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WHEN THE LIGHTS ARE TURNED ON:

Documenting the Impact of COVID-19 on California's Education Landscape

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INTRODUCTION:

MAKING SENSE OF AN EXTRAORDINARY PERIOD FOR CALIFORNIA'S YOUTH

THE YEAR 2020 MARKED AN UNPRECEDENTED PERIOD IN U.S. HISTORY, WITH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SHAPING AN ALREADY TUMULTUOUS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE.

The virus, which is still active today, at its peak claimed millions of lives globally, inducing economic downturn, uncertainty, and political upheaval. The pandemic disproportionately affected low-income and communities of color nationally and in California, exacerbating existing educational disparities. The abrupt closure of public schools in March 2020 through the Spring of 2021 forced a radical shift to remote learning for over 50 million U.S. students and billions of students worldwide. This calculus included close to 6 million California youth, unveiling and widening pre-existing academic gaps.

Numerous studies have highlighted diminished achievement growth during remote learning, especially in high-poverty schools that serve a majority of young people of color *(Fahle et al., 2023; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Kuhfeldt et al., 2020)*. These are patterns that still exist today, several years after the height of the pandemic. In California, Black and Latinx students face declining academic performance compared to their White and Asian counterparts *(Fensterwald & Willis, 2023)*. The period of remote instruction was defined for many students as a time period of not only great isolation, but also insufficient access to technology and reliable connectivity. This hindered students' learning opportunities.

The abrupt shift to digital platforms between the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years highlighted and exacerbated pre-existing educational inequities, necessitating a rapid transformation in educational service delivery. In California, there were an estimated 1.8 million students, most of which were Latinx and Black, without digital access at home *(Alliance for Excellent Education, 2020)*. Even for youth who did have access to devices, there was not a guarantee that they could access online schooling, as large swaths of areas in urban and rural communities lack the necessary hotspots that allow connectivity to occur *(Gross & Opalka, 2020)*. As a result, schools provided millions of devices to students, and delivered WiFi hotspots to tens of thousands of areas across the country, merely for students to log on to see their teachers, access content, and interact with their peers to resemble some degree of learning.

The pandemic's impact extended beyond academics, affecting students' social, emotional, and mental health. Teachers, navigating unfamiliar technological platforms, faced difficulties engaging students. Essential workers' children, often low-income students of color, confronted the added responsibility of overseeing their own and younger siblings' learning.

As the pandemic unfolded, the threat of COVID-19 compounded uncertainties. This research brief chronicles the effects of COVID-19 on California schools and its students. The brief intends to elevate new research coupled with recommendations for strategic action based on the perspectives of educators across California who participated in interviews and online surveys. Our hope in sharing this brief widely is that we'll be able to turn the lights on; to see clearly the deep and profound effects of the virus on our education landscape. In doing so, we hope to spur a strategic and comprehensive response from all California stakeholders who are invested in the education, health, and well-being of young people.

KEY FINDINGS

01

INEQUITIES IN REMOTE LEARNING CONDITIONS WERE WIDESPREAD.

The quality of remote instruction during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years varied greatly depending on the community, with school systems serving mostly low-income students and students of color largely left alone to figure out how to deliver remote instruction with inadequate technology, connectivity, and capacity. The compounding effects of dealing with pre-existing education inequities and new inequities presented by remote instruction were significant. This led to major challenges in supporting core, grade-level instruction for students in subjects like mathematics, especially for low-income students of color. Young people in some cases struggled to build foundational knowledge required in core subjects, having a cascading effect for future instruction, and adding pressure to students and educators to play catch-up.

"We have a number of students coming back this year that recognized that they didn't learn much last year in subjects like math, which scaffolds on top of each other. They're coming back and the fluency is not there for the next level. However, we put them in the next level because of the no harm grading policy two years ago. And then last year the work was there but it wasn't what it would be in a normal school year, nor did they have that day-to-day practice. So, all of that really upticked the stress levels for a number of students as they were realizing the deficiencies in their own knowledge acquisition."

DISTRICT LEADER

02

REMEDIATION, STUDENT LEARNING ACCELERATION AND SOCIALIZATION ARE UNIVERSAL CHALLENGES AFTER LOST IN-PERSON INSTRUCTIONAL TIME.

Data from qualitative interviews revealed three themes that were most salient to better understand how the pandemic has affected student learning resulting from minimal in-person instructional time over several academic years and in some cases, remote learning that was lacking in quality. Themes included: **1) a need to develop remediation and learning acceleration strategies because of academic struggles; 2) behavioral challenges for young people, and 3) cases of students needing to re-learn grade level social norms and developmentally appropriate behavior in school settings.** As this quote from a math teacher suggests, it is hard to accelerate any learning strategy until students attain foundational skills and concepts before taking on more complex tasks in a particular subject. And if students aren't socialized to succeed in their grade level with peers, then that may act as an initial barrier to student learning.

"How am I supposed to teach this current standard when they (students) don't even know the other standard and I'm having to teach that first before they can get to this, and now I'm behind. And so, the added stress of just doing that is catching up to them."

HIGH SCHOOL MATHEMATICS TEACHER

03

PRE-PANDEMIC DIFFERENCES IN ACHIEVEMENT PATTERNS ARE ACCELERATING FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR.

Historically, strong achievement patterns have existed across race and income in the United States *(Hung et al., 2020)*. Progress has been made in years prior to the 2019-20 school year, the year the pandemic began, including in California *(Podolsky et al., 2019)*. However, according to California statewide data, student learning outcomes for historically marginalized students including Black, Latinx, Indigenous and multilingual learners took a concerning decline in statewide achievement data. This was reflected in the comments of educators interviewed to inform this study. In the eyes of some interviewees, pre-pandemic educational patterns have only accelerated for students of color. A district leader explained the landscape she is seeing as it relates to achievement for historically marginalized students. She noted that key student groups, including low-income students, students in foster care and multilingual learners—the priority of the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)—have been profoundly impacted by the virus.

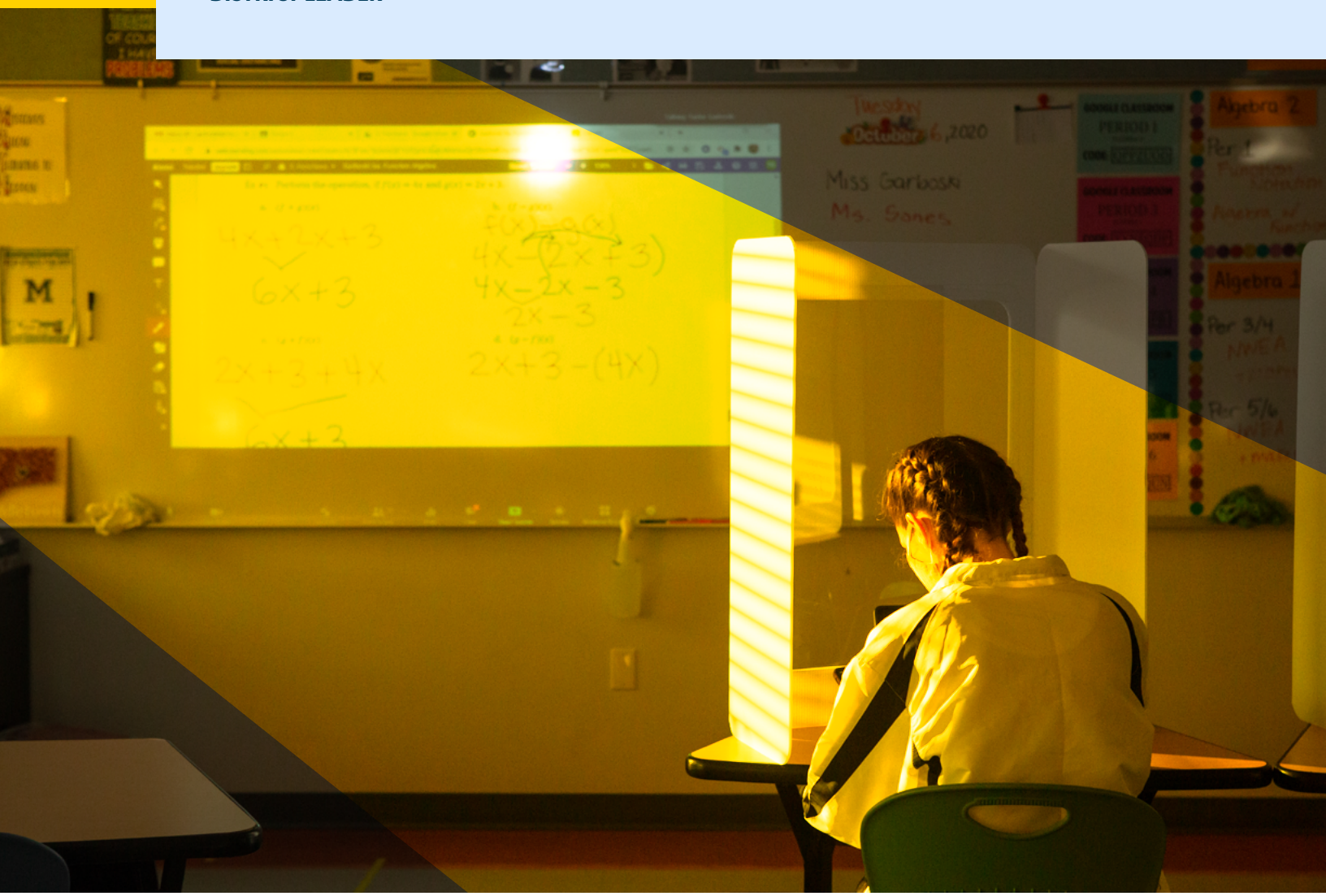
> *"The student populations that we have worked so hard to support: youth of color, our students in foster care, students living in transitional contexts like those experiencing homelessness, multilingual learners and students with disabilities... All of the students whose identities are the other, I would say, are most impacted by the outcomes of COVID and during COVID because I think those inequities existed before and they just have been highlighted with COVID."*
>
> **DISTRICT LEADER**

04

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF STUDENTS ARE FAR EXCEEDING STAFF CAPACITY.

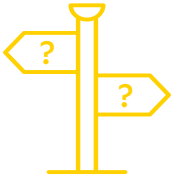
Most respondents shared examples of how they are navigating complex territory in today's COVID-era education landscape, one that is impacting countless young people and adults. Many schools are being asked to take on issues at a scale never experienced before in response to social, emotional and mental health patterns in schools. Student mental health needs have grown to unprecedented levels. One district official explained further:

> *"I can tell you right now, our suicide rate numbers, assessment numbers are off the chart. I mean, they have increased by say 60-70%, and we're only in December. I have never seen the number of suicide assessments come in at this rate with the level of support and need from DMH [Department of Mental Health]."*
>
> **DISTRICT LEADER**



05

LITTLE STATE GUIDANCE OR SUPPORT WAS/IS BEING PROVIDED TO SCHOOLS TO DEAL WITH AN UNPRECEDENTED EDUCATION CRISIS.

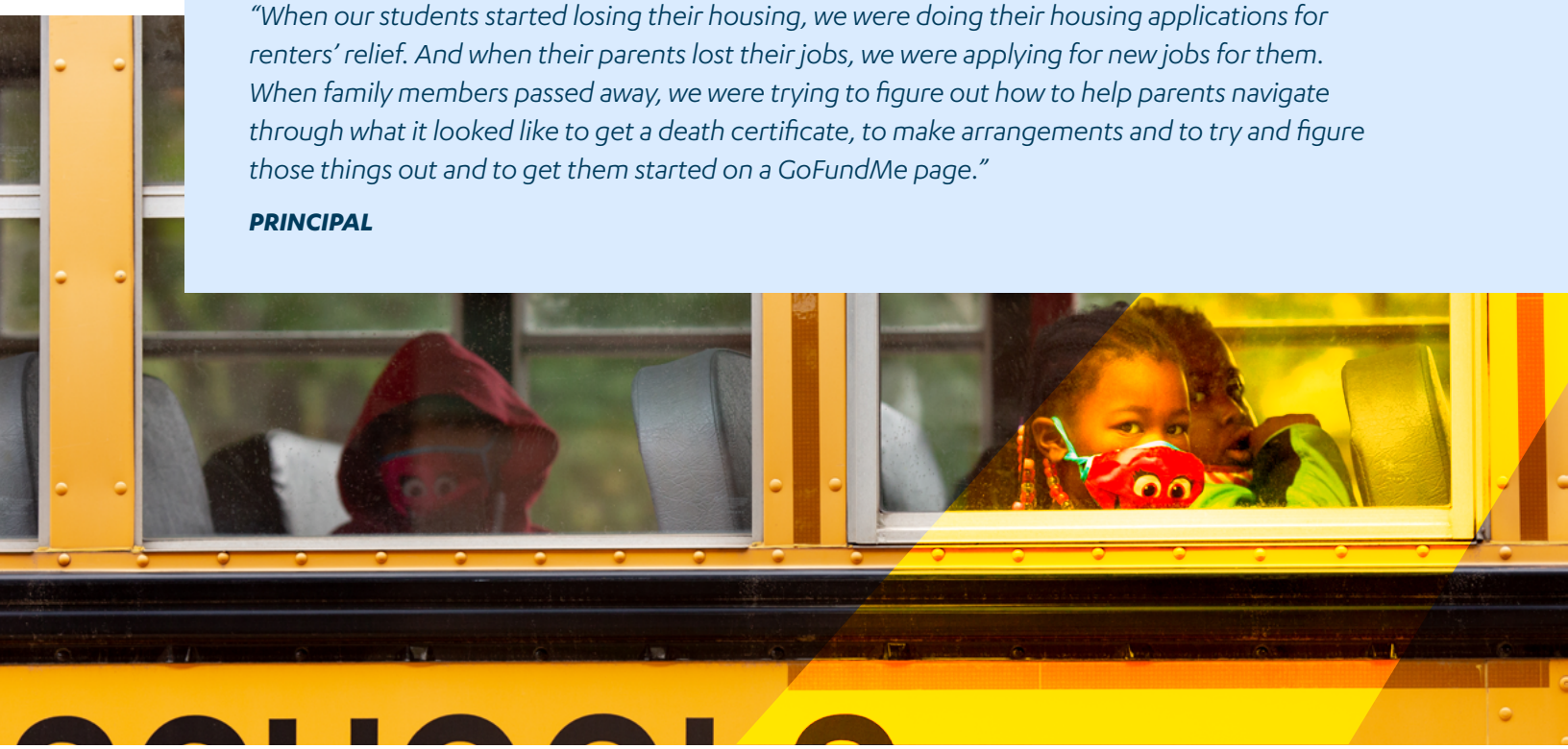


In the wake of vast challenges for schools across California, educators working at all levels in school systems navigated a once-in-a-lifetime crisis. This included making schools the headquarters of education, health and social services during the pandemic. One district official acknowledged that the state had done little to guide school systems during the pandemic. This includes advising schools on how to spend resources in a fashion that will optimize learning, especially for students who may be struggling. While district leaders interviewed weren't looking for mandates that would limit locally driven expertise and decision making, more support from the state was desired.

> *"I know our schools have money. I think most districts have money. They even know they don't even know how to truly spend that money."*
>
> **PRINCIPAL**

That same district leader identified a growing need for guidance from the state after talking about little direction around strategic use of state COVID resources.

> *"When our students started losing their housing, we were doing their housing applications for renters' relief. And when their parents lost their jobs, we were applying for new jobs for them. When family members passed away, we were trying to figure out how to help parents navigate through what it looked like to get a death certificate, to make arrangements and to try and figure those things out and to get them started on a GoFundMe page."*
>
> **PRINCIPAL**



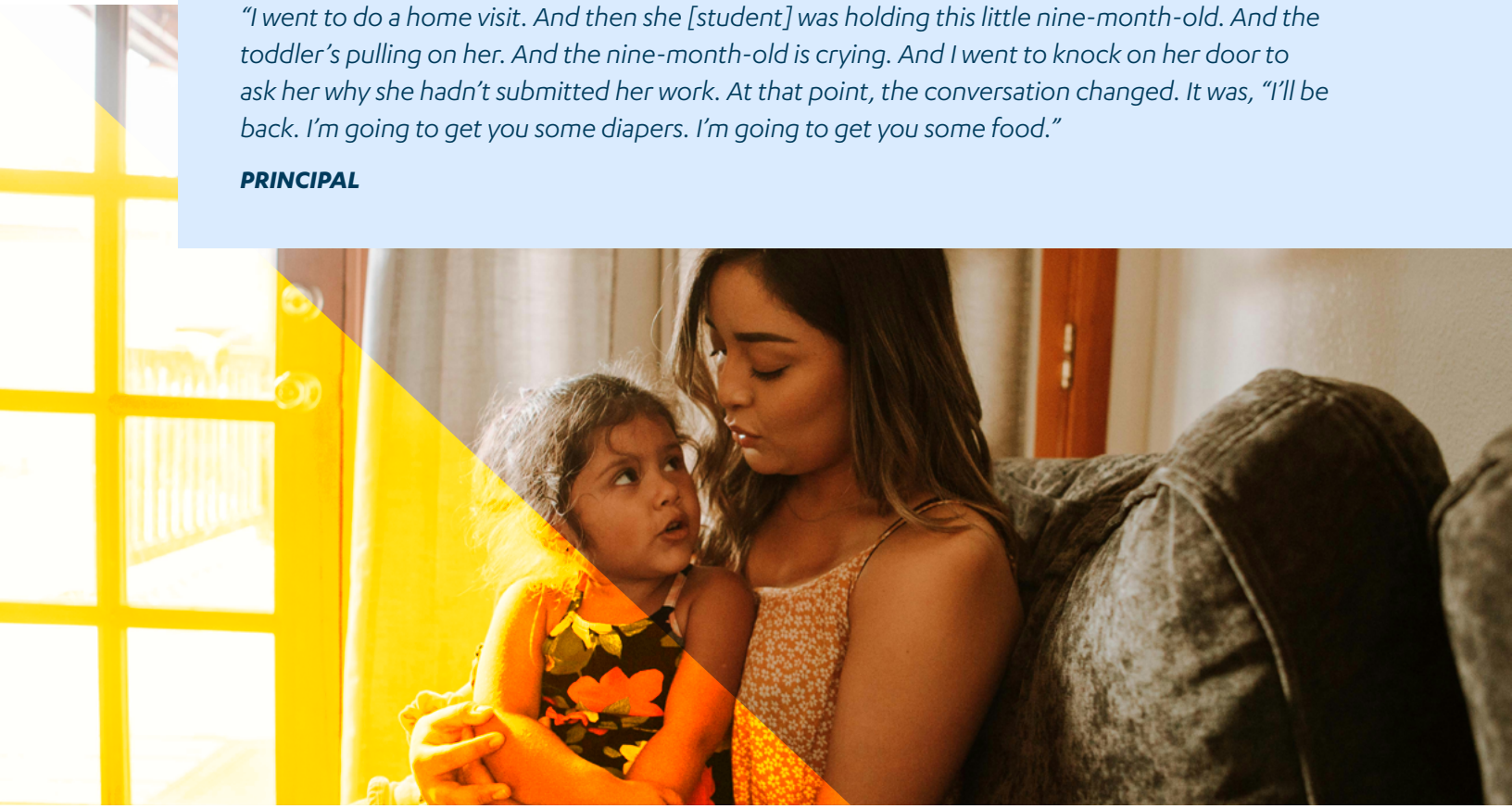
06

BASIC NEEDS ARE MORE FUNDAMENTAL TO STUDENT LEARNING THAN EVER BEFORE.

Poverty and inequality profoundly shaped the California education landscape long before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost two-thirds of the 5.5 million K-12 students in California are economically disadvantaged *(California Department of Education, 2021)*. Recent analysis suggests that pre-COVID numbers of K-12 students experiencing homelessness at 270,000 students, enough to fill Dodger stadium almost five times *(Bishop et al., 2020)*. Of those students statewide, 7 out of 10 young people are Latinx. Those numbers are likely much higher.

These patterns point to a much larger issue around how foundational it is for schools to help young people and families meet their basic needs as a learning strategy, a reoccurring response in interviews conducted. Students who lack access to food and a safe place to call home are more likely to struggle in school. Schools in many cases have risen to the challenge, something that surfaced repeatedly in interviews. But more must be done to support schools who are operating as centers of care. A site principal described the types of challenges her students have faced and how home visits provided a window into what her students really need.

> *"I went to do a home visit. And then she [student] was holding this little nine-month-old. And the toddler's pulling on her. And the nine-month-old is crying. And I went to knock on her door to ask her why she hadn't submitted her work. At that point, the conversation changed. It was, "I'll be back. I'm going to get you some diapers. I'm going to get you some food."*
>
> **PRINCIPAL**



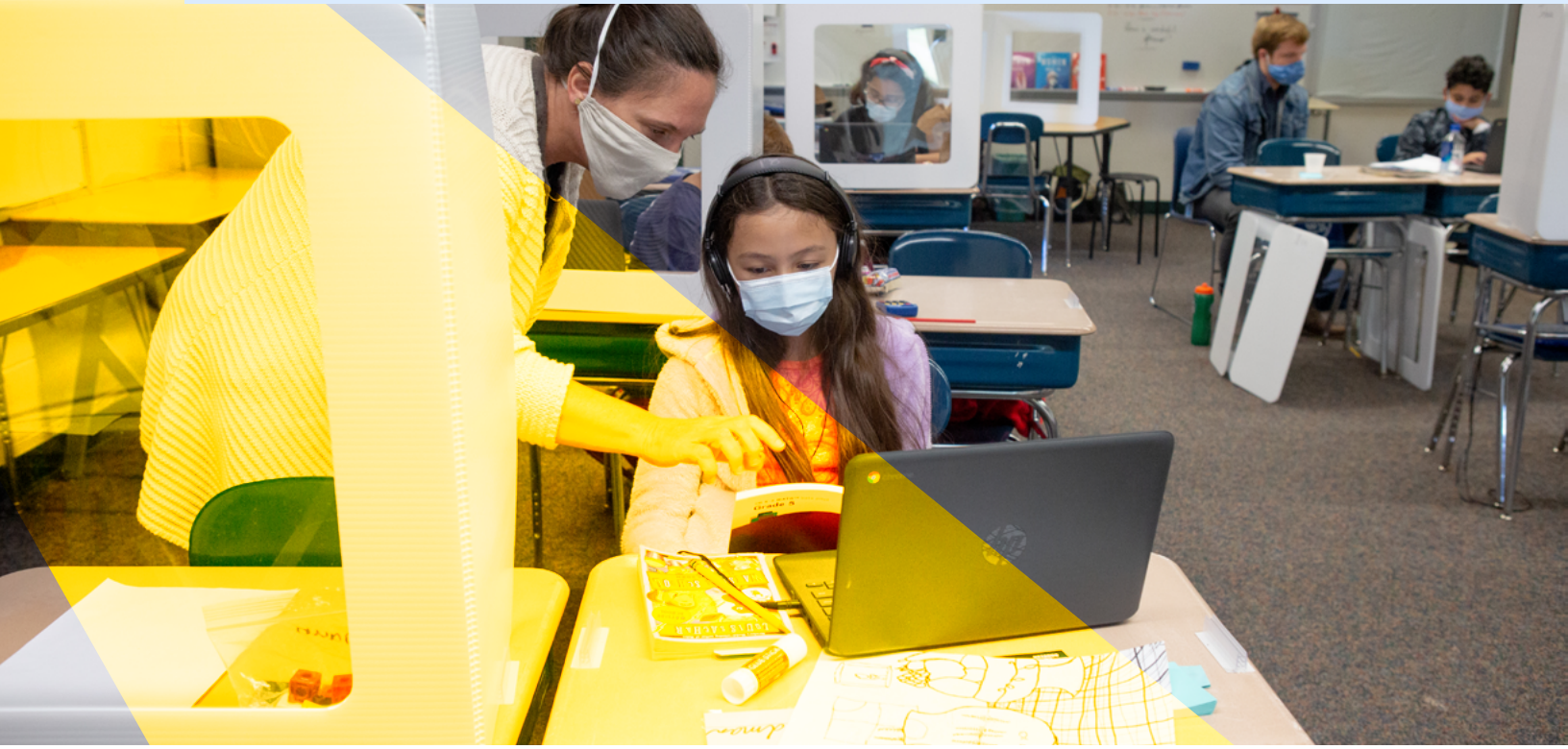
07

A WEAK PIPELINE OF EDUCATORS AND STAFF AND ONGOING RETENTION CHALLENGES ARE NEGATIVELY AFFECTING SCHOOLS.

Recent analysis shows that subject area teaching shortages are becoming more widespread than before the pandemic, based on a survey conducted across 12 California districts *(Carver-Thomas et al., 2022)*. A combination of increases in teacher retirements and resignations, coupled with a limited supply of candidates and a need for more teaching positions, is driving unusually high levels of vacancies in several districts in California. Shortages are extending beyond the classroom in education, including critical staff positions. According to a national survey from Ed Week, more than three-quarters of district leaders and principals say they're experiencing at least moderate staffing shortages in their school buildings this year *(Lieberman, 2021)*. These patterns are impacting the ability of educators we interviewed to not only prioritize student academic success, but also staff health and retention. One teacher explained her moral dilemma of having so few substitute teachers available and her worries about her own health during the pandemic.

"There are no teachers in the teaching pools. You can barely get a sub if you ask for one. You have to really, really make real efforts to try and get a sub if someone is absent."

TEACHER



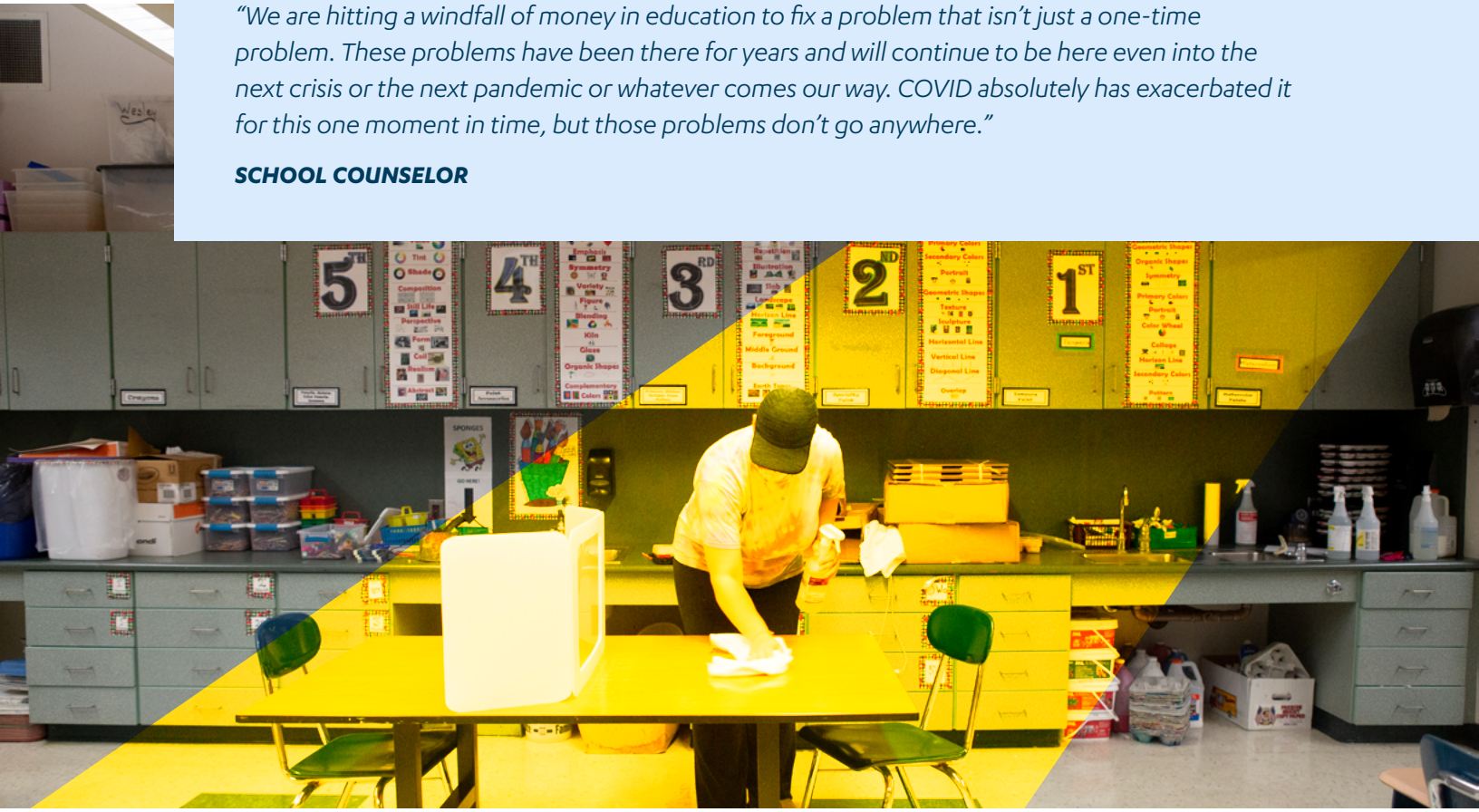
08

AN AGGRESSIVE STATE POLICY RESPONSE IS NEEDED TO SUPPORT RACIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY.

State policy surfaced in most interviews as an area that deserves further attention to address educational inequities broadly, specifically racial educational inequities that have grown during the pandemic in California. Educators identified four types of policies as critical to helping the state rebound from historic education inequities, especially those accelerated in the past several school years due to COVID: **1) real-time data to inform school implementation; 2) equity standards for implementation of state learning goals and the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF); 3) predictable, long-term, whole child investments that are not one time state allocations; and 4) changes to how schools are funded, based on enrollment, not average daily attendance (ADA) as a way to bring missing students back to school.** On the topic of policy change related to funding, several respondents spoke to the need for more strategic, focused, long-term investments to build upon momentum the state has gained as a result of more robust state spending packages. A school counselor called for more long-term thinking from the state, not one-time priorities in the budget:

"We are hitting a windfall of money in education to fix a problem that isn't just a one-time problem. These problems have been there for years and will continue to be here even into the next crisis or the next pandemic or whatever comes our way. COVID absolutely has exacerbated it for this one moment in time, but those problems don't go anywhere."

SCHOOL COUNSELOR



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

01

Establish a core body of state agencies, the State Board, Administration and Legislative members to set goals, monitor progress and utilize integrated data systems around addressing the educational effects of the pandemic for the short and long-term.

02

Identify and analyze essential school level, school system and regional data points to inform how the state moves forward to prioritize the education, health and wellbeing of young people, especially young people of color across the state.

03

Create a state roadmap for boosting enrollment and attendance in California's public schools based on deeper insights from educators, students, caregivers, families, and community members.

04

Establish statewide capacity-building efforts that prioritize race-centered approaches to systems of support.

05

Start collecting data in a more centralized fashion that captures digital equity indicators (e.g., access to broadband, high speed internet, technology, educator technology infrastructure).

CONCLUSION

At this time, it is essential to take a three-pronged approach about how to make sense of what has happened to young people and their education prospects during the COVID-19 pandemic:

First, we must take a look back, and take full stock of the historical failures of the past four years in California. It is essential to understand where district, county, state and federal efforts fell short in making sure that all students, but in particular those most vulnerable, were provided with the essential support to learn in the days, weeks, and months after the pandemic.

Second, there needs to be a full and rigorous assessment of where California students are now, like we are doing for these expert reports. There have been unprecedented resources allocated for schools related to COVID-19: the American Rescue Plan allocated $122 billion for K-12 schools to be distributed through the federal Title I formula for funding schools and districts with concentrated poverty.

Third, a plan must be chartered with great urgency that ensures that there are adequate supports to address learning loss, social emotional and mental wellness of students and educators, and a nationwide strategic plan that responds to the ongoing fallout of this unprecedented pandemic. Similar to the response to a California wildfire or natural disaster, an emergency education response is needed now.

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APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY FOR INTERVIEWS

Empirical data on educators' perspectives was collected between December 2021 through February 2022. Eleven (11) educators serving at different levels within school systems were interviewed based on a standardized protocol that explored the relationship between the pandemic and student learning, especially student learning for historically marginalized student groups. Interviewees included classroom teachers, school psychologists, school counselors, site principals and district leaders. Two of the eleven respondents are presidents of statewide professional organizations representing hundreds of members, meaning they not only understand local challenges associated with the pandemic, but also have insights on statewide patterns based on relationships with other statewide members.

The sample of interviewees was geographically diverse, from border districts, Southern, Central and Northern California. Interviews did span beyond the Los Angeles and Oakland communities, which is where plaintiffs in the case are based to determine whether patterns statewide corresponded with patterns in those regions of the state. Educator interviewees were also representative of the state's diverse student population, most identifying as Black, Latinx or Chicanx with a balance of men and women.

A rigorous qualitative coding process was utilized based on transcript data, applying codes to excerpts and conducting several rounds of coding in order to identify common themes and patterns. Approximately 20 codes were consolidated to the seven listed in this expert report. Interviews were conducted virtually in 30–60-minute increments using a standardized protocol based on a set of research questions (see questions below). Interviews were transcribed using a professional transcription service and coded to identify common themes across interviews.

Interview protocol:

1. *How did COVID affect your student's learning?*
2. *How did COVID affect student social, emotional and mental health?*
3. *What issues have been magnified or accelerated because of the pandemic?*
4. *What do you wish your school or district would have done differently?*
5. *What's needed now from the state for the short-term and long-term?*

APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY FOR SURVEY DATA

The following questions which were presented as open survey items, with a summary of responses from 49 respondents are provided for each question below.

1. *What new responsibilities have you taken on as a school or school system in recent years?*
2. *What issues have been magnified or accelerated because of the pandemic?*

Responses from both survey questions were coded and organized into a set of themes based on their frequency which can be seen in Tables 1.1 and 1.2. Note that responses were based on an open-ended survey, so some administrators identified several of the categories below as high priorities. Frequency of responses does not equal the total number of respondents or N size.

Table 1.1. Administrators Survey Responses (Question 1) (N= 49)

Administrator Responses	Frequency (Responses)
Student/Staff Social/Emotional & Mental Health	17
COVID-related health & safety issues	13
Staffing Challenges: classified and credentialed staff	6
Student Basic Needs (universal meals, community connectivity, housing insecurity)	4
Instruction & Student Learning Loss	4
Political Challenges (Threats to Staff & Community Concerns)	3
Other (All of the above or "too many to name")	3

Table 1.2. Administrators Survey Responses (Question 2) (N= 49)

Administrator Responses	Frequency (Responses)
Student/Staff Social/Emotional & Mental Health	25
COVID-related health & safety issues	3
Staffing Challenges: classified and credentialed staff	10
Student Basic Needs (universal meals, community connectivity, housing insecurity)	7
Instruction & Student Learning Loss	8
Political Challenges (Threats to Staff & Community Concerns)	6
Other (All of the above or "too many to name")	4