EDITOR’S NOTE
Student learning has changed in unheard of ways. This Spotlight will help you discover how movement-oriented SEL can improve learning; evaluate how to instill the confidence students need to take on rigorous work; explore how teachers of color benefit all students; assess supports needed to push learning recovery; learn about the future of tech in class; and begin feeling optimistic about learning.

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The Future of Blended Learning: What Educators Need to Know

By Alyson Klein

The Hustisford school district in rural Wisconsin wasn’t an obvious candidate for blended learning before the pandemic. There were no immediate plans for a districtwide 1-to-1 computing initiative, and about 1 of every 3 students did not have reliable internet access at home.

Then the pandemic hit and Hustisford, like countless districts around the country, had to shift quickly to virtual instruction. That meant buying devices, handing out wireless hotspots, and making big changes to teaching practices.

Now, Hustisford’s teachers are regularly using tools like Kahoot, a game-based learning platform, YouTube videos, and even TikTok as part of in-person classroom lessons, said Heather Cramer, the district superintendent.

More significantly: a handful of teachers took the initiative to flip their classrooms, allowing students to learn new material at home via online tools and spending class time on group work, class discussions, or digging deeper into the material.

“That’s something that we’ve really, really lacked in the past,” Cramer said. “The kids didn’t have that technology at home to be able to do that research and bring that all together.”

The pandemic and the increasing use of technology in K-12 education it prompted has added renewed energy to the blended learning movement as most students are now learning in school buildings. About two-thirds of educators are expecting their use of the approach to increase during the 2021-22 school year, according to a July survey by the EdWeek Research Center. Nearly 30 percent said they were betting it would “increase a lot.” Just 14 percent expected it to decline.

Blended learning is an approach that leverages both digital tools and face-to-face instruction to offer a more personalized learning experience for each student. Students are typically given greater control over the time, place, and/or pace of learning and often participate in new instructional approaches, such as flipped classrooms. The approach is usually built on the premise that students will be attending classes in school buildings.
Thanks in part to a device-buying binge in the first year of the pandemic, fueled by federal relief dollars, 74 percent of educators surveyed by the EdWeek Research Center in March said their districts had invested “a lot” in devices since the pandemic started, with nearly another quarter saying their districts had invested at least “some” money.

At the same time, teachers became much more adept at using technology. Eighty-eight percent of teachers said their ability to use tech improved during the 2020-21 school year, according to the March survey.

**Blended learning and the ‘new normal’ picking up momentum**

In some cases, educators are taking the initiative to continue instructional practices they started using during the pandemic. For instance, teachers in California’s San Marcos school district are much more likely to record their lessons and post them online for students than they were before COVID, said the district’s director of educational technology, Stephanie Casperson. That allows teachers to flip their classroom or gives students a chance to review lessons if they need help understanding a concept.

Even school social workers and music teachers are making these instructional videos, she said. “Before COVID, it was mostly my American Sign Language teachers who did videos,” Casperson said.

Before the pandemic, only two or three teachers at Corunna High School near Flint, Mich., were very comfortable using blended learning approaches, said Barry Thomas, the principal. Now, it’s more like eight to 10 of the school’s roughly 30 teachers, he said.

Corunna teachers are now more apt to record their lessons so that students can go back and review them, and the school’s math department has embraced online platforms like Khan Academy to supplement their own instruction.

“They’ve found things in the course of this last year and a half that they really have liked,” Thomas said. “And now it’s just part of their normal operation.”

But some educators are cautious about embracing too much digital instruction.

“I’m not going to force anybody to do more blended learning,” said Scott Clayton, the principal of Scofield Magnet Middle School in Stamford, Conn. “Most children have a device or a cellphone. And now we’re putting a Chromebook in front of them or a laptop. It’s increasing screen time.”

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**How did your students’ average learning growth perform in 2020-21 compared with a typical year?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behind 55%</th>
<th>On track 38%</th>
<th>Ahead 1%</th>
<th>Other 5%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**How do you plan to use blended learning this school year for accelerating learning? Select all that apply.**

| Students will have access to online programs at home more frequently than in the past | 46% |
| Students will spend more time using instructional software programs to supplement their classroom lessons | 38% |
| Teachers will receive more training on how to integrate digital tools to help students speed up their learning | 37% |
| Students will be offered intensive tutoring that incorporates digital tools more than in the past | 26% |
| We do not plan to use blended learning to accelerate learning | 24% |
| Other, please specify | 3% |

*Respondents are principals and district leaders.*
Districts put greater emphasis on professional development for blended learning

Yet as teachers’ level of interest in, and use of, blended learning has risen, districts and schools are making it a higher priority for professional development. More than half of the district leaders and principals who said they were planning to offer some remote instruction next school year in a survey by the EdWeek Research Center this summer—58 percent—said they plan to offer training on the strategy. That’s compared with just over 30 percent who said they were likely to work with teachers on remote instruction or teaching kids in-person and online simultaneously (so-called concurrent teaching), the next most popular approaches.

“Demand on our end has been explosive,” said Kareem Farah, the chief executive officer for the Modern Classroom Project, a nonprofit that works with educators on blended, self-paced, mastery-based instruction.

The organization has trained 2,300 teachers through a virtual mentoring program, which was at capacity last school year. And a free online course on blended learning launched at the start of the pandemic went from 500 users initially to 30,000.

But despite an influx of federal funding that can be used for professional development, there are logistical challenges to getting teachers hooked up with blended learning training. The San Marcos School district, for instance, is running up against a nationwide substitute teacher shortage, making it difficult to find time to get teachers out of the classroom for training.

And for some teachers, there’s a big temptation to revert back to traditional instruction.

“The initial shift is kind of almost been like, ‘We want to go back to exactly what we were doing before,’” said Justin Cutts, the principal of Whitney High School in Rocklin, Calif. “Which is, to me, a little bit of a disappointment. We had the math department burn through, like, 12 [packages] of paper in the first two weeks of school. How did we go [through] the last year and a half, and now we’re gonna go back to breaking copiers again?”

Blended learning for acceleration and remediation

There has been significant concern among educators and policymakers about students falling behind academically due to the pandemic. Half of teachers said their students were behind where they would be in a typical year, according to a survey of 1,042 teachers conducted this spring by the Clayton Christensen Institute, a nonprofit research organization that promotes innovation in education and other fields.

It’s unclear how much of a role technology can play in helping students regain their academic footing, through either acceleration or remediation, at least during class time.

School and district leaders surveyed by the EdWeek Research Center this summer were most likely to say their students would be able to use online tools for acceleration and remediation at home more frequently than before.
How K-12 educators can help students stay engaged from anywhere
Teachers, students, and parents exhibited fortitude and resilience in adapting to online learning during the global health crisis. Now it’s time to give them more help in the classroom and to build on data and hard-won insight to shape the connected classroom and the future of education.

Educators, are you ready for the blended classroom?

Blended learning integrates the convenience and flexibility of online instruction with the enduring advantages of the face-to-face classroom environment.

To begin with, it enables access to curriculum content anywhere, anytime. Blended learning can also free up time for educators to work with students individually, which helps teachers differentiate and personalize instruction based on student needs. The end result is improved academic outcomes and better student satisfaction and retention.

However, many K-12 administrators, faculty, and IT professionals lack the guidance to ensure optimal student experiences in blended and remote learning.

And there are many issues to address.

Access is limited. Fifty-nine percent of parents with lower incomes say their children would likely face at least one of three digital obstacles to education: a lack of reliable internet at home, no computer at home, or needing to use a smartphone to complete schoolwork, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center.¹
**Devices matter.** Devices are an essential component of the blended learning experience for students and teachers. The relative age, type, and quality of device matter just as much as reliable, high-speed internet access. Especially in lower grade levels that are more dependent on video, high-quality devices are critical to student engagement. In secondary grade levels that offer programs such as career and technical education, devices featuring higher-performance processors may be needed.

**Teachers need training.** Faculty struggle to adapt to the demands of connected classrooms. As many as six in 10 new teachers haven’t been trained on how to teach a remote classroom, and nearly seven in 10 school district leaders say teachers need additional professional development to use technology more effectively, according to a study by the Rand Corporation.²

It’s clear that, in many ways, online teaching requires a different skill set than the physical classroom requires, with different tools, and it demands a critical measure of technology proficiency to be effective.

This ebook provides education leaders, faculty, and school IT administrators with insights into the technology challenges students and teachers are experiencing and offers guidance for beginning to close the homework gap. You’ll discover advances in education technology and tools that empower teachers to unlock every student’s potential. We address four technology factors that stand in the way of successful academic outcomes in blended learning. We then offer a selection of tools for educators to consider that will help future-proof the connected classroom and prepare the workforce of tomorrow.

Want to learn how you can deploy technology that supports all students in their education journey?

**Read our ebook: Blended learning and teaching in the connected classroom.**

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Teachers are now more likely these days to try out an intensive form of blended learning—the so-called flipped classroom—in which students cover class content online at home and in-person instruction is used for discussions, projects, and practice.”

**CHRISTENSEN INSTITUTE Survey**

Less popular: Offering intensive tutoring that incorporates digital tools more often than in the past.

About another quarter of district and school leaders surveyed aren’t planning to use blended learning at all to help accelerate instruction, or for remediation.

Some districts are trying a multipronged approach.

California’s Whitney High School is having some of its students catch up using a mix of software, courses specifically geared toward helping students who are behind in either math or language arts, and even smaller classes to help students who have failed multiple subjects.

While the district has used “bits of pieces of this system,” it has never been as comprehensive as it is this school year,” said Cutts, the principal.

But some schools are taking a more-cautious approach to blended learning.

For instance, even though he and his school have embraced the use of technology for teaching and learning, Clayton, the principal from Connecticut, doesn’t think it’s necessarily the best strategy for making sure that students have the background information they need to access grade-level content.

“If anything instructionally will shift, it’s this move toward an acceleration model of learning, which is not about technology,” he said, referring to the practice of refreshing students on just the learning they need to access grade-level content. “That’s about instructional practices. It’s about teachers not relying on remedial instruction because they feel as if students have somehow lost learning over the [last] year.”

**More educators are experimenting with flipped classrooms**

Teachers are now more likely these days to try out an intensive form of blended learning—the so-called flipped classroom—in which students cover class content online at home and in-person instruction is used for discussions, projects, and practice, the Christensen Institute survey found.

Eighteen percent of teachers said they were planning to use the model after the pandemic, compared with 12 percent who said they used it before the pandemic.

For instance, last school year, when most schools were using hybrid instructional approaches, some 5th grade teachers at Winchester Trail Elementary School in Canal Winchester, Ohio, began to shift to a flipped model. The principal, Max Lallathin, who encouraged teachers to give the arrangement a shot, is hoping to see it used in his school more often this school year.

“It’s a timesaver for the kids because they can go right in” and begin discussing content, he said. “If they watch a scientific video, they can go right into the scientific method the next day, instead of watching the video in class.”

But despite all the trends showing teachers’ technology skills rising and increasing use of blended learning approaches, some educators worry about backsliding this school year.

“My biggest fear was that we’d go back to business as usual this [school] year, and that teachers would stop using some of the technology” that they mastered during the pandemic, Casperson said. “And I think that’s a fear of pretty much every ed-tech director that I’ve talked to.”

At 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...
Student Learning

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-
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.

Student Learning

Immediate strategies exist but plan for a new normal

Yvonne Alexander, a science teacher at Hopkins Junior High School in Fremont, Calif., said her students don’t want to sit still in their seats. We’ve been locked in our bedroom and we want to be with our friends, they’ve told her.

So she’s let students move their desks. They’re welcome to step out if needed to alleviate anxiety. She’s leading more classroom activities where students work together.

“We want to be productive,” Alexander said. “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 Juan 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.

How to Give Students the Confidence To Take on Rigorous Work

By Sarah Schwartz

In the first months of the pandemic, school leaders and state officials made a unified call for grace, an acknowledgment that students and teachers both had more pressing concerns than academic expectations: They relaxed grading policies, canceled end-of-year assessments, or directed teachers not to fail students because of work not completed during shutdowns.

Over the past two years, though, school systems have brought back many of these requirements. State and school district leaders’ pleas for leniency have thinned, and their expectations for teachers and students have risen. Teachers are tasked with “catching up” students, trying to prepare them for success in the next grade and beyond while accounting for the disruptions of the past two years.

“The expectation is ‘back to business,’” said Marina Martinez, a 7th grade math teacher and the department chair at Bancroft Middle School in San Leandro, Calif. Students are more reluctant to tackle complex problems, teachers say. Is there a way to deepen rigor without adding stress?

Teachers say the dynamic puts them in a bind: They want to hold their students to high expectations, giving them the kind of meaty work that has a better chance of re-engaging them in school and preparing them for the next grade and beyond. But they also say that schools aren’t really “back to business” yet, and they don’t want to add more stress to students’ lives during an already difficult time.

“There’s this fine line between ‘we’re still teaching in a pandemic,’ but we want kids to understand that there are certain expectations of their behavior, their responsibilities,” said Nancy Nasr, the science department chair at Granada Hills Charter High School in Los Angeles.
“That’s part of our teaching, especially in the high school. It’s not just the content, it’s developing these responsible citizens who understand the importance of deadlines, doing what you’re supposed to do, following through on that.”

In an EdWeek Research Center survey from December 2021, one in three teachers said that the rigor of their instruction had decreased compared to before the pandemic. More than 80 percent reported that they had increased their focus on reteaching. And about half of all teachers said the amount of homework they assign and the strictness of their grading policies are still more lax than they were pre-pandemic.

**Is rigor possible during disrupted learning?**

Teachers say that so much time without traditional school routines has shaken students’ confidence in their ability to wrestle with cognitively demanding assignments. About seven in 10 reported that the quantity and quality of work that students turn in has decreased.

In interviews with Education Week, some teachers worried that continuing to relax expectations would lower the quality of education that they were able to provide and decrease the chances that students would be prepared for the next grade.

But others argued that these changes to their practice didn’t necessarily translate to “easier” classes. Instead, the pandemic has changed the way they conceptualize rigor, they said.

Nasr, for example, has moved from a more traditional, multiple-choice summative test to more holistic end-of-term assessments that account for students having been in and out of the physical classroom at different times throughout the semester. “The hammer coming down, the multiple-choice, punitive grading culture has changed for me,” Nasr said.

There has always been a “tension” between covering all of the content and skills that students are going to be evaluated on, and taking the time to help students’ grow their capacity for deeper learning, said Camille Farrington, a managing director at the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, who studies academic rigor.

“Given that the system is really at a breaking point, and there’s wholesale evidence that students can’t live through COVID and keep up at grade level, … what are we going
to do about it? I don’t think there’s incompatibility between COVID and rigor, but I think there is incompatibility between COVID and broad grade-level standards.”

Gaps in basic skills hinder acceleration

One solution is the idea of “acceleration.” If a teacher is working with a 4th grade class that was in remote learning for most of 3rd grade math, for example, she would introduce them to 4th grade concepts while providing “just-in-time” support when they needed to rely on 3rd grade knowledge or skills.

Instead of going back to reteach entire units from the previous grade, teachers and students can keep moving forward, introducing kids to more challenging content. Several national education groups have endorsed this strategy during COVID, when the unpredictable nature of school building shutdowns—and students’ lives—mean that kids may miss different chunks of instruction.

But some teachers say that students’ increased struggles with basic skills make moving forward difficult. “I think about 8th, 9th grade, and the main focus is equations. And the kids are struggling because they don’t have their basic facts down,” Martinez said.

In years’ past, she wouldn’t let students use calculators, asking them instead to draw on their stored knowledge of math facts. But she’s changed that this year, after seeing that her students are having more trouble with that recall than they have in the past. “It gets to a certain point where we’re so dependent on those basic facts that we’re not pushing the math itself forward,” she said.

Zachary Chan, a 3rd grade reading teacher at the Young Women’s Leadership Academy in San Antonio, said he’s reteaching handwriting and concepts of print—skills that students would normally master by the end of 1st grade.

“We’re focusing more on growth,” Chan said. “I feel pressure to have them grow more than a year in writing instruction in that year they’re with me.”

Some older students are having trouble with reading skills, too, said Lisa Vanderlin- den, a chemistry and biology teacher at Kennedy High School in Bloomington, Minn. “Before a lab, I’ll need to tell them every single thing about the lab that we’re doing, because they’re not as good at reading directions,” she said, of her 11th graders. They also need support with the algebra involved.

Compared to prior to the pandemic, how, if at all, have the following changed during the current 2021–22 school year?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Decreased</th>
<th>No change</th>
<th>Increased</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The rigor of my instruction</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>42%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The amount of homework I assign</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>47%</td>
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<td>The amount of formative assessment I do</td>
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<td>47%</td>
<td>44%</td>
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<td>The amount of summative testing I do</td>
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<td>58%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>The engagement levels of my students</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The strictness of my grading policies</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center
in her class, such as balancing equations.

But the bigger problem, Vanderlinden said, is that students are having trouble concentrating and thinking through problems. They’re not as confident in their knowledge.

“I don’t think that they got behind as much on content as they got behind on critical thinking skills and the ability to process challenging information,” Vanderlinden said.

This dip in students’ ability to take on cognitively demanding work is a much bigger hurdle than some gaps in their understanding of math formulas, she said.

The pandemic has heightened this kind of response from students, teachers say, but the phenomenon isn’t entirely new.

Martinez said that she and her colleagues have always provided students with scaffolds that help them access grade-level work, breaking down a problem into its component skills and walking students through step by step. It’s a strategy that would ideally let kids wrestle with concepts and ideas that are more challenging, but sometimes it doesn’t work out that way.

If teachers are cutting up a concept or question into too many chunks, they can hinder students’ ability to make connections themselves and see the “big picture,” she said. Now, that problem has gotten worse.

How should schools measure rigor?

Schools have not historically developed students’ capacities to take on rigorous work without over-scaffolding, said Zaretta Hammond, a teacher educator and the author of Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students.

This has especially affected Black and brown children, who are more likely than white children to be given work that’s watered down and not cognitively challenging, she said. And the pandemic revealed how deeply inequitable this problem is—how the education system has failed to cultivate historically marginalized students’ capacity to carry the cognitive load and process new content, so that they can turn it into usable knowledge, Hammond said.

A lot of students disengaged from school during remote learning because they found virtual learning uninteresting and lacking in any intellectual curiosity or joy, she said. But others, she added, disengaged because they weren’t prepared for learning without teachers’ over-scaffolding.

Compared to prior to the pandemic, have you increased or decreased your focus on the following areas in order to help your students master material they should have learned during the pandemic but didn’t?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Area</th>
<th>Decreased focus</th>
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<th>Increased focus</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Small group work</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whole class instruction</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reteaching material that should have been taught in prior grade levels</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying new/different curricula/instructional resources</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>71%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social-emotional learning</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching to standards</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center
Teachers of Color Are Linked To Social-Emotional, Academic Gains for All Students

By Madeline Will

Teachers of color tend to bring specific practices and mindsets into the classroom that benefit all students, a new study finds—the latest addition to the body of research that emphasizes the importance of recruiting and retaining these teachers, who make up just 21 percent of the workforce.

The new study reaffirms that teachers of color are linked to positive academic, social-emotional, and behavioral student outcomes and finds that these effects are driven, at least in part, by mindsets and practices aligned to what’s known as culturally responsive teaching.

“We think of culturally responsive teaching as being multidimensional, having multiple components to it,” said David Blazar, the study’s author and an assistant professor of education policy and economics at the University of Maryland.

These effects are driven, at least in part, by the use of culturally responsive teaching, a new study suggests.

For example, he said, culturally responsive teachers believe that all students can learn, so they are more likely to hold students to high expectations. They are more likely to build relationships with students’ families, so they understand students’ culture and can bring that into the classroom. They also work to differentiate their instruction by providing varied supports for all students to succeed.

“To me, that goes back to good teaching,” he said. “Some of the things I’m describing are very much components of good instruction. ... They on average seem to benefit a range of student outcomes.”

Blazar analyzed a dataset of 4th and 5th grade teachers that included their students’ academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes, as well as observation data and surveys to gauge the teachers’ mindsets and practices. The dataset came from four school districts on the East Coast of the United States.

He found that when upper elementary students are randomly assigned to a teacher of color, they are better at completing tasks and are more engaged, score higher on end-of-year math and English/language arts test scores, and attend school more frequently. This effect holds true for both students of color and white students, and the effects on test-scores and chronic absenteeism persist up to six years later, when the students are in high school.

The impact teachers of color have on student outcomes is partially explained by the fact that teachers of color are more likely to practice culturally responsive teaching, Blazar found.

The analysis found that teachers of color are more likely than their white colleagues to view student intelligence as malleable instead of fixed, build relationships with students and their families, spend more time differentiating their instruction to fit individual students’ needs, and lead well-organized classrooms. All are components of culturally responsive teaching.

Blazar was not able to rule out other reasons why teachers of color might have positive effects on student outcomes. Past research has found that teachers of color serve as role models for students of color, which could also play a role in students’ academic or social-emotional success.

Still, he noted, if teachers of color are engaging in culturally responsive practices, that benefits both students of color and white students.

More than just diverse books

Culturally relevant, or responsive, teaching is a term that was first introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings, a scholar and teacher-educator, in 1995.

“I think there’s a misconception that culturally responsive teaching is just about bringing in diverse books or having multiple perspectives [in the curriculum], but it’s more of a pedagogical approach to the way that you teach in the classroom,” said Nadine Sanchez, the principal of Livingston Elementary School in New Brunswick, N.J.

For instance, she said, a culturally responsive teacher makes sure that students feel connected to the content and are provided with the tools to be able to master it: “It’s really about the way you are with students, the way you approach content, and the way that you give students access.”

And high expectations for all students is a key component, Sanchez said. Past research has found that white teachers have lower expectations for Black students than they do for white students, and those can turn into “self-fulfilling prophecies” when students internalize them or when teachers change their approach to students as a result of their mindsets.

For instance, a 2012 study from Rutgers University-Newark found that when white teachers were presented with a poorly written essay, they provided more praise and less criticism if they thought the essay was written by a student of color than if they thought the essay was by a white student.

Teachers’ racial biases can also result in decreased access to advanced coursework and higher rates of suspensions, past research has found.

When teachers utilize the practices of culturally responsive pedagogy, students feel empowered and are more likely to thrive, Sanchez said.

“I see dramatic shifts in the way our students engage in the classroom,” she said. “I’ve noticed a tremendous difference [in particular] in my English-language learners and my students of color because they feel much more
Student Learning

White teachers can follow these practices, too

Of course, this work is not unique to teachers of color. White teachers can and do incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy into their classrooms. But they are less likely to do so than teachers of color, Blazar’s study found.

After all, for many teachers of color, this work is instinctive, Sanchez said. Many teachers of color remember feeling marginalized in classrooms when they were growing up, and they want to help their students have a better experience.

“’I’m Latina, and I came in [to the classroom] already with that mindset—I’m coming in to empower my people,’” she said.

Blazar said his study shows the need for professional development that focuses specifically on culturally responsive teaching. That could help train the mostly white teacher workforce to engage in these practices that benefit students, he said.

A supportive school leader also helps. For example, Sanchez encourages teachers in her school building to share positive stories about student success in an effort to make some of these practices visible. She also works to create a school climate where families are valued partners to educators.

Ultimately, the study reinforces the need for districts to recruit and retain teachers of color, Blazar said. He added that these findings also add some nuance to the heated national debate over “critical race theory,” as state legislators introduce bills seeking to limit discussion of race in the classroom and community members push to ban books about race and social identity.

“White students are benefitting from what is happening here, from having teachers of color, from culturally responsive teaching,” Blazar said. “This doesn’t need to be a them or us discussion.”

OPINION

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Why We Can Feel More Optimistic About Learning

By Michael Fullan

As we enter 2022, humanity is exhausted. Few of us can remember being so down-trodden in our lifetimes. Physical (climate) and social (low trust and mutual dislike) negativity are at extreme levels. Mental stress has rarely been so high for so many. Education is in disarray.

Yet human evolution is a crazy thing. It can rebound when things seem hopeless. It can take off with great speed and power when new configurations begin to appear and feed on themselves. In this respect, there are six reasons why I am optimistic about learning in the coming year. Together, they provide a runway to future learning that could be transformative.

At the same time, the next period could go horribly wrong. There is a vacuum now. Bad things fill vacuums faster than good things do. My six optimistic reasons are not automatic. They provide a platform for what’s worth fighting for. The hard work remains to be done. The quality of our future, maybe even our very existence, depends on our individual and collective uptake of these six interrelated themes (Fullan offers a deeper look at these in a webinar on March 1st).

1. Escaping a bad system. Most people already knew in 2019 that the existing educational system was stultified—before COVID struck. At least 75 percent of students were bored or alienated; inequality was baked into society and worsening. In retrospect, we will acknowledge that we were fortunate to be jolted out of a bad system that was harming most of us—indeed, ultimately all of us. Escaping a bad system is Reason 1 for being optimistic.

2. Recognizing and working with our best allies. The longer that COVID has persisted, the more that students
and teachers recognize that change in learning is needed. While tired to the bone in the short run, more and more students and teachers want change in learning compared with what they had before. More powerfully, they see each other as allies (students and teachers). They are ready to put in the effort to develop new ideas. Parents, too, will end up being supporters. Our best partners for better learning are right at our doorstep.

3. **Well-being and learning are joining forces.** It was never a good idea to let learning become an academic island. After one year of COVID, we realized that well-being is essential to learning. After almost two years, we are concluding that well-being is also learning. In addition to the importance of academic knowledge, most people know that human qualities are essential: like compassion, reliability, teamwork, helping others in time of need, gratitude, loyalty, dependability, courage. More people know that mental and physical well-being are crucial, and fragile. Overall, good at learning and good at life will become the new goal.

4. **New more powerful forms of learning are on the rise.** Three forces for better learning are converging. One consists of “new purpose, belonging, meaning, global competencies” (such as our 6Cs: character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking). A second involves equity and thriving for all becoming deeply integrated in all learning. The third consists of breakthroughs in the science of learning and development designs related to immersive whole-child learning with respect to “pedagogies, partnerships, learning environments, and leveraging digital” for all in relation to engaging and changing the world. Learning and living will merge around these three aspects. We now have the potential to engage all learners.

5. **Diverse leadership will grow and present new benefits.** By diverse, I mean leaders of all ages, especially the young, and people of a variety of ethnicities, genders, and backgrounds. General populations are rapidly becoming more diverse; sheer numbers will push diversity upward. Discrimination will remain, but there is a hidden benefit here: People who struggle and move up generally make better leaders; as this becomes more known, it will result in more effective leaders being appointed. This movement will face prejudice, but because the potential leaders will be better and more plentiful, it will gain momentum.

6. **Systems will begin to change.** Believe it or not, when dysfunctional systems don’t change, they eventually are replaced. We are beginning to see radical cracks within the system toward what I call greater action founded on principles of “systemness.” The latter is an awareness on the part of larger numbers of people at all levels that the system needs to be changed and that such change is the responsibility of people from each and all levels (local, middle, central). Some of the obvious new developments include: the recognition that eradicating poverty needs to be an explicit goal (with respect to health, food, shelter, safety, jobs)—this, in fact, is an explicit goal of some systems; replacing punitive standardized tests with new metrics of assessment (such as performance metrics) linked to feedback and developmental learning; and the increased power and interactive presence of the local and the middle with a new role for the center as partners in systemness improvement. Intralevel and interlevel connections will increase for the betterment of the system.

It is debatable whether human evolution will inevitably self-correct in positive ways (humans are born to connect, but not all forms of connection turn out to be positive). But I do think when destructive patterns begin to feel permanent, that most of us, especially the very young, are inclined to want to do something about it. They are our best bet. This is why a strong learning system is key. It will be beautifully ironic if positive contagion turns out to be our savior.


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**OPINION**

**Movement-Oriented SEL Might Just Improve Student Learning**

By Zoe Darazsdi

In the summer of 2020, I worked as a drama specialist at a virtual camp for neurodiverse children. On my first day, I entered a Zoom room full of fidgety 5-year-olds and immediately panicked that I wouldn’t be able to hold their attention. One student was in a garage where the floor and walls were lined with gymnastics mats. During our drama games, he sprinted across the room and back flipped off the walls, appearing totally unaware of our lesson. But when another student asked him a question, he somersaulted toward the screen and delivered a response that indicated he had been listening intently.

Thus began my process of realizing that both virtual and in-person schooling can increase students’ learning capabilities and overall well-being when engaging in movement during instruction. Especially now, as the highly transmissible omicron variant continues to rage through communities, many school districts are debating a return to virtual learning. Regardless of the location, movement-oriented learning is a must for students of all ages.

My interest in using creativity and psychology to empower neurodiverse people led me to pursue a master’s of clinical mental-health counseling at Villanova University. It was there that, in addition to conducting my own research on neurodiversity, I joined a team headed by education researchers and social-emotional-learning experts Madora Soutter and Chu Ly and supported by fellow graduate research assistants Diainni Dennis and Amanda Adams.

Starting in fall 2020, our qualitative study team interviewed parents, teachers, and students to investigate ways in which social-emotional learning can be fostered in online spaces. SEL is a pedagogical commitment to help students acquire social, emotional, and academic skills and is typified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning competencies of self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decisionmaking,
and relationship skills. Our team focused specifically on transformative SEL, which shifts the focus away from an individualistic and decontextualized approach of assessing and building students’ social-emotional skills and toward a communal effort to create equitable classrooms and societies. Whereas traditional SEL places the onus on each child to exemplify SEL competencies—regardless of how societal influences can make that iniquitously harder for some students—transformative SEL uses a collectivist approach to acknowledge and rectify the effects of societal systems on the classroom community.

We used purposeful sampling to select a racially diverse group of seven parents, four teachers, and four students, all hailing from suburban or urban public or private schools across the United States. Our research team sought a nuanced reflection of how the shift to online schooling affected social-emotional-learning practices, with a specific focus on how the pandemic and recent social-justice movements impacted the inclusion of equity in the curriculum.

I was especially curious about how equity for neurodiverse students was shaped by the ongoing crises of COVID and racial justice.

Early in the pandemic, experts in the field of social-emotional learning asserted that, while educators may find their attention called to myriad other challenges—from transferring an entire in-person curriculum to a digital space to managing their own and their family’s new physical and emotional needs—they should not neglect SEL curriculum. Rather, it was predicted that an increase of SEL lessons would support the social, emotional, and mental well-being of students during this stressful time. While pre-pandemic research focused largely on the benefits of SEL in person, recent research from around the world has illuminated the ways in which challenges with holistically supporting students through the pandemic engendered innovative educational practices (e.g., including students’ families in the educational process, utilizing daily student check-ins) that can be carried forward into post-pandemic classrooms in the best of conditions.

One such innovation concerns utilizing SEL to foster the partnership of physical and emotional health. We know from extensive literature that enabling a child to engage in movement throughout their school day helps them to learn and implement their SEL skills. For some students, virtual schooling meant long hours sitting on Zoom calls, but for some of the participants in our study, it meant increased freedom to move around their house while still observing the lesson.

The qualitative findings of our study suggest the importance of movement for students of all ages, proclivities, and differences. We utilized lengthy, open-ended interviews with a diverse group of participants until we reached saturation, meaning that though our sample size was small, the care we took to thoroughly explore many different types of people’s lived experiences generated a robust and valid comprehension of this phenomenon.

Our study also generated some recommendations for educators whether they are teaching in-person or not:

- **Strengthen classroom community through physical games.** Incorporate games that get students to move and collaborate to teach them self-management, relationship skills, responsible decisionmaking, self-awareness, and social awareness while releasing excess energy. Participants discussed the benefits of structured group movement breaks and projects that required students to “move around and do things in different groups.” Some examples they cited were as simple as sitting in a circle 6 feet apart or challenging the class to some group exercise.

- **Teach emotional regulation through mindful movement.** The increased stress that COVID-19 foisted upon children created a need for mindful movement practices that can be integrated into any teacher’s toolbox. Our participants cited the significance of activities like progressive muscle relaxation, stretching, usage of mindful movement websites, and embodied breathing exercises to increase students’ self-management and self-awareness. One participant listed combined breathing and movement exercises with fun, kid-friendly names, like balloon breathing, which teaches students to breathe in deeply enough to inflate their stomach like a balloon. She noted the value of imparting a technique that is not “reliant on external tools” but rather something that students can always carry with them.

- **Create freedom of movement in the classroom.** Many kids who struggled to adhere to the movement limitations of traditional classrooms thrived when they could attend Zoom class while pacing or bouncing on a yoga ball. One participant showed us the balancing beam on which she releases excess energy during virtual class time. Find creative ways to allow students freedom of movement, including a designated place in the classroom to pace or a policy that allows students to quietly stretch or stand during lessons. This recommendation is particularly applicable to creating equitable learning environments for neurodiverse students who have utilized improvisatory movement, such as drumming, as an adaptive means of self-management throughout the pandemic.

While the pandemic has given rise to countless adversities, it also has catalyzed the swift transformation of practices that were not inclusive to all students. Movement practices are just one way to redefine inclusivity and wellness in a post-pandemic classroom.

Zoe Darazsdi is a counseling and education researcher, mental health counselor, and autism rights advocate. She lives in Bryn Mawr, Pa., and is in a master’s of science program in clinical mental health counseling at Villanova University.
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