and well-being in an ongoing and holistic way, such as by creating access to formal support networks and by working to develop supportive workplace cultures.

3. Consider teachers' time and capacity when delivering training.

While teachers' confidence and retention are impacted by effective professional development, staff development opportunities often fail to accommodate the realities of teachers' work and personal lives. At the state, district, and school level, administrators should strive to improve the content and cadence of professional development to better reflect teachers' time and capacity. Educator input on timing, mode, and content should be elicited to ensure that it is personalized.

Supporting Teachers With Student Re-engagement

1. Develop and disseminate resources and strategies for engaging students who have learning and attention issues.

It is evident that many, if not most, students will need additional attention to overcome the negative impact of lower levels of school engagement experienced during the pandemic. States and districts should allocate resources toward employing evidence-based strategies for both academic and social-emotional re-engagement with school. To disseminate strategies, states and districts should develop and promote communities of practice or web-based clearinghouses for teachers to both share and access information.

Survey responses showed:

- Almost **50%** of teachers indicated that students with learning and attention issues demonstrated lower levels of school engagement than in prior years.
- **More than one-third** of teachers reported similar patterns of low school engagement among students impacted by poverty and among English learners.

2. Engage with parents and caregivers, paying special attention to students with disabilities who are also impacted by poverty and/or are English learners (ELs).

Teachers reported similar patterns of low-level school engagement among students impacted by poverty and among EL students. Parents are critical players in re-engaging students, and efforts must be made to equitably improve communication with them. Consistent, clear resources on remote engagement of family members may assist teachers in reducing barriers to participation and collaboration. At the state or district level, resources should be invested to create culturally relevant family engagement practices, including translation services or translated materials, digital literacy training, or other evidence-based strategies for developing and sustaining productive family-school relationships.

Supporting Teachers With Learning Acceleration and Social-Emotional Learning

1. Invest in resources to build teacher confidence on positive behavior strategies, flexible grouping, and collaboration.

In addition to developing materials and conducting professional development sessions, resources should be invested to establish sufficient shared planning time for educators to learn, collaboratively implement, and reflect on these practices. As concerns about learning recovery have dominated national conversations, there is an opportunity to invest in key pedagogical strategies to catch students up to grade level and provide

When asked to rank the top three strategies they wanted to implement, teachers were most interested in:

- Positive behavior strategies **(52%)**
- Flexible grouping **(46%)**
- Collaboration **(44%)**

When asked to rank the top three strategies for importance, teachers were most interested in:

- Strategies to catch students up to grade level **(42%)**
- Strategies to keep students engaged and motivated **(42%)**
- Social and emotional learning support for students **(40%)**

the support for behavioral growth that is critical for all students – and particularly important for students with learning and attention issues.

2. Invest in social-emotional supports for students, including building data capacity.

The majority of teachers surveyed reported having to rely upon their own personal assessment or “gut instincts” when evaluating student engagement. States and districts should engage experts to advise on the creation of tools and procedures necessary for screening and data collection regarding students’ social, emotional, and mental health needs. School districts should invest in district-wide professional development to allow educators to build the relationships and inform supportive contexts for learning. These investments should build on existing, effective multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and/or Response to Intervention (RTI) systems, or seek to create new programs and systems that provide equitable, universal, and targeted supports for students’ social, emotional, and academic learning and development.

Acknowledgments



[NCLD](#) works to improve the lives of the 1 in 5 children and adults nationwide with learning and attention issues – by empowering parents and young adults, transforming schools, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. We’re working to create a society in which every individual possesses the academic, social, and emotional skills needed to succeed in school, at work, and in life.



[Understood](#) is dedicated to growing and shaping a world where everyone who learns and thinks differently feels supported at home, at school, and at work; a world where people with all types of disabilities have the opportunity to enjoy meaningful careers; a world where more communities embrace differences. Because differences make the world worth exploring. Differences define who we are. Differences are our greatest strength.

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