

How Federal Education Aid Can Tackle The K-Shaped Learning Recovery: Let's Start With \$3000 Per Disengaged Student

[Marguerite Roza](#) 06:47pm EST



For many students, pandemic schooling isn't working.

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Each week brings [more calls](#) for another round of federal aid for public education. If more money comes—and it should—some of it needs to be deployed differently than it was with the CARES Act.

That's not to say the CARES act wasn't a success. It was. The early dollars

enabled districts to stand up a makeshift version of pandemic schooling—with digital devices and training for remote instruction, or plexiglass and air purification for modified in-person classes. Alongside these investments, tireless educators in thousands of districts across the country pivoted to keep millions of students learning.

But frustratingly, these efforts haven't worked for all students. What's critical now is funding to support those educators, administrators and entrepreneurs who are ready, willing and able to do whatever it takes to meet the needs of students for whom current efforts are failing.

Economists are describing a [K-shaped recovery](#) from the pandemic, where some industries and workers are bouncing back while others face a longer, more difficult recovery. This isn't just an analogy for America's workforce—it [applies to America's children](#) and their learning trajectories too.

Some households have adapted to pandemic schooling and students are continuing to learn (even if not at the same pace as they once were); their learning trajectories represent the upper leg of the K. For others—often students without means—pandemic schooling isn't working and the learning curve continues on a downward slope; they're on the lower leg of the K. Earlier this year it wasn't clear that the measures taken would leave so many children academically behind. But [data](#) now point to a dramatic [drop-off in learning](#) that looks to be [catastrophic](#) for [millions](#) of kids.

Let's be honest: the challenges go beyond access to a device and internet. For some children, a parent isn't able to [assist and support remote learning](#), or screen-based delivery hasn't worked for their learning needs. Some teens need more structure or in-person engagement to stay focused, especially when digital devices double as a gaming platform and a social media hub. Where in-person models are offered, some families aren't comfortable showing up.

As months go by, the problem is compounding for students on this lower leg of the K. Imagine a second grader who hasn't done any reading since March, or an algebra student trying to join a class on quadratic equations after missing the lessons on linear equations.

There are some who will argue that there's nothing more that can be done until vaccines allow schools to reopen fully. That response is simply not good enough.

And, it ignores the power of ingenuity being [unleashed in other industries](#), where entrepreneurs are finding ways to deliver in a pandemic. Restaurants are creating outdoor venues. [Retail pop-ups](#) come to residential neighborhoods. [Mobile health units](#) travel to those with unmet medical needs. And [innovative protective equipment](#) enables dentists to do their work. On the government side, parks departments are blocking off streets for parks in underserved communities.

Similar innovations are happening in education. [Outdoor schooling](#) models, [mobile classrooms](#), [pandemic pods](#), and [tutoring hubs](#) are all examples.

That brings me back to money. New federal aid would likely deliver some money directly to districts to backfill budgets, but addressing students on this lower leg of the K—I'll call them "disengaged" students—requires a dedicated sum that is structured differently.

That targeted aid should come in the form of a flexible sum: I propose \$3000 per disengaged student. Assuming 10% of students are on this lower leg, the total would be roughly \$15 billion (about equal to the annual Title I program).

State agencies or municipalities could then field applicants who are able to jump in to engage students in a way that provides a real chance of reversing learning loss. In many locales, that may mean funding non-traditional

providers, especially where the [district](#) or its workforce is [unable](#) or [unwilling](#) (e.g., per labor arrangements) to deliver services in person or in a way that works to target students to alter the learning trajectory. This is not a time for turf wars; rather, identifying and launching effective interventions requires an all-hands-on-deck approach.

States accepting the funds would need to [better track](#) exactly how many students are in need. Some might be “chronically absent” and others might be “attending” but not learning. When I contacted a few dozen districts around the country, few could tell me much beyond the basic fact that absenteeism is up. And continuing to measure student learning is a must, so our nation’s educators, researchers and policymakers [can learn](#) what works and what doesn’t to reverse the loss.

Time is critical. As we enter the winter months, for some students it’s been nearly a year of disengagement, and each day they’re sliding further behind. But a problem ignored doesn’t go away. Like interest on debt, it compounds. Let’s treat this as the emergency it is and move quickly to pay down that debt now before the damage is irreversible.