



Coalition for  
the Future  
of Education



CENTER FOR  
EDUCATIONAL  
IMPROVEMENT (CEI)

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3/30/2022

Dear Secretary Cardona,

Congratulations on your accomplishments in 2021! We were so excited to see your Youth Listening Tours. It is so essential to listen to youth right now.

Attached you will find our latest recommendations to the US Department of Education. Our work in mental health and school leadership has convinced us that right now many schools simply need to “Press the Pause” button. Of course we are not suggesting that schools close, but rather, instead of continuing to struggle as they move forward, we provide some funding for innovations that include short waivers of academic proficiency requirements according to some specified requirements. And a pause to listen to students and communities, to try innovations that will be a source of inspiration to many. To be effective, authorizing agencies would need to set careful parameters for this – we have discussed this with our Coalition Advisory Committee and have consensus regarding these specifications – many of which we describe in the attached paper.

We believe **now is a critical time for the activities** we recommend, and without a lot of hoopla, that these programs could easily be implemented during the next few months. Summer is such a critical time for the recommendations we are making.

**We would like to meet with someone at the USDOE to further explain our ideas.** Also we have one very specific question – could schools and districts use ESSER and pandemic response funds for the types of pilots we are recommending?

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Melissa Patschke, EdD, Director, Coalition for the Future of Education



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## Background on the Coalition for the Future of Education

The [Coalition for the Future of Education](#) includes 29 educational leaders and high school/college youth. Last year 100 organizations and individuals signed a letter the Coalition developed that included eight specific recommendations to the U.S. Department of Education.

Dr. Melissa Patschke, the Director of the Coalition, is also principal of Upper Providence Elementary School in Royersford, PA, an adjunct professor in educational leadership, and member of regional and national committees supporting principals.

Dr. Christine Mason, the Executive Director of CEI, is an educational psychologist with experience as a researcher, author, and educational consultant. She is also cohost of the series, *Cultivating Resilience a Whole Community Approach for Alleviating Trauma in Schools*, which includes interviews with over 50 school psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, other mental health providers, school administrators, international educational leaders, and students.

Paul Liabenow, the President of CEI, is also the Executive Director of MEMPSA (the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principal's Association).

Christine Mason, Paul Liabenow, and Melissa Patschke are co-authors of *Visioning Onward: A Guide for ALL Schools* (2020). Dr. Mason is also lead author on five related books on mindfulness, alleviating trauma, cultivating happiness, and compassionate school practices (2020-2022).



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## Press the Pause Button

3/17/2022

### Executive Summary

Many students, teachers, and other school staff around the country are suffering right now. Since the return to in-person schooling in the fall of 2021, many schools appear to be trapped in cycles of chaos. We have all experienced trauma during the past two years; in light of this trauma and our sometimes less than satisfactory in-person experiences in schools this past six months, what are the next steps for schools?

Recently, Secretary of Education Cardano (2022) addressed many of the concerns that we have. He not only conducted a [Youth Listening Tour](#), but in a January 27, 2022 spelled out a vision that has much in common with our recommendations for schools, saying “This is our moment to truly reimagine education.”

The Center for Educational Improvement in conjunction with the Coalition for the Future of Education, which we established in 2021, has *sought schools and communities where students and staff are thriving*.

Through our work with the Collaborative to Alleviate Childhood Trauma, we have uncovered many examples of excellence, where students and staff have found strategies to bolster not only the education of students, but the mental health and well-being of students and staff. In these schools, educators did not attempt to “return to normal,” but rather listened to students, addressed student interests, and strengthened social-emotional learning supports.

To move forward, we recognize that not every school community is ready to implement radically different strategies and practices. Yet, if ever we were to engage in major educational reforms, this is likely the right time. How should schools proceed? We believe that one of the

most profound - and practical - ways to advance is to first take time to dialogue, to **listen** to youth and staff, and to plan and implement pilots.

In this paper, we present a proposal for how to guide this course of action in ways that can be customized to ultimately meet the needs of local communities and advance the education, learning, and well-being of each and every student, in every school, in every district in the United States and around the world.

## Press the Pause Button

As we emerge from the darker days of COVID, what can educators do to ensure the health and vitality of our schools and our students? As we leave masks behind, how can we leverage what we have learned? Is there a way to advance not just a “return to normal,” but rather *a way to step forward* to a better, brighter future for schools, our students, our staff, and our communities?

### Is a “Better and Brighter Future” necessary?

We have covered a lot of ground in the past two years, even as we may have felt frozen in time and space. Certainly, many around the world have an increased understanding about how to deal with global disruption, fight a pandemic, fast track medical innovations, and reinvent work. Families have learned about how to share small spaces at kitchen tables and bedrooms were transformed to office spaces and classrooms. Educators at all levels – administrators, teachers, classroom aides, and support staff – have gained new knowledge and skills not only about remote instruction, but also about the primary importance of wellbeing – physical and mental – and of helping students who felt isolated and missed social interactions with peers while they were learning from home. Given this new knowledge, if schools were simply to “return to the pre-COVID normal,” it might negate the significant insights that were delivered to our school-house doors via special COVID delivery.

In a [speech on January 27, 2022](#) Secretary of Education Cardona said

And I want to be very clear: as educators and leaders, we're either closing educational opportunity gaps or making them worse with the decisions we make in the coming months and years.

Our students' success is at stake. Not just the students we serve today, but also those who have yet to be born.

Our country's strength is at stake.

Our status in the world is at stake.

Our task is not only to improve our education system from where it was before the pandemic, but also to take bolder action to elevate it to lead the world.

And he continued,

Our schools must offer increased access to mental health supports for students, wrap-around programs, meaningful and authentic parent and family engagement, and interventions for those students who felt the impact of the pandemic more bluntly than others. . .

Our schools must also embed mental health supports into their day-to-day operations in new and innovative ways. Every child must have access to a mental health professional – whether through their school or through a community-based organization – and districts should use ARP funding now to hire these critical staff and create more partnerships.

### **A Walk Down Memory Lane**

While Cardona is urging schools to move forward, many still want to return to life and to schools pre-COVID. What was it really like pre-COVID? What is the best way to characterize pre-COVID education? Oh, the nostalgia. Remember kindergarten students gathered in a small, intimate circle for storytime? Or students joyfully shouting while watching their favorite teams, crowded together in community stadiums? Life was so active as students moved freely around hallways and corridors, and even ventured out on field trips to nearby aquariums and museums.

However, pre-COVID, social and economic disparities, and the fractured mental health and well-being of students, were still realities hidden beneath the outward activity.

Before COVID-19 and racial injustice unleashed (or revealed) a public mental health crisis, youth mental health and well-being were already on a sharp decline. Youth suicide, now the second leading cause of death for individuals ages ten to twenty-four, has spiked in the past decade, with a 56 percent increase in teen suicides between 2005 and 2017 (Abbott et al., 2019).

Even before COVID began, anxiety, depression, bullying, school shootings and other acts of violence in schools were major concerns. In the first 46 weeks of 2019, there were 45 incidents of school shootings. That's close to an average of one school shooting a week (Wolfe & Walker, 2019).

While we may long for a return to normal, we would be remiss to claim that the situation in our schools before COVID was simply wonderful. Not every school prospered pre-COVID. And while we cannot deny the weight COVID has had on the mental health and well-being of students, the utter upheaval of the education system as we knew it also caused teachers and administration to explore new methods, embrace new avenues, and discover ways to tackle needs that they had never even considered. This opened up doors to reach out to students in fresh ways and to implement increasingly necessary mental health education and prevention strategies. Yet, as we continue to examine the impact of our individual and collective experiences, including not only the challenges that arose, but also the solutions we uncovered, we strive to step forward in educating our students in the world as we know it now.

## Learning From Students

**Student Voice.** When educators spoke to students in 2020, we heard about the screen fatigue, and about how so many students missed their friends – they missed the in-person social interactions as they adapted to the equivalent of being under house arrest. We also became aware of factors that made a huge difference to students – things like office hours to chat with their teachers, group breakout rooms to talk to peers, and even such innovations as reinventing Wednesdays so that students could experience asynchronous learning and a mid-week break from structured zoom time ([Artman, 2021](#)).

In 2020 and 2021, the Center for Educational Improvement conducted our own virtual listening tour, listening to over 100 youth. We focused largely on how they were doing “in the moment” ([Becker & Chen, 2021](#)). Listening, we heard that some students gained self-motivation and discipline skills when they were given a flexible schedule during 2020. When asked questions regarding their overall opinions of education in America, many students responded that they valued being asked their opinions and hoped there would be further opportunities for their voices to be heard as administrators continue to adjust class instruction and requirements. Students also hoped for greater integration of hands-on learning and mindfulness exercises to guide them through and alleviate stress and anxiety.

**Engaging Students and Building Resilience.** As we listened to youth, we also talked with educators, psychologists, social workers, and mental health professionals. Many educators for the first time are realizing the value of social emotional learning. Because of the major disruptions to learning over the past two years, and especially with the impact on those who are most marginalized, social emotional learning is even more critical to facilitate student healing from trauma, enhance social connections, and deepen their learning ([Hamilton & Gross, 2021](#)). As social emotional learning is incorporated into the classroom and the students' social interactions, this helps them direct their energy toward (instead of away from) engaging in learning and building resilience. Several research studies support the finding that “students retain more information from learning experiences when their cognitive challenges in classrooms are connected to social interactions” ([Jones & Khan, 2017](#)).

## Re-examining and Shifting Protocol

As educators stepped onto new turf during COVID, they were forced to re-examine their lesson plans, their protocols, and their practices. Under pressure in 2020 with tremendous fear around the safety of in-person schooling, we perfected how to set up lights, webcams, and action to guide instruction via laptops. While remote learning was certainly not a panacea, teachers also uncovered some features that will forever change instruction. Prior preparation and access to resources was a driving factor in how schools performed. A private school, like the Riverdale Country School in New York City, fared better because they invested a month's time with infrastructure design and collaboration between administrators, teachers, the school's technology team, students and parents. Similarly, in Florida, the Broward County school district

had been trying to set up its technology program for several years before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the teachers were already trained in managing classes online ([Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020](#)).

On the other hand, schools that did not have access to resources fared much more poorly. According to a 2021 [McKinsey report](#), teachers working in high-poverty schools found virtual classes to be especially ineffective and expressed concerns that remote learning further intensified existing inequalities. The report used findings from across the globe, and concluded that the school shutdowns may have put students up to six months behind expected academic milestones. These reported delays were greater in math, and lower-income communities faced greater challenges. Yet, when we consider “educational delays” we are on new ground. There are many educational strategies to help accelerate student learning, so it is critical that we don’t operate from the presumption that students who are behind will stay behind.

## **Chaos**

As students return to in-person, we have also seen tremendous chaos. Students have struggled to adjust to being back in schools, confined by time constraints that are wildly different from the previous two years of isolated, in-home learning. We also see that teachers were demoralized – they fled education as never before. Many are worried about the state of our nation and the world. There are many indicators of a world turned upside down, a world where the old playbook no longer seems to work and where educators are having to meet continually changing formats and new expectations such as managing hybrid learning. When we see news reports and hear repeatedly that it has “been a tough week – tougher now than during remote learning in 2020,” something seems seriously amiss.

When we consider renewing education, there are so many options and, so many ways to head. Going back – backwards—to what was, is only one option among many.

## **Even in the Darkest of Times: Pockets of Excellence**

There are shining examples of schools, students, staff, parents, and communities who have weathered the COVID storm with great equanimity, grace, and success. What can we glean from these exemplars that could contribute to making all of our classrooms feel more authentic and connected in these challenging times?

Here are a few examples:

- At South Shore PreK-8 school in Seattle, [Principal Justin Hendrickson](#) is leading the charge to mitigate trauma and foster racial resilience with [many programs](#) implemented for greater small group participation and community involvement.
- In Michigan, MEMSPA (the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association) is participating with Michigan Virtual and Blue Cross Blue Shield to bring a [program to reduce teen suicide](#) to teachers and other school staff

- Jesse Kohler and the Campaign for Trauma Informed Policy and Practice (CTIPP) are bringing trauma-informed practices to schools and districts and advocating for policy change. This includes resources such as their Early Childhood Toolkit and their support for mental health and well-being in childcare settings.
- Jeff Donald, the Mindfulness Coordinator in Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland has implemented mindfulness and restorative practices with over 1,400 teachers in 168 schools, reducing traditional punitive discipline procedures, and leading to improved academic achievement and a reduction in school suspensions, office referrals, and behavioral incidences. (Mason, et al., 2021, p. 254).
- Viviana Barajas, a teacher and certified Nurtured Heart consultant in Merced, CA helped teens connect in meaningful ways through the “Greatness Project.”
- Healing Indigenous Lives conducted a series of town hall meetings with Tribal youth ages 14-24 to increase youth advocacy and a sense of safety, belonging, and healing from trauma.
- YouthLead, an international initiative providing resources and sponsoring youth initiatives continues to expand its reach with such projects as youth mentorships, digital activism, and youth summits.
- Youth.Gov provides innovative resources, internships, scholarships, jobs, and leadership opportunities to empower young people to make a difference in their lives and the world around them.

See the Appendix for additional examples.

### **What Can Be Done**

Despite the excellence, many schools, staff, and youth seem to be barely treading water. Many schools and districts have never heard of YouthLead, Youth.Gov, or places to turn for guidance and support. Is there anything to be learned from communities that seem to be doing better? And if so, how do we get that information to others? And then what?

Informing is one thing; action is something else. Today, it is even difficult to understand the facts as we see alternative facts, and if not different facts, wildly different interpretations.

Where might we turn?

### **The Work of the Coalition for the Future of Education**

Last year, the Coalition for the Future of Education recommended eight steps for education, beginning with listening circles where we could learn from youth, knowing that they deserve the opportunity to help create their futures. We saw a need to help students find a sense of meaning and purpose, even as we asked for equitable access to resources, assurance that educators understand how to alleviate trauma, enhanced teacher and administrator

preparation, a focus on individual and collective self-care, and the development of sustainable and coherent solutions.

We also sense a need for deep, honest, authentic dialogues – dialogues designed with a focus on empathy, compassion, and a vision for moving beyond what may be obsolete ways of “conducting” education.

The vision of the Coalition is of a world

that leans in with heart and compassion for self, others, and our environment, where people and institutions are dedicated to expanding conscious acts of caring, building resiliency, and advancing learning, equity, and justice.

We also envision:

safe and equitable schools with education that serves as the foundation for our humanity; it is flexible and empowering. There is room for adventure, students drive their own learning, learning and self-understanding are celebrated, and communities support their individual and collective self-care, and well-being.

Since last year, the Coalition for the Future of Education, has continued its efforts, sharing our recommendations with the Biden administration, and spinning off an initiative that included a series of podcasts, all focused on addressing trauma ([Cultivating Resilience: A Whole Community Approach for Alleviating Trauma in Schools](#)).

### **Are Schools Ready to Act?**

Last year, the Coalition recommended listening, dialogue, and action. And we were not alone. Secretary Cardona toured the country, listening to youth. And other organizations have been listening and dialoguing. In a different time, the next step would be a “call to action.” Instead, given the extent of chaos and lack of vision and insight, we are recommending “a pause.”

As Kevin Hawkins and Amy Burke (2022) indicate, “in our experience of introducing mindful listening and speaking and structured dialogues, these provide teachers and schools with something quite tangible and practical even beyond the benefits of taking a pause. These are very practical techniques that teachers often go on to use in faculty meetings and also in the classroom and they contribute to those changes in school culture that we are all seeking.”

In some ways, some schools just are not yet ready to act. For one thing, the actions that are needed are no ordinary “small steps” along a path to change. There is too much happening. We cannot ask teachers to “take on one more thing.” So forget the small steps.

## Taking a Pause...

We sense a need for deep, honest, authentic communication— dialogues designed with a focus on empathy, compassion, and a vision for moving beyond what may be obsolete ways of “conducting” education. We urge schools and districts to:

- Hold student-staff-parent-community dialogues, facilitated in ways that really help people communicate more mindfully and listen more deeply.
- Ensure that these dialogues are seen as integral part of the work of a teacher and not added “as one more thing,” instead finding ways to release time, such as taking something off an educator's plate so that these dialogues do not add to the burden.
- Establish a system of academic proficiency waivers so that the dialogues can occur without the attempt of business as usual.
- Structure dialogues in an open way, giving parties the opportunity to see a road ahead that very well may be different than the past, opening a way for radical change.
- Use skillful leaders who can help mediate differences that arise.
- Consider how to try something new, sharing information from some of the promising practices that can help advance understanding of alternative paths.
- Realize that in stretching capacity and vision, errors will occur. This is the nature of change.

## Some Pilots

Now, “pausing” may not work for everyone, for all schools, right now. Within a school or a community, it might work well for small clusters of student leaders, staff, and community members to meet, vision, and plan together. Pilots such as these might work well when initially kept small, with ground rules, and perhaps coaching from a group dedicated to moving forward. Consider excusing a group of students and staff from (a part of) the regular curriculum with the expectation that they will meet, dialogue, and pursue the possibility of other options. This might be followed by an extended opportunity to implement the pilots that are planned in these sessions.

Because of the significant need for more resources to support student mental health, we are also advocating for inclusion of funding for additional mental health supports and services in schools that are part of the pilot program.

To help ensure the efficacy of the pilots, we recommend working with a group of coaches who could collaborate in establishing parameters and then working directly with schools and districts in the implementation of the dialogue and pilots.

## **What We Hope to Obtain with “Pressing the Pause Button”**

We need to find a way to “ease” into change, relieving some of the pressure and tension. The best solutions for moving forward will come from a sense of well-being and visions for what could be – visions that are not hampered by the constraints of what has been.

It could be that the way forward is developing positive memories for students right now. It could be that students would be more meaningfully engaged with education if we truly understood at a deep level what it is they want. This starts by listening to them and to one another. This is a pivotal moment, and fortunately, much of the groundwork has already been done. Many educational thought leaders have advanced ideas for the future of education – it might be schools without walls, more project-based learning, more entrepreneurial instruction, more opportunities for teachers to facilitate a movement away from “grade-level” instruction, more individualized pathways, or any number of paths forward. There are many educational leaders who could lead discussions about these options – through virtual dialogues across communities, with students, staff, and communities pausing to listen, reflect, and customize solutions for their own communities.

### **This Isn’t Rocket Science**

What we are asking for will not take expensive laboratories with gold-standard experiments. It will not take an infusion of research dollars or highly classified operations. However, the benefits could be substantial and full of impact for our schools, students, communities, and the future of our world. We envision the following gains:

- A decrease in the current chaos and pressure.
- An increase in teachers who will continue teaching instead of leaving education.
- An increase in student and teacher well-being.
- After a pause, accelerated academic gains and students better prepared for their futures.
- A practical and meaningful way forward.

The way forward may necessitate pausing, reflecting, dialoguing, and then creating new paths. There might even be many, varying paths. And perhaps not every school will experience a need to pause, reflect, and implement a few trials. However, each of these many paths might be better than continuing to encounter enormous boulders, with ever-steeper inclines, and the sheer exhaustion that comes from the equivalent of obstacle upon obstacle, the exhaustion that comes with trying to trudge ahead, as we stumble in the darkness. Rather, let’s stop and pause so that we can regain our bearings, and only then become the trail blazers that are so needed right now.

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## Appendix

Here are some other examples of excellence

- The Career Technical Center in Wexford-Missaukee ISD, led by its Director Timothy Rigling, provides 14 programs for students who are enthusiastically pursuing learning that is addressing their individual interests, including programs in such diverse areas as agriscience and natural resources, building business and marketing, and metal fabrication and welding.
- Principal Stacy Bachelder-Giles at Bridgewater Hebron Village School in New Hampshire and a Childhood-Trauma Learning Fellow with the New England Mental Health Technology Transfer Center has implemented heart centered compassionate learning practices and supporting the mental health of staff and students in her school.
- Through the HEART Collective, Dr. Martha Staeheli and her team at Yale University's New England Mental Health Technology Transfer Center are enhancing collaboration between schools and community mental health centers as they promote a holistic approach to children's mental health.