Helping Students

EDITOR’S NOTE
Students need help and K-12 educators need resources. This Spotlight will empower you with an understanding of newer tutoring methods and learning solutions available; information on what mental health supports schools are asking for from congress; ways you could push supportive learning recovery; study data on combination math supports; and how you can help your grieving school community.

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Can Online Tutoring Help Schools Dig Out Of a Pandemic Learning Hole?

By Stephen Sawchuk

Tutoring is the top-billed remedy to help students make up for disrupted learning. States and districts are spending millions in federal funds to pay for it. But can it work online when so many other efforts to move instruction online have fallen short?

A new study from a team of researchers is the very first to test the hypothesis using a randomized experiment. And the results, while far from a silver bullet, show some promise and suggest some lessons for other online tutoring efforts.

Probably because most students in the study received only around three hours of tutoring in a 12-week period—far short of the intensity prescribed in prior research—the findings weren’t strong enough to be statistically significant.

But they pointed in a positive direction overall, and the study found suggestive evidence that more tutoring time would have yielded stronger results. The study also relied on volunteer college students to serve as the tutors, a model that can offer some cost savings.

“It’s not a huge amount of tutoring overall, and in some ways, despite the lack of statistical significance, I’m somewhat even surprised that we found positive and suggestive effects given the basically low dosage,” said Matthew Kraft, an associate professor of education and economics at Brown University and one of the team of researchers who conducted the study.

Previous studies bolster tutoring—but not in a pandemic

A wide body of prior research points to intensive tutoring, in one-on-one or very small groups, as an effective way to boost learning. In the early days of the pandemic, researchers, scholars, and media outlets highlighted it as a promising approach to support students who were struggling academically.

But that research had limitations, too. All of it predated the pandemic. Much of it was done in person, with qualified tutors, and embedded for lengthy periods in the school day.

Those conditions are far different from the reality district leaders have been forced to contend with the last two years—exhausted staff, a labor market in upheaval, virtual learning. They’ve had to turn their constraints around like a Rubik’s cube puzzle, trying to get the pieces to land the right way up.

What if schools use certified, trained teachers? Costs rise—if you can find and hire them in the first place. Use volunteers or college students? Cheaper, but they typically have less experience with teaching methods. Reduce the amount of tutoring? You may not get as big a bang for your buck. Try virtual tutoring? So far, the best evidence comes from a pilot program—in Italy, not the United States.

The new study comes much closer to the realities on the ground facing districts.

Kraft and his team worked with a nonprofit begun by college students, CovEd, which provided free tutoring services beginning in the 2020-21 school year.

Some 230 tutors worked with 6th through 8th graders at a Chicago middle school. Half the students were assigned to tutors who aimed to provide about an hour’s worth of tutoring each week. The other students went to their regular advisory period.

Even though the tutoring was provided virtually, CovEd and the team faced challenges sustaining the program for the duration of the study.

The study began in spring 2021, just as some college students were returning to their own in-person courses. In summer, volunteers’ schedules changed as they picked up jobs. By fall, the program struggled to find enough tutors to keep it going. Absenteeism was an issue too, though not due to any one factor, said Evelyn Wong, a manager of CovEd who helped found the nonprofit.

“Another challenge was students who didn’t have reliable internet access or whose parents were working, so the fact that the school had built the tutoring into their schedule was really helpful,” she said. “Even then, a lot of students have things going on at home. The mentor would show up and students wouldn’t be able to [participate], because they were looking after a younger sibling, and the opposite was true, too; a mentor would have a job come up.”

It was sobering for the researchers, too

“In my experience trying to implement, and talking to district leaders trying to scale tutoring, uniformly they’ll tell you there are substantial implementation challenges,” Kraft said. “That shouldn’t be surprising given there’s a general labor shortage for people working in the education sector. But even beyond that, changing ossified school schedules and structures in dynamic and new ways [to make space for tutoring] takes pushing...
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back against kind of the existing norms, and that isn’t always easy.”

The resulting test scores, while positive, weren’t large enough to rule them out as being a product of test error. But the study did show that those students who had more opportunities to attend tutoring sessions seemed, overall, to progress more than those who had fewer.

Logistical challenges are real—but not insurmountable

Some of these logistical challenges exist across the virtual tutoring field, said Shaan Akbar, the co-founder of Tutored by Teachers, a company that uses certified teachers to provide online tutoring services to schools and districts.

Akbar, who was not involved in the study, said such programs are harder to set up when harried administrators—and even the procurement officials who work out the tutoring contracts—are busy covering classes in schools thanks to staff shortages and teachers being ill with COVID.

“Yes, they want to work with you. Yes, they signed up with you. But man, they have to get you the student data and schedule you into their day—it’s school day design stuff,” he said.

“And you have to have staff on the ground to monitor those kids or usher them to the computer lab and monitor them. And so what we’re finding is that we are more often than not deploying people of our own to the schools to support all of that.”

All that said, he said, his organization’s internal data shows progress among students when they receive at least an hour and a half of tutoring each week. (That’s far more than students in the study received.)

“The low cost, on-demand tutoring, the quick-solve stuff, isn’t going to yield the outcomes you want,” Akbar said. “You have to find deep partnerships and do it right to get the outcomes you need.”

And matching students to tutors is an art, not a science, Wong added.

“It’s about bringing a sense of normalcy,” she said. “Having a mentor they can connect with and look to is more than 80–90 percent of the challenge here, rather than just looking for a match between mentors and subject areas.”

Thus the new study is really a beginning not an end—and begs for follow up.

“We have very few data points on the effectiveness of online tutoring. This is a new data point,” Kraft said. “It is far from the definitive answer, and we need lots of dots to try to see the whole picture. We’ve filled in one dot.”

More Than 1 in 3 Children Who Started School in the Pandemic Need ‘Intensive’ Reading Help

By Sarah D. Sparks

More than 1 in 3 children in kindergarten through grade 3 have little chance of reading on grade level by the end of the school year without major and systemic interventions.

That’s according to a new study by the curriculum and assessment group Amplify, based on data from more than 400,000 students in kindergarten through 5th grades who participated in the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, which Amplify administers. The research, released late Wednesday, shows that though students have begun to recover lost academic ground in the last year, big holes remain in students’ fundamental reading skills.

Researchers compared students’ reading achievement from 2019 through 2022 on DIBELS, one of the most commonly used diagnostic assessments for reading. Teachers administer the DIBELS to students in person and one-on-one, and the researchers matched midyear test data from more than 1,300 schools in 37 states who participated in the test each year from 2019-20 through 2021-22.

Across each elementary grade, fewer students are on track for grade-level reading instruction now than before the pandemic, and the earliest grades have the fewest students prepared. For example, from 2019 to 2022, the share of students who are on track in reading by the middle of the school year has fallen from 55 percent to 47 percent in kindergarten, 58 percent to 48 percent in 1st grade, and 59 percent to 51 percent in 2nd grade. By contrast, 57 percent of 3rd graders are on track in reading, only a single percentage point lower than the on-track share pre-pandemic.

“We’re seeing some rebound now, which is good,” said Paul Gazzerro, Amplify’s director of data science. However, Black and Hispanic students, who had lower average reading scores compared to white students before the pandemic, fell even further behind on average during school disruptions, he said.

Black and Hispanic students have been particularly hard hit by education disrup-
Risk Rises for Early Reading Struggles

A new study of data from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, one of the most commonly used reading diagnostic assessments, finds significant portions of students in elementary grades are not reading well enough for grade-level instruction.

Students Recover Some Ground, But Gaps Remain

The study finds more children are now "at-risk readers," those who have only a 20 percent change of reading on grade level by the end of the school year.

The Ranks of the Most Struggling Readers Swell

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<th>Grade</th>
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% of students scoring at/above benchmark

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% of students scoring well below benchmark

SOURCE: Amplify

And a growing group of students across the elementary grades fell severely behind, not just by a little, Gazzarro said. “There’s one group [reading] below benchmark—think of them as ... ‘bubble kids,’ you know, the ones who probably need strategic support that could be offered within the classroom, but don’t need to be pulled out for something more intensive,” he said. “And then [there are] kids who are least likely to be successful at the end of the year, these kids we’re identifying as at risk.”

These at-risk students have only about a 20 percent chance of reading on grade level by the end of the school year without intensive reading interventions, according to the researchers. There are more of them today across every grade and student group than there were in 2019. They account for more than a third of K-3 students and more than a quarter of students in grades 4 and 5.

The sheer number of students in need of intense reading support strains the capacity of schools that often rely on tiered systems like response to intervention, Lambert said, in which the vast majority of students progress with only core classroom instruction and just a small percentage receive small-group or more intensive interventions.

Systemic interventions needed

At least 17 states require districts to hold students back if they are not reading on grade level by the end of 3rd grade, and another doz-
en allow school districts to mandate retention. In the last year, several states put their existing grade retention policies on hold in light of widespread classroom disruptions and protests by parents and teachers.

As that flexibility wanes in the states that had it, some experts argue effective retention policies should be coupled with additional, intensive reading instruction and individualized learning plans.

Yet, Lambert noted, “the kids with dyslexia, kids that need to be on IEPs, have been harder to find because they haven’t been in school,” making it more difficult to determine whether a reading difficulty comes from learning differences or interrupted schooling.

“We need to make sure that as districts and schools, we’re creating a system—not individual student interventions—but a system whereby we’re monitoring the data,” she said, and that “we’re providing the intervention in multiple ways and getting creative about that so that we can close those gaps for kids as quickly as possible.”

Deborah Wheeler, an assistant education professor at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, was not part of the DIBELS study, but she has tracked changes in reading behaviors for children and families during the pandemic. She said schools must work to rebuild literacy habits at home, too.

During the pandemic, Wheeler found that parents of young children reported they continued to read with their children, but were much more distracted. “So [parents] would read a little bit and then have to walk away; something distracted them, work, whatever,” she said. “In the typical reading they reported that they did prior to COVID, they spent that quality time with their children. They would talk about what they read prior to reading it during the time they were reading with their child and afterwards.”

Schools need to restart discussions of literacy between teachers and parents, she said. “They need to reduce the distractions and think about the impact of those distractions. Students have not met the standards but children are very resilient. With the right environment, language and literacy rich, I feel confident that they will recover.”

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Student Mental Health Is Overwhelming Schools. Can Congress Help?

By Andrew Ujifusa

A recent high school graduate’s plea for schools to do more to support students’ mental well-being was powerful enough to move a U.S. senator to tears.

The show of emotion took place during testimony from Claire Rhyneer in a U.S. Senate hearing on mental health disorders and substance abuse. She has worked at the National Alliance on Mental Illness as an advocate on issues affecting young people.

Rhyneer, who graduated last spring, recounted her own struggles and called for schools to adopt curricula that incorporates material about mental health. Doing so, Rhyneer told senators, would make it easier for students to identify any symptoms they might have and seek help, and make them less likely to try to search for answers by themselves online.

“I am representing the tip of the iceberg,” Rhyneer said. “I am more than an anecdote.”

Near the end of his speaking time in the hearing, Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., thanked Rhyneer for her work and said his own family had been affected by suicide.

At that point, Cassidy choked up, apologized for getting emotional, and cut his mic.

Second-grade teacher Melissa Shugg teaches a lesson at Paw Paw Elementary School in Paw Paw, Mich., about thoughts, feelings and actions late last year.
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A concerning picture of child and youth mental health

During the hearing, senators and experts discussed how schools can do more to support students’ mental health, and disturbing trends in child well-being.

Several senators expressed grave concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on child well-being. These worries were backed up by medical professionals who told the panel about sharp increases in reports of children struggling with mental health.

But they also said that with new resources, personnel, guidance from their communities, and classroom materials for students, schools can take a big step forward when it comes to helping their students.

Educators, researchers, and others are still coming to grips with all of the pandemic’s effects in the short and long term. But many working in schools have said that nearly two years of COVID disruptions and restrictions have affected students’ mental health and will continue to do so for years to come.

A recent study of children in several countries found that between 18 to 60 percent of students experienced strong “distress” and especially symptoms of anxiety and depression. While the study found no significant link between school closures and suicide among young people early in the pandemic, the research found other concerning results about a decline in referrals to child-protection services and children’s screen time.

And many teachers are simultaneously going through their own struggles with skyrocketing stress.

Felecia Evans, a principal in Mayfield Heights, Ohio, for example, told Education Week last year that collaborating with her school’s psychologist, counselor, and other staff to identify at-risk students and see what can be done to help with their anxiety about pandemic-driven challenges has “kind of changed the nature of my work.”

Concern is also growing that the pandemic is behind a possible rise in student misbehavior—including violence—this school year, although it is unclear to what extent this sentiment will ultimately be backed up by data.

Mental health professionals can be key partners to schools

Lawmakers as well as the witnesses discussed alarming statistics involving children’s mental well-being.

Dr. Mitch Prinstein, the chief science officer of the American Psychological Association, said there had been a 42 percent increase in self-injury and suicide cases reported by children’s hospitals in the first three quarters of 2021, compared to the same period of 2019.

Yet Prinstein also said the nation’s mental health professionals can provide crucial support and information to educators even if they are not working full-time in schools. Helping teachers and administrators connect with students “before they reach a moment of trauma” is essential, he said.

“School staff are currently overwhelmed,” said Prinstein. “Please do think about ways that psychologists and other care providers can help teach schools about what’s needed. ... We have many prevention programs ready to deploy.”

He also expressed support for the Mental Health Services Student Act, which was introduced in Congress last year that would authorize grants to support school-based mental health services like screening and treatment. ( Companion House and Senate bills were introduced by Rep. Grace F. Napolitano, D-Calif., and Sen. Tina Smith, D-Minn.)

Echoing this argument, Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., said more should be done to ensure that people working directly with children, including adults in schools, receive more education about mental health and children, given all the money already spent on training professionals like teachers and pediatricians.

Citing recent work by David Leonhardt in the New York Times about the harm done to children by pandemic policy choices, Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, asked witnesses about comparing the negative effects of COVID-19 itself with the fallout from COVID-19 restrictions, including school closures, for children.

Prinstein responded by saying that a host of reasons are behind children’s rising mental health problems, from delays in receiving special education services to a divisive political culture.

“They have tremendous disruptions in their rules and routines,” he said. “They see polarization in leaders.”

Meanwhile, Rep. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, who served as the ranking member for the hearing, said she’d seen evidence of a troubling divide separating young people struggling with suicidal ideation and despair, and adults who are reluctant to hear about and respond to such challenges.

“They were afraid that if they spoke about it, it might be encouraged,” Murkowski said. ■

A Tenuous Balance: Supporting Students While Pushing Their Learning Recovery

By Ileana Najarro

A t C.W. Ruckel Middle School in Niceville, Fla., so many kids were using their cell phones in class—a violation of the school’s rules—that administrators loosened up their policy of confiscating them. It had become impractical to enforce. Students had become heavily dependent on devices to help find answers quickly—a side effect of months of remote learning—and were expressing frustration when they had to wrestle with a question or problem on their own, said Steve Chambers, a social studies teacher.

In a New York high school, one teacher has students who stressed out over their parents losing jobs. And at another school, teachers must help their older students re-learn classroom rules.

The individual anecdotes of frustration, stress, distraction, and anxiety students are experiencing this school year add up to a large, complicated reality of social-emotional and mental health needs that teachers must acknowledge and help address—at the same time that they must move children forward academically. It’s a difficult balance to strike.

“At the end of the day, if kids are dealing with mental health issues or families’ basic needs being met, that is going to hinder and
has continued to hinder growth in the academic areas, and in academic skills,” said Katrina Miles, an English and drama teacher at Temecula Middle School in Temecula, Calif.

Getting students interested and excited about learning—a challenge that predates the pandemic—is harder than ever, according to a December EdWeek Research Center survey of 630 teachers across the country. Low student engagement is the most widespread problem teachers pointed to as an impediment to helping students reach grade level, with 68 percent of respondents citing it. Large percentages of teachers cited four other major barriers as well: behavioral problems (59 percent), student quarantines (55 percent), and student mental health needs (54 percent).

Teachers, counselors, and district leaders alike acknowledge that a lot of these challenges existed prior to the pandemic’s start. But moving between remote, hybrid, and in-person learning and adjusting to frequently changing COVID-19 protocols, have intensified and affected more students. While some educators have found ways to navigate the balancing act, they also recognize it won’t be an easy journey.

“We’re still in a pandemic,” said Stephanie Andrews, executive director of student and family support services for the Tulsa Public Schools. “This is not going to be a fast fix.”

Old challenges have worsened

At C.W. Ruckel Middle, the front office had been filling up every day with too many students waiting to pick up their confiscated phones, said Chambers. The principal, in a faculty meeting last fall, told teachers to stop taking phones away.

Though Chambers had seen students get more frustrated at not being able to use phones to help them with schoolwork, he now worries about building up his 8th graders’ drive to formulate answers rather than regurgitate them as they prepare for high school. The endurance kids need to complete their work has eroded in a larger number of students, he said.

“You just have to continue pushing along and teaching the kids and taking the kids from where they are to where they need to be,” he said. “It’s difficult sometimes, because the kids want to quit on you.”

Julie Capossere, an English teacher at Brighton High School in Rochester, N.Y., said more of her students are going to see counselors.

Students are experiencing stress at home, stress from all the political turmoil they’re wit-
How High-Dosage Tutoring Supports Teachers and Fosters Student Success

Program Flexibility is Key to Help Districts Get Students Back On Track

When it comes to combating learning loss, high-dosage tutoring (HDT) is emerging as an effective approach. More than ever, educators need reliable, flexible learning tools that save them time and make their lives easier.

One example of a school district that has turned to HDT as a way of meeting students' needs is Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD), one of the 20 largest districts in the United States.

Istation is one of many vendors that Dallas ISD campuses can choose to work with for their supplemental tutoring programs.

“Istation is student driven with teacher oversight and progress monitoring support,” said Jason Wallace, Director of the Office of Tutoring Services at Dallas ISD. “With Istation, it’s really kind of easy to hit that [usage] mark because it’s so readily available to the kids. They can do it anytime, any place, and it allows for small-group instruction as well. This flexibility is really nice because campuses are able to tutor whenever and wherever as long as there is internet connection.”

Dallas ISD’s program was developed largely in response to recent Texas legislation that implements more accelerated-learning instruction for struggling students. Within Dallas ISD each campus gets to choose which vendor they want to work with that best suits their students' needs. Then the campus works to build an internal program. Dallas ISD campuses have had successful partnerships with Istation for many years.

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“I have faith that humans are resilient, but we have to give them a space to be safely resilient in and fall apart, literally just go ahead, and let’s just fall apart.”

YVONNE ALEXANDER
Science teacher at Hopkins Junior High School in Fremont, Calif.

I have faith that humans are resilient, but we have to give them a space to be safely resilient in and fall apart, literally just go ahead, and let’s just fall apart.”

Miles, the teacher in Temecula, has seen how isolation during remote learning impacted her 12-year-old son. His confidence in his ability to learn took a dip.

She was initially more lenient with him as with her students in giving the space and time needed to socialize and get re-adjusted to in-person learning. But now she’s stepping up to say, “I don’t care about the grade, but I do want your best.”

She’s encouraging other parents to join her. She calls her students’ parents after school and on weekends to learn more about what challenges they are facing outside of the classroom and to let parents know what the students need to do to stay on track or catch-up and how she can help. She frames schoolwork as a positive distraction from the stressors that are out of her students’ control.

Districts are weighing in with strategies as well.

In the Dallas Independent School District, schools were able to choose from three different calendars this school year that would allow for more time for instruction or professional development, time for additional academic support for students and more, said Juany Valdespino-Gaytan, the district’s executive director of engagement services. The district has hired more than 50 new mental health clinicians for students and required morning meetings and advisory periods, along with providing teachers with SEL lessons to use during that time.

Tulsa public schools have wellness teams in schools where a group of teachers, counselors, and administrators get together to figure out the students who seem to be in greater need for wellness, and determine how best to support them, said Andrews.

In the long-run, there’s no returning to what schooling was like prior to the pandemic, Andrews and others said. Even now with sporadic school closures, quarantines, and staff shortages, schools are struggling to offer consistency students need to progress both academically and socially-emotionally, Andrews said.

Her hope is that more educators work toward imagining what a new normal can look like that can benefit students and teachers alike.

“I think that this is a year for us to kind of be thinking about and dreaming in different ways and designing our lessons differently than we did in the past,” Andrews said.
deviation. Two years of math enrichment in preschool and kindergarten were enough to produce 3rd-grade math gains large enough to close about 40 percent of the math performance gap between low- and high-income 4th graders.

**Attendance improved for participants**

Moreover, the researchers found that 28 percent of the students who participated in two years of math enrichment were chronically absent—meaning they missed 10 percent or more of school days—in grade 3, compared with 37 percent of 3rd graders who had not received the early math services.

While chronic absenteeism in early grades often comes from family challenges and stressors that the study did not measure, the researchers did offer some speculation about why students who received math enrichment missed less school later on. Mattera said.

“In kindergarten, in our earlier years of analysis, we found effects of the programs on children’s attitudes towards math. Perhaps, how kids either viewed school or viewed math might have influenced whether they wanted to come to school,” she said. “It’s also possible that teachers saw children who were doing better in math or liked math better as more engaged,” and so built better relationships with them.

These academic and attendance benefits may be particularly important for school districts working to catch up large cohorts of students who are now entering preschool with less formal early-childhood education as a result of the pandemic.

“Both of these programs build on learning trajectory development. All children develop math abilities on a general developmental sequence,” she said. “If you understand the skills that are associated with that sequence, you identify activities that are appropriate for meeting the child’s needs and learning goals to move them to the next part of the sequence.

“I think it makes a nice addition to how people can think about the wide range of skills that children will be coming in with after COVID, because while some students may be coming in with lower skills, because they’ve had missed opportunities, some children may have had a different set of opportunities and teachers are really going have to differentiate across that,” she said. “And this gives an entre into thinking about how you could use similar math activities to meet the needs of a wide range of children’s skills and experiences.”

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**3 Ways to Help Students to Be the First In Their Families to Attend College**

**By Ileana Najarro**

Alma Lopez, the 2022 Amerian School Counselor Association School Counselor of the Year and lead school counselor at Livingston Middle School in Livingston, Calif., went to college as a first-generation student without crucial information that could have helped her, such as the fact that there were different ways to pay for tuition that didn’t involve taking out loans.

Now the pandemic has upended future planning for current high school students, with 2021 graduates reporting heightened stress along with financial hardship as they enrolled in college, starting full-time work, or took on caregiving roles. This was among the main findings from a nationally representative EdWeek Research Center survey conducted in August and September 2021 of nearly 1,500 high-achieving high school graduates.

The survey additionally found that more than 1 in 5 low-income 2021 graduates said they changed their college or job plans to care for a family member infected with or at high risk for COVID-19, and about 14 percent of respondents said they “never” received support from their high school on questions related to financial aid.

When working particularly with students who would be the first in their family to go to college at this tumultuous time, Lopez offers some advice to best serve their needs.

**Don’t assume what information the student can access**

Lopez grew up in a Mexican immigrant household where she couldn’t ask her parents for advice on how to apply for college.

“Many families are similar to my own parents who came to the country as young adults, wanting that better opportunity, trusting the systems that were out there to guide [their children] but really limited in their own understanding of a lot of those systems,” Lopez said.

When working with students in a similar situation, Lopez strives to provide as much information as possible to students and their families about all paths available post-high school without assuming students already have a family member they can turn
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to for advice. That includes, for instance, explaining what scholarships students can apply for and what work-study programs entail.

Get parents involved

The more parents who didn’t attend college themselves can learn and be part of their child’s education journey, the better the connections school counselors can form with students, Lopez has found.

That’s why when Lopez takes her students out to field trips at state and community colleges, parents partake as chaperones to share in the learning experience. She has even coordinated events and field trips specifically for creating a space where parents can ask all sorts of questions, such as how scholarships and work-study programs work and what exactly is the living situation on college campuses.

Demystify the college experience

Students too have questions about college that go beyond the application process.

It’s why Lopez’s school in Livingston, Calif., works with the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program that partners her middle school students with current college students to help them learn things like studying and communication skills. Knowing how to study effectively, how to communicate and how to be organized are skills that aid students’ success in school and really in life, Lopez said. The program also offers her students an opportunity to ask all sorts of questions about college life such as what activities, including sports, are available; do they have to pay for meals; and do they have to live on campus.

The more school counselors can help demystify the college experience for students, the better planning for college can go with students being able to ask more specific questions about the process.

OPINION

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Grief Has Engulfed the Learning Environment. Here’s What Can Help

By Brittany R. Collins

As teachers and students enter the third year of the pandemic, we face unprecedented levels of grief in the learning environment. An estimated 1.5 million children worldwide lost a caregiver to COVID-19 in just the first 14 months of the pandemic—more than 120,000 of those children grieving the death of a parent or caregiving grandparent in the United States alone. That number, for comparison, equates with the entire population of Hartford, Conn. And those losses are not evenly distributed. Black and Indigenous students and other students of color face higher rates of bereavement due to systemic health inequities.

Meanwhile, young people and teachers face forms of loss that extend beyond physical death. Living losses are forms of loss such as those associated with divorce, housing insecurity, foster care, or a familial falling out. Disenfranchised grief is grief that is not socially or societally acknowledged, such as generational grief and trauma tied to inequity. Both forms of grief abound in this pandemic, albeit in less trackable ways than those tied directly to COVID-related death.

No matter its form, grief changes the brain, body, and behavior, which inevitably impacts learning. In response, grief-responsive teaching—a pedagogical and interpersonal approach to teaching that integrates science and stories of grief into actionable practices for implementation into classrooms—offers strategies for helping students in this time of communal grief.

To integrate grief-responsive teaching in the classroom, consider a tiered approach: Contemplate the environmental, interpersonal, and curricular structures at play in your learning environment and how you might infuse grief-responsive practices into each level to better support students’ well-being—as well as your own.

1. Consider the classroom environment. Whether we are 8 or 80, experiencing grief and loss can incite a sense of helplessness, fear, and lack of control. Our routines no longer comprise the connections we once held close. Nor do the “hidden regulators” that we once valued (the sensory ingredients of our routines and relationships that may go unnoticed until they are gone, such as the sound of a parent’s laugh, a teacher’s thoughtful penmanship, or a sibling’s favorite music floating through the home). In the midst of an altered world, offering opportunities at school that return to students a sense of routine, autonomy, and choice helps recovery.

How do you already create and scaffold a
sense of routine with your students? In what ways do you offer choice to students through differentiated instruction, project-based learning, reading assignments, or community-building activities? To what extent, and in what ways, do you think and talk about metacognition with students when approaching learning and subjective experiences in the classroom? Do they have a say in how class time or assignments are structured?

In the context of loss, return to these questions, as well as your classroom plans and goals, to consider how to enhance collaboration to empower students to speak up for their needs. Find ways to add activities, engagement strategies, and opportunities for dependable relationship-building into students’ routines.

2. **Enhance interpersonal support.** Connection is our greatest defense against trauma and necessary in the face of loss. Yet the reality of *vicarious trauma* reminds us of the importance that teachers, who may be experiencing grief and loss alongside their students, do not hold the sole onus for supporting students in times of grief. Educators are not trained therapists, but that does not mean that as caring adults in the lives of young people they cannot offer guidance and mentoring that holds lifelong meaning for students experiencing adversity.

Orient yourself as one member of a grieving student’s “team” and consider ways to increase connection in students’ lives. This means not only by building strong relationships with grieving students through direct communications about your interest in their well-being but also by facilitating furthered connection between students and classmates, students and colleagues, and students and members of your local community. By increasing students’ web of connection, you buoy their sense of “perceived support availability,” a term that psychologists use to describe the sense that people in one’s circle will be supportive should they need to turn to them for help. That is, itself, a powerful predictor of one’s ability to cope with and integrate experiences of loss.

3. **Attend to curricula.** No matter what subject you teach, loss and mortality may arise in curricular content. You may not know whether students in your classroom are actively grappling with grief and loss, nor do you need to know the specifics of students’ stories in order to be responsive to the presence of grief at school.

Instead, consider how to scaffold students’ engagement with potentially challenging materials by offering content warnings or alternative texts with which they can engage on a “challenge by choice” basis. Welcome students’ expressions of their lived experiences in the learning environment but never require or force students’ disclosures, lest that pressure induces further trauma. Be mindful that culturally responsive teaching and grief-responsive teaching must be intertwined, as students’ identities and contexts may influence their orientation toward and expressions about grief and loss. Finally, consider how you normalize expressions of loss and grief, whether through literature or about lived experience.

In Western society, traditionally a death-denialist culture, students who are grieving may feel “othered” by many adults’ inabilitys to know what to do or say in the face of bereavement. Distill the topic of grief at school by considering the three tenets above and how grief may impact the student experience, as well as your curricular and relational strategies at each level. Doing so offers a starting place for destigmatizing loss—and learning through it—in this moment of collective challenge.

**Brittany R. Collins** is the author of *Learning from Loss: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Supporting Grieving Students* (Heinemann, 2021).
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