THE PATH FORWARD: Supporting PreK-12 STUDENTS POST-COVID-19

The COVID-19 public health crisis has dramatically disrupted primary and secondary education—disproportionately impacting our most vulnerable students. The differing impacts of the pandemic mean that many of Texas' children, families and communities are experiencing ongoing trauma—from loss of life and income to isolation, and food insecurity. These dramatic events can have long-lasting effects on academic achievement and emotional well-being.

The stakes could not be higher. Prior to the pandemic, too many Texas students were not performing at grade level academically nor were they on track toward college or a career. According to the E3 Alliance, in 2019 only 44% of Texas third graders met Texas's reading standards, and only 29% of 8th graders had completed Algebra I. Fewer than 30% of Texas high school graduates were earning a post-high school credential within six years of graduation, even though 71% of jobs will require some level of higher education by 2036 (Texas 2036). For years, the percentage of Texas students enrolling in higher education institutions has been falling. In 2018, only 52% of Texas students had enrolled, a decline from the previous year, putting the Texas 60X30 goal of 58% of students enrolling in higher education by 2020 at risk.

The pandemic has the potential to drastically worsen those numbers. For example, Texas Pre-K enrollment was down 21% during the 2020-21 academic year (E3 Alliance). National research suggests that students may be as many as nine months behind in math performance, with students of color being as many as 12 months—more than a school year, behind. In addition, the proportion of adolescents and young adults experiencing serious levels of anxiety has tripled in the last year to its highest levels on record. The pandemic's effects risk widening the already existing gaps in academic achievement and threaten the well-being of our Black, Latinx, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and English learner students, as well as those with disabilities.

Yet despite the significant disruptions and ongoing challenges, there are reasons for hope. Research shows that students who engage with rigorous, evidence-based learning acceleration paired with strong social and emotional supports can not only reach their grade level, but can also potentially achieve additional academic gains. Texas is equipped to meet these challenges. Equity and excellence can be achieved if the right actions are taken at the right time for students and school communities. That time is now.

We have joined together to harness expertise in identifying the most powerful, equitable, and sustainable pathway to success for all students now and in the future. As a result, we recommend the following:

I. Prepare and support educators with resources to mitigate disruption to learning and provide tools to equip them to support the academic and social and emotional well-being of their students
   - Institute intensified and accelerated instruction for math and reading for all students
   - Use real-time formative assessment to support learning and well-being
   - Employ a holistic, asset-based approach with integrated social emotional learning (SEL) to effectively engage student learning, with a sharpened focus on equity

II. Establish a Texas Education Research-Practice-Policy Partnership (RP3): A Model to Assess Needs and Best-Used Resources, Engage with Partners, Collect Data, and Evaluate Outcomes to Provide a Cycle of Improvement

We strongly recommend using Texas' federal recovery dollars to fund, adapt, and scale evidence-based interventions to meet immediate needs and ensure the innovation necessary to meet future challenges. This is a call to action for Texas to ensure that all PreK-12 students in the state receive the academic and social emotional resources needed to recover and thrive.