



March 2021

THE FUTURE OF SCHOOLING STARTS NOW



Leveraging the lessons of COVID-19 to meet the needs of all Arizona students through flexible, locally-driven school design

INTRODUCTION

The joint statement by Arizona Governor Doug Ducey and Superintendent of Public Instruction Kathy Hoffman on March 15, 2020 changed everything for students and their families, educators, and schooling itself.

The initial two-week physical closure of all school buildings in response to the worsening COVID-19 pandemic was very quickly extended to the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year. Schools transformed overnight to provide learning models that leveraged technology and flexibility to meet the needs of their students and families. Schools and school systems were also granted additional flexibility to meet a variety of statewide educational mandates. In this innovative environment, schools around Arizona developed a wide array of in-person and remote delivery models for education for the 2020-2021 school year. These models accommodated the numerous scenarios that communities, schools, teachers, and families found themselves in during the COVID-19 pandemic while keeping student learning and well-being at the fore.

Like most other aspects of daily life that accompanied the pandemic, responding to COVID-19 has led to an evolution of teaching and learning that is unequalled in scope. Schools exercised the ability to redesign the delivery and experience of education that came with the more flexible policy environment of the past year to better meet the needs of individual students and their families. In doing so, schools laid the foundation for transformational change to advance an excellent, resilient, and equitable education system needed for the future success of every child.

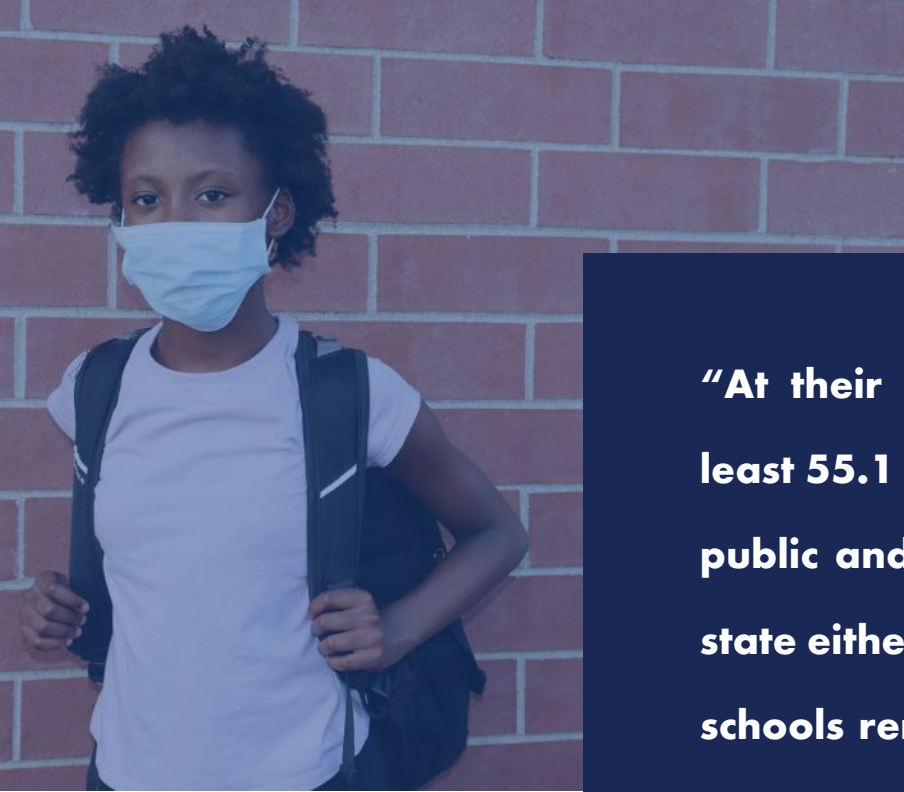
Many effective and innovative strategies surfaced during the last year – including productive ways for schools to maximize student learning time, improve their online and technology-enabled learning options, and efficiently spend their funds. Extending these practices will be necessary to allow schools to continue to transform Arizona’s educational system into one that meets the needs of every student and family.

We offer here a summary of this exciting work that deserves policymakers’ immediate attention as Arizona’s educators, families and students seek to protect new or promising practices made possible during this period of flexibility. We offer for consideration several flexibilities enacted in response to COVID-19 that, if made permanent, will support and enhance student learning and accelerate the ability of our educators to make bold, lasting change directly aimed at the success of every child.

“Today, we are jointly announcing the closure of all schools from Monday, March 16, 2020 through Friday, March 27, 2020. We will continue to work together and assess this situation on a 24/7 basis.”¹

**Arizona Governor Doug Ducey
& Superintendent of Public
Instruction Kathy Hoffman**





“At their peak, the closures affected at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 U.S. public and private schools. Nearly every state either ordered or recommended that schools remain closed through the end of the 2019-20 school year.”²

- EducationWeek

THE TASK AT HAND

On the heels of this national experience, there was swift consensus amongst educators and policymakers that flexibility in existing regulations was needed to serve students no longer physically walking into classrooms daily and to ensure the ongoing funding and operation of schools. Congress, governors, state superintendents, and state legislatures from coast to coast responded by developing remarkably similar plans to accommodate the massive upheaval of American schooling. The regulatory response to continuing learning during a pandemic was, rightly, to give educators maximum freedom to triage the needs of their students.

In Arizona, the response included temporary flexibility in terms of how schools and systems accounted for student learning time, expanded the definition of and support of quality virtual learning, and decreased restrictions on how schools and systems spent certain funds. Thus, by April 2020, traditional school design elements were modified, put on hold, or waived – resulting in a less-restrictive policy ecosystem that allowed schools and systems to respond more nimbly and effectively to the ever-changing context and better ensure student learning.

When school closures and regulatory flexibilities were extended into the 2020-2021 school year, many school and system leaders continued to make bold, resourceful, and locally-driven school design decisions that moved towards a truly personalized learning experience - allowing each student to learn at a pace and in a place that makes the most sense for them and their family.

In a months-long series of conversations with school and system leaders across Arizona, we consistently heard the need to preserve the best ideas that surfaced during one of the most challenging times in our schools' long history. Leaders shared that over the past year their educators learned a lot about student engagement, tailoring learning to the needs of every child, and effective 21st Century school design. Their teachers honed new skills and techniques to ensure all students are learning. All of which will be lost if the key policy waivers that created this innovative environment expire as scheduled this spring and are not made permanent.



Empower locally driven school designs, modify schooling in ways that matter for students & ensure flexible and highly transparent spending mechanisms

RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are our recommendations to empower locally-driven school design to meet the needs of all Arizona students and ensure high-quality learning:

1

**Rethink
"Seat Time" at the
school and student
level**

Accelerate strategies to tailor or personalize learning for students

2

**Modernize
the availability of
quality remote courses
and online learning**

Reduce hurdles to offering remote or virtual learning experiences

3

**Ensure
flexible and highly
transparent spending
mechanisms**

Lessen restrictions on spending categories while monitoring results

1 Rethink “Seat Time” at the School and Student Level

Of all the necessary changes below, our school and system leaders shared that reforming “seat time” is the most urgent. It is tied to many educational requirements, from how schools are funded to the number of minutes teachers have to teach each subject each day. It thus has implications for the other recommendations herein. It is for this reason that this paper dedicates considerable space to sharing both its history and the challenges it presents to educators.

Carnegie Units, known less formally as “seat time,” came on to the scene more than 100 years ago. In 1905, the Carnegie Foundation suggested standardizing the amount of time every student should attend each class, in order to guarantee every student “an opportunity to learn” as a massive expansion of education was underway.³ One Carnegie Unit was the equivalent of learning a subject for one hour a day, five days a week, for 24 weeks. In essence, it was an attempt to ensure that students received at least some common base of academic study in the high school and postsecondary systems that were emerging early in the 20th Century.



...while the universal and portable hour may make for a more efficient system, the unit also promotes the false perception that time equals learning, in the same way for all students.⁴

-Elena Silva, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

The Carnegie Foundation used its substantial resources to offer pension incentives for adoption of their seat time recommendation. Thus, the Carnegie Unit became the standard and eventually the law in most states.

However, more than 100 years later, despite agreement among academics and practitioners that “seat time” is neither a proxy for knowledge nor appropriate to apply to every student and every class in the same way, the Carnegie approach survives. In 1993, the Carnegie Foundation’s own President, Ernest Boyer, declared Carnegie Units “obsolete.” In 2013, Carnegie’s Elena Silva wrote, “Today, we have communication technologies that were inconceivable when Boyer was writing. We can deliver information anywhere, anytime, and to nearly anyone. Measuring student learning by “seat time” in this new educational era most certainly seems obsolete.” Around the same time, Arizona began the move away from this traditional construct to one that assigns credit for demonstration of competency in a given subject area. Some reports on implementation of Carnegie units show Arizona already having made some gains in moving away from it.

Yet, “seat time” – or the amount of time students spend in a classroom on a given subject – remains the primary driver for school funding, determining student attendance, and earning a promotion to the next grade. In other words, regardless of when a student is ready for new material, all students must put in the same amount of time each year, per grade, and per subject.

While time-on-task matters, defining that time to be the same for every student in a school system, school, or classroom fails students. This standard schedule for every student means students may be stalled when they’re ready to go faster and promoted before they’re ready to move on.

This system is particularly harmful for students who have learning gaps at the beginning of each year, because it may artificially limit the learning experiences they may experience in order to “catch up.”

Not only is “seat time” standardized according to the Carnegie Unit, but how students spend this time is also standardized.

Current Arizona policy draws hard lines between in-person and remote learning, ignores learning that happens out of the traditional classroom walls, and doesn't allow teachers to design in-classroom and independent studies that align with what individual students may need.

Compounding these challenges is that every student is forced to have the same school day structure, a challenge that the pandemic put in sharp relief.

Waivers of "seat time"^{5,6,7} restrictions on how schools and systems accounted for learning time allowed educators to respond with creative approaches, but the solutions were all developed within the confines of temporary waivers.

The answer to this problem is a personalized learning approach that allows students to move at their own pace with supports and enrichment opportunities to thrive. To accomplish this goal, the broader recommendation to reform seat time must ensure the following:

Expand Mastery-Based Learning

● Mastery-based learning is not one model. There are many ways to offer a mastery or competency-based approach to education. The common thread for mastery-based systems is that students move on to the next learning concept when they are ready, not when the school calendar tells them to. This might mean mixed grade classrooms or additional time for academic interventions or enrichment experiences. Forcing students to go too slow or too fast in their learning journey is, in large part, a by-product of "seat time" and an outdated "one-size-fits-all" approach to education that we have known for far too long does not support student success. Moving students through the K-12 system as they learn and not on pre-determined calendars is critical to student progress and success.

Untangle Funding From a Single Definition of "Seat Time"

● School funding is tied to student attendance and rigid definitions of attendance and instructional time requirements for the amount of time students in a given grade level must spend in school.⁸ This lack of flexibility in the law is compounded by the way the statute is managed by the Arizona Department of Education. Regulators convert statutory requirements for annual seat time into hard requirements for the length of courses and days, which in turn, are then applied by schools to every student in the exact same way. Thus, in many cases, each student spends the same time in each class, ignoring opportunities for students to devote more coursework to areas of interest or areas needing additional study. A clear statutory framework for "seat time" flexibilities should be fashioned to allow schools to implement personalized approaches and not have to worry about funding implications.

Ensure New Flexibilities for the Time and Place of Learning

● Schools need room not just to vary the amount of time spent in courses for each student, but also to account for varied times of day and place for learning. During physical school closures, students worked independently on academic projects outside of the regular school day and attended class – by viewing recorded lectures or completing independent studies – at non-traditional times. Many school leaders shared that the regulatory adjustments led to more engaged learners, reduced student attrition, and allowed students to be responsible for their own learning. Expanding when and where learning occurred led to school redesigns and new models centered around best meeting the student's learning and families' needs. This was the first time educators had the space to define attendance based on activities of learning, not just time in seats, without concerns regarding school funding. This flexibility must be continued.

It is important to note that all of the above instances maintain the statutory amount of required learning time. "Seat time flexibility" should not be construed as reducing learning time for students, but rather ensuring that the student-centered teaching and learning approaches that developed during the pandemic, which leveraged the 21st Century reality that learning can happen at various times, paces, and places, should be allowed to continue in a post-COVID world.

In sum, there is no evidence that forcing every student to spend the same exact amount of time in every class for 13 years leads to student success and preparation to be ready for life after high school. Amend Arizona law to make seat time more inclusive of all the strategies that work for students so that lessons, learning days, and school years do not continue to fail students.

2

Quality Online & Remote Learning

In 1998, Arizona passed a pilot program allowing four schools to offer online and remote learning to students. In 2009, Arizona made online learning a permanent part of the education landscape – making it no longer just a pilot program. However, online learning was not made broadly available for traditional brick-and-mortar schools to blend into their school days. It was compartmentalized for students and schools, and learning was defined as either solely online or in-person – a sharp contrast to how technology was being broadly embraced and seamlessly integrated into daily life across America outside of schools, including for remote work across industries.

In the decade that followed, schools - scrambling to keep up with demand from students for online content and responding to an educational technology marketplace that provided more and more quality virtual learning platforms - had to apply to the state and spend thousands of dollars to be defined as “Arizona Online Instruction” schools, even if their primary delivery mode was in-person.

During the initial physical school building closures in Spring 2020, the lack of digital and remote options integrated into the regular school day added to the incredible lift schools had to make when all of Arizona’s public school students transitioned to schooling from home in response to the pandemic.

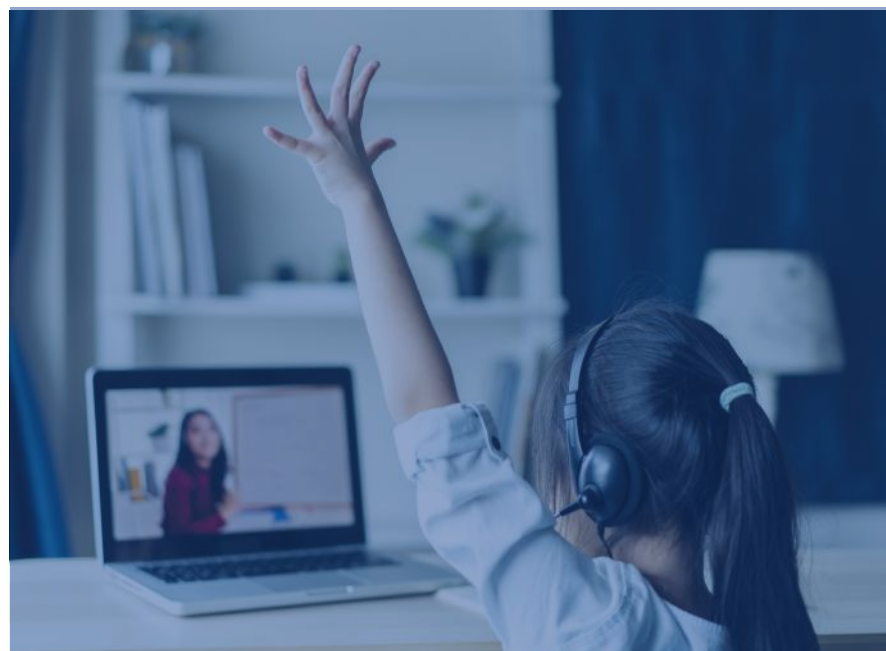
The COVID-19 school building closures triggered an overdue but temporary waiver from some of the regulatory barriers for online education that had prevented broad access to modern tools and strategies for education leaders and led to a massive investment in technology devices and tools. The need for all students and educators to utilize best practices of online instruction as a result of building closures exposed a lack of access to digital content, broadband, computers, a lack of training for educators, and a need to blend traditional school with the digital and remote activities – all of which could be best-facilitated by a redefinition of “Arizona Online Instruction.”

In other words, being able to accommodate the individual needs of individual learners requires the tools of the day to be more readily available – not as separate from schools and the school day, but as part of it. School closures revealed the depth to which students and educators had been distanced from online learning as well as the lack of best instructional practices and robust content options.

Technology can bring a classroom teacher virtually into your home, allow students to re-watch lessons as well as access rigorous content not available at their school, allow learning during non-traditional hours, and bring relevance to students. Research supports that online learning options for students and families who choose them can be just as effective as in-person learning.^{9,10} The traditional regulatory approach, though, limited the natural growth of high-quality and affordable digital and remote content.



**Modernize the
quality and
delivery of
remote courses
and online
learning to be
responsive to
the learning
needs of
students**



Unlike when online instruction was first introduced in Arizona twenty-two years ago, we now know the role technology and digital content play in our lives. Our regulatory approach must catch up. Just as important, schools are using technology in new ways and have drastically invested in the tools and strategies technology provides. They cannot be asked to turn back the clock to February 2020. This recommendation requires action from the Legislature and regulators to do the following:

End the practice of forcing schools with in-person options to become “online” schools in order to offer online content and remote learning

By forcing schools to draw hard lines between in-person and online delivery of instruction, we limit the ability of educators to seamlessly integrate technology and remote learning into their plans for teaching and learning in order to meet the needs of every child. Allowing for blending learning within public schools will enable leadership to develop partners for accessing online content and to have contracts with other public schools to share pre-approved high-quality content on an as needed basis.

Ensure that “seat time” definitions allow for continued hybrid or blended learning – a model that includes both in-person and virtual learning

Where students learn is far less important than if students learn. Policymakers need to make sure remote learning experiences can be counted for attendance and that remote learning can be a part of a student’s course or school day without the school having to worry about not receiving funding for that student.

To advance integration of in-person and remote options, end differentiation in accountability systems

Online schools have a different accountability system. As more schools and districts combine the best elements of in-person and virtual instruction, or offer both options, policymakers must ask whether this separation is still necessary. This will allow schools to use online content and remote learning options in a way that makes sense, while still holding them accountable for their results.



3 Ensure Flexible & Highly Transparent Spending Mechanisms

Physical school closures, a shift to tailored and more personalized learning, revamped virtual learning, and mitigation of any the COVID-related “learning loss” require flexible teaching and learning options and also flexible spending authority.

In recent years, Arizona has provided additional flexibility in how public schools may spend their funds. However, funding silos survive, mostly through regulation, and limit the ability of school leaders to respond to the needs of their students and teachers.

While schools are rightly still accountable for their use of public funds, narrow funding parameters and directions on how to account for expenditures have the effect of limiting the efficient usage of public education dollars. For example, due to

regulations on their expenditures, schools spent money on buses they didn't need during a pandemic, instead of using the funding for new computers and science labs or smaller, more efficient fleet vehicles.

When learning, transportation, or meal needs change, school systems cannot be responsive. Funding formulas and agency-created processes enact requirements not clearly prescribed in law and push education and schooling operation decisions to state administrators that should be localized.

When the tail wags the dog, policymakers should step in.

Many of the recommendations in this paper reverse course on some of those practices. However, a longer-term effort must be made to ensure agencies are making school expenditures flexible, extremely transparent, and publicly accessible. What happens in practice with school funding reporting and directions is not only a mystery to many, but a barrier for educators engaged in the critical work of school redesign.

This flexibility would lead to more innovation and increase efficiencies. The unexpected remote learning needs of students has schools maxing out spending for capital needs like technology devices and finding themselves with leftover funding in other portions of the budget that regulation does not allow them access that would allow them to serve their students even better.

Possible solutions for policymakers and agencies:

Authorize waivers to release trapped resources in the short term



Provide district and charter schools opportunities to refine their budgets on short notice and to have a process with state regulators on shifting unused resources to priority needs.

Work with our federal partners to ease current application of federal regulations for how to spend federal funds and interpretations of supplanting at the local level



Current practice makes it very difficult for schools to move funds around as conditions change on the ground.

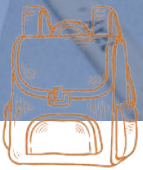
Double down on the work to increase transparency of spending at the school level and do more to empower principals and teaching teams in school budgeting



The variation of need across Arizona schools has widened during the pandemic, but the intricacies of budgets make school customization difficult. It is within the Legislature's power to fix this. In 2017, the Legislature passed school level budget transparency but progress has been slow. Accelerate the work to increase school-based budgeting and the transparency of funding and expenditure decisions that should go with it.



We can build an education system that develops the unique full potential of each child



CONCLUSION

2020 was the year incredibly challenging circumstances for schools and communities distanced us from the dated notion that a single model of education works for all students. We can build an education system that develops the unique full potential of each child - engaging and empowering them in their own learning, providing them with the flexible time they need to learn, and providing multiple pathways to success.

Informed by conversations with our state's top school and system leaders, the recommendations in this paper guide a new path forward. With policymakers supporting their work, educators want and are ready for this next chapter.

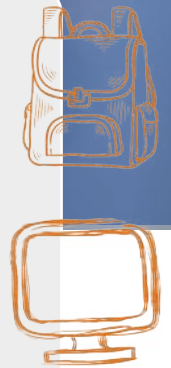
Teachers and school leaders across Arizona already began this journey by making changes to meet the needs of students as a result of the increased flexibility they had to respond to the pandemic. Policymakers now can do their part by making these flexibilities permanent.

We hope this paper catalyzes some of these changes so that the future of schooling really does start now.



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