

Unfinished Agenda: The Future of Standards-Based School Reform

Few people have played a larger role in efforts to raise standards in the nation's schools than Michael Cohen and Laura Slover.

As the director of education policy at the National Governors Association, Cohen acted as the governors' chief advisor at their seminal national educational summit in the late 1980s and led the development of the first national education goals that emerged from the summit. During the eight years of the Clinton presidency, he led the development and implementation of legislation and regulations to promote rigorous state standards as a senior advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Education, assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education, and special assistant to the president. He subsequently spent 17 years as president of Achieve, a nonprofit organization formed by political and business leaders to promote college- and career-ready standards. Achieve played a central role in the development and implementation of the Common Core State Standards, the Next Generation Science Standards, and the Partnership for Assessment of College and Careers (PARCC), a state testing consortium.

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In this FutureEd essay, Cohen and Slover reflect on the evolution of the standards movement in American education and recommend what they believe should be the movement's next chapter.

— Thomas Toch, Director, FutureEd

BY MICHAEL COHEN AND LAURA SLOVER

The long campaign to raise standards in the nation's public schools, for decades the cornerstone of efforts to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes of traditionally underserved students, is out of fashion in school reform circles. Critics charge it has been "a giant waste of time" and should be pushed aside in favor of a return to local education agendas.¹ It's true the standards movement hasn't achieved as much as we and others who have worked in the movement since its inception had hoped for, although it has increased the rigor of state standards and improved the quality of state tests overall. The Common Core, the movement's culminating initiative, has survived relatively intact in many states, often under a different name. Even in cases where it was scrapped, studies suggest that

subsequent state standards are generally stronger than their pre-Common Core predecessors.² But the fundamental problem posed by the standards movement persists: Millions of students—particularly Black and Latino children and those from low-income families—continue to be taught to low expectations. And that lack of rigor remains a major barrier to economic mobility and social justice.

Without standards sufficient to ready students for college and careers, many students, the history of public education makes clear, simply won't get the demanding education they need to navigate an increasingly complex world successfully. Rather than abandoning standards, we and other leaders of the standards movement need to acknowledge and address a critical shortcoming of the movement—that we failed to prioritize the hard work of translating standards into rigorous curriculum materials, instructional strategies and teacher training. That is the difficult, decidedly unglamorous work we need to double down on in the wake of a pandemic that has intensified the standards movement's central challenge, leaving long-underserved students even further behind.³ Critiques of the Common Core and the standards movement have confused state adoption of standards with the work needed to implement standards. The standards movement was not the wrong agenda; it's an unfinished agenda. We outline in this essay a path to completing it in the nation's classrooms.

It will be harder to do this work with culture war battles over textbooks raging in many states, not to mention the ongoing impact of Covid-related school closures and growing educator shortages. But there are now billions of dollars in federal Covid-relief aid that can help states and school districts create a coherent instructional system anchored in a high-quality, high-expectations curriculum for every student.

A recent Council of Great City Schools report shows what's possible. It examined six large urban school districts—Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Washington D.C., Miami-Dade County, and San Diego—whose students showed significant improvement in math and reading achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress from 2009-2019, outpacing both other large urban districts with similar student populations and the nation as a whole. Each of the districts relied on standards-based curriculum reforms to clearly communicate their instructional expectations at each grade level, “including what high-quality instruction and student work should look like.”⁴

Most were moving toward a shared district-wide curriculum. Some provided curated instructional materials and resources, defined critical concepts to be covered at each grade level, or provided standards-aligned pacing guides. Several provided teachers with instructional units throughout the school year, often accompanied by sessions to help teachers prepare for instruction. And they held teachers, principals, and central office staff accountable for student achievement.

These are the elements of coherent instructional programs—a shared vision of instructional quality, with curriculum, professional learning, assessments, and accountability systems all aligned with college and career-ready standards—and the unfinished work of the standards movement.

Calls for Change

It's easy to forget the national urgency to raise expectations in schools four decades ago. Beginning in the early 1980s, a chorus of school reform manifestos from government, business, and education leaders across the political and ideological spectrum demanded that the public school system educate the nation's students to higher standards, their proposals splashed on the front pages of the nation's newspapers. The longstanding practice of diverting millions of high school students—especially those from Black, Latino, and low-income communities—into low-level academics and dead-end vocational courses no longer served an increasingly knowledge-based economy.⁵ Anxiety about

international economic competitiveness and the moral force of the civil rights movement meant that, in the words of the left-leaning Twentieth Century Fund, “The skills that were once possessed by only a few must now be held by the many.”⁶

Nearly every state responded, raising high school graduation requirements, introducing honors diplomas and merit-based college scholarships, raising the quota of academic courses needed for admission to public colleges and universities, even establishing academic standards to play high school sports.⁷ Yet the level of rigor in many classrooms remained largely unchanged, with vast numbers of schools responding to the new requirements with new watered-down courses like “informal geometry” and “fundamentals of general science”—a strategy fueled by deep skepticism among many local educators that all students should or could be taught to high expectations.⁸

The failure of many schools and school districts to increase rigor led to an unprecedented bipartisan summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1989 between Republican President George H.W. Bush and the nation’s governors that resulted in the first-ever national goals for education and launched what would become known as the standards movement in American education.

Among the summit’s aims was that every student “leave grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography.” The subsequent need to define “competency in challenging subject matter” led the Bush administration to fund the drafting of model national standards in core subjects and caused his democratic successor, Bill Clinton, who led the governors at the Charlottesville summit, to put higher standards at the center of his education agenda—including requiring states through the 1994 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act to adopt reading and math standards and tests to hold schools accountable for results.

President George W. Bush went further. Lamenting what he called “the soft bigotry of low expectations” in many public schools, he worked with both Republicans and Democrats in Congress, including liberal Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, to extend the Clinton testing demands to more grades and to sanction schools that failed to meet state achievement targets under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—only to have many state education leaders lower the proficiency bar, fearful of the political consequences if schools failed to get students up to standards under the law’s strict timelines.

That race to the bottom only began to shift after a 2005 national education summit led several dozen states to work together to toughen high school graduation standards under the auspices of a new American Diploma Project, which gave states safety in numbers in pursuing rigorous standards and led, ultimately, to the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards and accompanying tests by 2013, spurred in part by Obama administration financial incentives.

But if the Common Core standards made earlier efforts by presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton to establish voluntary national standards and tests a reality, they proved a bridge too far politically. The Tea Party and its conservative legislative allies attacked the Common Core as part a of wide-ranging anti-Washington crusade. Teacher unions and progressives on the other side of the political spectrum pushed back against accountability for results that they said overemphasized test scores, including the Obama administration’s incentives for states to use test results in teacher evaluations. As a result, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that President Barack Obama signed in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act, retained NCLB’s standards and testing requirements, but greatly diminished the role of the U.S. Department of Education in standards-based school improvement in favor of state autonomy.

The Instructional Core

Even prior to the decades-long push to raise academic standards, studies highlighted the public education system's weak foundation for improving instruction, including the highly fragmented nature of education governance, the preponderance of non-scientifically based reading instruction, the poor and often incoherent quality of training for teachers once they're in the classroom, and a lack of standards-aligned curriculum materials.

In their seminal 1991 essay "Systemic School Reform," Marshall S. Smith and Jennifer O'Day argued for tying the United States' highly fragmented education policies together based on clear, challenging standards for student learning.⁹ While schools and school districts should have the ultimate authority to select, revise, and develop curricular materials, they argued, states had both the responsibility and potential leverage to ensure an adequate supply of high-quality textbooks and other materials in line with the standards, so that teachers did not have to reinvent the wheel for every grade and subject.

But efforts to ensure an adequate supply of standards-aligned curricula lagged far behind the push to develop state standards and tests. Most state officials were loath to influence districts' curriculum decisions—sometimes because the politics were deadly in light of the nation's long history of local control in education, oftentimes because they lacked the capacity to do so. Publishers, meanwhile, were quick to assure districts that their materials were aligned to standards, despite evidence to the contrary.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the federal government and private foundations focused primarily on developing tests aligned to standards, as the linchpins of new state accountability systems, rather than on ensuring that teachers had the materials and training to change teaching practice. The political trade-off of accountability for results in exchange for greater state and district flexibility meant that federal and state education leaders were reluctant to wade into capacity challenges at the local level, let alone spend their political capital on that topic, even as studies found that school districts needed substantial outside expertise to implement the standards effectively and some teacher unions, particularly the American Federation of Teachers, advocated for better instructional materials to help teachers teach to the higher standards.¹¹

A few national organizations sought to help educators determine whether their existing teaching materials aligned with emerging state standards. Shortly after the Common Core State Standards were adopted, Student Achievement Partners (SAP), a nonprofit organization launched in 2011 with foundation funding to support the Common Core, developed the Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool and Achieve developed the Educators Evaluating the Quality of Instructional Products (EQuIP) rubric, two widely used instruments to support high quality English Language Arts and math instruction by weeding out materials that didn't meet standards of quality. These tools, and the conversations about quality they engendered, paved the way for the founding of the nonprofit organization Ed Reports in 2015. Conceived as the education equivalent of the nonprofit consumer advocacy organization Consumer Reports, Ed Reports provides independent reviews of textbook quality and alignment to standards in mathematics, English Language Arts, and science.

Yet no single organization was "in charge" of helping implement the standards at scale. No entity, or partnership of organizations, had the responsibility or capacity to mount a successful and sustained response to the heavy, difficult work of improving instruction to align with standards. The result was that many educators experienced the reforms as simply about standards, testing, and accountability—not about improving the instructional core.

A Way Forward

More recently, an increasing number of states and districts have sought to scale the use of high-quality, standards-aligned curricula and related professional learning, spurred by mounting evidence of its importance to student learning.¹²

Louisiana launched an ambitious statewide strategy in 2013. First, the state published a vetted list of high-quality curricula aligned with the state's academic standards, with Tier 1 being the highest quality. State officials provided financial incentives for districts to use these materials by giving all Tier 1 vendors statewide contracts that made it easier and more affordable for districts to work with the vendors. To further incentivize the use of the top-rated curricula, the state required districts to use Tier 1 curricula to be eligible to compete for a range of state grants. The state provided teacher professional development aligned to Tier 1 curricula and funded districts to contract with outside professional-development vendors on a state-approved list.

Currently, 99 percent of all middle and high school students in Louisiana have access to high-quality reading and math materials as a result of these efforts. Studies by the RAND Corporation have found that teachers in Louisiana are far more likely to use standards-aligned materials and to be knowledgeable about standards than teachers in other states.¹³ Student achievement is also on the rise.¹⁴ In 2019 Louisiana ranked first in the nation for improvement in 8th grade mathematics on NAEP, and its pace of improvement since 2009 significantly exceeds national trends. Further, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of students scoring "Mastery" and above on state standards-aligned summative tests in English Language Arts, math, and social Studies.

Based on the experience in Louisiana, the Council of Chief State School Officers now supports an Instructional Materials and Professional Development (IMPD) Network of 12 states that is encouraging districts to adopt high-quality instructional materials aligned to state standards and provide teachers with professional development based on those materials, with the goal of engaging every student in meaningful grade-level instruction every day—regardless of whether the network members are "adoption" states that centrally approve or recommend curricula, or non-adoption states working to put stronger materials in the hands of local educators.

A 2021 national teacher survey by the RAND Corporation found that in states participating in the CCSSO network, a greater proportion of teachers use at least one fully aligned curriculum compared to the national average, though there were significant differences among states in the network.¹⁵

In addition, national organizations such as Instruction Partners, Pivot Learning, Student Achievement Partners, TNTP, and CenterPoint Education Solutions, where we work, are helping states, districts, and local educators increase the coherence of their instructional programs. But much more work remains to be done. A 2020 report from Ed Reports found that despite the growing availability of well-aligned curriculum materials, nationally only 16 percent of English Language Arts materials and 26 percent of math materials used by teachers are aligned to standards.¹⁶

The Building Blocks We Need

In nearly every state, curriculum and instruction are local responsibilities. Traditionally, under the banner of local control that can be traced, in part, all the way back to the founders' reluctance to establish a national education system, states have played almost no role in ensuring or even reviewing the quality and coherence of the instructional core. Unless that changes in many more parts of the country, we are unlikely to see substantial improvements in academic achievement at any scale. This does not require substituting state control for local control. But the historic "hands-off" stance by state education agencies toward local curriculum, instruction, and professional learning is no longer workable.

As the nation's schools struggle to both recover from the debilitating effects of the pandemic and complete the unfinished work of the standards movement, federal, state, and district leaders need to prioritize measures that could lead to standards significantly improving classroom instruction and student learning. They include:

High-Quality, Standards-Aligned Curriculum. Students learn primarily through their interactions with teachers and curriculum content. So, the content they engage with matters profoundly. A high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum is a non-negotiable anchor for building a coherent instructional core. The curriculum should be rigorous and grade-level appropriate and provide students with the opportunity to build knowledge and skills and develop strong relationships with teachers and other students.¹⁷ It should include texts and topics that affirm students' identities and appeal to their interests; help them learn about, understand, and develop empathy and respect for others; and empower them to be agents of change in their own lives.¹⁸

The Chicago Public Schools, for example, worked with a number of organizations including CenterPoint to develop the Skyline Curriculum, a standards-aligned curriculum across all grades and subjects. The curriculum uses contemporary and culturally relevant texts; focuses on essential questions designed to help students develop confidence and agency; and includes unit plans, teacher facilitation guides, formative assessments, and other features that are aligned to each other. Rather than designing their own curriculum, districts also can select from a growing number of high-quality instructional materials in English Language Arts, mathematics, and science that have been "green lit" by Ed Reports as rigorous and aligned to standards.¹⁹

Professional Learning Connected to the Curriculum. States and districts should invest in quality professional learning to help educators understand, "own," improve, and deliver the curriculum. The experience of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), the most rapidly improving urban district based on 4th and 8th grade NAEP reading and math scores, provides a robust example of what is required for coherent implementation of new curriculum.

The school district's LEAP (Learning Together to Advance our Practice) program is based on research that most effective professional learning is school-based, content-specific, and grounded in the instructional materials and strategies teachers will use with their students. A clear, district-wide vision of instructional excellence, adopted by the district and aligned with the curriculum, anchors DCPS's efforts. Each teacher on a LEAP team participates in a 90-minute, content-specific LEAP seminar each week, and most receive 30 to 60 minutes of individual observation and coaching to provide differentiated support for individual teachers.²⁰ To provide sufficient resources for professional learning and school-based coaches, DCPS eliminated a number of central office positions and elevated its highest-performing teachers into LEAP leadership roles in their schools.

In 2019, the Delaware Department of Education refocused its professional learning grants to districts on the adoption and use of high-quality instructional materials aligned to state standards. Three districts with early reading programs showed substantial improvements in English Language Arts scores on the Smarter Balanced summative assessments for all subgroups. Each used a knowledge-rich early reading curriculum that includes a systematic focus on foundational reading skills.²¹ Each devoted substantial time throughout the year to support professional learning, including through the use of professional learning communities for teachers, coaching, and district-wide professional development days. And each district's professional learning was tied to the specific curriculum in use.

Similarly, teacher-preparation programs should be revamped so that they focus on helping prospective educators identify, implement, and adapt high-quality curriculum materials for their specific student populations, rather than encouraging teachers to create their own lessons from scratch. Preparation programs need to produce school leaders prepared to lead instructional-improvement efforts, including recognizing standards-aligned instruction and curriculum materials when they see them.

Since 2003, Mississippi has worked to improve reading achievement by requiring teacher-preparation programs to use the best scientific evidence about how students learn to read, including helping students to decode the letters and sounds in words and to understand spoken language. The state passed legislation requiring colleges of education to include courses on reading instruction and, ultimately, to certify that their teacher preparation programs are based on the science of reading.

The National Council on Teacher Quality found that the proportion of teacher-preparation programs equipping prospective teachers with the most advanced strategies for teaching reading increased from 35 percent in 2013 to over 50 percent in 2020. Teacher preparation programs in Mississippi performed the highest of any state's programs, according to NCTQ.²² Mississippi also made rapid and substantial gains on NAEP's 4th grade reading assessment, moving from well behind the national average as recently as 2017 to even with the national average in 2019.²³

Curriculum-Aligned Assessments. All assessments, whether at the state or district level, should be aligned with the curriculum that students and teachers use in classrooms. Unaligned tests should be eliminated. At Achieve, an organization formed by national political and business leaders to promote college- and career-ready standards, we developed a process of "auditing" assessments across a district and found, as did the Council of Great City Schools, that many districts had numerous, overlapping measures that did not provide a coherent picture of student achievement and sent conflicting signals to students and teachers about what was important.²⁴

By contrast, what we need are mutually reinforcing assessments at the state, district, school, and classroom levels that work together to paint a comprehensive picture of the public education system—rather than requiring a single test to serve every purpose. Importantly, these assessments must each be high quality and aligned with state standards. This means ensuring that districts' interim assessments are aligned with the curriculum and provide clear and actionable data. It also requires designing, developing, and administering new approaches to state tests that promote a coherent instructional core rather than standing apart from it.

Louisiana, for example, is piloting new state tests that bring its English Language Arts and social studies standards, curriculum, and assessments into full alignment. The pilot, which has been approved under the federal Innovation Assessment Demonstration Authority, is starting in middle school. The middle school humanities assessment will be given three times a year at the conclusion of curriculum units. Students will complete a series of writing tasks, some based on texts they have studied in class and others that are new to them but closely aligned with the content they've been studying. This honors the work that teachers and students have been doing throughout the year. It also advances equity, since all students have access to the content knowledge required to understand the reading passages, based on the state's English Language Arts and social studies standards.

Some states may wish to retain their current regime of end-of-year assessments measuring students' grasp of grade-level content in reading and mathematics. But we think it is time to consider shifting from one summative end-of-year test aligned to state standards to permitting districts to select from among a handful of tests aligned to widely used, standards-aligned curricula in the state, with the intent of strengthening curricular coherence at the district level. States would be able to compare student performance across school districts to some degree by embedding common test items in each curriculum-specific test. Several states and districts are experimenting with variations of this model that could provide valuable proof points.

If permitted under the next reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, states also could shift from assessments in grades 3-8 and once in high school to assessments at key transition grades (end of elementary school, end of middle school, 11th grade), coupled with teacher-scored performance tasks for students in non-tested grades, such as essays written over multiple days or real-world problems that require students to apply math skills.

Replacing grade-level tests with summative assessments at key transition points would provide sufficient information to hold schools accountable for their students' academic performance, especially if schools were responsible for the quality of their instructional program. These tests could also yield individual student scores.

Administering standards-aligned performance tasks in off-years would provide teachers with excellent professional learning opportunities and the tasks could be "counted" toward students' report card grades. Students could be provided with multiple opportunities to work on the tasks, to present their best work. Samples of student work in each class would be reviewed by content experts to ensure a high degree of consistency across a school district. Students' scores on the tasks would be shared with their parents, and, just as test scores are currently reported at the school and district levels, the performance task scores would be reported at those levels as well. The feedback to teachers on the results would provide low-stakes improvement opportunities.

In every case, public reporting and disaggregation of results by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, coupled with continued administration of state NAEP and of NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment, would provide necessary guardrails to maintain a strong focus on educational equity and the ability to detect when instructional innovation is not leading to better results. Clearly, pursuing the innovations we've outlined in state and district testing would require an amendment to ESEA; in the near term, however, the requirements of the current federal innovative-assessment program could be amended to get the ball rolling.

Accountability Focused on Instructional Coherence. Holding schools accountable for students' results has been a core component of the standards movement since its founding. Because so many schools performed so poorly under the long-standing tradition of local control in public education, the thinking went, policy makers needed to put pressure on educators to perform by enforcing consequences when they failed to educate students.

A 1986 report from the National Governors Association, *Time for Results*, captured the movement's stance. Developed under the leadership of Governors Lamar Alexander, Bill Clinton and Tom Kean, it proposed a "horse trade" in which states held schools accountable for results in exchange for providing schools greater flexibility to determine which approaches produced the best results.²⁵

That strategy, which relied on test scores as the primary measure of school performance, focused much-needed attention on school results and raised achievement in some parts of the country. But it failed to boost achievement at scale, for two fundamental reasons: Existing state tests could not provide timely and instructionally useful information to teachers, as assessments administered in the spring often did not yield results until the following fall; and, more significantly, when accountability provisions were first enacted, local schools and districts lacked the ability to address problems that accountability systems identified.

Few had the experience or capacity to put in place a coherent and high-quality instructional program aligned to the relevant learning standards, especially those in impoverished communities serving large numbers of struggling students. Few districts and schools had data systems that could identify significant problems and monitor progress in real time so that they could make adjustments. Few states, or assessment vendors, had the wherewithal to develop high quality, standards-aligned assessments or the capacity to identify standards-aligned instructional materials. Had the governors' horse trade been "we will hold schools accountable for results and help build their capacity to deliver them," the standards movement might have had a very different trajectory.

Next Steps

To that end, we propose a fundamental shift in state accountability systems, in which states primarily hold districts accountable for the coherence of their instructional program and its continuous improvement, while continuing to publicly report disaggregated achievement and attainment results and attach modest consequences to them, consistent with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. These are some of the key moves that states and districts should consider:

States should adopt policies requiring every district to demonstrate that its curriculum, instructional materials, professional learning, and local assessments are aligned with each other and with state standards. States should help districts build a coherent instructional program, drawing heavily on the lessons from the Council of Chief State School Officers' Instructional Materials and Professional Development Network, and then start holding districts accountable for the coherence and quality of their instructional program.

School districts should be responsible for conducting or commissioning a "coherence" analysis, with guidance provided by the state. There is no off-the-shelf guide for this work, but a recent "challenge paper" from Carnegie Corporation of New York provides a solid framework for aligning professional learning with high-quality curriculum materials and describes the leadership and resources necessary to promote and sustain coherence.²⁶

States and districts should work collaboratively, with outside expertise, to develop the instruments and metrics that can determine the coherence of local instructional programs. Foundations should help launch this process by funding research and development and the piloting of tools. But ultimately, the federal government should support ongoing coherence monitoring, analysis, and improvement efforts to sustain this work. In the short term, federal Covid-recovery monies (such as the \$122 billion in the third round of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) could be used to lay the foundation.

States should build local capacity through "coherence institutes" that bring together district instructional teams to develop and implement comprehensive, coherent instructional-improvement plans. The teams should include curriculum and professional development leaders, teachers and school leaders, representatives of parent and community stakeholders, and others. States should invite districts to participate, with the expectation that there will be multiple cohorts over a period of years, with the aim of every district ultimately participating.

The outcome of the institute process should be a comprehensive, districtwide instructional-improvement plan and strategy that addresses issues such as the need for sustained leadership, common instructional guidance and support, ongoing teacher and school leader training, and support for struggling students and schools. It also should prioritize community investment and engagement in school improvement and a culture that stresses collaboration and accountability.

States should begin a conversation about the accountability consequences for districts that ultimately lack a coherent approach. The remedy should be to help identify and correct the incoherence not to mete out punishment, unless the problem is a lack of will. Again, a regular "coherence" review cycle with publicly shared results could be the core of the accountability system. Where local will is an obstacle, states should have the authority to condition some financial resources on the use of widely used high-quality solutions that have been adopted in similar district contexts.

After working at school reform for years, we are more convinced than ever that rigorous state standards are needed to achieve the nation's ambitious aims for public education. But the arc of the standards movement has demonstrated that standards alone aren't sufficient to overcome many local educators' lack of capacity and commitment to teach much larger percentages of students to high standards. Instead, standards should be the foundation of instructional

systems that combine a shared vision of sound instruction with high quality, tightly intertwined curricula, professional learning, assessments, and accountability systems.

Many school districts lack the time, resources and expertise to build new instructional systems by themselves. But Louisiana and the urban districts in the Council of Great City Schools study demonstrate that such systems can be constructed. And if the nation hopes to turn its public education system into a true engine of economic opportunity and social mobility, especially in the wake of a devastating pandemic, the task ahead is to scale that work dramatically.

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