Supporting Youth with the Most Need

For many, the pandemic has been just one of a host of barriers to a high-quality education.

Hailly T.N. Korman

Long before the pandemic, an estimated five million young people were experiencing disruptions to their education through experiences like a placement in foster care, an experience with homelessness, or incarceration.[1] Many saw multiple disruptions simultaneously. Despite these students' different circumstances, the root causes of their educational challenges are consistent: interrupted learning, barriers to enrollment, and disconnected care. The impact is also the same: inconsistent, disjointed learning experiences. As a result, they are more likely to achieve far below grade level, be excluded from postsecondary opportunities, drop out of high school, become early parents, be employed in low-wage and insecure jobs, grow increasingly reliant on the social safety net over time, and enter (or return to) the criminal justice system.[2]

Some of these student experiences—an eviction or a parent's mental health crisis—are not closely tracked. Others—foster care placement or expulsion from school—are rigorously quantified, aggregated, disaggregated, tracked, and reported. For example, we know that statistically, 54 percent of youth in foster care do not graduate from high school, 97 percent do not graduate from college, they are more likely to experience homelessness and incarceration as adults, are more likely to be under- and unemployed, and are more likely to rely on public benefits as a result. In addition, nearly all young people who experience one type of disruption also experience another, often in quick succession or even simultaneously.[3] Where data sets exist for some experiences, others go uncounted, and there is no deduplicated data set that accounts for young people who have more than one disruptive experience. The lack of reliable data makes identifying and tracking these student populations difficult.

Moreover, there are four important population overlays to be mindful of: race and ethnicity, disability, gender, and English proficiency. To be clear, these attributes are not themselves problems. However, the ways in which systems discriminate against people along these lines of difference creates disparities in both opportunities and outcomes. The populations of young people who experience disruptive experiences are disproportionately Black, brown, and Native.[4] Many more have disabilities and unmet special education needs.[5] All young people, regardless of their sexuality and gender identity, experience the harms of patriarchal attitudes and fixed concepts of gender roles.[6] And students who are learning English as a new language face additional barriers to accessing the services and programs that they might need.[7]

Each of these experiences is either created or exacerbated by material poverty. While cash cannot remove all disruption from a young person's life, it can certainly mitigate the effects of otherwise stressful, confusing, or frightening experiences.

The compounding nature of adversity results in a small number of young people who experience enormous, nearly insurmountable obstacles to success—no matter how it is defined. They are likely to have the most serious, most complex needs, and the measure of real, meaningful equity in a system is whether those students' needs are met. Right now, the systems that these young people turn to, or are sent to, are punitive in nature and far more likely to punish than to support.[8] In addition to the specific needs that a young person might have because of their unique circumstances, they have an invisible additional burden of navigating supports across fragmented systems.

Overcoming Fragmentation

Systemic fragmentation is not a new phenomenon. Many communities offer programs and services tailored to

students who have had a set of experiences or who otherwise fit into defined eligibility criteria. Some of those are public services, others are provided by community-based or faith organizations, and others are provided through the private sector, but they are almost always autonomous and diffused.

To have impact, these programs must be of high quality and available to everyone who needs them—but quality and access are not enough. Even where there are good programs with enough to go around, many young people's needs are not met.[9] In fact, the patchworked nature of services and programs can add more chaos to a young person's life.[10] Fragmentation is not a quality or access problem, nor is it the byproduct of poor service delivery. It is its own problem with its own set of solutions.

For generations, service providers have attempted to solve problems without taking into account the perspective of those experiencing the problem. Consequently, services and solutions are inevitably narrow: They focus on a small group or a single facet of life at one point in time. But, of course, no one lives their lives that way.

Local efforts to plan and coordinate more intentionally, like collective-impact efforts or cross-agency task forces, are a step in the right direction but often fall short when designed around the "average" or "typical" student—the 80 percent at the center of a bell curve. Newer approaches to designing systems for learning or policy—universal design for learning, design for accessibility, targeted universalism, and human-centered design—suggest that the right starting place is at the middle of concentric circles of layered needs. Design methods like these center the perspectives of people who are experiencing problems and give them the power to generate solutions.

Designing for students with the greatest needs does two things simultaneously: 1) it addresses the needs of students who otherwise are afterthoughts or "someone else's job," and 2) in doing so, it meaningfully advances equity for all students and solves for other less dire or less complex needs. For example, if a data system can aggregate multiple incomplete transcripts in real time for a student who has changed schools several times during an academic year, it can also support all students' credit accounting and course placement needs.

COVID-19 as Added Disruptor

While COVID-19 left virtually no student in America unaffected, the disruption for some was far more severe. Not only were learning experiences delayed, interrupted, or unfinished, but as many as three million K-12 students encountered fundamental barriers to attending school regularly at all.[11] Students' pathways to college were also meaningfully disrupted.

Some went missing from classrooms—meaning that they are interested and likely to return to school as soon as they can but have missed significant portions of the instructional time that their peers received. Although many students had intermittent challenges with distance learning, students living in group homes or shelters and those changing foster care placements felt this change much more acutely. Similarly, students who needed additional support to access learning—including young people with IEPs who were attending school from adult prisons or unaccompanied and new-arrival immigrant students who may not have legal status and were learning English as a new language—found themselves thwarted by a lack of special education and language supports, despite their desire to be engaged in school.[12]

For others, their transition away from education may be permanent. Many of these are older students who left high school or college pathways to take on new or additional work responsibilities because of pressing economic needs for themselves and their families. These students' circumstances have likely changed in ways that make returning to school feel like an impossible dream; they may now be primary wage earners for their families or have children themselves.

State and local education systems are more frayed and fragile than ever, and the temptation to revert to how things were before the pandemic will be strong. It is critical that community, education, and policy leaders at all levels resist the pull to return to an approach to their work that focuses on programs, funding streams, and eligibility categories. Instead, state leaders should begin by asking who is missing and why—and then work to design solutions that meet real needs for their communities.

Principles for Coherence

Systems change does not happen overnight. However, four key principles for designing coherent systems that meet the needs of students whose education has been disrupted shift mind-sets and chart a course of action. State boards of education can apply these principles and so can anyone responsible for day-to-day decisions of case management on up to big, strategic choices. The more consistently and broadly these principles are used, the greater the impact will be.

Continuity of people prioritizes adding the smallest number of new adults to a young person's life and then maintains those relationships over the longest possible period. For many students, it is not the case that they fall through the cracks and are served by no one; they are served by everyone and receive too little from too many. State boards could consider ways to incentivize both school staffing plans and partnerships with community-based organizations that prioritize and reward the cultivation and sustaining of adult-child relationships over time.

Continuity of information gives adults in a young person's life access to the right information at the right time to support good decision making. Access to accurate, real-time data in order to help students navigate multiple systems that may be giving them conflicting guidance or setting competing expectations is essential. State boards could promote investment in infrastructure upgrades to improve quality, detail, and rigor in data collection, with a focus on student populations furthest from opportunity who may be served by multiple public agencies simultaneously.

Someone owns the management of collaboration and coordination while prioritizing coherence. It is a full-time job and cannot be relegated to those who administer stand-alone programs or agencies. State boards could develop guidelines for schools on resourcing and recruitment strategies for positions like this and could consider developing a cohort approach to these roles across school districts to enable individuals to share best practices. At the state level, findings from these cohorts' work could be shared with other states—and the field more broadly.

Student voice requires leaders across agencies and hierarchies to listen responsively and creatively to the students who are experiencing problems and marshal resources to meet those needs. State boards—including student members of those boards—classroom teachers, and everyone in between can engage in active listening. Such reimagined leadership does not just cultivate feelings of empowerment among students but actually enables leaders to make important decisions. If not in place, state boards should advocate for selection of student members to amplify their perspective. If they already have student members, boards should ensure that they center existing student members' voice in formal proceedings, including by giving them full voting power.
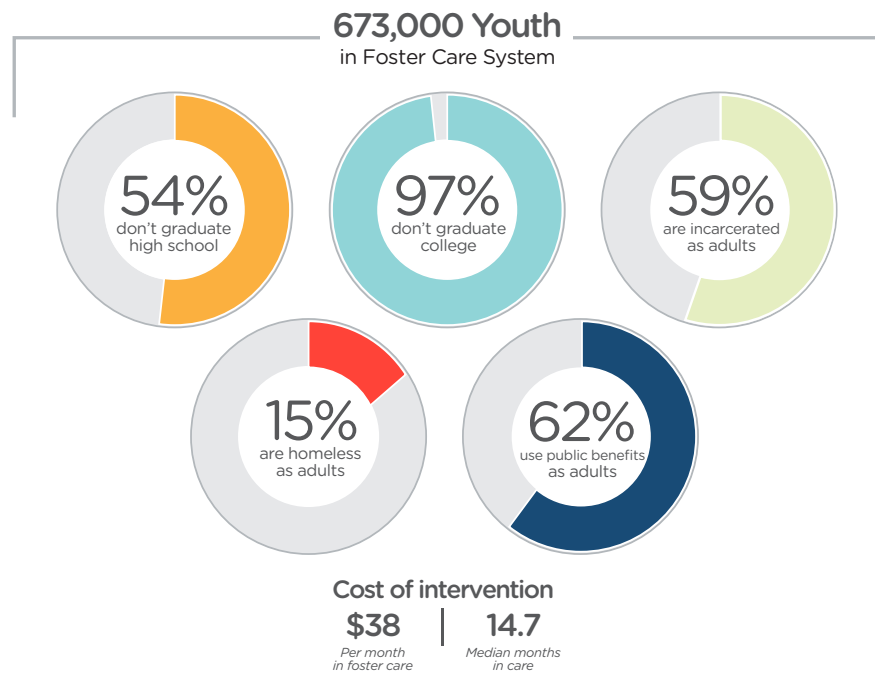
The Cost of "Back to Normal"

Fragmented systems cause stress, unhappiness, fear, corrosion of relationships, and destabilization of communities. They are also tremendously expensive.[13] Bellwether Education Partners' financial modeling estimates that a system with effective first-intervention strategies for students who experience disruptions return $600,000 per person over their lifetime to communities. Under the pricey status quo, jail cells, lost wages, lost tax revenue from under- and unemployment, and stress on the limited social safety net are pure costs—not investments. As one input to the model, we calculated the costs of supporting youth in foster care under present systems who, as previously noted, are statistically more likely to be under- and unemployed and rely on public benefits as a result of a range of experiences. The same analysis for youth incarceration, homelessness, and pregnancy accounted for the duplications across populations and found that the total current direct and indirect cost of the status quo is $1.7 trillion. In a more coherent system, services that work would cost an estimated $204 billion. The $1.5 trillion (over the lifetime of the people currently being served by key social service agencies) could be redirected toward improved services and greater investment in overall community well-being (figure 1). Bellwether terms it the value of harms avoided.

There is reason for optimism if states and school districts use American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act funds thoughtfully. With a historic $123 billion for K-12 and $39 billion for higher education, ARP funds can exponentially increase

Fragmented systems are also tremendously expensive.

Figure 1. Calculating adult outcomes and costs associated with foster care placement

673,000 Youth
in Foster Care System

54%
don't graduate
high school

97%
don't graduate
college

59%
are incarcerated
as adults

15%
are homeless
as adults

62%
use public benefits
as adults

Cost of intervention

$38
*Per month
in foster care*

14.7
*Median months
in care*

Source: Kelly Robson, Hailly T.N. Korman, and Rebecca Daulton, "The Value of Harms Avoided: Calculating the Cost of a Fragmented System of Social Services" (Washington, DC: Bellwether Education Partners, February 19, 2021).

ARP funds provide an enormous opportunity to build systems that are more resilient and more coherent.

the resources available to address long-standing, complex needs like homelessness, food insecurity, and workforce development. "Back to normal" cannot be the goal. ARP funds provide an enormous opportunity to build systems that are more resilient and more coherent. It is an opportunity that should not be squandered. States should seize this moment by activating reimagined approaches to leadership, partnering with people closest to the problems, focusing on providing guidance and resources, and setting expectations for public agencies, contractors, and local partners through strong planning and support for implementation. State leaders can accomplish these aims in three key ways:

As a general rule, people who are experiencing unmet needs should be approached as partners in leadership early and deeply, as they are best positioned to help to define and solve the problems. Where that work is best done locally because of geographic or demographic variation, states should consult with, and provide guidance for, strong community partnerships as they continue to refine their allocations of federal ARP funds, in keeping with the law's mandates.

With the foundation of partnership established, state leaders should create opportunities for unified spending plans that span a range of public services and avoid fragmentation. States can allow blended funding to meet complex needs, avoiding rigid eligibility criteria and considering every possible opportunity to use available funding for direct-cash transfers. States should also encourage increased investments in startup costs for the kinds of durable supports that were already long overdue, including data infrastructure for real-time sharing of student records, on-campus laundromats, and food banks for students experiencing unmet basic needs. In addition, investments in hotlines, clearinghouses, and case management infrastructure to provide needed 1:1 services for students and families who currently carry the burden of navigating across fragmented systems on their own are critical.

Finally, accountability is key. States should set clear expectations for local public agencies and partner organizations that are contracting to deliver services by establishing strong evaluation criteria at the outset and ensuring that strategies for continuous improvement are in place. Mechanisms of accountability will allow states to exercise meaningful oversight and quickly identify best practices to replicate, share, and scale.

Reimagining Student Support

The pandemic has laid bare many of the long-standing inequities in the lives of far too many

students. For young people in need of the coherent support that our systems are not designed to provide, the scope and complexity of challenges exacerbated by COVID-19 are profound. The status quo approach of one-time fragmented supports, parceled out by state officials operating in silos, not only will not meet the needs of students who experience disruptions to their education but often make the work of getting their needs met harder.

Instead, state officials should make coordination and collaboration a key element of their work, even if that has not historically been the way that things are done. This effort starts with proactively communicating across agency boundaries, sharing plans, asking for input, convening cross-agency partnerships, and being open to compromise. For example, as states are planning to disperse education dollars to districts, counties are making plans for discretionary recovery funds that will be allocated to the social service agencies likely to be serving the very same students. If leaders work together and share information about their highest-need student populations, the service gaps that might exist, and best practices around delivering services in a coherent way, they can magnify their spending impact.

State leaders should also prioritize seeking expert advice from people who are experiencing these unmet needs and weigh those perspectives with the same seriousness as all other expert counsel. That might mean asking a student board member to share an example of a time when an adult did not have the information that they needed to provide good support. It could also mean inviting advocacy groups comprising young people who have had disrupted education pathways, such as youth who were or are incarcerated or who have experienced homelessness, to propose solutions they believe would have worked for them.

The measure of real, meaningful equity in a system is whether and how the most complex, difficult, and challenging needs are met. Right now, most of the systems that these young people turn to (or are sent to), do not meet needs; they punish failure. ARP funds are a once-in-a-lifetime chance to create more resilient systems that can effectively support students who experience disruptions through a new focus on coherence. This reimagined approach will give states an opportunity to do exactly what thoughtful stewards of public funds ought to be doing: use limited resources to meaningfully improve students' lives. ∎

[1] Kelly Robson and Hailly T.N. Korman, "Continuity Counts: Coordinated Education Systems for Students in Transition" (Washington, DC: Bellwether Education Partners, April 25, 2018).

[2] See, e.g., Jason Amos, "The Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Average High School Dropout Has a Negative Net Fiscal Contribution to Society of $5,200, Says New Report" (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, October 26, 2009); Chris Mai and Ram Subramanian, "The Price of Prisons: Examining State Spending Trends, 2010–2015" (Brooklyn, NY: Vera Institute of Justice, May 2017); Kate Bartell Nowak, "Educating Children in Foster Care: State Legislation, 2008–2012" (Washington, DC: National Conference of State Legislatures, May 2013); ACSD, "School Dropouts: Home and School Effects," Research Brief 1, no. 9 (2003); Texas Comprehensive Center, "Teenage Parents and Their Educational Attainment" (Austin, TX: SEDL, 2011); National Conference of State Legislatures, "Postcard: Teen Pregnancy Affects Graduation Rates," June 17, 2013, http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/teen-pregnancy-affects-graduation-rates-postcard.aspx.

[3] See, e.g., Kelly Robson, Hailly T.N. Korman, and Rebecca Daulton, "The Value of Harms Avoided: Calculating the Cost of a Fragmented System of Social Services" (Washington, DC: Bellwether Education Partners, February 19, 2021).

[4] See, e.g., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, "Racial Disproportionality and Disparity in Child Welfare," Issue Brief (November 2016), https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/racial_disproportionality.pdf.

[5] See, e.g., National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center, "Youth with Special Education Needs in Justice Settings" fact sheet (Washington, DC: AIR, December 2014), https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED594440.pdf.

[6] See, e.g., J. G. Kosciw et al., The 2019 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth in Our Nation's Schools (New York: GLSEN, 2020).

[7] See, e.g., Glenn Flores, Milagros Abreu, and Sandra C. Tomany-Korman, "Limited English Proficiency, Primary Language at Home, and Disparities in Children's Health Care: How Language Barriers Are Measured Matters," Public Health Reports 120, no. 4 (July-Aug 2005): 418–30, doi: 10.1177/003335490512000409.

[8] Brandon Lewis and Hailly T. N. Korman, "Investing in Healthy Transitions to Adulthood: The Role of Schools" (Washington, DC: Bellwether Education Partners, April 26, 2021).

[9] Justin Trinidad, Kelly Robson, and Hailly T. N. Korman, "Building a True Safety Net: A Case Study of El Dorado County's Youth and Family Commission" (Washington, DC: Bellwether Education Partners, July 2020).

[10] "Rigged" is a choose-your-own-adventure style game designed and developed by Bellwether Education Partners to help leaders in education and social service agencies walk in the shoes of the students they serve. See https://thegameis-rigged.org/.

[11] Hailly T.N. Korman, Bonnie O'Keefe, and Matt Repka, "Missing in the Margins: Estimating the Scale of the COVID-19 Attendance Crisis" (Washington, DC: Bellwether Education Partners, October 21, 2020).

[12] Jess Arnold, "Students in DC Jail File Lawsuit against DCPS," WUSA9, April 15, 2021; Bianca Vázquez Toness and Jenna Russell, "A Year of Grit and Despair: For One Class of Immigrant Students, the Pandemic Threatens to Upend Their Educational Dreams," Boston Globe, March 26, 2021.

[13] Robson, Korman, and Daulton, "The Value of Harms Avoided."

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