

From Pandemic to Progress

Eight Education Pathways for COVID-19 Recovery

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Supporting a Diverse Choice Ecosystem From the Bottom Up

The movement to empower families to exercise educational choice has yielded significant progress. Though the struggle to empower every parent to choose a great option for their kids is far from over, the [trend lines](#) are [undeniable](#): More families are choosing how their children are educated than ever before. Much of this growth was the result of public policy change that expanded access to within-district choice options, public charter schools, and private school choice programs.

Families are also increasingly exploring more granular sub-schooling educational options, such as tutoring or online courses. The COVID-19 pandemic played a key role in accelerating this trend as families supplemented or replaced their children's traditional schooling with [online providers](#) and [learning pods](#). The growth of these new options wasn't the product of policy change — it was driven by the emergent preferences and needs of families.

In an increasingly diverse educational ecosystem — especially one driven by family demand rather than policy design — supporting quality and coherent options is a much more complex endeavor that calls for a more decentralized approach.

In the wake of COVID-19, the development of multiple AP-like consortia aligned to different educational visions for grades K-12 could help foster quality, coherence, and pluralism across a diverse range of education providers.

From Pandemic to Progress puts forth eight ambitious but achievable pathways that leaders and policymakers can follow to rebuild education — and student learning and well-being — as the country begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. To read more from this series, visit www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress.

How can families navigate among a sea of providers? How can providers show families how their offerings can augment or replace traditional educational options?

Fortunately, advocates can look to a successful program that manages to provide high-quality educational options for millions of students across a range of educational settings without relying on top-down policy efforts: [Advanced Placement \(AP\)](#).

A range of AP-like consortia aligned to a variety of educational visions may be the best way to ensure quality and coherence in a diversifying education ecosystem. The consortia could provide a bottom-up mechanism to help families better navigate the landscape of education options while also helping providers deliver quality and coherent solutions that serve families' heterogeneous educational preferences.

The Advanced Placement program offers lessons for supporting a choice ecosystem.

The AP program began as a small effort among elite private schools that today allows for college-level content to be offered at [more than 70% of our nation's high schools](#), including traditional public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, and private schools. In addition to AP's broad adoption by schools, there is also a robust market for third-party support for AP students, including books, tutoring, and Khan Academy videos. AP's success is not the result of top-down directives from state legislatures or boards of education: Only [eight states and the District of Columbia](#) require districts or schools to offer access to AP courses. Instead, schools and other education providers willingly adopt or align to AP offerings.

The broad adoption of AP courses across a range of education providers is a direct result of the program's structure:

- **Clear branding:** It doesn't take much for students, families, or educators to know that an AP course is a way for students to replace traditional high school courses with rigorous, college-level coursework. The AP brand is a clear signal of what a school or third-party is offering to students and families.
- **Well-defined course content:** Each AP course must follow a clear scope and sequence of content. This ensures that students taking AP Calculus at a public school in Hazard, Kentucky, are covering the same material as students taking the course at private boarding schools. Even within this structure, there is still plenty of room for educators to innovate how they engage students with the content in AP courses.

- **Content-focused assessments:** AP tests are criterion-referenced and directly aligned to course content. They are also scored by a third party to ensure consistent, fair grading.
- **Support for educators:** The College Board offers a robust combination of professional development opportunities and peer networks to support AP teachers.

The combined power of these elements fostered the organic growth of AP across [all 50 states and internationally](#), improving the quality of coursework offered in high schools *regardless* of direct mandates from state governments. The end result: If a family moves from one school to another, or even across the country, they know that AP courses will offer a similar opportunity for their child, regardless of the school they choose.

Quality and coherent choice ecosystems require a bottom-up approach.

The bottom-up, voluntary approach of AP does much more to foster quality and coherence in a diverse educational ecosystem than a top-down, policy-driven approach. American families' educational priorities are too heterogeneous to be addressed through a singular approach. Top-down attempts to bring some degree of commonality to what is taught in our nation's schools – from [America 2000](#) to [Common Core](#) – failed to gain traction precisely because there will never be consensus around a single set of learning standards or curricula.

Instead of a top-down approach driven by policymakers, choice advocates should work to develop several AP-like consortia that can serve a range of visions for what K-12 education should look like. Getting families, educators, nonprofits, and businesses to voluntarily opt in to AP-esque curricular frameworks and assessment systems that align with their particular vision for education will do more to foster high-quality, coherent educational options than could ever be done through legislation.

Each of these AP-like educational consortia must start with a shared vision of what K-12 education should look like. That vision could be established by a combination of philanthropists, advocates, accreditation bodies, and/or businesses connecting with a network of education providers – either a preexisting network of schools with a shared curricular vision (e.g., [Core Knowledge](#) schools) or a group of like-minded providers (e.g., a group of high-performing charter management organizations).

Each consortium would then need to establish the four foundational elements that undergird the AP system:

- **Define clear branding.** Parents and educators have a clear understanding of what AP offers: college-level courses for high school students. As consortium partners convene, they must develop a brand that will help parents and providers understand their vision for what students would gain through their offerings.

- **Articulate a coherent curricular framework.** The consortium must develop a curricular framework to clearly define the scope and sequence of content and skills to be covered in a specified grade range. This would be similar to the design of AP courses, which specify what students ought to learn during the course but are flexible in how that content is delivered.
- **Develop a system of content-driven assessments.** These assessments should have a singular goal: communicating to families and education providers the degree to which students have mastered the content and skills included in the curricular framework. These assessments should be scored by an independent third party, similar to how AP tests are scored.
- **Provide support for educators.** Just as the College Board provides a range of supports for AP teachers, the consortium should develop similar opportunities for educators opting in to their educational vision.

As schools and other education providers align with these consortia, it will help families differentiate among a complex array of educational options. They'll be able to immediately discern if an online course will help their student master the content they're covering in their consortium-affiliated school. If families want to create a learning pod, they could assemble several consortium-affiliated options to provide a tailored and coherent educational experience for their kids.

This approach also has clear benefits for providers. Aligning and affiliating with a consortium's curricular framework and system of assessments would help focus their efforts to develop solutions that address the specific educational needs of families. The system of assessments would also serve as a clear metric of success directly aligned with the interests of students and families.

AP-like consortia can be artificial reefs for educational options.

In many ways, the topography of the current K-12 education landscape looks a lot like the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Texas. Unlike the warmer waters found off the coast of Florida, Texas' portion of the Gulf of Mexico is [poorly suited for the growth of coral reefs](#) that support a wide range of marine life. Similarly, the current K-12 landscape lacks any structures to help foster an increasingly diverse range of educational options for families.

But it doesn't have to be this way. AP-like consortia offer a strategy for building more hospitable ecosystems for educational choice.

In lieu of naturally occurring reefs, [artificial reefs](#) establish a habitat for species in an otherwise inhospitable setting. They have even been used to stimulate the healing of ecosystems after ecological disasters like the [Deepwater Horizon oil spill](#).

Building the educational version of artificial reefs could allow educational options adopted by families during a public health disaster to flourish well beyond the current crisis. Fostering the development of multiple AP-like consortia that allow providers to align to a specific curricular framework and system of independent assessments can help address the challenges of an increasingly diverse educational ecosystem better than any legislative solution. It could also help empower families to better navigate the current complex landscape with confidence that the options they choose support a coherent and quality education.

Building these structures should be a priority for education choice advocates as they work in parallel to address issues of access and ensure that in the years ahead, families have access to more high-quality, coherent options than ever before.

To read more from this series, visit www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress.

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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice. Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.