

## Education leaders should lean in to lessons from the pandemic



by **JEFF RICE** posted 12.06.2024

OPINION – According to a report by the [Public Policy Institute of California](#), the federal government has allocated \$31 billion in one-time aid to public schools since March 2020. Federal funds accounted for 23% of K–12 funding in 2020–21 and 11% in 2021–22. The amount of federal funding that went to public schools during this time was significantly more than during most non-recession years before the pandemic when the federal share ranged from 6% to 9%.

The pandemic and its fallout forced the traditional public education system to confront the need for systemic change. For many schools, the pandemic created a critical need for greater flexibility, focusing more on the needs of individual students, creating education delivery options beyond the classroom, and offering access to resources that were more relevant to student life skills and needs. The Personalized Learning model became front and center and students, parents, teachers, and administrators adapted by embracing flexible systems, approaches, and mindsets in education. This shift reinforced the idea that education should adapt to the learner, not the other way around.

The PPIC report got to the heart of the matter that will need to be debated and decided in 2025. They stated: “Districts will need to decide which pandemic-era school resources and services to continue after the expiration of federal stimulus funding in fall 2024; this will be challenging for schools that are still grappling with academic and social-emotional fallout from the pandemic.”

As federal relief funds wind down and schools decide how to prioritize programs, policymakers should not ignore the lessons learned during the pandemic. Policymakers must consider the tremendous value of flexibility and personalization and establish policies and programs to incentivize traditional classroom-only public schools to create more flexible and personalized education delivery models in the future.

While classroom-only learning is important for many students, it is flexible, personalized, and student-centered instructional approaches that are essential for improving equity, academic outcomes, and student well-being.

Personalized learning allows for differentiated pacing, so that students can move through material at a speed that suits their learning needs. Advanced learners can accelerate through the content, diving deeper into subjects that interest them, while students who need more time can receive additional support and reinforcement to master the material. When students feel that the material they are learning is relevant to their interests and goals, they are more likely to stay engaged and motivated.

Schools should continue to invest in programs that use data to identify and address individual learning gaps as well as adaptive learning resources that can help students progress at their own pace and catch up in areas where they may have fallen behind. State policies should also encourage the use of digital tools to personalize student learning and provide educators with tools and resources to appropriately blend technology and AI into their teaching practices.

The reliance on personalized learning during the pandemic highlighted that educational success depends not only on students and teachers but also on families. Supporting families in their role as learning partners has become a key lesson for the future. State policies should allow for expanded options for families and students who want and need something different. Hybrid academies, virtual learning, independent study, and other flexible approaches have given tens of thousands of students in California a pathway to success. Giving families choice in finding the right public education model is critical and state policies should honor parents' desire to be active participants in their children's education.

Personalization and flexibility are no longer nice-to-have in education; there are essential components for ensuring that all students regardless of their background and life circumstances have a chance to succeed. If our policymakers accept that shift in thinking they will embrace the lessons learned during the pandemic and support student-centered policies and programs that encourage flexible learning.

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