



Recovery and Renewal in Three California School Districts

Working Paper - Early Findings

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RECOVERY AND RENEWAL IN THREE CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Summary

California districts have received billions of new public dollars to maintain operations during the pandemic – guarding against illness, avoiding layoffs, even to undertake new programs advanced by state policy makers. Confronted by daunting local challenges, how did district leaders and school principals allocate these large infusions of new funding? What internal deliberations yielded varying budget priorities? What internal deliberations yielded varying budget priorities? Who at district and school levels decides how to focus new dollars on recovery and renewal activities?

We found that district leaders engaged in a blend of *institutional maintenance* and *recovery activities* – especially health and safety measures for children and families, along with the return to in-person classrooms in the 2021-22 school year, based on our periodic interviews and site visits inside three districts. This report details the varying ways in which district leaders and principals set their fiscal and educational priorities to protect students and families, while adapting to harsh and uncertain conditions.

We also discovered a variety of *organizational and pedagogical innovations*, supported by federal and state dollars, including digitally enhanced teaching, hiring of new staff (teachers and instructional aides), newfound attention to the holistic well-being of students, deeper ties with parents and even rethinking the school day. The district leaders and principals, interviewed over a 16-month period, expressed distinct interest in sustaining many innovations, while expressing skepticism over the state’s new initiatives – faced with an uncertain fiscal future, shaky enrollment levels, and fragile teacher morale after a grueling two years.

Moving forward, this report delineates a variety of institutional practices or mediators that may help to explain whether and when sizable infusions of new dollars enable schools to recover “lost learning” and narrow persisting disparities in student achievement. How California districts labor to recover from the pandemic and renew teaching and learning is the tandem focus of our long-term study.

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Backdrop – Emerging from the Pandemic, Innovating in Uncertain Contexts

California educators began to recover and regroup in 2021-22, following months of recurring closures and sporadic teaching online. This report details how district leaders and school principals emerged from this unprecedented era – regaining their institutional footing and deepening pedagogical innovations that sprouted during the pandemic. It proved to be a period of recovery, mixed with inventive renewal, during the 16 months that we visited and interviewed educators in three districts.

We began our interviews (remotely) in spring 2021, one year after the nationwide closure of schools and shift to online instruction. Many California schools – cautiously attempting to reopen – then suffered from recurring shutdowns, bouts of illness among students and teachers, and death inside many families. We met many courageous and resilient educators who reopened their classrooms under dreadful and uncertain conditions.

Still, by fall 2021 district leaders were redoubling efforts to stay open, buoyed by rising vaccination rates in California. Most students returned to in-person classrooms during the 2021-22 year in and around periodic closures and quarantines. As our site visits began, we discovered that administrators remained preoccupied with safety conditions – setting-up testing stations, distributing masks, and corralling antsy students through hallways and playgrounds to minimize social contact.

Conditions did evolve in two promising ways. First, unprecedented levels of federal and state aid began flowing to local districts in 2020. Three rounds of federal stimulus would eventually provide more than \$32 billion to California schools – above and beyond annual state revenues – an investment that remains available to local districts through 2024.¹ California’s state government sent billions of additional dollars to local districts, covering the cost of safety measures, avoiding teacher layoffs, and soon pressing to lengthen the school day for “expanded learning opportunities”.

Stimulus efforts also helped sustain a surprisingly strong economy, driving up state revenues that brought additional (unrestricted) dollars to districts via Local Control Funding. Overall, core state spending per pupil has more than doubled since 2014, rising from just under \$8,000 per student to over \$17,000 in current dollars, not including the federal infusions, detailed below.²

In addition, the Covid plague proved to be the mother of all invention. Educators began to innovate during the era of remote instruction – pursuing novel teaching practices, better organizing instruction with digital technologies, and arranging more time in small groups to serve disadvantaged or disabled children. Teachers and principals told us they have built stronger relationships with parents, sharing online tools to clarify weekly assignments, build trust, and promote careful monitoring of homework.

The two years following school closures in March 2020 were exhausting and upsetting in many ways – but this massive disruption prompted an unprecedented array of innovations – from how the school day is organized to how teachers enliven instruction – as we detail in this report. Whether promising innovations persist, and a “new normal” takes shape inside schools offers a ripe question for future research.

¹ Legislative Analyst, (2022a).

² This represents a 116% boost in per pupil spending in Proposition 98 allocations. The consumer price index rose 17% during the period, 2014-2022. Reported by the California Legislative Analyst’s Office.

Our three rounds of interviews and multiple site visits engaged district leaders, school principals, and teacher leaders over the 16-month period. We heard first about how all the fresh funding aimed to protect children and families from illness or death, efforts to minimize health risks for families that unfolded well into the 2021-22 school year. We heard much about learning loss and how to better serve students falling behind.

Many educators with whom we spoke grew more aware of the emotional well-being of students, recognizing the human loss suffered in families and (longer-term) the holistic nature of children’s development. Educators reported new ways of organizing classrooms, aided by the embrace of digital tools, or inventive ways of arranging instructional time, especially for pupils who had disengaged or fallen behind.

One part of our long-term study will estimate how differing patterns of district spending may help raise the achievement and social well-being of students. The present qualitative study begins to illuminate how certain investments – shaped by local institutional practices – may lift teachers and student learning in discernible ways. It’s these inside-the-district processes that *mediate* how additional funds have been allocated. District leaders enjoy wide latitude in how to distribute their new funding, along with whether principals and school-level leaders make key allocation decisions. The present report begins to uncover shared institutional conditions or practices that lend order to allocation decisions – which may bear on conditions for stronger student learning. Our field work in three districts (ending June 2022) points to mechanisms that link novel investments with classroom practices and pupil performance.

Main Take-Aways

The wealth of qualitative evidence resulting from our interviews and school visits yields five key findings:

- District leaders were required to keep returning to the basic *safety of students, families, and staff* during the 2021-22 school year. Even when jump-starting in-person instruction, district administrators and principals helped to sustain testing stations for families, spent days and days engaged in contact tracing, and scrambled to keep classrooms open when teachers fell ill. In short, recovery efforts stalled, given the exigencies of public health.
- Federal stimulus and new state dollars were typically divided between these *safety efforts* and distinct *organizational reforms* that had emerged since March 2020. All three districts participating in our study moved to hire classified staff – classroom aides, counselors and therapists, and playground supervisors -- relieving burdens felt by teachers and opening time for inservice training on novel pedagogical adjustments.

Two districts hired certified teachers and instructional specialists, budget managers girding to face associated long-term costs. Worries over the loss of learning sparked a variety of pedagogical innovations: formative assessments of kids’ learning, digital innovations to enliven class sessions, small-group work with disadvantaged pupils. Leaders in all three districts shifted attention to the emotional well-being of students, and educators concentrated on teaching to “essential standards” as the return of state testing loomed.

- Management practices driving local budget allocations varied considerably among districts – especially the extent to which district leaders *decentralized discretion* to principals in shaping spending priorities. Awarding decision-making authority to school-level leaders complicates how we assess the efficacy of federal stimulus and new state dollars. It led to a wider variety of allocation patterns and between-school priorities in decentralized districts.
- New *state initiatives received mixed reviews* as local educators worried about the return to centrally regulated categorical financing, newly shaped by Sacramento policy makers. District leaders welcomed dollars attached to the Expanded Learning Opportunity (ELO) grants and program. But superintendents and top deputies remained unsure that a nine-hour school day would be the “silver bullet” to address learning recovery. Severe labor shortages – even for classroom or playground aides – reportedly hamper implementation of ELO, after-school enrichment, and expansion of Transitional Kindergarten (TK). Two districts decided to contract with local nonprofits for enrichment activities rather than hiring long-term district staff. (The bulk of new federal and state aid during the pandemic held few restrictions on how it was spent, as detailed below.)
- More *frequent contact with parents* emerged as digital tools allowed steady messaging and easy access to homework assignments and student work. The use of video conferencing reportedly yielded stronger parent participation for meetings between teachers and families, along with town halls with large numbers of parents and guardians in at least one district.

In short, we detail how three districts began to recover from the pandemic, while culling through and sustaining a variety of organizational reforms. Fresh funding from federal and state agencies ensured the return to in-person teaching and helped spark innovations that may prove effective in lifting student learning and well-being. In short, during our 16 months inside these districts, we observed resilient efforts to recover institutionally and kindle a spirit of renewal..

Organization of Findings

This report is organized into three sections. First, we describe the contexts surrounding the sampled districts as they entered the 2021-22 school year. Basic characteristics of each district are reported as well. Second, we elaborate on the core findings sketched above, stemming from three rounds of district visits and interviews with district leaders and school principals. Third, we discuss implications for local educators and state policy makers – as school leaders regroup, foster renewed morale and innovate in possibly sustained. You will hear in their voices that economic uncertainties, declining enrollments, and new state mandates add complexity as districts endeavor to recover and renew.

Our research is motivated by a consequential question: As billions of new dollars have flowed into California schools, how have these resources helped schools maintain operations and recover from the Covid era? Then, as innovations took root in schools, how are educators sustaining innovations to help lift student learning? We also hope to describe the conditions under which educators have devised promising innovations. Overall, this report clarifies initial evidence to inform our longer running study conducted inside a larger count of districts.

1. Three California Districts Regroup

California schools shut down in mid-March 2020 – initiating what became a familiar and distressing story. At least four-fifths of the state’s districts continued to rely on remote instruction during fall 2020. Yet, by May 2021 just over half (51 percent) the state’s districts reported that all grades had reopened for in-person teaching back in classrooms.³ Urban school districts were slower to reopen. Districts remained closed for 75 additional days, on average, where at least three-fourths of students enrolled were of African American or Latino heritage, compared with all other districts. (Multiple studies show that achievement gaps grew wider in districts that remained closed for longer periods.⁴)

Our team began contacting California districts in winter 2021, aiming to inform three interwoven questions. First, we hoped to learn how new federal and state dollars were being allocated by district leaders and school principals.

Second, our earlier study had uncovered a wide range of innovations months into remote instruction – reshaping how the school day was organized, relying more on small-group work (online) to buoy disadvantaged kids, enriching formative assessment, and organizing curricular materials within digital software, often combined with digital tools that enlivened instruction.⁵ We were curious about whether these early adaptations and inventive practices might improve teaching and learning as the pandemic eased.

Third, we aimed to understand why budget allocations and organizational innovations varied among districts. That is, what contextual or leadership dynamics lead to varying budget priorities and spending patterns – fueled by sizeable dollops of new funding – among districts and between schools? New funding set the conditions for organizational innovation, but organizational practices likely varied in ways that may enrich teaching and learning post-pandemic.

Selecting and Learning from Districts

We contacted several districts – set in differing parts of California – to inquire about their openness to multiple rounds of interviews and site visits from our team. This would require generosity and trust expressed by candidate districts. One local superintendent reached out to us, following publication of our first report on school innovation during the pandemic. A second was known for its innovative character, focusing on student mastery of specific proficiencies where students work with learning facilitators. The third district eventually selected was moving inventively to get teachers up to speed on digital tools during the first year of school closures. They proved open to a deeper dive into their budget practices and organizational inventions.

The resulting three districts – those agreeing to participate – should not be considered representative of California’s diverse local education authorities. But these three districts do manifest significant variety in their budget priorities, methods for making allocation decisions, and types of organizational and pedagogical innovations they pioneered and shared with us.

³ Herrera, Starr, Prunty and Gao (2022).

⁴ Empirical evidence summarized by Kane (2022).

⁵ Our earlier study details several remarkable innovations mounted by 18 California charter schools, including novel ways of organizing the instructional day and using digital tools to enliven classroom teaching, monitor student progress, and speak with parents more frequently (Fuller, Bridges, Du, & Pardos, 2021). A [video](#) summary of these result is available.

Our research team began interviews with district superintendents and top staff by spring 2021, conducted on Zoom or in-person as the pandemic let up. We focused on lead district staff who made key budget decisions, along with teaching-learning specialists who fostered adaptation to remote instruction and fostered innovations. A year later – by early spring, 2022 – conditions had eased, allowing site principals to participate in interviews or focus groups. (Leaders in all three districts granted principals varying levels of discretion in setting budget priorities, adapting to community contexts, and pursuing organizational change as we detail below.)

At least three team members attended each interview or focus group that we conducted during our 16 months of field work. This resulted in more than 100 pages of field notes that we coded for major themes and findings. We ran an inter-coder reliability check to establish consensus and sufficient reliability among researchers in how we interpreted quotes from participants and key results (see Methods Appendix). The coded results inform the five areas of findings that surfaced among our participating districts as we detail below.

District Profiles

The three selected districts are geographically dispersed across the state and serve a diverse variety of students and families. Let’s first look at their basic characteristics, then examine their fiscal position as new federal and state dollars arrived in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. Table 1 offers a brief summary of these attributes.

Table 1. Basic characteristics of three sampled districts

	Enrollment	Annual budget (2021-22)	Students eligible for free or reduced price meals (FRPM)	English learners
Lindsay Unified	4,000	\$109 million	89%	37%
Milpitas Unified	10,072	\$169 million	29%	24%
So.Cal Unified	24,213	\$419 million	42%	20%
State average (unified’s)	10,732	\$213 million	58%	19%

Source: Department of Education CALPADS UPC Source File, 2021-22; SACS annual unaudited actual, 2020-21..

Lindsay Unified, situated between Fresno and Bakersfield, has innovated over the past two decades to help students master learning proficiencies at their own pace, steadily guided by “learning facilitators”. The district primarily serves a low-income Latino community, enrolling about 4,000 students each year in this rural part of the Central Valley. Fifty-three percent are considered English learners, and nine in 10 are eligible for free or reduced price meals (FRPM). Two-fifths of parents residing in the district have not graduated from high school.

District leaders aim to elevate their community, offering meals and health care, raising new teachers from within, and reaching out to parents. The district was innovating long before the Covid era, achieving notable results for students through a mix of conventional classes and personalized learning – tied to moving all kids toward state learning standards. Lindsay Unified operates on a yearly budget of \$77 million, hosting six elementary schools, one regular and one continuation high school.

Milpitas Unified, located north of San Jose, hosts two child development centers, 10 elementaries, two middle and two high schools. A new “middle-college” site fosters postsecondary coursework for students who still

attend high school. Total enrollment, declining slightly, stands at just over 10,000 students. More than one-fifth are designated English learners. The district has experienced an influx of refugees from Central America and was piloting a tailored curriculum for these students just prior to the pandemic. Twenty-nine percent of all Milpitas pupils are FRPM eligible, yet families served range from impoverished to affluent parents working nearby in Silicon Valley.

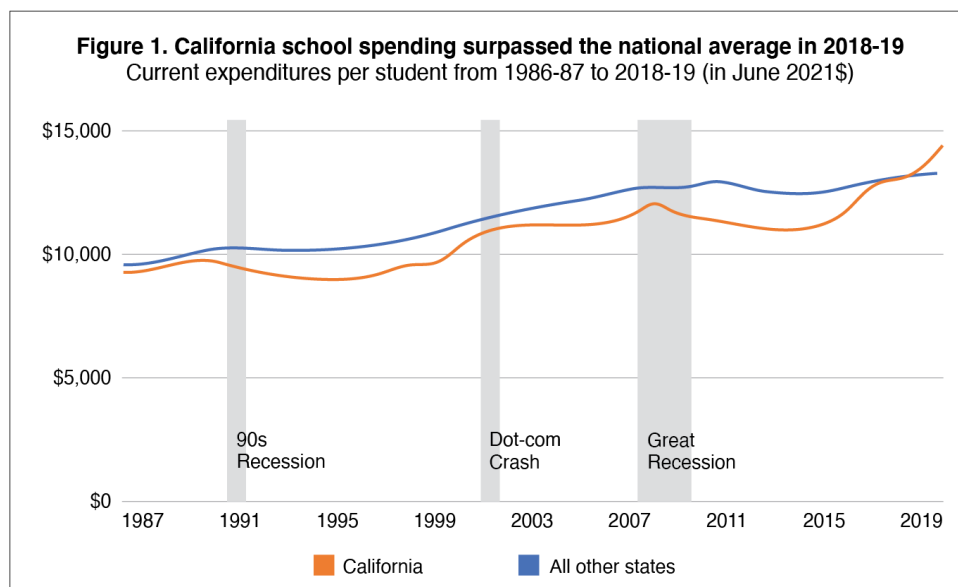
The district’s annual budget equaled \$118 million in 2021-22. A single dual-language campus serves children entering Transitional Kindergarten. A new “innovation campus” broke ground this year and will offer programs in STEM, art and design, digital tools, and job apprenticeships for high school students, building from the community-school model. Over 85 percent of students reported feeling safe and supported by teachers in a recent climate survey.

So.Cal Unified, located in Los Angeles County, served more than 24,000 students in 2021, including a diverse range of low-income and affluent families. One-fifth of So.Cal’s pupils are classified as English learners, and 46 percent qualify for free or reduced price meals (FRPM). The district has long innovated with dual-language programs, currently hosting seven different languages, including Spanish, Mandarin, and European languages.

The district operates 10 pre-K programs, 20 elementary schools, four middle and four high schools, funded by a \$298 million annual budget in 2021-22. A well-staffed teaching and learning office distinguishes So.Cal, helping to foster pedagogical innovations, such as project-based learning and “flipping” classrooms so that students prepare at home for more complex instruction at school. District leaders preferred to remain anonymous for purposes of this report.

Budget Revenues

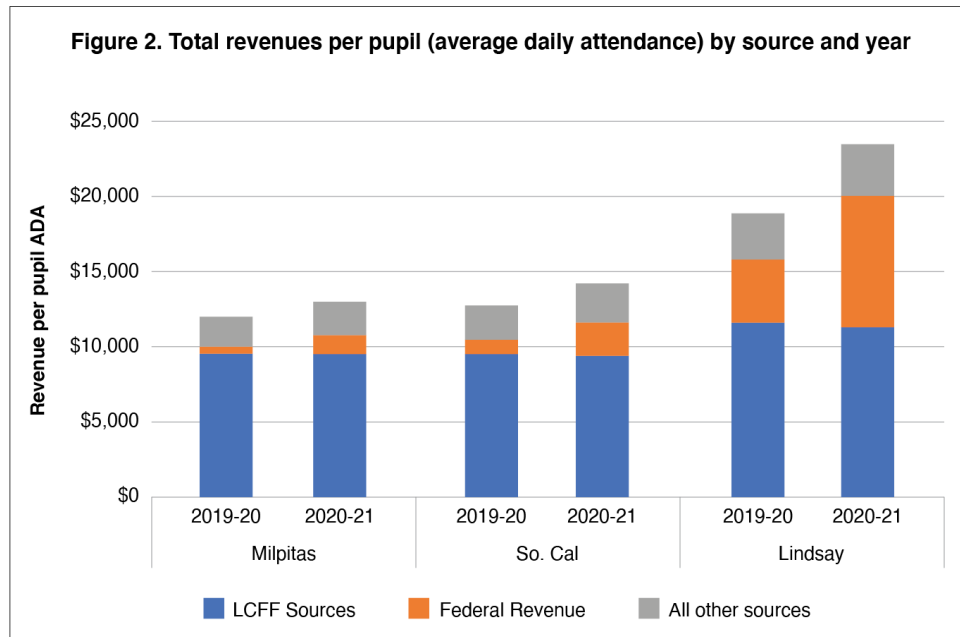
Our inquiry occurred as billions of new dollars arrived to local school districts, financing essential efforts to protect the health of families and teachers, along with sustaining remote or returning to in-person instruction. Notably, education spending was on the rise well before the pandemic. In the 2018-19 school year, California surpassed the national average in total spending per pupil, climbing to over \$14,000 in current dollars (Figure 1).



Source: Lafortune & Herrera (2022).

Four years later, total allocations (including federal aid, most expiring in 2024) reached over \$21,000 per student, including more than \$17,000 in state Proposition 98 funding, according to the legislative budget analyst.⁶

Turning to our case-study districts, all three enjoyed gains in total funding prior to and during the pandemic. California’s state government supplemented federal support of basic health and safety efforts mounted by district leaders (Figure 2). So.Cal and Milpitas each received about \$10,000 in LCF dollars per pupil in 2021-22. Lindsay approached \$13,000 per pupil in LCF funding, largely due to serving a greater concentration of low-income families.



Source: California Department of Education. Analysis by Public Policy Institute of California

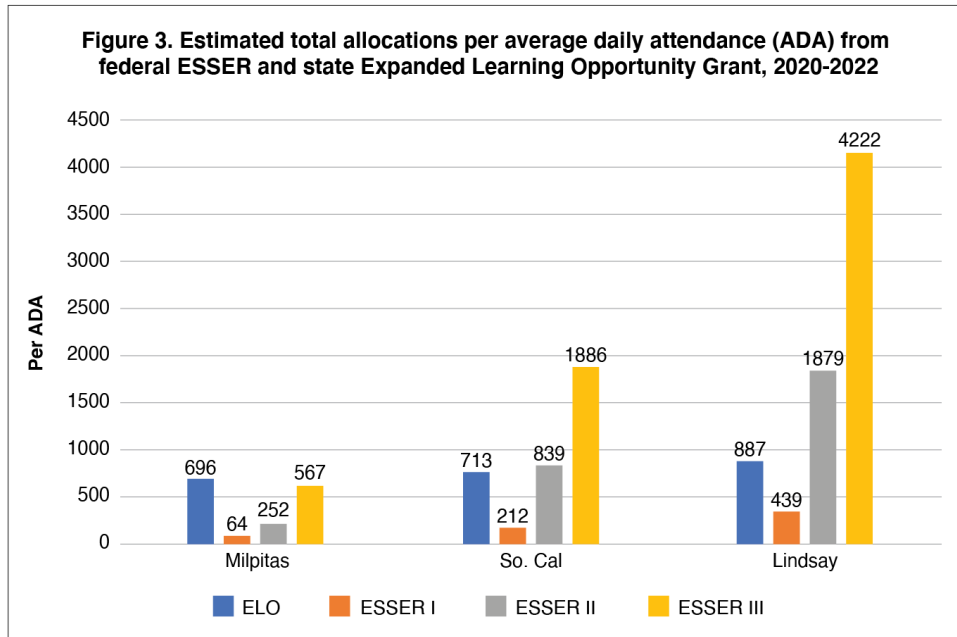
All three districts benefited from gains in federal revenues. Per pupil revenue grew to nearly \$15,000 in So.Cal for 2020-21. Lindsay received about \$24,000 per pupil, thanks largely to gains in federal spending tied to child poverty. Here revenues from the state’s Expanded Learning Opportunity (ELO) program and grants are included in “all other sources”.

Figure 3 breaks-out district allocations for the state’s ELO initiative and three tranches of federal stimulus under the Elementary and Secondary Education Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. These totals are estimates for the 2020-2022 period. The third dollop of federal funding, ESSER III, was the largest single allocation, arriving to districts in 2021 and available for spending through 2024. In June 2022 the state allocated another \$7.9 billion to California districts under the Learning Recovery Emergency Fund.

Federal ESSER funding remains quite flexible in how districts may opt to allocate these dollars, set against local spending priorities. State funding for ELO reflects lawmakers’ confidence that lengthening instructional time will help students rebound from the pandemic, along with spurring pedagogical improvements to lift poorly achieving students. This includes mandating a nine-hour school day and requires after-school programming that attempts to buoy children’s learning curves. You will hear below the voices of district and school leaders who

⁶ Lafortune and Herrera, 2022; Legislative Analyst, 2022.

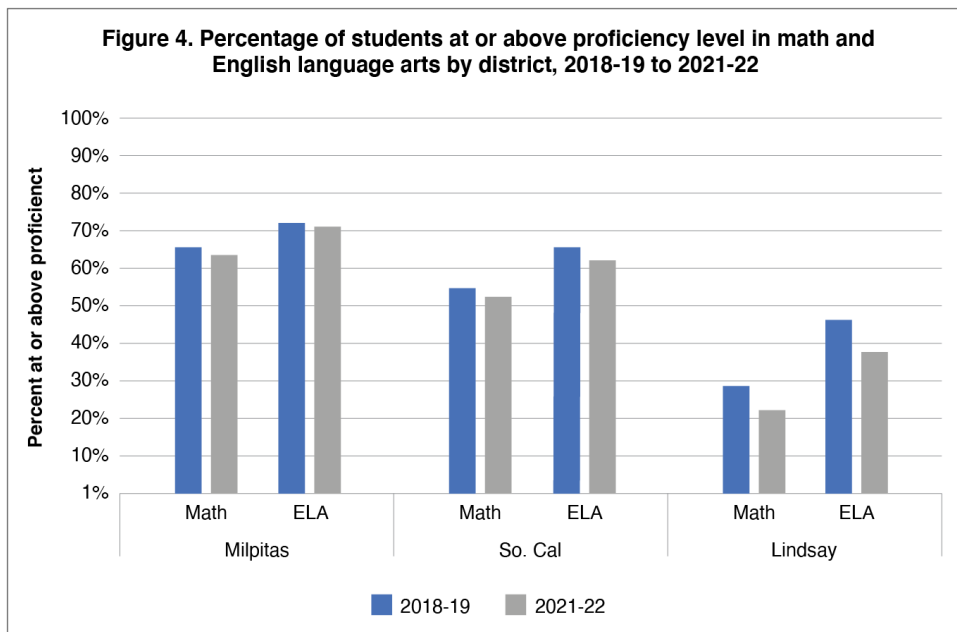
express concern over Sacramento’s return to “categorical aid”, where program contours are defined in the state capital and become centrally regulated. That said, the bulk of new funding from the state – now moving above the national average – has been unrestricted over the past decade.



Source: California State Department of Education

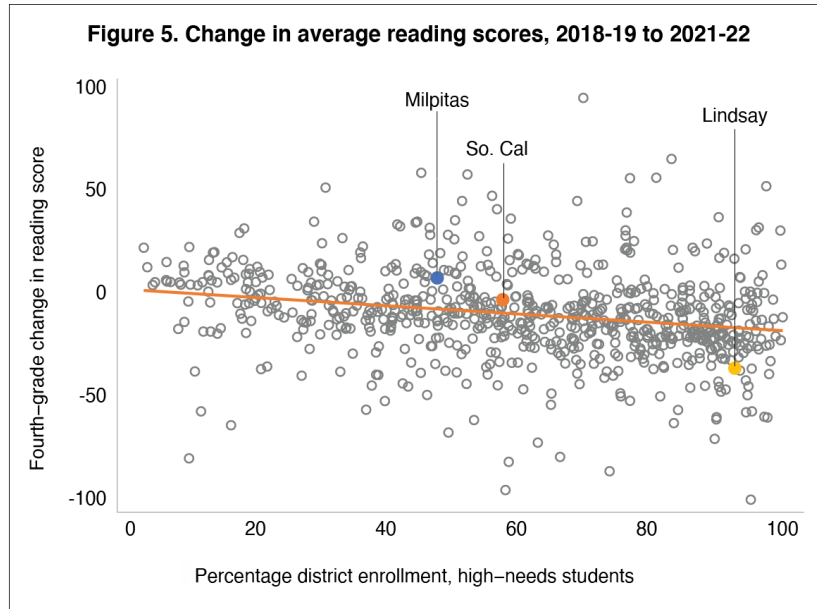
Student Achievement

Levels of student proficiency in reading and mathematics vary among the three districts. Figure 4 displays the percentage of students at or above proficiency for each district in 2018-19, one year prior to the pandemic. Milpitas students slightly outperform peers in Lindsay and SoCal districts. But remember these cross-sectional scores for one year are sensitive to the racial and social-class background of children and their families.



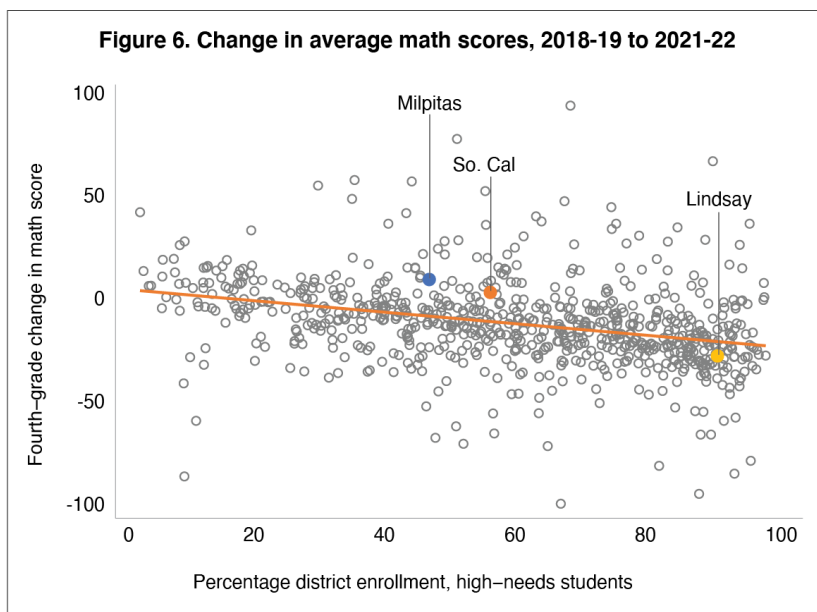
Source: SBAC proficiency rates, California Department of Education, 2019-2020. Fewer than 10 students took the math tests in Lindsay Unified, so data are suppressed by the CDE.

To gauge how students fared during the Covid era, we estimated average change in reading and math scores for California’s one thousand school districts between 2018-19 and 2021-22, then located our three study districts (Figure 5). Each circle represents a school district. The downward sloping line reflects the average decline in fourth-grade reading scores for differing percentages of high-needs students (x-axis) among the state’s districts. The falling slope captures how average declines (“learning loss”) during the pandemic were more severe in districts hosting greater shares of high-needs students, defined as “unduplicated” disadvantaged kids under the state’s finance structure.



We see that students in Milpitas and SoCal fall above the line, indicating that their decline in reading scores was less than the state’s average decline. For Lindsay, their students declined a bit more than the average erosion in reading scores.

Figure 6 displays the same dynamics, but for math scores in the fourth grade. The pattern is quite similar: the decline in average test scores was moderated in Milpitas and SoCal. Whereas in Lindsay, students suffered from a bit more learning loss than the average decline statewide, even when compared to similarly low-income school districts.



Ideally, we can identify the organizational factors that help to explain these differences in achievement over time. This variation in “learning loss” was not solely driven by infusions of new funding. Recall that Lindsay received the biggest boost in federal and state dollars during the Covid era. Yet, their students fell (modestly) below state averages.

The present report and future work, then, begin to identify district practices and school-level innovations that may contribute to the magnitude of achievement declines and the comparative success of districts in regaining their momentum to raise student learning.

2. Fresh Funding Arrives – Recovery and Innovation in Districts and Schools

Let’s turn next to how district leaders and school principals describe their recovery from the pandemic and months of remote instruction – interrupted by closing classrooms, running testing stations, and scrambling to find enough healthy teachers as they returned to in-person teaching. These local educators had much to say about setting budget priorities during uncertain times, along with embracing a variety of organizational and pedagogical innovations that took root inside schools.

This section reports on common patterns and variation in district practices, tracking against five bins of key findings. We illuminate how five core dynamics emerged from March 2021 through June 2022 – as district leaders:

- Remained swamped by recurring basic *health and safety challenges* for much of the 2021-22 school year.
- Distributed new federal and state dollars among *institutional maintenance, health and safety, and innovative efforts* aimed at motivating and lifting student achievement.
- Made key budget and program decisions within the district office while awarding principals varying discretion in shaping recovery and renewal efforts – *balancing centralized leadership with decentralized authority* for principals.
- *Adjusted to new state mandates* – the ELO program and expansion of Transitional Kindergarten – creating demands for new instructional staff within tight labor markets and long-term fiscal uncertainty.
- *Reached out to parents* via steadier channels, aided by digital innovations and signaling a broader role for children and families in tracking asynchronous homework and improving communication with teachers.

We highlight budget actions and innovations *shared across the districts*, along with *variation* in how district leaders and principals invested rising levels of federal and state support.

Returning to Classrooms, Persisting Health Threats

District leaders remained preoccupied with ensuring the health and safety of students, families, and staff members during much of the 2021-22 school year. Many teachers were forced to isolate due to illness or quarantine due to Covid exposure, prompting a frantic search for substitute teachers. Our interviews were often postponed as district staff were assigned to cover classrooms with regular teachers out.

In this context, significant shares of federal funding went for the purchase of masks, testing stations, and outreach to families well into 2022. Several principals that we interviewed reported spending days and days

contact-tracing after students or teachers tested positive for Covid-19. District leaders negotiated with local health departments to shift responsibility for testing and vaccination stations back to county governments. Still, core health and safety measures recurrently dominated the time and budgets of district leaders and principals.

Funding. Districts have received three rounds of federal funding totaling more than \$31 billion to address immediate safety concerns and avoid laying-off staff, which began in 2020 under the federal ESSER program. The bulk of these funds remains quite flexible through 2024. A minimum of one-fifth is earmarked for learning recovery – which became a significant priority for district leaders by the 2021-22 school year. ESSER was the major source of funding for testing stations, masks, disinfectants, upgrades to classroom ventilation, purchasing technology and hiring of short-term staff to monitor student movement in hallways and to regulate other safety measures.

So.Cal Unified’s superintendent emphasized how “maintaining health and safety of our students” was our primary responsibility. This district maintained 37 testing and vaccination sites, running 15,900 Covid tests during the school year. These services were open to students and families, along with teachers and support staff. In January 2022, the superintendent reported that “lines are very long,” as another variant spread rapidly. “The root cause is that there isn’t enough testing going in the state,” the district chief told us.

One So.Cal principal reported how his health aide was out with Covid, three classrooms were shut down, and he lost his assistant principal – all collapsing as the Omicron variant spread midway during the 2021-22 school year. Leaders in So.Cal and one other district reported how they kept nudging their county health department to take over these basic safety activities, rather than assuming that education agencies should carry this burden.

Then, as county public health departments did assume wider responsibility – for example, delivering masks to schools and finally staffing testing stations – districts could redirect ESSER and state funds to other demands. Testing protocols also eased in the second half of 2021-22, freeing time for principals and support staff inside schools. “We are getting things from state and the county, such as masks,” Milpitas’s chief financial officer told us. “The investment right now is focused on technology equipment... investments are for regular maintenance and replacement [of old computer technology].”

All three districts upgraded technologies inside classrooms, such as smart boards, one-to-one laptops for all students, and new software programs to enliven instruction and organize assignments within a single platform. Districts overall juggled how to sustain remote instruction digitally and retool their teachers, all the while providing health and safety services. By fall 2021, a third priority was emerging: cautiously returning to in-person classrooms.

Exhaustion, renewal, “finding that joy again”. Leaders in all three districts reported a deep sense of exhaustion during much of the 2021-22 year. “We are still in a recovering mode,” one district leader in Lindsay Unified told us. “We see high levels of frustration, people begin to burn out.” At the same time, district administrators and teachers remained committed to their students and families. “We saw high levels of hunger [in low-income Lindsay], it causes us not to push away from the table when maybe we should. We are exhausted.”

At the same time, the easing of infection rates, a healthier teaching force, and more present county health departments began to kindle a fragile sense of renewal by early 2022. “Getting rid of mask requirements helps boost staff morale, one Milpitas Unified leader told us. Differences among schools began to emerge as some principals embraced rebuilding, even sustaining Covid-era innovations. One district leader said that we would “encounter a couple principals, someone who is resilient” and one still hunkered down. “Some are able to make more strides while others have been more gradual,” this district official said. After two weeks of substitute teaching, one So.Cal manager said, “We are glad to be back doing our regular jobs.”

Prolonged school closures took a significant toll on the social and emotional well-beings of students in all three districts. As one Milpitas principal said, “Not only are our students in need of SEL support; but the needs are bigger.” Several schools leveraged technology to aid daily wellness check-ins; one Milpitas high school adopted trauma informed teaching practices, and two school sites converted school buildings to mental wellness centers.

Several administrators and principals spoke of “restorative practices” – focusing on the social and emotional well-being of kids, along with nurturing caring networks among teachers. “We are doing a lot of re-teaching... at all ages,” one So.Cal principal told us after schools fully reopened. “Stay in your seat, being on task, establishing expectations and classroom management.” She reported this deterioration of social routines “affects teacher morale, it’s been hard to move on to academics.”

Conducting a “Thrive Workshop” that summer (2021), “restorative practices were the most popular [professional development, PD] sessions in terms of sign-ups,” one teaching and learning specialist told us. “Everyone has refocused their attention in that [social-emotional] direction,” she said. So.Cal’s renewal strategy, initiated in August 2021, blended a spirit of teachers coming together again with spotlighting classroom inventions that had emerged in the previous year (2020-21).

These included a shift to project-based learning with asynchronous “homework” online, moving all assignments and instructional materials into Google Classroom, and carving out significant time to foster teacher collaboration. So.Cal contracted with a nonprofit to run social-emotional learning (and recreational) sessions with students, opening-up time during the school day for teacher PD.

One So.Cal principal focused on “building-out the student culture” as pupils returned in 2021-22. “There’s nothing cozy about my [elementary] campus,” a site that serves many immigrant students, some “kids who have never been in school before.” So, she spent part of her \$271,000 supplemental allocation to have murals painted on exterior walls, along with an expanded after-school program and contracting out to a local nonprofit.

“It builds community... I want my families to experience fun,” the principal said. With the fresh dollop of discretionary funding, this principal also reported that “I have to look at expansion of transitional kindergarten,” referring to the state’s ambitious new pre-K mandate.

In sum, we heard of considerable time spent on essential health and safety activities, along with principals scrambling to find substitute teachers, then turning to contact tracing for much of the day. Yet, this was mixed with inventive efforts in attending to the emotional to emotional well-being of all, then spreading digitally aided pedagogical innovations and ways of strengthening ties with parents. “This year is about restoring, renewing,

and refining,” as one Lindsay principal put it. A So.Cal principal summed-up: “You need to have your kids fall in love with their school again... to find that joy again.”

Recovery in uncertain contexts. Two interwoven forces constrained the capacity of districts to move past the pandemic, stabilize budgets and staffing, and perhaps sustain organizational innovations. So.Cal and Milpitas face *declining or uncertain enrollments*. All three districts variably struggled with local labor shortages. Enrollment in So.Cal has slipped by about 400 students in recent years. “If we can beat enrollment declines in neighboring districts, can muster in just 2 to 3 percent decline, we are doing pretty good,” one district manager told us.

While both dynamics tended to drive uncertainty in the eyes of district leaders and principals, enrollment trends and labor conditions might be considered separately. Districts facing declining enrollments may enjoy diminished labor shortages as their overall staff shrink. At the same time, if state revenues continue to support greater district spending, additional teaching positions may be purchased to lower class sizes – the budget choice made by Lindsay Unified’s leaders as discussed below.

Alternatively, all three districts raised wages for instructional aides and support staff, largely to keep pace with new state mandates, like ELO and TK expansion. So, let’s turn to how local educators view these tandem uncertainties, while thinking about them independently, each calling for differing local strategies and state policy adjustments.

Milpitas officials worried about declining and uncertain enrollment. Before the pandemic Milpitas was the only district in Santa Clara County maintaining or increasing average daily attendance levels. But enrollments began to inch downward prior to Covid. “We gained enrollment in 2019-20 (10,390); then 10,025 in 2021 and the projected number is 10,003 in 2022”, said the district superintendent. On the northeast edge of Silicon Valley, Milpitas Unified may benefit from new housing units, “potentially 7,000 new units in the Great Mall area, which will keep growing,” the superintendent said. It’s these demographic shifts and housing uncertainties that make long-term budget planning difficult, especially once federal stimulus dollars run out in 2024.

Lindsay’s enrollment has inched upward since 2017, rising to nearly 4,400 students in 2022. This buoyant pattern bucks the trend of Central Valley districts, where declining fertility rates tend to hurry enrollment declines. Yet, this small district does suffer from the second contextual force that limits the capacity of districts to fully recover: a shortage of qualified job candidates in the labor market, from credentialed teachers to classroom aides and after-school program staff.

Sacramento policy makers have intensified this frustrating hunt for teachers and classroom support staff by expanding Transitional Kindergarten. This ambitious initiative will require between 12,000 and 16,000 new teachers and more than 24,000 classroom aides.⁷ A mandated nine-hour school day, under the ELO program, has sent Lindsay Unified and other districts on a sustained hunt for additional staff.

Lindsay has spent much of its federal ESSER allocation on “overtime for classified staff – pre-K and elementary liaisons, classroom assistants – [and] special ed teachers,” one administrator told us. Lindsay’s leaders work diligently to combat labor shortages – in part, by lengthening work days and paying overtime.

⁷ Melnick, Garcia and Leung-Gagné (2022).

Thinking longer-term, Lindsay's leaders also mentor their own graduates to pursue college, then return to teach in the district. "The [local] pipeline is generating more people than we can hire," one district leader told us. The district also promotes from within, helping young graduates or classroom aides earn their teaching credential if they commit to serving Lindsay Unified or another high-needs school for five years.

Gains in state funding have allowed Lindsay to raise teacher salaries. "Our high-end learning facilitators (teachers) are earning six figures," one leader said. Thinking more broadly, "our ultimate goal is to flip poverty in our community," he said. "But we don't have middle-class housing [in Lindsay]." Staff move out to Exeter or Porterville. "We are trying to work with developers" to grow local housing options.

So.Cal budget leaders reported that funding is currently not a constraint when hiring additional staff. This district hired five newly credentialed teachers, largely to eliminate multi-age classrooms in which children in two grade levels had attended a single classroom. But specialists, notably school psychologists and intervention teachers, proved difficult to find in a tight labor market. For all the hand-wringing and attention to children's emotional upset and social disconnects, appropriate counselors and staff remained scarce.

One principal expressed frustration after interviewing promising job candidates, then the district's central human resources office would fail to move expeditiously. "I would love to choose my own people," this principal said, "but I have to go through HR." Another principal said, "it's really hard to attract people into our profession. Our lowest paid staff earn \$14 an hour, versus \$25 per hour at McDonalds. We are trying to recruit volunteers from within the community."

Milpitas only had three vacancies to fill in 2021-22 for classroom teachers, which they did promptly. Yet, "we had to do contractors while aggressively hiring for SPED teachers," the superintendent worried. She remains concerned about a "leadership shortage" as well. "On the school leader side, the pool has not been very good for candidates," she said. "We posted three times now for an elementary principal position. We have the influx of money, but we don't have the staffing willing to do the extra time," the superintendent reports, citing the extended instructional day mandate arriving from the state capital. "We had to double the hourly wage for subs... and used the [ESSER] fund for incentives to maintain full-time principals for all elementary sites to focus on student engagement." Whether such wage boosts can be sustained after federal dollars disappear remains a pressing question.

A related concern is how new funding is distributed among schools and communities *within districts*. So.Cal's 30 schools are distributed across differing neighborhoods, marked by ethnic, language, and social-class variation. One principal, whose school mainly serves working-class families, worried of her pupils' geographic mobility year to year. Another principal expressed concern that district-led supports and technical assistance at times appear to flow to school sites serving more advantaged children. We uncovered no direct evidence of regressive distributions, yet the perceptions of principals remain notable. They also highlight that new federal and state dollars may be unevenly distributed among schools, a topic that deserves careful research.

Setting Local Budget Priorities – Recovery with Innovation

We dedicated considerable time to learning – from district leaders and principals – about how federal stimulus and new state dollars flowed through the superintendent’s office and out to schools in the 2021-22 school year. A sizeable portion went for health and safety measures and materials as discussed above. District financial officers worked to conserve federal dollars, authorized through 2024, to guard against future exigencies. But persisting outlays for masks, testing stations, substitute teachers, and ventilation upgrades resulted in shrinking reserves. So.Cal’s chief financial officer ordered 90,000 Covid test kits, one half-million masks. “They [teacher union leaders] say you have to use a new one every five minutes,” he said with a quizzical tone.

Three major findings emerged regarding budget priorities from our interviews. First, two of the three districts reported hiring appreciable numbers of new classroom teachers to lower class size, enrich instruction, or add one new class period (in the case of So.Cal Unified). But the stronger tendency was to allocate new dollars for classroom technology and a variety of non-credentialed support staff. Second, all three districts funded a range of organizational and pedagogical innovations, detailed below. Third, federal ESSER dollars remain viewed as quite flexible, yet new state dollars tied to new program initiatives are often seen as overly regulated, efforts designed in the far away state capital.

Hedging against long-term wage costs. Lindsay allocated new funding to hire 17 additional (credentialed) learning facilitators – this district’s inventive version of teachers. The aim is to lower class size at the elementary level, principals reported. Lindsay overall remains in a stronger financial position, relative to other districts, given high levels of federal support – the district received about \$30 million from federal stimulus dollars. And recall that So.Cal moved modestly to eliminate mixed-age classrooms by hiring a handful of certified teachers.

Still, all three districts reported they preferred to hire classroom aides, safety coordinators, or playground monitors – positions with little security of employment and greater flexibility for districts. And the cost of new positions was traded-off against the press to raise wage levels for classroom aides and support staff. Budget directors did not assume that any of the new funds were going to remain long-term. One fiscal chief said that state allocations to his district have grown about 4 to 5 percent each year, while pension obligations climbed 8 percent annually. Bringing on certificated teachers adds to this long-term cost.

Labor shortages in many parts of California mitigate against hiring certificated staff. Recall that Milpitas had difficulty recruiting for an open principalship, given the tight market and high living costs inside Silicon Valley. So.Cal struggled to find substitute teachers most days. We have “tons of money for staffing,” one district leader told us. “Then we have plan A, plan B, plan C, plan D [for filling positions].” The district contracted with the nonprofit, Hey Tutor, to find substitute teachers, along with The Services Company to find necessary cafeteria and custodial workers.

Lindsay hired an additional special education teacher and social-emotional learning coordinator. But “I worry about sustainability,” the district’s budget director told us. “It allows us to experiment a bit, getting more adults in classrooms working with kids.” Lindsay successfully lowered the child:teacher ratio in their K-3 classrooms. District leaders prefer the fungibility of ESSER and state Local Control Funding – allowing them to consider

trade-offs between hiring new staff, raising wages, or funding significant innovations. Yet, local discretion over setting priorities becomes limited, this district administrator said, “when the governor keeps creating more categorical aid programs.”

So.Cal had committed to adding a seventh period to the school day before the pandemic. The flow of new funds allowed them to accelerate this reform as pupils returned in-person. This required hiring about 40 additional teachers, a long-term commitment that’s much larger than what we observed in Lindsay or Milpitas. Here too, sustainability of this long-term cost remains an issue as federal relief dollars are spent out by 2024.

Districts allocated new funding to provide release time for teachers – increasing planning time to adapt digital innovations or to expand PD activities with colleagues. So.Cal inventively contracted with a nonprofit that organizes recreational activities and “social-emotional development” for kids during regular school hours. Principals then arrange PD and team-building activities during the day, avoiding the challenge of renegotiating labor contracts. This additional time helped teachers become acquainted with new curricula, focus on “essential standards”, and renew supports among staff, as reported by So.Cal principals.

Organizational and pedagogical innovations. All three districts moved beyond the nagging pandemic to advance a spirit of recovery *and* renewal in 2021-22. The Milpitas superintendent reported on several innovations that sprouted during the era of remote instruction. Each, she reported, challenges traditional assumptions about teaching and learning. She has directed fresh investments into a variety of digital, organizational, and pedagogical inventions – moving beyond maintaining old practices.

“We must ensure that we maintain a momentum of innovation, moving forward to cut the rubber band, so we doesn’t snap back [to conventional ways]. We need to figure out some way we can provide better PD for teachers. We want to push for computer science standards that advance equity. There’s also culturally responsive teaching.”

The Milpitas superintendent acknowledged that “we had some pushback about why?” especially as many staff members remained exhausted, settling for a return to familiar routines inside classrooms. Yet, leaders in all three districts reported the opportunity – stemming from the unprecedented shutdown of schools and the digital revolution – to further encourage pedagogical and organizational invention. Many of these innovations bubbled-up from teachers themselves.

We heard much about two sets of innovations across the three districts. The first included *technological inventions*, as teachers and parents adopted digital platforms to efficiently organize instructional materials and work assigned to kids. Creating lessons online prompted novel use of fresh video material, animation, and software that allowed teachers to see students puzzle through math problems or writing exercises in real time.

A second set of innovations – surfacing in district interviews and school visits – manifest *social-organizational reforms* that restructured the school day, focused more time with small groups of students, or markedly shift pedagogical practices or ways of connecting with parents. These innovations are proving more fragile, district leaders and principals reported, as state-mandated instructional minutes and habitual routines have returned to structure the school day.

In So.Cal and Milpitas we repeatedly heard about pulling back to “core standards,” as teachers coped with learning loss and antsy students returning to in-person classrooms. “We whittled down to essential standards,” one principal told us. “We said, ‘do not try to focus on everything, put time in to go deep on the vital, essential standards.’” Another principal said his teachers were “moving back to a normal scope of standards,” aided by review of formative data on student progress during the 2021-22 year. “We are going to work on what’s to be tested [by the state].”

Still, the Covid era spurred teachers to become tech savvy and enliven classrooms with digital material and real-time ways of tracking student progress. The funding infusion from Washington and Sacramento – along with the instant urgency to innovate, to drop conventional assumptions about teaching – allowed Milpitas to purchase additional computers, instructional software, and pedagogical devices such as smart boards to enliven instruction.

After 15 months of remote teaching, teachers had grown facile with Google Classroom to arrange in one online location core curricula, video and animation materials, class assignments, even art and music projects. This eased homework tasks and tracking a child’s progress by teachers and parents. Students quickly learned where everything was located. Now teachers could allocate precious classroom time to actual instruction and engaging kids in motivating, digitally enhanced ways.

Additional software packages, like Nearpod, allowed teachers to observe live how each student was puzzling through a math problem or identifying vocabulary or grammar lessons. Some teachers used online chat rooms to invite student comments and draw-in kids who might otherwise not speak-up on screen.

“It definitely jump started our move toward one on one [each student with a laptop],” a district leader said. “When we started with remote, using Nearpod and Jampod, teaching became more interactive, breaking the old pedagogical mode of one adult talking.” In addition, “teachers use DocuSign and other digital methods to connect with parents,” she said. Along with “using that technology for IEP and other stakeholder meetings.”

Milpitas leaders reported how technology does incur long-term costs. The district reported having to replace hundreds of Chromebooks prior to Covid, along with servicing many other devices and supporting instructional technology specialists. The advance of new teaching technology did run into some concerns expressed by union leaders. The district’s teaching and learning team in Milpitas prefers that teachers use the same software, containing PD costs and allowing uniform tracking of student proficiencies in a formative manner. But labor leaders press for teacher autonomy, which they see as more motivating.

Digital innovations reportedly enhance how teachers address the social and emotional challenges faced by many students in the pandemic’s wake. Milpitas leaders point to teachers’ sustained use of programs like Kahoot, which hosts a check-in regarding kids’ feelings and emotional issues they continue to face at home. Texting with students has become more common in Milpitas, district staff reported, hoping to deepen relationships and teacher support. The district’s teaching and learning coordinator told us that “there was a push to use more interactive tools, Nearpod and Jamboard, which are more disruptive of [conventional] teaching and learning.”

The Milpitas superintendent talked of how “teachers create materials online and students can log on to access it, Covid really helped accelerated the trend.” Other innovations “are bubbling-up from teachers,” she said. One example, emerging from the pandemic was “culturally responsive teaching,” in Milpitas, a district populated by parents of South Asian heritage, Latinos, and middle-class white families. “We have a partnership grant working with second-language learners and computer science standards,” enhanced by teacher expertise with state-of-the-art software.

So.Cal made substantial investments in digital innovations as well. Prior to Covid the district aimed to have one Chromebook for every three students. Then came remote instruction, prompting new purchases eventually totaling 40,000 laptops. “How to maintain, service... provide wi-fi bandwidth and new firewalls,” the CFO remarked, for that many machines?

Still, So.Cal’s superintendent did not want “to take our foot off the pedal” when it came to technology and related innovations. She moved forward with “block scheduling, added a seventh period, preparing “super tutors” and PD for teachers on a variety of technologies for classrooms and tracking student proficiencies to formatively improve pedagogy. [Super tutors are high-achieving students who volunteer to tutor peers.]

“This is the time to do it,” the So.Cal superintendent emphasized, finally emerging from school closures and remote instruction. “I don’t think this would have happened so fast if not for the pandemic,” a district teaching and learning specialist told us. “Chromebooks, going 1:1 is not going away”, echoed one high school principal, who created a Tech Center on campus and dedicated two staff to manage their “geek squad or apple store”. With expansive use of technology, the principal also spent \$400,000 to convert the library and connect with the Tech Center as an organizational “collaborator”.

Digital innovations provided more tools to address students’ social and emotional well-being. One So.Cal principal’s supplemental budget went from \$25,000 to \$265,000, thanks to stimulus and new state ELO funding. This principal invested in a social-emotional package to structure deeper, more supportive conversations among teachers and students. Freeing-up PD time, by contracting with the nonprofit reported above, allowed staff to shift instructional time toward emotional issues and underlying causes of student disengagement.

Led by the district-level teaching and learning shop, So.Cal also helped teachers move toward project-based learning, “fewer worksheets” and “more [digital] tools for organizing instruction.” As students took on more responsibility to study material at home (asynchronously), it allowed teachers to focus class time on more complex instruction. For example, district staff encouraged “a flipped approach with students taking more responsibility at home, even after returning in-person to classrooms,” one district leader told us. “Teachers invited students to create small Powerpoint presentations to explain a new topic and pursue an application from literature, math, or social studies”.

We could not discern the prevalence of such reforms across teachers or schools. Yet, district leaders in So.Cal and Milpitas inventively moved from remote instruction to discern windows of opportunity for altering conventional pedagogies – shifting greater responsibility to students for asynchronous learning, digitally enlivening class time, moving to project-based learning, and tracking pupil progress with efficient forms of formative assessment.

Leaders at Lindsay continued to innovate, advanced by the new federal and state funding. One principal emphasized that “more independent work” had been assigned to students under remote instruction. He wondered aloud whether this shift in responsibility would persist, as pupils returned to work with learning coordinators in-person. Students have long worked independently at Lindsay, yet formal classes were again meeting and many chose to spend face time with their instructional coaches.

District staff and principals reported a mindset shift as instructional staff focused more heavily on the social and emotional state of students. “Before Covid we were very academic driven,” one district staffer emphasized. The pandemic opened our eyes to social-emotional learning, how to teach learners to articulate and cope with SEL stressors.” At Lindsay “everyone moves at their own pace. [Each student] must demonstrate competency in core topics and state standards,” another district leader told us. “This includes social and emotional skills... [fostering] a caring and compassionate person, a quality producer, a culturally aware person.”

In these ways Lindsay was “well positioned to move to remote instruction,” one district official told us. Students were already accustomed to logging-on, checking to see what proficiency area they must next focus on, then run through a personalized assessment to check their own progress. A nearby learning facilitator – online or now back in-person – was always nearby to help explain concepts or trouble-shoot where students got stuck.

“At Lindsay, every learner had their own device in 2010,” one district leader emphasized. “Every learner and their family had 24/7 connectivity at home... in 2016. With our learning management system, Empower, under development for over a decade, now [offers] anywhere, anytime learning. It was in place before the pandemic.”

The Empower software – a personalized and competency based format – helps learning facilitators to “flip classrooms,” another district leader said. This allows students to study new material asynchronously at home or at school, then use group discussions with peers and learning facilitators to go deeper, to work through applications, whether from gaining proficiency in mathematics or contemporary literature.

Leaders at Lindsay were relieved to return in-person by 2021-22. They observed losses in anticipated proficiencies. Yet, they remained committed to their structural recasting of how education occurs – helping students pursue state learning proficiencies through a mix of conventional courses, steady mentoring by the learning coordinators, and varying degrees of independent studying at home or online.

Teachers at Lindsay can sign-up to be “literacy coaches” to aid certain students. And volunteers receive extra pay, “so the union can’t say much about it,” one district leader said. Covid-era funding helped boost incentives for teachers to attend newly tailored PD sessions. Like every young learner, each adult in the Lindsay district has their own “personalized learning plan.” District curriculum planners at Lindsay have deployed Rhithm, another inventive software package, for wellness checks and identifying students that may benefit from extra support.

In summary, the influx of federal and state stimulus dollars provided much needed relief through 2021-22, in part to ensure basic health and safety, to staff and keep classrooms only when a variant spread or teachers fell ill. Fresh funding went further to stir and sustain digital innovations inside classrooms, rethink small-group work for kids with special needs, and selectively hire new staff, while minimizing long-term labor costs. In short,

the pandemic ushered in a broad wave of technological, organizational and pedagogical innovations to enrich teaching, reorganize the traditional school day, repurpose school buildings, and support children's holistic development.

Whether public schools will sustain these promising innovations, taking stock of what's working, remains a pressing question. That is, "avoiding rubber-banding back" to the old normal, as Milpitas Unified's superintendent put it.

District Leadership and School Priorities

District leaders in all three locations articulated clear yet varying priorities, exerting leadership and guidance to principals and lead teachers at school sites. At the same time, discretion granted to principals varied among districts. So.Cal appeared to be the most decentralized – where the bulk of new funding (after health and safety allocations were centrally set) was driven by principal-designed budget plans. The superintendent asked each principal to submit a spending plan in summer, 2021. "They had pretty wide berth," one district leader told us. "They are purchasing different materials" and requesting varying positions.

The state's supplemental allocation to So.Cal, for instance, equaled \$17.6 million in 2021-22, about \$14 million awarded to schools based on each principal's plan. This equaled between \$400 and \$500 per pupil, building on a base budget for which 85 percent goes for people, the district CFO reported. He described this decentralized strategy as, "just get it out there and they [site principals] will handle it." Yet, another district official worried that this resulted in "inconsistencies" as schools have struggled to recover and renew.

Three principals in So.Cal Unified we interviewed appreciated the opportunity to set priorities from inside their schools. "It's great we have the freedom to do what we want to do. We had 20 various plans from other elementary schools... \$235,000 [in additional funding], just mine to spend." Yet, this level of decentralization, and resulting variability, may hamper efforts to gauge what's working inside schools to renew student motivation and achievement. On the other hand, local conditions and institutional history likely mediate how new spending yields measurable effects.

The district office established certain priorities and centrally organized ways of better equipping teachers (with digital tools, for example) and fostering instructional gains, including elimination of mixed-age classrooms, a push toward project-based learning, and implementing new curricular packages with ample PD preparation. The district also retained authority over health and safety activities, and the Human Resources office remained a linchpin in filling new positions, which remained slow in the eyes of at least two principals with whom we spoke. The district office also greased the wheels for certain organizational moves endorsed by multiple schools, notably contracting out of recreational and "social-emotional time" to a local nonprofit – freeing teachers to participate in additional PD during the school day.

Milpitas exercised central leadership and guidance as well. Yet, recall this superintendent's emphasis that several organizational or pedagogical innovations "bubbled-up from below," as teachers spearheaded expansion of transitional kindergarten, shared digital tools for pedagogical innovation, arranged for teacher-mentors who served particular students feeling stress or falling behind, and pushed forward on new learning proficiencies

in computer science. Schools have some degree of flexibility in Milpitas, “some funds are more set; some are more prescriptive but I have more control”, as one high school principal told us. The superintendent returned to labor opposition to central moves that might harmonize teaching practices, as with efforts to utilize richer data on student progress in order to adjust pedagogical practices.

Lindsay Unified remained committed to its self-paced, proficiency driven model of “instruction” guided by learning facilitators – a centrally reinforced structure that remained firmly intact through the Covid era. Two of six elementary principals that we interviewed spoke to and clearly endorsed the district’s overall philosophy and inventive teaching model. They did cite ways in which their reporting up to the district can alter local policy and priority. Yet, the tacit priority was to maintain fidelity to the district’s inventive model. The district-wide shift toward social-emotional concerns and mounting several new initiatives reportedly stemmed from dialogue among school principals.

Lindsay principals also decided which new teaching positions to create and who was hired into each post. “I got five new ones [learning facilitators] at my site,” one principal told us, “to reduce class size and eliminate combo classes.” Certain principals supported expanding transitional kindergarten, while others place less priority on this reform. Another principals defined her discretionary pots of dollars as “Title I, EIA [Economic Impact Aid,] and lottery [dollars].” She was aware of ELO funding from the state, “but they [district officials] did not always tell us where the fund comes from.” District-wide policy guides PD activities, “early release every Wednesday to cover a specific learning topic,” one principal said. “It’s not for loose collaboration.”

In summary, district leaders varied on what and how budget priorities are set, along with their relative emphasis on efforts to improve pedagogy, lift students, or enrich the everyday working conditions of teachers. This priority-setting process unfolded within differing degrees of centralized or de-centered management. SoCal advanced a formal process under which principals crafted their own budget plans.

Milpitas and Lindsay employed a less structured strategy when taking leadership on certain organizational or pedagogical reforms – as leadership was able to move beyond health and safety activities. Lindsay works from a deeply shared mission, an inventive teaching and learning model. This model is not so much centralized in a regulated manner. Instead, district leaders inculcate a shared enthusiasm for how mentoring and learning should be arranged within this small district. Educators who find Lindsay’s learning-coordinator model too inventive simply move on.

As new monies flowed into districts, these facets of institutional history and forms of management appear to make a sizeable difference. Budget priorities and the distribution of new dollars are not decided in unambiguous fashion. *A priori* forms of management, differing shades of school-level decentralization, and variable commitment to a shared mission work to mediate any causal link between new funding, classroom improvement, and gains in student learning.

Mixed Reviews of State Policy Reforms

Educators in all three districts expressed gratitude for the infusions of funding that arrived from Washington and Sacramento during the pandemic. Federal stimulus dollars manifest flexibility for district managers and school principals – able to purchase necessary health and safety equipment, then pivot to recovery activities, even to support new staff, redouble investments in teaching technologies and innovations.

Reviews, however, were less glowing for new state funding tied to mandates or programs designed largely by far away policy makers. Faced with severe labor shortages – from new principals to playground aides – district leaders face demands from the state to expand TK and provide a nine-hour instructional day for K-6 students. Most administrators supported the intent of state policy makers.

But how to implement such ambitious initiatives as districts get back on their feet and remain unable to staff massive new programs? “A nine-hour day with ELO-P,” one senior administrator said, “no one wants to work a nine hour day” after all we have been through. “Do students need extra time? Yes. But a nine-hour day is no way of fixing that problem. The money is actually distracting me from changing the core instructional practices.”

“It’s a great idea, the state says we have to build a big after-school program” one Lindsay administrator said. “But we need funding for our [core] day program. We may have to go into our Local Control Funding to support after school.” In Milpitas, one administrator said, “The state is going back to the categorical way, no more local control.” Pressures on the base budget persist. “SPED is an unfunded mandate, the state doesn’t provide enough money to cover the rising cost of living.” And now the district faces at least two additional mandates, she said. “Teacher leaders and principals [are saying], “don’t give me one more thing. And we cannot hire the staff to support the implementation.”

So.Cal leaders greeted the state’s ELO initiative more warmly. We are “not feeling boxed in” by the new streams of categorical aid,” one district official said. These new funds supported an enriched summer program for students. “The ELO framework helped to cement what I felt was important as an instructional leader,” one So.Cal principal told us. “And we can pay livable wages.” At the same time, “it would be nice if all was presented as a package of funds,” she said. “When it’s very specific, it’s a challenge to spend.” Another principal welcomed new state dollars for extended day, but emphasized that “our after-school program is capped, there’s a huge waiting list,” she said. “We can’t find enough people to achieve the required [staffing] ratio.”

In summary, districts appreciated the much-needed financial relief from federal and state government. But these local educators expressed worry over how to implement new state mandates – faced with uncertain enrollment levels and fiscal worries tied to rising wages and pension costs, finding new staff as the pandemic waned. Districts see state policy makers as returning to regulated categorical aid funding, moving new dollars away from the Local Control Funding stream that ensures decentralized discretion by school boards and district leaders. Specific program models newly enforced from Sacramento seem to distract from core efforts to enrich classrooms or better engage students, from the vantage point of district leaders.

Richer Ways to Engage Families

Districts reported another silver lining from the pandemic era – digitally aided ways to connect with parents and families. This took on three forms. First, smaller districts like Lindsay established basic aid, including meals, Covid testing stations, information on health care, and learning activities for children and families during the period of remote instruction. Serving a low-income population and many parents not fluent in English, the district became a vital link for sound information and minimizing threats to health and well-being. This novel way to foster a more cohesive school-community and support the whole child seems consonant with the state’s rising investment in so-called community schools.

Second, teachers in So.Cal and Milpitas shifted to Google Classroom, as the repository for online curricula, class assignments and written products. This digital tool was easily accessed by parents who desired to track their child’s homework and progress in school. Our research team earlier discovered how digital tools made elements of teaching and learning easily accessible for students and parents alike.⁸

Third, school principals and teachers created novel channels for communicating with parents regarding the remote school schedule, children’s social-emotional issues, and holding parent-teacher town halls online. One So.Cal principal produced engaging and humorous You Tube videos each week about his teaching staff and community activities, helping to network kids and parents.. Several principals in So.Cal and Milpitas reported the use of video conferencing with parents to discuss Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), or ensuring that students were on track during this difficult period.

Milpitas leaders reported that attendance at IEP and other meetings with parents has never been higher. “Parents are doing IEP meetings online; parents are able to participate in meetings without taking off of work... some holding down three jobs,” one Milpitas teacher told us. “Same for other stakeholder meetings.” These online sessions often follows-on from earlier home visits that many teachers and counselor conducted during the pandemic, building a feeling of trust and safety among families. One principal talked of fostering these “connections on the door steps” for the first time.

These channels remained open, then shifted to video conferencing in 2021-22 as institutional recovery proceeded. One principal in Milpitas reported increased parental participation after community meetings were shifted online, and the weekly update to the school website had made a difference in making information accessible to parents. In summary, digital innovations have given districts and schools more tools to communicate, connect, and engage with parents during the pandemic. Some school sites provided digital literacy training as not all parents had the skills to navigate digital platforms.

⁸ Fuller, Bridges, Du and Pardos (2021).

Prevalence of Differing Budget Issues and School Innovations

We have reported on a variety of issues and dynamics voiced by district leaders and school principals. But which surfaced more frequently or attracted greater attention from these local educators? The various organizational innovations that surfaced in our site visits and interviews seemed promising. But did they rarely occur, relative to allocating budgets for health and safety measures or maintaining competitive teacher salaries? Alternatively, it's possible that discussion of learning recovery and pedagogical reforms arose quite often. To inform this question of proportional salience, we coded our field notes and identified the central themes that kept arising as we proceeded with interviews and district visits..

It's no surprise that a large share of our conversations centered on new funding and how district leaders distributed these dollars to various activities, as detailed above. This stems in part from the format of our interview protocol, which guided our conversations in a semi-structured manner. Less expected, after coding our field notes, we discovered that district leaders had much to report on digital innovations, a wider set of organizational or pedagogical reforms, labor issues (from shortages to union engagements), and how to balance efforts to recover "lost learning" with taking seriously the disengagement displayed by many students – even as schools returned in-person in 2021-22.

Stepping back, we conducted repeated interviews with each district superintendent, the chief financial officer, the director of teaching and learning, and about three or four additional district leaders. We interviewed 19 school principals, just once, across the three districts. These interviews and site visits resulted in just over 100 pages of field notes.

After reviewing these notes we identified four "buckets" of topics: (1) how the effects of Covid persisted between winter, 2021 and summer 2022, the period of our work in the field; (2) how new federal and state dollars were being allocated and through what deliberative processes; (3) efforts to sustain quality instruction or innovate in ways that may lift students or certain subgroups; and (4) how new resource flows were perceived by principals and how they decided their budget priorities. Within these four areas, 31 specific codes arose, which were then tagged to the appropriate field note or quote that emerged in our interviews. See the Appendix for details on establishing reliability among researchers in accurately coding field notes.

Table 2 offers a clearer picture of which themes proved to be more prevalent in the hearts and minds of these local educators. Note these counts of thematic issues by district staff or principals are biased by how much time researchers spent on various questions within our interview protocol. That said, some of our questions prompted detailed discussions, while other topics raised uncovered little relevance to budget allocations and organizational change. It's the varying weight or salience that interviewees placed on differing topics on which we focus. This modest analysis is meant to inform future surveys and field work.

Table 2. Comparative salience of district contexts, budget priorities, and organizational innovations in three California school districts, March 2021 - June 2022

	District superintendents and administrators	School principals
Topic 1. Responding to Covid, health measures, seeking institutional stability		
Count of instances arising and discussions (%)	56 (17%)	
Contextual constraints (enrollment, fiscal pressures)	25	
Topic 2. Budget priorities: how dollars allocated to positions, activities, innovations		
Count of instances arising and discussions (%)	203 (62%)	
General pattern of budget allocations	17	
Budgeted for teaching posts or classified staff	25	
Support for organizational or teaching innovations	77	
Concern with labor shortages	22	
Worries over new state mandates, categorical funding	18	
Topic 3. Shifts or sharpening of educational focus, recovering learning delays, shift to social and emotional well-being.		
Count of instances arising and discussions (%)	69 (21%)	
Efforts to serve special populations, disadvantaged	26	
Fall back to 'essential standards', adjusting curriculum	14	
TOTAL INSTANCES FOR MAJOR THEMES AMONG DISTRICT LEADERS	328 (100%)	
Topic 4. Principals' perceptions of new resources and setting school-level budget and educational priorities		
Count of instances arising and discussions (%)		250 (100%)
Shifts to sharpening of educational focus, recovering learning delays, shift to social and emotional well-being.		52
Concerned with implementation of new state programs		28
Organizational or pedagogical innovations		23
Hiring new teachers or classified staff		30
Connecting with parents in novel ways, digital innovation		32

We spent more time with, and posed more questions to, district leaders compared with school principals. Our team remains interested in how principals interpret district-level priorities, along with the extent to which principals set their own spending plans inside schools. Tracing how new monies are deployed, already varying among districts, gets even more complex when considering the discretion of principals in allocating funds to new posts or programs.

Table 1 first reports on the incidence of issues that emerged in our repeated interviews with district leaders – arranged by the three main topics sketched above. We coded 328 instances in which these major themes surfaced across district leaders, pooling field notes from all three districts. Seventeen percent (17%) of these dealt with responding to Covid, mounting health and safety efforts, and seeking to maintain the district's organizational stability. With this topic, one subtheme emerged with regularity: the question of long-term stability and vitality in light of enrollment declines or long-term fiscal obligations (wage bill, health insurance, pensions).

Discussion with district leaders focused much on budget priorities and allocation decisions, three-fifths (62%) of coded topics from field notes. This is not surprising, given this was a core question in our interview (see Appendix for interview guide). Pursuit of organizational or pedagogical innovations emerged as the proportionally largest subtopic. This included digital or parent-outreach innovations that emerged during the pandemic, as well as collateral inventions that district leaders were attempting to sustain: advancing digitally enlivened teaching, experimenting with small groups for disabled or disadvantaged students, contracting-out to nonprofits for extended-day programming or to free PD time during the school day.

Considerable conversation also unfolded around labor issues – both the desire to hire additional teachers or instructional aides and, in turn, the reality of labor shortages. As state policy issues arose during interviews, significant discussion of new mandates also surfaced, especially the recent push from Sacramento to expand Transitional Kindergarten and build-out to a nine-hour school day.

The remaining one-fifth of interview topics centered on shifting educational priorities, such as efforts to lift students who fell far behind during remote instruction, and the consensus around how teachers must attend to the social and emotional challenges facing many pupils. Several district leaders talked of how learning proficiencies had been pared back, focusing teachers on “essential standards” during the 2021-22 school year.

The bottom section of Table 1 reports on core topics that arose in our interviews with principals across the three districts. We focused on how principals perceived new resources arriving, their own resource and program priorities, and their varying discretion over hiring new staff and distributing dollars among improvement activities. About one-fifth of the 250 coded topics, again pooling field notes across three districts, centered on how principals addressed learning delays, best served under-achieving kids, and how to balance with newfound interest in the emotional vitality of students.

Similar to reports from district leaders, these principals also spoke much about pedagogical innovations being pursued, how they devise steadier ways of engaging parents, and the challenge of hiring new teachers and instructional aides. Principals acknowledged the surrounding labor shortage and complained of HR delays or lack of school-level discretion in recruiting new staff. Principals expressed worries over whether the state’s priorities and new mandates were the right ones, given organizational demands and long-term budget pressures that principals experience.

3. A New Normal? Implications for Local Educators and Policy Makers

Will schools rubber-band back to their “old normal,” conventional ways of organizing classrooms, spotty ties with parents, focusing on raising test scores, rather than the holistic development of children? Leaders in each of our districts expressed a distinct desire to avoid this reversion to old practices that have not always lifted students nor closed disparities in learning.

We did not observe a radically new normal inside district offices and schools over the 16-month period of field work. But as students and teachers returned to in-person classrooms in 2021-22, they did report much greater digital savvy, integrating novel forms of media and compact ways to arrange curricula and assignments online. Educators had become intensely aware of their charges’ social and emotional well-being, not just bent

on academic skills tied to standardized testing. An adjusted and often more inventive “normal” was emerging across the three districts we observed.

We have detailed how local educators in California continue to enjoy sharp gains in new funding – arriving from Washington and Sacramento – while faced with sustained health and safety costs, facilities renovations, and maintaining a remote instruction option. The district leaders we interviewed felt unsure how they would soundly implement two ambitious mandates from state policy makers: operating a nine-hour school day, mount after-school programs, and expand Transitional Kindergarten for young children. Overall, 2021-22 proved to be an uncertain and challenging year, as educators faced severe labor shortages as renovation and renewal included new obligations and required programs.

Clarifying Institutional Mechanisms – Linking New Funding to Student Achievement

The infusion of federal stimulus and state ELO funding proved essential in combating the pandemic’s continued effects, financing testing stations and temporary staff (substitute teachers) when regular instructors fell ill. Districts served as beacons of health care, information, and child care well into the 2021-22 year, as Covid variants flared-up and threatened to shutter schools once again.

These new funding streams, looking forward, have allowed districts to support a variety of organizational adjustments and classroom innovations that may help students bounce-back in terms of emotional confidence and vitality, as well as cognitive achievement. At the same time, the tapering-off of federal stimulus dollars in 2024 adds to fiscal uncertainties. We can define these adaptations or innovations – advanced by district leaders and principals – as social mechanisms or institutional practices that operate between all the fresh funding and student benefits.

A variety of mediating mechanisms may help to explain when and through what district practices greater levels of public financing yield discernible results for students –

- Two districts invested in additional *certificated teachers* or learning facilitators, combining mixed-age classrooms and/or lowering class size. All three aimed to minimize labor costs by lengthening work hours of classroom aides or hiring additional staff. Future research could test whether richer staffing ratios or simply employing more adults helps elevate students.
- A portion of schools visited set aside more time for students to work in small groups or assigned mentors for more *personalized attention*. This stems in part from additional work in small groups with disadvantaged or disabled students during remote instruction. Whether these adjusted teacher roles pay-off offers another ripe empirical question.
- All three districts tapped into new funding to sustain *digital innovations* – advancing more engaging pedagogy or stronger ties with parents – that may lift student learning curves. But what is the state’s role in fostering and sustaining these kinds of innovations, especially once federal ESSER dollars end in 2024 and many California districts confront declining enrollments.

- Local *implementation of the state’s Expanded Learning Opportunity program varies* among districts and between schools within districts. Care of children before morning classes begin differs and appears complicated by efforts to expand Transitional Kindergarten. After-school programs are contracted-out in many schools – raising questions about staffing and quality during a period of labor shortages. Future survey and qualitative research can better describe these variants of a nine-hour “school day”.
- Local educators emphasized a keen awareness of *social and emotional anxieties* faced by students – the loss of family members and ongoing stress inside families. This sudden focus on the whole child, on differing domains of human security and growth, offers a silver lining from the pandemic. But here too, what’s the best role for the state and district leaders to widen pedagogy beyond hammering on slim slices of cognitive knowledge that are easily testing – given new-found recognition of the motivators and impediments to each child’s healthy growth?

Each of these institutional mechanisms has grown more vivid by the unprecedented surge in federal and state funding of public schools. But each may also be in jeopardy and districts return to historical levels of funding while confronting labor shortages, rising wages costs, and shaky levels of student enrollment. District leaders already face difficult trade-offs in responding to these forces. Should we hire additional teachers, while moderating wage increases? Is it better to advance digital tools or more deeply rethink how the school day is structured? How do new state mandates improve teaching and learning, or distract us from core gains inside conventional classrooms? As federal dollars begin to wind down, setting such priorities may become ever more challenging for district leaders and site principals.

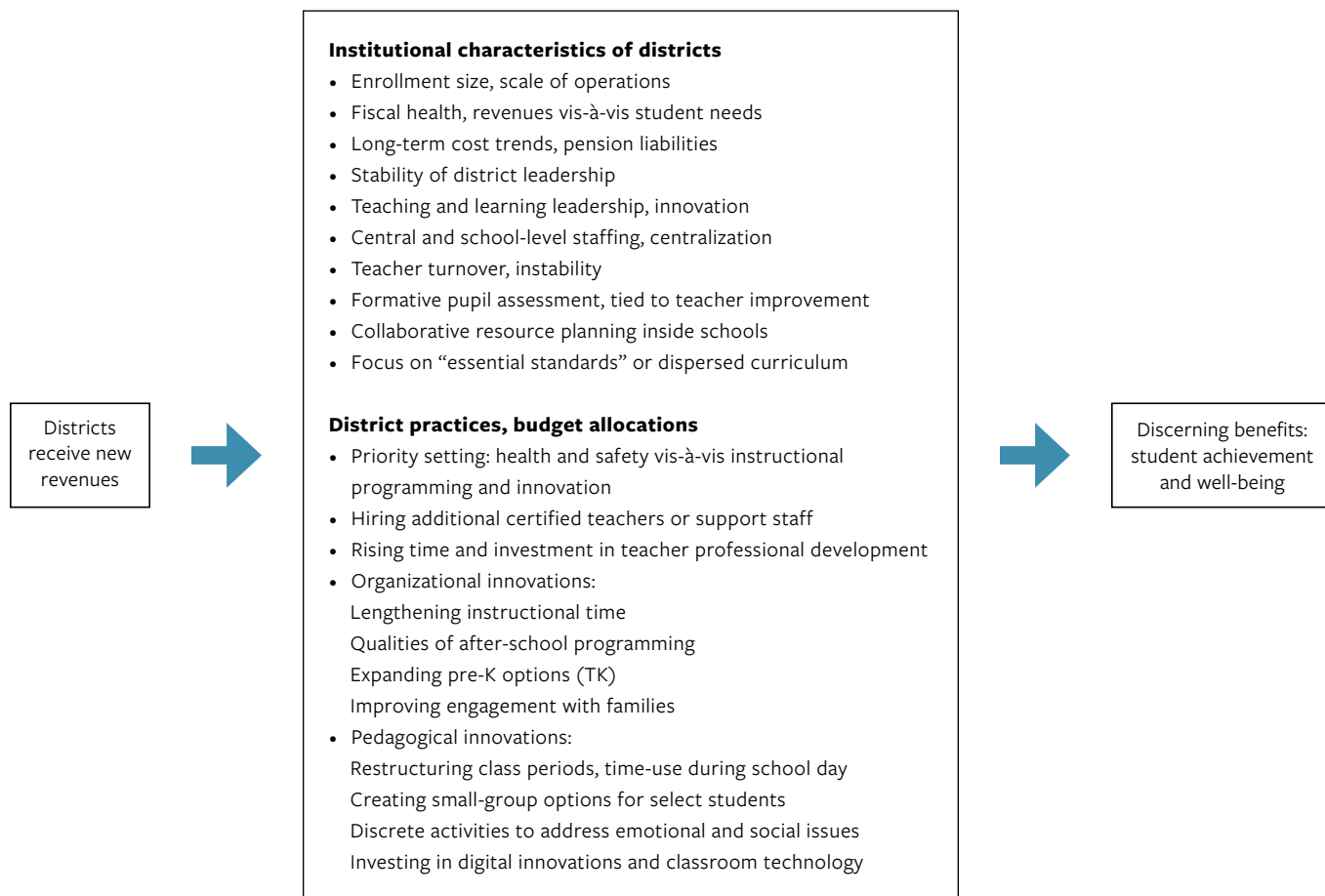
Civic debate naturally arises over whether the billions of new dollars moving into public schools will discernibly help students rebound, even spur innovations and closer relationships that lift student learning and holistic development.⁹ Yet, the tendency to correlate fresh dollars with varying achievement levels must not distract from uncovering the variety of organizational adaptations and pedagogical innovations that sprouted during the pandemic. Where students do bounce back – academically, socially, and with emotional strength – we want to know what district priorities and budget allocations help to explain these successes.

Necessity was indeed the mother of all invention. These novel forms of grouping students, enhancing the count and types of adults working with kids, and enlivening once-staid pedagogy via digital innovations may well lift students over time. It’s these organizational mechanisms inside the guts of districts and schools that tell a more complete empirical story.

A graphic summary of salient district practices or institutional mechanisms clarifies a manageable count of conceptual bins (Figure 5). This can help guide future research on key mediators, operating inside districts or schools, which may explain whether and when new dollars yield discernible benefits for children and teachers.

⁹ For example, Locke (2022).

Figure 7. District characteristics and practices that may mediate the effects of new dollars on student achievement and well-being



This (simplified) causal model delineates features of school districts (middle box) – that preceded and remained mostly stable during the Covid era – which may act to mediate whether, and how, new funding may lift students. Similarly, district practices and allocation decisions during the 2020-2022 period may have mediated the effects of new dollars. One analytic goal is build a parsimonious set of such mechanisms that prove to empirically advance or inhibit the possible benefits of new funding that has flowed into districts.

Policy Remedies

Two immediate issues surfaced in our field work that require attention by California policy makers and local civic leaders. Labor shortages persist for credentialed teachers, classroom aides and support staff. State lawmakers and the governor are eager to extend the school day to nine hours, to expand classrooms seats for 4-year-olds via TK. Meanwhile, we consistently heard how districts cannot replace counselors, find compelling school principals, not to mention special education staff or bilingual teachers. And for all the talk of attending to the emotional and social detachment expressed by many students, the tools and people to address this problem remain in short supply.

Declining enrollments will ease labor shortages in some areas. But inventive efforts are required to reduce teacher turnover and make conventional schools more engaging places in which to hold a professional job. Lindsay’s strategy of grow-your-own-teachers, as one example, appears to yield positive results: fostering residency training and promotions for aides and other school staff, enabling them to become credentialed teachers. Many of these trainees live in the Bakersfield area, with ties to family and friends. Yet, districts situated in

expensive areas – like Milpitas and parts of So.Cal – face rising wage costs, staff shortages, or both. Whether this localized approach, heavily involving districts in shaping preservice training, would work at scale remains an open issue. We could systematically learn from the new or expanded consortia – fusing local districts, county education offices, and universities and funded by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing – to produce high-quality teachers in high-demand fields.

Second, for all the recognition that students face emotional hazards and social challenges at home and school, districts at times remain ill equipped to gauge the prevalence and respond in effective fashion. Hardship and trauma are not new to many California children and youths. Now that Covid has shown a bright light on this domain, the state could evaluate what’s working and which school staff (counselors, teachers, social workers) yield positive results for kids. So.Cal’s experiment with peer tutoring – which may strengthen social relations – is worthy of careful study. Milpitas pioneered in asking students if they desired an adult mentor to work on social-emotional or academic issues, then move with them in small groups.

Lindsay supports a clinical counselor at each school site and hired a new specialist to advance social-emotional work inside classrooms. A comprehensive health center for the community, located downtown, offers mental health and basic medical care for the town. Beyond our study, the state’s so-called CORE districts have pursued fine-grain measures of social-emotional well-being and weighed how best to respond.¹⁰

In summary, we observed inspiring episodes of recovery *and* renewal across the three districts, repeatedly visiting and conducting video interviews over 16 months between winter 2021 and early summer 2022. Local educators pressed on, early 2021, to engage children and families, setting-up testing stations and brokering health and safety measures. By fall, 2021, students returned to classrooms, yet teachers and parents fell ill, classrooms sporadically closed, district leaders maintained testing and vaccine stations when public health authorities fell short.

We then observed a *variety* of budgeting strategies and organizational innovations during the 2022-23 school year – sprouting from the uninvited digital revolution, hiring of new teachers and aides, even rethinking the school day, from expanding pre-K to extending school activities into late afternoon. Critics often point to the seeming intransigence of public schools, how its form and routines seem frozen in time.¹¹ But as of this writing (late 2022) we have seen three school districts that protected their students, continued to teach, and innovated in ways that may (or may not) persist and yield results over time.

This study also reveals the variety of budget strategies and organizational adjustments made by district leaders. The inflow of new funds went, in part, to pandemic relief: masks, testing stations, ventilation and facilities improvements. But fresh resources also sparked the various organizational and classroom inventions that surfaced. Whether or which forms of innovations persist and with what discernible results remains a key question moving forward. It’s one half of the post-pandemic recovery and renewal story.

¹⁰ West, Buckley, Krachman and Bookman (2018).

¹¹ The institutional rigidities of schooling have been explored from differing vantage points. See, for example, Tyack and Cuban (1997), Goldstein (2015), and Fuller (2022).

Nor do we know whether particular budget or reform strategies – staffing patterns, use of instructional time or student groups, expansion of pre-K or extended-day programs – contribute to student learning or emotional well-being. That is, which resource allocations and organizational changes help mediate the influence of fresh dollars on student growth? Perhaps the prior structure of district operations – from highly standardized to decentralized management approaches – further mediates the effects of new funding on human- scale conditions for teaching and learning inside schools.

This report offers a first glimpse of how new monies were allocated in the immediate wake of Covid-19, along with how district leaders defined institutional recovery with a spirit of renewal. Not all teachers or school staff embraced this tandem agenda. But public schools may well emerge stronger in certain ways, boasting organizational or pedagogical reforms that lift student learning curves. A three-year study of how new dollars are distributed locally, yielding what organizational practices and achievement effects, is now underway at the Public Policy Institute of California in cooperation with the state Department of Education and University of California researchers. Stay tuned.

Appendix: Field Work and Qualitative Research Methods

After gaining the participation of three districts, we began interviews with superintendents and district staff in March 2021. These conversations were guided by a flexible protocol that appears below. We often moved into issues or dynamics most salient in the hearts and minds of district staff – and soon site principals – requiring flexibility in how our discussions evolved. These interviews – by video conference or during two or three field visits per district – continued through June 2022.

At least three research team members participated in each interview, yielding multiple field notes for each session. We focused on district staff who contributed to budget and allocation decisions (at district or school levels), along with teaching and learning specialists who fostered adaptations to remote instruction and supported the variety of innovations detailed above.

We repeatedly interviewed between four and 11 district staff members in each district during the 16-month period of data collection. In addition, we interviewed (just once) two to four school principals in each district. This procedure resulted in more than 100 pages of field notes, aggregate text that was coded in qualitative software by multiple team members.

Corresponding to our interview protocol, we began with four first-level “bins” or codes that included persisting budgetary and instructional effects from Covid; how new dollars are allocated and who’s involved in making these decisions; shifting forms of educational activities in classrooms or across schools; and how principals perceived and allocated new resources. We eventually added 28 “sub-bins”, more specific codes falling under one or more first-level bins.

To ensure that our team members interpreted this stack of field notes in similar ways, we ran an inter-coder reliability analysis. That is, we ran two trials where all team members assigned codes to the same field note, one segment of a single interview. After two rounds, we achieved a moderately high level of inter-rater reliability, the kappa coefficient equaling 0.74 for first-level coding. After establishing this level of consistency, we proceeded to complete the coding of all field notes.

Opening interview protocol

Budget allocations and program adjustments

Districts have received federal stimulus dollars, Expanded Learning Opportunity Grants (ELOG) from the state, and augmentations to Local Control Funding.

1. What programs, staff categories, or cost centers (‘buckets’) have received additional funding as you recover from Covid and move forward? What are your top three priorities in terms of achieving organizational stability and advancing improvements? Do three or four ‘bins’ or program initiatives benefit most from this new funding?
2. Do the program requirements of federal stimulus or ELG dollars nudge you in certain directions or advance finance priorities that you had already emphasized? Do federal and state reporting requirements seem complementary or at times contradictory, pushing you in differing directions?

3. Vivian earlier mentioned a long-term concern with enrollment decline. Do you see current funding stimulus as temporary, somewhat independent of longer-term budget planning?
4. Do you feel that you have had room and funding to pursue specific innovations? Or, would you say you are strengthening what you were already doing? What staff categories (certified, classified, others) have expanded most and why?
5. Half the school year has passed since we last talked. Did you have to adjust your aspirations, priorities a bit in face of the pandemic and other pressures? Have these adjustments been pushed by external events, or do you feel you can adjust priorities with intentionality?
6. Have parts of your ‘recovery and innovation’ strategy required engaging labor partners?
7. To what extent have labor shortages constrained hiring and program priorities?
8. You earlier mentioned efforts to expand after-school care, perhaps growing out TK. Are you pursuing these strategies? Does the ELG instructional day requirement affect your plans?

Teaching and learning innovations

Last summer you reported several exciting innovations: moving to block scheduling, integrating teaching technologies into regular classroom practices, even ‘flipping’ classrooms and moving more toward complex, challenging instruction in classrooms.

9. Which of these innovations have stuck inside a significant share of classrooms? Have teachers embraced such pedagogical improvements, or has Omicron and other events led them to ‘hunker down’ and return to conventional practices?
10. How have principals, teacher leaders, your IT staff at school sites impeded or fostered specific innovations?
11. How have federal stimulus and ELG dollars from the state helped to support teaching and learning innovations? Do federal or state requirements discourage classroom innovation
12. Have you seen promising innovations fade out or lose staff support or resources – perhaps when school staff breathe easier and return to normal routines?

For principals and teacher leaders

13. How has the school year unfolded so far? Have you remained open or had to close due to Covid outbreaks? How would you say teachers are feeling, their overall morale?
14. Do you feel that you and your staff have returned to basic routines? Or, is there a ‘new normal,’ a sense that classroom teaching and school management has changed forever?
15. What are your major challenges day to day? What are the biggest demands on your time that you experience?

16. We understand that you developed a new school plan – lending structure to new staff positions and dollars coming to your school. What priorities and funding targets did you emphasize? Have you experienced flexibility from the district office in terms of how you allocate new resources? Do you feel your spending priorities have shifted since last summer’s planning?
17. We have heard that district leaders hope to foster a variety of teaching and learning innovations – such as, block scheduling, better integration of instructional technology, using classroom time in less didactic ways? Has your school embraced these kinds of innovations, or has it proven difficult given external constraints?
18. How have your teachers approached innovations and perhaps move beyond the “old normal”? Do your colleagues prefer a return to old routines and ways of doing schooling? If you are adding (classified) support staff, are they taking on new activities, novel roles in any way?
19. Over the past six months have you tried to focus on certain students to recover ‘learning loss’? What innovative practices have you tried to better lift SPED, EL, or dual-language kids?
20. During the era of remote instruction did you pare-back curricular standards that could be reasonably addressed by your teachers? Do some subjects now get less attention, given concern over ‘core curricular standards’? Have you experienced any shift toward social-emotional learning for your kids?
21. What forms of professional development have been most helpful for you and your teachers over the past year?
22. Who do you consult for social support and/or learn of new approaches for managing your school, considering innovations in the teaching-learning domain?

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