Early School Success: Recover learning and accelerate gains

Primer for individual donors and professional grantmakers

Early School Success: Recover learning and accelerate gains

In this guide

About CHIP

The Center for High Impact Philanthropy is a trusted source of knowledge and education to help donors around the world do more good. Founded as a collaboration between the School of Social Policy & Practice and alumni of the Wharton School, it is the premier university-based center focused on philanthropy for social impact.

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About Our Partner

The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is a collaborative effort by foundations, nonprofit partners, business MSP leaders, governemt agencies, and states and communities across the nation to ensure that more children in low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career, and active citizenship. The Campaign focuses on an important predictor of school success and high school graduation— grade-level reading by the end of third grade.
https://gradelevelreading.net/

Why this, why now?

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted learning for children of all ages. For children ages 0 to 8, brain development, social and emotional learning, and life skills are especially critical.[1] Since early school success predicts later academic achievement and a host of positive life outcomes,[2] we risk losing a generation of children unless we recover learning lost during the pandemic and accelerate gains

All young children need a web of support to develop their full potential. That web of support consists of the adults in their lives — parents, caregivers, teachers, and others — who help them meet their physical, social, emotional, and academic needs. By supporting one or more of the following evidence-based strategies, donors can help strengthen that web of support.

- Support the Whole Child by meeting children's comprehensive needs, at home and at school
- Increase Learning Opportunities by expanding when and where learning happens and who teaches
- Ensure Digital Equity by improving digital access and literacy for those who continue to be left out

This primer explains each of these strategies and why they matter. To find organizations that are using these strategies to boost learning and support children ages 0 to 8, visit our Early School Success toolkit at https://impact.upenn.edu/early-school-success

Support the Whole Child

What happens in school depends on what happens at home. Children's physical health, mental health, and sense of security are critical to the development of their emotional readiness, resilience, growth mindset, self-control, and ability to set goals and manage stress. These capabilities, in turn, are linked to indicators of early school success such as kindergarten readiness, school achievement, attendance, and graduation rates.[3]

The COVID-19 pandemic increased existing disparities by causing widespread stress, loss, isolation, and economic distress for children and their caregivers. Even as the economy recovers, many American families continue to face high rates of hardship. As of October 2021, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that 20 million adults reported difficulty getting enough food, and 12 million Americans were behind on rent. Households with children, Black adults, Latino adults, and other people of color were affected the most.[4]

Bridging gaps in opportunity and achievement requires a multifaceted approach that tackles in-school and out-of-school factors that influence how children learn and succeed. Here's what philanthropic funders can do to help:

Support emotional, mental, and physical well-being

Social and emotional development begins in the earliest days of life. When children feel secure in their primary relationship with a parent or caregiver and have their needs met in responsive and consistent ways, they begin forming the foundation for early relational health. Early relational health recognizes the role of this primary relationship in advancing the ability of children to learn to pay attention, regulate their emotions and behavior, express feelings, and overcome challenges successfully.[5] All of these skills allow children to be responsive to other adults around them, including teachers, and able to learn in school. Early relational health applies a public health framework and encompasses what we know about child development, including emotional, brain, and physical development.

Support for children's emotional, mental, and physical well-being can take many forms. For example, in-school health clinics provide mental health and nutrition services; basic preventive care through immunizations, vaping and tobacco prevention, and check-ups; prescriptions and other care for sick children; physical and mental health screenings; and follow-up counseling and crisis intervention when needed.[6] Programs

that focus on social-emotional learning can reduce levels of anxiety and depression in children and help them build the resilience needed to succeed in stressful environments.[7]

Schools are increasingly asked to take on social service roles beyond teaching. Wraparound services that extend beyond the school such as family support groups, tutoring, recreation therapy, transportation, and legal services address children's mental and physical well-being while also supporting the entire family. When nonprofit organizations and community partners provide these services in coordination with schools, then teachers, principals, and staff can concentrate on student learning.

Adopt a multigenerational approach

Very young children rely on the adults around them — parents, grandparents, and caregivers — to meet their basic needs of housing, food, physical safety, and health. When the adults around them experience physical, financial, and mental hardship, children's learning and healthy development suffer. Toxic stress experienced in early childhood — known as adverse childhood experiences or ACEs — is linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance abuse as that child grows to become an adult. ACEs can also negatively impact education and job opportunities.[8]

A multigenerational approach involves addressing families' needs. There are multiple ways philanthropic funders are helping. They include meeting basic needs such as providing funds to increase housing assistance (providing rental assistance, increasing the supply of affordable rental homes, and enforcing renter protections) mental and physical health services for the whole family; access to benefits (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Unemployment Insurance, Disability Insurance, Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Care Tax Credit, etc.) for eligible households; and guaranteed income programs. Some donors, professional grantmakers, and nonprofits are also advocating for policies that include raising the minimum wage and advancing more equitable income growth so that more families have the economic resources to provide a strong start for their children.

There are also opportunities for communities to use federal funding through the 2021 American Rescue Plan (ARP). Donors can fund organizations that are establishing programs and tools to help communities and youth advocates navigate access and use of this unprecedented influx of funding.[9]

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Increase Learning Opportunities

There is now ample evidence of the learning lost and gains needed due to COVID-19. Declines in preschool attendance threaten to overturn decades of improvements in school readiness, particularly for the most vulnerable children.[9] COVID-19 has also significantly disrupted K-12 students, leaving students on average five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the school year.[10] There was already a gap in funding and access to high-quality learning outside of K-12 schools, and that gap has widened.[11]

Donors can help by expanding time for learning through high-dosage tutoring, afterschool and summer programs, and creating more everyday spaces for learning. They can also expand learning opportunities by strengthening the resources and training available to parents, caregivers, and educators, including in-home family child care providers, day care teachers, and elementary school staff.

Invest in high-quality childcare

Working parents and caregivers have always relied on daycare centers, home-based care, and other child-care settings to nurture and teach children, and there was already a well-documented lack of available, affordable high quality early childcare options. The pandemic made things worse: nearly 1.6 million moms of children under 17 dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic to care for children and have not been able to return to work because of unstable school and daycare situations.[12] The child-care sector lost 10% of prepandemic jobs from February 2020 to November 2021,[13] and a 2021 national survey found that more than a third of child-care providers and 55% of minority-owned childcare centers were considering quitting or closing down their businesses within the next year.[14]

Examples of what donors can fund:
- Networks of smaller childcare centers, or family childcare homes that share costs and administrative and program services thereby increasing the capacity of providers.
- Child resource and referral organizations that provide training and technical assistance to providers.
- Organizations that directly help the large number of immigrant women who work in childcare
- Programs that help providers navigate and access the complex federal, state, and local funding that will be or have recently been authorized.

- Early childhood advocates who direct local and national attention to the child care crisis and advance potential solutions to boost child care access and affordability and provide child care workers a livable wage.

Reinforce that learning happens everywhere, all the time

Early childhood is a time of intense brain development. Young children have the capacity to learn everywhere and all the time, and funders can reinforce that capacity in multiple ways.

For example, the implementation of high-quality, high-dosage tutoring (HDT) integrated within schools themselves has been found to be an especially effective strategy for helping K-3 students get back on track. The most effective programs involve tutors who work consistently with the same students throughout the course of the year and provide personalized, intensive attention, working one-on-one or two-on-one with students. Often the best programs incorporate HDT as its own separate class period for all students — when all students participate in the program it becomes less stigmatized.[15]

Providing children in the early years of elementary school with safe and engaging places to go after school and during non-school time is another way to boost learning and support their emotional growth. Quality summer programs can not only stop summer slide (i.e., learning loss experienced by students over the summer), they can also advance the kind of learning gains that prepare children for success in the year to come.

Alternative locations such as lending libraries and learning nooks in informal spaces like laundromats and barbershops can host lending libraries and other learning nooks, which allow children to develop skills related to literacy, mathematics, and spatial relations.

Grow the pool of teaching talent

While public schools have faced teacher shortages for years, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a new spike in retirements and resignations due to the heightened stress of teaching and burnout.[16] As schools attempt to hire new staff, many cities have come to face a substitute teacher shortage due to safety concerns, uncompetitive pay and benefits, and full-time teacher attrition. Up to 50% of substitute teaching positions are unstaffed, causing 77% of school principals and district teachers to report

difficulty hiring substitute teachers.[17] This increases workloads for teachers and administrative staff.

Examples of ways donors can help:
- Pay for teachers to be nationally board-certified, a program that involves teachers' providing coaching and mentoring to other teachers. The program has been shown to to increase the quality of teaching, student achievement, and teacher retention.[18]
- Support policy experiments aimed at improving teacher recruitment and retention. For example, experiments in California, Colorado, Tennessee, and Texas have attracted and retained talent by increasing compensation for teachers. In Michigan, providing longer teaching permits for substitute teachers has been found to be effective in retaining needed substitute teachers,[19] while efforts in Arizona focused on increasing pathways for substitute teachers to become full-time teachers.
- Advocate for policies and local leadership focused on promoting teacher recruitment and retention.

Promoting these innovative responses for growing the pool of teaching talent gives donors a hand in remedying this issue and provides students the high-quality instruction they deserve.

Ensure Digital Equity

In 2020, approximately 21% of schools in the country were entirely online and the majority of schools (59%) offered one class or more online.[20] Distance learning required during COVID-19 made differences in digital access stark: roughly 30% to 35% of Black and Hispanic households and 20% of White households did not have the broadband access that made distance learning possible.[21] Bridging the gap in access to and knowledge of technology — often referred to as the "digital divide" — is critical not just for remote school, it is increasingly required for in-person school (e.g., for homework adn interactions with other students and teachers).[22] For parents and other caregivers, digital access and knowledge is increasingly important for jobs, health, and meeting other needs. Technological skills are useful and/or required in a wide variety of careers and students disadvantaged by this digital divide are at risk of falling behind their peers and losing the opportunity to advance in these fields. Here's how funders can help:

Increase student access to devices and broadband

Gaps in device accessibility and connectivity became critical during COVID-19. States, districts, and donors mobilized to provide devices and access to the Internet and to facilitate online learning. Between May and October 2020, the numbers of students with access to devices increased, and the gaps between White and Black students access to devices dropped from a 10 point difference to 4 points, with 93% of White students having access to learning devices all or most of the time in October and 89% of Black students reporting the same.[23]

This quick response is an example of how philanthropic funders and businesses can help close the digital divide. Donors can help by funding and advocating for affordable broadband options at home and ensuring that every student has access to a digital devices at school and home. This is necessary for both virtual learning and to close the "homework gap," where some students can not complete homework because they have no device to use at home.

Support digital literacy with training and ed tech

Digital equity is not just about access, but also about digital literacy — preparing students, parents, caregivers, and teachers to navigate the online world safely and efficiently. Technology is only a tool — the interactions between technology and students are what matters most.

Digital equity also means advancing education technology for all, as technology is increasingly a necessary component of learning. Educational technology (ed tech) enables remote learning and introduces IT tools into the classroom to create a more engaging, inclusive, and individualized learning experience. Student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2019 Mathematics Assessment provides an example of the difference in student performance where technology played a role. Among eighth-grade participants, higher socioeconomic status (SES) students (i.e., students not eligible for the National School Lunch Program [NSLP]) consistently performed better than lower SES students (i.e., students eligible for NSLP). But students who reported having access to computers at home, regardless of SES, had higher average scores than those who reported no access to computers at home.[24]

Ed tech increases collaboration; 24/7 access to learning, including the ability to "flip" the classroom so that lessons can be viewed outside the classroom and classroom time can be focused on more interactive and group-based learning; personalized education where students can learn at their own pace while teachers receive timely feedback on a students' progress; and the ability to have more engaging lessons through different platforms (video, podcast, games). No single ed tech solution or initiative will achieve the same results everywhere, but improving access to ed tech can help create equity in the classroom.

Donors can help by providing digital literacy training not only for students, but also educators, parents, and caregivers. Funders can fund research on the effectiveness of new ed tech and how such technology can improve learning in different populations and settings. Funders can also support training and coaching for teachers on how to better engage students using ed tech. These include improving instruction with prerecorded quality lessons that level the playing field and facilitating differentiated instruction through computer-adaptive learning and live one-on-one tutoring.

Additional Resources

Our Early School Success toolkit at https://www.impact.upenn.edu/early-school-success provides additional resources for donors and professional grantmakers who want to act on the information in this primer. Those resources include examples of specific opportunities to have impact; guidance on related issues such as COVID recovery and mental health; examples of nonprofit organizations; and webinars for you to learn more.

Endnotes

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Methodology

This primer was written with the support and collaboration of Campaign for Grade Level Reading. It was based on interviews with dozens of nonprofit and education leaders; review of 60+ reports, websites, newsletters, and webinars; and more than 15 years of experience developing guidance on how individual donors and institutional grantmakers can best support early childhood education. Find a full bibliography and more resources at https://www.impact.upenn.edu/early-school-success

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Visit the Early School Success microsite for resources, case examples, and related guidance

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