

Business Not as Usual: Understanding Factors for Organizational Change after a Crisis

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**Amanda Lu, PhD¹, Susanna Loeb, PhD²,
and Nancy Waymack, MPP²**

Abstract

Drawing on the crisis management cycle (CMC) framework, this study examines the organizational adjustments made by school systems in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the implementation of high-impact tutoring (HIT) to address the pandemic's academic impacts. Analyzing 112 interviews across 10 local education agencies, we identify three postcrisis organizational change pathways: stagnation without learning, change through learning, and stagnation after initial learning. Critical to navigating these pathways are stakeholder alignment, external partnerships, access to expertise, effective resource allocation, and organizational readiness for adaptation. Our research highlights how these factors collectively determine an educational institution's resilience and capacity for long-term structural adjustment following a crisis. By elucidating the mechanisms that enable or impede organizational learning and change, this paper contributes insights into overcoming entrenched practices, thereby enhancing schools' preparedness and response capabilities for future crises and current policy challenges.

Keywords

crisis management, tutoring, implementation, learning interventions, systems change

Organizational-level and systems-level conditions affect school systems during crises, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted students' academic achievement and well-being (Donnelley et al., 2021; Engzell et al., 2021; Meherali

¹McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA

²SCALE Initiative, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Amanda Lu, McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University, Washington, DC 20001, USA.
Email: amanda.lu@georgetown.edu

et al., 2021). Existing literature addressing organizations' responses to crises highlights the importance of both internal factors, including organizational culture and leadership (e.g., Bowers et al., 2017; Deverell & Olsson, 2010), and external factors, such as resource availability and policy trends (e.g., Diehl & Golann, 2023; Hillman et al., 2009). This article extends prior research, which emphasizes immediate responses, by identifying factors that enable schools to adjust organizational structures to mitigate long-term harm and provide better educational opportunities for students in the future. Utilizing the vast but uneven landscape of tutoring efforts following the pandemic, we focus on instances where organizations learn from crises, work to fortify themselves against challenges presented by future crises, and utilize changes to improve their educational offerings.

The adoption of high-impact tutoring (HIT) in the three years following the pandemic provides a useful case study because of the approach's popularity in addressing challenges to academic progress faced by schools. The pre-COVID literature on tutoring shows that when implemented well, HIT is one of the most consistently effective learning interventions (Robinson & Loeb, 2021). However, more recent analyses of scaled efforts of HIT show that these impacts can fade as program implementation becomes more unwieldy (Kraft et al., 2024). Efforts to implement HIT could also be resourced through various funding streams, including philanthropic, state, and federal resources. Given these circumstances, the scaling of HIT enables the investigation of broader system-level conditions and school leader decisions that impact efforts for systemic change.

Bishop and Noguera (2019) provide a framework for the conditions that could produce educational equity, given that equity-oriented policies typically fail to meet their intended outcomes. One specific push these authors have for the field is for a broader consideration of local implementation to understand how we need not only better policies, but also systems that are more capable of pursuing equity-oriented policy goals. Our investigation into the uneven scaling of HIT, with a focus on enabling conditions for program growth, can provide the field with knowledge about how resources can be leveraged in moments of need to both address immediate student needs and build stronger systems for future crises. Unlike typical policy analysis, we do not examine the intervention itself or the amount of dollars invested, but instead interrogate and center the organizational contexts of districts and how they affected program implementation.

This paper draws on a dataset of 112 interviews from 10 school districts across the country, in various HIT policy contexts, involving different school, district, and state-level actors. We analyze these interviews, which describe efforts to implement HIT at scale, to identify key conditions for organizational change in response to crises and contribute insights for crisis preparedness. We identify three distinct post-crisis organizational pathways: one of organizational change and two of organizational stagnation. We find that the alignment of stakeholders determines an organization's initial trajectory, the availability of external partnerships, and access to relevant expertise. The effective allocation of resources and organizational readiness to direct their personnel's efforts determine the organization's ability to sustain the positive change they pursue.

Policy Context

Given that school districts saw a median reduction of approximately 52% of a year's worth of achievement growth in math and 23% percent in reading (Fahle et al., 2023), educators faced the daunting task of remediating and accelerating learning to minimize the long-term detrimental impacts of the pandemic. As an intervention with a substantial body of research supporting its potential efficacy, HIT held promise in addressing both postpandemic challenges and ongoing concerns about inequities in student achievement (Nickow et al., 2024; Robinson & Loeb, 2021). Essential features of HIT include substantial time each week for tutoring with a consistent tutor during the school day, close monitoring of student knowledge and skills, high-quality instructional materials, and oversight of tutors to assure quality (National Student Support Accelerator [NSSA], 2020). HIT is useful for studying change in response to crises because it requires shifts in resource allocation, particularly in personnel and time. School systems also need to build a pipeline of tutors. This might require partnering with local higher education institutions or contracting with tutoring providers. HIT programs also require district personnel to oversee and coordinate tutoring efforts, and school leaders to cooperate with integrating tutoring into the existing school day schedule. These changes are notoriously difficult (Conley & Enomoto, 2005), requiring substantial implementation capacity for districts and schools.

School systems can implement HIT with fidelity if they have access to a wide set of support and resources. Federal funding, state policy initiatives, and local investments of time and personnel facilitated HIT implementation across the United States as a pandemic-related academic recovery strategy. At the federal level, Congress allocated nearly \$190 billion, collectively known as the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, to facilitate academic recovery, address student and staff well-being, and support operational needs. ESSER dollars were restricted to certain spending categories such as school facilities, academic remediation, education technology, and summer and afterschool programs. Districts could choose to fund HIT programs through the \$28 billion earmarked in the American Rescue Plan to address learning loss. Districts could also seek assistance from private philanthropies and collaborate with policy partners for implementation support.

Both policymakers and policy influencers supported the proliferation of tutoring. State policies often facilitated the targeted use of this federal funding. In Texas, House Bill 4545 mandated that students who did not pass the annual state examinations in grades 3–8 receive individual accelerated learning plans, the majority of which included HIT. Local districts had autonomy in their approach, with the Texas Education Agency providing high-level guidance. Some states, such as Maryland and New Jersey, have fostered tutoring programs through grant programs as a financial incentive for district HIT programming. Some districts without direct tutoring requirements also pursued HIT. For example, Guilford County Public Schools in North Carolina offered 12,000 students 300,000 tutoring sessions during the 2022–2023 school year. This was enabled by fostering local partnerships to provide a sustainable source of

tutors and growing their organizational capacity to manage a program of this size and scale (Hashim, Leak, et al, 2024).

A coalition of think tanks and nonprofits also facilitated HIT as a source of implementation expertise. The New Teacher Project, Saga Education, and the National Student Support Accelerator (NSSA) developed policy briefs about HIT and advised school districts nationwide on implementation. Philanthropies such as the Walton Family Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made substantial investments in HIT. Given the context of policy momentum and widespread implementation of HIT, studying HIT's implementation enables us to investigate the importance of both the external environment and internal conditions in postcrisis organizational restructuring. This work contributes to a broader understanding of organizations in crisis and, specifically, to the factors that prompt schools to overcome stagnant practices and meet the challenges affecting the most vulnerable students.

Background

In this section we present the relevant literature that informs this study, including prior research on school reform and systems change as well as more current work on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schooling.

Structural Changes in Schools

Discontent with U.S. schools fuels cyclical reform efforts (Cuban, 1990), but often little change to schooling structures. Schooling tends to follow established scripts as schools strive for perceived legitimacy (Metz, 1989). Isomorphism, an organizational process of convergence, can cause schools to look similar despite differences in social contexts because of common external pressures and social structures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The systems that govern schools are often described as “loosely coupled,” meaning the layers are often partially autonomous and nonresponsive to one another (Weick, 1982). This makes it difficult to disrupt the classroom practices and student–teacher interactions that are essential to school improvement, what Elmore (1996) calls the “instructional core of schooling.” Although schools have resilient structures, they do incorporate new practices and policies to meet mandates from local, state, and federal authorities (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Organizational change is, thus, a dynamic process affected by discretion and existing circumstances. Understanding how to create conditions for necessary changes in our school systems ensures that they can address the needs of diverse and underserved student populations even while navigating significant disruption.

Organizational Readiness

A strand of organizational theory identifies conditions that enable organizations to change. Weiner (2009) defines organizational readiness as a multilevel construct that

consists of both the organization's members' willingness to change and the organization's ability to implement changes effectively. Scholars have applied theories of organizational readiness to studies of healthcare systems (e.g., Weiner et al., 2008), but rarely to schools.

Large-scale social disruptions often create windows for changes to occur. Historically, scholars have viewed crises as policy windows allowing for larger structural reforms (Friedman, 1962; Klein, 2007). A crisis can be either a *sudden crisis*, which arises unpredictably, or a *smoldering crisis*, which compounds over a longer period due to negligent management (James & Wooten, 2005). Much of the political rhetoric around public education in the United States suggests U.S. schools are in a smoldering crisis, as critics take issue with achievement (Klein & Rice, 2014), equity (Noguera, 2009), and governance (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Due to U.S. federalism and the decentralized education system, crises are often localized when disaster or mismanagement occurs, although common issues across the nation's schools can also emerge, such as racial and socioeconomic inequality (Reardon et al., 2014).

Policy activists and scholars have framed the pandemic—a global sudden crisis, with its many interrupted schooling processes (transportation, instruction, school meals, etc.)—as a moment to re-evaluate public education and the structures taken for granted (Orellana et al., 2022; Tesar, 2021; Woulfin & Spitzer, 2023). As districts sought to implement HIT, they faced the task of making structural changes from a crisis state that either facilitated or hindered these changes. To implement HIT, districts had to accommodate tutoring in their already resource-constrained master schedules, create capacity to oversee tutoring programs at the district level, and create staffing plans to hire, train, and allocate tutors. For instance, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, the state agency overseeing local education agencies (LEAs) in Washington, D.C., created and managed a grants program for 14 tutoring providers working at over 141 schools and serving 5,000 students in the 2022–2023 school year (Pollard et al., 2024). This initiative expanded to partnering with 41 tutoring providers serving over 7,000 students across 174 schools in the 2023–2024 school year (Lu et al., 2025). The district also monitored implementation to ensure fidelity to the HIT model required of providers, as laid out in their initial request for proposals.

The Crisis Management Cycle

The crisis management cycle (CMC) delineates the stages in which an organization experiences and responds to a crisis. It has five distinct phases, two of which precede crisis onset:

- *Mitigation*: Efforts taken before a crisis to avoid or reduce the impact of the crisis
- *Preparedness*: Efforts taken to produce crisis management plans and reduce the impact of unavoidable crises

After a triggering event for the onset of a crisis, an organization engages in:

- *Response*: Efforts taken to contain and control the damage of a crisis
- *Recovery*: Efforts taken to address needs that continue to arise postcrisis
- *Learning*: Efforts taken to reflect on data and feedback gathered during prior stages to improve future crisis response efforts

After a crisis recovery process, organizations then re-enter the precrisis phase to await future crises.

In Figure 1, we apply the CMC to describe school system responses to the pandemic and implementation of HIT. The initial response included closures and the establishment of virtual learning systems, as well as efforts to ensure that free school meals remained available to families in need. During the recovery period, schools worked to reopen safely and began to assess the ongoing effects of the pandemic on students and stakeholders. During the learning stage, school leaders and policymakers began to make larger-scale policy decisions regarding pandemic recovery, including the allocation of ESSER funds and the passage of laws requiring schools to address learning loss through coordinated academic remediation.

This study focuses on the learning phase and the organizational changes to determine what factors facilitate postcrisis change. The learning phase is a potential window for organizations to commit to organizational change. These changes can then fortify school systems, adding to their resilience when faced with future crises. In noncrisis times, positive changes implemented in response to a crisis can continue to impact the trajectories of students and the working conditions of educators. Past scholarship on the learning stage emphasized the importance of leaders reflecting intentionally on their decisions for the sake of the organization's future approaches to crisis (Fener & Cevik, 2015; Grissom & Condon, 2021). When examining how districts stabilized teaching and learning operations in response to the onset of COVID, Hashim, Weddle, and Irondi (2024) found that they relied on pre-existing relationships within and external to schools to implement new online learning modalities. This paper contributes to this scholarship by applying an organizational-level lens to decision-making to discern what conditions facilitate structural change to schools that happen later in the CMC as leaders learn from their experiences. Understanding these conditions allows for a conceptualization of crisis management that is more inclusive of organizational and systems-level capacities and provides us with insights about how to build educational systems that are able to withstand and continually evolve in response to crises.

Organizational Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a common set of challenges for schools that led to uneven impacts across geographies and social groups. During the pandemic, low-income students and students of color were less likely to have stable access to the

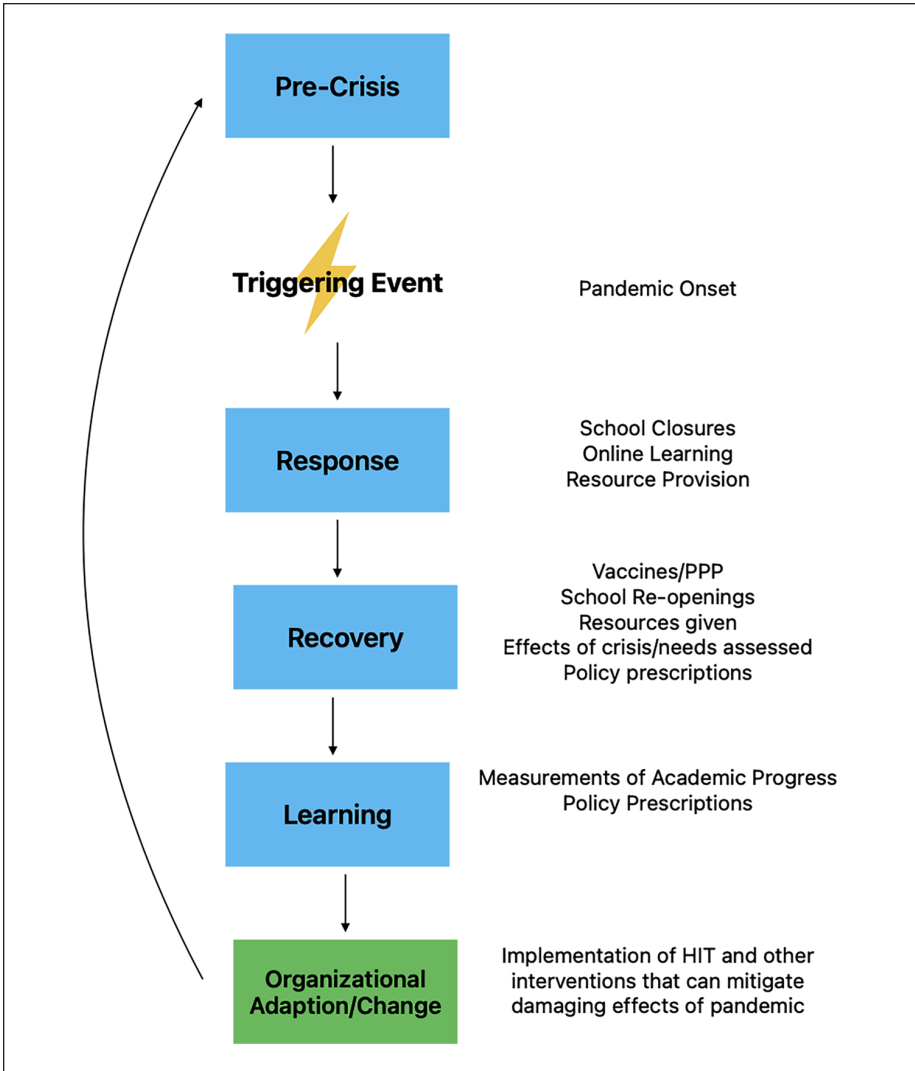


Figure 1. The Crisis Management Cycle, COVID-19 and Schools.

internet (e.g., Patrick et al., 2021), available parental support during virtual schooling (e.g., Lee et al., 2021), and consistent attendance (e.g., Santibañez & Guarino, 2021). Widening disparities in standardized test scores (Fahle et al., 2023) animate the policy discourse around pandemic recovery efforts. During recovery efforts, policymakers used the concept of “learning loss” and “unmet learning” to summarize the effects of the pandemic on academic achievement (e.g., Ingzell et al., 2021). Though these

constructions are contested for their validity and unidimensional emphasis on standardized testing (e.g., Robbins & Cipollone, 2023), educators and policymakers have broadly oriented themselves on accelerating learning to regain the perceived loss of students' development.

Research on schools' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has focused primarily on how school leaders navigated decision-making in the early days of the crisis and the variation in decisions to return to in-person instruction (e.g., Fotheringham et al., 2022; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Local political conditions highly predicted the timing of school reopenings—schools in localities that skewed Republican were more likely to reopen for in-person instruction in the fall of the 2020 school year (Grossman et al., 2020; Harris & Oliver, 2021; Hartney & Finger, 2022; Houston & Steinberg, 2025; Marianno et al., 2021), and districts with a strong teachers' union presence were less likely. Although reopening decisions were often framed as a tension between “politics and science” (Marianno et al., 2021), Singer (2022) found that decisions are more nuanced than binary framings due to the diverse set of stakeholders that district leaders engaged during decision making.

Much of the policy made at the state level during the first stages of the crisis was concerned with preserving the continuity of structures rather than changing these structures (Menefee-Libey et al., 2023). Though states made large-scale short-term adjustments, such as suspending standardized testing, these changes often preserved structures in the longer term. We examine district-level implementation of HIT, applying the CMC framework, to understand how organizations might structurally undergo and sustain positive change after a crisis.

Methods

We conducted 112 interviews with 90 participants, including school district administrators, tutoring program administrators, teachers, tutors, and umbrella organizations (i.e., nonprofits and government agencies supporting HIT implementation). Our research sites included 10 districts and charter management organizations from eight states. Interviews were conducted from December 2021 to July 2022. During this time, districts were in the midst of the first full school year of being fully reopened after the pandemic and allocating (or not allocating) pandemic relief funds for reopenings and learning recovery. We chose districts in various stages of scaling HIT and had differing levels of state support and local partnerships that also allowed for a diversity of geographic regions and policy contexts. We were also intentional in sampling districts that served large numbers of low-income students and students of color—students who stand to benefit the most from well-executed HIT programs. Table 1 describes our interview sample within our 10 districts that yielded 108 interviews. We also conducted four interviews with statewide stakeholders in Texas, bringing our total number of interviews to 112.

We used a distinct protocol with each stakeholder group, designed to provide insights on the implementation and scaling of HIT in 10 diverse districts and one

Table 1. Description of Interview Sample.

| Pseudonym | State | Local | District Admin | Tutoring Provider | Partners | School Leader | Teacher | Tutor | Total |
|-------------------|----------|---------------|----------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| Sunshine | FL | Suburb: Large | 2 | 2 | N/A | 1 | 3 | 1 | 9 |
| Hidden Valley | TX | City: Large | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Summit | CO | City: Large | 3 | 1 | N/A | 1 | 1 | 2 | 8 |
| Pinetree | NC | City: Large | 6 | N/A | 6 | 8 | 1 | 7 | 28 |
| Peachtree | GA | Suburb: Large | 4 | 3 | N/A | 5 | 0 | 0 | 12 |
| Atlantic | DMV area | City: Large | 0 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 7 |
| Oceanside | CA | City: Small | 3 | 2 | N/A | 1 | 0 | 3 | 9 |
| Swampside | TX | Suburb: Large | 5 | 2 | N/A | 6 | 2 | 7 | 22 |
| Fields | IL | Rural: Fringe | 1 | N/A | N/A | 2 | 1 | 3 | 7 |
| Tumbleweed CMO | TX | City: Large | 2 | 0 | N/A | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| | | | 28 | 12 | 15 | 24 | 8 | 25 | 108 |

charter operator across the United States. Each of the included LEAs implemented and expanded HIT programs during the 2021–2022 school year. Interviewees provided detailed information about the implementation of district-led tutoring initiatives. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 45 minutes. A verified service transcribed interviews.

Coding

We developed an a priori coding scheme grounded in the theory of action aligned with HIT (e.g., Robinson & Loeb, 2021) and existing research documenting prior attempts to implement and scale tutoring in school districts in the United States (e.g., Burch et al., 2007; Heinrich et al., 2014; Jacob et al., 2016). Our initial coding scheme consisted of 20 parent codes, including enabling conditions for tutoring implementation within and external to the district, program design, stakeholder responsibilities, distribution of services, costs, and instruction. We expanded this initial framework to include emergent codes from the data. The final coding scheme included 9 parent codes and 33 subcodes. See Appendix A for a comprehensive list of parent codes and a description of our interrater reliability. Our findings for this paper were generated through analyzing codes related to enabling conditions and scaling. We analyzed these excerpts both within a particular context, to understand tutoring provision within a particular locality, and across contexts, to understand how we might be able to generalize the importance of certain factors in facilitating change at scale.

Findings

We identified factors both before and during implementation that shape the success of organizational changes essential to the successful implementation of HIT programs, to

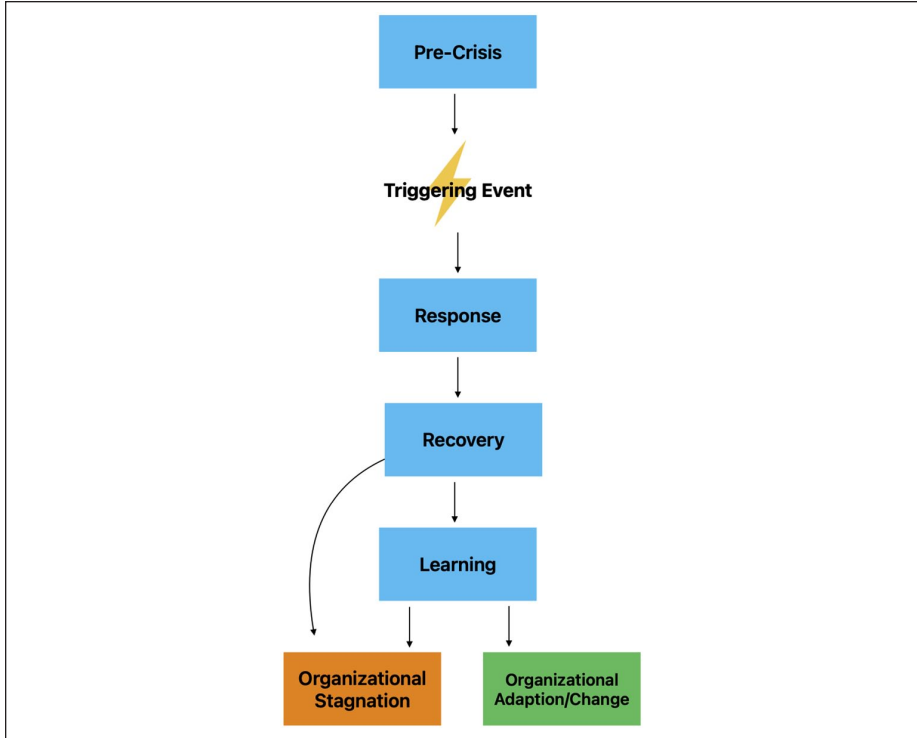


Figure 2. Potential Organizational Pathways After Recovery.

understand organizational change in crisis. We defined three specific pathways that organizations take after the initial response period: a path toward organizational stagnation without learning, and two paths through learning, one toward organizational change and the other returning to organizational stagnation, as shown in Figure 2. We found that organizations can take a path of organizational stagnation if they do not take on the work of postpandemic learning or reflection. They can also take a path toward stagnation after learning if the costs and barriers of implementing changes are too high. Alternatively, learning can create a pathway to sustained organizational change when an organization can overcome implementation challenges. These changes can make an organization more resilient to future crises and can impact educational practices, affecting student development in noncrisis times.

We found that factors present pre-implementation and those arising during implementation affect districts’ pathways. As shown in Figure 3, in the pre-implementation learning period, the following factors facilitated an organization’s decision to commit to implementing HIT programs and how these programs would take shape:

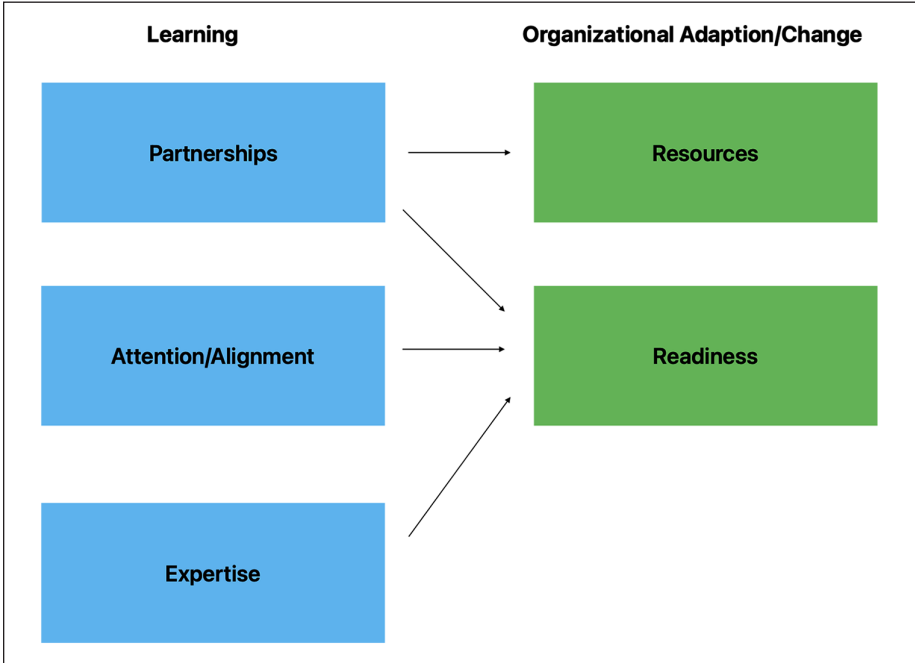


Figure 3. Factors that Enable Organizational Change.

- *Alignment*: Agreement among stakeholders regarding the problem and an appropriate solution
- *Partnerships*: External organizations that provide support, structure, and information to school districts seeking to implement HIT
- *Expertise*: Specialized skills and knowledge relevant to enacting implementation-specific tasks

These factors facilitated an organization's decision to embark on HIT efforts that require structural change. During implementation, the following factors were consequential for the success and sustainability of these endeavors:

- *Resources*: The availability of money, materials, staff, and other assets, and the ability to leverage those assets toward organizational aims
- *Organizational readiness*: The presence of mindsets and motivation necessary for pursuing organizational goals

These factors determined the constraints organizations navigated and their persistence in navigating them.

Not All One Pathway

The pandemic brought about unprecedented disruption to schools, followed by unprecedented resource investments in schools. These resources were accompanied by the hope that schools would address students' interrupted learning through a range of both proven and innovative practices. HIT programs expanded widely—as of November 2023, 16 states had passed tutoring policies, and 40 states provided funding for tutoring (NSSA, 2023). But they expanded unevenly. Some districts did not embrace tutoring at all; others did so as add-on programs that could easily be terminated when ESSER funds ran out; and others used the new resources to affect structures in schools that could lead to sustained change.

The variation in the utilization of ESSER funds is one indication that not all school systems are engaged in the learning processes. In a study focused on California districts, Jordan and DiMarco (2024) found that although most of California's districts reported spending at least 80% of their ESSER III funds, approximately 60 LEAs had not spent any of their funds through March 2023, and another 108 had spent less than 10%. Given the variety of ways that ESSER funds could be used, the lack of utilization likely signals a lack of direction about pandemic recovery. Although some districts chose not to engage in HIT at all, many others did. Among those who turned to HIT, some approached it as a temporary add-on while others sought to leverage the available funds for HIT as a longer-run improvement strategy. According to a survey conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) in December 2022, 83% of public schools provide some form of tutoring. Of those schools providing tutoring, 37% were providing tutoring that could fall within the criteria of HIT (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Understanding the differences in HIT implementation in the national education landscape can help us to understand how districts and state structures can adapt to becoming more crisis-resilient, in both the short and long term.

Engaging in learning is essential to yielding positive organizational change after crises. In the following sections, we detail determinants of an organization's path, specifically looking within LEAs that have made a concerted push for HIT. Within these localities, school leaders have engaged in a learning process about the pandemic's effect on student achievement and chose HIT as a potential solution to address these effects. By examining how our participants explained challenges and successes in their pursuit of implementing HIT, we isolate the factors that contribute to an organization's trajectory toward postcrisis change.

Finding 1: Enabling Factors for Organizational Change at the Learning Stage

Organizations emerging from the learning state of the CMC with the resolve to pursue HIT as a recovery strategy had a set of facilitating factors for their decision. Specifically, alignment among stakeholders, external partnerships, and policy-relevant expertise provided the capacities needed to learn from the crisis and crisis response to make

change. We found that these conditions varied across the sites. For instance, in our Texas research sites, we learned about significant differences between districts around the urgency to implement HIT, even though state law in Texas mandates learning acceleration for students who are academically behind. In the following section, we surface explanatory factors for why districts were more successful at implementing HIT.

Alignment. Stakeholder alignment was a crucial enabling condition. Agreement between multiple layers of stakeholders is often necessary to ensure that information and processes flow through decentralized decision-making systems. Implementing HIT required the coordination of tutoring providers, tutors, teachers, school administrators, and leaders. It was more successful with the buy-in from these stakeholders. A partner organization describes the alignment between actors in Pinetree, a large district in North Carolina:

. . . the superintendent knows what's happening, can speak to its importance. . . . I think having a senior sponsor . . . is key. I think support of the principals is huge, and support of the teacher is huge. So, I think that's kind of an area where we want to really think about how we help our teachers to think that this is the goal of our tutoring.

Instead of attributing the success of the district's program to a single actor, leader, or decision, this partner describes the layers of agreement necessary for large-scale programs to thrive.

Stakeholders' alignment on the importance of HIT and its appropriateness as a policy solution for issues arising from the pandemic created an atmosphere of focus within LEAs. Aligned actors became motivated to take on extra work and work outside of their assigned roles, which was essential to accomplish tasks needed to start HIT programs. A district official in Swampside discussed how this happens:

At one point it was a bit disjointed when we first started because no one knew right what was going on . . . people were working outside of their areas. . . . I would start the job description. Well, my job really isn't to start a job description. But maybe HR was working over here on this. So let me start the job description, then let me pass it off to someone else to edit it, and then someone else will put the money on it. And so, it really was a collaborative effort between the committee that was put together.

The emergence of the new processes needed for HIT created new tasks, with no preassigned person to take them on. Alignment pushed these processes forward as actors agreed to work outside their typical roles to support the building of something new, which they believed was important.

Alignment around HIT could not be induced simply through policy mandates alone, though policy mandates fostered new conversations, moving some motivated and resourced organizations toward action. The importance of alignment was clear in the variation in HIT implementation across Texas after the passage of HB 4545. The Texas

State Legislature passed HB 4545 in June 2021, mandating individualized academic remediation for students who perform below grade level on the state assessments. Although the policy was uniform across districts, the reaction across and within LEAs was not. HB 4545 induced discussion broadly but led to pockets of intense focus where aligned actors created HIT programs at scale. LEAs without aligned actors were less likely to take this path.

On a practical level, establishing alignment proved difficult in the middle of the school year, when other priorities and programs had already been established, potentially adding undue stress to teachers. A school leader in Swampsides describes this difficulty in the first year of implementation of their HIT program during the middle of the school year:

Unfortunately, there were a lot of factors that were given to us all at once. So I feel like we're running just behind the curve and what we need to do, but we're able to at least acclimate so our teachers aren't frustrated and running out the door. . . .

With time, however, this same school leader mentioned that the summer was a time to craft better plans and implement new ideas from the previous year. They described their enthusiasm for implementing improvements and ideas that have emerged throughout the school year. Other districts reported using the summer periods to pilot smaller programs or assess what learning recovery needs would be prioritized during the next school year.

Strategic Partnerships. Even systems with aligned local actors benefited from external partnerships to successfully undertake the complex implementation needed for effective HIT. Districts often utilized the help of partners such as philanthropies and non-profits working at the local, state, and sometimes national level to help with understanding the implementation of HIT. The passage of HB4545 induced deep uncertainties within Texas school districts around how to meet the bill's demands. Though the state provided guiding resources such as a list of tutoring vendors, districts were tasked with structuring how they were going to meet the individualized academic remediation mandate for students. In some locations, community partners stepped in to provide support to these districts in their efforts to implement HIT. One partner working with Hidden Valley and other districts in the metro area describes the pieces of advice and essential questions they provide to districts new to HIT:

Make sure you have some systems in place before you start trying to scale this. . . . 4545 is a mandate, but you can start piloting [HIT] in a few places to actually like, learn from it and . . . build some like systems-wide approach. . . . Do you have leadership and dedicated resources? Can you start making sure that there's representation across all levels? And then the process mapping, because when the rubber has to meet the road . . . things get real.

Partners can give districts starting points when the task of implementation feels daunting.

Partners (in Texas, but also across the country) transmitted information between policymakers, funders, and practitioners, which helped transcend layers of governance and decentralization. They were able to take on this role because of their broader networks, which allowed them to share information between contexts and layers of decentralization. One partner working with both Pinetree and Atlantic described how to manage a funder's expectations of a district:

[T]he role has been . . . trying to negotiate between the funders and the sites to say, "hey, funders, that's crazy, or they don't have that" . . . as we're going forward, I'm pushing pretty hard to redefine the kinds of data that we're asking sites for. . . I'm talking with the funders directly, we're looking at . . . what's coming in, what's not coming in, and what the challenges are . . . that has been hopefully useful to everybody. . .

Partners also freed up capacity for districts by simplifying and scaffolding implementation decisions. They described how they advised on issues ranging from effective tutoring vendors to budgeting, program design, and building buy-in. By helping to frame these decisions and offer advice on best practices, partners freed up the district's capacity to implement these policies, thereby increasing district readiness to offer HIT programming at scale.

Expertise. In response to the pandemic, districts sought information on how to address student learning needs, and those implementing HIT sought information on how to effectively implement it. Making those choices required expertise that some districts had or were able to obtain and others were not, leading to poor choices about what programs to pursue and how to pursue them. One local education service center (a subsidiary of the Texas Education Agency), which covers Sunshine District, described how the lack of initial guidance about quality programming led to poor choices:

. . . when there was not a lot of guidance from the state . . . what happens is out of necessity. . . They ended up putting students on . . . some kind of online platform . . . which in my opinion does not qualify as [HIT].

Partners sometimes provided expertise; state departments of education sometimes provided expertise; and in some cases, districts contracted with companies specializing in tutoring services that provided expertise. Many of our district interviewees described a positive partnership with vendors as essential for their HIT programs; however, they also identified a need to foster internal expertise so that policies could meet desired aims. For instance, a tutoring coordinator in the Pinetree District described how they leverage internal expertise to ensure curricular alignment between tutoring sessions and classroom instruction:

The tutoring department is in the teaching and learning department, which is our curriculum department. And so, we . . . are very focused on . . . ensuring that we provide curriculum to students and teachers so that we can also ensure that the equitable outcomes happen . . . some of those external partners . . . have their own curriculum that didn't necessarily follow our curriculum. And so, we wanted to make sure that whatever was done in the classroom was not being undone in a tutoring session.

In this quote, the tutoring director describes how internal expertise was necessary to ensure that tutoring partnerships did not undermine classroom learning due to misalignment. The HIT program maintained coherence with other structures within the district. The activation of this internal expertise enabled the adoption of tutoring programs into the local context and ensured that partnerships were leveraged effectively.

Finding 2: Enabling Factors for Sustained Change at the Adaptation Stage

After learning about HIT and its potential to ameliorate learning loss, and choosing to implement HIT, successful implementation required both resources and organizational readiness.

Resources. Available funding was a primary driver of the expansion of HIT (NSSA, 2023). The ESSER funds, which were not committed to existing programs and had to target learning, allowed districts to invest in new programs. However, districts also needed the capacity to leverage the funding effectively. School resource allocation often happens through a complex and decentralized process that keeps funding from reaching its intended purposes. Districts needed to establish new processes to spend ESSER funds. One district administrator in Atlantic District explained:

This federal funding that came in was so big. . . . It was a struggle . . . to move it through. . . , we get the same money every year. . . . And so there are plans and processes in place . . . I read in the media . . . this money is . . . no strings attached. . . . But that's not entirely true . . . the documentation we had to do to show that this program and meeting those requirements took time.

Accepting, processing, and allocating new financial resources is a policy burden that can impede resources from being effectively spent.

Although these funds were unprecedented in magnitude, many participants described them as insufficient to fully support their HIT program. Shores and Steinberg (2022) found that ESSER funding alone could not offset district spending declines during the pandemic. In response to funding constraints, our participants often reduced the quality of their programming or the number of students served. A district leader in

Summit described the tradeoffs that they made with ESSER funding when budgeting for their HIT programs:

I recognized pretty quickly that the ESSER funding was not going to be enough . . . because I didn't want to compromise our other programs. . . . [HIT] can't be the only thing that we're doing . . . because if you think of tutoring as kind of like this silver bullet, then it can actually eat up your whole budget. . . .

This district eventually received funding from a state-level HIT grant, which freed ESSER dollars for other needs. These additional resources allowed the district to maintain the integrity of its HIT program, among other recovery demands. Overall, new funding allowed districts to pursue HIT, and their capacities to use available funding determined the strength of their programs.

Organizational Readiness. Given the complex, decentralized structures of school systems, shifting practice requires sustained motivation from organizational actors. The pandemic pushed school leaders to break with routines and structures (Grooms & Childs, 2021), but this task was challenging, especially when schools could not draw from pre-established best practices. Implementing HIT, for example, often required reorganization of the master schedule to allow for remediation. The master schedule needs to account for state regulations around instructional time, space constraints, and busing schedules. A school leader in Swampside described master schedule woes in one large district:

The . . . [district leader] understands that unless we have time built into the schedule, there is no way to implement [HIT] during the school day and allow access to the students who need it the most . . . but [the district] is averse to a master schedule mandate. . . . Districts have got to say this is non-negotiable.

From this partner's perspective, the only way to address some of the scheduling issues is for leaders to be prepared to take a strong stance on HIT, which may put it at odds with other priorities.

When organizational readiness combined with organizational alignment, actors were empowered to remove institutional barriers. A partner serving Pinetree and Atlantic described district-level mindsets they observed as necessary to commit to larger-scale educational change:

. . . in a district the size of [urban district], you've got so many people at the decision-making level. And if there's not a shared understanding and a shared vision across all of those people to collectively make it happen, it won't happen.

This partner's observations describe a strong link between the mentality of organizational actors and their perceived agency. Organizational readiness structured how

district leaders perceived the feasibility of HIT and affected their motivation to remove structural barriers for implementation.

Discussion

The crisis management cycle is a well-established framework for understanding how organizations respond to crises. Given the enormity of the pandemic and the challenges it presented for schooling, we contributed to this framework by first establishing three separate pathways schools took after recovery. One pathway is when an organization does not engage in postcrisis learning and returns to “business as usual.” These were schools that did not have the capacity or support to engage in meaningful learning. They enter a stage of stagnation before another crisis occurs. The other two pathways occur after a stage of learning. After reflecting on a school system’s vulnerabilities during a crisis, leaders can choose to enact change in their organizations. These changes may be successfully implemented, leading to a path of sustained change, or they may fail, leading the organization toward stagnation. We show that postcrisis learning and change are not inevitable, especially for complex and strained public school systems. Returning to the Bishop and Noguera (2019) ecology of equity framework, this finding highlights the importance of fostering policy ecosystems that enable school systems to learn and reflect, ultimately leading to changes in structure and practice in response to evolving external pressures. This type of capacity is crucial for serving students who are most vulnerable to disruptions in schools and society. By identifying and fostering the types of conditions that give districts this type of capacity, we can then create conditions through policy and partnerships that allow systems to better target individual and group-level student needs.

Grissom and Condon (2021) emphasized the importance of leadership during times of crisis. We find that internal alignment and broader organizational readiness to undergo change are key determinants for pathways toward institutionalizing change during a crisis. We also establish enabling conditions for leaders to implement changes, such as partnerships that provide expertise, and the availability of resources, as well as the processes to distribute those resources effectively.

Conclusion

As we consider how districts will manage future crises to ensure that children can continue to experience schooling, we can apply the knowledge gained here to create conditions that enable organizations to emerge from crises more prepared for the next impending crisis. In particular, we need to support districts in structuring their change processes by providing them with information about promising solutions and assisting with the development of sustainable processes and structures. Future work should examine how new structures that may have arisen from this moment can be sustained and

consistently improved upon. It may be particularly fruitful to examine the longer-term structural impacts of ESSER funding to understand whether districts were able to develop and sustain new practices that better support equitable learning opportunities.

From a policy standpoint, our findings show that change processes are contingent on many internal and external factors that policymakers can actively foster in preparation for adapting to future challenges. First, the ongoing engagement of policy partners in the external environment may bring additional capacity and expertise to facilitate structural change implementation. Policymakers may seek out collaborative spaces between policy organizations, research organizations, and education leaders that allow for shared capacity building and knowledge sharing. Second, policymakers can also build stronger practices when it comes to processing new funding streams. Resource creation is likely not enough; school systems may require specific capacities to enact policies that effectively target and impact the most vulnerable student populations (Lu & Matheny, 2025). This capacity building can occur in tandem with researchers who often focus on the presence of funding, but not on the processes by which funds are allocated for program development. For instance, researchers can invest in more comparative work on how money moves through our decentralized education system to create new education programming and offerings.

As we look to the future, public schools have many potential sources of precarity and uncertainty. We must support school systems in managing new and existing resources, and in both sustaining and building effective programming that will help students. Though research on effective learning interventions may be more constrained in the immediate future, the scaling of HIT in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic's onset shows how the leveraging of the existing research base on effective learning interventions can ultimately be a launching point for longer term efforts for educational change and improvement.

Appendix A

Table A1. List of Interview Codes and Definitions.

| Code | Use | Subcodes |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| Enabling Conditions—External | Conditions beyond a school district’s direct power and resources that influence tutoring planning and implementation. This may include federal and state policy, and resources provided to districts through partnerships with community organizations, government, and private organizations. This may also include broader economic and cultural conditions. | Partnerships; Policies; Knowledge |
| Enabling Conditions—District | Descriptions of the people, policies, and practices within a school district that influence tutoring planning and implementation. | Program Selection, Leadership Support; People and Processes; Coordination with Schools and Providers |
| Scaling | Ideas, plans, and processes related to how tutoring can be sustained, grow, and improve over time. | Sustainability; Continuous Improvement |
| Funding and Costs | Descriptions of the amounts, types, and sources of resources (monetary, in-kind, people, etc.) used to plan and implement tutoring. | Funding Sources and Processes; Budget; Cost Ingredients |
| Tutor- Related Policies | Descriptions of policies and practices related to hiring, training, placing, and supporting tutors. | Tutor Role, Expectations, and Compensation; Tutor Supply and Recruitment; Tutoring Matching; Training and Support; Retention |
| Eligibility and Selection | Descriptions of which grade levels, subject areas, schools, and students tutoring programs are designed to target and actually reach. | Program Focus; Student Selection; Take-Up and Attendance |
| Program Design | Descriptions of tutoring group size, delivery (in-person/virtual), location, and dosage both as designed and as implemented. | Group Size; Delivery; Setting; Dosage |
| Curriculum and Instruction | Descriptions of the materials and approaches used to teach students in tutoring sessions. | Personalized Approach; Curriculum Materials; Connection to Tier I; Student–Tutor Relationship |
| Tutoring Goals and Outcomes | Interviewee perspectives on what tutoring should do, the key features a program must have to be successful, and whether the tutoring they’ve experienced is having the intended impact. | Program Goals; Key Design Elements; Influence on Students; Influence on Tutors |

Interrater Reliability

Six research team members participated in a training process in which all raters coded the same transcript excerpts. For research team members to reach initial fidelity benchmarks, they were required to meet a 70% agreement threshold with coding team leaders. To monitor ongoing interrater reliability and guard against rater drift, 15% of all transcripts were randomly chosen to be double-coded by one of the master raters on the project. Overall interrater agreement was 89% across all parent codes with a pooled kappa of 0.64. After researchers coded transcripts, we searched for themes following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for conducting thematic analysis. For this study, we searched for themes within descriptions of the origins of policy decisions to implement HIT, the factors respondents used to explain the successes or failures of their HIT programs, and the challenges experienced during implementation. Team members summarized the findings in initial memos, discussed the findings as a team, and ultimately settled on the findings presented in this paper.

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Author Biographies

Amanda Lu is a postdoc at the SCALE Initiative at Stanford University and incoming faculty member at the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University. Her research focuses on state capacity and the consequences of privatization and decentralization in the U.S. public education system.

Susanna Loeb is a Professor of Education and Faculty Director of the SCALE Initiative at Stanford University.

Nancy Waymack is the Director of Research Partnerships and Policy at the SCALE Initiative at Stanford University and leads the Education Research Partnership Network at Stanford.