



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CLEVELAND'S EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

MAY 2022

A photograph of two young girls on a blue playground structure. The girl on the left is climbing a vertical post, wearing a light pink hoodie, blue jeans, and black sneakers with white laces. She has a white face mask hanging from her ear and a pink bow in her hair. The girl on the right is wearing a bright pink hoodie and glasses, smiling as she reaches out to help the first girl. The background shows green trees and a clear blue sky. The image has a dark blue diagonal overlay in the bottom right corner.

We dedicate this report to the thousands of educators, families, and students in Cleveland whose lives and education were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY

DEAR CLEVELANDERS,

Since the adoption of the Cleveland Plan in 2012, our community has worked together to ensure every child in the city has access to high-quality preschool, enrolls in a great public school, and has the opportunity and resources to enroll in higher education. Our aim has been to align systems that support children, youth, and their families and dramatically accelerate and improve academic and social outcomes within and across the education continuum.

In the decade prior to COVID-19, Cleveland made significant progress in early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary education:

- Between 2014 and 2019, Cleveland significantly increased both the number of high-quality preschool seats throughout the city and the number of children enrolled in those seats: from 2,857 preschool students to 4,819, a gain of 72 percent.
- In the last decade, high school graduation rates in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) increased nearly 30 percentage points, from 52.2 percent in 2011 to 80.9 percent in 2021. Additionally, the number of CMSD graduates needing college remediation declined.¹
- Following the launch of Say Yes Cleveland, college enrollment increased five percentage points for the CMSD class of 2019 (49 percent of graduates). College completion rates for previous CMSD graduates at both two- and four-year higher education institutions also rose.

Prior to March 2020, our focus was on how to improve, accelerate, and broaden the reach and impact of the community's collective efforts. Today, it's a very different conversation. The impact of COVID-19 and the current state and federal policy context has underscored the disparities that affect low income families and communities of color. The pandemic's racially and economically driven negative impact on children's education, health, safety, nutrition, and wellbeing is well documented, as is the effect of the digital divide.

At every level of education—preschool, K-12, and higher education—students experienced significant disruption in their education journey: a potentially generation-shattering occurrence. The loss of formal and familiar learning environments and learning opportunities is profound. Children experienced the trauma of upended routines, rituals, and celebrations; of disrupted friendships and relationships; of hunger, homelessness, and job loss; of illness and death in their families. This is trauma that will not dissipate easily, and it extends to all the adults in our community.

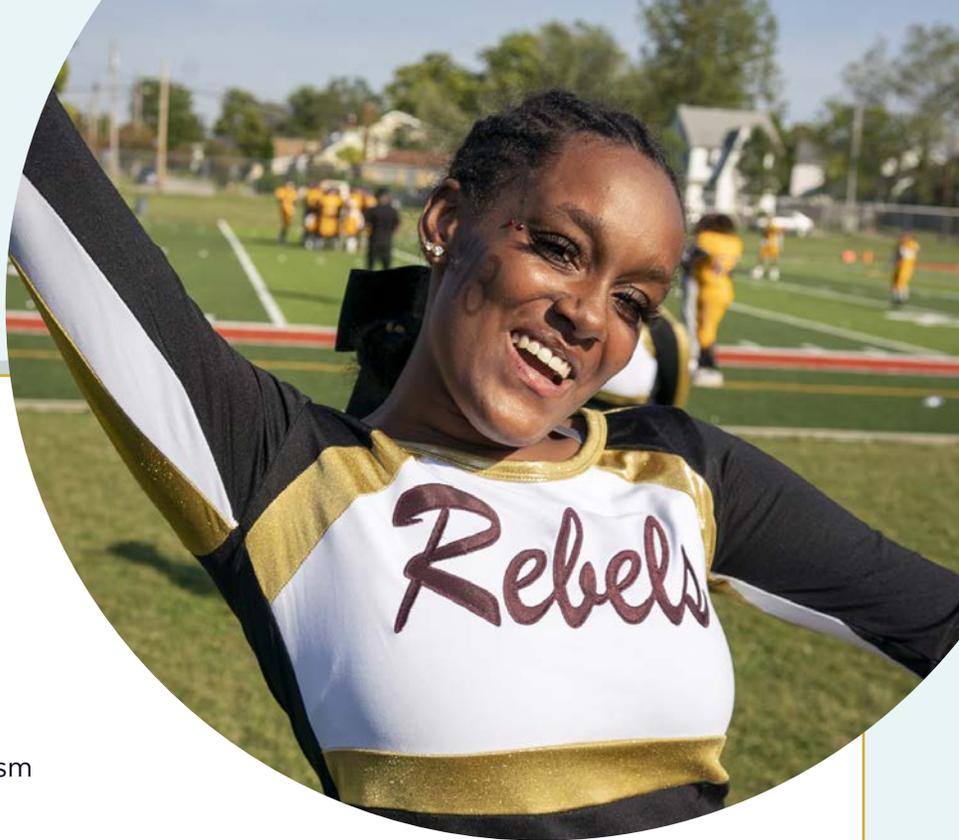




While we do not yet know the extent of COVID-19's damage, preliminary national and local data are alarming:

- Enrollment in early childhood programs dropped by 50 percent in 2021.
- In K-12, academic performance plummeted, enrollment dropped, and chronic absenteeism doubled, setting the stage for long-term remediation and acceleration needs.
- Enrollment in postsecondary education for the class of 2020 dropped by 10 percentage points from the class of 2019.

We offer this report, *Education Forward*, to spotlight both the impact of COVID-19 on Cleveland's educational landscape and the opportunities we must seize upon to recover, rebuild, and reimagine education in Cleveland. This report is informed by federal, state, and local data; viewpoints from national experts; insights from community partners; and interviews with a cross-section of Cleveland families. The report's first three sections describe pre-pandemic progress, detail the impact of COVID-19; and provide recommendations for moving forward in each education sector – early childhood, K-12, and higher education. The last section, before the conclusion, highlights extraordinary examples of how the community stepped up to support each other, Cleveland's children, and families during the COVID-19 pandemic.



We must continue our collective work—educating Cleveland's children—with a renewed sense of urgency. We need high-quality early learning so children are ready for school; a quality K-12 school in every neighborhood; a pathway to postsecondary education programs and careers; and coordination of services, programs and opportunities to help students successfully reach their goals regardless of who they are, where they live, and the barriers they might face.

Children are not merely a private family matter, where luck and circumstances determine health, economic, and social outcomes. Children are—or are not—a public policy investment in our future, and essential to the health and economic well-being of our community. Safeguarding the future of Cleveland's children is no different than safeguarding the future of Cleveland. We must step up and move forward.

TOGETHER, LET'S MOVE EDUCATION FORWARD IN OUR COMMUNITY,

Cleveland Foundation
Cleveland Transformation Alliance
College Now Greater Cleveland
The George Gund Foundation
Higher Education Compact of Greater Cleveland
PRE4CLE
Say Yes Cleveland
Starting Point

EARLY CHILDHOOD

EDUCATION

Early childhood education, particularly for children ages three to five who are not yet in kindergarten, lays the foundation for academic success later in life and is a critical component to the stability of families and local economies. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the nation has never really invested in a system of high-quality early learning. The cost to deliver quality early childhood education has always been more than most parents can afford to pay. Meanwhile, public investments in early learning have historically been insufficient to

sustain the early childhood workforce, and the decentralized model of early learning programming has made cohesive action in the sector difficult.

The closure of early childhood centers during the first months of the pandemic had a severe impact on the development and socialization of young children. In addition to the detrimental effects on our early learners, changes to the operations, enrollment, and capacity limits at early childhood centers during COVID-19 created tremendous strains on those providers. Early childhood centers are facing overwhelming financial pressures, acute staffing shortages, and ongoing concerns about health and safety, all of which are contributing to significantly lower rates of enrollment.

In order to move early childhood education forward, local communities, states, and the federal government must work together to build a publicly-funded, high-quality early childhood education system that works for children, providers, and educators.

Early Childhood Education Report Contributors: *In addition to conversations with parents, families, and providers, content for this section was created in partnership with Katie Kelly, Executive Director of PRE4CLE; Nancy Mendez, Executive Director of Starting Point; and Suzann Morris, Fellow, Early Childhood Initiative of the Bipartisan Policy Center.*



SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS BEFORE COVID-19

Cleveland has been a leader in building high-quality early learning systems for more than four decades. Through the leadership of Starting Point and Cuyahoga County’s Office of Early Childhood/Invest in Children, Cleveland played a critical role in pioneering Ohio’s statewide quality rating and improvement system for early learning—Step Up To Quality—as well as a national model for preschool excellence—UPK—among other innovations.

Additionally, with the 2014 adoption of PRE4CLE, a citywide plan to enroll all three- and four-year-olds in high-quality preschool², Cleveland built on this legacy of early learning excellence to systemically and strategically change the landscape for its youngest learners. In the six years leading up to the pandemic, increased enrollment in high-quality preschool programs³ yielded significant gains in kindergarten readiness for Cleveland’s children.



GAINS IN KINDERGARTEN READINESS

By 2020, young children in Cleveland had seen significant gains in language and literacy as well as overall kindergarten readiness.

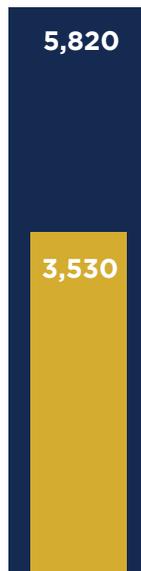
67% of children in a PRE4CLE preschool were demonstrating or approaching kindergarten readiness, with 28 percent demonstrating readiness.

INCREASED ACCESS

2,290

Additional High-Quality Preschool Seats Since 2013

In 2019, the availability of high-quality preschool seats in Cleveland expanded to 5,820, a 65 percent gain since 2013.



INCREASED ENROLLMENT

2,046

Additional Children Enrolled in High-Quality Preschool

Forty-three percent of all preschool-aged children in Cleveland were enrolled in high-quality preschool, representing a 72 percent increase since 2013.



2013 2019

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

COVID-19 introduced profound challenges to Cleveland's early learning system, most notably the immediate effects on the learning and development of young children as they were removed from their early learning settings in March 2020, with many unable to return until well into 2021, if at all. In addition to the loss of early learning opportunities, many children also lost access to critical services such as mental and physical health resources, special education, and vital nutrition support.

Unlike many other social service and education systems, early childhood education in Ohio is not housed within a single network. Rather, hundreds of decentralized entities operate independently, connected only through state-level star-rating systems, government guidelines, and local organizations like Starting Point, PRE4CLE, and provider networks. Given this structure, and the historical under-funding of early childhood education, a unified response to emergencies like COVID-19 was all but impossible. COVID-19's impact on early learning providers' operations and capacity, staffing, and enrollment has created a significant crisis in the sector.

SIGNIFICANT DECLINES IN PROVIDER CAPACITY AND ENROLLMENT

Across the country, many K-12 school systems and postsecondary institutions were able to transition to virtual learning, but for most early childhood providers, this was not a viable option. While the state of Ohio permitted early childhood programs to return to pre-pandemic operations in August

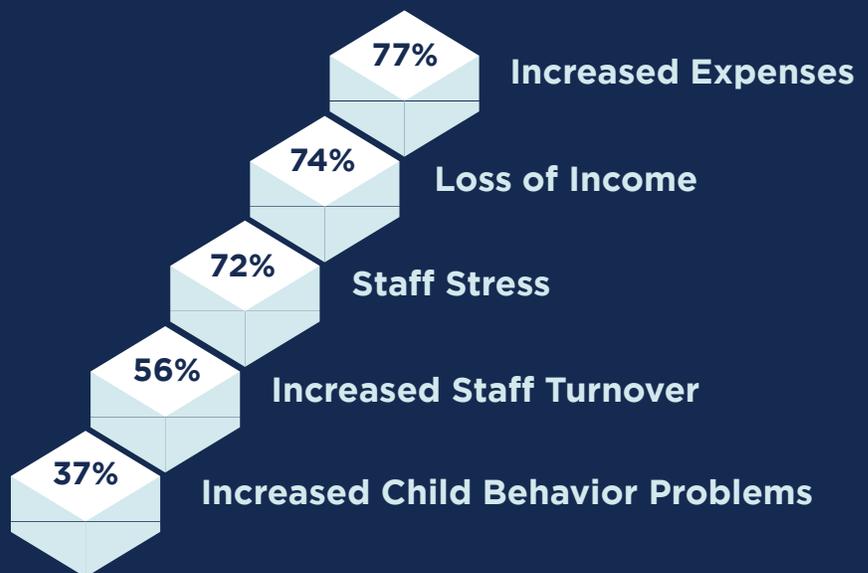
2020, many local providers opted to implement smaller class sizes in order to protect the health and safety of staff, students, and their families. Despite financial support from the state for programs that helped reduce class sizes, the vast majority of Cleveland's early childhood centers simultaneously experienced drastic increases in expenditures and significant loss of income due to decreased enrollment, creating operational instability.

The number of children enrolled in high-quality programs declined from 4,819 students in 2019 to

3,728 students in 2021.⁴ At its lowest point, in September 2020, fewer children were enrolled in high-quality programs than before PRE4CLE's existence. This decline in enrollment can be attributed to several interrelated factors: parents losing their jobs, being ineligible for subsidies, working from home, and perceiving alternative arrangements as safer than on-site childcare programs. While a rebound is starting to occur, there are still significantly fewer children enrolled in high-quality early education settings than before the pandemic.

TOP FIVE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON CLEVELAND'S EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE CENTERS

From Starting Point's September 2020 Quarterly Provider Survey



50%

Fifty percent drop in the number of children aged five and younger enrolled in high-quality child care between September 2019 and September 2020.

HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL CLOSINGS IN CLEVELAND



6 Early childhood programs in Cleveland are temporarily closed or inactive as a result of the pandemic.

8 Early childhood programs in Cleveland have permanently closed since the start of the pandemic.

COVID-19 has adversely affected Cleveland’s preschool population and early childhood providers in every possible way. While the impact on young children will take years to fully assess, it is likely that young children who experienced disruptions in their early learning environment will face delays in cognitive development and setbacks in their mastery of basic foundational academic and social emotional skills.⁵

A FINANCIAL CRISIS FOR PROVIDERS

The closure of early learning programs, combined with subsequent loss of enrollment as parents kept children home for safety or financial concerns, has

caused significant staffing and financial strains on the entire early learning system. In July 2021, 77 percent of early learning programs reported that they were short-staffed, driven by the systemic under-compensation of childcare teachers and staff, a trend that has been sharply exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.⁶ The unprecedented levels of under-enrollment experienced during the COVID-19 era have led to a significant financial crisis for early education providers. Without intervention, widespread permanent closures are likely. These worrisome trends illustrate the ways that the pandemic continues to push many early childhood providers to the brink of closure.

HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL ENROLLMENT VS. CAPACITY (2019-2021)

DECEMBER 2019

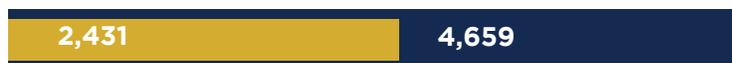
83%



OF AVAILABLE HIGH-QUALITY SEATS FILLED

SEPTEMBER 2020

52%



OF AVAILABLE HIGH-QUALITY SEATS FILLED

SEPTEMBER 2021

60%



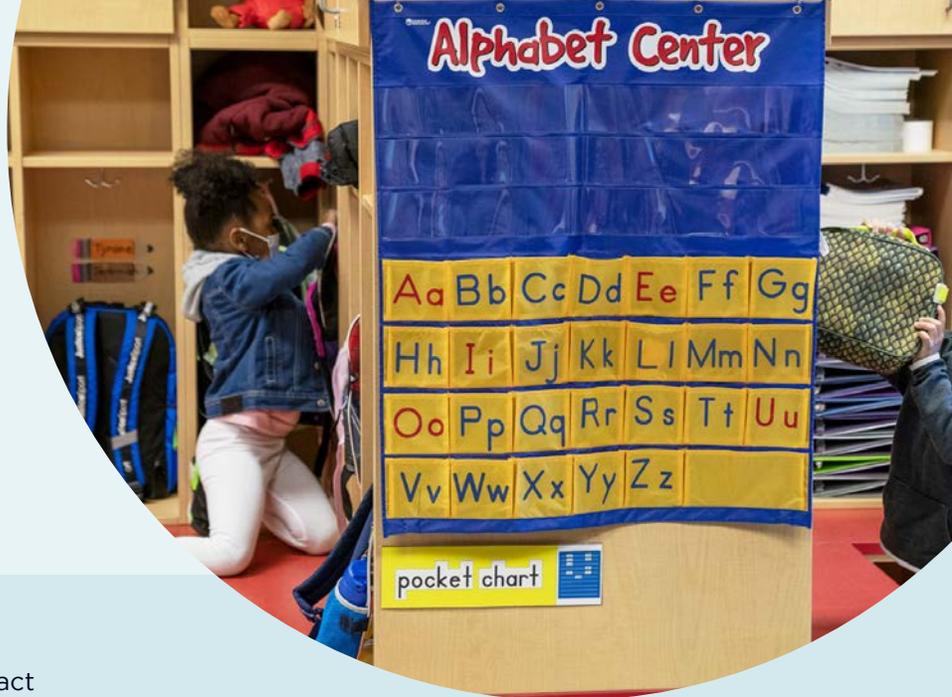
OF AVAILABLE HIGH-QUALITY SEATS FILLED

CHILDREN ENROLLED IN HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL
 POTENTIAL CAPACITY

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

DESTABILIZATION OF THE SYSTEM + STAFFING SHORTAGE AT A CRISIS LEVEL

By Suzann Morris, Fellow, Early Childhood Initiative at the Bipartisan Policy Center



Across the country, COVID-19's disruptive impact amplified an economic crisis in every community, including for early childhood providers. State mandated closure orders forced some early childhood programs to close, while CDC health and safety guidelines capped the size of early learning classrooms, diminishing revenues for programs. Even before COVID-19, the sector grappled with challenges such as extremely low wages for workers,⁷ averaging \$11.65/hour nationally in 2019. With a 94 percent female workforce, represented by 15 percent Black women and 21 percent Hispanic women, COVID-19's impact on early childhood programs was disproportionately felt by women.⁸

Today, early childhood worker shortages are acute. A recent poll by the National Association for the Education of Young Children found that four out of five childcare centers have a staffing shortage, and 78 percent of respondents identified low wages as the main obstacle to recruitment of educators, while 81 percent said it's the reason they leave.⁹

While the impact on young children will take years to fully assess, there are early indicators for young children who experienced disrupted routines in their early learning environment. Emerging stories shared by pediatricians point to an increase in social skill delays and a rise in challenging behaviors.¹⁰ An analysis of Arkansas early childhood programs in February 2021 noted 36 percent of early childhood teachers reported children show reduced levels of attention during group activities.¹¹ The same review observed 29 percent of children were less likely to engage in cooperative play with peers and 24 percent were less likely to make new friends compared to before the pandemic. For Black children, who are twice as likely to be suspended from preschool than their White peers, a rise in behaviors labeled as inappropriate could further disrupt their continuous participation in early learning without meaningful classroom supports.¹²

As thousands of early childhood programs closed permanently during the pandemic, the ripple effect is leaving families with fewer options. A shrinking supply of early learning educators additionally limits the sector's capacity. Yet significant federal investments offer a platform of opportunity, as innovative solutions are on the horizon for supporting families and early learning.





Ohio Voters Agree Early Childhood is a Priority

Ohio parents are feeling intense stress around COVID-19, including pressure in meeting home and work obligations and finding and affording high-quality childcare and early learning for their young children. Parents need high-quality early childhood education for their children in order to fully engage in Ohio's economy, and Ohio's economy needs those parents in the workforce.

Additionally, because access to early childhood education centers is inextricably linked to parents' employment, COVID-19 created a crisis among working parents, especially women. More than 4 in 10 working parents in Ohio (43

percent) had to cut back on hours to care for their children due to the pandemic, with nearly 60 percent of non-working or part-time working mothers with young children indicating that their employment hours would increase if they had access to quality childcare for their children at a reasonable cost.¹³

Nearly three quarters of Ohio voters agree early childhood is the most important educational experience of a child's life, and believe a significant portion of the state's education budget should be allocated to early learning.



43%

Forty-three percent of working parents in Ohio had to cut back on hours to care for their children due to the pandemic.

74%

Nearly three-quarters of Ohio voters agree early childhood learning is the most important educational experience of a child's life.

MOVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FORWARD

COVID-19 exposed the fragility of the early childhood education system, a result of decades of underinvestment and under-prioritization. The pandemic also exposed how critical early childhood education is to the cognitive and social development of our children as well as the stability of families and local economies. While early education enrollment rates dropped significantly in the first months of the pandemic, these rates have begun to increase in the 2021-22 school year. Moving forward, we need to support the continuing efforts of local partners including PRE4CLE, Starting Point, and Invest in Children to bring high-quality early learning capacity and enrollment back to pre-pandemic levels. In addition, we must commit to and aggressively pursue strategies for stabilizing and strengthening Cleveland's early childhood education system.



Building this system will require significant advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels. The optimal utilization of currently available federal early childhood COVID-19 relief dollars controlled by the state of Ohio that are available mainly to providers through 2023 is an important first step. Approval of PRE4CLE's request that the City of Cleveland commit \$5 million of its ARPA dollars to early childhood facility upgrades would be another critical step. Finally, approval of some version of the early childhood component of the proposed Build Back Better Act is a possible game changer.

The proposed Build Back Better Act would significantly expand childcare access by ensuring that families up to 250 percent of Ohio's median income use no more than 7 percent of their income to cover the cost of childcare. This expansion was expected to cover 9 out of 10 Ohio children. The bill would expand access to free, universal preschool for every 3- and 4-year-old nationwide and offer funding to both preschool and childcare providers to increase the quality of early childhood programs, expand capacity, and raise wages. While it is unlikely that the Build Back Better Act will be approved by Congress, there is bipartisan support for possibly developing comprehensive legislation that focuses on early learning and childcare that addresses many of issues included in Build Back Better.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION COVID RELIEF FUNDING

Since the Spring of 2020, the state of Ohio has received nearly \$1.8 billion in federal COVID relief funding.

The first two rounds of funding (\$117 million in March 2020 and \$333 million in December 2020) were used to: reopen a small group of childcare programs to serve parents who were essential workers; award grants to providers that could be used for payroll, personal protective equipment, and other expenses; increase the amount of and eligibility for subsidized childcare; and provide supplemental payments to childcare program staff. In March 2021 Ohio received an additional \$799 million to provide direct relief to childcare providers for past or future costs related

to COVID-19, support the childcare workforce, and support the health and mental health of children and staff. These funds which need to be expended by September 30, 2024, are currently being distributed through a grant application process. Ohio received another \$500 million that can be used to give families and essential workers childcare assistance, and to support childcare providers, especially in the publicly funded childcare programs. Ohio has yet to determine how those funds will be used. In addition to having access to these various rounds of state funding, eligible Cleveland childcare providers have received almost \$9.3 million in Head Start Covid relief funding.



SHORT TERM FOCUS: Return early childhood education capacity to pre-pandemic levels.

- Ensure providers access and leverage existing federal early childhood COVID-19 relief dollars controlled by the state.
- Work with early learning providers to address staffing shortages and resource needs.
- Conduct targeted information and outreach campaigns to connect families to quality early learning opportunities.

LONG TERM FOCUS: Build a strong and stable early childhood education system that serves all children.

- **Affordability:** Create a new funding model that balances the affordability for families and retention of a quality workforce. The eligibility criteria for publicly funded childcare should, at a minimum, be expanded to 200 percent of the federal poverty level.
- **Quality Workforce:** Address the issue of equitable compensation for childcare professionals including benefits such as paid leave and health coverage that support working families.
- **Quality Facilities:** Ensure Cleveland's high-quality preschool programs are in facilities that are safe, organized, and resourced to adequately support early learning, and have the funding to support facility repair and maintenance. Advocate that the City of Cleveland commit \$5 million of its ARPA dollars to early childhood facility upgrades, a request put forward by PRE4CLE.
- **Quality Standards:** Maintain the Step Up to Quality Rating System or its equivalent that supports the advancement of high-quality early learning, an urgent issue that requires advocacy at the state level from local leadership.
- **Birth-to-Age-Three Strategy:** Organize the Cleveland community to work together to build a birth- to- age-three strategy that supports healthy brain development during the critical first three years of life, including the eradication of lead poisoning and access to quality physical, social-emotional, and early care and education supports.
- **Family-Friendly Workplaces:** Work with local employers to adapt their policies, processes, and workplaces to meet the needs of families by offering paid parental leave, flexible hours, and compensation for childcare.
- **Federal Advocacy:** Endorse the growing bi-partisan support for comprehensive federal legislation that would significantly expand access to affordable childcare and offer funding to both preschool and childcare providers to increase the quality of early childhood programs, expand capacity, and raise wages.

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE OVERCOMING CHALLENGES AND MOVING INTO THE FUTURE

By Katie Kelly, Executive Director, PRE4CLE; and Nancy Mendez, Executive Director, Starting Point

For more than forty years, Cleveland has been at the forefront of building high-quality early learning systems. While Cleveland reached significant milestones in the past decade, the COVID-19 pandemic created a perfect storm that has exposed long-existing weaknesses in the childcare system.

While local and national partners helped mitigate the worst of the pandemic's effects, many concerns still exist about the long-term impact on children and early learning providers.

We remain hopeful that increased attention to the needs of young children and early learning providers, as well as new strategies such as virtual professional development and creative outreach to families, will create the opportunity to emerge stronger from this crisis and build a more resilient and equitable early learning system for the future.

EDUCATION

On March 12, 2020, Ohio became the first state to announce statewide school closures as a response to COVID-19. Impossible decisions about the need for distance learning and balancing public health and education needs quickly followed. Families were forced to juggle the safety of their children, changes in work environments, and lost income. Students transitioned to virtual learning while grappling with fear of illness and death.

COVID-19 has affected student enrollment, attendance, instructional time, engagement, mental health, grade level advancement, and more. This is particularly true for school districts that primarily serve low-income individuals and students of color, where longstanding gaps in opportunity, achievement, digital access, housing, and job insecurity have worsened as a result of the pandemic. In some ways, the 2021-22 school year presented more significant

challenges than 2020-2021. As the pandemic continued, new variants emerged that proved more harmful to children, compelling schools to adapt almost daily to changing circumstances.

Schools have had to radically change their approach to educating children, shifting from all remote to all hybrid in 2020-21, back to in-person in fall 2021, and then back and forth between remote and in-person as the virus continued.¹⁴

Masking and vaccinations have become divisive political issues, and vaccination rates are too low to achieve herd immunity. Recent outbreaks have challenged all Cleveland schools' ability to deliver quality education. Labor shortages in schools affect busing, food distribution, safe and healthy learning environments, and classroom instruction. The pandemic has continued to disrupt in-person learning, which is critical to educational progress, engagement, and students' emotional well-being.

While COVID-19 caused major disruption, schools with community support have stepped up to meet the challenge. In addition, education leaders recognize that the education system's adaptation to the pandemic—the increased use of technology and capacity for hybrid learning—offers the opportunity to improve, innovate, and even reinvent teaching and learning.

K-12 Education Report Contributors:

In addition to conversations with parents, families, and providers, content for this section was created in partnership with Dr. Beth Tarasawa, Executive Vice President of Research, Northwest Evaluation Association; Meghann Marnecheck, Executive Director, Cleveland Transformation Alliance; Michelle Burris, Senior Policy Associate, The Century Foundation; and Tracy E. Hill, M.Ed., Executive Director, Family and Community Engagement, Cleveland Metropolitan School District.



SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS BEFORE COVID-19

In 2012, Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools set out to ensure every child in Cleveland attends a high-quality school and every neighborhood has a multitude of great schools from which families can choose. Nearly a decade later, The Cleveland Plan has helped drive improvements in student achievement, increased financial support, and catalyzed policy change in support of these goals. Under the Cleveland Plan, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District went from the worst-performing school district in the state ten years ago to one of the state's most rapidly-improving districts. The Cleveland Plan has led to tangible progress, as seen in steady increases in student achievement, graduation rates, and public confidence.

CLEVELAND'S PLAN FOR TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS

In 2012 Cleveland's Plan for Transforming Schools was passed with broad stakeholder engagement, making sweeping changes to state law around district autonomy and flexibility, employment policies and practices, and charter school quality and collaboration. The goal of the Cleveland Plan is to hold all public schools, district and charter, to the highest standards of performance and guarantee every child in Cleveland attends a high-quality school. Updated in 2021, the Cleveland Plan continues to focus on ensuring that all Cleveland public education students receive a high-quality, equitable education in schools that inspire joy in learning.¹⁶

IMPROVED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

In the years leading up to the pandemic, Cleveland's schools showed steady progress in reading and math. Controlling for barriers to learning like poverty, language acquisition, and learning disabilities, Cleveland was outperforming state and national averages in 4th and 8th grade reading, as well as in 4th grade math.¹⁵

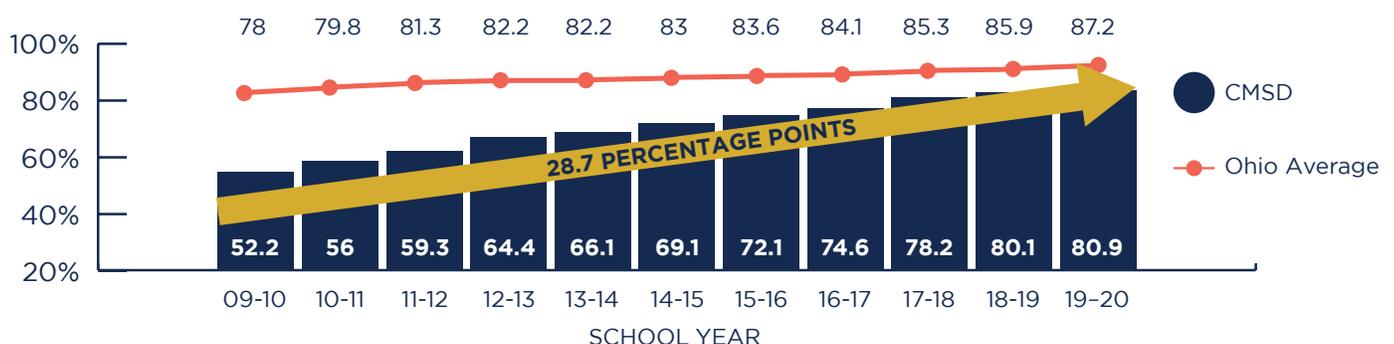
SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

Building on increased student achievements, the CMSD class of 2020's graduation rate was 80.9 percent, an impressive 28.7 percentage point increase over the class of 2010. CMSD has closed the high school graduation achievement gap. The graduation rates for Black (80.9 percent) and Hispanic (84.9 percent) students are higher than those of their white peers. In addition, CMSD graduates of color outperform state averages for their peer groups.

EXPANDED COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND COLLABORATION

Cleveland residents have shown confidence in the CMSD's progress and fiscal stewardship via unprecedented voter support for significant levies in 2012, 2016, and 2020. The CMSD shares a dedicated portion of levy proceeds to 16 partnering charter schools that support the tenets of the Cleveland Plan.

FOUR-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE (2009-10 THROUGH 2019-20)



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

COVID-19 has greatly affected K-12 education in Cleveland. The pandemic disrupted the lives of our citizens and exacerbated longstanding inequities. In a city where half our children were already living in poverty, families have struggled to meet their most basic needs—food, housing, safety, and healthcare.

The pandemic also amplified Cleveland’s well-documented digital divide. Lack of access to reliable Internet prevented students from fully participating in learning as schools moved from completely in-person to an online environment. The physical separation of students from their teachers and peers only intensified students’ pandemic-induced sense of isolation.

In addition to the resulting lost academic learning and socialization time, current enrollment and attendance rates are well below pre-pandemic levels. Recent Ohio data indicate that the pandemic is negatively affecting student achievement across the state, particularly in low-income communities.

If not addressed, these declines will continue, affecting long-term grade level advancement and graduation rates.

SIGNIFICANT DECLINES IN ATTENDANCE

In the CMSD, chronic absenteeism in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 is double pre-pandemic levels. CMSD students are experiencing high levels of stress, are not feeling supported, and are scared of COVID-19. For these reasons and more, many CMSD students have missed at least 10 percent of classes in the first seven weeks of the 2021-22 school year. Chronic absenteeism is disproportionately affecting students with disabilities; economically disadvantaged students; and Black, Hispanic, and multiracial CMSD students, with over half of these populations on track to miss more than 18 days of school in the current school year.^{17,18}

PERCENTAGE OF CMSD STUDENTS CHRONICALLY ABSENT 2019-20 THROUGH 2021-22

PRE-PANDEMIC 2019-20 SCHOOL YEAR



2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR (NEARLY DOUBLE PRE-PANDEMIC LEVELS)



2021-22 SCHOOL YEAR TO DATE



20%

40%

60%

CMSD STUDENTS CHRONICALLY ABSENT

TOTAL CMSD STUDENTS

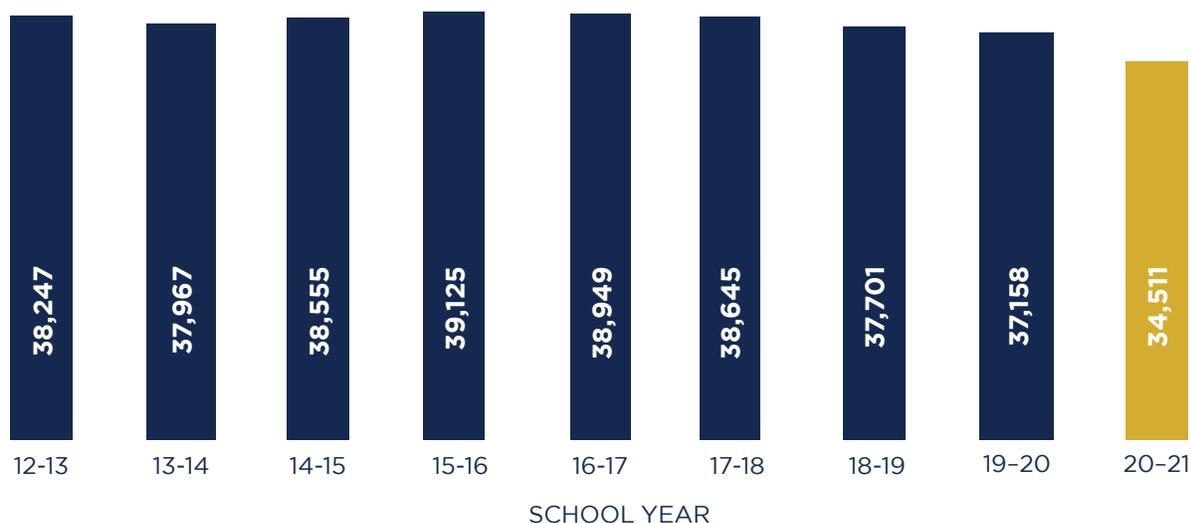




SIGNIFICANT DECLINES IN ENROLLMENT

CMUSD enrollment dropped seven percent in the 2020–21 school year, with the largest decline in kindergarten enrollment. The under-enrollment in large urban districts like the CMUSD puts pressure on school budgets, posing threats to course offerings, cross-grade-level teacher collaboration, arts, music, athletic programming, and more. Although official enrollment data for the 2021–22 school year is not yet available, we anticipate that enrollment numbers will slightly increase.

CMUSD STUDENT ENROLLMENT 2012-13 THROUGH 2020-21



INCREASED MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Educational challenges were accompanied by broader shocks to society, including potential trauma related to COVID-19. In particular, students of color saw more pandemic-related economic setbacks and were at greater risk for food insecurity and increased rate of domestic violence, disproportionately affecting their mental health.¹⁹ Increasing stress levels are associated with rising rates of depression, a factor identified as an adverse childhood experience with negative long-term outcomes. Though schools often provide counseling services and other important social emotional supports for students and educators, the pandemic brought greater focus on the importance of prioritizing students' psychological health.²⁰

Distance learning took students away from the day-to-day socialization with peers and teachers and made it harder for teachers to identify and meet mental health needs. This lost socialization yielded a national increase in instances of verbal and physical fighting, behavioral referrals, and mental health concerns as students returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2021. This significant increase in behavior issues is a reflection of the stress the pandemic placed on children—upending their education, schedules, and social lives. For students dealing with grief, mental health issues, and/or the layered effects of poverty and racism, this transition is proving to be even more challenging.²¹

LOST ACADEMIC LEARNING TIME

Early predictions indicate students overall will have lost between 3-14 months of learning time during the pandemic, with Black and Hispanic students projected to lose up to three times more than their white peers.²² Without intervention, the loss of classroom learning time is expected to have drastic effects on grade promotion, graduation rates, and risk for student disengagement and dropout in high-poverty urban districts across the country. Some studies show that these students could lose \$61,000 to \$82,000 in lifetime earnings, or an equivalent of a year of full-time work.²³

EARLY NEGATIVE IMPACT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

It is clear that the pandemic is causing massive disruptions in students' opportunities to learn. Although drawn from a limited dataset, recent statewide assessments show that overall, the pandemic has negatively affected student learning. Based on Ohio's state English Language Arts assessments, third-grade students demonstrated roughly 20 percent less learning on average between November 2020 and April 2021 as compared to students in prior years. Across most grades, English Language Arts proficiency rates generally decreased by eight percentage points and mathematics proficiency rates decreased by approximately 15 percentage points during this time.²⁴

These overall declines in rates of achievement across Ohio were reflected in the state's 2021 report cards. These declines were particularly notable among low-income students and students of color. Unless addressed, these negative trends could most certainly affect grade level advancement and graduation rates in the future.



GREATER ACHIEVEMENT DECLINES FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR

Ohio State University researchers found that the average achievement for third graders in English Language Arts declined by nearly one-third between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020.²⁵ Students scoring at the proficiency levels also fell by approximately nine percentage points. These declines were nearly 50 percent larger for Black students compared to their White peers, equating to half of a year of learning time lost. Academic declines were also found in students learning remotely, and/or students affected by COVID-19-related unemployment in their households.²⁶





A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE MUST BE PERMANENTLY CLOSED

By Michelle Burris, Senior Policy Associate, The Century Foundation; and Dr. Beth Tarasawa, Executive Vice President of Research, Northwest Evaluation Association

The pandemic interrupted learning and widened opportunity gaps for millions of students in the United States and across the globe. One of the largest barriers to students is the digital divide.²⁷ In K-12, this represents nearly 16 million students impacted when the pandemic began, and nearly 12 million students who remain under-connected to this date, with Black, Latinx, Native American, and economically disadvantaged students being the most affected. Disconnected students are also estimated to have lower lifetime earnings. During the pandemic, efforts by school districts such as laptop distributions had a significant impact but are non-permanent. Common Sense Media found that state and school districts temporarily closed 20-40 percent of the national digital divide for students who lacked a high-speed connection; however, nearly 75 percent of those efforts will expire in the next one to three years.²⁸

Nearly three in four Ohioan students were learning remotely in hybrid settings at the start of the 2020-21 school year, yet Ohio had one of the largest populations of K-12 students (30 percent) without adequate Internet connectivity.²⁹ Racial inequities, infrastructure, and a lack of affordability perpetuate the digital divide, with over half of students in Ohio (54 percent) lacking affordable broadband access. While the lack of broadband tends to be the most pronounced in rural households, in Ohio this gap was most prevalent in urban areas. Among the affected households, urban residents outnumbered rural ones by a factor of three.³⁰

During the pandemic, Ohio allocated \$50 million from the CARES Act for school districts to provide hotspots and broadband subsidies through December 2020. The Cleveland Metropolitan School District partnered with T-Mobile to provide unlimited data hotspots and equipment for a two-year period.³¹

Leading policymakers are working to align financial resources to the most pressing school needs—building technological, social, cultural, and human capital capacity. As virtual instruction and remote family engagement continue into the future, closing the digital divide and strengthening distance learning is a technological imperative.³² The digital divide must be permanently closed through affordability, availability, and adoption. To support universal learning, students must have access to standardized and low-cost broadband service.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic:

40%

of Cleveland families lacked reliable access to high-speed Internet in the home.

68%

of Cleveland families had no device other than a smartphone.

“ I think the pandemic exposed a lot of gaps in education and society. There was of course the digital divide—lack of devices, lack of broadband. Broadband is still a challenge in Ohio, today. Even though the District has done a lot of work to make sure our families are connected, we know that Internet access in much of the urban area is still difficult. It’s not great connectivity. We have it, but it’s not great.”

Shari Obrenski, President, Cleveland Teachers’ Union 279

MOVING K-12 EDUCATION FORWARD

COVID-19 has brought unprecedented levels of disruption to Cleveland's K-12 education system and the students and families it serves. Education stakeholders—students, families, school staff, community partners—have experienced unprecedented levels of collective trauma, instability, and isolation. Students have lost a substantial amount of learning time that could significantly interrupt their educational progress.

Moving forward we need to address these issues and restore a sense of stability and normalcy. At the same time, we have an enormous opportunity to reimagine what student-centered teaching and learning could look like and permanently scale the supports and opportunities students need to be fully engaged and successful in designing their own pathways.

SHORT TERM FOCUS:

Return K-12 schools to a pre-pandemic operating level.

- Keep the school buildings open by proactively preventing the spread of COVID-19 through a community campaign that promotes vaccinations, mask wearing, social distancing, and testing.
- Develop and implement strategies to address pandemic-induced capacity limitations, particularly central office and school-based staffing shortages.
- Leverage ESSER funding to address student issues related to mental health and social isolation through counseling, classroom supports, out-of-school opportunities, and summer programming.
- Develop and implement a school-community collaborative strategy to address chronic absenteeism.
- Increase enrollment by complementing district-wide marketing efforts with grassroots parent-to-parent peer engagement efforts.



K-12 EDUCATION COVID-19 RELIEF FUNDING

In total, the CMSD has received \$464 million in COVID-19 relief; the overwhelming majority of these funds (\$461 million) have come in three rounds of CARES, Elementary, and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and ARPA funding. Round 1 must be spent by September 30, 2022; Round 2 by September 30, 2023, and Round 3 by September 30, 2024. All three awards must be used to prepare for, prevent, or respond to the pandemic including addressing its academic and nonacademic impact on students.



LONG TERM FOCUS: Create a fairer, student-centered, more effective, and just education system in Cleveland.

- **Learner-Centered Approach:** Support CMSD’s efforts to reinvent teaching and learning by shifting the educational experience for Cleveland’s students toward competency-based, anytime-anywhere, individualized learning that focuses on the whole child and ensures students graduate with a career vision and plan.
- **Student and Family Supports:** Build upon Say Yes to Education’s growing wraparound services infrastructure by providing integrated health services—including mental health—in all schools, and quality out-of-school programs in all neighborhoods.
- **Digital Equity:** Ensure that every student has up-to-date devices and permanent and affordable broadband access— a foundational requirement for learning and thriving in a digital world.
- **Equitable Funding:** Continue to advocate for an equitable school funding formula and policies that support both the academic and social-emotional development of all children.

“We did not lose learning, we lost time. By shifting away from deficit models that K-12 education used in schooling, we’re looking at the assets each learner has and how we build upon them. We have the opportunity to rethink school policy in a way that is actually more learner centered. If we think learning is lost, we will treat the system as if that is true. If we believe time was lost, we will make learning the constant, not the variable, and we’ll give more opportunities to recover that lost time.”

Eric Gordon, CEO, Cleveland Metropolitan School District

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTHS TO LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE

By Meghann Marnecheck, Executive Director, Cleveland Transformation Alliance; and Tracy E. Hill, M.Ed., Executive Director, Family and Community Engagement, Cleveland Metropolitan School District

As one of Ohio’s largest urban centers, Cleveland has the highest child poverty rate in the country (51 percent), is rated the worst city for Internet connectivity, and is ranked as the 9th most segregated community in the United States. Yet, despite these factors, under the Cleveland Plan, the CMSD went from being the worst-performing school district in Ohio ten years ago to one of Ohio’s fastest-improving districts. Our local efforts were paying off—and then COVID-19 shifted the world as we all knew it.

Through an unexpected and challenging year, as a community we must take advantage of what we and others have learned about educating children today. The need for individualized learning, added support, one-on-one time with teachers, and the focus on social and emotional learning should not be abandoned. Cleveland families are now better connected to the Internet and technology devices than ever before. We can capitalize on that momentum to better prepare students for their role in the global economy.

POSTSECONDARY

EDUCATION

Postsecondary credentials—four-year degrees, two-year degrees, and industry-recognized certifications—are pathways to family-sustaining wage careers. During the past decade, wide-scale community partnerships and nonprofits including the Higher Education Compact, College Now Greater Cleveland, and more recently, Say Yes to Education have helped improve postsecondary readiness, enrollment, persistence, and completion rates for Cleveland Metropolitan School District graduates.

The arrival of COVID-19 in spring 2020 halted traditional operations for colleges and universities, drastically affecting everything from in-person classes to on-campus housing and dining to student support services. Many higher education institutions had the infrastructure to shift to a virtual setting, but the complexities of the transition posed considerable obstacles to students' postsecondary participation. For instance,

students indicated a preference for in-person classes and many lacked adequate broadband access and the quiet environment required for remote learning.

While the pandemic's impact will be more apparent in future persistence and completion data, it is already clear that Cleveland students have been among the hardest hit. In Cleveland and across the country, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion and student enrollment in postsecondary education plummeted. Many students at higher education institutions stopped going to classes for one semester or more, finding themselves confronted with serious challenges related to affordability, food and housing insecurity, online learning, health concerns, and increased family demands.

Enrollment and persistence pose legitimate concerns for higher education institutions, and prioritizing the mental and emotional health of students is now more urgent than ever. Looking ahead, Cleveland must continue to work collaboratively to improve opportunities and outcomes, raise awareness, promote the need for higher education, and advocate for policies that support student access to and success in postsecondary education.



Postsecondary Education Report Contributors:
In addition to conversations with parents, families, and providers, content for this section was created in partnership with Rachel Fishman, Higher Education Program, New America; Michele Scott Taylor, Ed.D, Chief Program Officer, College Now Greater Cleveland; and Maggie McGrath, Executive Director, Higher Education Compact of Greater Cleveland

SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS BEFORE COVID-19

In 2010, Cleveland’s civic leaders, educators, and college and university presidents came together to develop a plan to increase the number of Cleveland Metropolitan School District youth enrolling in and graduating from college as part of the Cleveland Plan. Now, over a decade later, over 80 community-based organizations, Ohio colleges and universities, and representatives from city and county government, philanthropy, and the CMSD convene regularly as the Higher Education Compact of Greater Cleveland. The Compact measures and monitors CMSD graduates’ progress toward increasing readiness for, access to, and persistence through postsecondary education. This collaboration has resulted in considerable gains in college readiness (as indicated by a significant reduction in remediation rates for CMSD graduates), as well as increases in enrollment, persistence, and completion.³³

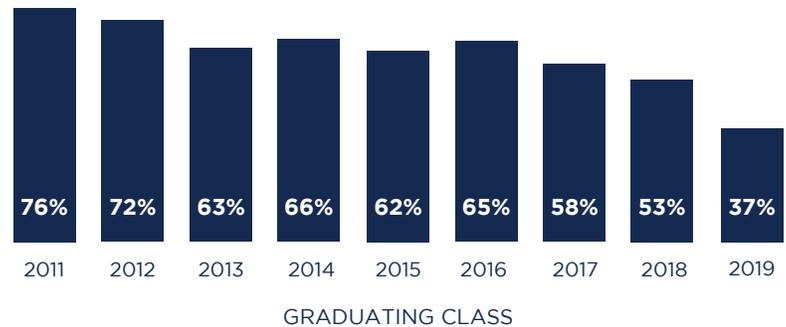
SAY YES TO EDUCATION

In 2019, the launch of Say Yes to Education Cleveland further reinforced Cleveland’s commitment to supporting the whole child.³⁴ The strategy behind Say Yes is to improve Cleveland’s economy, neighborhoods, and workforce over the coming generations by providing a tuition scholarship to every eligible CMSD graduate, and provide support services to students from preschool through high school graduation to help them overcome the significant challenges that often hinder postsecondary pursuits. Say Yes Cleveland support services are currently available in 68 CMSD and partner charter schools and will be offered in all CMSD and partner charter schools by 2023. In 2019, the first year of Say Yes Cleveland scholarships, Cleveland saw an increase in college enrollments. To date, more than 1,100 CMSD graduates have enrolled in postsecondary education through Say Yes Cleveland.

INCREASED COLLEGE PERSISTENCE AND COMPLETION

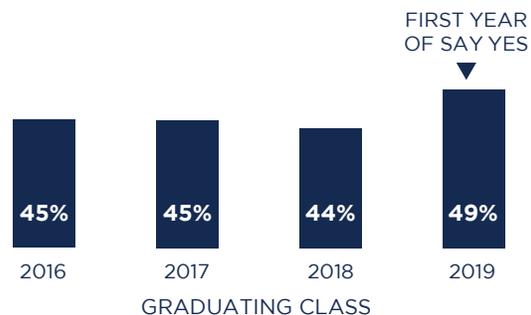
- 14** Percentage point increase in first year persistence rates between 2011 and 2019, to a record high of 61 percent for the class of 2019.
- 15** Percentage point increase in college completion rates at two-year institutions since 2011.
- 4** Percentage point increase in college completion rates at four-year institutions since 2011.

POSTSECONDARY MATH AND ENGLISH REMEDIATION RATES FOR CMSD GRADUATES 2011–2019



*Rates from Ohio Postsecondary Public Institutions

CMSD POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT RATES 2016–2019*



*Enrollment within one year of high school graduation

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The 2020–21 school year of remote instruction for Cleveland postsecondary students was extremely challenging—even more than in the spring of 2020.

Students abruptly had to shift their academic lives online, many from crowded homes with no quiet space and low Internet bandwidth. “Zoom fatigue” fears about the Coronavirus; anxiety about the future; and heightened financial, housing, and food insecurities caused significant disruption in students’ higher education plans.

While 77 percent of students nationwide reported being concerned about their ability to continue with their original academic plans, Black and Hispanic students were twice as likely to experience this disruption as compared to white peers.³⁵

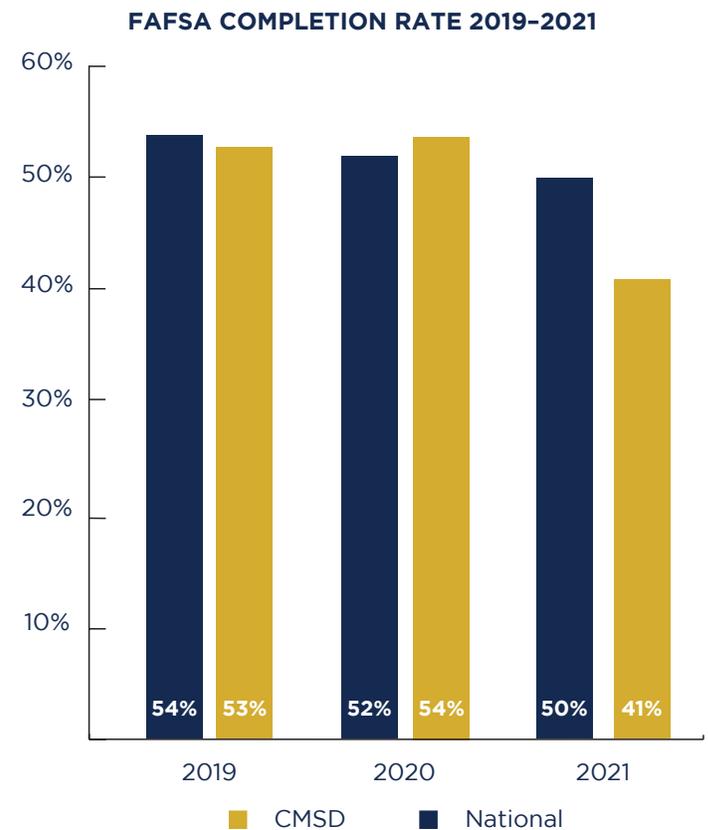
In addition, students are facing extreme isolation, anxiety, and depression as a result of the pandemic. In a survey conducted by College Now, more than 75 percent of respondents said their mental health/anxiety levels were their biggest concern for the spring 2021 semester. Almost two years into the pandemic, students’ struggles to meet their basic needs, rising mental health concerns, and disruption in academic plans are evidenced by declining leading indicators of higher education success—FAFSA completion, enrollment, persistence, and postsecondary completion.

SHARP DROPS IN FAFSA COMPLETION

At the end of the 2020 school year, the national FAFSA completion rate declined 1.8 percent points (52.3 percent for the Class of 2020 and 54.1 percent for the Class of 2019). However, the completion rate continued to decline another 2.2 percentage points, with only

50.1 percent of 12th grade students in the Class of 2021 completing FAFSA.³⁶

Locally, CMSD students completed the FAFSA very close to national rates pre-pandemic, 53% in 2019 and 54% in 2020. However, the Class of 2021 finished the year with a 41% FAFSA completion rate demonstrating the effects of a year of remote college advising.



“ I knew that students would need a lot of supportive services to mitigate personal challenges that they were experiencing like housing and food insecurity. Unfortunately, COVID-19 exacerbated the disparities that people of color experience normally. So, a lot of our students had to postpone their educational aspirations because of the need to attend to those personal necessities. Many needed to find ways that they could finance their immediate needs. ”

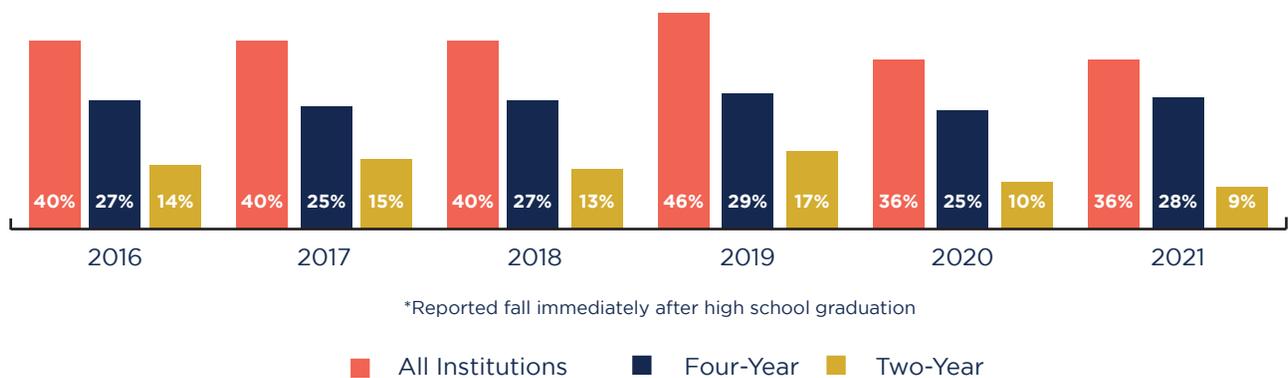
Alex Johnson, Ph.D., President, Cuyahoga Community College

SIGNIFICANT DECLINES IN ENROLLMENT

Since the onset of the pandemic, there has been a dramatic decrease in college enrollment. Nationally, enrollment fell eight percentage points during the two-year period (4.5 in fall 2020 and 3.5 percent in fall 2021). In Cleveland, following an uptick in 2019 as a result of the Say Yes Cleveland launch, CMSD graduate postsecondary enrollment declined ten percentage points from the Classes of 2019 to 2020

to 36 percent but remained steady at 36 percent for the Class of 2021. Enrollment in four-year institutions decreased four percentage points in 2020 but rebounded three percentage points in 2021. Following the national trend, local two-year institutions experienced higher enrollment declines, an eight-percentage point loss over the two-year pandemic period.

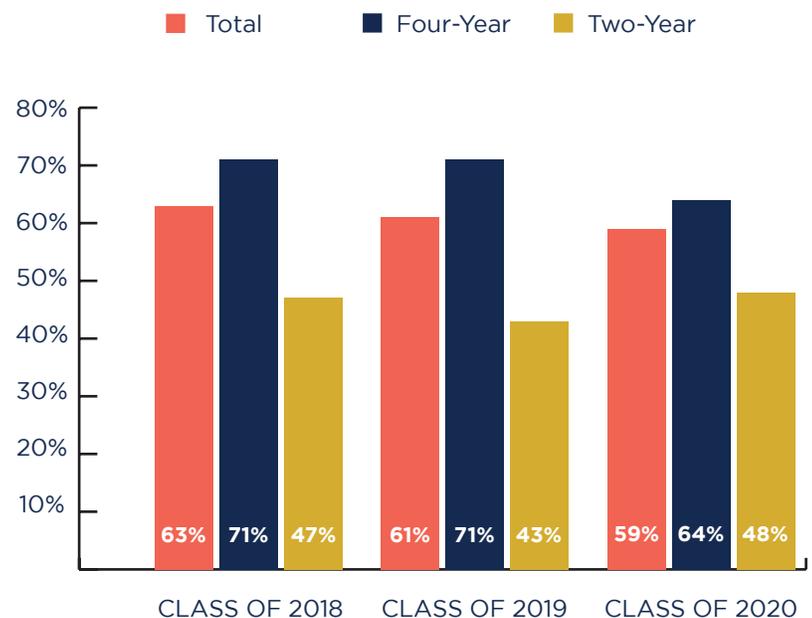
POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT RATES FOR CMSD GRADUATES*: 2016-2021



DECLINES IN PERSISTENCE AND COMPLETION RATES

The pandemic has significantly affected year one to year two postsecondary persistence. Nationally, 74 percent of first-time freshmen in fall 2019 returned to college for a second year, representing an unprecedented one-year drop of two percentage points. Locally, the overall CMSD graduate persistence rate declined two percentage points, matching the national trend. The significant reduction in persistence rates at four-year institutions between the Classes of 2019 and 2020 can be explained by the fall 2020 closure of campus facilities and the fact that, because of the economic downturn, many students chose to work full-time rather than return to school. At Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C), our local two-year institution, the increase in persistence can partially be attributed to the dedicated intensive coaching through the Tri-C Say Yes Scholars Program.

YEAR ONE TO YEAR TWO POSTSECONDARY PERSISTENCE RATES AMONG CMSD GRADUATES 2018-2020



MOVING POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FORWARD

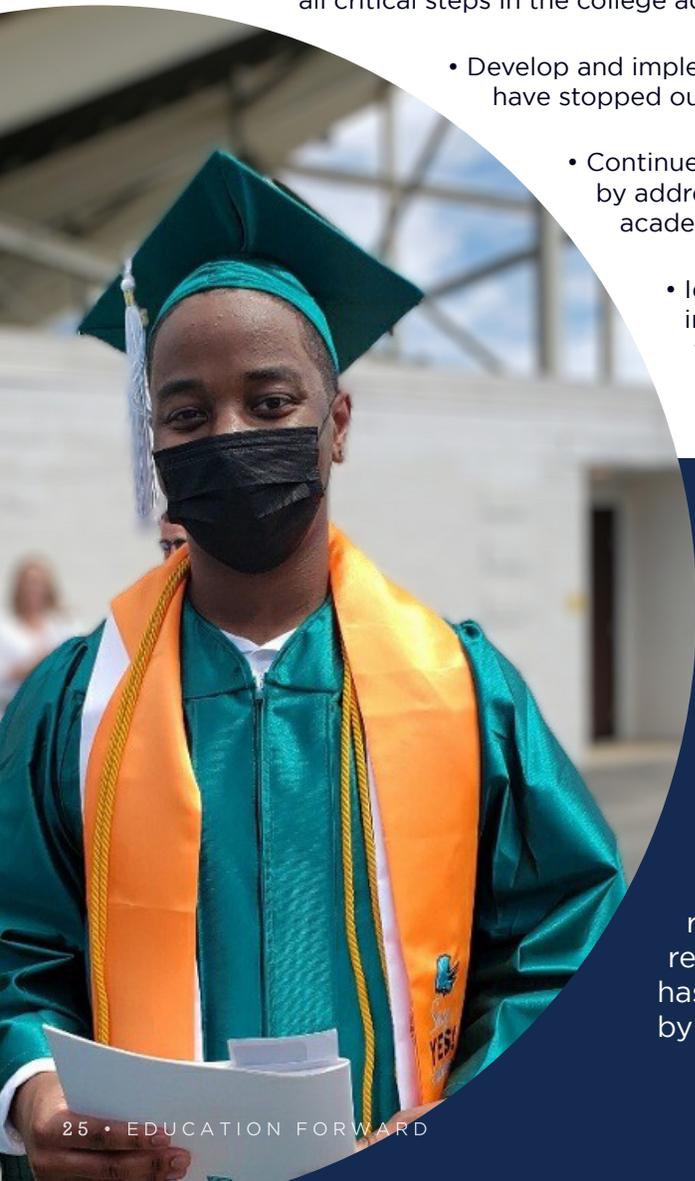
COVID-19 exposed and exacerbated the existing inequities that prevent students from low-income backgrounds and students of color from accessing and completing a postsecondary program. During the pandemic, Cleveland youth experienced increased food, housing, and financial insecurities; high levels of anxiety; and a disruption in education. In year one of the pandemic, these factors contributed to dramatic declines in postsecondary enrollment and persistence rates. In year two, these negative trends were neutralized to a degree because of aggressive community partner outreach to vulnerable students and the utilization of federal COVID-19 relief funding

by local colleges and universities to close tuition gaps, provide emergency financial support, and expand student support services. Unfortunately, this federal funding will end as of September 2022. Moving forward we need to support and expand the efforts of higher education institutions and anchor community partners—the Higher Education Compact of Greater Cleveland, College Now Greater Cleveland, and Say Yes Cleveland—and others, to significantly increase postsecondary enrollment and persistence rates and eliminate systemic barriers that prevent Cleveland students from accessing and successfully pursuing a postsecondary education.

SHORT TERM FOCUS:

Return postsecondary enrollment and persistence rates to pre-pandemic levels

- Provide the needed information and advising to ensure CMSD high school students and their families complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, college applications, and Say Yes/other scholarship applications—all critical steps in the college admission process.
- Develop and implement strategies to identify, re-engage, and re-enroll students who have stopped out during the past two years.
- Continue and expand proven institutional practices that improve retention by addressing affordability, basic needs, and students' access to enhanced academic and nonacademic support services.
- Identify and secure funding to ensure higher education institutions have the financial resources to support students' financial and non-financial needs once the current federal funding ends.



HIGHER EDUCATION COVID RELIEF FUNDING

Since the Spring of 2020, higher education institutions in Cuyahoga County have received three rounds of federal HEERF (Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds) funding for a total of \$240 million.

HEERF funds can be used to help students meet urgent, basic needs as well as underwrite the cost of tuition. Locally, Cuyahoga Community College has received \$106 million; Cleveland State University has received \$98 million; and Case Western Reserve University has received \$33 million. Institutions must use these funds by September 2022.



LONG TERM FOCUS: Eliminate systemic barriers to post-secondary access and completion for Cleveland youth.

- **Affordability:** Mobilize a community coalition to advocate for significant increases in need-based aid.
 - Federal Focus: Raise the maximum Pell Grant Award, increase investment in historically Black colleges and universities, and award college completion grants to students needing additional aid.
 - State Focus: Increase and expand the Ohio College Opportunity Grant (OCOG) to cover basic needs expenses such as housing, transportation, and childcare; extend more need-based aid to community college students.
- **Access:** Advocate for changes in policy that incentivize and promote college enrollment among students from low-income backgrounds and students of color. At the state level this might include making FAFSA completion a state high school graduation requirement, and ending debt collection practices that prohibit students from re-enrolling in college. At the institutional level this could include making college entrance exams an optional admission requirement and not withholding student transcripts due to past debt.
- **Retention:** Increase enrollment in and expand support to students to and through summer bridge programming, summer co-requisite courses, and paid summer internships to ensure smooth transitions from high school to higher education institutions. Expand investment in proven programs that provide comprehensive wraparound services and intensive one-on-one coaching (e.g., the Cleveland State University Parker Hannifin Living Learning Community, Tri-C Say Yes Scholars Program, and The Ohio State Say Yes Scholars Program).

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE WORKING TOGETHER TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE

By Michele Scott Taylor, Ed.D, Chief Program Officer, College Now Greater Cleveland; and Maggie McGrath, Executive Director Higher Education Compact of Greater Cleveland

Despite the considerable efforts from colleges, universities, and community-based organizations, the COVID-19 pandemic slowed the momentum of our community's college-going culture efforts and the Say Yes Cleveland rollout. The state has set a goal that, by 2025, 65 percent of Ohioans aged 25-64 will have a degree, certificate, or other postsecondary workforce credential. As of now, Ohio has a 49.5 percent attainment rate, which places it at 33rd in the country. Longstanding research indicates that the biggest barrier to educational attainment is poverty, and since 2019 Cleveland has had the highest poverty rate among major U.S. cities.³⁷

It will take several years to rebuild a culture that emphasizes the importance and impact of postsecondary education and training.

As a community, we must continue to build on the last decade of progress to increase the number of Cleveland students who are ready for, have access to, and persist in postsecondary education. Federal and state legislatures desperately need to expand public funding for colleges and universities, increase need-based aid to Ohio's students, and provide supplementary support for food, housing, and other basic needs. Given adequate funding, we can address the challenges that a post-COVID-19 world will bring by working together to remove barriers to higher education and create a brighter future for Cleveland's youth.

AN INSPIRING COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO COVID-19

As this report detailed, the pandemic's impact on Cleveland's education landscape has been unprecedented. COVID-19 affected the ways in which we live, work, socialize, and learn—requiring incredible resilience, kindness, and ingenuity from individuals, organizations, and institutions alike.

The challenges posed by the pandemic have brought our community together in new and powerful ways. Partnerships formed to address many issues including basic needs, digital equity, and personal protective equipment distribution, among others. Here are some highlights of the countless examples of our community stepping up and stepping in to help alleviate the impacts of COVID-19.

GREATER CLEVELAND COVID-19 RAPID RESPONSE FUND

Established in March 2020, the Greater Cleveland COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund was philanthropy's immediate response to the pandemic. Between its launch and September 2021, the Rapid Response Fund raised more than \$20 million from Greater Cleveland donors and institutions and granted more than \$19 million to nearly 800 nonprofits in Cuyahoga, Lake, and Geauga Counties. These initial grants were focused on, but not limited to, basic needs, access to personal protective equipment, and educational supports.

In September 2021, the Rapid Response Fund transitioned into the Funders Collaborative on COVID Recovery. This partnership, spanning more than 50 foundations, nonprofits, and local government partners, is focused on a multi-year approach to an equitable regional recovery from the pandemic. To achieve this, the Collaborative is focused on increasing vaccine uptake, addressing homelessness, building nonprofit resilience, centering equity in data and practice, and advocating for systems and policy change.

GREATER CLEVELAND DIGITAL EQUITY FUND

The COVID-19 pandemic threw a spotlight on and exacerbated systemic digital inequities nationwide. The Greater Cleveland Digital Equity Fund was launched in July 2020 to address the short-term technology needs of Cleveland residents including reliable high-speed Internet access, Internet-enabled devices, and bilingual digital literacy training for those who have never previously used digital technology. To date, the Digital Equity Fund has dispersed \$4.3 million of the almost \$4.7 million raised from over a dozen community partners.

The Fund has targeted filling the technology gaps for students attending Cleveland, first ring, and charter schools as a major priority. To date, the fund has provided \$1.4 million to Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD). Additionally, the Fund helped underwrite the purchase of 5,000 unlimited data 4G LTE Internet hotspots from partners at T-Mobile and over 4,000 laptops from partners at PCs for People for non-CMSD students who would not otherwise be able to participate in their education remotely. The Digital Equity Fund also assisted in establishing a local hotline, website, and network of trusted digital to guide people through any basic technology questions they have.

In addition to wide-scale community partnerships like the Rapid Response Fund and the Digital Equity Fund, several community-based organizations across the education continuum stepped up to meet the needs of educators, families, and children.



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

- Forty-nine PRE4CLE and Universal Pre-K (UPK) programs received grants through funding provided by the Greater Cleveland COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund and administered through Starting Point. These supported PPE, sanitation supplies, enhanced staff compensation, COVID-19 testing, social-emotional support for staff, and facility updates to support safety.
 - Cuyahoga County's Office of Early Childhood/Invest in Children continued to fund 60 UPK providers while they were shut down during March-May 2020 and transitioned all professional development and coaching for UPK to a virtual format throughout the pandemic. UPK also provided increased scholarships for families through July 2021.
 - Starting Point and PRE4CLE collaborated to provide 104 childcare programs with funding and materials to support children's social-emotional needs.
 - 200,000 N-95 masks were distributed to childcare providers in Starting Point's four-county region.
 - Starting Point offered approximately 1,800 early educators virtual professional development training.
 - PRE4CLE and PNC Bank, in partnership, distributed 750 Learn-at-Home kits to preschool children.
-

K-12 EDUCATION

- Following the shift from in-person to remote education in spring 2020, CMSD adopted a one-to-one device policy so all students in grades K-12 could have access to quality technology. The new policy allows students to maintain device ownership post-graduation to ensure continued access.
 - During the 2020-21 school year, community partners worked together to provide a safe, small-group, in-person option to families who needed an alternative to remote learning for their elementary-aged child. Overall, over 900 CMSD students were served, 30 percent of whom had documented special needs.
 - In summer 2021, CMSD launched its Summer Learning Experience, in which over 8,000 students participated in hands-on, fun learning activities that helped them to finish, enrich, and engage in learning. CMSD's Summer Learning Experience is being held up as best practice nationally.
 - Given its citywide presence, CMSD hosted vaccination clinics, not only for CMSD students and families, but also the larger community. As part of Mayor Bibb's COVID-19 task force, CMSD continues to take the lead on coordinating vaccine/testing efforts among schools and districts.
 - In summer 2021, the Cleveland Teachers Union hired 27 Family Engagement Leaders (FELs) to connect with CMSD families about the return to in-person learning through 50 community events, visits to over 400 homes, and calls to 3,720 CMSD caregivers. Through their phone banking and home visits, FELs confirmed the return of 2,316 students and addressed parents' concerns. During the 2021-22 school year, the FELs have shifted their efforts to address chronic absenteeism.
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POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

- The Say Yes Cleveland Scholarship Board adopted two COVID-related policies that expanded scholarship eligibility for students enrolling part-time or requiring extra semesters to complete their postsecondary education.
- College Now's Mentoring Program supported college students dealing with pandemic-related challenges such as housing insecurity, financial aid concerns, and mental health needs, most notably through a new partnership with Beech Brook.
- The College Now adult learner team followed up with students in the CMSD Classes of 2019 and 2020 who had not yet enrolled in college but had previously shown interest or had stopped going to class because of COVID-19. To date, they have supported 51 students' re-enrollment.
- Retention programming at The Ohio State University, Cleveland State University, and Tri-C has been crucial in keeping our 834 Say Yes scholars in the first two cohorts enrolled and on-track to graduate through the pandemic. In addition to keeping students connected to essential resources, program staff helped students feel connected with their schools and peers despite campus closings and isolation.
- Many higher education institutions adopted more flexible student policies, such as pass/fail grading options, and disbursed additional flexible financial aid that could be applied to both academic and basic needs. Postsecondary institutions have also reevaluated admissions requirements, beginning the move away from the SAT/ACT.

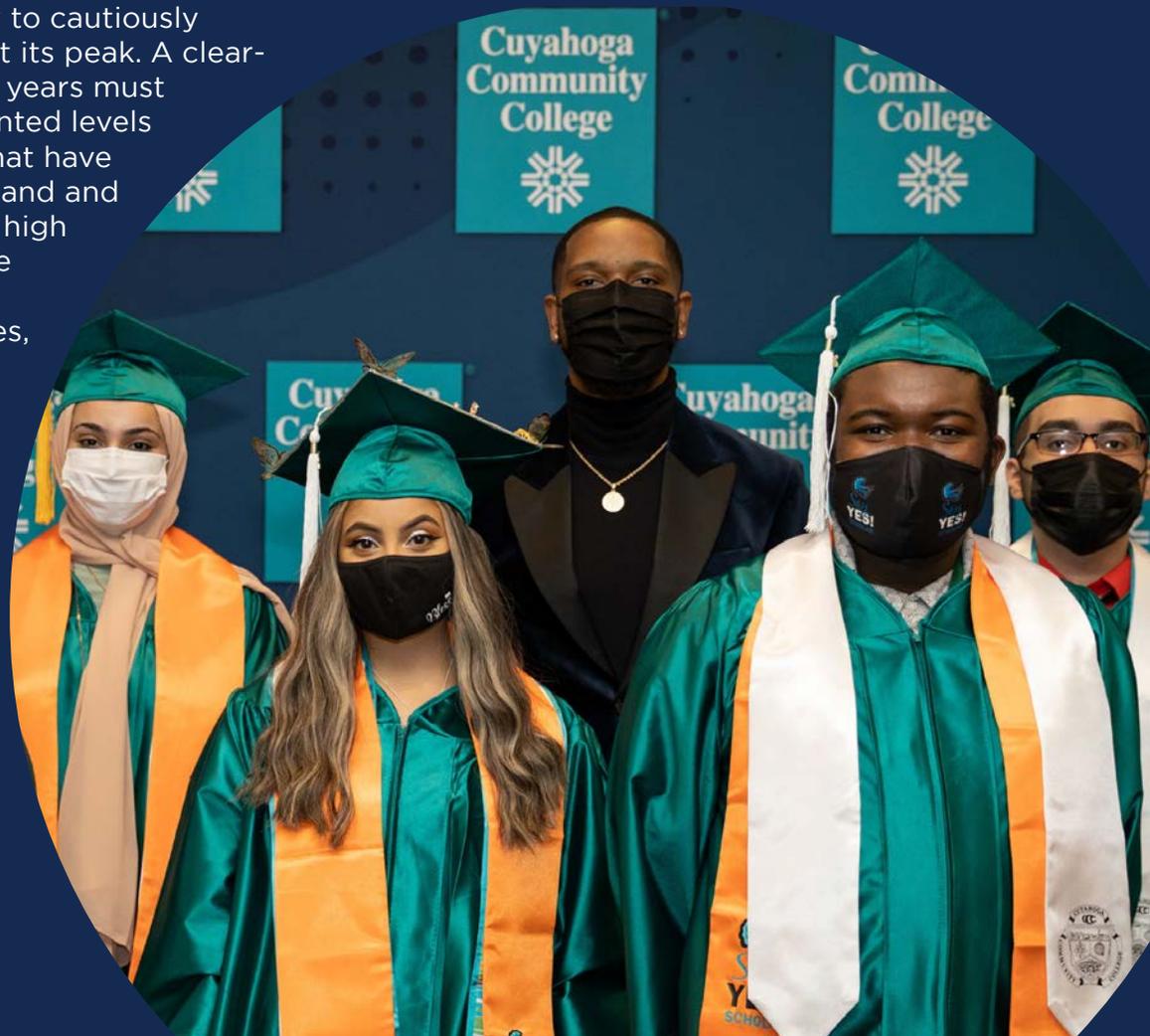
CONCLUSION

WE MUST MOVE EDUCATION FORWARD

Two years from the initial COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, Cleveland's education landscape, like so much else, has been fundamentally changed. The direct, negative impacts of the pandemic on students, families, educators, early childhood centers, K-12 schools, and postsecondary institutions have been profound, and will continue to be felt for years to come. COVID-19 also brought into sharp relief longstanding inequities students face in our education system, which will continue to hinder educational achievement post-pandemic unless addressed.

The pandemic is not yet over, but the conversation around how to cautiously shift toward recovery is at its peak. A clear-eyed view of the last two years must recognize the unprecedented levels of disruption and harm that have especially afflicted Cleveland and similar communities with high percentages of vulnerable populations, including individuals with disabilities, refugees, people of color, and low-income families. COVID-19 hit harder here, and the recovery will take longer.

With a glimpse of a possible light at the end of the tunnel, it is understandable to yearn for a return to what many have described as "normal." However, we need to use this time of great disruption to rethink and envision a new, more equitable education system. In each area of education – early childhood, K-12, and postsecondary – we must capitalize on this moment, and on federal recovery funds, to fundamentally rethink the policies and programs that define our system to prioritize equity and support for the communities most affected by the pandemic.





The first step is ensuring adequate investment in the full education continuum, from early childhood through college and career training, with initial efforts focused on a few key areas:

- Ensure education institutions at all levels have the funding needed to continue operations and support students and educators;
- Invest in academic and mental health supports to address loss of learning time and the psychological impact of the pandemic;
- Ensure access to reliable high-speed Internet, Internet-enabled devices, and digital literacy training for all students and families;
- Retain, promote, and expand the educational workforce to close staffing gaps; and
- Make postsecondary education an option for all students by ensuring college affordability through funding scholarships and securing increased federal and state support.

Our city is full of education champions who are dedicated to rebuilding systems that have been affected by temporary school closures, the digital divide, lost learning time, and antiquated education policies that often exacerbate inequities for students of color and students with disabilities and English-language needs. An equitable approach to education recovery will be key to shaping a new, forward-thinking, and thriving system for stakeholders, educators, families, and—most importantly—students.

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American Rescue Plan Act

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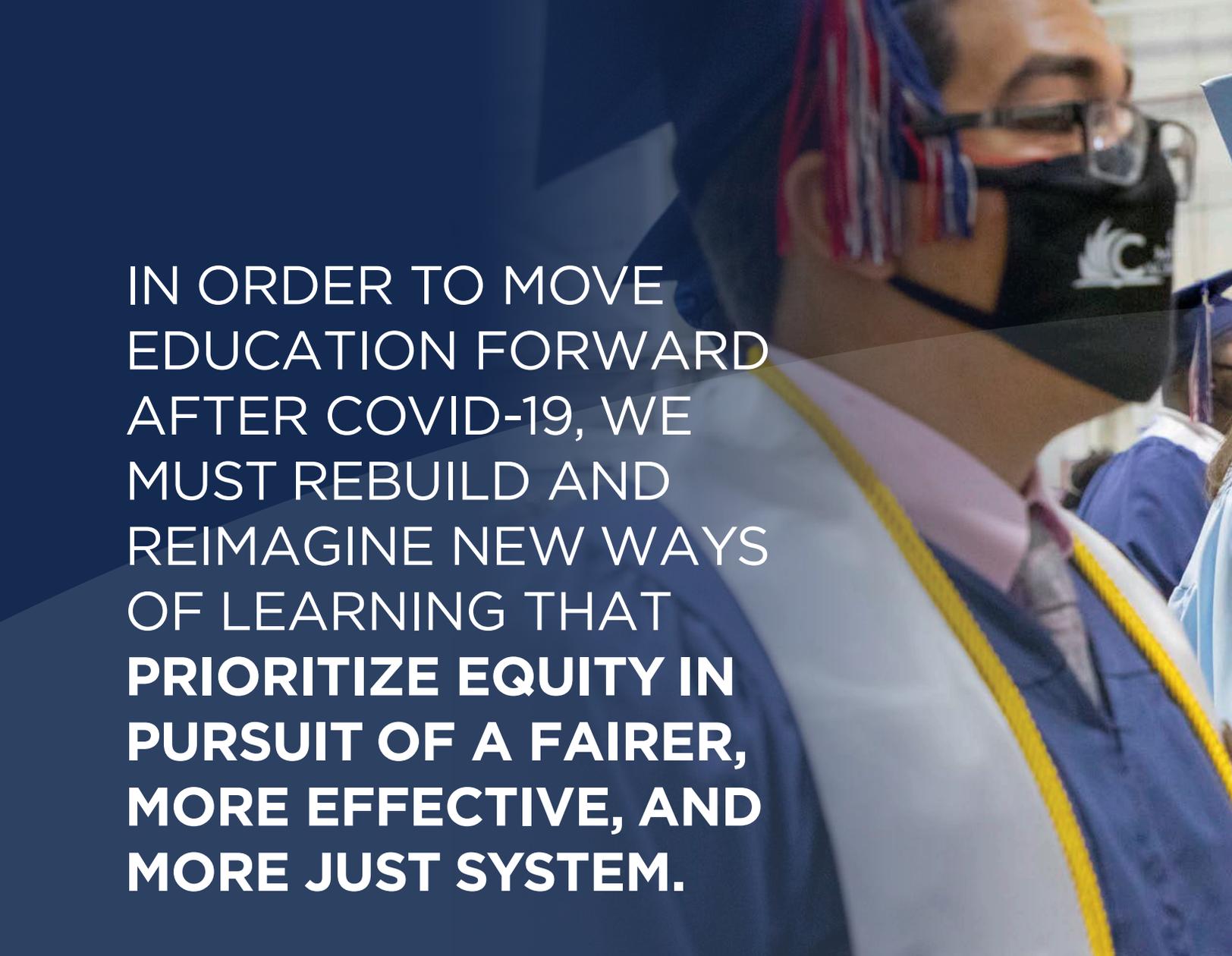
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IN ORDER TO MOVE
EDUCATION FORWARD
AFTER COVID-19, WE
MUST REBUILD AND
REIMAGINE NEW WAYS
OF LEARNING THAT
**PRIORITIZE EQUITY IN
PURSUIT OF A FAIRER,
MORE EFFECTIVE, AND
MORE JUST SYSTEM.**

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