Six Things States Can Do to Support Learning During Coronavirus

More than 55 million students in the United States have been impacted by school closures due to coronavirus, and many students and families have found out they won’t be returning at all this academic year. Twenty-six states have ordered or recommended buildings stay closed for the remainder of the school year.

The past month has brought much uncertainty for students, teachers, and families as they wonder how students who have missed months of instruction will advance to the next grade. Parents are wondering how to support continued learning at home, and teachers are having to rapidly adapt in-person instruction to the virtual world in which they have been thrust.

As state policymakers consider how to encourage and support learning during this unprecedented time, state think tank experts have been working together to develop a list of policy recommendations that help address these challenges, support teachers, and ease the burdens on students and families.

While every state must customize its policy response on education to meet the specific challenges faced, the following recommendations gathered from leading state think tank education policy experts are good starting points for consideration. As states consider how to fund these ideas, they should keep in mind that many could be supported by federal funding received via the CARES Act.

Solution 1: Require schools to continue providing education via distance learning.

Require that, in order to receive state funding for the remainder of the year, schools must continue to provide instruction from a distance. Leave flexibility up to schools and districts to determine how it is done. Both Arizona and Texas have already done this:

- California Policy Center: Suggested Executive Orders for California Gavin Newsom (see #6)
- Georgia Public Policy Foundation: Near-Term Proposals as Georgia Tackles COVID-19

Some state and district leaders have stopped or discouraged all distance learning for fear of violating federal equity requirements for students with special needs. States should ensure that all schools and districts are aware of the Department of Education’s March guidance that says: "To be clear, ensuring compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), † Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act should not prevent any school from offering educational programs through distance
instruction." This could be accomplished by requiring the state education agency or department of education to send a notice to each charter and district.

Remove all barriers, such as contract limitations or employment rules, that could limit learning during this unprecedented time.

- Yankee Institute: Remove all stops and implement distance learning for school children.

Solution 2: Support schools and teachers working to provide quality distance learning.

Consider a stipend for teacher professional development so that educators may access training on how to teach virtually and how to convert in-person curriculum to remote. For example, Florida appropriated a $200 stipend per teacher for up to 10,000 educators.

- Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty: How Wisconsin Should Spend It's CARES K-12 Funding (see page #2)

Reward teachers who are going above and beyond in navigating this crisis and supporting their students with creative and effective approaches. States could set up a small fund that school leaders could tap into for merit-based bonuses.

Solution 3: Waive seat time requirements and make online learning “count.”

Now is not the time to be concerned with the exact number of hours a child spends at a desk. States should waive arbitrary seat time requirements and ensure that any learning completed at home and online “counts” toward grade completion requirements.

- John Locke: North Carolina’s COVID-19 Response: K-12 Education
- Mackinac: Families need more flexibility

Solution 4: Work to address online equity issues for low-income and rural communities.

Subsidize school district purchases of hot spots and needed devices and hardware connectivity, especially for portions not covered by E-rate.

Spur broadband infrastructure progress by incentivizing companies through a tax break for meeting a certain timeline (a win-win as it could employ latent construction labor) and by removing regulatory barriers to speed up approval processes (leaving critical safety regulations in place).
Solution 5: Consider school choice mechanisms to help families.

Direct a portion of state per-pupil funding directly to families in the form of a mini Education Savings Account that can be used to purchase curriculum, books, tutoring, or other educational needs related to at-home learning. This option would give direct support to families who have been thrust into homeschooling and could benefit from additional resources for their children’s learning.

In economic recessions, private school enrollments tend to decline as some families become unable to afford tuition. Not only does this take students out of their preferred school, it places a higher burden on public schools that absorb those students. States should consider a tax credit or ability for non-itemizers to deduct donations and/or tuition payments to private schools.

Even when brick-and-mortar schools re-open, some families may not be willing to send their children back due to concerns related to health, education, or other factors. Allow the creation of high-quality online schools in states that do not have them, and allow families to enroll their children in high-quality online programs or virtual charter schools.

Solution 6: Share stories of innovation with all schools and districts.

As schools and districts innovate in response to these unique circumstances, share best practices with others across the state so that success may be replicated. For example, in California, Los Angeles Unified School District is using public broadcasting to teach students. This type of solution could be accomplished informally through any sort of policy mechanism, or states could potentially share this information with their districts via state education agency communications.
Other innovative state think tank ideas and resources

- Civitas: Coronavirus and the public schools: a way forward
- Pioneer Institute: Shifting to Online Learning in the COVID-19 Spring
- John Locke: Give Parents the Resources to Select Online Educators

For more information on these policy ideas or to connect with the authors of the above policy ideas and reports, contact Katherine Bathgate, Senior Policy Advisor at bathgate@spn.org.