



NORMAL WAS NEVER ENOUGH. COVID OFFERS THE OPPORTUNITY TO IMPROVE THE STATUS QUO



As school resumes across the nation amid the rising threat of the Delta variant of COVID-19, educators and students are trying to return to some semblance of normality.

But what about the students for whom “normal” was never okay? Emerging bilinguals who were treated in school as if they had a language deficit. Students of color who found themselves suspended and expelled at disproportionate rates. Students from low-income families whose opportunities to learn were truncated by the limited resources available to them through their communities and schools.

It is these students, the ones who have been historically marginalized, that are the focus of a new [report](#) from the National Academy of Education (NAEd), an organization representing many of the nation’s most prominent education scholars.

Based on a panel discussion with NEPC Fellow and NAEd president [Gloria Ladson-Billings](#), along with Deborah Loewenberg Ball of the University of Michigan, Luis Gomez of UCLA, and former West Virginia governor Bob Wise, the report recommends four broad strategies for advancing a meaningful reset of our nation’s educational system that would emphasize not only excellence but equity.

- 1. Take a problem-centered approach to teaching and learning:** This means centering instruction on real-world issues, incorporating the lived experiences of students, and helping them to incorporate knowledge in an interdisciplinary way.

- 2. Involve everyone in education—not just students and teachers:** Parents and community members are key stakeholders whose knowledge should help guide and improve schools. Further, while schools may be the intellectual focal points of their communities, learning also occurs at home—a fact that is important to remember in the midst of handwriting over the amount of time students have spent learning in their living rooms during the pandemic. Educators need to learn about their students’ home cultures and environments, and to listen rather than to give in to the urge to imagine how they themselves would react in a given situation. Families should have the opportunity to be deeply and meaningfully involved in structural reforms that help schools to better serve their communities.
- 3. Teachers need more and different training:** Culturally responsive, problem-centered instruction doesn’t magically happen. Teachers need to learn how to do it, and do it well. Their training needs to focus more heavily on helping students to become real problem solvers and also on learning how to learn about their students’ lives, regardless of whether those lives are similar to teachers’ own experiences.
- 4. Equitable access to education entails equitable access to resources:** The pandemic laid bare the longstanding challenges faced by historically marginalized communities, which have been more likely to experience educational, economic, and health-related consequences of COVID. Here is where the federal government has an opportunity to step in. The NAEd report includes the now-common call for federal funding that enables every student to have equitable access to the internet and devices. But it also explains that the families most severely impacted by the pandemic need support beyond what stimulus packages have promised. They need ongoing services as well as funding for postsecondary education.

All of these strategies, the report explains, are critical if the pandemic is to become a catalyst for change rather than another blow to those with the fewest resources to withstand the storm.

NEPC Resources on Equity and Social Justice

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