The COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted the daily routines of tens of millions of K–12 students and families are actively looking for solutions to continue their children’s education. This playbook consists of ideas that will help state policy leaders create opportunities for continued learning, innovative educational experiences, and policies to address the unknown challenges that lie ahead.

This is not a guide for how to reopen schools as they once existed. While the future is uncertain, there is no doubt that educators and families have viewed this experience differently, and there will almost certainly be divergent opinions on what the future of education should look like. Instead of directing resources and efforts towards realizing one vision, we believe that these differences should be embraced. Now is the time to cultivate pluralism, dynamism, and student-centered education.

The needs of each state will be different, and yes. every kid. is ready to help leaders find solutions that meet the needs of their unique circumstances.

Small learning communities to continue in-person learning

There were many good reasons to support small schools before COVID-19, and there are even more reasons to support them at a time when maintaining contact with fewer people can be a matter of life and death. Small schools mitigate viral spread and help with tracing and containment efforts if an outbreak were to occur. Perhaps even more important for children, small schools have been shown to foster trusting, caring, and attentive relationships among students and educators.

Facilitate new school authorization, whether through chartering authority, microschools, or other innovative models (see section on Innovative, Student-Centered Models below for more information on how to operationalize small school creation).

Schools-within-schools are large schools that are divided into smaller, autonomous learning communities that operate within existing school facilities. For instance, a 1,000-student high school could be turned into ten 100-student schools that utilize the same space each school day.

Staggered schedules may be necessary to make the logistics of small schools and small classes realistic. Staggering start/end times would allow students to continue to isolate from students outside of their small school environment and allow school staff to conduct orderly and safe starts to school days.

Reimagine the “when and where” of the school day to allow young adults to pursue their interests via project-based learning, internships, part-time jobs, apprenticeships, and other enriching opportunities that prepare students for life after high school.

Partnerships with community organizations like libraries, museums, Boys & Girls Clubs, 4H, and other educational organizations will be vital to ensuring there are learning opportunities and the square footage to enable smaller schools and class sizes to exist.
Innovative, student-centered models for continued learning

One of the only certainties facing the future of education is how students learn, where they learn, and how learning is delivered will be changed. District schools will look and behave differently than they did a year ago. Many families will be searching for new environments after mass closures of private schools due to reduced tuition revenue from forced closures, and they will face economic hardships of their families. Millions of families will be looking to chart a different educational path that will forever change how we think of schooling.

Provide credit for learning, wherever it occurs, through policies that allow students to earn course credit for learning opportunities that take place outside of their main school (online or in-person) at places like Boys & Girls Clubs, 4H, music lessons, after-school clubs, etc.

Learn Everywhere Microgrants enable families to access outside learning opportunities that are not free. This is especially important at a time when many non-core offerings like arts, athletics, and other extracurriculars may be cut due to budget constraints.

Open enrollment policies allow families to attend public schools other than their zoned school. Arbitrary district boundaries should not prevent students from opportunities to learn, especially at a time when quality distance learning is essential and inconsistently implemented.

Education scholarship accounts are funded accounts that families can use on school tuition, tutoring, educational therapies, curriculum, and a variety of other approved uses. ESAs allow families to create customized educations by directly funding them, not bureaucracies.

Course access/concurrent enrollment policies provide the freedom for students to enroll in a variety of courses across different schools and vendors without having to disenroll in their current, main school.

Distance learning reciprocity allows students to enroll in online courses/programs approved by other districts and states. At a time when demand is outpacing supply of quality online courses, a course that has gone through the review process in one state or district could be an option for all.

Distance learning districts are wholly new LEAs that serve students across the state, regardless of geographic residence. This effort is an innovative way to fund virtual learning and break down the geographic boundaries that prevent families from choosing online options.

Regulatory relief to allow innovative approaches

To meet the unprecedented challenges of today, schools will need regulatory freedoms. Educators should be given the benefit of the doubt and not bottlenecked by inaction from state and federal governments, or bound by rules that were designed for a world we no longer live in.

Permanently remove arbitrary seat time requirements that dictate the number of days and hours students must be in a classroom. These requirements influence funding, staffing, schedules, content delivery, and other core areas that serve as an obstacle to innovative approaches.

Move to competency-based education, which focuses on mastery of concepts and skills, regardless of time, place, and pace. This effort allows schools to rethink traditional practices like grouping children by age, organizing content by one subject area, and funding based on time.
Revisit attendance requirements, which are being disrupted. Regardless of when schools reopen, many families will likely choose to keep their children home — at least partially. Compulsory education requirements will need to consider arrangements like part-time and hybrid learning.

Provide schools and districts the ability to teach remotely. Many schools and districts have had to ask for permission to pivot to virtual instruction due to outdated rules designed to keep kids in brick-and-mortar school settings.

Provide school-level financial control to school leaders. To lead, they need the freedom and autonomy to shape key aspects of school life, including hiring, pay, curriculum, schedules, and other powers that have been stripped from school leaders over time.

Unbundle funding formulas so funds follow students to the school, course, or provider where they are learning. Almost all funding formulas envision a world where a child is in one school for a specified number of hours, days, weeks, and months. That no longer makes sense.

Support for students, families, and schools

The challenges students, families, and schools are facing are unprecedented. While schools are working to reopen and/or provide alternative models of instruction, the quality and consistency of offering varies from school to school and district to district. Parents are largely being left to pick up the slack with educational, social, and emotional needs of children. Such challenges call for new ways of supporting each institution.

Provide resources directly to families via grants, stipends, or family-directed accounts to help pay for the courses, devices, connectivity, tutoring, and other forms of learning that parents have been left to pay for.

Use existing tools to bridge the digital divide. Instead of creating even more programs for schools and families to navigate, states should utilize one of the many public and private programs aimed at getting digital devices, broadband, and other distance learning tools to families.

Ensure all schools are provided resources during these challenging times. Every school in the state — public, private, charter, magnet, etc. — were forced to close to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. When considering support to schools, ensure all schools are represented.

Protect home learning from attacks and efforts to overregulate. Opponents are using the crisis as an opportunity to attack the concept while tens of millions of families are learning from home. With an uptick in participation, attacks to weaken family rights are sure to follow.

Rethink student meal delivery by using new federal flexibility to provide grocery vouchers to families in lieu of school-based meal distribution. This method is safer, more sustainable, and prevents missed meals and chaos that ensues during times of unexpected school closures.

Emphasize student—educator interactions through synchronous learning and regular check-ins. As leaders work to provide continuity of academic offerings, it is important that they work equally as hard to foster interpersonal connections between students and educators.

Educator freedom to teach, innovate, and serve students

As schools prepare to provide new types of learning for students over the coming months, a similar approach must be taken to prepare the teaching force for this new environment.

Give teachers the freedom to share great content Emphasize “open source education” by giving educators the freedom to create and post lessons and courses online, independent of their employers.

Remove arbitrary teacher licensure requirements. Educating virtually, maintaining relationships, and frequent changes to students’ daily routines require different skills and mindsets than most traditional certification programs emphasize. Schools need flexibility to hire the best individuals.
Grant teacher certification reciprocity by recognizing licenses from other states. Education is moving from a consistent classroom to a hybrid of in-person and distance learning, and removing unnecessary restrictions that keep teachers from teaching should be a priority.

Allow subject matter experts to teach subjects they have expertise in. Deep knowledge of a subject should be as important of an indicator of ability to teach as arbitrary certification requirements or generic education degrees at a college of education.

Broaden the space in which teachers are allowed to teach. When it is safe to do so, allow teachers to offer mini-classrooms or micro-school settings to instruct and remediate students. Directly fund teachers from the state based on student enrollment in programs they offer.

Rethink professional development through teacher-directed training. Many teachers have expressed feeling unprepared to teach in today’s environment, especially in virtual settings. Professional development dollars should be shifted to educators to allow them to seek out the training they feel they need to better serve students.

State autonomy to stabilize education

Permanent removal of top-down federal regulations. In an effort to provide flexibility to state education systems in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, the U.S. Department of Education provided waivers from federal requirements surrounding standardized testing, seat time requirements, and other top-down burdens for the 2019—20 school year. Every state took advantage of this flexibility, begging the question: Why have these waivers not been made permanent? The federal requirements hinder innovation and prevent state leaders from full oversight of their education systems. State leaders should advocate for continued waivers from these regulations that have already proven to be expendable and should, ultimately, be removed from federal statutes via future federal legislation.

Gubernatorial discretion over federal funds to meet state needs. Federal education dollars should be sent to governors to use at their discretion – instead of sending education dollars through outdated federal funding formulas that are inflexible, opaque, and unnecessarily complex, especially when combating a pandemic. As CEOs of state government, governors have a clearer understanding of how the crisis is impacting students, educators, families, and communities. Governors should have the ability to advance innovations that support students quickly and be freed from lengthy appropriations processes and convoluted formulas.