

A photograph of two young children, a girl and a boy, both smiling and looking towards the right. The girl in the foreground is wearing a blue t-shirt and holding colorful plastic blocks. The boy in the background is wearing a pink shirt. The image is partially covered by a purple diagonal overlay on the right side.

5 CHALLENGES EDUCATION LEADERS ARE FACING IN 2021

and How to Move Forward Together



The education system and leaders across the country are facing unprecedented challenges. And, as we look deeper into them, at the core are critical needs for children, educators, and families. The call has been for the educational system to restabilize, reopen, and recover in the face of these challenges.

But, what if we see the challenges we are facing as an opportunity? The opportunity to create something new, rather than rehashing inequitable systems? The opportunity to build in data use for meaningful improvement toward the outcomes that matter most?

THE OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION NOW.



THE CHILD

Nurture the whole student, meeting both their social-emotional and academic needs.



THE EDUCATOR

Support every teacher in becoming a life-changer by giving them the tools they need to improve.



THE SYSTEM

Create lasting change by building an equitable system that focuses on the biggest lever in education: teacher-child interactions.

WE KNOW THESE CHALLENGES CAN BE OVERWHELMING. IN THIS GUIDE, WE EXPLORE THE TOP FIVE CONCERNS WE'RE HEARING FROM PARTNERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND WAYS TO APPROACH THEM.



CHALLENGE 1:

ONGOING BARRIERS TO A QUALITY WORKFORCE

Recruiting and retaining quality early childhood professionals and caregivers has been a longstanding challenge with low wages, inconsistent quality standards, and minimal funding among other key factors. And now, with the rippling effects of COVID19, where we saw even higher turnover rates and in-person professional development opportunities halted, the availability of qualified educators has continued to dwindle.

RESEARCH AND REFLECTION

Teachers are people. They bring with them to the classroom external stressors, including higher than average rates of their own Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which [can negatively affect](#) their interactions with children. Teachers who struggled the most with interactions are [more likely to leave](#) - and nearly a third of them do, every year. In K-12, too, [teacher turnover](#) leads to [high costs](#). If teachers who stay are [emotionally exhausted](#), the quality of their interactions with children suffers.

The challenges to the early childhood workforce run deeper than turnover and retention. The [lack of nation-wide agreement on teacher preparation expectations](#) means that educators come to the field with varying degrees of knowledge and understanding about child development.

Overcoming this challenge requires deeper, more intentional support of the components that develop a quality workforce: credentialing and licensing, commitment to workforce

ONGOING BARRIERS TO A QUALITY WORKFORCE

development, ongoing professional development opportunities, and consistent, high-quality coaching practices.

- Through training, such as the [Child Development Associate credential](#), teachers can increase their belief in and [implementation of developmentally appropriate practice](#).
- Research also shows that teachers who are confident and supported [see the greatest benefits](#) from further training.
- The best kind of PD, according to research? Ongoing, [coaching-style professional development](#).

What information and skills do your teachers need to be their best? What area will make the biggest impact for children?

How will your program demonstrate its commitment to workforce development?

MOVING FORWARD, TOGETHER

As your partner, we can work with you to understand your workforce challenges, and find creative ways to develop a solution-set that addresses your challenges and aligns to your longer-term strategic goals. We can help to:



Enroll new staff in the only CDA program powered by CLASS®



Provide teachers with individualized, digestible, and engaging learning experiences



Pair your teachers with CLASS® coaches for virtual practice-based coaching sessions



Develop a custom professional development plan tailored to your organization's goals

A LEADER'S PERSPECTIVE:



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Preschool classrooms are complex laboratories for children's learning! Emotional, organizational, and instructional classroom dimensions that support children's inquiry and discovery can be difficult for many early childhood leaders and teachers to notice and articulate. Over the last five years, our district has chosen to implement the CLASS observational system as a lens for collective reflection on practice, as well as for developing programmatic and individual teacher goals. The CLASS system has provided classroom teachers and district leaders with a shared understanding of high-quality preschool practice, grounded in intentionally designed interactions. The CLASS system has also given our program the language and definition to identify specific classroom interactions as well as verbiage that supports meaningful, collaborative discussions between teachers and leaders surrounding specific indicators of classroom practice. Most importantly, CLASS has served as a tool to provoke teacher self reflection and strengthen teacher agency.

—Melody Hobbs, TN District State Pre-K Director



CHALLENGE 2:

LEARNING LOSS AND WIDENING GAPS

Families, teachers, instructional leaders, policymakers...everyone is trying to figure out what to do to compensate for the instructional challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. While it may be tempting to dive straight into content to make up ground, it's critical that coming efforts are about the *whole child*.

RESEARCH AND REFLECTION

All learning is [social-emotional learning](#). When you start with this principle, it quickly becomes clear that effective instruction cannot be separated from meaningful relationships. That's why an abundance of research has shown the relationships between teacher-child interactions, as measured by CLASS, and students' academic outcomes:

- Early interactions are powerful. The gains made in preschool can be sustained [for the long haul](#), especially when there's [alignment between pre-K and K-12](#).
- High-quality interactions are critical to unlocking [early literacy skills](#). It's not just explicit language and literacy instruction - Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support are all uniquely important for developing early literacy skills.
- In fact, research shows links between CLASS-measured interactions and outcomes [across domains](#), including academic achievement, social-emotional, executive functioning.
- It's not just young children who need these types of interactions. In [elementary school](#), [middle school](#), and beyond, high-quality CLASS interactions are related with stronger engagement that in turn produces better academic outcomes.
- Intentional coaching around these interactions can [strengthen teachers' abilities](#), [leading to student growth](#).

LEARNING LOSS AND WIDENING GAPS

What is expected growth in a “normal” year? How does that differ from this year’s outcomes? And how much of that difference can reasonably be made up in the coming school year(s)?

*What strategies are teachers equipped to use to make the most of the coming year?
What do they still need to make it possible?*

MOVING FORWARD, TOGETHER

Overcoming learning loss, and combating the growing academic gaps will require concentrated efforts on supporting every educator’s professional development to recognize and know how to tailor and use instructional strategies to guide every child’s learning. We can help to:



Connect your teachers to certified coaches for continuous reflection and improvement



Strengthen instructional support practices to promote positive child outcomes



Measure and improve quality interactions proven to drive academic success



A LEADER'S PERSPECTIVE:



“Every student needs an adult champion who understands and supports their academic and social-emotional needs. I’m incredibly proud of the early childhood leader champions of Tennessee who minimized potential learning gaps or learning losses by leveraging the use of the CLASS along with implementation of the TN Foundational Skills Curriculum Supplement to bring together academic and social-emotional supports needed to ensure every preschool student had access to high-quality instruction and interactions every day. During school closures and reopening, these leaders provided families with tools and resources to support meaningful and high-quality early learning at home.”

—*Dr. Darlene Estes-Del Re, Former Assistant Commissioner of Early Learning at the Tennessee State Department of Education*





CHALLENGE 3:

INCREASED TRAUMA AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEED

With hundreds of thousands of American families affected by death or illness since the onset of COVID-19, our children and educators are facing a once-in-a-generation challenge. Leaders need to make sure they're ready to meet children's and staffs' emotional needs, knowing the need may run far deeper than before.

RESEARCH AND REFLECTION

Nearly half of all children in the United States [have experienced one or more forms of serious trauma](#), and that data comes from before the full effects of the pandemic have been realized. However, it takes [sustained attention and effort](#) to take “trauma-informed” from buzzword to reality.

When teachers provide consistent, supportive interactions for young children, they're better able to meet [students' social-emotional needs](#) and help them develop the “soft skills” needed for success:

- Consistent, high-quality Emotional Support interactions build relationships between teachers and children that help children develop social competence and [avoid misbehavior](#).
- [Trauma-informed elementary schools](#) were associated with higher CLASS scores - a measure we know [supports children's learning across domains](#).
- High-quality interactions also support [children's behavior](#) and [engagement](#).
- When returning to in-person learning, children [may experience new levels of stress and anxiety](#). If these feelings present as challenging behaviors, positive interactions can [buffer the potential negative effects](#) these behaviors have on children's academic learning.

INCREASED TRAUMA AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEED

What social-emotional needs do you know of in your school community? What might you still need to learn?

Whether or not a given child has experienced trauma, how will social-emotional learning and a trauma-informed environment support their return to in-person learning?

MOVING FORWARD, TOGETHER

Social-emotional development and well-being requires comprehensive support. We can help you and your staff to:



Develop trauma-informed best practices to support children, families, and staff members



Promote positive social-emotional development with research-based resources



Measure and improve quality interactions proven to drive social-emotional development





CHALLENGE 4:

EXISTING SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES

Our pre-COVID educational system already posed plenty of challenges. When rebuilding, it's critical that we disrupt systems that have caused harm and develop new ones to support every child, and every educator, in every setting.

RESEARCH AND REFLECTION

We know that opportunity is not equally distributed across our country. Children of color, children with disabilities, and children in underserved communities are [not afforded the same chances as their peers](#) to grow and succeed. Even at kindergarten entry, "[readiness gaps](#)" are present, and existing opportunity and achievement gaps along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines [are widening during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). This academic gap [runs parallel to a "discipline gap"](#) - Black, Latinx, and AIAN students are disproportionately likely to be suspended or expelled from school. As has been well-documented, these differences in educational experiences have [negative effects](#) well beyond the school doors.

Well-intentioned school systems can still perpetuate inequity. For example, New York City's universal pre-K program, Pre-K for All, made preschool free and accessible to all four-year-old children. However, the program still resulted in uneven funding, differences in program accessibility, and [varying levels of quality](#). Disappointingly but unsurprisingly, these variations [favored White students over their Black peers](#).

EXISTING SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES

Informed leaders can take action to counteract some of these inequities in their systems:

- High-quality [pre-K programs](#) show higher returns for [income-needy](#) students and dual-language learners. This is especially true when paired with support, like coaching.
- When teachers receive coaching, racial disproportionality in discipline referrals decreases - and [can even be eliminated](#).

When looking at data, what inequities show up in your setting?

How do you ensure that all students in your setting have life-changing teachers? How do you know when you're successful?

MOVING FORWARD, TOGETHER

Creating an equitable learning environment takes intentionality. Teachers and students need individualized support to meet them where they are and develop a plan to reach their potential. You can target your efforts to specific classrooms or practices, or find new ways to build all teachers' skills and mindsets. We can offer supports to:



Maximize the potential for every child by focusing on quality interactions with CLASS



Get insights into the quality of interactions within every classroom, across your program



Maximize the potential for every educator by engaging with a certified CLASS® coach



CHALLENGE 5:

DEMONSTRATING MEANINGFUL GROWTH AND CHANGE

Amidst the historic funding opportunities comes the understated challenge and need to track these investments and to demonstrate the impact the COVID19 pandemic has had, and the success of these critical rebuilding efforts and investments.

The road to recovery will not be clearly marked. It will be up to savvy leaders to use data to find a path, identify roadblocks, and guide the way forward.

RESEARCH AND REFLECTION

Without data, it's difficult, if not impossible, to see a full picture of what's happening in a school or classroom. CLASS data, which is so clearly linked to specific teaching practices, can give leaders and educators an understanding of what is happening in classrooms and how to make improvements. These improvements, in turn, drive student outcomes.

Since we know what's important, why do we need to measure it? Because in most classrooms, especially those serving children placed at risk, [day-to-day quality isn't high enough](#) to make [the biggest impact](#) on children's learning. But, when leaders and educators focus on learning, measuring, and improving daily interactions, growth happens for teachers and students: Intentional coaching around these interactions can strengthen teachers' abilities, leading to student growth:

DEMONSTRATING MEANINGFUL GROWTH AND CHANGE

- When teachers learn about the types of interactions that are most effective, they are [better able to implement them](#) in their own classrooms.
- Since Louisiana narrowed its quality rating and improvement system to focus on CLASS alone, the [quality of teacher-child interactions in the state have increased](#). This change has also been helpful for teacher efficacy: most teachers surveyed in two large Louisiana parishes felt that, with practice and support, [teachers can improve their CLASS scores](#).
- This ability to improve is empirically backed: with [coaching that is directly aligned](#) with the CLASS tool and observations, teachers [improve their skills](#) and [CLASS scores](#).
- CLASS is trusted to help leaders and policymakers [make informed decisions](#) and [systematically support their teachers](#) across the country.

What kinds of data do you use? How do you use it to make instructional and policy decisions?

How do teachers use data? Do current data sources relate to their practice, provide clear steps for improvement, and give them the information they need to plan for every student?



DEMONSTRATING MEANINGFUL GROWTH AND CHANGE

MOVING FORWARD, TOGETHER

Our Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS) is the leading quality improvement system for teaching. CLASS not only defines teaching quality through the lens of interactions, it provides the ability to measure and improve the interactions that matter most for student outcomes. And, it's a journey of continuous improvement that is data-driven and focused on what matters most for student outcomes, interactions.

With [CLASS](#), you can:



Establish a baseline of quality in the context of today's new challenges



Leverage a systematic approach for continuous improvement



Track success, progress and improvement over the coming months and years



A LEADER'S PERSPECTIVE:



“The Lebanon Special School District has seen quality improvement in the Voluntary Pre-K program both qualitatively and quantitatively this school year. The CLASS observation tool has been impactful in assessing classrooms and helping teachers focus on specific domains of instructional support, emotional support, and classroom organization. The CLASS tool gave us data for goal-setting in the fall and for measuring growth and effectiveness in the spring. This year’s data validated teacher growth in instruction that can be witnessed in classrooms daily with students.”

—*Penny Thompson, Ph.D., Instructional Coordinator/Pre-K Director Lebanon Special School District*





REBUILD TOWARDS A FUTURE OF QUALITY FOR EVERY CHILD, AND EVERY EDUCATOR

As we embark on this industry wide initiative and opportunity to recover, reimagine and improve education for all children, families, and educators remember we are in this together. Together, we can and we will support every child, and every educator.

**CONNECT WITH A SOLUTIONS ADVISOR,
AND LET'S MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER, STARTING TODAY.**