Chapter 13
Leaning into the Leapfrog Moment: Redesigning American Schools in a Post-Pandemic World

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Abstract Post-pandemic, the United States education system is challenged by substantial declines in student achievement as indicated by declining National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, heightening teacher dissatisfaction, and decreases in teachers' commitment to the teaching profession. All pose threats to the longevity of schools and schooling. Additionally, while American schools have received an influx of billions of dollars through Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds to assist in remedying instructional loss, many of the initiatives these funds are being used for are temporary and provisional. These initiatives also miss the silver lining and leapfrog moment that the pandemic has offered American schooling. In this chapter, we present student and teacher outcomes in the United States from the past two years during the pandemic. We then detail how American schools have the opportunity to embrace a new norm for teaching and learning, which we call the Next Education Workforce. Finally, we discuss the initial findings of teachers' participation in these models, which hold implications for what teaching and learning could be in a post-pandemic world.

Introduction

Both because of the COVID-19 pandemic and having been exacerbated by the pandemic, the United States has faced a variety of challenges. Two years ago, as many American adults transitioned to work-from-home in the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, many American children also transitioned to school-from-home. 7 out of every ten public schools transitioned to distance learning formats in Spring 2020 (NCES, 2022). At this time, 50.8 million pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade students were enrolled in the American public school system (Sparks, 2022).

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Slowly, more schools began to re-open for in-person instruction or provided hybrid instruction opportunities. In 2020–2021, the following school year, 4 out of ten public schools were offering both remote and hybrid instructional opportunities (NCES, 2022). Yet only 49.4 million students were enrolled in American public schools (Sparks, 2022). At the end of the 2021–2022 school year, 3 out of ten public schools were offering remote instruction and only 1 out of every ten public schools were offering hybrid instruction. Although public school enrollment gained an additional 100,000 students during this school year, the overall decline in enrollment since the onset of the pandemic may demonstrate that some parents are choosing other learning options for their children, such as homeschooling or private schools (Sparks, 2022). In part, this may be because the pandemic "substantially altered parents' perceptions of the quality of schooling their children might experience" (Musaddiq et al., 2022, p. 1).

As remote and hybrid options began to fade, schools gradually returned to in-person instruction. By the end of the 2020–21 school year, 62% of public schools in the United States were offering in-person instruction. And, by the end of the 2021–22 school year, 98% of public schools were offering in-person instruction (NCES, 2022). To make this transition, school systems and educators endured harrowing narratives and trudged through poor working conditions to make teaching and learning happen every day. School systems had to pay increasing and unprecedented attention to their role in maintaining public health, which sparked debates on masking, the safest ways to approach school re-opening, and increased access to vaccines for all ages and what, if any, their accompanying mandates should be.

In this chapter, we present a timeline of the United States' educational response to COVID-19, beginning in March 2020. We discuss the revelation of "cracks in the normal"—longstanding inequities that have always existed in education—that were exacerbated by the pandemic. To illustrate this, we present recent findings related to student and teacher outcomes that signal the instability of our current educational system. Finally, we describe how the pandemic has, indeed, offered a "leapfrog moment" (Vegas & Winthrop, 2020) and detail a systems-approach to post-pandemic recovery: team-based staffing models. We present the models' initial outcomes and its promises as a mechanism for increasing student achievement and teacher satisfaction.

Reviewing the Timeline

To understand the rapid shifts in schools due to COVID-19 in the United States, this timeline illustrates some of the key moments starting in March 2020 (CDC, n.d.; NCES, 2022; OESE, n.d.) (Table 13.1):

Table 13.1 Timeline of key policy responses to COVID in the United States

March 11, 2020	The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic
March 13, 2020	President Trump's administration declared the virus a nationwide emergency
March 15, 2020	Public schools began to close their doors, including new York City public schools, which is the largest public school district in the United States with 1.1 million students. Many schools remained physically closed and transitioned to delivering remote instruction for the remainder of the 2019–2020 school year
March 27, 2020	U.S. congress sets aside $13.2 billion of the coronavirus aid relief, and economic security (CARES) act for the elementary and secondary school emergency relief fund (ESSER), now known as ESSER I. these funds were used to purchase personal protective equipment, cleaning materials, and other supplies necessary to continue school operations. ESSER funds can also be used to support student learning and teachers
July 2020	Centers for disease control (CDC) releases resources to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the upcoming 2020–2021 school year
December 2020	After clinical trials demonstrate vaccine efficacy, those in high-risk environments (e.g., healthcare settings) begin to receive their first vaccine doses
December 27, 2020	An additional $54.3 billion is earmarked for ESSER II from the coronavirus response and relief supplemental appropriations (CRRSA) act
March 2, 2021	President Biden's administration directs all states to make pre-K-12 teachers, school staff, and childcare workers priority vaccine recipients
March 11, 2021	$122 billion is set aside from the American rescue plan (ARP) act for elementary and secondary school emergency relief
April 6, 2021	CDC estimates that nearly 80% of pre-K-12 employees have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine
May–June 2021	62% of public schools in the United States were offering in-person instruction at the end of the 2020–2021 school year
Spring 2022	Nearly all schools (98%) offered full-time, in-person instruction by June 2022

Exacerbating Cracks in the Normal

The pandemic brought on novel challenges for education, such as a rapid, system-wide shifts to remote instruction. But it also exacerbated "cracks in the normal" (Basile, 2020)—the looming inequities in school as "we've always done it." Recent data indicate that post-pandemic student achievement has declined, and historically underserved groups of students faced—and continue to face—disproportionate disparities in educational access and outcomes. Similarly, news outlet headlines continue to proclaim a "post-pandemic teacher exodus" due to unprecedented burnout and job dissatisfaction that the teaching profession has been reporting in the decade prior (e.g., Merrimack College, 2022). Both student and educator outcomes were troubling pre-pandemic, but the pandemic revealed "cracks" that can no longer be ignored.

Student Outcomes

Two years into the pandemic, researchers are beginning to uncover the impacts of instructional loss on student outcomes. Using Fall 2021 data from the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) growth assessment, researchers analyzed 5.4 million students in grades 3–8 (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Findings revealed that reading scores were 0.09–0.18 standard deviations (SDs) lower compared to their peers in the same grade in fall 2019, and math scores were 0.20–0.27 standard deviations lower (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). These findings are especially concerning when compared to effects on student learning after other major disasters. After Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, Louisiana, math scores dropped 0.17 deviations for those evacuee students (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). This same achievement data revealed "cracks" of students from underserved backgrounds: low-poverty schools grew by 20% (0.20 SDs) in math and 15% (0.13 SDs) in reading during the 2020–21 school year (Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

The National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) also revealed the impacts of instructional loss, which The New York Times characterized as "erasing 20 years of progress" (Mervosh, 2022). For the first time since the NAEP assessment was administered in 1973, the United States saw a decrease in mathematics scores; similarly, reading scores faced their first drop since 1990. As of 2022, 41% of American fourth graders are proficient in mathematics and 35% in reading; for eighth graders, 35% are proficient in both math and reading; and for twelfth graders, 24% are proficient in math and 37% are proficient in reading (Nation's Report Card, 2022).

Finally, we would be remiss not to mention the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the socio-emotional wellbeing of American students. One national youth survey revealed that nearly half of students reported feeling depressed, anxious, or stressed (Chu & Lake, 2021). In 2021, the Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey (ABES) revealed that more than one in three (37.1%) high school students had poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. For students of color, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, and other underserved groups of students, the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing educational disparities. Additionally, these students had limited access to mental health supports (OCR, 2022). To mitigate the academic and socio-emotional impacts of the pandemic on instructional loss, schools will need systemic solutions.

Teacher Outcomes

In addition to significant decreases in student achievement, the teacher workforce has faced significant strain as well. National polls continue to uncover alarming findings about the state of the teaching profession in the United States. A survey administered to National Education Association members revealed that more than

half (55%) of its members planned to leave education sooner than planned because of the COVID-19 pandemic (NEA, 2022). Other surveys, like the Merrimack College Teacher Survey, echo these sentiments - finding that almost half (44%) of teachers plan to leave the profession in two years (Merrimack College, 2022). 90% of NEA members report feeling burned out (NEA, 2022), and only 12% of educators are very satisfied with their jobs (Merrimack College, 2022). While these findings might reflect the combined effect of factors that teachers trudged through to deliver instruction during the pandemic, teacher satisfaction with their jobs was still less than ideal even before the pandemic. Between 1984–2012, the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher found that teacher satisfaction with their jobs fluctuated between 33% and 64%. These findings do give weight to the headline's proclamation of the impending teacher exodus.

Identifying the Cracks

For decades, the one-teacher, one-classroom model has been the prevailing structure of American schooling. American teachers are often found in classrooms — the sole trained individual responsible for facilitating teaching and learning — and working in isolation from their colleagues except for lunchtime conversations (Labaree, 2004; Lortie, 1975). We have considered these isolated conditions "normal" in American education (Basile et al., 2022). During the pandemic, teachers found themselves teaching in steeper isolated conditions—at home—and lost the limited moments they had in schools to interact and collaborate with colleagues.

While the gambit of programming has erupted with the support of federal relief funding and in response to the pandemic, these are short-term solutions. Previously stagnant—and now, declining—student achievement is not the sole reason that the education system needs long-term solutions, but it is one indicator that the way schooling has traditionally been conducted is ineffective. Another indicator is teacher satisfaction and teachers' commitment to the profession, which is also declining rapidly. No dosage of student tutoring will completely reverse the impacts of the pandemic on student achievement, and no amount of mentoring will keep the number of teachers schools need to operate in the classroom. The way the United States conducts teaching and learning will need to change before anything else can improve (Mehta & Fine, 2019) —and the pandemic has offered us the impetus to move toward this and to do it faster.

Actualizing our Leapfrog Moment

Some school systems' pandemic response was to simply double-down on sustaining the normative ways of teaching and learning: one teacher in their island-like classroom, isolated from their colleagues and given the responsibility of moving their

group of students through required curriculum, in lock-step, while simultaneously meeting the learning, socio-emotional, and mental needs of their students (Basile et al., 2022; Labaree, 2004; Lortie, 1975). Other school systems, however, embraced the leapfrog moment. They accepted the opportunity and challenge of rethinking their systems, how teachers worked together, and how learning experiences were delivered to students. These school systems undertook the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights proclamation that the pandemic is:

> …a rare moment as a country to take stock and to begin the hard work of building our schools back better and stronger—with the resolve necessary to ensure that our nation's schools are defined not by disparities but by equity and opportunity for all students (US Department of Education. Office of Civil Rights, 2021, p. iii).

While we have seen a flurry of unsustainable short-term solutions, we have also seen an array of promising long-term, systemic shifts that are equipped to remedy students' instructional loss and increase teacher satisfaction and commitment to the profession.

As we reflect on what happened during the pandemic, we can see several factors that catalyzed new ways of thinking about schooling. First, remote learning. Where the technological infrastructure was available, teachers moved quickly and connected with learners online. However, even as technology connected learners and educators together, both still became isolated. Teachers gripped that learners wouldn't—or couldn't—turn on their web cameras, or that learners were not engaging with lessons. For those without the technological infrastructure, remote learning took the form of paper packets sent home with the hope that learners would engage with worksheets or other curricular activities. Other countries, such as Mexico, faced similar challenges with sustained student engagement and lack of technological infrastructure (see chapter by Cardenas et al., 2023 in this book).

Parents and caregivers were expected to engage in their children's education in a way they were not prepared for, nor did they have the time for. Many parents and caregivers were simultaneously working in the home, or for essential workers, working multiple shifts as others became sick or abandoned their positions. Additionally, many students were "lost" during remote instruction for various personal or family reasons, and schools had few ways to hold students and families accountable for attendance. Finally, a haze of fear and frustration developed and darkened as the pandemic continued. The politics and misinformation were discomforting and placed schools and teachers in the crosshairs of politicians and health experts, making decisions in the moment about a virus we knew little about. The discourse about masks, social distancing, cleaning procedures, and use of materials brought on angst and disruption to normal instructional practices. As a result of these conglomerating factors, we saw less collaboration—not only between teachers, but between schools and families—more isolation, and less student interaction. If the American educational system is to recover, the importance and urgency of building back a better system is not to be underestimated.

Building the Next Education Workforce

During the pandemic, the United States education system faced a myriad of staffing challenges across the nation. School systems experienced staffing shortages caused by teacher absences, unexpected resignations, a shortage of substitutes, and teacher burnout on a scale unlike ever before (Long, 2022; NEA, 2022). But even before the pandemic, education was facing these issues. Questions about the vitality of the teaching profession in the context of these swelling teacher shortages continue to linger.

Five years ago, Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC) started asking different questions. Across the United States, the typical role of a teacher's college is to, of course, prepare teachers. The typical teacher's college might ask questions about the role of teacher preparation in remedying the teacher shortage, but MLFTC asked questions beyond the teacher shortage. Instead, MLFTC asked questions about the design of schools and the education workforce itself. The first was: "what would happen if we stopped building our schools around the one-teacher, one-classroom model?" The responses to that question from a variety of stakeholders have proven to be unending. Changing the modus operandi of schooling—one teacher in one classroom—is a fundamental shift that changes how we think about teaching, learning, and educators' roles and responsibilities in the workforce.

The hypothesis is that if school systems can move away from the one-teacher, one-classroom model, there are countless opportunities to rethink how teaching and learning happens. School systems can start to re-cement the cracks that were exacerbated by the pandemic. They can start to deepen and personalize learning, provide whole child support, create a more diverse workforce, stop the isolation of teachers, integrate more fully with others with differentiated expertise, and provide more educator autonomy. The premise is that no teacher would or should work in a classroom by themselves. They would take advantage of their individual strengths and work in teams that include professional educators, community educators, paraeducators, teacher candidates and residents, and others who would share a larger roster of students (Fig. 13.1).

The Promises of Teacher Collaboration and Teams

One recent systematic review of teacher collaboration revealed a variety of the model's benefits. Vangrieken et al. (2015) found that some of the benefits included improved performance for students, more motivated teachers, a decreased workload, reduced personal isolation, and the positive change of school climates. Given this, increasing teacher collaboration seems to be one way to bring recovery to a multitude of post-pandemic problems. Ultimately, while teacher collaboration is important, the pandemic has given us a chance to think beyond teacher
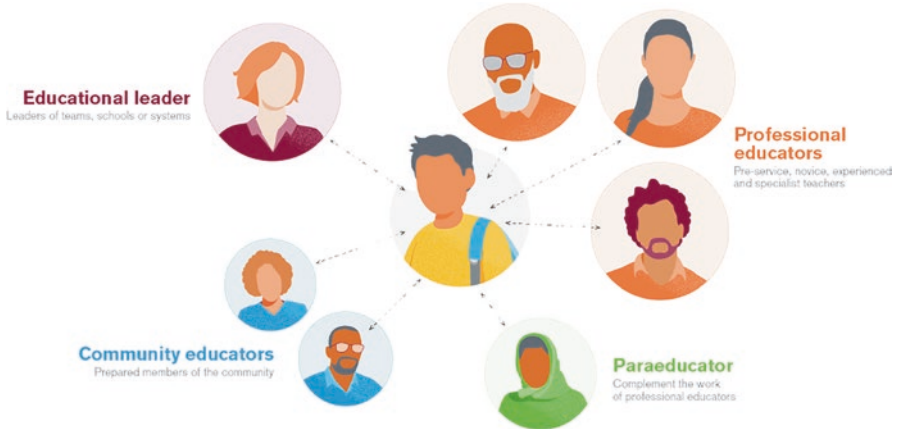
Fig. 13.1 Different roles in Next Education Workforce models

collaboration as an activity, to collaboration as a cultural and structural phenomenon in schools and school systems (Azorín & Fullan, 2022).

Beyond Collaboration and toward Differentiated Roles and Responsibilities in Education

One flawed, underlying assumption in the American education system is that teachers are widgets—that is, the effectiveness of the American teacher is relatively the same from classroom to classroom (Weisberg et al., 2009). This current assumption drives the organizing principle of schools: one teacher in their one classroom. Yet we ought to be considerate of the variety of backgrounds and experiences American teachers have, especially with the rise of alternative preparation programs.

Take, for instance, these examples of two American teachers. Teacher A is a third-grade educator. She has been teaching for fifteen years and was prepared through a traditional teacher preparation program. She is a highly effective reading teacher and an "okay" science teacher. Teacher B, who formerly worked in a biotech lab, is a fourth-year teacher who was prepared through an alternative licensure program. He is an "okay" third grade reading teacher but a stellar third-grade science teacher. The current design of the education workforce—the one-teacher, one-classroom model—expects both Teacher A and Teacher B to achieve the same student outcomes. Yet, Teacher B simply may not have the pedagogical knowledge and skill to execute effective reading lessons, and Teacher A may not have the content knowledge to execute effective science lessons. If Teacher A and Teacher B worked as a team, however, their expertise and the needs of the students would drive their teaching responsibilities - rather than being driven by the fact that they are both third-grade teachers. Perhaps they would switch classes for those subjects and share

responsibility for the outcomes of all the third-grade students in their school. Or perhaps both decide to teach reading and science but mix their rosters and re-group students based on their strengths and needs. While collaboration is still essential and may assist in helping to grow Teacher A and Teacher B's knowledge and skill, role differentiation enables teachers to focus their time and energy on what they are experts in.

A Case Study in Building the Next Education Workforce: Mesa Public Schools

With approximately 64,000 students across 90 schools, Mesa Public Schools (MPS) is the largest school district in Arizona. Like other school systems across the United States, MPS faced common challenges during the 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years, including staffing shortages due to the Omicron COVID-19 variant (Long, 2022). Prior to the pandemic, the superintendent of MPS had committed to moving at least 50% of her schools to team-based models. This meant that administrators and school leaders had to provide professional learning and other supports quickly. Even during the challenging days and months of the pandemic, this work continued to grow. Despite the obstacles, educators in the Next Education Workforce in MPS continued to embrace working as a team to deliver deeper and personalized learning to students.

The first year, one elementary school started with one team. By the end of the second year, all grade levels at that school were working in teams. By the third year, given the disparities they were seeing among students, the school created teams of educators to serve mixed-age and grade-levels of students. Teachers essentially worked in teams throughout the day, in-person or remote, and delivered instruction in large and small groups depending on what students needed. These teachers were given more collective autonomy to change schedules and collaborate, change roles and responsibilities based on expertise, and develop structures for their learning environments that were more conducive to serving all students.

One high school started with one ninth grade team of educators who shared a roster of 150 students. By the second year, the entire ninth grade was divided into 6 teams. These high school teams included academic content expertise but also expertise for career exploration, multilingual learners, and students with exceptional needs. Teams included professional educators, paraeducators, and community educators who were already in the building. Now, however, their roles and responsibilities have been re-configured to serve students in new ways. Here again, schedules changed to allow for longer blocks of time to serve students' needs, focus on interdisciplinary project- and problem-based learning, and provided protected time for teams to plan.

Researching these models has been critical to their development. ASU partnered with Johns Hopkins University's Institute for Education Policy (JHU) in March

2022, to administer a survey to all 3264 teachers in Mesa Public Schools that would explore the outcomes of these models. Almost 70% (n = 2260) of teachers responded to the survey. JHU established that, for a participant to be included in the survey, they must have completed at least 50% of the survey. Thus, 1418 (62.7%) were included in the sample in JHU's primary analysis. JHU conducted confirmatory factor analyses and prior evidence of the survey's constructs and determined that there was ample reliability and validity evidence (JHU, 2022). Initially, JHU found that teachers in Next Education Workforce models in MPS were statistically significantly more satisfied, collaborated more, and had better teacher-student interactions than their colleagues in traditional classroom models (JHU, 2022).

In addition to quantitative data collection, JHU interviewed and observed teachers and administrators implementing Next Education Workforce models in 10 MPS schools in March 2022. JHU noted that, from these interview and observation experiences, there was clear evidence that teachers were changing their instructional practices (2022). JHU also observed that teachers felt supported in the model (2022). As one educator in a Next Education Workforce model attested:

> I think I wouldn't want to go back to the other way of teaching before. How much support I have, I feel like we have done leaps and bounds and taken chances and done things that changed things, tried new things that would've taken 10 years and we've done in a year and a half.

Teachers also recognized the sustainability of their roles and responsibilities in these models. Another educator in a Next Education Workforce model voiced:

> I rarely, rarely do anything outside of school hours. There's occasional times where there's things we want to do to our classroom or things where we're putting in that extra where we'll come on the weekends just to do a couple things. But I do a lot less outside of school than I did when I was by myself.

Finally, educators in Next Education Workforce models see benefits to the models in helping to target students' individual needs. One educator remarked:

> We can break into small groups, like you saw me with the five kids there, and reach those kids that are either really gifted and need extra stuff, or those that are just really struggling. And we can give them that help that they need, that you can't do in a self- contained classroom with 25–30 kids.

This ability to regroup students based on their needs and provide targeted instruction may be a key component in helping to remedy instructional loss in a post-pandemic world.

Conclusion

The American education system is still strained in numerous ways. Many of these challenges existed before the pandemic, but the pandemic illuminated them in ways that demand our immediate attention. COVID-19 has exacerbated the long-term problems of instructional loss, teacher dissatisfaction, and teachers' commitment to

the profession. The American education system will not be able to address these long-term problems with short-term, isolated projects, programs, or activities. No amount of curricular change, professional learning, technology, or tutoring support will move the needle in the ways we need it moved right now. What we need now—in the United States and across the globe—is a new way to think about the fundamental structures and systems of education. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that we don't like isolation or inflexibility. Yet, the structure of schools in the one-teacher, one-classroom model is both isolating and inflexible.

The pandemic has given schools and school systems the opportunity to rethink the way teachers work together, who can support them, and how these new structures and systems can best foster student learning and development. A glimpse of what is possible for teaching and learning is illustrated in the case of Mesa Public Schools. In addition to this school system, The Next Education Workforce initiative continues to thrive. Currently, we have 10 school systems that are designing and implementing team-based staffing models. Approximately 60 more systems—both in the United States and internationally—have joined a learning cohort to begin exploring and planning for implementation of team-based staffing models in the Fall of 2023. These school systems are recognizing that this leapfrog moment cannot go to waste. It is imperative that we continue to look at new ways of teaching and learning by building the systems, structures, and cultures necessary for our students and educators to thrive in a post-pandemic world.

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