

The Pandemic, Change in Federal Policy, and the Increasing Need to Transform Student/Learning Supports*

COVID-19's pandemic disrupted almost every aspect of daily life. As schools closed their doors, many students – particularly those in under-resourced communities – fell behind academically and socially. When students returned, schools were confronted with an increased proportion of learning, behavior, and emotional problems. And despite resources from federal, state, and local agencies (e.g., providing support for tutoring, high-quality curricula, summer and other extended learning time), the results have been disappointing.

According to the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP),

- reading scores for both 4th and 8th graders declined by 2 points compared to 2022. This represents a continued downward trend since 2017 and follows a 3-point drop in 2022. 40% of 4th graders and about one-third of 8th graders are reading below the NAEP Basic level. The lowest-performing students are now at their worst levels since 1992.
- k–12 enrollment dropped from 50.8 million in 2019 to 49.5 million in 2023.

A widely reported related concern is the general increase in chronic absenteeism rates, a problem especially among English learners, students with disabilities, homeless students, and those in foster care.

COVID-19 disproportionately affected students with unique learning needs. English learners, students with disabilities, and homeless youth had higher rates of absenteeism, disrupted services, and setbacks. Our analysis points to a dysfunctional system that served these students badly before the pandemic hit and remains inadequate. ... Too many students whose learning was most severely interrupted during the pandemic still aren't getting the support they need to recover (CRPE, 2024).

As to social and emotional development, the pandemic's impact has been widely discussed (especially with respect to mental health), and there has been increased attention to social emotional learning (see appendix).

In 2025, the federal government made a multitude of policy changes affecting the nature and scope of public education. These include

- expiration of federal pandemic relief funding
- restructuring and downsizing of the U.S. Department of Education and a push toward state control, charter schools, voucher programs, and faith-based education
- attacks on efforts to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion and threats to protections and support of students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students of color
- cuts to education related research and data collection

Given all that has happened, it is evident that this is a time of major changes in public education, especially in schools where students are not doing well.

As always, most public schools will have to work with sparse funding. Nevertheless, a significant amount is and will continue to be expended to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems. From our Center's perspective, increased attention to how these resources are used and their limited impact provides an opportunity for schools to move toward better ways to address barriers to learning and teaching.

*The material in this document was produced by Josephine Thompson as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2025.

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Transforming Student/Learning Supports

Over the last decade, increasing numbers of districts and schools have adopted/adapted a multi-tiered support system (MTSS). The investments in some states have been in the millions. For example, California has allocated 95 million to date to establish its version of MTSS statewide.

Over the last five years, a variety of concerns have arisen across the country about how well MTSS is meeting teachers' needs for student/learning supports. Some concerns have pointed to implementation problems. While acknowledging that implementation can be difficult, our Center's concern has stresses that MTSS is a too limited framework. Because of its limitations, it is not equipped to end the fragmentation and marginalization that have long characterized the ways schools address barriers to learning and teaching and the attempts to reengage disconnected students.

We suggest that it is essential to realize that more is involved in building a truly comprehensive system of student/learning supports than the emphasis on a continuum of interventions. That is, while a full continuum is essential, it is just one facet of a comprehensive intervention system. The other essential facet involves a categorical set of about six learning support domains that function across each level of the continuum.

It is time to evolve MTSS into an intervention framework that guides transformation of student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching. We encourage folks to browse our recent report:

>*Building on MTSS to Enhance How Schools Address Barriers to Learning*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/BuildMTSS.pdf>

and our guide for improving student/learning supports

>*Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>

This is not a time to circle the wagons; it is time to do as much as possible to bolster how schools play a critical role in enhancing equity of opportunity for succeeding at school and beyond. Adelman & Taylor, 2025

Appendix

Social and Emotional Development and Peer Connections

Schools are not just places for academic instruction. Most educators agree that fostering students' social and emotional development is essential for academic success, mental health, and lifelong learning. They also recognize that experiences related to schooling can have a negative impact on social and emotional well-being.

Peer connections are critical to social and emotional development. During the pandemic students were cut off in many ways from their peers and that had a negative impact, as the following research studies suggest.

>The aim was “to determine whether there is any conspicuous difference in the social adaptation skills of five-year-old preschool children who did not attend any social skills intervention program besides the ongoing curriculum but continued their education process in different environments (face-to-face/online) because of the pandemic. Included in the study were 296 children enrolled in independent kindergartens, who were within the five-year-old age group and were from similar socioeconomic families. Among them, 159 attended face-to-face and 137 attended online classes. At the beginning of their formal education, the Social Adaptation Skills Scale (SASS) was administered to the children in both groups as a pre-test. At the end of the trimester, the SASS was repeated as a post-test. A significant difference was found between the face-to-face education group and the online education group, in favor of the former, in terms of the social adaptation sub-factor of the SASS. Furthermore, the social incompatibility sub-factor scores of the face-to-face education group were significantly lower than those of the children in the online education group” (Günindi, 2022).

>“An intervention study investigating the peer influence effect of cooperative learning on the development of social skills was conducted with 558 students (Mage = 8.66; 49,3% female) of 26 classes. Over the course of four weeks Cooperative Learning was implemented daily in intervention classes to determine the effects of peer influence as well as additional effects of Cooperative Learning on the development of social skills. The results suggest that students with low social skills can benefit from Cooperative Learning if they are taught in highly socially skilled classes. The article discusses possibilities to enrich Cooperative Learning to benefit all students (Hank & Huber. 2024).

In general, peer connections are seen as playing a role in enhancing abilities related to

- communication (e.g., listening, turn-taking)
- conflict resolution
- cooperation and teamwork
- empathy and perspective-taking
- emotional regulation and response
- resilience
- identity
- feelings of competence and connectedness
- a sense of fairness, justice, and responsibility
- moral and ethical thinking and action

Peers also can play a significant role in providing social and emotional support and a sense of stability during transitions and other difficult situations (e.g., starting school, family changes, interpersonal conflicts, personal problems).

Advocacy for schools to pursue social and emotional development in recent years has come from those who have developed a curricular approach to social emotional learning (see <https://casel.org/>). And our Center has emphasized that there are natural opportunities each day at schools to promote such learning. Currently, some folks have argued that SEL distracts from academic rigor and focuses on values that should be taught at home.

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