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# EQUIPPING SCHOOL BOARDS TO BE ENGINES OF INNOVATION IN EDUCATION DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND.

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## INTRODUCTION



No federal mandate forced the creation of local school boards. So why did states as different as Rhode Island and California, or South Dakota and New York, decide to create them? It is apparent that state leaders recognized that ensuring access to a free, public education would require community “ownership” and leadership. Generations later, school boards remain central to America’s education system, but boards are now often tasked with addressing complex local problems – some driven by global events – and within the confines of a maze of federal and state requirements. Despite these outside controls, modern school boards – representing communities of vastly diverse sizes and characteristics – remain best-positioned to make effective decisions for their students and to be powerful engines of educational improvement.

Local education innovations are needed now more than ever to minimize learning loss caused by the pandemic and to promote school improvement. Many school boards have been thrust onto the front lines of helping communities navigate the current public health crisis, while also addressing significant social – and in some regions environmental – challenges facing the country. This paper aims to stimulate discussions among local board members about how to respond to these immediate disruptions while strengthening schools to support students and educators over the long term. Specifically, we hope this material will prompt conversations about how school boards can become more agile, better engaged with their communities, and laser focused on achieving equity.

## ***THE NEED***

The pandemic is a powerful reminder about the need for local planning and innovation.





*Life certainly changed in a hurry during 2020. The onset of the pandemic in March required a sudden adjustment of routines, and that was especially evident in public education. With the end of the school year on the horizon, instruction quickly had to shift from in-person to virtual, a dramatic change foisted on a system that hardly was prepared for it. Customary approaches to technology, staffing, and even regulatory compliance often were out of step with schools' immediate operational and instructional needs. Districts with an existing education innovation model or mindset, however, were much better prepared to adjust.*

Many communities were not ready from a planning, infrastructure, or staffing perspective to effectively engage students through remote learning. Most schools do not provide computers or similar devices to all their students, but even many of those that do were not prepared for the upheaval they experienced. Further compounding the problem, nearly 17 million students – including one of every three Black, Latino and American Indian/Alaska Native children – do not have internet in their homes, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education.<sup>1</sup> Many teachers were not trained to present their lesson plans remotely, and up to 400,000 of them lack adequate internet and computing devices where they live, based on a recent study by Common Sense and Boston Consulting Group.<sup>2</sup> These learners and instructors were thrust into a new environment without a sound plan or the essential tools for success, and as a result, most schools have been working for months to adjust to a new context.

**The pandemic also has shown light on the challenging nature of education governance. Public education is a highly regulated enterprise that traditionally rewarded compliance more than innovation. While end-of-year assessments were canceled in nearly every jurisdiction, many of the legal requirements governing schools remain in effect – including mandatory fire drills and child health screenings, for instance. A rule-bound mentality is a poor fit for times that demand innovation and creativity.**

Challenges have remained through the start of the new school year. While it safely can be said that most school districts have worked hard to prepare, they have done so with major information gaps, and constraints beyond their control. Local leaders scrambling to serve their students sometimes received conflicting advice from federal and state health officials about best practices for safely operating schools during the pandemic. And even by going to extraordinary lengths to comply with social distancing and sanitary guidelines, school officials cannot be certain that students and school employees will remain free of COVID-19. That uncertainty, in turn, has caused many who work in the school system to decide to leave their jobs, from both a sense that whatever they do is likely to fall short of protecting everyone in a school building – as well as from a concern about their own personal safety, particularly for those whose age or underlying health issues make them especially vulnerable to contracting the coronavirus. Navigating these challenges has been difficult for all leaders. It is especially so for communities tied to traditional instructional and operational models.

The current pandemic is both a wake-up call and an opportunity for local school leaders to rethink core district strategies and functions. So, this raises the question: what exactly is the “new normal” in education and how can school boards innovate through the pandemic and beyond? Despite strong headwinds, most people recognized that COVID-19 was not a foreseeable event, and the challenges it posed could not have been anticipated. School boards and administrators frequently were given credit for trying to adapt quickly and do the best they could with no time to prepare. But that was in the Spring of 2020, already a long time ago. The measure of success now is no longer whether some instruction is being provided but, rather, whether schools have adapted quickly enough to achieve the best success for every student during the pandemic and beyond.

## **PLANNING AND LEADERSHIP**

Innovation requires careful planning and agile leadership.





*The need for new educational models is clear, but meaningful change requires agile leaders who are willing to think and act in new ways. It is not enough for a local board to hire a strong superintendent; board members themselves must provide leadership and support for innovation. Changing one’s mindset about how schools should be operated is not easy, especially if based on years of experience on the front lines. We now are expecting superintendents and others in the system to do what they never had to do before, with little preparation and high expectations for positive outcomes.*

Several steps may assist school board leaders in being effective, agile voices for confronting the new challenges posed by the pandemic and changing the longstanding shortcomings of legacy systems:

- **Identify barriers to innovation.** A good place to start is identifying the external demands that preclude local innovation in a time that demands it. What, exactly, is preventing the district from best serving students and educators right now and for the long term? Are there specific regulations, compliance requirements, and performance metrics that are duplicative, unnecessary, or even counterproductive to effective learning? Can they be waived by the relevant federal and state agencies? What flexibility already exists that the district is not utilizing? Are there alternative approaches school officials can implement locally that would meet student needs more effectively?

- **Examine district practices.** Special attention should be paid to district practices, too. Much of the work of schools falls into patterns – from the start of the school year, to testing cycles and on to graduation. School board agendas often are constructed, at least in part, to focus only on the issues that traditionally need to be addressed at various times of year. Have these practices been altered during the pandemic, or has “muscle memory” continued to drive much of the work of school officials, current demands notwithstanding? How should that change? Do any district policies stand as barriers to innovation goals? Can the district produce the data school boards need to make decisions? What is the perspective of families and the community? Perhaps most importantly, does the board’s vision and strategic priorities reflect a commitment to innovation?



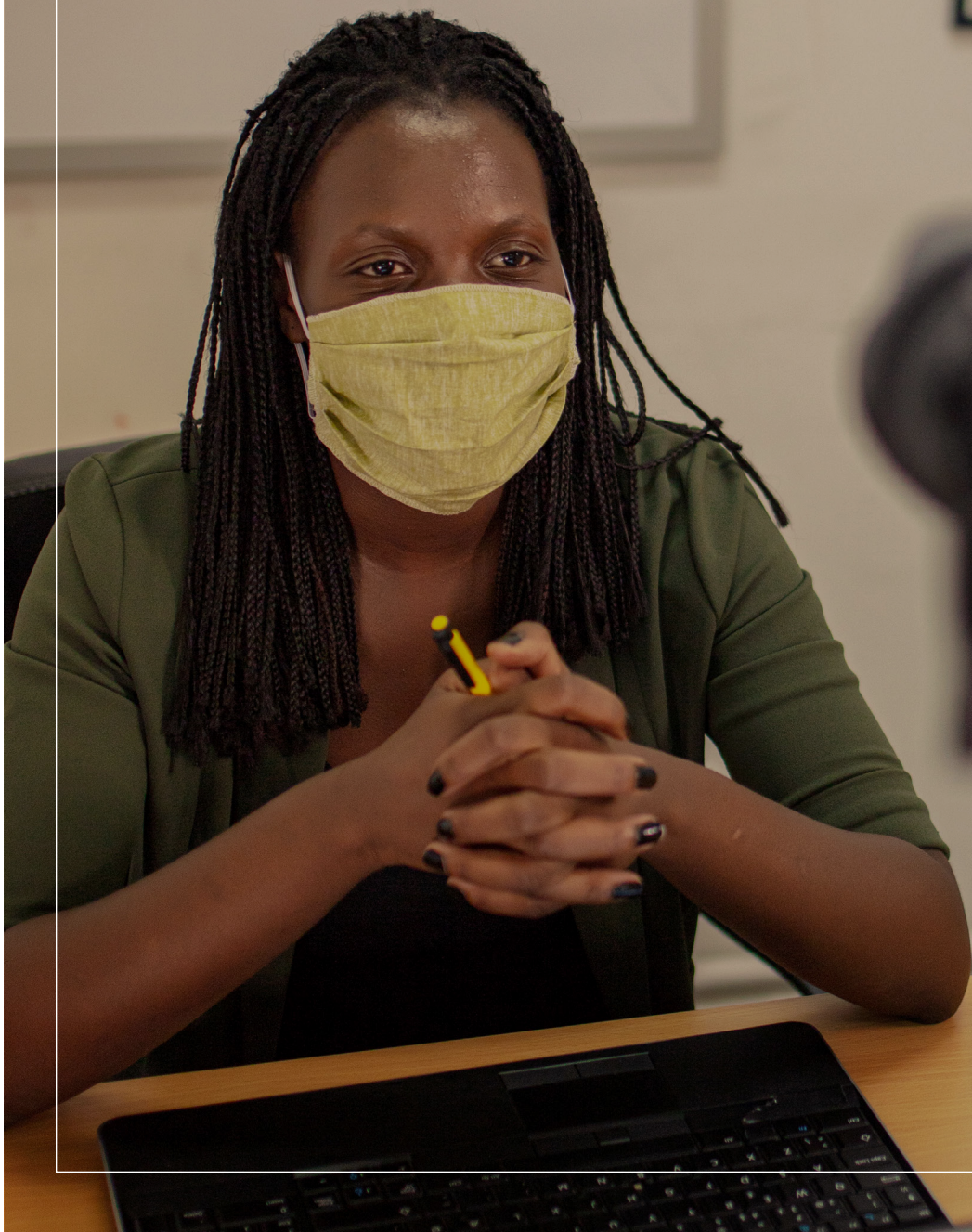
- ***Self evaluate.*** Take time as a leadership team to discuss what has happened in your district since the pandemic hit in March. What have you done well and would do again if necessary? What would you do differently? What input have you gathered from the community and stakeholders? In other words, what lessons have been learned that can affect the actions your district will take in the future? Time is at a premium during a crisis, but this kind of reflection and analysis can be valuable – especially if the process is facilitated by a disinterested third party, who can help ensure that the review is a productive, not fault-finding, exercise and is future-focused.
- ***Learn and identify ideas for improvement.*** Building on this analysis involves capturing learnings and working with your leadership team and community to identify areas for improvement and possible innovation. Sharing your knowledge and experience with partners can help create “space” for local innovation. Associations representing school boards, superintendents, and other administrators would benefit from knowing what is working and what is not at the local level, so they can use that information to persuade federal and state officials to remove barriers and support innovation. School districts are likely to be subject to audits and other evaluations of their performance during the pandemic; identifying, now, the obstacles posed by existing laws and regulations, for instance, will help create a more rational basis for those reviews later.





**COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT**

Innovation requires effective communication and engagement.





*Yogi Berra once famously said that something was “too coincidental to be a coincidence”. He easily could have been referring to school boards. Public education in America is a decidedly decentralized system. The federal government’s influence is primarily in the form of conditions attached to the funds it allocates. Washington, D.C. has limited authority to dictate curriculum, instruction, or a host of other actions that affect student learning. State governments have been the linchpins of the system since they established public schools in their respective constitutions, but local government provides the engine that makes the schools work.*

The nature of each state’s education system varies widely – some providing more money than others, each imposing its own set of laws and regulations that govern how their schools operate. Yet despite this variation, states almost universally decided to create local school boards as an essential means of delivering the service in a way that meets unique community needs, at least in part, by enabling regular local communication and engagement. Boards may go by different names (e.g., school committees, boards of school trustees), but their fundamental role of enabling voters to elect their own representatives to govern and lead schools is the same.

Embedded in this construct of governance is inherent tension between the goals of uniformity of access and standards of quality across a state, and the goals of local accountability and flexibility to meet unique needs. This tension can create conflict, of course, but it also is a crucible of innovation that has served public education very well. In playing such an important role, school boards have a special responsibility to be transparent in their actions and clear in their communications. They must make a priority of keeping the people they represent well informed, and especially engaging with them regularly about proposed changes to longstanding policies and practices.

**Leadership involves listening as well as deciding. It recognizes that there is no one “general public” but, rather, multiple constituencies that need to be regularly and effectively engaged. A school board’s effectiveness is directly linked to its credibility in the community. And credibility, like reputation, must be earned and actively maintained.**

For innovation to occur, local board members must make their communities an integral part of the planning process. In a republic, we elect leaders at all levels of government to make decisions on our behalf. We trust them to understand complex issues and to choose the best approaches to solve problems. However, we do not send them to a bunker to act. We rightly expect that they will explain the choices they face and the reasons for the decisions they make, particularly regarding fundamental changes to traditional education systems and practices.

School leaders have formal ways of communicating with their constituents, such as newsletters, websites, social media platforms, board meetings and public forums. Yet the informal options are equally if not more important. This informal engagement includes connecting with the public not just by relying on leaders with titles like mayors and county commissioners but seeking out the natural connectors who know and interact with broad networks of people. Hairdressers and barbers, ministers and rabbis, small business owners, ride share drivers, retirees and others often have connections across social strata, and they are in a position to share candid feedback about what people are thinking, as well as to relay important information





from school officials to the residents of a community. Social distancing restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 may impact the opportunity for board members to have informal engagement with community members, requiring them to be intentional about making sure those interactions still occur.

The pandemic underscores the necessity of fully engaging all communications channels, especially in a time of emergency when people and systems are stressed – and as has been apparent recently, when misinformation is ubiquitous. In this case, school leaders need to be clear about how they are providing instruction by balancing the need for safety with effective student learning.

There are at least several critical elements that school boards should consider for effectively discussing their innovation visions and plans with community stakeholders:

- **Develop an innovation plan.** Using the information gathered through the evaluation process and initial community engagement described above – board members should develop and share formal plans for achieving the innovations required during the pandemic and beyond. Formal adoption of a plan is only the first step, however.
- **Explain the plan.** Simply presenting the plan does not ensure that people will understand it. There should be multiple opportunities for discussion about the alternatives that were considered, and why some options were approved by the board and others rejected. Transparency is essential to facilitating public acceptance of school officials' decisions, especially when seeking to implement significant changes to longstanding practices and systems.
- **Build alliances to support the plan.** The current crisis has required school officials to work closely with a range of agencies and organizations, some of whom they may not previously have had the opportunity to establish meaningful relationships. The persons who lead these other groups (along with their board members and employees) also may be residents of the district and have their own connections with

neighbors, work colleagues, and others. In addition to these coalitions being vital to coordinating efforts in response to the pandemic, they can prove to be valuable assets to school districts working to identify and adopt longer term improvements.

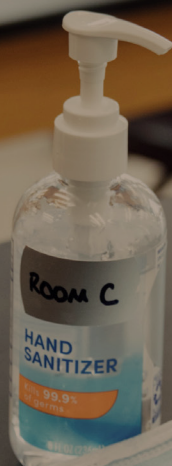
- **Communicate the plan.** The *how* of communications is as critical as the *what*. As noted previously, there are multiple audiences in every community, all of whom have an interest in the work of the school district. These stakeholders include parents and students, of course, along with senior citizens (many of them grandparents, aunts and uncles of children in school), the business community, social service agencies, news media, and many others. All groups should be identified and reached in ways that are most effective for each – and not just once. At a time of great uncertainty, when people have a lot on their minds and their own issues to address, it is impossible to communicate too much. School board members, as direct representatives of the public, are essential for this purpose – as are school administrators, teachers, and other school employees. All of them should have clear messages and data to deliver to those with whom they interact. District residents are likely to expect clear answers to their questions about what the schools are doing. Responses from those in the school system like “I really don’t know” are going to be unsatisfying; worse, they can fuel rumors that a district is not well prepared no matter how much planning it actually has done.
- **Revisit the plan.** The public should understand why the instructional options for 2020-21 were selected – and it should know that the decisions already made are subject to review and revision, as necessary. The goal is not to create uncertainty but to acknowledge that appropriate adjustments will be made as more is known both about (a) the pandemic and associated public health issues (such as how the virus is transmitted, the effectiveness of a vaccine, and other approaches to mitigate the impact of COVID-19), and (b) what in the instructional plan is working as intended and what is not. In addition, this is a critical time to reassure the community that its feedback will be thoughtfully considered, including helpful suggestions about other steps the school district should take to improve.

The pandemic has been the biggest and most difficult challenge for school leaders to address in recent memory. But it has sparked intense public interest in what school districts are doing and plan to do in the months ahead. Said another way: people are paying attention. That offers an opportunity not only to provide clear, consistent, and reliable information related to the pandemic but also about the work of the district generally. This is a great time to share good news, including vignettes about students, teachers and others in the district who are achieving success despite the challenges of COVID-19. Public education is an incredibly resilient institution, but it is the people in it who make it so. They should be celebrated, especially right now.



## **EQUITY**

Innovation plans must include a focus on equity.



*This summer, equity has been front and center in our national conversation, with issues of social justice and systemic racism a major subject of discussion on the internet, the airwaves, and in the streets. School boards are an important part of our nation's democracy and play an essential role in ensuring that all children receive the education they need to be successful.*

Nationally, school board members are a politically diverse group. Whatever their views on broader politics, however, in their governance role they should support policies that are meant to improve outcomes for all children within their district. But school boards do not always represent the full racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of their community,<sup>3</sup> and it can be easy for board members to be responsive to community elites or the constituencies that elected them. School board members will be most effective if they listen to the entire community and make sure that all voices are heard.

Indeed, some districts get caught in a difficult pattern where many families do not understand the system, so they don't engage actively with the district. Their children then lose out on opportunities that more savvy parents take advantage of. This can make them angry – so now they engage with the district, but from a place of frustration.<sup>4</sup>

Board members and districts are wise to get ahead of this problem by affirmatively engaging the full range of families on any major initiative, and on important policy decisions. Particularly in a pandemic, there may be many valid reasons that families are unable to engage with schools – and it is almost never because they genuinely do not care about their child's education. Translating families' interest into engagement is difficult work, but it can impact the district's success in a whole host of ways.

There are some issues where school district decisions have significant implications for equity. Resource distribution and the setting of attendance boundaries in the past have been hotly contested topics with significant equity implications. And districts may need improved analytic capacity to ensure that their decisions are having the intended impact on equitable outcomes.

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## **Ensuring equitable distribution of resources across schools.**

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In any district with more than one school, there are decisions to be made that impact the way resources are distributed across schools. How districts address these choices strongly impacts how those schools function.

For example, in the many districts where teachers with seniority get paid more and have the ability to influence where they are placed, the highest-paid teachers frequently end up in schools serving students from the wealthiest backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> Children from the lowest-income families then end up with the newest teachers and principals, which can often lead to disruptive churn, where teachers and principals only last for a year or two before leaving a school.<sup>6</sup> Districts can review their policies on salary and teacher placement, and work with staff to ensure that the schools serving low-income children have a stable and skilled teaching staff. In states with collective bargaining, this issue likely will be negotiated with teacher unions, which will be needed as partners to provide great teaching to all children.





While teachers are key to the success of every school, additional resources also play a key role in student support. Schools serving lower-income populations may need additional counselors or support staff. The current pandemic also has exposed significant inequity in the availability of broadband resources. School districts may not have the resources to address that issue on their own, but they can play a leadership role in doing what they can and partnering with other governmental agencies to help as well.

Finally, some districts have chosen to emphasize schools that serve diverse populations based on race and income. These schools can have many advantages and provide a valuable experience to all involved – but they do not automatically do so.<sup>7</sup> Districts have learned that when schools bring together students from multiple backgrounds, intentional strategies are needed to ensure that all of them can thrive together under the same roof.

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## **Setting attendance boundaries or establish choice policies to create diversity among schools.**

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Which students are assigned to which schools has historically been a politically charged decision. Numerous Supreme Court cases – most famously *Brown v. Board of Education* – have dealt with the issue of how districts assign attendance boundaries, particularly based on race. In many districts there are no attendance boundaries that will come close to satisfying all constituencies.

Significant tensions come into play in this work. Some leaders in the community may want diverse schools that draw a broad range of students, whereas other leaders may want schools more reflective of neighborhoods within the district. These divisions do not always cleave neatly along racial or political lines. Districts also have different approaches to parent choice and offering multiple options, as opposed to assigning children to schools primarily based on where they live.

There are no easy answers in this work, but school boards will be most successful if they start by listening – and most critically, listening to historically disenfranchised communities. Good decisions are built on good information, and districts will get into trouble if they make assumptions about what the public wants. Taking time at the beginning of the process to hear from community leaders and families often will spare a great deal of heartache at the end of the process.

One important and new consideration for districts is the opportunity presented by virtual learning. When classes are on-line, school buildings need not be a limiting factor in determining who has access to educational opportunities. While parents and teachers are eager to see a safe return to in-person instruction, during the pandemic districts may have built up the capacity to deliver instruction in new modalities – capacity that then can be used to advance equity goals even when children are back in their classrooms. If districts are offering high-quality virtual instruction available regardless of geography, that may change the nature of the conversation about attendance boundaries.

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## **Support analytic capacity.**

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In all these areas, districts will make highly consequential and public decisions that then need to be implemented. Paying attention to the quality of implementation is key, as is ensuring that data is available on a continuing basis to monitor how the work is progressing. Ongoing engagement with community leaders and families plays an important role in this process as well.

Districts also provide support for school leaders in using information to improve performance and outcomes. Schools are constantly generating information – but it is not always accurate or timely, and even when it is, school leaders may not know how to use it. Supporting their ability to do that is key to the education process and a role savvy districts are already playing.

Finally, school boards would do well to telescope outward and consider how their districts fit in the context of a larger education system. National data shows that many districts – including districts serving primarily low-income students – are doing a solid job of ensuring that children receive a year’s worth of education every year.<sup>8</sup> In many districts, then, achievement problems in high school actually are the result of actions taken (or not taken) prior to kindergarten entry. Analyzing how children are doing at every point in their educational journey is key to understanding how resources can best be deployed to help them.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, school districts cannot do this work alone. Inter-district inequity is a huge issue in many states and metropolitan areas.<sup>10</sup> The divides among urban, suburban, and rural districts are significant, something each district on its own is unlikely to be able to address. But districts can engage with neighboring and nearby districts to form partnerships and build understanding, and they can work with state officials to think about broader policies that improve education where that help is most needed.

The pandemic has forced us to think differently about school resources and delivery – but it has also forced us to think differently about the meanings of geography, with restrictions on in-person work and many families spending much more time at home. Districts gain their strength from being rooted in community, and in many places the nature of community is shifting in ways that are unpredictable.

Indeed, the pandemic raises larger questions about the responsibility all of us have to each other. How are residents in one part of a school district responsible for the education of children in a different part of that district? What are their responsibilities to students in other parts of the same metropolitan area or even the rest of the state? Our current systems are based on responses to these questions that may no longer make sense in our new reality, and school districts can play a valuable role in raising these questions and helping to provide new answers.



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## Pandemic emergency resources can support local innovation.

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The economic downturn and difficulty of operating schools during the pandemic – virtually and in person – are placing significant pressure on school district budgets. Funding constraints may make it very difficult to develop and pursue new innovations. Fortunately, emergency federal resources offer flexible assistance that can help schools with basic administrative costs as well as other changes that will help to ensure that students receive the support they need. School leaders should carefully determine how they might use these federal resources consistent with an innovation strategy.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act, provided \$13.5 billion for elementary and secondary schools and an additional \$3 billion for governors that may be used for K-12 initiatives. Congress granted schools the ability to use these funds for a vast array of activities and needs. Funding may be used for nearly any educational purpose authorized by federal law – including, but not limited to, any Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and Perkins Career and Technical Act (Perkins Act) purpose.<sup>11</sup>

The CARES Act’s flexible authority for schools, connected to existing federal education laws, means that the funding may be useful source of support for innovative changes to district practices and policies that can help all students succeed during the pandemic and over the longer term. For example:



- *The ESEA’s Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant program supports investments in technology – broadband, devices, and software - that could help districts serve students at home during the pandemic, and over the long term close the “homework gap” (the inability of some students to access educational materials and tools online because they do not have home broadband connections).<sup>12</sup>*
- *The ESEA’s assessment provisions permit investments in improved ways for determining what students know and are able to do with their knowledge, including permitting investments in competency-based learning strategies.<sup>13</sup>*
- *The ESEA also supports high quality early learning, English language learner support, and curricular innovations such as using open educational resources.<sup>14</sup>*
- *The Perkins Act’s Innovation and Modernization Grant program permits investments in next generation career and technical education initiatives.<sup>15</sup>*
- *Perkins also supports investments in technology to support CTE classrooms and students. Each of these authorities, and many more, enable schools to use CARES Act funding to support local innovation.*

## CONCLUSION



Over its history, public education has adapted and thrived in the face of often enormous external challenges. The predominantly agrarian nation that existed when public schools were founded was transformed in the mid-1800s when railroads and rapid westward expansion altered the very nature of the country. That was followed by an Industrial Revolution – which led to dramatic changes in schooling to prepare students for a vastly different economy – and then again by huge population growth following World War II and the rise of the Baby Boom generation. More recently, of course, technology has completely changed workplaces, schools and daily life.

As different as these inflection periods may be, a common denominator has been the resilience and adaptability of local school leaders to stay ahead of the evolving needs of society. The COVID-19 pandemic poses the same challenge. Meeting it requires creativity, risk taking and a commitment to making the changes essential to ensuring that all children receive a quality education – whatever it takes.



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Tom devoted 40 years to serving school boards and advocating for public education. He led the National School Boards Association (NSBA) as its Executive Director and CEO for nearly eight years. Headquartered in the Washington, DC metro area, NSBA is a federation of 49 state school boards associations that advocates on behalf of the locally elected and appointed officials who govern the nation's 13,000 public school districts. Upon his retirement from NSBA in June 2020, he was named Executive Director and CEO Emeritus by the organization's Board of Directors. Before taking the helm of the national association, Tom capped more than three decades at the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) by serving as its Executive Director for 11 years, after previously leading the organization's advocacy efforts as head of its Governmental and Member Relations Department. He is Founder and Principal of Gentzel Insights LLC in Alexandria, VA and Harrisburg, PA ([www.gentzelinsights.com](http://www.gentzelinsights.com)), where he continues his work on behalf of effective school governance and nonprofit organizational leadership.

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With over two decades of legal, policy, and lobbying experience, Reg advises education leaders about the federal laws, regulations, and programs that directly impact and support efforts to expand and improve educational opportunities. Among other laws, he counsels clients about the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, and the Universal Service provisions of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. His current work focuses on federal requirements and programs related to education technology, early learning, accountability and assessment, data use, and educator professional development and preparation.

**Elliot Regenstein, Partner**, [Elliot.Regenstein@flpadvisors.com](mailto:Elliot.Regenstein@flpadvisors.com), 1.202.499.6996, Ext. 105.

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Elliot has extensive experience in state-level policy and advocacy, with a particular focus on early learning; he has also consulted with more than two dozen states on a wide range of education policy topics. Much of his work focuses on how decision-making occurs in state education and early education systems: who is responsible for which decisions, what information they have to support those decisions, and what incentives are acting on key stakeholders. He is a frequent author and speaker on topics including accountability, governance, state data systems, and the connections between early learning and K-12.

**Amy Starzynski, Founding Partner**, [Amy.Starzynski@flpadvisors.com](mailto:Amy.Starzynski@flpadvisors.com), 1.202.499.6996, Ext. 102.

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Amy has spent more than 20 years building a deep understanding of state and local education agencies, and the ways in which federal law and policy can be leveraged to improve education systems and student outcomes. She advises state and district leaders, national associations, not-for-profit and community-based organizations, accreditors, and others about federal laws and regulations, including many of the major education-related laws such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, and Higher Education Act. Amy also advises clients on issues of non-profit governance, operations, and strategic planning. Her recent work has included a focus on the transition from the No Child Left Behind Act to the Every Student Succeeds Act (the latest reauthorization of ESEA), advising on state policy change regarding district and school leader evaluation systems, assisting with virtual education program redesign, and developing multi-issue advocacy strategies for associations.



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