



P-12 Education Priorities

Psychological science has a great deal to say about how students learn, how educators teach, and how we address the social and emotional needs of all students. APA is committed to working with policymakers to provide equitable access to a high-quality education—irrespective of a student’s socioeconomic status—train and retain a diverse educator workforce, provide critically needed mental and behavioral health services to support students social and emotional well-being and development, and ensure that schools are safe environments for all students, irrespective of race or gender identity.

APPLICATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE TO TEACHING AND LEARNING

Strengthen teacher preparation. The role of psychological science to the pre-service education and training of our nation’s teachers is critical and must be a pillar of any teacher preparation program.¹ This will help ensure that students receive a well-rounded education that incorporates all aspects of learning into academic achievement.² All efforts must also be made to ensure that the educator workforce is diverse and representative, including by enforcing Title I educator equity requirements and providing funding for states and districts to implement equitable distribution plans. To address current and future needs, teacher preparation curricula must include instruction on delivering education remotely, including increasing teachers’ efficacy on using the psychology of learning. Currently certified teachers must also be provided professional development opportunities to improve their skills in a digital learning environment. Increased funding for programs such as Title II-A, the Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants and the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program can help accomplish these goals.

Address learning needs. COVID-19 has provided an opportunity to reexamine how students are educated and how we foster a more positive school climate by focusing on all the dynamics of learning.³ Isolation, disrupted routines, and on-going uncertainty resulting from the pandemic have highlighted the importance of emotional management, relationship building, and problem-solving. Applying psychological science to teaching and learning—through social and emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching practices, and principles of motivation, resilience, and engagement⁴—will be critical to successfully addressing learning loss and closing achievement gaps, which existed even before the coronavirus. Building these skills can help students learn and cope with stress, instability, and trauma—both while distance learning and in-person settings.

SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Increase school-based mental health services. Even prior to the pandemic, shortages of mental and behavioral health professionals in schools existed across the country.⁵ With COVID-19 further exposing children to higher levels of trauma, as evidenced by increases in child suicide,⁶ these services are even more necessary, both during in-person and virtual schooling. APA strongly supports efforts to increase school psychologists, counselors, and other critical mental health professionals, and is committed to working with lawmakers to do so. However, these professionals are already among those staff being laid off or furloughed due to pandemic-related state budget constraints.⁷ Schools—especially those that

are under-resourced and serve high numbers of low-income and BIPOC students—must receive more support to both mitigate these losses, and help increase and retain diverse, culturally competent providers, both to address current and future needs. This can be accomplished through strengthening Medicaid-funded services in schools; increasing funding for Project AWARE and Title IV-A, the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program; and training more qualified professionals to fill these positions, including through more support for programs such as the Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Support students with disabilities. COVID-19 has provided a unique set of challenges for students with disabilities.⁸ In many instances, lack of access to support staff such as counselors and paraprofessionals, difficulty managing remote learning, and failures to implement individual education plans has led to regression and loss of skills. Further guidance and technical assistance must be provided to help schools continue delivering equitable education to students with unique needs. Congress must also commit to fully funding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Additionally, to ease the transition of students with disabilities into higher education settings, policies should clarify that these students can submit previous documentation of a disability and provide additional testing and diagnostics for appropriate adjustments for services and supports. Data collection efforts should also be bolstered, along with the monitoring and oversight of IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and other federal laws that provide access to education.

INVEST IN K-12 EDUCATION

Increase funding for Title I. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides federal financial assistance to schools and districts with high amounts of low-income students. To help close academic achievement gaps, Congress must fully fund Title I to make sure that all children, including some of the most vulnerable, receive equitable access to public education. Any increase in funding for Title I must also be made permanent and indexed to inflation to ensure that it is maintained in the long term. Additionally, federal policies must hold states and school districts to the “supplement not supplant” standard, so as to avoid further local disinvestment in schools serving low-income students.

NEEDS SPECIFICALLY RELATED TO ADDRESSING COVID-19 IN SCHOOLS

Safely reopen schools in an equitable manner. Reopening schools is critical for maintaining learning and addressing children’s social and emotional needs.⁹ Detailed, comprehensive federal guidance and increased funding for schools to address costs associated with reopening—including for personal protective equipment, testing, cleaning services, and ventilation systems—is critical. Teachers and other school personnel, such as counselors, psychologists, and paraprofessionals, should be among the first groups to be vaccinated. Lawmakers should also solicit input from psychologists to ascertain the effects of the pandemic on the mental health of students and staff, when determining increased needs as they return to the classroom. Although data show that transmission is low in school settings,¹⁰ schools should only reopen in a safe, equitable manner that follows the recommendations of scientists and public health experts.

Increase data collection efforts. As infection rates continue to change, increased data collection is necessary to better understand how the virus spreads in schools and which populations of students are being impacted most. Any such effort must be comprehensive and used to create long-term capacity. The inclusion of psychology in data collection efforts will expand the information collected beyond school operating status and the infection and vaccination rates of students and staff. Psychological science will be able to provide information and context about the impact of learning loss, availability of support services, numbers of students lacking access to broadband and missing from remote classes, information on shortages of teachers and other critical support staff,—such as school psychologists—and numbers of students seeking and/or not receiving necessary emotional and mental health services.

LEARNING-RELATED INFRASTRUCTURE

Expand equitable access to broadband for remote learning. Gaps in access to equitable internet connectivity and devices for low-income students in urban, rural, and tribal communities existed before the pandemic. As state budgets shrink and school districts struggle to address a range of challenges associated with both returning students to the classroom and maintaining effective remote learning options, the federal government must provide further support close this

digital divide. Currently, as many as 12 million students, nationwide, lack adequate access to the internet and/or devices,¹¹ which is impacting both their learning and emotional well-being. Students of color are disproportionately represented among this group, further exacerbating achievement gaps. With many school districts maintaining remote learning in the short-term,¹² as well as looking to retain it beyond just the pandemic,¹³ both emergency and sustainable solutions—including through the FCC's E-Rate program—are needed.

EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Promote equity and inclusion in education. Positive school climate is critical to ensuring that students of all backgrounds, including those from marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ students, students of color, or those with a disability, can receive a high-quality education. Hostile conditions in school settings can have a negative impact on students' effect on psychological well-being, social and emotional development, and academic achievement. These effects can have long-term ramifications for children's growth and advancement. Federal policies must ensure that schools are safe, healthy, and inclusive environments for all students. They should be rooted in principles of psychological science with the aim of ending bullying; ensuring that transgender students have equal protection under Title IX to participate in all school programs and activities consistent with their gender identity; restoring and strengthening protections against gender-based harassment and sexual misconduct; and eradicating the school-to-prison pipeline by limiting exposure to trauma associated with exclusionary discipline practices while implementing restorative, non-adversarial, non-punitive alternatives to disciplinary actions.¹⁴ Additionally, Civil Rights Data Collection must be increased, specifically on all education disparities related to race, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Improve assessment to better serve students. To be useful tools for measuring academic achievement, standardized tests must be reliable, valid, fair, and cover all dynamics of learning.¹⁵ Assessments must also be designed and conducted in an equitable manner that accounts for disparities in race and socioeconomic status, as well as accommodate the needs of students with disabilities and English-language learners. Due to the unprecedented nature of the previous and current school years, any testing must consider the conditions for learning (i.e., whether students had equitable access to remote learning, lost learning time, etc.), students' social and emotional needs, student participation and attendance, and family engagement. Psychological scientists are leaders in providing expertise related to student assessment protocols and identification of various learning abilities. Their counsel would be invaluable to the policymakers when developing guidance and regulations in this area.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Support early childhood education. Early childhood education programs should promote the social and emotional well-being of students and ensure standards of cultural and linguistic competency. Research shows that early childhood education is critical to laying the foundation for a child's entire education, by developing their cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and their ability to engage and relate to others.¹⁶ Furthermore, early childhood education programs improve economic, health, and social outcomes.¹⁷ However, low-income and BIPOC communities still lack access to high quality pre-school and early childhood education. Additionally, drops in public school enrollment during COVID-19, have been most magnified at the pre-K level.¹⁸ More federal investment in programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, the Child Care Development Fund, and Preschool Development Grants would help close these gaps.

ENDNOTES

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