

# From Pandemic to Progress

Eight Education Pathways for COVID-19 Recovery

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## *Establishing Coherent Systems for Vulnerable Students*

Investments in our social service systems, including our schools, will not achieve equity until policymakers and practitioners address fragmentation: the persistent lack of coordination and cooperation within and across the schools, agencies, nonprofits, and community organizations that serve young people.

Every day, [nearly 5 million children and youth suffer the consequences of fragmentation in encounters with our country's social service agencies.](#)

Some seek support to address challenges such as homelessness, incarceration, or foster care placement; others seek help for other unmet physical and mental health needs. Regardless, these students have to navigate a complex web of adults — including caseworkers, social workers, teachers, probation officers, mentors, therapists, judges, and lawyers — all siloed from each other within agencies, over different layers of government, and across different organizations.

**In the wake of COVID-19, more social service agencies should address fragmentation to ensure that vulnerable youth receive comprehensive, streamlined support services to help them grow into successful, fulfilled adults.**

*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](http://www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictoprogress).

When adults don't work together proactively and effectively, services are duplicated, resources are wasted, and additional burdens are placed on the child to make sense of competing (and sometimes contradictory) agency and programmatic demands. The end result is a fragmented system, in which all the adults can deliver high-quality services to everyone who comes through the door but still not meet all of the needs that a young person or family is experiencing.

More social service agencies must address fragmentation to ensure that vulnerable youth receive comprehensive, streamlined support services to help them grow into successful, fulfilled adults.

### **Vulnerable youth benefit from coherent support.**

Creating more coherent systems of support is a critical step for ensuring equitable educational opportunities for children and youth who have experienced trauma and disruption. The need is urgent: Nearly half ([46%](#)) of U.S. youth under age 18 have experienced at least one adverse life experience (such as separation from a parent due to death, divorce, or incarceration; witnessing or experiencing violence; or living with someone struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues). [About 10% of America's youth](#) have experienced *three or more* adverse life experiences by the time they are adolescents, putting them at [much higher risk](#) for negative education and career outcomes, chronic health conditions, and mental illness.

A system designed to support youth experiencing this kind of adversity should be centered around a reliable, individualized source of support. [Research](#) shows that a consistent relationship with a caring adult — such as a teacher, mentor, coach, church member, or relative — can serve as a buffer against the negative effects of trauma; the adult can provide emotional support and [help connect the young person](#) to other resources and support systems they need to overcome challenges. When youth who have experienced adverse life experiences have the support of a caring adult, they are [more likely](#) to attend and persist in school, earn better grades, and graduate from high school.

Unfortunately, the current fragmented system leaves many vulnerable youth without access to consistent adult relationships that can provide coherence across multiple disconnected systems and guide them toward better educational, health, and life outcomes. Often, the youth themselves are the only individuals with the knowledge of the full universe of systems, programs, services, and requirements they must navigate — and they are typically the person least prepared to do that effectively. Creating a coherent system of support would shift that burden of navigation off of individual youth and return it to the systems themselves, allowing the youth to connect to all the services and supports they need through one streamlined point of contact. In other words, a well-designed system could play the role of a caring mentor even if the youth don't have one in their lives.

Fragmentation is not created by a single policy, agency, or leader, and as a result, there is no single solution. Instead, building more coherent systems requires cultivating a new shared set of priorities to repair a thousand tiny cracks in the spaces between — which is no one's job but must be everyone's responsibility.

## Agency leaders must move from fragmented to coherent systems.

To create durable and sustainable change, agency leaders should adopt a collaborative and communicative mindset and bring together different actors within the system to work together to generate solutions that lead to greater coherence. The [systemic nature of the problem](#) means that no one person is able to single-handedly change the conditions that lead to fragmentation. In fact, attempting to solve for this in isolation often aggravates the problem, creating more chaos rather than easing burdens, as individual leaders may design competing solutions, duplicate efforts, and add needless complexity. So how can our systems of support evolve from fragmentation to coherence?

Because each place has its own unique history, demographics, resources, relationships, and existing structures, there is neither a [simple recipe nor a one-size-fits-all recommendation](#). In fact, we believe that overly aggressive implementation of generic approaches without careful understanding of what is already in place can backfire. Instead, we offer four principles that leaders can use to guide decision making in order to shift toward a more coherent system.

- **Continuity of People:** How might we minimize the number of different adults that a young person comes into contact with over their K-12 experience?
- **Continuity of Information:** How can we ensure that the right people have access to the right information at the right time to make good decisions?
- **Champions and Owners:** Who wakes up every day worried about making sure that this happens? How do we assign accountability and tether that to authority to act?
- **Redefining Leadership:** How might we activate a leadership mindset of flexibility and creative problem solving that is responsive to the needs, wants, and constraints of people experiencing the problem?

When leaders in any jurisdiction orient around these four principles of change, they will necessarily begin to identify ways to bring greater coherence to the services they provide. A focus on any one of these principles will be productive; pressing on all four levers at once will multiply each one's impact. By using the principles to inform daily decisions, revise current practices, and create new policies, leaders at every level can begin to reshape systems as a whole. Over time, policy changes that enable — and sometimes require — better practices can gradually bring along the rest of the staff within an agency. And in cases where leaders of different agencies can work collectively to develop a cross-systems plan to move toward a shared vision with these as guiding principles, the results can be transformative.

For example, county leaders in El Dorado, California, challenged themselves to improve Continuity of Information by asking, “How might we better share information across agencies to support our young people when they experience disruptions to their education pathways?” They engaged in a [yearlong planning process](#) culminating in the development of a formal cross-agency Youth and Family Commission. This commission oversees the development of processes and policies for communication and data-sharing for families served by the county’s various agencies and community-based organizations. But leaders in El Dorado are quick to point out that “the commission isn’t the exclamation point” but rather that it provides them with a standing opportunity to collaborate proactively.

In New Orleans, leaders of the school district’s Youth Opportunity Center [adopted these same principles](#) to think about how best to build additional capacity across the city to support some of the school district’s highest-need families by focusing on Continuity of People and Reimagining Leadership. While they wanted to improve outcomes for the families they served directly, they realized that they could have much more impact by leveraging their experience and expertise to support other community providers and by sharing out the data and information that could build public engagement and awareness.

### **Addressing fragmentation requires overcoming several barriers.**

Creating more coherent systems runs against many of our accepted constraints for managing public systems. First, even though public services for any given individual are delivered through a fragmented system, they address needs that are highly interrelated in reality. This means that the benefits of improvements to one system might show up in a different system’s outcome data. And the costs of those improvements are sometimes borne by another system entirely.

This “wrong pocket” phenomenon is inescapable in a fragmented system. Fixing it is a complex undertaking that fundamentally changes the ways that people do their work and work with one another. That kind of change can take longer than the average agency leader’s term of office. Moreover, these problems are held in place by limited funding: Right now, public agencies, nonprofits, and other community-based organizations often find themselves in competition for scarce resources, which forces people to become territorial, inhibiting collaboration.

In addition, there are well-founded fears among vulnerable populations about how information might be used against them. Any efforts to build more coherence must consider how to simultaneously protect individuals’ privacy. Right now, that often shows up in the form of federal privacy statutes like HIPAA and FERPA, but those have proven to be blunt instruments that are sometimes used to avoid information sharing entirely.

While these challenges may sound daunting, leaders of child-serving agencies who commit to the four principles will necessarily begin to engage in innovative problem solving to overcome these hurdles within their communities.

### **Addressing fragmentation requires taking a first step.**

The right first step for agency leaders will depend on their state and local contexts, but by anchoring around the principles outlined above, they will find themselves building more coherence over time, with a feedback loop that makes every attempt easier.

Ultimately, it is impossible to protect every child from adverse life experiences or from the educational disruptions that result from those events. However, it is possible to improve the odds of educational and career success for those youth who have experienced adversity, building on what we know about the importance of a reliable source of support.

By taking the first steps toward rethinking systems within their organizations and in collaboration with other agencies, policy leaders can guide us toward a future where no young person has to bear the burden of navigating a confusing, fragmented system on their own.

To read more from this series, visit [www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictopprogress](http://www.bellwethereducation.org/pandemictopprogress).

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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.