

FUND EVERYTHING

EMERGENCY
EDUCATION
INVESTMENTS IN A
NATIONAL CRISIS

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Introduction

As we embark on the first full year of schooling during this global pandemic, one thing is clear: America's K–12 education system is in crisis. It is time to bring an emergency mindset to education funding by doing everything in our power to not let the 2020-2021 school year lead to irreversible learning losses for a whole generation of students.

We do not know when the pandemic will end, but we do know that when it ends, we will need an education system much stronger and more just than before. Reaching that goal means making education our highest national priority. By making a series of smart, bold investments in the coming months, we can ensure that we have a more flexible, equitable and student-centered system of education when we emerge from this crisis.

The starting point in any discussion of emergency educational investments is a recognition that, despite the heroic efforts of America's educators, our existing educational institutions have struggled under the weight of this new mission of continuing schooling without school buildings. Large numbers of children never showed up for online classes when buildings were closed down in March. Those who did often learned only a fraction of what they would have inside school classrooms. Our nation's already high levels of educational inequality have reached new heights. More of the same for a full academic year would cause unthinkable harm.

Unfortunately, while many countries have successfully controlled the spread of Covid-19, the United States continues to struggle. This has left our school leaders with a series of difficult choices, and no easy answers, as they approach the new school year.

Teachers are worried about their safety if they return to a school building. Parents—either overwhelmed by working from home while educating their children or disappointed by the quality of virtual instruction their children received—desperately want something different this year. Students feel like they aren't getting the education they need right now and dread a return to this new normal. This is particularly challenging for special education students who are not able to access appropriate in-person instruction, for English Language Learner students who rely on an in-person environment to master the language and for students who were already far behind grade level before the crisis.

This is a national emergency that deserves a nationwide emergency response. By maximizing opportunities to learn across schools, small learning environments and homes, we can ensure a more adaptable system that better meets families' needs. However, there is a risk that

local school boards will respond out of fear of a loss of funds with a push against giving options for families. By providing additional emergency federal funding directly to towns and cities—along with state policies that hold public schools harmless from lost enrollment this year—we can help steer clear of a destructive zero-sum dynamic while dramatically expanding access to new types of learning. We believe a “fund everything” approach will provide the best shot at keeping our country’s children both educated and safe during this crisis.

In this brief, we aim to outline those areas in need of support and suggest concrete ways in which local, state and federal funding can help ensure that learning continues. Our goal should be to meet the immediate needs of students while also using this temporary emergency funding to pave the way forward to a better future. As FDR remarked in his 1935 State of the Union address:

“The attempt to make a distinction between recovery and reform is a narrowly conceived effort to substitute the appearance of reality for reality itself. When a man is convalescing from illness, wisdom dictates not only cure of the symptoms but also removal of their cause.”

Principles of support and modes of schooling

While we must move quickly to bring new educational support to students, it is important to be clear about the principles that should guide these investments and the modes of schooling we are aiming to reach.

1. ***Listen to students and their families.*** With so much about the education experience changing every day, top-down plans will often be overtaken by new facts on the ground. The only way to ensure that we are being responsive to student and family needs is to build as many choices as possible directly into our funding plans. There needs to be an emphasis on respecting the dignity and wishes of those students and families who are heard the least in our education debates.
2. ***Reach students wherever they are.*** There is no typical place of learning anymore. In response to this emergency, American students have been scattered across a variety of settings—in-person

schools, online schools, microschools, learning pods and home-schooling—and our response must aim to reach all of these students with a variety of emergency funding responses.

3. **Support experimentation, flexibility and research.** The education landscape stands on the precipice of something incredibly disruptive but also potentially transformative. We need to move quickly, try new things and accept that the only certainty right now is that failing to adapt will mean repeating the mistakes of the spring. At the same time, we need to invest in data collection and research to understand what is working and what is not. Finally, we need to be ready to keep changing based on what we are learning from these different approaches.

These three principles should be applied across the three modes of learning in which students and families now increasingly find themselves.

1. **Schools.** While in-person schooling has typically been the default for the vast majority of American schoolchildren, it is not clear whether a majority of students will actually spend time inside a school this fall. Therefore, it is important to both provide new funding for schools to offer in-person, small group instruction for the kids who need it most, while also providing the resources needed to give every student the opportunity to access a high-quality online learning track.
2. **Microschools and pods.** Large indoor gatherings represent a real risk as the nation struggles to contain Covid-19. That’s why many families who feel their kids won’t do well in an online school are turning to microschools (small schools serving 20 to 40 children) and learning pods (where one teacher serves 4 to 10 children) to allow for in-person learning without the risks of large groups. Ensuring equity of opportunity for these options will require new kinds of targeted aid outside of traditional school funding mechanisms.
3. **Homeschooling.** Most parents now find themselves much more involved in the day-to-day education of their children even when they are enrolled in a school. Some are choosing to go further and take on the full role of teacher themselves through homeschooling. This takes the form of either fully implementing a program on their own or guiding them with support from a virtual learning offering. As with microschools and pods, ensuring this is an opportunity for all families means rethinking the kind of financial support we provide.

What all children will need, no matter which learning environment they find themselves in this school year, is a device of their own that stays with them as they change modes of education and free, high-speed internet at home. That is the foundational investment upon which all the other investments must build. To support the use of these devices and services across all three modes of learning, it is important both to provide public investment in these devices and to make sure that families get to use these publicly supported devices in any learning environment they choose.

These emergency investments won't be cheap, but if we fail to keep learning going over the next year, it will set back an entire generation of students and do permanent harm to our economy, our democracy and our social fabric. Education has to come first.

Schools: Opening up a system of choices for all

The shift to distance learning in the spring demonstrated the difficulty in adapting to this new environment. Now, schools must attempt to keep learning going for an entire school year. This will require new funding, but it will also require a more flexible approach to collaboration across school types. We must open up all the options we can for kids by breaking through the old dividing lines of education policy debates to enroll students across all of the different schools in their communities.

If their local district school is only providing in-person learning this year and parents have safety concerns about this option, they should be able to send their child to an online program offered by a different school within their district or in another district. Similarly, if parents feel their children can only have their needs met through a small group, in-person learning environment, they should have the option to transfer into a school that can provide one safely.

To maximize the adaptability of our system of schools in an unpredictable year, our emergency investments should focus on maximizing these choices across all school types—district, charter, parochial and private—by making it possible to enroll in any school where there are open seats for new students, either physically or virtually.

Course choice should also be supported, as families may need to assemble a comprehensive offering that includes elements of what is de-

livered locally along with classes and content delivered by other entities, including college classes and career and technical classes for high school students. To maximize the number of options, these virtual course offerings should be made available no matter the location of the student or provider.

Policy recommendations:

- All district, charter and private schools should receive emergency funding to support safely running in-person schooling this school year if they are able to do so and to provide a flexible, high-quality online schooling option for all students. The Council of Chief State School Officers estimates the cost of emergency funding between \$158 billion and \$245 billion over the next year.
- Families should be able to easily move into or out of these in-person and online options as their health circumstances and risk factors change throughout the year.
- Families should have the option to enroll their student in an online district school program outside of their neighborhood boundaries or in an online charter school or private school program anywhere in the country. There should not be any unnecessary restrictions to these online transfers, such as state enrollment caps, and the flexibility of these options should be protected. Jurisdictional waivers at the state level and interstate agreements between governors should be pursued to maximize the number of choices.
- Families should also receive funding to enroll their child in an in-person school in a neighboring district or in a charter school or private school if their district school does not offer an in-person option.
- Families up to 200 percent of the poverty line should receive a direct payment of \$2,000 per child to pay for supplemental educational materials, tutoring, technology and other learning expenses. This should build upon the payments—\$1,200 per adult and \$500 per child—in the CARES Act.

Microschools and pods: Support small group instruction for those who need it the most

Most students will learn more in person than online but having an in-person learning option is particularly important for students with special needs, English language learners and those who have fallen several grade levels behind. In those communities where we can't safely bring students together in traditional school buildings, it is crucial to provide support for small group instruction opportunities through microschoools or learning pods.

There has been a huge spike in interest over the summer in these options, with many parents moving quickly to organize their own pods with neighbors and friends by hiring a teacher who will teach 4 to 10 children over the course of the year. By dramatically restricting the number of students they will come into contact with, this approach can limit the spread of the virus while still allowing the benefits of in-person instruction. The challenge now is how to make access to these small group, in-person opportunities more equitable.

The childcare sector provides a model for an equitable approach to microschoools and pods. We have seen how public investments in home-based family, friend and neighbor childcare options have allowed a diverse range of entrepreneurs—particularly women of color—to create and run home-based centers that serve less affluent families in their communities.

By providing families with public resources that can be pooled to create pods, or used as tuition at microschoools, we can help ensure that the children that need this kind of safe in-person environment the most are able to get it. These supports can be structured to both provide a full-time alternative to traditional school options or as a part-time supplement to existing online programs offered by schools.

Policy recommendations:

- Families up to 400 percent of the poverty line should receive a credit of \$8,000 per child that can be pooled with up to five other families to create a learning pod or microschoool and pay for a teacher's salary and related expenses.

- Districts should be given the budgetary flexibility to offer their own learning pods and families should have the option to direct their per child credit to those districts to support that option.
- Families up to 200 percent of the poverty line should receive a direct payment of \$2,000 per child to pay for supplemental educational materials, tutoring, technology and other learning expenses.
- Governors should use their federal Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funds to provide grants that support the creation of new microschools and pods by nonprofit community-based organizations to support the growth of these options. State departments of education should also make use of funding from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSERF) to help expand these offerings.
- Tax credits should be made available to businesses that allow their unused facilities to be repurposed for pods or microschools.
- Families should be allowed to use money in 529 plans to supplement these small group learning expenses. States should directly contribute to lower-income families' 529 accounts and provide a mechanism for the philanthropic community to do so as well.

Homeschooling: Making sure it is an option for everyone

The safest in-person learning opportunity for students this year is also one of the oldest: homeschooling. Parents are already finding themselves playing a much larger role in guiding their children's learning and it is expected that historic numbers will take the extra step this year in fully taking on the role of teacher.

As with microschools and pods, this raises questions about equity. But we should not underestimate the interest and ability of communities of color to lead the way forward with these efforts and the way in which public support would remove barriers to doing so. Increasing

homeschooling could help ease the huge pressures this year on local public schools while also providing more opportunities to create in-person environments that help children learn.

Policy recommendations:

- Families up to 400 percent of the poverty line should receive a credit of \$8,000 per child that can be used to cover the time they spend as their child’s teacher in a homeschooling environment.
- Families up to 200 percent of the poverty line should receive a direct payment of \$2,000 per child to pay for supplemental educational materials, tutoring, technology and other learning expenses.
- Families should be allowed to use money in 529 plans to supplement homeschooling expenses. States should directly contribute to lower-income families’ 529 accounts and provide a mechanism for the philanthropic community to do so as well.

An all-hands-on-deck moment

While schooling has traditionally been funded through a mix of local property taxes and state revenue, with the federal government paying only about 10 percent of total costs, this unprecedented national emergency demands a national response. A greater level of federal support across these three modes of learning is needed. At the same time, states, cities and towns will have to put education first to ensure that an increase in federal support isn’t undermined by state and local cuts.

By focusing on student need and a commitment to more equitable access to a wide variety of learning options, we can help ensure not only that we keep learning going for students this year, but provide the foundation for a stronger and more adaptable education system for decades to come.

About 50CAN

50CAN: The 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now is a locally led, nationally supported nonprofit education advocacy organization committed to a high-quality education for all kids, regardless of their address.

www.50can.org

