EDITOR’S NOTE
As the pandemic continues to impact students and educators, they persevere. In this Spotlight, analyze where learners—and educators—are in their learning process; see how other districts are planning their futures; review a new approach to supporting disabled students; gain insights on how to assess tech for accelerating learning; begin to evaluate the experience your learners have while in school; and challenge the idea of learning loss.

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Learning Gaps

— Marianna Ivanenko/iStock
Learning Gaps

Education Week | SPOTLIGHT

‘Learning Loss, in General, Is a Misnomer’: Study Shows Kids Made Progress During COVID-19

By Sarah Schwartz

Even though the pandemic has interrupted learning, students are still making progress in reading and math this year, according to a new analysis from the assessment provider Renaissance.

The company looked at a large sample of students—about 3.8 million in grades 1-8—who had taken Star Assessments, which are interim tests, in either math or reading during the winter of the 2020-21 school year. (Because they were comparing these scores to fall 2019 and fall 2020, only students who had taken Star tests in each of those three periods were included in the analysis.)

Overall, the analysis found, students’ scores rose during the first half of the 2020-21 school year. In other words, children did make academic progress during COVID-19. Even more encouraging, the amount of progress made was similar to what Renaissance would expect in a non-pandemic year.

“Learning loss, in general, is a misnomer. Kids’ scores are going up,” said Katie McClarty, the vice president of research and design at Renaissance.

For the most part, the gap between where students’ scores are now and where Renaissance would estimate them to be in a “normal year” is shrinking. But, the company found, that gap still exists.

Using past results, the researchers made an estimate of how well students would have done on these tests had the pandemic not hit. Then, they compared this estimate to students’ actual scores from this winter. They looked at students’ percentile ranks—a norm-referenced score that compares a student’s performance to that of other students in the same grade nationwide. The scale was last updated in 2017, pre-COVID-19.

In math, on average, students were 6 percentile rank points below their expected performance. This means that a student whose past performance would have indicated that they should have been average by winter, at the 50th percentile in math based on pre-pandemic norms, could now be at the 44th percentile in math on that same scale.

In reading, the difference was smaller, with students 2 percentile rank points below their expected performance. This means that a student whose past performance would have indicated that they should have been average by winter, at the 50th percentile in math based on pre-pandemic norms, could now be at the 48th percentile in math on that same scale.

The difference was smaller in reading, where students were two percentile rank points below their expected performance. This means that a student whose past performance would have indicated that they should have been average by winter, at the 50th percentile in math based on pre-pandemic norms, could now be at the 42nd percentile in math on that same scale.

The COVID-19 impact was greater for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students than for their white and Asian peers, and for English-language learners and students with disabilities. Students in these groups also saw a slower rate of score growth during the first half of the 2020-21 school year compared to the overall sample.

“When you think about some of those communities, there have been other really hard impacts of COVID,” she said. “Education importantly is one of those, but so are higher death rates, infection rates, rates of essential workers.”

There’s a limit to what the data can show

The data from Renaissance echo other large-scale analyses of interim assessments from earlier this fall, showing that the pandemic interrupted students’ academic growth—and that these interruptions have had a greater effect in math.

In December 2020, the Northwest Evaluation Association published a study showing that students in grades 3-8 performed 5 to 10 percentile points lower in math than their peers had in 2019. Student performance was similar across years in reading, though. Curriculum Associates, a curriculum and assessment company, also found that math performance was further behind than reading performance on its formative tests for students in grades 1-5 in fall 2020.

Ideally, information like this, from Renaissance and other assessment providers, can help districts plan how best to allocate resources to help students catch up—putting money and time where students have the greatest needs, McClarty said.

Still, there’s a limit to what data like these can show, said Scott Marion, the executive director of the Center for Assessment, an organization that consults for states and districts on testing issues.

For example, he said, the absence of a big dip in performance in early grades reading doesn’t necessarily mean that students won’t need extra support in reading this summer and fall.

“It’s possible that scores that look good on average could be hiding a lot of variability—
Use ESSER funding to accelerate learning recovery and be better prepared for the future.

Recovering from the pandemic’s impact on K–12 education and creating a better path forward is the agenda for the 2021–2022 school year and beyond.

ESSER I, II, and III funding will deliver more than $100 billion over the next several years to help school districts respond to the urgent need for learning recovery and preparedness for future emergencies or school closures. Yet, this “reset” of learning is uncharted territory with no easy fix.

The imperative is to take lessons from what worked well for students before and during the pandemic. Adapting these effective models and approaches to reshape learning in environments can lead to more rapid recovery and better preparedness.

Lean on Stride Learning Solutions’ 20 years of experience to help your district implement proven solutions to close learning gaps for K–12 students, get high school students quickly back on track to graduation, and address the changing needs of your learning community with flexible online and blended learning.

What We Know Works

A recent research study conducted by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) found “students enrolled at Stride K12-powered online schools, and who participated in one of NWEA’s growth assessments, did not experience the same level of learning loss as their peers during the pandemic. In fact, they were more likely to maintain or grow academically than to slide.” The study also found that “driven by the dedicated wraparound support services available to all students enrolled at Stride K12-powered schools, student engagement remained strong during the COVID-19 pandemic.”

School districts can tap into the proven model of Stride K12-powered online schools when looking to implement an effective online learning solution.

Here are five critical factors to keep in mind as you plan to maximize your ESSER funding and reset learning this year and beyond.

1. CREATE STUDENT-CENTERED ONLINE OR BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS TO SUPPORT CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT

Stride K12-powered online schools did not experience the same urgency of having to quickly shift learning online during the pandemic. With strategic online learning systems and supports already in place, the schools were prepared to provide students with continuous access to equitable, engaging, and student-centered learning experiences.
These successful models demonstrate the critical importance of:

- Dedicated systems to monitor student engagement online
- Clear expectations for behavior that are specific to the virtual setting
- Ongoing assessment and systematic interventions delivered online to respond immediately when students fall behind
- Onboarding and training that teaches students to navigate the learning platform and teachers to maximize instruction in an online or blended environment

**2 SUPPORT TEACHERS WITH TRAINING AND TOOLS TO MAXIMIZE THE POTENTIAL OF TECHNOLOGY**

According to the Christensen Institute’s January 2021 report, *Breaking The Mold: How a global pandemic unlocks innovation in K–12 instruction*, “Currently, 83% of teachers teach in hybrid or remote modalities that, in most cases, require extensive use of online learning. Yet only 16% of teachers report using online learning ‘a lot’ pre-pandemic.” Stride K12-powered online schools emphasize professional learning for teachers focused on delivering effective, engaging online instruction.

For many districts, learning during the pandemic consisted of virtual instruction via Zoom or Google Meet that tried to recreate in-person instruction virtually and failed. Teachers need ample training to utilize technology and resources that are designed to support student-centered practice delivered virtually—including:

- Digital materials designed specifically for active learning in an online or blended setting
- Learning platforms that adapt to provide personalized learning paths
- Platforms that facilitate frequent and dynamic interactions between teachers and students
- Learning management systems that support teachers and students as they work to close learning gaps

**3 IMPLEMENT FLEXIBLE AND INNOVATIVE LEARNING PLATFORMS BUILT SPECIFICALLY FOR EDUCATION**

Stride K12-powered online schools that saw limited learning loss during the pandemic used the strength of learning platforms built specifically for education to deliver student-centered learning online. Zoom and other platforms filled a necessary gap for K–12 learning during the pandemic, but they were designed for the business work of meetings and not for collaborative, active classroom learning.

Platforms like Stride support online sharing, collaboration, interaction, and communication through features like video conference tools, breakout rooms, online screen sharing, digital whiteboards, and live quizzes that make it more likely for students to stay connected and active in their learning. These learning management systems also support teachers with tools for efficient classroom management within the virtual or blended setting.

Districts should be encouraged to introduce innovative programs designed for education that leverage the strength of technology. Video call mentoring, virtual tutoring to support remote learning, learning pods organized by families, and learning hubs for central access to curated learning resources and activities are all innovative ways to connect and support students online.
USE PERSONALIZED, ADAPTIVE CREDIT RECOVERY TO SUPPORT THOSE WITH THE GREATEST NEED

Widespread absenteeism and a lack of student engagement during the pandemic have exacerbated learning loss and credit deficiencies for high school students, creating an even greater need for credit recovery programs.

At Stride, we know it is critical to engage students in credit recovery programs delivered in a motivating, flexible, and personalized environment. Successful credit recovery programs like those in our online and blended schools share these characteristics:

• Self-paced learning using diagnostic testing for placement into an adaptive learning setting
• The ability for students to test out of previously mastered material and progress at their own pace
• Flexibility to adapt to a wide range of settings, circumstances, and modes of instruction
• Centered on socioemotional learning with embedded tools to support the whole student
• Proactive and consistent planning of individual pathways that include the path after high school

IMPLEMENT SYSTEMIC SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING TO SUPPORT THE WHOLE CHILD

The mental health crisis experienced during the pandemic put a spotlight on the continued need for systemwide, consistent, and cohesive social emotional learning (SEL) programs. As we work to recover, doubling down on filling the academic gaps alone will not work. Districts must implement dedicated SEL programs that are designed to help students grow holistically as they grow academically.

Systemic SEL programs created through school-family-community partnerships help promote equity and create thriving learning environments where students are encouraged to develop a growth mindset of resilience, perseverance, and self-management. Districts need to use research-based SEL models proven to sustain positive school cultures. They should also consider curriculum like Stride’s rapid credit recovery and skills recovery that embeds SEL into the courses.

As you consider these five critical factors to reset learning in the new school year, talk to a Stride Learning Solutions representative about maximizing your ESSER funds with our proven solutions.

Contact us today: 844.638.3533
stridelearning.com/learning-solutions

Sources:

1Stride NWEA Study on Learning Loss
2Stride, 2021: Finding What Works to Speed Learning Recovery
some students who are doing very well and others who are really struggling. “We have a saying in New England: You can have one foot on a wood stove, and another on a block of ice, and on average you’re pretty comfortable,” Marion said.

Another consideration is that students who are able to take these interim tests—either because they attend in-person classes or have a reliable internet connection—may be qualitatively different than those who aren’t included in these samples. The most vulnerable students with the least access to instruction may not be present in these numbers, a concern that NWEA discussed in December 2020 with its data.

“It’s the kids not represented that we really have to worry about,” Marion said.

### Video Resource

**Making a Difference for Students With Learning Differences 1 on 1**

Younger students with learning differences with older students with the same challenges.

**Watch Video**

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**3 Studies for District Leaders to Read as They Plan for Learning Recovery**

By Stephen Sawchuk

The research on what works in helping students catch up, without holding them back or putting them in remedial classes where they miss out on regular content, can be complex and confusing. Education Week and has picked out three of the most salient studies for district leaders as they begin to plan.

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### Extensive tutoring works, even in the secondary grades

A released study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that a math tutoring program in the Chicago district had large effects—equivalent to anywhere from about a year of additional learning to more than twice that.

The research was based on two random-assignment studies of 9th and 10th graders who received daily 45-50 minute tutoring sessions provided by trained, recent college graduates using a model developed by Boston’s Match charter high school. (The tutoring program was later spun off into its own nonprofit, now known as Saga Education.)

In addition to boosting math learning, the study found, the tutoring boosted students’ overall GPA and was linked to a decline in math course failures, and the gains persisted into the students’ 11th grade year.

One reason this study matters is because the majority of interventions are prioritized for the earlier grades. (Think of the national push for universal pre-K, for instance.) There’s far less research, in general, about what works for secondary students. But the study shows that the personalized nature of tutoring can yield dividends for older students, too. Plus, it takes place during the regular school day.

“This is not after or before school. It’s not homework help. It’s embedded in the school day and students got credit for the tutoring class,” said Monica Bhatt, a senior research director at the University of Chicago Education Lab and one of the researchers who conducted the study.

The estimated cost of the tutoring program studied here was on the high end—around $3,800—but other researchers suggest that it’s possible to bring down costs by using a one-to-four model, a virtual component, or partnering with teacher colleges to find tutors.

In general, researchers know less about online or virtual tutoring, but the team behind this study is now evaluating a pilot program, also run by Saga Education, that has a larger tutor-pupil ratio and a blended component.

### Extended learning academies offer a year-round model

Extended learning time is often thought of as additional time at the end of the school year, but it’s an approach that can work during the school year as well. A 2017 study published
in Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis found that a weeklong “acceleration” approach used in Lawrence, Mass., and targeted to students needing extra help, yielded large benefits in math and modest ones in English/language arts.

The weeklong academies, which took place during fall and winter breaks, were part of a bundle of turnaround efforts in that district and appear to have played a large part in overall school improvements. The approach has since been adopted by other Massachusetts districts, including Springfield, which has also expanded it to English-language learners. In that district, it’s coordinated and supported by a central public-private organization set up to help its overall turnaround efforts.

As with other effective interventions, the academies did not simply give students more of the regular curriculum. Instead, they used smaller class sizes and were taught by teachers who passed a competitive application process. Each academy was specially tailored for a specific subject, and used research-based curriculum to deliver it.

**Summer learning can work—but attendance is a concern**

Summer learning encompasses a lot of different programs, both older-style mandatory “summer school” reserved for students with low grades, and newer models that thoughtfully integrate academics with enrichment, field trips, and activities.

One of the most important new insights comes from a 2016 randomized study by the RAND Corporation looking across five districts that administered five-week or longer elementary summer programs for two consecutive summers. It found that the programs were modestly effective at boosting students’ math scores after the first summer—but, overall, weak student attendance rates seemed to undermine the effort, and there were no effects for the second summer.

The study did find some evidence to suggest that a subset of students who did reliably attend the classes over two consecutive years saw lasting gains, and those gains seemed to appear in English/language arts and in behavior, as well as math.

It’s possible, said Catherine Augustine, a senior research scientist at RAND and lead researcher on the the study, that shorter summer programs that focus on only one subject—rather than both math and reading as in this study—might also be effective.

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**Vetting Technology With a Focus on Acceleration**

Asking vendors the right questions will help ensure programs have capability to accelerate learning.

- **What percentage of time does a particular program spend on grade-level content?**
  - Look for a program that only reviews previous grade content as a step toward accessing grade-level content.

- **Is training of teachers part of the program?**
  - To be successful, a program should maintain interaction between teachers and students and not simply put students in front of technology.

- **What happens when a child demonstrates they are working below grade level?**
  - An essential feature is a uniform and comprehensive screening tool that will gauge a student’s comprehension and move them forward as they are ready.

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Image: Marianna Ivanenko/Stock

**Source:** Education Week reporting

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**Accelerating Learning: Tech Advice to Make It Happen**

**By Alyson Klein**

Schools around the country have a big task ahead of them: Making sure that students are ready to dive into the next grade, after a school year in which instruction for many kids was spotty, at best.

For a lot of schools, that means embracing “acceleration” or ensuring students can access content for the grade they are in, even if they haven’t mastered every concept in the previous grade. Figuring out what material to hit, for how long, is a tricky pedagogical tightrope, and one that technology companies are eager to help educators navigate.

But it can be a big challenge to find software that truly addresses acceleration—reviewing information from a previous grade only to the extent necessary to support learning new, grade-level subject matter—as opposed to remediation, which typically means relearning content from a previous grade in greater depth.

That’s because a lot of education technology isn’t designed for acceleration, said Bailey Cato Czupryk, a vice-president at TNTP, an organization focused on teacher quality.

“I think a lot of systems provide for remediation-based programs that stick kids on content that is well below their grade level and keeps them there for a really long-time. On purpose,” she said. “That will not accelerate learning.”

To make matters worse, it is often Black and Latino students and kids from low-income families who get stuck with these remediation programs that do not allow them to advance academically, she said.

One problem for districts trying to pur-
chase software that will truly help students accelerate: Amid fears of learning loss during the pandemic, “acceleration” is rapidly becoming a hot buzzword that companies are using to reposition their products and services even if they are not necessarily effective for accelerating learning.

“Remember when the common core came out, a lot of publishers were like, there’s a sticker on top of our same old textbook, [saying ‘it is aligned to the new standards], we promise, please buy it?,” Czupryk said. “Acceleration has the potential to become the ‘sticker’ [word] of 2021 through 2025, even though in reality the program [advertised] is no different than it was in 2019 or 2020.”

One way to grasp the difference between acceleration and remediation: Think of the “previously on” segments that play before new episodes of your favorite television drama. Those quick catch-ups help you understand enough about the characters and plot of the show to be able to follow the upcoming episode. But a viewer wouldn’t get nearly as much of the backstory as they would if they, say, binge-watched the past few seasons.

In a similar way, acceleration gives students the background information they’ll need to access a particular grade-level concept, as opposed to trying to catch them up on all of the information they may have missed the previous year. That way, students will stay on grade level, reviewing only the concepts that are most important to learning what comes next.

To help ensure students stay on track, states and districts received about $122 billion in federal relief funds, at least 90 percent of which will go directly to districts. About a fifth of that money is supposed to be directed toward “learning recovery” programs. That means there will be plenty of resources for acceleration, but districts need to be choosy about how they spend the money, Czupryk said.

So how can districts make sure that what they are getting are programs that embrace true acceleration? One tip from Czupryk: Don’t ask vendors directly if the program offers acceleration. (They will likely say it does, even if that’s not accurate, she said.) Instead, educators should find out what happens in a particular platform when a child demonstrates that they are working below grade level.

If the vendor says something like, “we fill in every single hole,” their program likely provides remediation, not acceleration, she said.

But if the answer is more like, “we prioritize the content that a kid would need to know to [understand] particular concepts or particular skills, and we spend time on that,” the program is more likely to include acceleration, Czupryk said.

Another tip: Ask education companies what percentage of time a particular program spends on grade-level content. If it’s not much, there probably isn’t a ton of acceleration going on, Czupryk said.

Acceleration has the potential to become the ‘sticker’ [word] of 2021 through 2025, even though in reality the program [advertised] is no different than it was in 2019 or 2020.”

BAILEY CATO CZUPRYK  
VICE-PRESIDENT, TNTP

Embracing intensive tutoring

The Tennessee Department of Education has a multi-pronged approach to accelerating learning in which technology will play a key role. The Volunteer State is going big on intensive tutoring, offering every high schooler a live tutor for both math and writing. Kids in kindergarten through 8th grade will work with tutoring software, geared toward acceleration.

The state hasn’t yet selected tutoring software for elementary and middle school kids. But Tennessee has a long wish list. The program or programs must be able to tailor an approach to individual student needs. “We are not looking for something that is generic or one-size-fits-all,” said Penny Schwinn, the state’s education commissioner.

The programs must also offer interim checkpoints or assessments, be engaging for students, and provide reports for teachers and parents. Students must be able to access them at home, on demand.

Plus, they must be directly connected to the materials students are using with their teacher. “We’ve found that acceleration doesn’t happen” if there’s a mismatch between a program and what students are actually dealing with in the classroom, Schwinn said.

Tennessee is also facilitating groups of districts—sometimes as many as 100—to collaborate on instructional problems, including how to accelerate learning in specific subjects, like early literacy. The districts are even filming lessons to share with others in the state, complete with explanations of why the lessons are structured the way they are. Those lessons will also be broadcast on local PBS affiliates so that students (and parents) can access them from home.

“We know the whole country is going to see some declines in performance this year because of the disruptions,” Schwinn said.

“But I think our goal is to say that, by the end of this recovery period, we will be better off. And I do deeply believe that.”

Tennessee isn’t the only state looking to use tech to accelerate learning. Nebraska has offered all its 200-plus districts the chance to use Zearn, an online math program geared toward acceleration that gets high marks from TNTP. Nearly half opted in, said Cory Epler, the state’s chief academic officer.

Zeringoing in on essential content

Some districts—including Omaha Public Schools, the state’s largest—are using Zearn as their main instructional tool in summer school. On the other end of the spectrum, though, some districts are just distributing information about the program, along with a login, to parents who may want their children to get some extra math practice before school starts again.

When selecting a program for acceleration—rather than remediation—it makes sense to ask the ed-tech provider how “essential content” (the most important concepts students need to know) is determined, Epler said.

Districts should also find out what the teacher’s role is in implementing a particular program, he said. “Worry if [their answer is] like, ‘You don’t need a teacher! Just put them on a computer,’” Epler said. He thinks that translates to, “Alright you’re behind a grade level so we’re just putting you on this computer so you can get this credit.” I don’t think that approach is what we’re necessarily after.”

Other good features to look for: a uniform and comprehensive screening tool to gauge students’ skill levels. That provides, “a coherent, systemwide approach to assessing students’ immediate needs,” said Todd Davis, the chief academic officer for the Aldine school district, which serves portions of Houston and the surrounding Harris County.

Davis also recommends making sure the
Learning Gaps

Even if school districts pick a great program, no technology is going to give a student all of the acceleration help they’ll need. “There’s something around creating a sense of belonging within a classroom culture,” Czupryk said. “I think the best tech platforms can contribute to that, but I think there is a need for some human interaction in ways that tech platforms do not offer.”

The upside: If districts select high-quality programs and train teachers to use them, they could have a system for quickly ramping up a student’s background knowledge that could remain in place when the pandemic is just a distant memory.

Acceleration “really does get at this idea of being most efficient with the time we have with our students,” Epler said, adding, “I think this notion of acceleration is important because I don’t know that remediation is working, to be honest with you.”

That’s especially true for “some students who are underserved. Most of them don’t get grade level content to begin with,” he said. “We’re having this conversation because of COVID, but it’s something that has always existed.”

OPINION

Published on February 4, 2021

The Idea of ‘Learning Loss’ Begs Us to Ask, ‘Loss From What?’

By Larry Ferlazzo

The question of the week is:

There’s a lot of talk about students suffering “learning loss” because of the pandemic—what does that mean and how concerned should we be?

Boston educator Neema Avashia—and her students—shared their reflections in Part One.

Today, Georgia teacher Marian Dingle “wraps up” this two-part series.

Marian Dingle is a veteran elementary educator in Georgia. She is passionate about mathematics and justice and advocates for educators, students, and families:

‘The quantification of learning’

Definitions

At the risk of aging myself, I first learned of the quantification of learning with the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a norm-referenced test, over 20 years ago. Predating No Child Left Behind, students took this test every year, and scores were reported in “grade equivalents” or GE’s. A school year was reduced to 10 months, so each month was a tenth of a school year and a month of learning. A “typical” student at the beginning of their 2nd grade year was at 2.0.

If satisfactory progress was made, when the student tested again a year later, the student would be at 3.0. Teachers were judged by this standard and received both accolades and reprimands because of these numbers. Rep-

utations were based on which teachers could average a 1.5 in “growth” or gain of their students. Those who were not able to consistently produce them, and thus, earned “losses” were often placed on improvement plans.

As a beginning teacher, it was hard not to internalize this culture of competition. Students were also aware of their scores and gains, as these were used for eligibility into gifted and enrichment programs. A few years after this came the statewide standards-based test, which, in our state, also determined promotion to the next grade. Teachers were now judged, and learning was now measured, differently, but the terms of gain and loss have not left department and staff meetings. The internalization of gain and loss affects both teachers and students.

The Problem

It is really convenient that there are 10 months in a school year and that we use the base 10 system. However, any observer of children, whether it is a pediatrician, a parent, or a child-care worker, can tell you that learning is not linear. There has never been a good reason to expect that it is. Teaching and learning are both art and science; no one knows exactly how and why the light bulb illuminates when it does. Teaching is an act of faith. Sometimes the benefits of a teacher don’t manifest until years later. Neither teacher nor student should be punished for that.

Despite the spirit of not leaving a single child behind, there was a light shine that many had been. Test scores were racialized, and the inequities were obvious. Many explanations were offered, and there was no short cut of remedies. The test-prep industry boomed, marketing their solutions to districts hungry for solutions. Unfortunately, many of the solutions centered around deficit frameworks for marginalized students, ignoring the culturally relevant pedagogy of Dr. Gloria Ladson Billings and many others. Districts purchased different programs and resources and engaged in train-
Enter the Pandemic

The introduction of widespread remote learning was, of course, a shock. It was necessary to preserve life and buy us time as we acquired scientific knowledge. The education system was forced to learn how to continue with learning in real time. For many of us, summer could not come too soon. Feeling like a first-year teacher again (a pretty horrific state for those of you who have not taught) had taken its toll. We were relieved that we had made it and done our part.

However, the exposure to racial trauma meant that none of us got a rest. It was inescapable, especially for those who were in targeted groups. Even the youngest children, I believe, were affected by it. Before the new school year had even begun, those involved in teaching and learning, students and teachers, had to wonder if school would be a safe place for them in the fall.

For some, it was. Dr. Bettina Love and others have written about how Black parents have noticed a renewed interest in school by their children. They feel freer to discover their true selves, free of spirit-murdering practices. Many of my teaching colleagues around the country are reporting the same—an actual increase in academic performance:

The time on screen is now free of microaggressions and more humane.

Many students, not just Black ones, are being taught by teachers who involve families in new ways, finding a new freedom they did not have before, in both remote and hybrid situations.

To insist that our students have suffered learning loss begs us to ask:

Loss from what?
Loss for whom?
Who is gaining now?
What if the loss is a loss in inflicting harm?

Many have suggested that this pandemic offers an opportunity to create a new vision of education. I want one that has no use for terms like “loss” or “gain.” Learning just is. It happens when it happens through the intentional co-construction of a community built on respect, love, and humanity. On screen or in person.

Thanks to Marian for her contribution! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.

This is the second post in a two-part series. You can see Part One here.

Learning Gaps

Districts offered little guidance otherwise

Teachers Were Told to ‘Give Grace’ As the Pandemic Started. They Did That and Much More

By Lora Bartlett

On Friday, March 13, 2020, schoolhouse doors closed across the United States in response to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic caused the only lengthy, coast-to-coast disruption of American education to have ever occurred.

Those first hours and days were for getting through the crisis. Teachers all over the country distributed materials to students, gathered their own belongings, and headed home that last time.

In retrospect, a massive experiment in education from a distance had begun. The experiment left teachers mostly on their own in efforts to reach students with care and instruction as schools scrambled to create an emergency response. How did teachers respond? And how might their profession be changed as a result?

As in most emergencies, the early days were characterized by an emphasis on survival and a coming together of people. In interviews my research team did with 75 teachers in nine states, it was clear that caring for student well-being and minimizing harm were the priorities for schools and teachers everywhere in the nation. Food and technology were the first order of business followed closely by ensuring student emotional well-being and then finally, attending to academics and learning.

Many schools struggled with defining and sustaining structures to achieve these goals. As a result, they defaulted to baseline requirements and left the rest up to teachers.

In our data, 83 percent of teachers reported that their school adopted “no harm” grading and attendance policies, functionally making class attendance and school work optional. Eighty-two percent of our respondents experienced drops in student participation. An Iowa science teacher had only six of 90 students doing any work. A Massachusetts high school teacher lost most of his 150 students.

“In the very beginning,” the Massachusetts teacher explained, “I heard from maybe 15 percent of them. Then it went to 10 percent. And then I was literally just begging them to answer my messages and tell me that they and their families were OK.”

Most of these teachers worked long hours to sustain connections with their students,
Respond, Recover, and Reset Learning

67% of students and parents are concerned about the quality of K–12 learning during the pandemic. Across different incomes, racial backgrounds, and political affiliations, the majority of parents are concerned that their children learned less.*

Maximize your ESSER funding to Reset Learning:

- Speed recovery with intervention tools that close learning gaps and accelerate learning
- Support the changing needs of your learning community with flexible full-time online and blended learning options
- Enhance student engagement and ensure equity with dynamic, student-centered learning
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The pandemic posed a significant learning curve for teachers: They needed to rapidly develop the technical and pedagogical skills to teach remotely. Only 3 percent of responding teachers reported substantial experience with remote instruction before the shutdown, while 90 percent had no or little experience with it at all.

This learning challenge was intensified by the loss of traditional, in-person support systems. In response, teachers turned toward one another in an unprecedented expansion of virtual teacher networks for knowledge exchange. Seventy percent of teachers in our study said their colleagues were their main source of instructional help and emotional support.

Where Teachers Got Support for Their Work

**77%** drew on existing teacher networks  
**66%** drew on new teacher networks


stretching their workdays late into the evening and through the weekend. Sixty percent got no working-time guidelines. Nearly half were given no guidance at all on how to proceed, or they were simply told to do something and to give a lot of grace in the process.

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Between March 9 and late July 2020, over 150 new teacher groups appeared on Facebook, with a combined membership total, at the time, in excess of 350,000 teachers—about a fifth of the more than 3 million U.S. public school teachers. These groups focused on how to navigate teaching and learning online during the pandemic. Teachers posted self-created and found resources, sought recommendations on needed tools, gave and received encouragement, and shared new knowledge about how to teach and how to sustain themselves while teaching remotely. Teachers connected with peers who used to be next door and others who had been strangers.

Teachers got creative in other ways, too. A veteran teacher in a rural high school posted this request in one of the Facebook teachers’ groups: “I need a millennial. ... I’ll teach you how to teach if you’ll help me with these [digital] notebooks.” A novice chemistry teacher from a city in another state responded, and the two started meeting weekly online. The experienced teacher coaches the newbie on effectively scaffolding chemistry concepts, while the younger teacher helps the older one master the technical tools needed for remote instruction.

The knowledge networks that emerged are notable in that they facilitate teacher-to-teacher professional development and support. Born during a crisis, they have every potential to continue to engage and support teachers well past the end of the pandemic.

There is something magical that happens when people pull together toward a common goal. “Giving grace” was the refrain we heard from teachers everywhere as they shared their spring 2020 experience. Teachers felt they gave grace to their students and received grace from their supervisors and from parents, the media, and political leaders.

The unprecedented nature of the emergency meant most schools and districts had to trust their teachers to carry the work of education. All over the country, teachers came together with their colleagues and made school happen. It didn’t look like regular school, and teachers were frustrated by hastily devised policies, worried about missing students, and mourning, with the rest of us, the losses being wrought by COVID-19. But they also felt energized by the clarion call to collective action.

In this experiment that no one asked for, teachers felt their significance and their agency. They saw what their colleagues could help them accomplish with new tools. And they heard appreciation for their efforts. It might have been a turning point for a profession that has long lacked autonomy. As the summer and fall of 2020 proved, it was anything but.

This is the second of four essays on the work of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws from Lora Bartlett and colleagues’ “Suddenly Distant” research project.

Lora Bartlett is an associate professor of education at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research focuses on the teaching profession and schools as workplaces for teachers. She is the author of Migrant Teachers: How American Schools Import Labor (Harvard University Press, 2014). You can follow her on Twitter at @LoraBartlett.

**Additional Resource**

What We Learned About Teachers During the Pandemic: A Series

A researcher shows how teachers went from making school happen to having little say in planning for an unprecedented year. Click Here
want a sense of belonging. They want a sense of accomplishment.

Learning only gets harder when these things are absent, research increasingly suggests. So when district leaders stop to understand what their students experience at school, it helps put students where they belong—back at the center of district planning.

Joseph S. Davis, the superintendent of the 11,000-student Ferguson-Florissant district outside St. Louis, held webinars and listening tours with middle and high schoolers to explicitly ask what their “hopes and dreams” are for their return to school this spring. Black students (who represent some 60 percent of the student body) said they want to see more of themselves in the curricula and connect more with teachers. Davis realized that to improve students’ experience in school, the system needs to amplify student voice and ensure their views inform all manner of policy and practice. Students now are helping to design and lead school reopening orientations for 7th and 9th graders, drafting a re-entry student handbook, and working on districtwide anti-racist standards.

In Washington state’s agricultural Yakima Valley, when leaders in the 3,700-student Grandview district talked with their English-learners, they heard students say they often feel anxious and excluded in school. And when they don’t feel connected to teachers, they feel even more so. For Jose Rivera, the assistant superintendent for teaching and learning, the district action plan for reopening is clear: “My charge is to work with principals to ensure that each student has a genuine connection with their teachers.”

Grandview leaders now know they want more informal peer mentoring and tutoring to reinforce student belonging—because their students told them that helps. And leaders in both Grandview and Ferguson-Florissant plan to make the conversation with students ongoing, as routine as a cabinet or budget meeting.

Talking with students about their school experience is fundamental to creating equitable or “just” schools. A “just” school produces experiences that help all students feel happy and proud. Academic outcomes are integral to that student experience. But as leaders dig into accelerating learning after the pandemic, we need to consider how we get to those outcomes—and ensure students of color also are afforded a rich, meaningful school experience.

History shows what can happen when leaders rush to intervene in the name of closing achievement gaps. While well-intended, remediation efforts are often pursued quickly, top-down, without thinking through the impact on students’ day-to-day school experience. (And therefore, perversely, without thinking through the impact on their learning and outcomes.) Students get batched for testing and sorted to remedy deficits. This can lead to stripped-down curricula that emphasize rote learning over the critical thinking skills and problem-solving mindset that students need to grow as learners.

To avoid a repeat of that unfortunate history, leaders need to stop doing “to” students and start doing “with” them. That means engaging students in the design of their own school experience.

So far in this pandemic, we don’t seem to be doing a great job of it, with districts like Ferguson-Florissant and Grandview the exception to the rule. In the Spring of 2020, students in national surveys said they wanted a voice in how remote learning works but were rarely asked. A recent analysis suggests the same story repeated itself with just a handful of districts having sought student input on their learning experiences.

We need to do better as we plan for reopening. And Grandview Superintendent Henry Strom knows it.

“Our principals know about student achievement, we have data points on achievement,” Strom says. “But we don’t have data points to know how students are feeling.” That means leaders don’t yet know what students need their school experiences to look like after months of remote learning that has left many overwhelmed, anxious, and isolated. Yes, understanding where students are academically is critical. But to engage students academically, Strom understands he first needs to know more from students.

Fundamentally, schooling is for and about students. And students are the experts of their own experience. In this moment, with so much at stake, leaders need to stop and listen to the experts.

Max Silverman is the executive director of the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) at the University of Washington College of Education. CEL supports professional learning for education leaders to eliminate inequities in education.
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