California’s Policy Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Classroom

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# *Table of Contents*

[Acknowledgements 2](#_Toc134050301)

[Table of Contents 3](#_Toc134050302)

[Executive Summary 5](#_Toc134050303)

[*Enrollment Rates 5*](#_Toc134050304)

[*Funding Sources 5*](#_Toc134050305)

[*Standardized Testing 6*](#_Toc134050306)

[*Methods 6*](#_Toc134050307)

[*Findings 6*](#_Toc134050308)

[*Significance 6*](#_Toc134050309)

[Introduction 7](#_Toc134050310)

[*Background: Enrollment Based Fiscal Challenges 7*](#_Toc134050311)

[*School Budget Historical Context 8*](#_Toc134050312)

[*COVID-19 Relief Funds 8*](#_Toc134050313)

[*Defining Learning Loss 9*](#_Toc134050314)

[*Purpose 9*](#_Toc134050315)

[Literature Review 11](#_Toc134050316)

[*Education at the Federal Level 11*](#_Toc134050317)

[*Education at the State Level 12*](#_Toc134050318)

[*Standardized Testing 13*](#_Toc134050319)

[*Framework at Work 14*](#_Toc134050320)

[Methodology 16](#_Toc134050321)

[*Framework at Work 16*](#_Toc134050322)

[*Efficiency 17*](#_Toc134050323)

[*Feasibility 18*](#_Toc134050324)

[*Equity 18*](#_Toc134050325)

[*Conclusion 19*](#_Toc134050326)

[Findings 20](#_Toc134050327)

[*The Problem 20*](#_Toc134050328)

[*Goals & Objectives 20*](#_Toc134050329)

[*Pilot Program Alternatives 22*](#_Toc134050330)

[*Collaborative Governance 23*](#_Toc134050331)

[*Reconsidering Enrollment Based Funding 24*](#_Toc134050332)

[Policy Recommendations 25](#_Toc134050333)

[*Stakeholder Map 26*](#_Toc134050334)

[*Pilot Program 26*](#_Toc134050335)

[*Cost, Feasibility, Equity 27*](#_Toc134050336)

[Conclusion 29](#_Toc134050337)

[References 31](#_Toc134050338)

# Executive Summary

In March of 2020, schools officially closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and quickly local educational agencies (LEAs) began developing strategies to ensure learning continuity. The public K-12 education system transitioned to a virtual classroom, made use of state and federal funds to address disruptions from the traditional schooling, and incorporate new programs like those related to mental health to address effects of the quarantine. In this paper, enrollment rates, state and federal relief funds, and standardized testing scores all painted a clearer, albeit not entirely accurate, picture of where the California K-12 education system stands now in 2023 and what that says about the future of California’s workforce.

## Enrollment Rates

Prior to the pandemic, enrollment was predicted to decline, but with the closure of schools, this estimated took a quick nosedive (CDE, 2019 & Sand, 2022). While some may argue that shrinking districts should see budget savings if enrollment is declining because there will be more money for less students. The reality is that schools received funding based on enrollment and attendance, also known as the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which will be explored further in this paper. Enrollment rates are critical towards adequately funding LEAs for staff, materials, and resources for student K-12.

## Funding Sources

Due to the pandemic, LEA’s received billions in state and federal funding opportunities. This paper will define the LCFF and funding issues pre pandemic and define expenditures of COVID relief funds and what this means for future school budgets. Understanding how the pandemic has impacted California school budgets, this paper will provide a historical context of how schools have been generally funded through the LCFF, the well-known Proposition 98 and how this aimed to support districts, and the COVID-19 relief expiring funds. Three key components to review what has been learned from these implementations and how to address future education spending.

## Standardized Testing

Standardized testing was included in this paper to better understand and define learning loss. This paper will provide a general overview of students K-12 and their test scores prior to and after the pandemic. Most notably, third graders who struggle to achieve standard reading comprehension levels.

## Methods

This policy paper will include enrollment, funding, and test scores collected during the pandemic, and policy alternatives that can help guide school administrators and policymakers. The Rational Model framework will be used as a template to define and analyze the policy alternatives. Using three of the five criteria defined in Meltzer and Schwartz (2019), this paper will define and assess the final alternatives by their efficiency, feasibility, and equity components.

## Findings

The policy analysis conducted points at two major areas of concern as a result of the pandemic, without a system in place to address learning loss, students’ financial and academic futures will be impacted. In the long run, a reevaluation of the LCFF will need to be addressed, given enrollment declines, and in the short run, collaborative efforts to equip teachers with the resources and skills necessary to address learning loss in the classroom will be crucial.

## Significance

A few months into 2023, the post pandemic numbers are setting in and the early results of what might detail the future impact of the pandemic for California students are available for further exploration. In this paper, an early analysis was conducted to propose a final policy recommendation to address the impact of the pandemic on students K-12. Overall, this paper aims to guide policy practitioners and stakeholders in California to develop a plan that considers COVID-19 related learning loss and invest in teacher training programs that contribute to test score improvements.

# Introduction

Students attending public school K-12 suffered economically, mentally, and in some cases physically from the effects of the pandemic. The classroom became the epicenter of contamination and classified unsafe for students across the state for at least an entire academic year. While students K-12 in the public education system in California were learning from home, the results of what this means for the future of California’s workforce is still being pieced together. To better understand the effects of the pandemic, understanding California’s education system prior to the pandemic is essential in this tracking. In this policy paper, I will explain how enrollment rates, COVID relief funding, and the most recent standardized test results say about how school children K-12 have been impacted by a worldwide pandemic. Most notably, I will lay out the early detected problems and how best to address them in the policy recommendations section of this paper.

## Background: Enrollment Based Fiscal Challenges

Enrollment rates prior to the pandemic reflected a loss of about 20,000 students ([Sand, 2022](https://www.city-journal.org/california-public-schools-are-failing)). Since the pandemic, the state has seen a loss of over 110,000 students ([CDE, 2021](https://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr21/yr21rel32.asp)). Research cites reasons for the enrollment decline are in part due to low birth rates, migration, a growing interest in charter, religious schools, or homeschooling alternatives (LAO, 2019; Sand, 2022). Enrollment rates, not to be confused with average daily attendance (ADA), both determine funding for each school. Attendance has also become an issue and exacerbated during the pandemic. Students, while enrolled, are struggling with chronic absenteeism.

The Local Control Funding Formula was enacted in 2013 in California, and it adjusted funding for the public school system in an effort to increase how much funding was received per student. The LCFF aimed to address absenteeism by funding school based on attendance. However, as discussed, the LAO reported back in 2019, that enrollment rates would decline by about 4 % in the coming years. Due to the pandemic, this decline jumped to a predicted enrollment decline of about 7% ([Warren & Lafortune, 2020](https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/declining-enrollment-in-california-schools-fiscal-challenges-and-opportunities-in-the-coming-decade.pdf)). While California schools follow an attendance-based funding formula, enrollment speaks to the overall reduction of student population for the years to come and it speaks to the future funding opportunities or lack thereof.

## School Budget Historical Context

The public school education system in California prior to the pandemic were classified underfunded ([Hahnel, 2020](https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/californias-education-funding-crisis-explained-12-charts)). In fact, schools were falling short on extracurricular activities, suffering from staff shortages, and due to Proposition 13, the state has been severely limited on property tax revenue since the late 1970s (Hahnel, 2020). In 2019, compared to other states, California had the lowest ratios of students to teachers ([Children Now, 2019](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED603000.pdf)). Initially, the LCFF was created to allow for more flexibility, greater authority over resources, while still requiring accountability over spending ([CDE, 2021](https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/lcffoverview.asp)). However, when schools lose students, it creates a financial loss as well.

Additionally, school budget transparency has been an issue for years and several attempts have been made to increase access to fiduciary reports ([CATO, 2013](https://www.cato.org/cracking-books/why-financial-transparency-matters); [Ender, 2017](https://signalscv.com/2017/06/california-legislators-propose-interactive-transparent-budget-website/); [Fensterwald, 2018](https://edsource.org/2018/charter-schools-not-documenting-spending-on-low-income-kids-report-says/600873)). Policymakers and advocates of public-school systems understood the financial burden schools across the state were experiencing, and this topic of expenditure transparency became another concern when school received sone -time state and federal funding.

## COVID-19 Relief Funds

 Due to the pandemic, schools received more than $300 billion in COVID stimulus money ([CDE, 2022](https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/cr/relieffunds.asp)). These were one-time funds, meaning they have a spending deadline, and were to be utilized to prepare students and teachers for virtual learning with new Chromebooks, broadband access, and sanitizing equipment ([Hong & Lewis, 2022](https://calmatters.org/education/2022/06/california-schools-stimulus-funds-oversight/)). To summarize, federally, the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) act secured $190 billion from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER). Additionally, schools received continued support through the Coronavirus Response, and Relief Supplemental Appropriates (CRRSA) Act and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) ([CSBA, 2022](https://csba.org/-/media/CSBA/Files/Newsroom/FINAL--Federal-COVID-Relief-Funding-Report-070622.ashx?la=en&rev=72350af55265408ba66a36ddc46d2735)). At the state level, $341 million in Governor’s Emergency Education Relief.

Reports of stimulus spending has been increasingly difficult to obtain from schools across the state and the demands for transparency has revealed mistakes or misspending’s (Hong & Lewis, 2022). In fact, Oakland Unified had to reimburse $1 million in stimulus money ([Hong & Lewis, 2022](https://calmatters.org/education/2022/06/covid-relief-spending-california-schools/)). Additionally, with funding set to expire, districts are anticipating the cuts and how they will impact schools relying heavily on stimulus money for school lunches and mental health programs ([Bullion, 2022](https://www.abc12.com/news/funding-for-pandemic-school-lunch-waivers-to-expire-june-30/article_36dc3ad4-9fe6-11ec-ad22-37cd595ea233.html)).

## Defining Learning Loss

 For the purposes of tracking learning loss, this paper will focus on two standardized test scores: one that helps provide information of education level prior to the pandemic and one that is administered at the national level to briefly address learning loss compared to other states post pandemic. The California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) reports how well students are learning and measures different preparation efforts for college coursework. In 2019, the California Department of Education (CDE), summarized the CAASPP trends which revealed, that while earlier grades are increasing in students who are meeting standards, later grades of 7, 8 , 11 are persistently underperforming ([CDE, 2019](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiG9eCxyJH9AhWbFjQIHborABAQFnoECAwQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cde.ca.gov%2Fta%2Ftg%2Fca%2Fdocuments%2Fcaasppresults2019.docx&usg=AOvVaw0kHCdzln8lve8hGDTOc70t)). In 2019, according the Legislative Analyst Office (LAO) report, “fewer than half of K-12 students met state standards of reading and math scores” and were below national average in reading ([LAO, 2019](https://lao.ca.gov/reports/2019/3924/edguide-2019.pdf)).

 During the pandemic, Governor Newsom prioritized health and safety. Schools adjusted to a virtual learning environment ([OGGN, 2022](https://www.gov.ca.gov/2022/10/23/california-outperforms-most-states-in-minimizing-learning-loss-in-national-student-assessment-with-record-investments-to-improve-education/)). To better understand where California stands at the national level, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that post pandemic, student scores dropped by 7% (NAEP, 2022). Only 30% of eight graders in the state achieved reading proficiency and only 23% achieved math proficiency ([NAEP, 2022](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/mathematics/2022/)). The national data indicates that achievement gap among student of color widened in California (NAEP, 2022). While California minimized learning loss compared to other states, the national test only tests a portion of students in each state. A limitation to consider when relying on national data.

## Purpose

The pandemic officially began in March 2020 and schools remained closed until roughly the fall of 2021. In this time, enrollment was impacted, standardized testing paused, and California schools received billions of covid relief funds. Enrollment rates are tied to school funding and predict the future of the state population. Finally, standardized testing, provides information on overall learning loss. According to the economic value of a life, each student falling behind represents $10 million in loss. With literacy and math scores plummeting, the learning loss will take years to recover. The purpose of this paper is to address the economic problem that arises from learning loss and provide recommendations to improve education outcomes. In order to examine how students are faring post pandemic, this paper aims to explore the early results and make recommendations to address learning loss in the coming years. Therefore, the problem statement for this paper states; during the 2020 – 2022 COVID-19 Pandemic, to many schoolchildren suffered too high of a learning loss that state and school district policymakers need to undertake intentional efforts to try and make up.

# Literature Review

The K-12 education system in California has been impacted by federal and state policies in the past 20 years that have redefined success and funding allocations. The historical context for educational funding sources and allocations shaped the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and how those funds were used. Since the pandemic, standardized tests have shown students testing below average in English, attendance has decreased, and LEAs have billions of COVID relief money to spend ([CAASPP, 2022](https://caaspp-elpac.ets.org/caaspp/); [LAO 2022](https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4595)). Despite large funding packages due to address Covid impacts, California schools have been severely impacted through drops in enrollment and test scores. Experts argue that these preliminary results speak to long term challenges and this paper aims to highlight learned lessons from the Great Recession and point to solutions to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic. This literature review will focus on a few pivotal moments that define the standard for LEAs across the state, touch on federal and state funding sources and finally touch on the Rational Analysis Approach that will guide the policy recommendations provided at the end of this paper.

## Education at the Federal Level

In the early 21st century, during the Bush administration, the newly instituted No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law was aimed to hold LEAs responsible for student achievement (Williams, 2004). This law indented to support economic gaps by supporting schools through various programs to meet the new academic standards and largely in response to concern of international outperformance ([Klein, 2015](https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/no-child-left-behind-an-overview/2015/04)). Included programs entailed programs for disadvantaged communities, funds for training qualified teachers, language instruction for immigrant children, emphasizing flexibility and accountability to improve testing systems, to highlight a few (Williams, 2004). Once instituted, there were implementation issues that challenged struggling administrators and teachers in part by defining success through overreliance on standardized test scores and threatened federal funding for noncompliance (Klein, 2015; Williams, 2044).

Following the Great Recession in 2007, per pupil spending decreased and largely impacted the highest poverty districts (Baker, 2020). As a response, the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund, also part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, aimed at providing federal assistance (Baker, 2020). The two-year duration of aid proved to be insufficient time for economics to recover and after the states cut revenue similar to the federal aid cuts, again the most disadvantages districts were severely impacted (Baker, 2020).

By 2017, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced the NCLB by allowing states flexibility to develop their own academic standards and offering LEAs waivers related to reporting requirements ([CDE, 2023](https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/es/)). Similarly, the Trump administration heavily promoted school choice, proposed budget cuts to the educational programs and ultimately limit federal oversight ([Wong, 2020](https://academic.oup.com/publius/article/50/3/423/5864200)). Faced with congressional opposition to cute funds and downsize the U.S. Department of Education, the 2019 budget reflected a 23.4% fiscal increase (Wong, 2020).

Following the school closures in the Spring of 2020, Congress enacted the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act granting $4.5 billion for education K-12 and community colleges (Howle, 2021). Allocations depended heavily on the belief that more funds should be allocated towards larger districts because of the increased risk of exposure, however, case rates reflected the same if not greater contamination in smaller rather than larger counties (Howle, 2021, p. 4-5). The American Rescue Plan, on the other hand, allocated $15.3 billion in federal funds to California’s K-12 education. In total, California schools received $26.4 billion in one time spending, which was $6 billion more than the ARRA back in 2007 ([Painter, 2021](https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=R46449);Wong, 2020).

## Education at the State Level

Federal and state funding sources like local funding sources finance K-12 budgets. Local revenue[[1]](#footnote-1) largely includes property tax revenue. In the state of California, Proposition 13 is undoubtably one most notable force that has impacted California education budgets. Originated in the late 1970s, Proposition 13 has contributed to inadequate funding for public schools by limiting state taxing to 1% of a home’s assessed value at the time it was sold ([Kirby, 2022](http://blog.csba.org/legacy-of-prop-13/)). In the state of California, local funding shifted from providing 60% of K-12 revenue to 34% in most recent times ([Lafortune, 2022](https://www.ppic.org/publication/financing-californias-public-schools/)). Additionally, while the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) aimed at offering spending flexibility and offered more aid to those with high need students (LaFortune, 2023). California is still spending less that three of the five next most populated states. In 2021, California spending per student was $14,913 while New York spending per student was $26,828.

 As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, California schools received spending packages with spending requirements most of which ranges from very broad categories like addressing learning loss, mental health services, and trauma learning expenses to more specific expenditures such as repairs virus transmission and instructional materials (CSBA, 2022 p. 8). In the California, the Coronavirus Relief Funds (CPF) had a year timeline to spend $4 billion, the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief I (ESSER)[[2]](#footnote-2) provided by the CARES Act provided $1 billion in two years, and the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief I (GEER) also had a two-year deadline to spend $350 million. In addition to allowable spending measures, there were quarterly reports due to ensure how much money was being spent, and that LEAs were meeting spending deadlines[[3]](#footnote-3) ([CDE, 2023](https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/cr/relieffunds.asp)). To continues these efforts, California Senate Bill 98 mandated that LEAs outline their strategies to ensure learning continuity (Hurt, 2022).

 The data on whether LEAs are spending these funds responsibly is still being gathered, but there has been concern over the transparency of these expenditures ([Hong, 2022](https://calmatters.org/education/2022/06/covid-relief-spending-california-schools/)). What we do know is that students have experienced learning loss due to the drop in standardized test scores. To better address learning loss for low-income, foster youth, and non-English speakers, California created the Expanded Learning Opportunity (ELO) grant of $4.6 billion ([Gao, 2022](https://www.ppic.org/blog/whats-ahead-for-education-recovery-in-california/)).

## Standardized Testing

During the midst of the pandemic, California students were not administered standardized tests in 2020, and less than 1 in 4 students took the 2021 exams ([Starr, 2022](https://www.ppic.org/blog/test-scores-show-six-year-setback-for-california-students/)). Recent test scores from 2022, fourth graders fell 11% compared to pracademic scores in math and 5% in English (Starr, 2022). Notably, readings math scores dropped more drastically for low-income students ([D’Souza, 2022](https://edsource.org/2022/how-badly-did-the-pandemic-deepen-californias-early-reading-crisis/680490#:~:text=But%2C%20as%20the%20state's%20test,from%2056.85%25%20to%2050.14%25.)). More unsettling are the students who were third graders and are now in sixth grade and less than half (45.1%) can read (D’Souza, 2022).

 Low-income, students of color, and English learners have also underperformed at an alarming rate. Only 15% of Black students met state standards in math, and 30.3% met English standards, while 9.7% of English learners met math state standards, and only 12.5% met ELA standards ([Hough, 2022).](https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/california-test-scores-show-devastating-impact-pandemic-student-learning) These rates raise highlight the importance of students across reserving equitable resources, and filling in access gaps, and making up for the learning loss for those struggling to catch up.

 While standardized test scores have and will continue to guide political decision making. It is important to address the limitation of relying heavily on standardized test scores. In early 2021, standardized testing was eliminated from California State University and college requirements because of the inequity that result from scores. Interestingly, during the pandemic, most California public and private universities first moved away from standardized testing in May 2020 before completely eliminating the requirements later that year ([Beall, 2022](https://www.calstate.edu/csu-system/news/Pages/Explained-Admissions-Without-the-SAT-or-ACT.aspx#:~:text=The%20CSU%20will%20no%20longer,does%20that%20mean%20for%20applicants%3F&text=In%20March%202022%2C%20the%20CSU,tests%20from%20undergraduate%20admissions%20processes.)). Research has shown that test results do not accurately reflect academic potential or ability, but have also intensified educational inequities ([Froese-Germain, 2001](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A%3A1011985405392); [Ayre, 2012](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Ckarinaarroyo%5CDownloads%5CAyre_J_EDST_590_Grad_Paper_2012.pdf); Kohn 2000). For the purposes of this paper, standardized test scores will help track learning loss in the past three years, however, it is important to recognize the limitations of these preemptive scores.

## Framework at Work

 In an effort to better address learning loss and offer alternative solutions, this paper will use the Rational Analysis Approach. According to Meltzer and Schwartz (2019), this framework is the most prominent approach in policy-related decision making. Alternative versions[[4]](#footnote-4) of the “Rational Model” exist, however, I plan to use the five process (Patton et al, 2013). This five-step framework requires a clear definition of the problem, identifies policy alternatives, specifies a criterion to evaluate the proposed policy options, weighs trade-offs and arrives at a final recommendation (Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019). Clearly defining the problem is clear, concise, and sets up the foundation of the analysis. When identifying the solutions, the options should identify a wide range of options to address the problems in distinctive ways. With a well-defined problem, developing the criteria will address the main objectives of the analysis and frame the most important evaluative criteria. Based on the value of each specified criteria, one alternative will surpass other options and prove to be superior. The generic criteria include effectiveness, equity, feasibility (either administrative, political, or technical), cost and efficiency (Meltzer & Schwartz 2019). The criteria are used to evaluate projected outcomes through the use of a qualitative (description-based) or quantitative ranking. The qualitative complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) analysis can use a Likert Scale to compare policy alternatives more accurately ([Broom, 2005](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0965229905000099)). Critiques of this model argue that it fails to address limited resources and limited time to review policy analysis. Furthermore, that “bounded rationality” or the idea that people’s inability to consider a full range of possible consequences is well reasoned.

# Methodology

When analyzing California’s learning loss, enrollment impacts, and financial concerns brought upon the COVD-19 pandemic, this paper will use the Rational Model, archived data and conduct a qualitative-based case study to develop one policy recommendation. A case study is a report published that highlights a particular approach to a real-world challenge to demonstrate the effectiveness of the solution (Shiels & Rangarajan, 2013, p. 115). The purpose of a case study is to provide insight into potential solutions and their impacts. To this end, I particularly focus on standardized testing, students’ enrollment rates, and the trend of COVID relief money. The aggregate data that address all three of the categories also included comparing archived data with more recent statistics to define the problem. This next section will aim to describe the methods, provide three criteria metrics that will be used to evaluate one policy and one administrative recommendation.

## Framework at Work

The “Rational Model” of policy analysis calls for an examination through a comparison of strengths and weakness of different solutions (Meltzer & Schwartz, p. 15). To accurately conduct a comparison, this framework states the criteria in place should speak to the effectiveness of the policy recommendation and how closely it addresses the central problem. First, the objectives of the paper should be clearly defined to provide a useful reference because ultimately the criteria are derived from the objectives. The criteria capture the degree to which the desired impacts are likely to be achieved by the proposed alternatives (Metlzer & Schwartz, 2019, p.106). In this case, the analysis determines criteria that will aim to minimize learning loss.

The purpose of using the Rational Model is to provide a final recommendation based on an evaluation of the criteria and the potential policy outcomes. In this paper, the Rational Model framework will guide the analysis and ultimately result in a policy recommendation that will help address learning loss in the California K-12 education system, provide a point in time archive of resources and additional data. As noted in this paper, aspects of the rational model, like a cost benefit analysis, has been implemented in previous research pertaining to COVID-19 impacts. To better quantify the evaluation, a Quantitative CAM Analysis or numerically measuring the value of each criterion will provide a ranking of how well each policy recommendation satisfies the respective criteria. Using the Likert Scale model with 0 representing it does not, 1 representing low satisfactions, 2 moderate, and 3 high achievements. The final policy recommendation will be determined using this weighted evaluation. This paper aims to follow the framework to provide an ongoing evidence-based dialog to improve learning loss concerns.

The Rational Model provides five categories of criteria to choose from: effectiveness, equity or fairness, feasibility, cost, and efficiency (Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019, p. 116). An effectiveness evaluation measures how well the policy alternative addresses or solves the central problem. While efficiency assesses the success relative to the cost of implementing it. Alternatively, equity will have several methods of evaluation whether the author wishes to address vertical versus horizontal equity, the process or the outcome, or even intergenerational equity (Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019, p. 118). To evaluate the policy recommendations, this paper will use the Quantitative CAM Analysis to evaluate the efficiency, political feasibility, and equity criterion.

## Efficiency

 The first criterion is known as the efficiency criteria evaluates the success of an alternative based on the cost of implementation (Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019). Effectiveness is defined on maximizing the output or what is defined as a success. Not to be confused with the cost or financial feasibility criterion, where the cost is defined as a potential barrier to implementing the solutions. The analysis revolves around considering realistic costs that capture explicit and implicit costs incurred during the process. For the efficiency criterion, the evaluation relies on a cost-benefit analysis and comparing which alternative maximizes the net benefit. The policy recommendation aimed at addressing learning loss, requires a large-scale change. Therefore, the financial investment of taxpayer money should be an important consideration. Based on the Quantitative CAM analysis, the efficiency criteria will be weighed at a 4.

 Measuring efficiency can be difficult to quantify and should require a 4-point scale. Using the Liker Scale will provide more room for explanation of the strengths and weaknesses based on the cost of each implementation. More specifically, how an alternative addresses the learning loss based on the amount of financial need. For this criterion, I will focus on minimizing the cost and maximizing improved test scores on average. The magnitude of this policy implementation will have the limitation that LEAs in California will have varying degrees of success depending on the size, population, resources already in place, etc.

## Feasibility

The second criterion is political feasibility. The category of feasibility could focus on administrative, political, and technical implementations. Therefore, this criterion is process-based and speaks to how well a policy alternative can overcome barriers that exist outside of the proposal (Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019). These challenges can be limiting due to the ability or willingness of an agency or individual relationships. Most notably, this criterion highlights internal or external capacities. For example, local political environments among Superintendents across LEAs could affect the implementation of policy regulations.

For several years, teacher union leaders have raised concern in the past of privatizations with extreme agendas that have polarize communities and politicians. More specifically, in late 2022, the California Teacher Association spend millions lobbying to issues that do not necessarily address education policy, like sports betting, banning tobacco and funding eclectic vehicles ([Jones, 2022](https://www.politico.com/news/2022/11/04/california-teachers-association-progressive-lobbying-00065267)). The CTA has historically had negative comments towards many conservatives in California politics. Issues that shave the potential of affecting political feasibility of negotiating teacher wages in the future. Political feasibility is weighted at 3 the criterion matrix because while a policy alternative could be well intentioned and have a clearly defined plan, the political challenges could make it an unrealistic proposal.

## Equity

The third and final criteria selected for this analysis recognizes equity as an important motivation for public intervention. Achieving equity, although not explicitly stated in the problem states, is broad concepts that bears costs and benefits for different groups (Meltzer & Schwartz 2019). Equity can be evaluated in three different ways. The first addressed vertical versus horizontal equity. Vertical equity considers that those with more should pay with the abundance they have for their position. For example, in California those with more income pay higher taxes to provide that vertical equity. While horizontal equity assumes that everyone lives with similar circumstances and should be treated as equals. The second contrast highlights equity within the process of implementation rather than the equitable outcome. Lastly, intergenerational equity speaks to the distribution of wealth over time and considering that future generations pay for present benefits. Equity is a major motivating factor in the history of education policy in the U.S. and in California in particular ([Vincent, 2015](https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED573782)).

## Conclusion

 While this analysis will focus on three of the five criteria of the Rational Model, the three that were selected provide an aggregate evaluation that includes three of the categories in this analysis. A financial, political, and equitable solution that could be considered to address learning loss in the coming years. One important limitation to note is that policy analysis is inherently uncertain, and it is based on what may or may not happen. However, the Rational Model provides a step-by-step guide that is designed to provide the most effective solution. Finally, this model also largely encompasses policy making proposals and recommendations that can influence or guide future policy making.

# Findings

Given that California has more than 6 million students attending public schools, the alternatives briefly discussed in this section aims to meet the needs of LEAs across the state and specifically address learning loss as a result of the pandemic. While current pilot programs aim to improve COVID safety guidelines to reduce the spread or in-class curriculum changes to address learning loss, the alternatives proposed in this paper, will aim to support teachers and staff in the form of pilot programs that can influence policy recommendations ([Carr, 2020](https://health.ucsd.edu/news/press-releases/2020-09-11-uc-campuses-pilot-google-apple-notification-technology-to-help-prevent-covid-19-outbreaks-/); [Fuller, 2022](https://www.laschoolreport.com/fuller-l-a-offers-lessons-for-helping-kids-recover-from-covid-learning-loss/); [Tadayon, 2022](https://www.sfexaminer.com/news/two-thirds-of-young-students-in-california-are-reading-below-their-grade-level/article_099d8a0c-4cab-5306-a32f-ccf07ff5caf3.html)). Within the context of the Rational Model, I will use the five-step framework to introduce two alternatives that are analyzed using three criteria: efficiency, feasibility, and equity to recommend one alternative.

## The Problem

 The first step of the Rational Model calls for a clear problem statement: During the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic, too many schoolchildren suffered too high of a learning loss that state and school district policymakers need to undertake intentional efforts to try and make up. In the short run, the problem is that K-12 students attending public schools in California are falling behind in reading comprehension and math studies ([CDE, 2019](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiG9eCxyJH9AhWbFjQIHborABAQFnoECAwQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cde.ca.gov%2Fta%2Ftg%2Fca%2Fdocuments%2Fcaasppresults2019.docx&usg=AOvVaw0kHCdzln8lve8hGDTOc70t)). As a result of the pandemic, enrollment is declining, COVID relief funding will expire soon without a set plan to address learning loss ([Sand, 2022](https://www.city-journal.org/california-public-schools-are-failing); [CDE, 2019](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiG9eCxyJH9AhWbFjQIHborABAQFnoECAwQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cde.ca.gov%2Fta%2Ftg%2Fca%2Fdocuments%2Fcaasppresults2019.docx&usg=AOvVaw0kHCdzln8lve8hGDTOc70t)). The underlying problem is that without understanding the impact of the pandemic, or a clearly defined plan for LEAs, students will continue to fall behind and generate a real problem for students in the next couple of years. A Stanford study on the economic impact of learning loss, predicts an economic loss of $70,000 in earning for California students due to pandemic ([Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020](http://hanushek.stanford.edu/publications/economic-impacts-learning-losses)). Furthermore, the status quo would be that the state of California can experience a loss of $1.2 trillion due to learning loss ([Hanushek, 2023](https://www.hoover.org/research/economic-cost-pandemic)).

## Goals & Objectives

 According to the Rational Model, the second step is to clearly identify and understand the goals and objectives. The objective is to propose an alternative that can be applied to LEAs across the state that utilize existing resources to respond to the learning loss. Defining the goals and objectives informs the function of the proposed alternatives and guides the decision-making process by clearly stating the intended result (Meier, Brudney, & Bohte, 2012). While the Rational Model suggests that the problem statement can entail several goals or objectives, it also notes the conflict that can arise from including multiple goals. If conflicting goals exist without resolution, the decision-making process is not possible (Meier, Brudney, & Bohte, 2012). This culminating project encompasses three main goals because it aims to detail the thought process of the formulation of two policy alternatives. Ultimately, the objective is to address learning loss and the subsequent goals highlight key components that influence the main objective.

To that end, the first and most important objective is to develop an approach that decreases the learning loss experienced by California students attending public schools. According to the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, the 2022 tests reveal that 1 out 3 California students in grades 3 – 8 failing to meet the state math standard and more than half unable to meet language arts standards ([CDE, 2022](https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/); [Hough & Chavez, 2022](https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/california-test-scores-show-devastating-impact-pandemic-student-learning)). Most notably, this data highlights the significant drop in scores for the traditionally underserved populations[[5]](#footnote-5). With 16% of Black students meeting the math standards in 2022, compared to 21% in 2019, and 30% met the English standard, compared to 33% in 2019. Additionally, only 21% Latinos students met the math standard compared to 28% in 2019 and 36% met the English language standard as opposed to the 41% in 2019 ([CDE, 2022](https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/)).

The second goal focuses on ensuring the long-term financial support to LEAs struggling to fund equitable educational opportunities amongst other fiduciary responsibilities ([Hoeven, 2021](https://calmatters.org/newsletters/whatmatters/2021/10/california-schools-funding/)). It is estimated that a $74 billion investment will be needed through 2025 to keep up with teacher salaries, facilities, etc. ([Lafortune & Herrera, 2022](https://www.ppic.org/publication/financing-californias-public-schools/)). For the purpose of narrowing the scope of this paper, this paper will focus on funding learning programs that asses and address learning loss. Despite the federal and state’s record-breaking financial support since the pandemic, schools are still struggling to meet the needs of their students ([Lafortune & Herrera, 2022](https://www.ppic.org/publication/financing-californias-public-schools/)). With enrollment declining and an inconsistent average daily attendance record due to COVID, migration, and declining birth rates, the policies in place fall short. One of the goals is to consider financial responsibility when prioritizing the implementation of learning programs across the state.

Lastly, the third objective includes a system of accountability measures that assesses program effectiveness and fiduciary responsibility. LCFF, COVID relief funds, to name a few relevant funding sources, have included accountability standards, however, the lack of transparency has risen concern prior to, and post pandemic ([Fensterwald, 2022](https://edsource.org/2022/analysis-of-covid-funding-reveals-california-districts-have-spent-little-so-far-to-address-learning-loss/675557); [Lewis & Hong, 2022](https://calmatters.org/education/2022/06/covid-relief-spending-california-schools/)). From survey data collected by the California School Board Association, school leaders have used COVID relief funds on operating costs, mental health services, and expanded learning (Anderson, Asch, & Briggs, 2022). For this reason, a pilot program can offer valuable insight into the effectiveness of program implementation, while also tracking costs.

## Pilot Program Alternatives

 The next step of the Rational Model calls for a proposal of alternative options to attain the goals (Meier, Brudney, & Bohte, 2012). As noted previously, doing nothing to address learning loss will end up costing California a loss of $1.2 trillion due to learning loss and up to $70,000 in earnings for one student ([Hanushek, 2023](https://www.hoover.org/research/economic-cost-pandemic)). The two alternatives proposed to address learning loss are presented one in the form of pilot program and one amending an existing policy. Both of which will be compared to the cost of doing nothing. In the past three years, the federal and state government have approved billions to address COVID related impacts, however, public school in California struggled financially prior to the pandemic and students have suffered from it (Carroll, 2005). While the following alternatives are policy recommendations, one is best initially implemented as pilot programs to study the effectiveness and to cut costs. Instead of immediately requiring all LEAs to adhere to a new policy, pilot programs can offer flexibility that can offer valuable information that otherwise could take years to gather. After using the introducing the policy alternatives, the last two steps of the Rational Model’s will include an analysis of each alternative according to the three criteria selected and the final recommendation.



## Collaborative Governance

In 2021, Assembly Bill 86 provided $2 billion for In-Person Instruction grant money and $4.6 billion for Expanded Learning Opportunities. The first alternative would encourage select public schools that have used existing COVID Relief funds to implement professional learning opportunities to support teachers that have to assess the degree to which student are falling behind and develop a curriculum that address learning loss. Ideally, the public schools selected would have a range of average daily attendance (ADA) to test whether these programs are more effective in different LEAs. Learning loss will show up differently for different grades and subjects, for this reason curriculums that accommodate for struggling students is a priority (Allensworth & Schwartz, 2020, p. 2). Reading levels and math scores have shown a significant drop in reading comprehension and therefore should be the two subject areas to focus on ([CDE, 2019](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiG9eCxyJH9AhWbFjQIHborABAQFnoECAwQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cde.ca.gov%2Fta%2Ftg%2Fca%2Fdocuments%2Fcaasppresults2019.docx&usg=AOvVaw0kHCdzln8lve8hGDTOc70t)).

In short, those LEAs that implemented teaching centered programs to assess learning loss or implement curriculums that assist students falling behind in reading comprehension and math basics would be tested every semester or quarter to test for effectiveness. Public schools that participate will be awarded grants according to the size of their district that can be used to maintain the learning loss or mental health programs at risk. This alternative is a solution aimed at diminishing the effects of learning loss by equipping teachers with the resources necessary to detect and address learning loss in the classroom. In addition, this alternative is an alternative that has the potential of becoming a policy recommendation, if this pilot program is proven to be cost effective and efficient.

## Reconsidering Enrollment Based Funding

 The second alternative focuses on the weaknesses of the Local Control Funding Formula instituted in a decade ago. The purpose of the LCFF provides financial flexibility to target traditionally disadvantaged students and provide a system of accountability (Koppich & Humphrey, 2018, p. 3). However, since the implementation of the LCFF, LEAs initially struggled with implementation, request a reconsideration of the accountability measures and some even argue it is not equitable funding (Koppich & Humphrey, p. 11). Additionally, since the pandemic, enrollment and ADA has taken a serious decline, expected to continue for the next seven years ([Warren & Lafortune, 2020).](https://www.ppic.org/publication/declining-enrollment-in-california-schools-fiscal-challenges-and-opportunities-in-the-coming-decade/) This alternative does not entail removing the LCFF requirement but amending the clause that would penalize LEAs that are struggling with enrollment or ADA for the foreseeable future. At this point, data indicates that enrollment will continue to be impacted for the next seven years, therefore, a reevaluation of this policy change would be required in five years’ time to examine the changes.

 This alternative would also allow for a review of the accountability measures or the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), provide guidance on supplemental and concentrated grants to support equity (Koppich & Humphrey, p. 52). In the context of the three objectives, this alternative is a long-term approach solution that focuses on financial need to address COVID impacts and indirectly support learning loss. It aims at assessing post pandemic concerns.

 In the last section of this paper, the two alternatives will be evaluated based on their efficiency, feasibility, and equity. Most importantly, the next section will present a final recommendation to address the three objectives.

# Policy Recommendations

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, students attending public schools in California and across grades have experienced different degrees of learning loss. While students have now fully returned to in person learning, the long-term impacts of the pandemic will follow students through their academic journey unless there is a plan to address learning loss. The first alternative relies on collaborative governance between teachers and governing boards working together to highlight the severity of the impacts the pandemic has had on test scores, enrollment rates, and financial stability for LEAs across the state ([Gee, Hough, & Chavez, 2023](https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/chronic-absenteeism-post-pandemic)). Additionally, the first alternative is presented in the form of a pilot program which offers short-term tests for larger scale projects that could work for LEAs across the state. While the second alternative focuses on revising and modifying enrollment-based funding to update policy based on the long-term effects of the pandemic as it relates to declining enrollment. Both of alternatives address learning loss by highlighting different immediate concerns. In the long run, both alternatives will need to be addressed, however, based on the Rational Model, the last step is using criteria to choose the best option.



## Stakeholder Map

 For the pilot program implementation, the Stakeholder Map provides a rough sketch of the impact of various important people that need to buy in to the impact of the pilot program, highlights opportunities for collaboration, and details field contributions. The key players include school leaders, staff, teachers, students, experts, and school districts at large. While the Policy area remains, a general concept given that the pilot program aims at providing supporting evidence for eventual policy implementation. In the beginning, policy implementation is the long-term goal. An important area to include but not one that can contribute in the pilot program implementation.

## Pilot Program

This section will focus on one pilot program conducted during the pandemic intended to support student learning. This pilot program was directed by the University of California San Diego’s Rady School of Management in partnership with the CovEducation (CovEd) organization which measured results from an online tutoring pilot program (Sadoff, 2022). The national pilot program paired university research students with middle school students online on a weekly basis during the pandemic (Sadoff, 2022, p. 2). Along with providing tutoring lessons in math and reading, these Zoom sessions worked to build mentoring relationships between participants. About 230 volunteer tutors participated in this pilot program and were instructed to engage in guided instruction to build skills regardless of whether the students expressed the need for help. While previous research supports in-person tutoring lessons, online tutoring was a cost-effective solution during the pandemic (Nickow et al., 2020). Across subjects the middle school participants tested slightly larger magnitudes of reading and math comprehension ranging from 0.004 to 0.007 respectively. Overall, this pilot program provided evidence that with consistent and incremental tutorial sessions, student scores increased at a lower cost to schools and families.

 The Rational Model’s fourth step is to evaluate the alternatives using criteria that best represent the goals and objectives (Meltzer & Schwartz 2019). The optimal alternative in terms of the goals would be the collaborative governance option because it is cost effective alternative, politically feasible, and equitable solution that mitigates the effects of learning loss. The Rational Model suggested evaluating both alternatives using a QAM analysis, however, this paper will focus on providing an analysis of the collaborative governance alternative using the Rational Model lens. A reevaluation of the LCFF will have to be conducted in the future considering enrollment and daily attendance continues to be a concern for many public schools ([Gee, Hough, & Chavez, 2023](https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/chronic-absenteeism-post-pandemic)). However, the alternative that most notably addresses learning loss will have to target the teachers that work with children every day.

## Cost, Feasibility, Equity

The collaborative governance alternative would be implemented initially as a pilot program because of the challenge of implementing a program that is successful across different grades, regions, and school district sizes. A pilot program approach would allow for greater flexibility, but most importantly address cost concerns. Much like the Child Care Pilot Program, this program would consider school districts that apply to the program that represent varying school districts ([CDE, 2023](https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ci/pilotprogram.asp)). Instead of recommending a policy that would require a dedicated budget ask, integrating this alternative as a pilot program would encourage existing funds from Assembly Bill 86 and additional funds for those LEA’s interested in participating (Lafortune & Herrera, 2022). Additionally, this alternative provides an opportunity for more research to be conducted on the impacts of learning loss that could be used to advocate for policy recommendation in the future. The pilot program would offer training programs for teachers to have the ability to identify students struggling from a degree of learning loss and determine a curriculum to accommodate for those students ([Nichols, Spang & Padron, 2008](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J121v18n01_02)). Therefore, this option would address the cost efficiency criterion because it would not require funding training programs for all teachers across the state, rather it would test the effectiveness of funding training programs to address learning loss due to the pandemic.

These training programs will also address what the data has showed on the impact of COVID to students and their mental health. Some schools have highlighted the concern of one-time COVID funds expiring and affecting the existing mental health resources. This dual training program better equips the teachers that have worked in schools across the state for years and those who are entering the workplace. Teacher shortages have become a main concern over the years and this pilot program would aim to provide teachers more resources considering their workplace has become increasingly difficult considering students are struggling academically and emotionally. Highlighting the flexibility of implementing a pilot program would increase the political feasibility of supporting this program become a policy change in the long run.

To address the equity criterion, the pilot program training would support teachers identify what learning loss looks like for different demographic groups. The data for underrepresented groups are struggling the most, as evident by student test scores, therefore a pilot program that prepares teachers with equity at the forefront, can greatly increase the chances of catching students before they fall behind ([CDE, 2022](https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/)). Overall, the equity component of the program would address demographic disparities to improve the likelihood of all students receiving the help they need to succeed.

# Conclusion

In this paper, I provide an exhaustive evaluation of the enrollment, financially status, and standardized scores of students K-12 prior to the pandemic to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on the California education system. Considering the preliminary data, two policy alternatives were presented to address learning loss. This culminating project uses the Rational Model approach to develop and analyze two policy focused alternatives and to ultimately recommend one. While creating the policy alternatives, highlighting the importance of pilot programs was fundamental because this is where the policy recommendation derived from. Pilot programs offer greater funding and implementation flexibility and for this reason, contributed to the final policy recommendation.

The first policy alternative was a collaborative approach that aims at targeting teachers and improving their ability to identify and address learning loss. This would be considered a short-term approach, while the long-term approach would include reevaluating enrollment-based funding as it stands currently. The LCFF should be reconsidered given the predicted enrollment and attendance declines. Combining the alternatives would ultimately provide a comprehensive solution to address the impact of the pandemic.

While using the Rational Model and creating a criterion that addresses equity, cost, and political feasibility, the findings will result in one policy recommendation that aimed at providing resources and skills to teachers that are helping students overcome the challenges of a post pandemic world. Equity was an important criterion to highlight because the data for different demographic groups was pointing at a solution addressing all forms of equity. While cost, appeared over and over in the research, to be source of concern given that the state and federal funding has provided billions to the public-school education system to address COVID impacts. Finally, the political feasibility of any proposal was going to greatly impact the probability of any alternative application. Although this paper uses a Rational Model that serves the purpose of holding stakeholders accountable through select criterion, both policy alternatives should be considered in the long run. In the long run, both policy alternatives should be considered and applied. Based on these rigorous considerations, both policy alternatives should be examining and applied in the long run.

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1. “State revenues also include personal income tax, sales tax, corporate taxes,, state lottery revenue, and state bond funding for facilities” (Timar, 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To clarify, ESSER I, ESSER II, ESSER III all signify different rounds and therefore have different requirements for expenditures, deadlines, and priority allowances. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to them more broadly. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Each spending package was accompanied by deadlines. According to early survey reports, there is concern over whether LEAs will be able to spend Covid relief aid by the federal deadlines (CSBA, 2022, p. 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Scholars have also provided various alternative versions of the rational model (Bardach and Patashnik, 2013; Stokey and Zeckhauser, 1978; Hammond et al., 1999; and Wignmer and VInning, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The main focus for this paper is California K-12 education system, however, there is National data that more broadly assumes the cost of COVID-19 and the disparities among different ethnic groups ([Hancock, 2020](https://wasa-oly.org/WASA/images/WASA/5.0%20Professional%20Development/4.2%20Conference%20Resources/Winter/2021/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help-v3.pdf); Christakis, 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)