

Education Week

The Top Issues for District Leaders in 2023

By [Caitlynn Peetz](#) — January 13, 2023

The past year (or two or three) was incredibly busy in K-12 education.

COVID-19 continued to take its toll on districts, on top of students' urgent academic and mental health needs. Divisive political debates overtook school board meetings and staffing shortages hamstrung some schools' operations. Districts facing talent shortages and supply chain problems struggled to spend a windfall of federal cash.

Many of those issues are sure to spill over into 2023, says Ray Hart, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, an organization that represents many of the country's largest urban districts.

But with all of the challenges also comes opportunity, Hart said—for improvement, creative thinking, and embracing change.

Hart outlined his expectations and hopes for 2023 in a recent conversation with Education Week. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What do you think will be the top issue in education in 2023?

The primary issue this year is really addressing the unfinished learning that students experienced during the pandemic.

We're really looking forward to understanding how well we've done this year with addressing those learning outcomes for students, particularly as we get into state test results, and then addressing those gaps.

I think the other areas ... are just addressing some of the needs around staffing that we've experienced, as most of our districts have struggled with staffing shortages, particularly in the areas like mathematics, special education. We just have to manage those and make sure we give kids the support that they need throughout the school year.

Obviously, budget and finance will likely come up toward the end of the year, and we're really looking closely at our state legislatures this year to see to what extent they support the schools across their states. This year, of all years, the [\[National Assessment of Educational Progress\]](#) data as well as the challenges that we're facing coming out of the pandemic, are clear indicators that the state and local investments in education are really, really paramount to make sure our kids have the long-term support that they need and to stabilize education.

What did districts learn last year that can help them address or prepare for those issue?

I think it would be a mistake for us to go into 2023 and think that the pandemic is not still weighing on the mental health of our students and on their social-emotional learning.

The lesson learned is that in order for us to really address the academic needs of our students, we need to make sure they're in a really solid place from a mental health standpoint.

Many of our districts are following through on that and making sure they're putting in those supports for kids, investing in bullying-prevention programs and restorative justice and all of the other things their students need.

We have to make sure we're addressing those social-emotional needs of students as we move forward. It's critical.

How prevalent will the school safety debates be this year?

Safety is on the top of mind for most of our superintendents and school districts, given what's happening in their broader communities.

In Philadelphia, for example, the superintendent recently shared that safety in the community is a top priority—ensuring that kids can get to school safely, that they go home to environments that are safe and conducive to making sure they come to school prepared to learn. That's not unique to Philadelphia by any stretch of the imagination.

Firearms are a challenge for all of our school districts across the country, and so making sure that we keep kids safe I think is absolutely going to be an area of focus moving forward

Are districts better prepared now to handle public health crises this year?

We built a great deal of muscle during the pandemic in responding to the medical and mental health challenges that our students face, and I don't think that's going to go away.

I think the lessons that we learned about how to handle those situations, while tough lessons, taught us how to really provide support to our students. Obviously, the pandemic was an extreme circumstance, but it taught us about providing support to our students, even when they're having challenges at home, being able to connect kids to the

classroom in ways that we hadn't before, ensuring that we're not only utilizing technology to the greatest extent possible, but we're also taking advantage of new technologies.

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I think all of those things are lessons learned from the pandemic that will be carried forward, not only this year but also in the years to come.

What is your greatest hope for education in 2023?

Our focus as an organization is always on student outcomes. So I'm hopeful that the unfinished learning that our students are coming out of the pandemic with will be addressed.

I think a lot of districts and the nation is going to react to [artificial intelligence] being built and think about how to make sure that doesn't influence students writing exam papers and other things like that.

I think the opposite actually is true. What I'm hoping for in the course of the year is that we can actually begin to sit down and think through how to leverage AI and other technologies in ways that benefit educational opportunities for all of our students [and] to begin to close some of the opportunity gaps that they might have with their peers around the country.

What I'm hopeful of is that new technologies will help us engage students in new ways and help us provide opportunities to students that they may not have had in the past.