

POLICY LEARNING FOR EDUCATION IN A PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC WORLD: THE ARC EDUCATION PROJECT



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The Atlantic Rim Collaboratory or the [ARC Education Project](#) (ARC) is a self-funded global educational movement anchored in the principles of equity, broad excellence, inclusion, well-being, democracy, sustainability, and human rights in high-quality, professionally run systems. As a policy learning network, ARC brings together policymakers, system leaders, and professional association leaders (unions, inspectorates, etc.) from its member systems (Iceland, Ireland, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Scotland, Uruguay, and Wales) and global members (International Confederation of Principals) for reciprocal learning through deliberately designed processes. Through its annual [Summit](#), the virtual [ThoughtMeet](#) (TM) series, as well as local and international activities, ARC seeks to connect its member systems, disseminate information on current best practices, and develop next practices that reflect ARC values.

Executive Summary

The aim of this policy brief is to summarize the key priorities and recommendations made by ARC delegates and thought leaders who came together virtually between March 2020 and November 2021 to find ways to support students, parents, teachers, and school leaders in their respective educational communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The four key themes of well-being, equity, collaboration, and assessment emerged from a qualitative analysis of the data collected during the ARC TM series and the 2020 ARC Virtual Summit.
- Key issues and priorities raised by ARC delegates, as well as recommendations and examples of innovative practices, are outlined for each theme.
- Although the COVID-19 pandemic challenged ARC delegates and their educational systems, it also proved to be a unique opportunity to revisit established policies, think innovatively, and make meaningful systemic changes.

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Introduction

At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 1.6 billion students in more than 190 countries were affected as schools transitioned rapidly from in-person to remote emergency schooling ([UNESCO, 2020](#); [UNICEF, 2022](#)). Policymakers, system leaders, educators, communities, families, and students struggled—and continue to do so—with school closures, absenteeism, and disrupted learning. There were also challenges in implementing effective strategies to address gaps in learning, equity, engagement, and well-being.

In April 2020, ARC launched a bi-monthly TM series to support its delegates in creating swift, timely, and practical collective solutions to address their pressing issues. ARC delegates learned with and from one another and openly shared their experiences about leading educational change in times of uncertainty. They also voiced their concerns about equity, the challenging workload borne by educators and leaders, and the strained collaboration and communication problems plaguing their education systems. This policy brief reports on a qualitative study that was conducted by the ARC research team analyzing all ARC TM and Summit documents and videos produced from March 2020 to November 2021. Four key themes emerged as priority issues: well-being, equity, collaboration, and assessment. These themes, along with recommendations and examples from practice, are outlined below.

Findings

At each network gathering, ARC uses a variety of individual and collaborative learning modalities, such as group discussions, breakout rooms, as well as digital collaborative reflection tools (see [learnlab.net](#)). For this study, data were collected from all ARC documents, such as the Learnlab reports that captured ARC delegates' contributions and reflections, the published [event summaries](#), and [ARC talks](#) by invited global thought leaders. The data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis method.

Well-being

A key priority widely acknowledged by ARC delegates was the well-being of students and teachers. The pandemic revealed the increasing need for access to mental health service programs for staff and students as well as more targeted resources to support vulnerable students from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds. The delegates also emphasized the need for a student-focused approach toward learning, which would prioritize personalized learning, support inclusivity of identities, and foster a sense of belonging. Focusing on student strengths rather than on deficits was also highlighted to counter the prevailing narrative of learning loss. The delegates shared some of the gains that have been made in their systems during the pandemic, such as increased resilience, flexibility, and competency in the use of technological tools and online teaching and learning approaches.

Equity

Equity is a core ARC value. The delegates discussed the importance of policies that affirm students' identities and

considered ways in which education can become a tool for empowerment and anti-racism. The issue of equal access to online and in-person schooling emerged as a continuing challenge. Recognizing that the pre-pandemic inequities in education persisted into the pandemic, the delegates considered the role of equity in inclusion policies and noted accessibility challenges across all modalities of online, hybrid, in-person, and blended learning. They shared their concerns about the numerous students, especially those from traditionally underserved communities, who struggled to access technology and/or the Internet, find a quiet place to learn, or who were expected to work independently and also support siblings while family members were working in high risk "essential" jobs. In an effort to find ways to reduce the poverty-related attainment gap, ARC delegates shared strategies and technological tools that schools and communities in their systems were using to support all students. These included innovative ways to ensure that families had uninterrupted access to school food programs (through local restaurants) and to curricular content via radio, television, and learning packets.

Collaboration

Greater collaboration within and across educational systems was another aspect highlighted in ARC talks by the thought leaders. However, finding effective strategies and structures that support meaningful collaboration between educational stakeholders remained a challenge. A prevailing tension was the need for greater joint decision-making and planning among government officials, teacher unions, and professional associations, especially when top-down and fast-moving decision-making was proving to be a strain on established collaborative relationships. Time, resources, and access to colleagues were frequently cited as factors that hindered sustained collaborative professionalism in schools. The pivoting between in-person and at-home learning was cited as disruptive to established collaborative practices. Nonetheless, the delegates also noted some positive outcomes that had emerged during this time, such as increased use of social media by educators and meaningful partnerships between school staff and those supporting learners at home. Distributed leadership and collaborative technology tools were reported to have contributed to greater collective responsibility in their systems.

Assessment

Conducting effective student assessments during and after the pandemic was another ongoing concern voiced by ARC delegates. Discussions were focused on rethinking high-stakes summative assessment practices and sharing alternative ways to provide credentials for secondary students. The delegates grappled with issues of well-being, mental health, and equity in relation to high-stakes assessment practices and considered how attention to student neurodiversity, culture, and context might also lead to increased student motivation and engagement. Locally tailored, trusted, and formative assessment systems that promote personal and adaptive learning with clear goals designed with and by teachers were discussed. In a [TM](#) focused on assessment in secondary schools, delegates were challenged to reconsider what their current assessment processes

measured. Thought leader [Dylan Wiliam](#) noted, “There is no perfect assessment system. There are always tradeoffs.” In her ARC talk, [Linda Darling-Hammond](#) argued that systems should prioritize students’ “learning ability” over content; she described the former as the ability to transfer and apply knowledge; analyze, evaluate, weigh, and balance; communicate and collaborate; take initiative; find and use resources; plan and implement; self-manage and improve; learn to learn; and think critically.

Implications

This policy brief highlights how ARC delegates prioritize well-being, equity, collaboration, and assessment as key areas for development, improvement, reconsideration, and innovation. Concerns persist, however, and in the recommendations outlined below are examples of strategies and policies drawn from the pandemic experience of ARC member systems that are intended to support and encourage educational systems globally. Specifically, ARC delegates hope that these strategies will be implemented and enacted into educational policy. As educational systems transition to a post-pandemic world, leaders will need to consider the long-term impact of well-being, equity, collaboration, and assessment issues, especially in K-12 education.

Key recommendations

The proposed recommendations reflect how ARC delegates tried to balance the needs of all stakeholders, which include students, parents, teachers, and leaders.

Well-being

- Increase accessibility to mental health service programs for students and educational stakeholders. For example, Uruguay implemented a 24/7 call line dedicated to support teachers.
- Foster student engagement through more collaborative and experiential learning activities. For example, increase access, resources, and funding for hands-on and outdoor activities; provide students with more options; and encourage them to voice their opinions.
- Increase multi-modal access to professional learning and development for teachers and school leaders. For example, introduce online modules focused on technological tools, mental health, equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- Formally recognize the increased workload and stress on teachers and leaders. For example, include additional workload compensation in teaching contracts for the hybrid context.

Equity

- Engage in a community-mapping process with key stakeholders that will identify at-risk students, especially in the post-pandemic scenario. For example, educational systems can tailor outreach campaigns to reach disadvantaged and vulnerable groups to increase enrollment and access to academic and socio-emotional support.
- Build on and increase the innovative support structures that were established during the pandemic for students

to access resources, free meals, technological devices, and the Internet. For example, Nova Scotia used bi-weekly learning packets developed by a volunteer network of teachers and delivered through the newspaper flyer system.

- Ensure technology is universal, inclusive, public, and developed through government partnership. For example, [Plan Ceibal](#) in Uruguay supported education and promoted digital inclusion and equal opportunities.
- Affirm students’ identities through inclusive representation in school curriculum and instructional practices. For example, use student data as a means to disrupt assumptions rather than confirm them.

Collaboration

- Maintain and enhance the culture of collaboration that was formed during the pandemic between educators and community members and families. For example, Nova Scotia used the telephone to connect to all students and families to address the reality of many students’ limited Internet access.
- Co-construct a united and comprehensive supplemental learning approach. For example, Saskatchewan implemented a six-day break between schools closing and moving to “at-home” learning so that all stakeholders across jurisdictions could plan the learning approach together.
- Meet regularly or use open access collaborative platforms to foster communication among all stakeholders, such as system leaders, educators, parents, community members, and students. For example, in Iceland, the Minister and all key stakeholders—teacher unions, school sectors, and universities—held regular meetings to take decisions about educational strategies and response to COVID-19.
- Develop and implement a system to share resources (e.g., books, technologies, expertise) across schools to support students, families, and educators. For example, develop a process in which schools can indicate surplus technology tools—laptops, speakers, projectors—which can then be distributed swiftly to students, educators, and schools if and when needed.

Assessment

- Use student assessment data in ways that promote excellence, equity, and well-being. For example, move toward formative and alternative assessments, promote teacher professional judgment, and adjust the weighting of standardized testing in the overall results.
- Prioritize measuring students’ “learning ability” over measuring content and avoid testing approaches that promote competition in a limited time frame as indicators of success. For example, the Reimagining College Access (RCA) initiative in California ([Martinez et al., n.d.](#)) implements a high-quality performance assessment through tangible evidence of learning such as papers, presentations, design specifications, and other products scored against specific criteria.
- Use technology to make student assessment data accessible and transparent to key stakeholders in real time and enhance a sense of collective responsibility.

For example, Scotland's partnership among national organizations, local authorities, and governments uses shared data-gathering systems to ensure consistent evidence-informed approaches toward student support.

- Promote teacher-moderated assessment as reliable and gain public confidence, while increasing equity and reducing the negative impact of disadvantages among students. For example, Ireland developed a dual system of assessment for the end of senior

secondary education that included (1) traditional examinations and a system of accredited (calculated) grades based on teacher estimates and (2) a national standardization process as per which students were awarded the better results of the two options.

- Increase opportunities for co-construction of curriculum and assessment among educators, academics, and policymakers. For example, in Wales, a [co-construction framework](#) was used to develop the New Curriculum.

Further Reading

Below is a list of helpful resources under each of the four themes on well-being, equity, collaboration, and assessment, all of which are available on the [ARC website](#).

Well-Being

Brackett, M. A. (2020). *Permission to feel: The power of emotional intelligence to achieve well-being and success*. Celadon Books. https://books.google.ca/books/about/Permission_to_Feel.html?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Well-being+in+schools:+Three+forces+that+will+uplift+your+students&printsec=frontcover

Hargreaves, A., & Shirley, D. (2021). *Well-being in schools: Three forces that will uplift your students in a volatile world*. ASCD. https://www.google.ca/books/edition/Well_Being_in_Schools/SMpUEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Well-being+in+schools:+Three+forces+that+will+uplift+your+students&printsec=frontcover

Shirley, D. (2020). Beyond well-being: The quest for wholeness and purpose in education. *ECNU Review of Education*, 3(3), 542–555. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531120932579>

Shirley, D., Hargreaves, A., & Washington-Wangia, S. (2020). The sustainability and unsustainability of teachers' and leaders' well-being. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 92, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.102987>

Equity

Ainscow, M. (2020). Inclusion and equity in education: Making sense of global challenges. *Prospects*, 49(3), 123–134. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09506-w>

Campbell, C. (2021). Educational equity in Canada: The case of Ontario's strategies and actions to advance excellence and equity for students. *School Leadership & Management*, 41(4–5), 409–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1709165>

Currie, M., Ng-A-Fook, N., & Drake, A. S. (2021). Is CRRP enough? Addressing antiracism(s) in teacher education. *Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies (JAAACS)*, 14(2), 2–28. <https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/jaaacs/article/view/196263>

Whitley, J., & Hollweck, T. (2020). Inclusion and equity in education: Current policy reform in Nova Scotia, Canada. *Prospects*, 49(3), 297–312. doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09503-z

Collaboration

Campbell, C. (2018). Developing teacher leadership and collaborative professionalism to flip the system: Reflections from Canada. In Netolicky, D. M., Andrews, J., & Paterson, C. (Eds), *Flip the system Australia: What matters in education* (pp). Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429429620-11/developing-teacher-leadership-collaborative-professionalism-flip-system-carol-campbell>

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>

Park, V., & Datnow, A. (2009). Co-constructing distributed leadership: District and school connections in data-driven decision-making. *School Leadership and Management*, 29(5), 477–494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430903162541>

Assessment

Fine, M., & Pryiomka, K. (2020, July 21) *Assessing college readiness through authentic student work: How the City University of New York and the New York Performance Standards Consortium are collaborating toward equity*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/assessing-college-readiness-authentic-student-work-report>

Guha, R., Wagner, T., Darling-Hammond, L., Taylor, T., & Curtis, D. (2018). *The promise of performance assessments: Innovations in high school learning and higher education admissions*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/promise-performance-assessments-report>

Maier, A., Adams, J., Burns, D., Kaul, M., Saunders, M., & Thompson, C. (2020). *Using performance assessments to support student learning: How district initiatives can make a difference*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/cpac-performance-assessments-support-student-learning-report>

Martinez, M., Willis, L., & Darling-Hammond, L. (n.d.). *Reimagining college access: Performance assessments from K-12 through higher education*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/project/reimagining-college-access>

William, D. (2010). Standardized testing and school accountability. *Educational Psychologist*, 45(2), 107–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461521003703060>

William, D. (2010). What counts as evidence of educational achievement? The role of constructs in the pursuit of equity in assessment. *Review of Research in Education*, 34(1), 254–284. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X09351544>