EDITOR’S NOTE
Implementing and scaling up targeted interventions can be challenging. This Spotlight will help you learn about the most common interventions for academic recovery; dive into research on implementing effective learning recovery programs; investigate strategies for making intensive tutoring sustainable; discover how districts are tackling learning acceleration; review how better data could improve access to early intervention services; explore strategies for boosting student learning; and more.
Students are still a long way from regaining their academic momentum following the learning disruptions of the last several years.

The most recent studies estimate the average 8th grader needs more than nine months of additional instruction to catch up to their pre-pandemic progress in math and 7.4 months of instruction to make up lost learning in reading.

Local districts have less than a year to set spending for the $122 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief money provided under the American Rescue Plan. So far, they have focused the bulk of ESSER spending on hiring additional staff and upgrading school facilities (particularly improving ventilation to limit future viral outbreaks.)

But in line with federal requirements that 20 percent of American Rescue Plan money goes to academic recovery, districts have also dedicated nearly $30 billion to interventions intended to help students gain ground in math and reading and improve emotionally from school disruptions in the last three years. Yet districts continue to face challenges in implementing and scaling up these interventions at a high enough intensity to help students recover what is, in some cases, years of lost learning progress.

Here’s what educators need to know about the most common academic-recovery approaches supported by ESSER.

### Acceleration

Teachers report that half their students started the 2023 school year behind in at least one core subject. Many educators attempt to remediate, reteaching previous lessons to fill these learning gaps before starting new content. Yet, studies show this can slow down students’ access to grade-level material, widening learning gaps instead of closing them.

By contrast, in learning acceleration, teachers continue to teach students grade-level content, while filling in missing foundational skills with short, just-in-time supports.

ESSER requires the use of evidence-based academic-recovery interventions such as acceleration.

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### Extended learning time

There are three main forms of increased learning time:

- **School day**, such as lengthening normal class hours from the traditional 6.5 to 8 hours or adding wraparound services from outside providers before or after school. The National Center for Time and Learning finds these longer days can be taxing for students and teachers, but they provide more flexibility for teachers to accelerate instruction and incorporate mental health and social support, while still allowing room for recess and other relaxation periods.

- **School week**, such as providing Saturday classes, dual-schedule (e.g., morning and evening classes), and on-demand virtual classes. Additional schedule flexibility can prove particularly helpful for older students trying to balance school with work or extracurricular activities.

- **School year**, either via adding days to the traditional 180-day schedule or adding summer and break programs.

In an analysis of more than 5,000 district and charter spending plans, representing nearly three-quarters of U.S. schoolchildren, the nonprofit FutureEd finds summer and after-school programs have been by far the most popular intervention for schools, with nearly 2,200 districts dedicating ESSER money to summer school and more than 1,200 using aid for after-school programs. (States are also required to spend 1 percent of their ESSER funding each on after-school and summer learning programs.)

However, experts say the organizational capacity for after-school programs has not recovered since the pandemic, and higher-income students are more likely to participate than students in poverty.

“Some districts offered little more than the traditional summer school, with opportunities to take an extra class or make up for a course failure. But others had robust programs that combined recreation, arts, and academics to help students recover learning. Many had a social aspect aimed at helping student reconnect and reengage with school,” said Phyllis Jordan, FutureEd’s associate director, in testimony to Congress.
To be effective, administrators should identify how much of the existing school time is spent on instruction and ensure extended learning time aligns with the goals and curriculum of the school day.

**Tutoring**

Tutoring is one-to-one or small-group instruction dedicated to a specific goal and used to supplement classroom instruction. About 1 in 4 districts and charters planned to spend ESSER money on tutoring as of 2023, and another 17 percent planned math or reading coaching or mentoring.

The National Center for Education Statistics defines three main tutoring types:

- **High-dosage tutoring** includes at least 30 minutes per session, three or more times per week, in 1-to-1 or small groups, by educators or well-trained tutors, and which uses high-quality materials and aligns with an evidence-based core curriculum or program. Federal data show that, as of the 2022-23 school year, about 11 percent of public school students received high-dose tutoring.

- **Standard tutoring** is less intensive and may include 1-to-1, small-group, or large-group sessions less than three times per week, taught by educators who may or may not have received specific training in tutoring practices. About 14 percent of public school students received standard tutoring in 2022-23, federal data show.

- **Self-paced tutoring** provides guided instruction for students to work through on their own, generally online, progressing to new content as they demonstrate mastery of the current content. Nine percent of public school students participated in self-paced tutoring in 2022-23, federal data indicate.

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s research arm, high-dose tutoring is the most effective—though often the most expensive. The National Student Support Accelerator, a Stanford University center that studies effective tutoring, finds that effective high-dose tutoring programs require:

- Tutoring integrated into the school day to increase tutor-teacher coordination and avoid transportation or time problems for students.
- Targeting students based on academic need rather than requiring parents to opt into services.
- Budgeting services for at least three to five days a week for extended periods of time.
- Differentiated tutoring based on particular student needs and skills.
- Data-gathering and progress-monitoring, particularly when schools work with outside tutoring providers.

**Assessments**

There are three main kinds of assessments used in learning recovery:

- **Formative assessments** measure student understanding of specific concepts and are used to guide day-to-day instruction. They may include adaptive benchmarking tests, such as the NWEA’s MAP, or teacher-developed live or computer-based games and puzzles, exit quizzes, or group error analyses.

- **Summative tests** measure student proficiency and progress on state or national content standards over time and are generally for systems accountability, rather than to guide instruction. They may take an annual “snapshot” of students in a given grade, such as state accountability tests, or track the progress of a cohort of students over time, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress Long-Term Trends Assessment.

- **Diagnostics** are single or batteries of academic, behavioral, developmental, or other tests used to identify a student’s specific learning needs, such as autism or dyslexia, and suggest potential options for intervention.

As of the 2022-23 school year, more than 1 in 5 districts planned to use ESSER funding to develop, implement, or expand assessments as part of their learning-recovery initiatives.
Congress allocated nearly $190 billion in emergency relief aid to help K-12 schools recover from the impact of the pandemic.

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What Two New Studies Reveal About Learning Recovery

By Sarah Schwartz

Two new studies shed light on the promise—and challenges—of learning recovery strategies that schools adopted in the wake of the pandemic.

The key theme from the research is as much a truism as it is a prescription: Getting the implementation right really matters. And it’s also difficult.

One working paper, from researchers at the American Institutes for Research, Harvard University, and the assessment provider NWEA, analyzed eight districts’ summer 2022 learning programs. Researchers found that the programs had a small but positive effect on student math scores, and no effect on reading.

Another working paper, from researchers at Vanderbilt University and Stanford University, examined tutoring programs—specifically, what conditions led to successful implementation. They identified some commonalities: Programs that functioned well had the support of school leaders and a structured process for recruiting tutors and managing logistics.

Together, the two studies underscore that academic recovery strategies require sustained, coordinated effort, said Susanna Loeb, a professor in the Graduate School of Education at Stanford, and one of the authors on the tutoring study.

“Anything that you’re going to do in schools, whether it is high-impact tutoring or a summer program, in order to have the kinds of impact that we need to get students engaged in school and learning at a faster pace, ... you’re going to need a lot of effort into implementation,” Loeb said.

Giving students many and varied opportunities for extra learning is important, too, said Emily Morton, a researcher at AIR’s National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research and one of the authors on the summer learning study.

The summer programs, which included time for academic instruction and enrichment activities, helped students make “marginal progress”—progress that is meaningful, she said.

“This is some of the very first good news we’re getting on any COVID recovery,” Morton said. Still, she added, “layering supports is going to be essential. Students can’t just get summer school.”

Districts have used federal COVID relief funds to support summer programs, tutoring initiatives, and other academic recovery plans—money that runs out in September 2024.

But maintaining multiple options for students requires funding and resources, Morton said. “To be able to do that, they’re going to need support from states and even from the federal government.”

Summer programs show small gains in math

The summer school study focused on summer learning programs in eight school districts. All of these districts served higher percentages of Black and Hispanic students and higher percentages of students eligible for free- and reduced-price lunch than the national average.

The researchers compared students who were eligible to attend summer school and did attend to students who were eligible but did not attend. They controlled for students’ characteristics, including race and free- and reduced-price lunch status, and their spring 2022 achievement levels.

Students who attended summer programs scored higher on an assessment of their math skills than students who did not. The researchers found a small, but positive, effect of summer learning on math achievement—0.03 of a standard deviation, which they estimated would mitigate about 2-3 percent of the total learning loss experienced in those districts. Most of this improvement was driven by upper elementary students.

The researchers found no effect for summer school in reading.

The programs did help students get extra learning time—the researchers found that each day of summer school produced academic gains roughly equivalent to each day of a regular school year. But these gains only made a tiny dent in academic recovery writ large.

Programs in the study were between 15-20 days long. On average, only 25 percent of target-ed students participated. “There’s an opportunity here to scale summer school more widely, and potentially to make it longer,” said Morton.

These kinds of changes would bring programs more in line with summer learning best practices, said Jodi Grant, the executive director of the Afterschool Alliance, an advocacy organization. Grant was not involved in the study.

“Even with intense support, it’s really hard to move the needle over a short period of time,” she said.

Grant also cited research-backed recommendations that summer learning should in-
clude opportunities for enrichment activities—not only academics. Doing so can make summer programs more attractive; they shouldn’t have to feel like a “punishment,” she said.

**Conditions for effective tutoring programs**

Designing an effective program is the first step. Implementing that program presents a whole new set of challenges.

This piece of the puzzle—implementation—is the focus on the working paper on tutoring.

“We know this intervention is really, really effective,” said Loeb. “But what hasn’t gotten nearly as much attention is that it’s not that easy to implement.”

Researchers reviewed 33 articles published since 2000. They found strong implementation relied in large part on the buy-in of principals and school leaders.

“Education leaders served as gatekeepers of student and staff time, school space, and data/documentation on students’ skills and instructional needs,” the researchers wrote.

Having a dedicated and informed program manager was important, too, Loeb said. “You really need someone at the district level who is kind of organizing the approach, making sure that it aligns with what we can see from the results are the most promising practices,” she said.

Program managers need to be compensated for the work they’re doing, she added. That money could come from new funding, or districts could reprioritize funds. “But you definitely need somebody who has paid time to do it, and who is really responsible [for it],” she said. “You can’t just add to people’s work without taking something away.”

Meeting conditions like these has been challenging for school districts.

The National Center for Education Statistics’ School Pulse Survey, an ongoing study of how schools are changing since the pandemic, polled school leaders in December 2022.

About a third of school leaders said they didn’t have the capacity to provide high-dosage tutoring to students who needed it. Two out of five schools said they couldn’t find time in their regular schedule for tutoring.

Still, Loeb said, better implementation is “not undoable.”

“Because it’s not easy,” she said, “we should be putting effort into thinking about the implementation process and really working on doing the implementation well.”
Tutoring Can Be Costly. Here's How To Make It Cost-Effective

By Sarah D. Sparks

In education as in finance, a diverse portfolio can be the most sustainable investment.

School District 11 in Colorado Springs hopes this kind of portfolio approach will enable it to continue to provide cost-effective tutoring for its students after federal support for learning-recovery efforts runs out next year.

In 2022-23, the Colorado district tutored more than 280 elementary students through a combination of in-person and virtual live tutors. Each year, it plans to target tutoring to students in the grades and subjects who need the most help with particular skills and match individual students to providers that specialize in the skills they need. While three district and outside providers administer tutoring in different subjects and grade levels, District 11 provides common curricular resources and ongoing training for tutors across providers to ensure all of them are aligned with and supplementing, rather than replacing, classroom instruction.

“Having this partnership with the data and the tutor providers—so that they’re striving for the same goal and accountable for that goal—that truly has been amazing,” said Tamara Acevedo, the district’s chief academic officer.

“We think it can be a game changer for not just how our district does work but how other districts work in the future with companies that provide tutoring.” Outside tutoring groups are paid in three stages, based on how much progress students make, rather than the number of hours they spend doing the tutoring.

While some states, such as Tennessee, have built tutoring into their funding formulas, most districts that want to continue tutoring after federal recovery money runs out will be on their own, said Susanna Loeb, an education professor and director of the National Student Support Accelerator at Stanford University, which studies ways to scale up high-impact tutoring. “I think there is funding in [existing federal funding streams, such as the Title I program for disadvantaged students, Title II grants for teacher training, and special education funding] that can all be used to support tutoring programs with advanced planning.

Tracking student data is critical to ensuring programs are cost-effective, said Nakia Towns, Accelerate’s chief operating officer.

Loeb’s accelerator is working with districts to train paraeducators to serve as tutors or to grow their own tutors into teachers. For example, the Guilford County public schools in North Carolina has partnered with the University of North Carolina-Greensboro to incorporate tutoring as part of aspiring teachers’ required preservice hours, providing a steadier pool of trained tutors.

Cost-effectiveness is key

Studies find the most effective tutoring takes place at school, during the school day, taught by teachers or trained professional tutors rather than peers or volunteers. These high-dose tutoring sessions involve groups of no more than three or four students per tutor and last for at least 30 minutes, three or more times a week.

“It’s really important to distinguish the kind of tutoring that is more one-off, where the student comes and opts in because they want some help on their homework or something like that,” Loeb said. “Those can be really great supports for students, but it isn’t the kind of intensive program that really takes a student and accelerates their learning or moves a struggling student onto grade-level work. That takes intensive work.”

But relatively few schools offer such intensive tutoring, and fewer students participate. The National Center for Education Statistics finds little more than 1 in 10 students receive this intensive, high-quality tutoring. In a nationally representative survey in December 2022, the University of Southern California Center for Economic and Social Research found fewer than 1 in 4 students with below-average grades received any tutoring, and less than 4 percent had long- or frequent-enough tutoring time in small groups for their lessons to be considered high-dose tutoring. (The survey did not ask about tutor qualifications or where the tutoring took place.)

Though it’s clear high-dose tutoring costs more in labor and resources than other forms of the intervention, Loeb said, there’s still no consensus around how much schools should pay for the intensive tutoring. Costs depend on the grades and subjects needed, as well as access to tutors and space.

But even small in-house programs can help, particularly for younger students. For example, Broward County, Fla., provided one-to-one tutoring for kindergartners struggling with early literacy. Rather than half-hour sessions, tutors met with students for seven to 10 minutes every day, targeting specific skills, at a cost of about $500 per student per year. “We saw the proportion of kindergarten students reaching the goals that the district had set for...
early reading go from just under 30 percent to well over 60 percent. So there was a really dramatic change,” Loeb said.

Avoiding repeating mistakes

High-dose tutoring has been the centerpiece of federal learning-recovery efforts since the pandemic. The U.S. Department of Education dedicated $20 million in American Recovery Act money in 2022 to provide 250,000 new school tutors and mentors via AmeriCorps and other groups; as of this summer, the initiative had provided grants to recruit 26,000 tutors in high-need areas. The department even urged universities to extend work-study credit to college students who serve as school tutors. But there has been no count of how many new tutors are working this year.

While the Council of Chief State School Officers estimates that states have spent $700 million in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, or ESSER, funds to expand tutoring programs, Robin Lake, who has been closely watching the rollout as the director of the Center for Reinventing Public Education at Arizona State University, said districts have been reluctant to invest in the most intensive tutoring.

“I think, in general, districts have held tight to the steering wheel. They have put money behind what they know—more staffing or deferred maintenance on things,” Lake said. “For many reasons, the money has not gone as far to things, like tutoring, that really work. ... It is a huge missed opportunity.

“That money’s already been spent,” she continued, “but with the remaining funds ... now, we have a much, much clearer idea about the scope of the problem, the challenge, and the needed strategies to address the problem.”

It’s not the first time the federal government has invested in large-scale tutoring expansion, and education watchers hope districts’ current tutoring efforts prove more effective and sustainable than the supplemental educational services that were part of the No Child Left Behind Act’s approach to school improvement from 2003 through 2015.

Under NCLB, schools that did not meet annual student-progress goals for multiple years had to offer low-performing students out-of-school tutoring, often provided by the district or outside providers. Four states today are using recovery funding to provide similar micro-grants for parents to pay for private tutoring.

But longitudinal studies of those efforts found that supplemental educational services did little to actually improve students’ reading or math performance and that schools struggled to align tutoring with school curriculum or identify the students who most needed help.

“There’s not a lot of evidence that the supplemental educational services under NCLB were very effective on average—and in retrospect, maybe that shouldn’t have been terribly surprising,” said Brian Gill, a senior fellow at the research firm Mathematica, who has studied supplemental educational services and other tutoring programs. "There wasn’t really a systematic mechanism for the tutoring providers to coordinate with what was going on in the classroom, which subsequently has been found—again, not surprisingly—to be one of the characteristics that tends to make tutoring more effective. At a minimum, you would hope to make sure that the tutoring instruction is reinforcing the classroom instruction rather than competing with it.”

Experience with NCLB tutoring has helped clarify factors that make programs more sustainable, Gill said. For example, incorporating tutoring sessions into the school day, rather than before or after school, eliminates the need for parents to organize transportation and can give tutors more opportunity to coordinate with teachers on the skills students need to practice.

Boosting participation

One simple way to make tutoring programs more effective and sustainable, Acclerate’s Town said, is to make sure the students who need tutoring actually participate.

Studies find low-income and low-performing students—those who are often most in need of an academic boost—are the least likely to opt into voluntary tutoring. Rather, she recommended schools identify and target specific students for tutoring aligned to the skills they need to develop.

But Keri Rodrigues, a co-founder and president of the National Parents Union, a network of more than 1,000 parent-advocacy groups nationwide, warned that schools need to communicate more clearly with parents about their children’s needs to drum up program attendance.

“You can create the program, but if you tell everybody, ‘No, you’re fine, your kid’s fine, [earning] A’s and B’s,’ no one’s going to sign up,” Rodrigues said. “We’ve seen many districts kind of play kind of fast and loose by say-
ing, ‘Oh, the tutoring is available, but it may not be worth even doing.’”

She advised schools to emphasize to parents the importance of tutoring by using student data. “It’s almost October, and we’re getting all of those results back from statewide tests,” Rodrigues said. “We could be using that data to identify the kids that are not making progress to grade level and generating information to parents saying, ’Hey, uh, regardless of what may have been on a previous report card, this is where your child is in terms of being at grade level. You should think about tutoring.’”

Planning for the long term

Mathematica’s Gill noted that there’s no guarantee that the different types of sources available now to support tutoring, whether they come from foundations or government sources, will continue. “They’re not built to work permanently,” he said. “This is one of the reasons that it is important to get providers experimenting with technology-enhanced versions and other things that might be less expensive to do and easier for districts to afford in absence of the extra federal funding.”

For example, District 11 is part of a national pilot by the Southern Education Foundation to develop contracts for tutoring providers based on student outcomes rather than student participation alone. Air Tutors, the group contracted to provide math support to 4th and 5th graders in Colorado Springs, had to provide trained tutors and site coordinators for tutoring sessions that met “high dosage” standards but also had to meet minimum participation requirements for all students and show faster-than-average student growth on the district’s STAR interim assessment. The tutored students progressed by one-and-a-half school years in 2022-23, for example, according to Acevedo, the district’s chief academic officer. The school system measures progress based on its interim assessment.

Success creates its own sustainability, Acevedo said. As more students regain their academic momentum, the district can narrow the focus of the most expensive and intensive tutoring to become more efficient.

“The idea of that [federal] recovery money really was to address learning loss that we saw as a result of the pandemic, and we’re already seeing that we’re shrinking that gap,” she said.
Learning ‘Acceleration’ Is Hard to Do. These Districts Are Tackling the Challenge

By Sarah Schwartz

Katina Tibbetts is determined to hold all her students to high standards. But she also knows that different kids need different kinds of help to get there.

Tibbetts, who teaches 1st, 3rd, and 5th grade English learners in the Gloucester public schools in Massachusetts, wants her students to be able to participate in class conversations when they go back to their general education classrooms. So she gives them a sneak peek of the work that they’ll do there. She does that by previewing important vocabulary words from the curriculum, giving students pictures, examples and nonexamples, and definitions.

“They really get the knowledge of that word that they’re going to see in class before they go back,” Tibbetts said. Then, her students have group discussions on some of the topics that they will learn about—another opportunity to use some of this vocabulary.

“What we’re seeing is that [English-learner] students, once they are in the class, are more able and more enthusiastic about engaging in discussions,” said Amy Pasquarello, Gloucester’s assistant superintendent. “They’re raising their hand, they’re participating, because they have that background knowledge that they may not have had before.”

What Tibbetts has been doing since she started in the district two years ago is considered a best practice for English-learner instruction. Some might just call it good teaching. But the Gloucester district sees her work as a key part of a new instructional strategy for all students, Pasquarello said: learning acceleration.

What is learning acceleration?

Starting in the spring and summer of 2020, education organizations started to promote the idea of acceleration as a pandemic-recovery strategy, a way to close learning gaps that arose from school disruptions and the challenges of remote learning.

The idea was that teachers would give all students grade-level work, even if they missed key understandings or knowledge from previous grades when in-person classes shut down in the pandemic. Teachers would build in support in their grade-level instruction that could help students access the material—like Tibbetts did for her English-learner students.

Despite the buzz around acceleration, federal data show that it hasn’t proved to be as popular as other learning-recovery strategies. A 2022 survey from the National Center for Education Statistics’ School Pulse Panel found that 72 percent of schools were using remedial instruction, 36 percent were using high-dosage tutoring, and 39 percent were using acceleration.

Experts have long said that doing acceleration well is challenging: It requires unified academic goals at the district level, resources that can help teachers add scaffolds to their lessons, time for teachers to plan, and ongoing professional learning. And it also can seem at odds with a commonly held education maxim—that teachers should meet each student where they are and differentiate instruction to their level.

“The folks that are engaged in this change process, it’s a multiyear effort,” said Elizabeth Chu, the executive director of the Center for Public Research and Leadership at Columbia University, who has studied teaching and learning during the pandemic.

Leaders in districts that started this work over the past few years agree. Building this kind of systemwide shift in instructional approach is at least a five-year journey, said Gary Willow, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Washington County public schools, in Maryland. He sees his district’s acceleration effort as an initiative with a broad...
### Which of the following best describes the approach you plan to use during the 2023-24 school year to address pandemic-related unfinished learning/learning loss?

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<th>Approach Description</th>
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<td>For the most part, my approach will entail moving directly to grade level content/skills</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<tr>
<td>or the most part, my approach will entail teaching the content/skills that students did not learn previously before moving on to grade level content/skills</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>N/A—I do not expect my 2023-24 students to have missed out on learning content/skills during the pandemic</td>
<td>11%</td>
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*Results show responses from teachers.

SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, July 2023

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er goal than just pandemic recovery.

“Our goal is not to get back to where we were,” Willow said. “Our goal is to go beyond where we were before.”

### How common is acceleration?

Before COVID, the word “acceleration” often referred to gifted education—giving advanced students above-grade-level content, or teaching them at a faster pace.

But the “acceleration” of the pandemic era has a different definition. It’s designed to be used with all students, not just those who are advanced. And the goal isn’t to move at a faster pace but to remove barriers that would prevent students from understanding grade-level content.

Take the example of a 4th grade class learning to add fractions. The teacher would first determine if students had unfinished learning around fractions from 3rd grade—did they understand that a fraction is a part of a whole number? If not, the teacher would weave that instruction into her 4th grade lesson, so that students would be better prepared to take on the grade-level work, rather than spending the whole lesson time reteaching the 3rd grade skill.

It’s hard to know how common this approach is, either in individual teachers’ classrooms or as a districtwide strategy, because surveys asking about “acceleration” might not capture everyone who is teaching this way, said Sarah Johnson, the CEO of Teaching Lab, a teacher professional learning organization.

“This jargon of acceleration is a pandemic-era jargon,” she said. “I think that most of the time, teachers don’t use the jargon of acceleration, but they might be engaged in the process of acceleration.”

In a 2023 EdWeek Research Center survey, only 14 percent of educators said that their districts or schools provided additional resources for accelerated learning to help students master material they missed during the pandemic.

But when asked to pick the description that best encapsulated their instructional approach, the majority of teachers selected the choice that described acceleration:

“This disconnect makes sense to Pasquarello, in Gloucester. “I don’t think what we’re doing we’re calling acceleration, but we are,” she said. Making sure kids have equal access to strong instruction is always important, she said, “but now more than ever.”

Last year, the district altered school schedules to create a separate block for intervention and special services, outside of time for whole-class, or what the district calls “tier 1”, instruction. “That makes sure that students are not pulled for extra services during the tier 1 block,” Pasquarello said. “It holds that tier 1 instruction is sacred.”

This year, the district plans to create structures that will bring the kind of scaffolding Tibbetts is doing in her classroom statewide, says Pasquarello.

The elementary teacher is excited to see more formalized systems for this work across the district, but she also worries about workload—especially for EL and special education teachers.

Tibbetts spends two to three hours of her own time every other day preparing the materials she needs to preteach vocabulary and content knowledge, she said.

“I do it because I love my kids and I think that’s what they need, but I know that’s not the fairest of routes,” Tibbetts said, referencing asking other teachers to take on that kind of extra workload. “There’s just some logistical stuff that’s going to be tough to figure out.”

### Putting the ‘grunt work’ on district leadership

Shifting some of these logistics off teachers and onto other district personnel was essential to making acceleration work in Charles Smith’s district.

“You have to think about your capacity to do something like this,” said Smith, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Wilton school system in Connecticut.

In Wilton, district instructional coordinators “took on some of the grunt work,” Smith said, analyzing student data and developing a learning “blueprint” that spelled out what kids might need to practice and review in order to meet each grade-level standard.

“That was really helpful for the teachers, because they didn’t have that time to do an in-depth analysis of what really was an enormous amount of unfinished learning,” Smith said.

In Washington County, Willow’s district, the curriculum team created a systemwide definition of, and action plan for, acceleration. The district added a feature to its learning management system that allowed teachers to have easy access to student data—so they could see which students needed help with which skills.

And over the 2021 and 2022 summers, the curriculum team developed materials and activities, tailored to the district curriculum, that teachers could use for students who needed extra support.

This bank of scaffolds included tools like sentence frames that could help kickstart an oral response for students or graphic organizers that could help them formulate their thoughts for a written assignment, said Carly Pumphrey,
the district’s supervisor of English/language arts and social studies.

These solutions were designed to give all students a way into grade-level text, Pumphrey said—rather than giving students different texts based on their perceived reading ability.

**Schools still face roadblocks to acceleration**

Leaders in the Wilton, Gloucester, and Washington County districts all see acceleration as a long-term strategy, not just a pandemic-recovery solution.

“We’re a fairly high-performing school district, but we have some distinct achievement gaps,” said Smith, Wilton’s assistant superintendent.

“I think our teachers do recognize the importance of making grade-level curriculum accessible to everybody, but they were struggling with how to do that. And I think this framework made it possible,” he said.

These districts are still working through the challenges that come with trying to radically restructure how teaching and learning operates.

In Washington County, those roadblocks have to do with the nitty-gritty of classroom instruction. The district has set acceleration as a priority and provided resources. But figuring out exactly how to plan and manage a 4th grade class in which some students are at a 4th grade level, some are at a 3rd grade level, and some are at a 1st grade level is still a big hurdle for teachers—and understandably so, said Pumphrey.

This year, she said, the district is restructuring middle school schedules to give teachers 90 minutes of daily planning time—a change that they already made last year for high school and one that Pumphrey hopes will give teachers the space to work on these questions.

The district is also focusing on coaching and collaborative professional learning this year, in which teachers will be able to discuss model lessons, Willow said.

In Wilton, Smith still isn’t seeing all the changes he would hope for in student data.

“Everybody grew, but some groups didn’t grow as much as others,” he said of test scores since the pandemic.

The score gaps that existed before the pandemic—between general education and special education students, native English speakers and English learners, students from low-income families and high-income families—persist.

“I think [those are the groups] that we’re still trying to figure how we can further accelerate their growth,” Smith said.
Teacher shortages have become a significant challenge for school districts nationwide. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCED), 18% of public schools had one teaching vacancy, and 27% had multiple vacancies in 2022. U.S. schools are also facing the largest decline in learning in two decades among their students, according to the National Assessment of Education Progress, due to the pandemic.

On average, students in grades 3-8 attending public schools in the United States experienced a loss of learning in the following:

- 6 months of math
- 3 months of reading

Remote instructional services can help bridge the gaps in staffing and learning for school districts of any size, allowing students to access quality education even when there are vacancies in their schools. And the benefits can be vast, such as:

- Alleviate staffing challenges and prevent teacher burnout
- Co-teach models that target learning loss
- Teach new courses not currently offered
- Provide individualized learning
- Minimize achievement gaps
- Create a positive learning culture

These services can also offer a way to mitigate future learning disruptions, enhance student-teacher bonding, and provide continuous academic support.

A teacher shortage can contribute to learning loss in a variety of ways, such as:

- Learning disruptions
- Limited bonds with teachers
- Poor student outcomes
- Low achievement
- Reduced learning opportunities
- Increased marginalization
Closing Achievement Gaps with Virtual Tutoring

In addition to providing remote instruction to overcome pandemic learning loss, research by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University has shown that high-dosage tutoring can lead to significant learning for many students – including those who have fallen behind.

That same study revealed that with ordinary instruction, it could take elementary school students up to three years and middle school students up to five years to recover and get back on track from the pandemic’s impact on learning loss.

Fast Facts on High-Dosage Tutoring

High-dosage tutoring is a proven, evidence-based method to quickly recover lost learning with a target focus on the student’s specific learning style and needs.

Here’s a breakdown on what high-dosage tutoring is - as well as how it can support students:

- Accessible to all, with priority given to lower-performing students
- Ideally consists of 30-to-60 minute sessions, three times per week
- Intensive 1-to-1 or small-group sessions
- Individualized to reinforce what students are learning in the classroom
- Provided by a state-certified, qualified teacher
- Responsive to student needs

“Teachers know best what their students need, so having a tutoring program that allows teachers to assign tutoring to specific students – and to communicate to the tutors what should be covered in those sessions – enables instruction that’s aligned to what students are learning in the classroom.”

Jennifer Moore, General Manager
Stride Tutoring
The Results: Enhanced Recovery through Remote Instruction and Tutoring

Stride Learning Solution’s remote instruction was implemented in Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) to address critical teacher shortages. Here’s a snapshot of the results:

- 46 certified remote teachers deployed
- 3,300+ students served with remote instruction

A survey of those students demonstrates how effective our remote learning solution was:

- 95% felt respected and challenged
- 94% found their remote teacher to be knowledgeable
- 82% felt appreciated for their in-class facilitator and remote teacher
- 80% overall student satisfaction

An Evidence-Based Approach to Tutoring for School Districts

In 2020, a meta-analysis of 96 tutoring students by the Poverty Action Lab concluded that high-dosage tutoring can help students make up three-to-fifteen months of lost learning – which makes it an ideal option for school districts to help their students rapidly recover lost learning. Stride Tutoring – which is credentialed as ESSA Level IV evidence-based – has impacted students and school districts across the U.S. with this proven approach.

“Not all tutoring programs are created equal, though,” Moore said. “Small group sizes are key – no more than about four students per tutor. And the quality of those tutors is paramount.”

About Stride Learning Solutions

Since 2000, Stride Learning Solutions has been a leader in strategic solutions to solve school district challenges. Stride Learning Solutions’ flexible online and blended learning options boost modern instruction and promote lifelong student success. With state-certified remote teachers, high-dosage tutoring, custom online schools, an innovative platform, comprehensive digital courseware, adaptable technology, and extensive support, Stride Learning Solutions is equipped to help your school district empower a brighter future for learners.

To learn more, visit StrideLS.com.
What’s Behind the Gaps in Early Intervention Services—And What It Means for K-12 Schools

By Evie Blad

Better demographic data about young children with disabilities who seek and receive federally funded early intervention services, such as physical therapy, could help policymakers address barriers to access.

That’s the conclusion of a new report by the Government Accountability Office, the nonpartisan federal watchdog agency, which analyzed states’ data from the 2021-22 school year.

The agency used the data, and related surveys of state officials to explore disparities in access to programs under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, through which states use federal funding to identify and treat infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays and to support their families.

The aim is to begin a program of treatment and support, sometimes fully addressing concerns before a child enters the K-12 school system. Those services could include speech therapy for verbal delays, physical therapy for motor skill development, family training to address emotional development, or vision support. But a lack of qualified providers and staffing challenges mean many qualifying children don’t receive or struggle to access services, state officials told the GAO.

That gap matters to K-12 leaders, who benefit when students receive services early, said Allison Friedman-Krauss, an assistant research professor at Rutgers University’s National Institute for Early Education Research.

“These children are going to be entering your system,” she said. “The more Part C can give them a step up early on, the better prepared they will be when they walk in your doors for kindergarten.”

Federal data lacking

Forty-one states provided the GAO with data about every step of the early intervention pipeline: referral, evaluation, eligibility determination, and enrollment in services. In those states, 53 percent of children who were referred for Part C were ultimately enrolled in services.

There are no federal data on the race and ethnicity of children who seek early intervention services, but statistics from the 16 states that track such information found “notable variation at different points in the enrollment process,” the report said. Those steps include referrals, evaluations, eligibility determinations, and actually being enrolled in services.

Among those 16 states, the portion of referred children who received an evaluation for services was as low as 59 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native children and as high as 86 percent of Asian children, a spread of 27 points.

Among children deemed eligible for services after an evaluation, the portion who actually enrolled ranged from a low of 91 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native to a high of 95 percent of Asian and white children, a 4-point range.

Gaps in services could represent factors like awareness of options among parents, a lack of early intervention staff who speak a student’s home language, or a variety of other factors, Friedman-Krauss said.

Another potential cause for disparities: States use different methods to determine whether children have developmental delays, some broader and some more narrow, the GAO found. Some states use qualitative measures. For example, Vermont evaluations call
for an "observable and measurable developmental delay." But other states use quantitative measures. In Illinois, for example, a child must show a "30 percent or greater delay in one or more developmental area."

The U.S. Department of Education has sought to address such access gaps by asking Congress to require states to create equity plans that include data about racial and ethnic disparities of children who enroll in Title C services.

But that plan doesn’t call for demographic data about earlier steps in the process—such as referrals and evaluations—which may help paint a fuller picture of how unequal access is, the GAO report found.

The agency recommended that Congress empower federal officials to require states to collect demographic data on children at all steps in the Part C process: referral, evaluation, eligibility determination, and receiving services.

“When kids in need of services are identified late in the game or not at all, they miss out on critical support needed to meet their developmental milestones,” Jacqueline M. Nowicki, who leads education research at GAO, said on an Oct. 5 agency podcast. “And that makes it harder for them over the long term—academically, behaviorally, socially, and developmentally.”
HE third full school year since the start of the pandemic is well underway, and teachers are reporting that students are still academically behind from where they should be. This school year could be make-or-break in terms of catching students up to grade level, experts say. The nation’s largest teachers’ union is among those looking for solutions.

The National Education Association hosted a three-day gathering in February for teams of educators who wanted to think creatively about how to boost student learning in their districts. The teams were comprised of educators, administrators, and community or parent partners. Each ultimately received a $10,000 grant from the union to put their plans into action following approval from district leadership.

The 10 district teams’ plans range from small-group tutoring to high-quality professional development to bolstering student engagement. Some of the plans don’t explicitly address academics at all, but rather focus on contributing factors like student hunger, attendance, and a sense of belonging.

The idea, NEA leaders said, is to think holistically about how to accelerate student learning and to recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for districts.

“The pandemic exacerbated gaps that we as educators knew existed—our parents certainly did—and those gaps have been there forever,” said NEA Becky Pringle in a webinar about the program earlier this month. “So make no mistake: Our accelerated student learning program is not designed to make up for just two years. That’s impossible. We know that. But we are committed to learning the lessons of all that we have experienced.”

School districts in Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Virginia received the grants. Education Week spoke to educators in three of the districts about their plans.

A focus on improving attendance

The Alton school district in southern Illinois, close to the Missouri border, is starting with the basics: Are students even in class to learn? Nearly half of the district’s 5,900-student body has been chronically absent following the pandemic, meaning they miss 10 percent or more of school days. Bobby Rickman, the president of the Alton Education Association who’s leading the project, said district has a diverse socioeconomic population, and students from all backgrounds are missing school.

The organization Attendance Works estimates the number of chronically absent students has as much as doubled nationwide since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. “We can’t help the student learn if they’re not in front of the teacher or support professional who can help them catch up,” Rickman said.

During the pandemic, parents became accustomed to their children being able to do their work at home on their laptops, Rickman said. They don’t always understand attendance policies, he said, adding that educators needed to do a better job communicating and connecting with parents.

And students are struggling with mental health and social-emotional issues that sometimes keep them home more than ever, Rickman said.

In the coming weeks, the team plans to launch a campaign titled, “Be here to get there.” The message, Rickman said, is that being at school is the pathway to students’ future goals, be they college or career.

The team will promote the message in the local newspaper and through signs, and tap recent high school graduates to make social media videos about what they liked about their school community.

Then, each school will establish a committee that will solicit feedback from students, parents, teachers, and other community members about what can be done to improve attendance.

“If you leave one group out, you’re leaving ideas out,” Rickman said.

In the spring, schools will identify an engaging project to make students want to come to school. For example, one school might plant a garden and allow students to take home its fruit and vegetables.

But the key piece is that the project will be chosen and designed by the students, Rickman said: “We want to leave it for the students to make that decision so they can feel like they are taking ownership—‘It’s not the school’s project, it’s our project.’”

The bulk of the $10,000 grant will go toward the projects’ startup costs. (Rickman said he hopes all schools will ultimately launch a student-led project, but that the dis-
Making sure students are fed

You can’t learn when you’re hungry. The team at the Dolton West 148 school district in a Chicago suburb is starting there.

The nearly 2,000-student school district already provides students breakfast, lunch, and—for those who are enrolled in the after-school program—dinner on weekdays, but many students are still going hungry on the weekends.

“A lot of parents are having a hard time now after the pandemic,” said Darlene McMillian, the safety facilitator at Park Elementary School and the president of the local teachers’ union who is leading this project. “They’re trying to make ends meet.”

To help bridge the gap, the district plans to start passing out bags of snacks—healthy and nonperishable items, like crackers and applesauce—that students can take home over the weekend.

McMillian said she believes feeding children is the first step to improving attendance and achievement.

“When a child is full and fed, their attention is more on what the teacher is trying to teach them,” she said. “If they were hungry on the weekend, and they have to wait [to eat] until they come back, their minds are not going to be focused on what they’re learning.”

The district will use the NEA grant to start up the project, but district officials are also pursuing community partnerships to sustain the initiative long after the initial $10,000 runs out.

“It’s one way that we can try to give back to our community to help out because we want to be considered more than just the school—we want to be a safe haven for our students,” McMillian said. “We need to realize that if we want students to succeed, we have to start with basic needs for their bodies.”

Accelerating learning through small-group tutoring

The Montgomery County school system in the mountains of southwestern Virginia wanted to tackle the learning gaps between students of color and economically disadvantaged students and their white, more affluent peers.

“Even though there were issues after the pandemic, some of those issues have always been there,” said Matthew Fentress, a 5th grade teacher at Kipps Elementary and the president of the New River UniServ who is leading this project. (UniServ is the NEA’s field staff program, which helps support local affiliates.) “Often, us as teachers get pinned down by trying to cover every standard of learning, and so we’re often forced to move along without sometimes taking kids to a level of mastery.”

The 9,680-student school district has committed to accelerated learning, which means teachers continue to give all students grade-level work and then build in supports to help students who have gaps in their knowledge or skills.

Fentress and the other five people on the team (including his wife, Crystal, who teaches preschool in the district) are working to bring in volunteers who can work with small groups of students three times a week. The team is starting small and initially focusing on 1st and 2nd grade students at the Christiansburg Primary School.

The goal is for local college students—including those supported by the Access to Community College Education program, which gives financial aid in exchange for community service hours—to volunteer as tutors. (Educators in the district would train the volunteers.)

This could have a secondary benefit, Fentress said: The college students might be inspired to pursue teaching, which could help address the local teacher shortage down the road.

The district is still looking for those volunteers but hopes to officially start the program this school year. Fentress said the $10,000 grant might be used to provide stipends for the volunteers, as well as to procure materials for tutoring.

The goal, he said, is “helping kids get to where they need to be, instead of where they’re at.”
What Districts Need When Investing Their Funds

If a district’s plan has the scope right, it will prioritize investing in proven strategies

By Denise Forte & Thomas J. Kane

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruptions not just to schools but to the lives of kids and families: Lost loved ones, lost jobs, lost homes, food insecurity, and more came with a steep academic and social-emotional toll. With the magnitude of unfinished learning now becoming clear—such as the recently released Education Recovery Scorecard and other national and state data that map out the losses in individual school districts across the country—state and local education leaders must revisit their plans for spending what remains of the more than $190 billion in federal pandemic-relief aid allocated to education.

As always in education spending, it is a question of not just how much but how well districts spend the dollars. Given that federal law required that 90 percent of the money be distributed to local school districts without strings attached, district leaders must scrutinize plans to ensure that the scope and substance of their plans match the scale of the crisis we all face.

If a district’s plan has gotten the scope right, it will prioritize investing in proven strategies: intensive, targeted tutoring; expanded learning time; social-emotional and mental health supports for students; and, of course, a strong and diverse educator workforce that provides rigorous, well-rounded, and empowering instruction.

If the recovery plan is implemented at the necessary scale, prior research shows that districts will be able to get back on track. On the other hand, if a district that suffered substantial achievement losses spends a disproportionate share on facilities improvements, technology, and supplemental instructional support for only a small proportion of students, its leaders will have failed to meet the moment.

Evaluating the substance of a district’s plan will require a deeper inquiry into the nature of the planned interventions. Consider three examples of investments:

- **Tutoring**: The evidence base for intensive, targeted tutoring calls for well-trained tutors working with students individually or in very small groups over a sustained period, ideally during the school day, using high-quality materials that are aligned to the curriculum. However, some districts say they are investing in tutoring, when in fact, all they have done is purchase licenses for use of an online homework-help platform and sent the link to families if they are interested in accessing it. Or they are providing fewer than the three tutoring sessions per week prior studies have shown to be effective. With either approach, the intended gains simply won’t materialize, particularly for students with the highest needs.

- **Summer learning**: When districts frame expanded learning time and summer programming as optional remedial support, they are unlikely to get many takers. A recent survey from Education Next shows many families still don’t realize the scope of unfinished learning their children have experienced, with a shocking 43 percent of parents saying they don’t believe their child has experienced any learning loss at all. A purely optional summer academic program without any supplemental elements or free transportation to attract participation won’t work. Evidence and common sense say that even the best summer school teacher can’t make a difference with students who don’t attend regularly. A well-designed summer program will either extend the school year itself—including both core academics and enrichment—or pair “ice cream with broccoli,” using high-engagement offerings like robotics, the arts, or athletics (through partnerships with local community-based organizations) to maximize student attendance while providing high-quality summer academic instruction.

- **Core instruction**: While districts may say their investments of recovery dollars are designed to strengthen core instruction, the urgent need to address unfinished learning should raise the bar for evaluating the quality of such investments. Replacing a weak reading curriculum that ignores the science of
reading with one that reflects the best research on the importance of systematic phonics instruction and building background knowledge and vocabulary would be a prudent investment. So, too, would be professional development for current and incoming teachers on the science of reading. On the other hand, allocations to professional-development activities without proven impact on student learning should be met with deep skepticism.

The Education Trust recently published a guide that highlights promising district plans for the use of recovery dollars and details the kinds of questions equity advocates should be asking district leaders and school board members about their recovery plans. But a good or even a great plan must be the beginning, not the end, of transparency and accountability. Districts need to be tracking the types and amounts of support each student is receiving so that we can all learn which interventions mattered most—and potentially adjust recovery plans next year.

Many schools and districts have been left to find solutions to unfinished learning on their own. This is a missed opportunity. There are decades of research on what works. District and school leaders can build on that knowledge base to implement programs that are aligned with best practices during this summer and fall, with an eye toward scaling up and sustaining the most effective approaches. An iterative process of testing strategies, evaluating the impact, adapting based on continuous learning, and replicating the most effective approaches is the key to progress. It’s not just about short-term pandemic recovery but about using this unprecedented federal investment to change how we do school in the long term, especially for the most underserved students.

Now is not the time to “get back to normal,” when doing so will mean allowing the inequitable impacts of the pandemic to continue to exacerbate existing inequities. If school and district leaders organize themselves to learn over the next two years, they can reinvent summer learning, engage parents in new ways, support educators, transform the way literacy is taught—and ensure that something good emerges from this pandemic.

Denise Forte is the president and CEO of The Education Trust, a national advocacy organization, and a leading voice on education equity. Thomas J. Kane is an economist and the Walter H. Gale Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.
Want to Take Learning Recovery Seriously? Support and Train Teachers

Don’t let fear and instructional ignorance get in the way

By Nardi Routten

This new year, I’m reflecting on a quote widely attributed to Maya Angelou that means a lot to me as an educator: “You did what you knew how to do, and when you knew better, you did better.” Last year opened my eyes to the many inadequacies in the U.S. education system. Sure, a lot of the gaps we see in student learning are a result of COVID’s impact on schooling. However, with the new year, I want to focus on teacher confidence and support.

Teacher confidence is critical—and a problem illuminated by the recent results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. NAEP survey data released alongside the test scores showed many teachers lack confidence when it comes to addressing students’ knowledge and skill gaps as a result of the pandemic. Many teachers feel they don’t have the support to close learning gaps in their classrooms, specifically regarding content that falls outside the current grade level of their students.

As a 4th grade teacher and a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees NAEP, I expect my students to enter the school year possessing specific foundational reading skills so we can focus more on reading to learn rather than learning how to read. Unfortunately, kids are increasingly lacking some foundational reading skills in the 4th grade, especially as a result of the pandemic.

Unfortunately, it is common to hear teachers say things like, “That’s not my problem, these students need to know this,” or “I don’t have time to teach it, I have to move on.” I have said those words myself; but today, those words make me cringe.

Is it truly a lack of time or is it a lack of knowledge and skills that drive us to think—or say—those things? I’ll be honest; for me, it was the latter. I did not know how to teach basic phonemic foundational reading skills and I was afraid to admit it. But at the start of this school year, my class’ initial benchmark and diagnostic assessments revealed that 40 percent of my 4th graders lacked certain foundational phonemic-awareness skills. It was then clear to me that I couldn’t let my fear and instructional ignorance get in the way of a proper response.

So, what do we do about this? We can’t just throw our hands up, blame the pandemic, and move on.

I’ve been able to improve my teaching thanks to new approaches in my state of North Carolina. Policymakers here have elected to provide P-5 teachers and other educators access to a professional learning program to help ensure instruction is aligned to the science of reading and help us address learning gaps. As a result, I have learned how to integrate important phonemic skills in my daily reading lessons to benefit all my students—even my advanced readers—not just those who exhibit gaps.

Training is vital to our craft when addressing learning gaps. If a student fails to master a specific concept, a different approach may be needed. The teacher with a vast repertoire of strategies—gained from proper training—will be more successful helping said student.

And the training is showing improvement in my instruction, too. About three months into the school year, one of my struggling readers came up to me beaming after reading a grade-level book with very little support and said, “Ms. Routten, I’m really getting this and I’m getting to be a better 4th grade reader.” It made my day. With the proper support,
I was better able to help my students.

It’s not just teachers who need to take steps to help children become better readers. Policymakers and decisionmakers must use all the education data available to see where student needs are and come up with targeted, evidence-based solutions to address learning gaps. My state’s approach to supporting teachers has been a positive step, and I hope policymakers in my state and others look for more ways to support educators in meeting the needs of our young people. This requires engaging teachers in meaningful conversations and creating the space for them to identify areas where they need support.

Policymakers should also use data to drive their decisionmaking. The latest “nation’s report card” is a rich data set that should inform all our work throughout the education system—from students and teachers to classrooms and schools—as we help students recover from the pandemic. My hope in this new year is for all stakeholders (policymakers, administrators, and all educators) to focus on what is best for students. They are our future. Let’s “know better in order to do better” by our children.

Nardi Routten teaches 4th grade at Creekside Elementary School in New Bern, N.C. She has been a member of the National Assessment Governing Board since 2018 and is the 2014 recipient of the Milken Educator Award.