



Supporting Teachers & Students

EDITOR'S NOTE

Supports needed by teachers and students have changed. This Spotlight will help you evaluate your district and what supports your schools offer; it'll help you assess potential weaknesses in your attendance policies to avoid burnout; you'll become familiar with equity needs seen in other districts; gain insights on curriculum frustrations; get advice on accelerating learning; and you'll have a chance to see how other leaders have harnessed the power of relationships.

Students Are Getting Mental Health Days. So Why Don't Teachers?.....**2**

The Pandemic Made It Harder to Spot Students With Disabilities. Now Schools Must Catch Up.....**3**

Accelerating Learning: Tech Advice to Make It Happen.....**6**

Understanding Learning 'Acceleration': Going Slow To Go Fast.....**8**

OPINION

The Overlooked Support Teachers Are Missing: A Coherent Curriculum.....**9**

5 Things to Expect When Schools Return to In-Person Learning.....**11**

A School District Is Built On Relationships. Here's How To Harness Them.....**12**



Published on August 3, 2021

Students Are Getting Mental Health Days. So Why Don't Teachers?

By Madeline Will

Emily Wang noticed that when her teachers seemed stressed, their demeanor changed and sometimes they took out their frustration on students. Wouldn't it be better for everyone, the 16-year-old wondered, if teachers could take mental health days?

Emily, a high school senior at St. Andrew's Episcopal School in Potomac, Md., surveyed two dozen public and private school teachers across the county during the 2020-21 school year about whether they think teachers need mental health days. Nearly 80 percent said yes, and the vast majority also said they think mental health days would improve teachers' performance in the classroom.

Yet Emily has received a lukewarm reaction from administrators and union officials as she's tried to pitch her research and proposal of paid mental health days for teachers. She said she's been told that educators want to focus on student mental health—which Emily agrees is important. But she wonders why that same attention isn't given to teachers.

"Once we start talking about teachers' mental health, no one seems to advocate for them," she said. "There's a lot of stigma around adult mental health."

There's a growing push in both state legis-

latures and school districts to make sure that mental health is an acceptable reason for students to take a day off. Yet there hasn't been an equivalent push for teachers, despite surveys showing that teacher stress levels—which were already high, compared to those of other adults—have skyrocketed.

A survey from the RAND Corporation found that 78 percent of teachers said they experience frequent job-related stress, and 1 in 5 said they're not coping well with that stress. Half of teachers reported feeling burned out, and more than a quarter said they experience symptoms of depression.

"If you want to support student mental health and well-being, you have to support teacher well-being and mental health because they are very inextricably linked," said Patricia Jennings, a professor of education at the University of Virginia and an expert in teacher stress. "I think people are starting to recognize that teachers' well-being is really critical to their ability to perform their jobs well."

Research shows that classroom tensions can be "contagious"—when teachers feel burned out or exhausted, their students are more stressed. Other studies show that teachers who feel stressed have worse classroom management.

Still, Jennings said, she's not convinced that giving teachers explicitly named "mental

health days" is the solution. Instead, she and other experts said, school leaders should encourage teachers to use their sick leave any time they don't feel well—physically or mentally.

Already, most districts do not require a doctor's note for the use of one sick day, so teachers could take the day off for mental health reasons. On average, teachers receive about a dozen sick and personal days a year and are able to roll over any unused days from year to year with no cap. (Many teachers save their sick days so they can have paid parental leave, which is not given to teachers in most states.)

Seventy-nine percent of educators said their school or district allows staff to take excused absences for mental health reasons, according to a nationally representative EdWeek Research Center survey of teachers, principals, and district leaders that was conducted June 30 to July 12, 2021. And 88 percent said they support staff being able to take time off for mental health purposes.

But in interviews, many teachers said they rarely take a day off for mental health reasons, even if they can. Some said the stress of finding a substitute, writing lesson plans, and then dealing with the aftermath of being absent for a day would negate the benefits of taking a break.

"The idea of a lost day ... you're kind of shooting yourself [in the foot] in the long run," said Meredith Lesser-Gonzalez, a 5th grade teacher in Framingham, Mass. "A mental health day seems like a luxury."

A lack of substitutes makes a day off seem out of reach

Educators often report working long hours, bringing work home on the weekends, and taking on a multitude of responsibilities to meet the needs of their students. Administrators have increasingly started to pay more attention to teacher mental health, but experts say it will take time to significantly change school culture.

"We have this ethos that if you're not showing up, ... it's probably a reflection of weakness on your part," said B Grace Bullock, the senior mental health strategist for the Oregon Department of Education. "There's really a stigma for identifying mental health concerns, and not all schools allow for those conversations. ... Schools, in many respects, are not designed with staff mental health in mind."

There are also structural issues preventing teachers from taking a break, experts say, like the shortage of substitutes. A nationwide EdWeek Research Center survey of school lead-

“

I think people are starting to recognize that teachers' well-being is really critical to their ability to perform their jobs well.”

PATRICIA JENNINGS

A PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION,
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

ers conducted in December 2019 and January 2020—before the pandemic—found that administrators were concerned about finding enough substitute teachers, and only about half of respondents were able to fill their teacher absences each day. (The survey was commissioned by Kelly Education, a staffing service.)

And the pandemic made things worse: Another national survey conducted in November 2020 found that most school and district leaders said their need for substitute teachers is up, yet applications for the positions were down. Teachers say they don't always know who will be taking over their classroom when they're gone. Sometimes they're even asked to find their own substitute.

“As a teacher, you end up feeling sort of trapped,” Jennings said. “On one hand, you feel like you need to take care of yourself, you need time off. On the other hand, you worry that you're just going to make your life harder if you do take time off.”

And one teacher taking the day off could make it harder for their colleagues. Lesser-Gonzalez said that when a substitute isn't available, other teachers on her team have to pick up the slack and cover the absent teacher's classes.

“While I love the idea of a mental health day, ... I would be reluctant to just take a day off because of the negative impact on my team of me not being there,” she said. “Our team works really closely [together], and we all support each other.”

Jennings said ideally schools would have a full-time substitute whom teachers trust and who could be readily available to take over classes. This type of model, common in high-poverty urban schools, is recommended by Substantial Classrooms, a national nonprofit focused on improving substitute

teaching, for the stability it provides students and staff.

After all, providing a substitute with information about each child's needs, in addition to the lesson plan itself, is time-consuming, said Mary Strickler, a 4th grade English/language arts and social studies teacher in Indian River County, Fla. The amount of time and work it takes deters her from taking a day off, she said.

It would be a relief, she said, if the substitute were a “member of your school community. ... You knew her, and she knew you.”

Teachers will need support this year, experts say

Attention to mental health will be especially important this coming school year, as both students and teachers return to the classroom still reeling from the stresses and traumas caused by the ongoing pandemic and the disrupted 2020-21 school year.

Bullock is spearheading a campaign through the Oregon education department for districts to spend the first few weeks focused on building a supportive community for both staff and students. For example, the department suggests that school and district leaders create opportunities for relationship building and celebrate educators' resilience.

Giving equal attention to both student and staff mental health is a cornerstone of the department's mental-health initiatives. Bullock said school leaders need to make sure they're putting systems in place that encourage teachers to take care of themselves.

“A mental health day is great but it does not address the underlying conditions that are contributing to the need for a mental health day in the first place,” she said.

Lesser-Gonzalez, the 5th grade teacher, said she'd rather have more time for planning and paperwork, “so we don't reach the point of needing a mental health day.”

In the meantime, Emily, the 16-year-old from Maryland, is still advocating for mental health days for teachers. She's reached out to the Montgomery County Education Association and the school district in hopes that they will consider her policy proposal.

Emily, who plans to replicate her study on a larger scale, said she was surprised at how “indifferent” administrators and others have been toward teacher mental health: “If nobody is willing to act, then when can the teachers' voices finally be heard, cared for, and valued?” ■



—Annie Mulligan for Education Week

Kanisha Aikin listens to her 8-year-old son, Carter, who has dyslexia, as he reads aloud in the family's home in Katy, Texas.

Published on July 14, 2021

The Pandemic Made It Harder to Spot Students With Disabilities. Now Schools Must Catch Up

By Evie Blad

Kanisha Aikin had suspected her son, Carter, might have dyslexia, but it wasn't until his Katy, Texas, school closed in March 2020 that she was certain.

Carter, then in 1st grade, quickly switched to remote learning alongside millions of students around the country as leaders struggled to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. That gave Aikin a rare chance to watch her son's day-to-day learning experience up close.

As his virtual class did reading exercises, Carter struggled to blend sounds together. Even after seeming to master a word on one page of a book, he failed to recognize the same word a few pages later. Sometimes his frustration would lead to misbehavior or a lack of focus. And his reading skills were noticeably different from his classmates' and even his younger sisters'.

“I was panicking,” Aikin said. “I thought, ‘If we don't do something quick, he's going to be in trouble.’ Regardless of the world shutting down, time was still passing, and he was still

How to Choose the Right Reading Intervention

Results from the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed that almost two-thirds of our nation's students are below proficient in reading for the entirety of their primary and secondary school careers. More recent published results, from spring 2021 state testing, confirmed that many students' reading progress was significantly impacted by the disrupted learning and instructional shifts of the past 18 months. The students most affected by the school closures and shifts to remote and hybrid instruction were those already struggling to make reading gains. Now as schools work to re-engage students—while striving to balance students' social-emotional and academic learning needs—there is renewed focus for school districts to implement reading intervention programs that engage students, accelerate their learning, and yield rapid results.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) encourages school districts to choose intervention programs that have sufficient evidence to demonstrate that they improve student outcomes. Additionally, school district's ESSER funding can be used for evidence-based programs that meet the comprehensive needs of students. Understanding evidence standards and knowing what to look for can help districts make informed choices about an intervention program's potential effectiveness.



Follow these steps to help you choose the right reading intervention for your district.

1. Identify Your District's Needs

First, engage all district stakeholders—including teachers, administrators, families, students, and community partners—to determine specific student needs. Consider gathering information via online surveys, personal interviews, and focus groups.

Next, compare current student outcomes to the district's performance goals. Use this information to identify student achievement gaps and determine which of them to prioritize. Where could an intervention help you improve?

Then take inventory of current practices and interventions to inform the types of interventions the district requires. Are you using any interventions that aren't working the way they should? Make sure you understand the current situation before looking to add a new intervention to your district's toolbox.

2. Look for Evidence-Based Interventions

Once you've identified the type of intervention needed, it's important to find one with quality efficacy research. The ESSA Tiers of Evidence can help narrow your search. Several clearinghouses can also help educators find instructional programs that are research-proven. Evidence for ESSA provides the most up-to-date and user-friendly review of research based on the ESSA tiers. The What Works Clearinghouse has begun to align its evaluation process with the ESSA tiers, and the National Center for Intensive Intervention provides evaluations of other program components such as academic screeners.

Most likely, you'll be looking for studies that meet "strong" and "moderate" evidence. But consider this: **gold-standard studies may not be feasible with all subpopulations**, so referring to programs meeting "promising" and "demonstrating a rationale" can also be useful when researching solutions for a particular group—for example, English language learners or students with disabilities.

No matter how you select a program, you will find that interventions with rigorous evidence of effectiveness are more likely to produce successful results in your district.

3. Read the Fine Print

After referring to a third-party source, check out the intervention's own research. But be careful that you read the fine print in marketing materials and when negotiating your contracts. You will sometimes see wording that promises "up to 2X or 3X expected growth." The red flag here is "up to," which often implies greater results than the product may actually achieve for most students. If the product's marketers could say, "On average, students with certain characteristics achieve X% of growth," they would.

Another red flag is reliance on self-referential data. Proprietary company results and performance data should be correlated with a national metric, such as SBAC, PARCC, or NWEA MAP to be a compelling comparison.

4. Review Testimonials

Teacher buy-in is one of the most important elements of any successful implementation. Look for quotes, videos, or case studies from schools that are similar to yours to ensure that all key personnel are in favor of the intervention. Consider who will be implementing the program in your district. Will they be reading intervention specialists, ELA teachers, or general education teachers? Then look for testimonials from educators who match that description.

Although a wealth of success stories from other schools and districts can point you in the right direction, you should also **consider piloting the program in your own district to understand if it's right for you.**



As a high school Reading teacher using Reading Plus in my classroom for adaptive technology, I was able to give my students the opportunity to independently practice skills we had been working on in core instruction. By utilizing Reading Plus reports, I was able to determine secondary benchmark standards to review with my students which translated into my later role as a Literacy Coach. Now as an elementary school administrator, I work closely with teachers in Grades 3-5 to implement Reading Plus in their classrooms. Students not only love the ability to choose the texts they read but also are able to earn fun incentives as they meet important milestones within the program including earning combos and leveling up!”

SHANNON MAKOWSKI,
Single School Culture Coordinator
Grassy Waters Elementary School

GET A CLOSER LOOK AT READING PLUS!

A program demo is an easy way to get a closer look at our adaptive literacy program as you begin evaluating new reading interventions for your school or district.

Request a demo at
readingplus.com/spotlight

5. Research the Product’s Hybrid and Remote Learning Options

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it’s that remote learning is here to stay in some form or other. Therefore, the intervention program you choose should be flexible enough to function just as well from home as in school.

When evaluating an intervention’s flexible implementation options, look for the following features:

1. Built-in communication tools between teachers and students
2. Web-based access from a variety of devices
3. Resources for parent and family engagement
4. Extensive reporting to maintain accountability
5. Easily accessible and responsive customer service

These five key components will boost an intervention’s effectiveness as a distance learning solution.

6. Review District Capacities

Funding, technology infrastructure, staffing needs and skills, administration leadership support, and even scheduling requirements are all success factors. It is critical to determine whether the program is a good match to support district goals. Review the district's ability to implement a given program with fidelity, and certify that there is sufficient allocation of resources.

If a product seems too expensive, reach out to see if the company offers free consultations about finding local or national funding to pay for the service. Choosing an easy-to-use, flexible, and evidence-based intervention program will help you maximize your return on investment.



Reading Plus has been used with fidelity at our school since 2018-2019 school year. Teacher buy-in was immediate along with administrative support and professional development provided by Reading Plus.”

LINDA EDGECOMB,
Principal

7. Implement with Fidelity and Examine the Results

Choosing a strong, evidence-based literacy intervention program for your district is an important first step in your literacy plan. But to actually achieve your literacy goals takes another critical step: you need to use the program as intended—with fidelity—to ensure maximum results.

To increase fidelity and ensure a successful implementation of the reading program, you will need to:

- Offer professional development for teachers to learn how and why to use the program.
- Provide teachers with the resources and ongoing coaching they need to use the program effectively.
- Continuously monitor student, classroom, building, and district performance data.
- Adjust the literacy plan as needed to stay on track toward expected growth outcomes.

If you have done the work to find a quality, evidence-based intervention that suits your district, you should be pleased to find that your search was worth the effort. ■

going to have to go to 2nd grade next year.”

Nationwide, 7.3 million students, around 14 percent of all public school students, receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the nation’s primary special education law. Policymakers have sounded alarms about meeting those students’ needs during the pandemic, and some fear there are children who need those services who haven’t been identified at all.

Parents and teachers are often the first to recognize the signs of disabilities in students. That’s especially true of students with learning disabilities, whose needs may not be as immediately obvious as those of other students who need special education services. And, during the pandemic, both parents and teachers have faced significant interruptions that have made recognizing those needs more difficult, educators told Education Week.

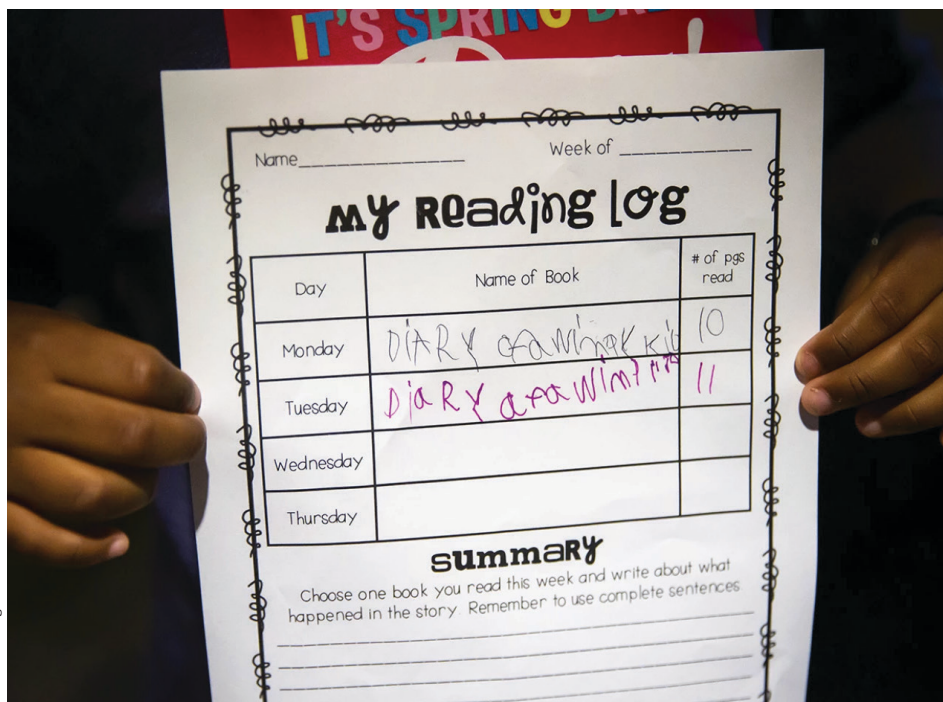
Like Aikin, some families flagged concerns as they supervised their children’s participation in online lessons. But many other parents—including those who couldn’t afford work interruptions—didn’t have the option of staying home to monitor their children’s remote learning or might not have recognized any subtle issues as they emerged.

For teachers, extended periods of remote learning or class time interrupted by frequent quarantines robbed them of the small ordinary encounters that can help them gauge students’ progress: how quickly children turn pages, how they engage with peers, how they respond to frustrations with reading and math exercises, even the appearance of their handwriting, which may have been replaced by typing into an online program.

Those dynamics combine with other challenges to form a perfect storm for schools as they seek to return to normal: They must work to separate which students need assessments for learning disabilities and which children’s academic struggles can be attributed to the ordinary fidgeting and grimacing that comes with learning in front of a computer.

Educators must work to recognize concerns that may have gone unidentified and to prioritize which newfound parental concerns are the most urgent. Many will do so with less data from classroom assessments and state-wide exams than they would have in a typical year. And they will tackle those needs as they also strain to accommodate heightened social and emotional stress for all students after an unprecedented set of school years.

“It’s going to be really difficult to assess where students are and to determine whether what we are seeing is the result of a disability or a



—Annie Mulligan for Education Week

new baseline for everyone,” said Meghan Whitaker, the director of policy and advocacy for the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

Looking for warning signs of disabilities

With a family history of dyslexia, Aikin said her “radar was turned on very high” to warning signs for her children. As she studied up on the special education process, she enrolled Carter in a small private program focused on reading instruction for the last school year. After getting a formal evaluation and diagnosis from her school district of dyslexia and dysgraphia, a disability related to handwriting, she’s weighing her options for the 2021-22 school year.

But there may be many children showing similar warning signs of disabilities that have gone undetected, said Winnie Williams-Hall, an 8th grade special education teacher in Chicago.

The early signals of disabilities can be very difficult for parents, and even teachers, to recognize, she said. And remote learning made that even more difficult for educators.

“During in-person learning, you are face-to-face with a student, and you can gauge facial expressions, when you need to slow down,” Williams-Hall said. “But that’s difficult to do during virtual learning and the student doesn’t even have the camera on.”

Similarly, while a student with a behavioral disorder or emotional disturbance may phys-

Carter Aikin shows off his summer reading log.

ically disengage or seem defiant in an in-person classroom, that same student may mute their microphone and ignore their computer in remote learning, and it can be difficult for educators to determine why they are absent from class discussions, Williams-Hall said.

Even for teachers familiar with learning disabilities, the sound quality and limitations of computer programs may have made it difficult to recognize them, said Teresa Ranieri, a teacher and literacy coach at a New York City elementary school.

During online reading exercises, it could be difficult to hear if a student was able to blend letter sounds together to form words, to deconstruct words into individual phonetic sounds, and to rhyme, she said.

“There’s a delay, there may be poor internet connection, and when all of the children say it at the same time, it’s very hard to hear them,” Ranieri said.

With a focus on science-based reading instruction, Ranieri’s school does universal assessments to gauge students’ reading skills and to determine who may need more-targeted evaluation. But those assessments were written to be administered in person, she said, and it’s difficult to measure how much online administration affected the reliability of their results.

With parents’ permission, Ranieri donned

gloves and a mask and went to twin students' home to evaluate them in person last year.

"I was able to identify strengths and needs so much more because I did it in person," she said. "In my mind I'm thinking, 'How can I go to everyone's home to do this?'"

Online learning presents challenges

There's no federal year-over-year data on special education evaluations, and states that tabulate such information do not yet have information on the 2020-21 school year. But signs point to a decline. In Indiana, for example, schools completed about 25,000 special education evaluations during the 2019-20 school year, which included the first few months of the pandemic. That was a 16 percent drop from the previous year, state officials told radio station WFYI. They cited school closures and drops in public school enrollment.

During the second half of the 2020-21 school year, more schools around the country that had operated remotely began to offer in-person or hybrid instruction. But even then, many families opted to keep their children at home.

For Williams-Hall, a return to the physical school building meant two students in the classroom and the rest of them on screens, an experience shared by many of her fellow teachers.

In a nationwide poll of parents conducted by NPR/Ipsos in March, 48 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "I am worried my child will be behind when the pandemic is over."

School psychologists—who evaluate children for disabilities and help plan interventions and individualized education plans—anticipate an uptick in concern about issues like time management, student engagement, and social and emotional well-being.

Some parents and educators may also be unsure if students' struggles can be traced back to a disability that requires targeted interventions, said Kelly Vaillancourt Strobach, the director of policy and advocacy for the National Association of School Psychologists. And, while schools want to identify the students in most urgent need of support, they will also want to avoid historical concerns about over-identifying students—particularly students of color—for special education programs.

"We are worried about districts and schools using special education as a remedy for what happened in the past year," Vaillancourt Strobach said. "You want to make sure you are accurately identifying students."

Further complicating the process: Federal special education regulations call on schools

to rule out a "lack of appropriate instruction" before diagnosing students with specific learning disabilities, which include processing issues that affect a student's ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Interruptions posed by the pandemic may make it difficult to rule that out.

The NASP and other organizations that advocate for students with disabilities have recommended that schools use federal COVID-19 relief aid provided through the American Rescue Plan to reengage all students through multitiered systems of support, through which educators use a leveled approach to provide increasingly intense help to students with academic or behavioral difficulties.

In such programs—like response to intervention and positive behavior interventions and support, or PBIS—Tier 1 includes all students. Tier 2 provides more moderate supports for students who need it, often through small group instruction, and Tier 3 provides more intense, one-on-one intervention for students with the highest degree of needs.

"In a typical year you will probably see 20 percent of your students need a little bit more" support Vaillancourt Strobach said. "What we are expecting this year is maybe 80 percent will need a little bit more."

If students respond well to the lower level of support, that means they may have just needed some help reenaging after an atypical school year, psychologists said. But if they struggle even as they advance up the tiers, they may need to be evaluated for special education services.

"We really need to understand why they are so far behind," said Whittaker, of the National Center for Learning Disabilities. "We have to just be careful and intentional in that process."

But the multiple-tier approach has its critics, including advocates for students with disabilities who say schools don't always have the resources to implement it well.

Whittaker said she hopes that schools will work quickly to invest in improving their systems.

"We have not implemented strong [multitiered systems of support] the way we need to," she said. "Now we are putting such a magnifying glass on this issue. I'm really hoping that now is the time we really do something about this."

But to anxious families who have seen signs of possible disabilities in their children, anything short of an immediate, individualized response could seem like stalling, some parents told Education Week.

That was the case for Lauren, a Massachusetts mother who did not wish to use her last name to protect her children's privacy. During

“

During in-person learning, you are face-to-face with a student, and you can gauge facial expressions, when you need to slow down. But that's difficult to do during virtual learning and the student doesn't even have the camera on.”

WINNIE WILLIAMS-HALL
SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER,
CHICAGO

the pandemic, she noticed her twin sons, who just completed kindergarten, struggled with understanding phonics instruction.

"Everyone said, 'Don't worry about it. All kids are struggling. All kids are having problems,'" Lauren said.

But, after seeing one of her sons confuse letter sounds and get frustrated with rhyming exercises, Lauren insisted on an in-person evaluation. Her school district complied, and a psychologist sat with her son outside the administration building to assess him, using the outdoor air as a virus precaution.

After seeing him in person, the evaluator quickly agreed Lauren's son needed targeted supports, and said his descriptions of his own experiences with reading sounded like textbook dyslexia, Lauren said.

After some discussion with the school, Lauren opted not to evaluate her other son

right away. Instead, she will watch his progress as he participates in the same small groups and academic enrichment programs his school plans to offer all of its students as it focuses on pandemic recovery.

"I'm still a little wary that another issue might pop up," she said.

A confusing process for parents

Parents who had concerns about their children's learning told Education Week that the process of pursuing evaluations for special education, supporting their children's academic work, and working with schools to create individualized education plans was overwhelming and confusing, even with supportive school leaders on their side.

Liana Durkin, an Alpharetta, Ga., single mother with a demanding work-from-home job, said it began to feel like "a full-time job" to help her 6th-grade daughter, Rylee, keep up with assignments, pay attention during six-hour days of online classes, and process concepts she clearly struggled to grasp.

After seeking her own diagnosis by an outside psychologist, Durkin requested a formal evaluation from Rylee's school that later confirmed she needed support for ADHD. The process was confusing, and Durkin relied on advice from other parents and Facebook groups, where she heard stories about issues like delayed evaluations, confusing meetings with administrators, and a lack of support.

"I kept thinking about, yeah, I can't even imagine the parents who have to go into work every day," Durkin said.

In many cities, concerns about a backlog of special education evaluations predate COVID-19. But, even in the earliest days of school closures, there were signs the pandemic had exacerbated the problem.

As Congress deliberated its first relief bill, the CARES Act, school district administrators pushed for waivers from some parts of IDEA, including timelines in the federal special education law that require evaluations to be completed within 60 days of a formal request. They cited an inability to do things like conduct assessments or provide supportive therapies for students learning in remote environments.

Asked by Congress to evaluate the need for IDEA waivers, then-U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos said the law's requirements should largely remain in place, even during the national emergency.

"With ingenuity, innovation, and grit,

I know this nation's educators and schools can continue to faithfully educate every one of its students," she wrote in April 2020.

Concerns about evaluation backlogs

But there are some signs schools failed to fulfill those mandates.

In March, for example, five Texas families sued the Austin Independent School District, claiming the school system had failed to respond to stalled requests for student evaluations and reevaluations. The district has since worked to address the backlog.

In August 2020, the state of Massachusetts intervened after a disability rights organization complained that the Nashoba Valley Regional School District had suspended all in-person evaluations, leaving some children in limbo.

Beyond those unmet requests, advocates are concerned about children who have fallen through the cracks because the educators who might normally notice their struggles failed to see them.

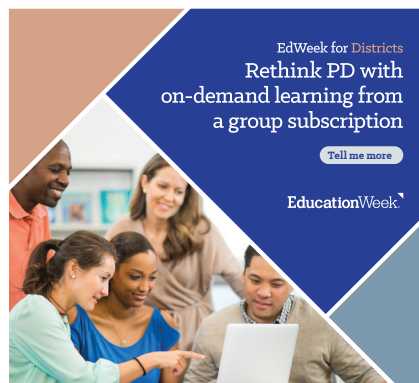
Aikin, the Texas mom, sees the progress her son has made after she identified his dyslexia, but she's mindful that many other children's needs may have gone unnoticed.

"So many children are missed and overlooked," she said.

As she weighs whether to send Carter back to public school in the coming school year, Aikin has seen signs of progress.

Her son who once ran away from reading assignments now asks to go to the library and bring books with him in the car. Recently, the family was passing through a restaurant drive-thru when Aikin heard Carter pipe up from the back seat. He was trying to read a sign out loud without any prompting.

"I almost hit the car in front of me," she said. "The fact that he was initiating, trying to read, was step one. ■



Published on July 20, 2021

Accelerating Learning: Tech Advice to Make It Happen

By Alyson Klein

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

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

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

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

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

To make matters worse, it is often Black

and Latino students and kids from low-income families who get stuck with these remediation programs that do not allow them to advance academically, she said.

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

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

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

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

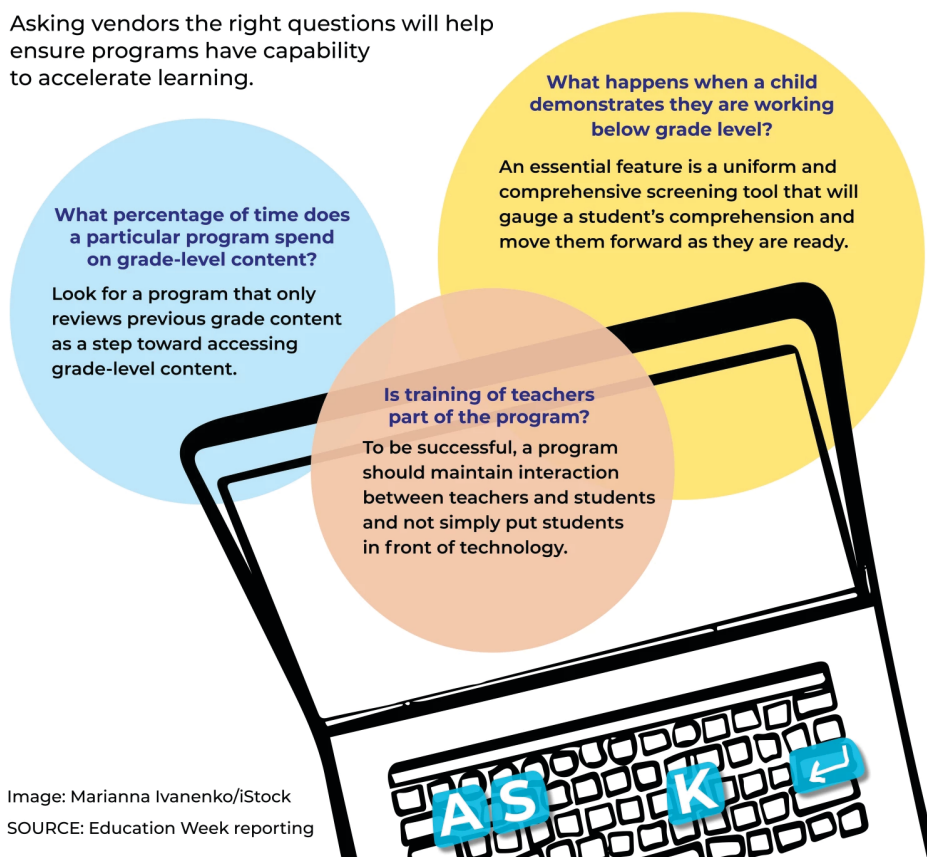
To help ensure students stay on track, states and districts received about \$122 billion in federal relief funds, at least 90 percent of which will go directly to districts. About a fifth of that money is supposed to be directed toward “learning recovery” programs. That means there will be plenty of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

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

If the vendor says something like, “we fill in every single hole,” their program likely provides

Vetting Technology With a Focus on Acceleration

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



remediation, not acceleration, she said.

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

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

Embracing intensive tutoring

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

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

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

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

Tennessee is also facilitating groups of districts—sometimes as many as 100—to collaborate on instructional problems, including how to accelerate learning in specific

subjects, like early literacy. The districts are even filming lessons to share with others in the state, complete with explanations of why the lessons are structured the way they are. Those lessons will also be broadcast on local PBS affiliates so that students (and parents) can access them from home.

“We know the whole country is going to see some declines in performance this year because of the disruptions,” Schwinn said. “But I think our goal is to say that, by the end of this recovery period, we will be better off. And I do deeply believe that.”

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

Zeroing in on essential content

Some districts—including Omaha Public Schools, the state’s largest—are using Zearn as their main instructional tool in summer school. On the other end of the spectrum, though, some districts are just distributing

information about the program, along with a login, to parents who may want their children to get some extra math practice before school starts again.

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

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

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

Davis also recommends making sure the program’s strategy for moving students for-

ward academically reflects the district’s curriculum.

Even if school districts pick a great program, no technology is going to give a student all of the acceleration help they’ll need.

“There’s something around creating a sense of belonging within a classroom culture,” Czupryk said. “I think the best tech platforms can contribute to that, but I think there is a need for some human interaction in ways that tech platforms do not offer.”

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

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

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

Published on June 22, 2021

Understanding Learning ‘Acceleration’: Going Slow to Go Fast

By Stephen Sawchuk & Liana Loewus

Most students will return to in-person schooling this fall, and teachers around the country are feeling the pressure to get their classes back on track.

In many places, a model known as acceleration is being billed as the way to ameliorate less-than-ideal learning conditions from this past school year. Generally speaking, the idea is to provide “just in time” supports, or scaffolds, to help students access their usual grade-level content, rather than going back and teaching what got skipped last year.

It’s a compelling idea, and one that’s been broadly embraced by a number of national education groups.



But what about an entering 1st grader who’s only learned phonics lessons on a computer screen, or in-person through masks? Or a student navigating the rocks and shoals of freshman year Algebra 1 who still has difficulties plotting points on a graph? Or a teacher whose English-learners are coming in running the gamut of proficiency levels?

In this special report, Education Week decided to pick three specific problems of practice centered on students who are entering key transition points: in [foundational literacy](#) and numeracy; in [9th grade algebra](#), which research connects to later success in high school; and in [English-language acquisition](#)—including for students who may be brand new to American schools.

Our reasons for the focus on these touchpoints are twofold. For one, teachers must fine-tune their plans based on the specifics of the content and of their learners. There’s no recipe for acceleration that will work in every single instance.

“Supporting unfinished learning is complex but doable work, and decisions that matter live in the details of instructional decisions,” said Emily Freitag, the CEO of Instruction Partners, a nonprofit that works with schools and districts on teaching and learning. “I see the zeitgeist trying to simplify the equation, but it’s an unsimplifiable equation. You have to get granular.”

Secondly, unlike social-emotional learning or character education, learning in these three areas typically doesn’t happen outside

of school classrooms. Most parents are not equipped to teach foundational reading systematically; algebra is almost always formally taught.

'Meet Kids' or 'Build a Bridge'?

Education Week wanted to know what acceleration might look like in those subjects, and what we learned helps to clarify some of the confusion around the term. For one thing, the general definition of acceleration doesn't apply here: It doesn't mean going faster. Sometimes it means going slower.

"If unit two on multiplication and division in 4th grade typically takes 25 days, you might need 30 days on that unit so that you can embed additional supports within the unit," said Freitag. "It's working through the plan for the year and making more time for the most important content."

The old adage of "meeting kids where they are"? Acceleration, experts say, requires tossing that aside. Instead, teachers can start with the current grade's work, then backtrack for students on certain concepts as needed. "What we've seen is that when we try to meet kids where they are, we never build a bridge to where they should be," said Bailey Cato Czupryk, a partner for practices and impact at TNTF, a national teacher-training and policy nonprofit. "We just stay where they are forever."

And sometimes acceleration won't work. Take early literacy foundations, which include making sure students have phonemic awareness and systematically learn all their letter sounds: There is no way to skip through those skills.

"If a kid is not fluently reading, you are going to need to explicitly go in and spend the time to fill in the grade level gaps in an intensive way," said Cato Czupryk.

But acceleration is also more feasible than most people think. Mathematics learning is not always linear; concepts repeat and become more complex with time. "Some walls are load-bearing and some are not," Freitag said. "You don't have to do the rhombus before you do fractions, but you do have to count backwards before you subtract."

And there are moments in a students' career where, beyond acceleration, schools should be prepared to bolster supports to prevent course failure—and the negative mindsets it can engender.

"Ninth grade is where students are figuring out, 'How do I do high school? Do I belong in high school? Can I succeed?'" said Elaine Allensworth, the director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, who has studied math coursetaking, the importance of the 9th grade year, and algebra credit recovery. "It is so much more effective to help prevent students from failing than go-

ing back and remediating it later."

Still, our sources told us, teachers shouldn't approach these challenges with an eye only to missed learning or deficits. [English-learners](#), for example, may have picked up more expertise in their home language, which could potentially help them make richer connections to the academic language they'll be learning in class.

And paradoxically, experts said, acceleration will also require teachers to fill in some of the other gaps that make for supportive, efficient learning environments. First graders may need more help on setting classroom norms and working independently, key parts of the kindergarten curriculum. Entering 9th graders may need to be encouraged to interact with one another and not to be afraid to ask questions, especially in a course like Algebra 1, where talking through misconceptions and "making sense of math" enrich students' abilities to apply the right algorithms.

For each story, we've created at least one composite student "case study" built on some of the actual needs and challenges sources have described to us, and then detailed the strategies you can use to adapt learning. We hope you'll find this unusual approach helpful.

And once you've started developing your own acceleration plans this fall and begun teaching, [why not reach back to us and let us know how they worked out?](#) ■

OPINION

Published on March 2, 2021

The Overlooked Support Teachers Are Missing: A Coherent Curriculum

The research on how districts can improve instructional systems

By Morgan Polikoff, Elaine Wang & Julia Kaufman

It goes without saying that educators have been under tremendous pressure during the COVID-19 crisis. While there has been a good deal of attention on issues related to technology access and student engagement during

the pandemic, there has been somewhat less attention to supporting teachers to teach a high-quality, standards-aligned curriculum during these times.

Even during the best of times, supporting teachers through coherent instructional systems—state and district policies around curriculum, assessment, and professional learning that provide teachers clear and con-

sistent messages supporting standards implementation—has been a challenge. Students need access to a high-quality, coherent curriculum—both during the COVID-19 pandemic and when they return to in-person classrooms after the crisis has passed.

The three of us sought to characterize the presence of coherence in teachers' schools and districts prior to the pandemic. Our study, published in November, offers a sort of baseline for how districts and states were doing to support standards implementation as we enter the fourth decade of the standards movement. Unfortunately, our work shows that a large majority of teachers do not teach in a coherent instructional system. However, our work also offers evidence-based recommendations for states and districts seeking to improve standards implementation through building more system coherence.

Spring of 2020, we surveyed state-representative samples of English/language arts teachers in three states—Louisiana, Massa-

chusetts, and Rhode Island—using RAND’s American Teacher Panel to study curricular coherence. We also surveyed district leaders in these states and we spoke with state leaders about their policy contexts. We reached several important insights about the coherence of instructional systems in these states.

First, we found that just a third of teachers in our sample reported regularly using a high-quality standards-aligned core curriculum (which we determined based on ratings from EdReports.org). Many quality materials exist, but schools and districts are not systematically providing them, especially in the higher grades.

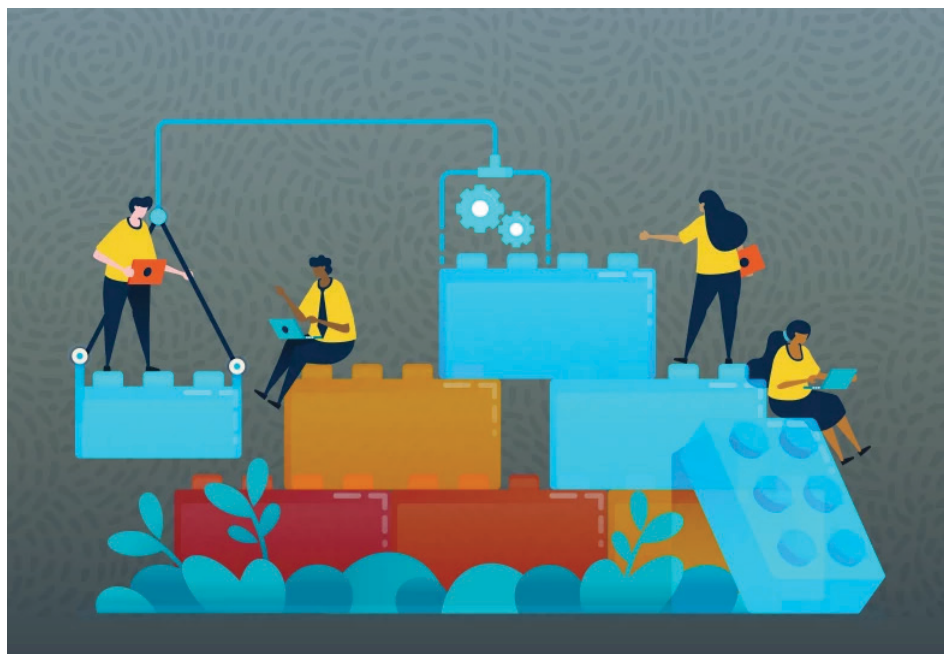
Second, we found that not even half of teachers receive curriculum-specific professional learning—57 percent of teachers reported never receiving multiday, curriculum-specific professional learning opportunities, and only 6 percent reported receiving more than a few of these opportunities a year.

More collaborative supports, like professional learning communities or common planning time, were much more common. But while these are undoubtedly important, they may not have the same curriculum orientation as more targeted opportunities. We found similar weaknesses in the provision of other curriculum and standards-implementation supports, such as lesson plans and aligned interim assessments.

Third, we found that very small proportions of teachers reported being in schools with high degrees of the conditions we think are necessary to support standards-aligned instruction. Just a quarter of teachers said that “goals for student learning that are clear for everyone” were present to a large extent, and just 10 percent said the same for “leaders who model learning.”

District leaders provided more positive responses, but even then, 41 percent of leaders reported that “the master schedule allocates sufficient time for all aspects of ELA instruction” in no or only some schools.

Using the results from the teacher survey, we classified the extent of coherence in their instructional systems. What we found was sobering. Just 1 in 7 teachers worked in a system that a) provided them a high-quality core curriculum, b) provided them two or more of four key policy supports for coherence, and c) reported at least a moderate level of conditions that support coherence. In fact, teachers were 50 percent more likely to meet none of these three targets than to meet all of them—meaning that they were more likely to work in an incoherent system than one that



provided coherent guidance around how to implement standards and provide high-quality ELA instruction.

Based on our results, we drew some important conclusions that can inform standards-based efforts moving forward.

Our clearest conclusion was that the state policy context clearly matters. We saw very sharp differences between Louisiana teachers and teachers in Massachusetts and Rhode Island in their descriptions of coherence. For instance, a third of Louisiana teachers taught in schools that met all three of the overall indicators we set for coherence versus just 1 percent of Massachusetts and 7 percent of Rhode Island teachers.

A major driver of the difference was access to high-quality curriculum materials, which Louisiana policy has made far more likely by introducing strong statewide incentives for districts to adopt so-called Tier 1 curriculum. In addition, Louisiana teachers reported more curriculum-aligned professional development and better alignment of interim assessments with standards. RAND researchers have studied Louisiana’s approach for several years now and demonstrated how state policy there has affected teacher knowledge and standards implementation. It is an approach to be emulated.

We also found some troubling gaps among teachers serving different kinds of students, and these gaps point toward an area for greater policy attention, particularly given the imperative to ensure equitable access to high-quality education for traditionally

underserved students. The clearest gap we saw was for teachers with greater proportions of students with disabilities. They reported less professional learning and that their professional learning was less helpful. They also reported fewer enabling conditions for coherence at their schools. Clearly, this group of teachers and students has specific standards-related needs that states and districts must work to meet, perhaps through targeted professional learning and curriculum supports aimed at standards-based teaching for students with disabilities.

We are still too far off from the classrooms envisioned by standards advocates, and it will take sustained effort from educational leaders for us to reach these ambitious goals. States and districts must prioritize efforts to support teachers to understand and implement standards through high-quality curriculum materials, aligned professional learning and other policy supports, and efforts to improve the conditions in districts to enable coherence. ■

Morgan Polikoff is an associate professor of education at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education. He studies the design, implementation, and effects of curriculum, standards, and accountability policies. Elaine Wang is a policy researcher at RAND Corp. She examines policies and practices that influence K-12 instructional and school leadership quality. Julia Kaufman is a senior policy researcher and co-director of the American Educator Panels at RAND. Her work focuses on understanding how state and local education policies and programs support teaching and learning.



—Shutterstock

OPINION

Published on April 26, 2021

5 Things to Expect When Schools Return to In-Person Learning

By Matt Fleming

By the time you read this, many American schools will be open with some form of in-person learning. Few schools are truly back to the normal environment we have been missing, but it is impossible not to see that the momentum of public opinion has shifted. Already, more than half of all adults in the United States have received at least partial vaccination for COVID-19. Pressure is mounting on all sides for schools to open their doors to students. Every moment, we come closer to the day when our classrooms and hallways will once again be crowded and bustling with masses of children.

It won't be what you expect.

The problem may be with our expectations. For while research on what our students are thinking about their return to class remains rare, we do know that reunions tend to be very hard on people. In fact, we see that prolonged separation can lead to conflict when families and friends

come together again. We are creatures of habit. And it's been a long time since we exercised the routines that will be filling our days again very soon. Here are five things you can expect as we return to traditional, in-person instruction.

You won't have the same rapport right away

I know. You love your students. Deeply. You educated yourself and spent your life preparing to teach them. Most of us can't wait to see "our kids" again. And they will be coming in with as many expectations as you have. Both of you will have your expectations crushed at the door. It is inevitable. But it is also OK.

Remember, everyone will be looking forward to all of their favorite things about school, and so will you. But we won't be able to fit all those wonderful things into the first minute, or the first day, or even the first week or month. Patience in both children and adults will be tried. Relationships will be strained. Even if they are the same kids—you are no

longer the same people. They are a year older! You are a year older, too! And you haven't really been together doing the things you are all the best at in a long time. Be gentle with each other. Which brings us to the second thing ...

There will be behavior and classroom-management issues

Our youngest scholars have been going absolutely bonkers about seeing each other again. How hard is it going to be to make them stay 3 feet, or 5 feet, or 6 feet apart from each other when their tiny hearts are aching for a hug? And not to hit the point too hard, but our older students have missed each other, too. They will be craving meaningful and rich interaction with friends, and perhaps even their teachers. But they will also have become used to independent learning, and the traditional classroom may feel confining.

Oh, yes. Our students' basic human needs will be in immediate conflict with our rules.

Human beings learn best from well-modeled behaviors, especially when the person modeling those behaviors expresses genuine caring and warmth that we can feel (Bandura, 1977). All the behavioral patterns and routines that you taught your students (and yourself) must be remodeled, retaught and relearned.

This is true for everyone. All of the adults in the schoolhouse must understand that when they feel stress, the students probably are as well. If you are feeling "strange" or "out of your element," imagine how your students feel. (Imagine how your teachers and staff feel, principals).

Bandura (1977) says that most behaviors are not fully thought out—they are reactions that have been learned. But the kids have been out of your routine for a year and are not in tune with you yet. Model, involve them in solutions—help them to be mindful of behavior so they can engage mindful control of it. Be gentle with each other.

There will be learning loss

Well, duh. You have probably felt that the media is beating you up about this personally. Our students will have forgotten some of what they knew. Just like they do after summer break.

This is not a time to judge yourself or the students too harshly. Maybe they could have been more present for distance learning. But have you every procrastinated with online learning or turned off your camera in a meeting, though? (I'm talking to myself here.)

This is a time to be patient, to collectively

take a breath and focus on the hard climb back. It is not time for blame. There is no use ignoring the collective trauma of our past year. Let's show our students how to heal and come back strong. And let's not neglect to be kind to each other.

There will be tension with adult relationships

This we know from research. Trust me. My fellow veterans can testify that returning from a deployment is often harder on a relationship than leaving for one. Again—it's been a while, and you have all changed. You are different people. It may take time to "fall in love" with our colleagues again after the first rush of our reunion. Don't neglect the fact that some of us have experienced great loss in this pandemic. Spend time getting to know each other again and pause judgment. Yes, there is a theme here. Be gentle and kind.

It will get better

- Things may never be exactly the same. Some of us lost members of the team.
- If COVID-19 had never happened, the changes in our culture would still have happened, but we would have experienced it all together. In normal times, the world changes, and we observe it as part of a community. COVID-19 put us in isolation, and we are not meant to live that way.
- It is 100 years since the last great pandemic in North America. And while the impacts of influenza may be hard to see these days, they are with us still. Give it time.
- Enjoy being back to doing to the work you gave your life and energy to before COVID-19.
- Find your way back to your first loves. All of them. And add to your life the new loves you gained in the past year. Bake your best sourdough for your colleagues. Knit someone a scarf. Just remember to be gentle and kind with others ... and yourself. You're worth it. ■

Welcome back.

Matt Fleming is a public school administrator in California.

OPINION

Published on July 9, 2021

A School District Is Built on Relationships. Here's How to Harness Them

By Zandra Jo Galván

A California superintendent explains how she mobilized a 75-member reopening task force. Early in the pandemic, my heart broke when I saw some of our students, laptops on their knees, sitting on curbs outside our public libraries and schools so that they could log on to complete their schoolwork. My immediate reaction was that we needed all hands on deck—or, in the language of our community, "Necesitamos todos manos a la obra"—to meet our district mission of "all means all."

Like countless other districts in the country, we were dispensing food out the cafeteria doors, distributing digital devices from school parking lots, planning remote learning instruction, and trying our best to secure internet access for students.

But it wasn't enough. Greenfield Union, in the heart of Salinas Valley—the setting of Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden*—is farm-worker country. It's likely that the grapes, lettuce, broccoli, artichokes, and strawberries on your table emerged from our rich soil. In Salinas Valley, fieldworkers were contracting COVID-19 rapidly. In April 2020, Greenfield had some of the highest case rates in our county with 2,711 positive cumulative cases in a community of only 17,000 residents.

Our agricultural families have many problems to deal with. More than 95 percent of Greenfield students are poor, homeless, or living in multiple-family homes. Many families share homes with one family in one bedroom, a second in another, and a third making do in other areas of the home.

When it came to getting our students online, how did we do it? We started by mapping out all residences and pooling our resources. Within two weeks of the start of the 2020-21 school year in August, we had provided a hot spot within 300 feet of every home with a student in our district. Cars, vans, and school buses were parked all over

“

Leaders have to take responsibility for their own performance. But we can't do it alone. Responding to crises requires engagement from across the district. If it's done right, the payoff is enormous.

the district so that our students didn't have to sit out on curbs to access the internet.

I'm big on cultivating relationships. We built relationships on all levels with concentric circles. We started with the board and our administrators, then moved out to the labor partner unions representing teachers and other school employees to plan appropriately, before turning to the parent community. We also connected with the county health department, state officials, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control to ensure we received and implemented the latest health and safety guidelines.

To harness these relationships, my assistant superintendent, Laura Cortez, and I convened a 75-member reopening task force representing each of our constituencies: the board, administrators, parents, community members, and labor partners. The task force split into six working groups to quickly gather information on instruction, social-emotional learning, parent and community engagement, safety, health, and nutrition.

By May 2020, the new task force was meeting weekly to manage the launch of the 2020-21 school year. Every week, we came together via Zoom before splitting into the subgroups

to explore what we needed to do to provide instruction; to protect the social and emotional health of students and staff; to open schools safely with social distancing, PPE, and physical barriers; to develop vaccination and wellness-center protocols; and to formulate a distribution plan to deliver more than 12,000 meals every week.

This was detailed and exhausting work. Every day, we found ourselves pushing many rocks up many mountains. Yet, it paid great dividends as we moved steadily, quarter by quarter, from full distance learning to fully reopened schools five days a week by April 26, 2021.

Leaders have to take responsibility for their own performance. But we can't do it alone. Responding to crises requires engagement from across the district. If it's done right, the payoff is enormous. Your teams become stronger and more cohesive, banding together to do whatever it takes to serve their community. And, in turn, the community appreciates the district's efforts. And, most importantly, your students and their families know you love them, will do whatever it takes to support them, and will never lose faith in them, because we are stronger together. ■

Zandra Jo Galván is the superintendent of the Greenfield Union school district in California. The district enrolls 3,550 students, many the children of farmworkers. Nearly 60 percent are English-language learners, 95 percent are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 11 percent receive special education services.

Additional Resource

17 lessons from experienced district leaders who spent the last year leading from home. [Click Here](#)

Copyright ©2021 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder.

Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source.

For additional print or electronic copies of a Spotlight or to buy in bulk, visit www.edweek.org/info/about/reprints.html

Published by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc.
6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100
Bethesda, MD, 20814
Phone: (301) 280-3100
www.edweek.org

EducationWeek®

SPOTLIGHT

Get the information and perspective you need on the education issues you care about most with Education Week Spotlights

The Achievement Gap • Algebra • Assessment • Autism • Bullying • Charter School Leadership • Classroom Management • Common Standards • **Data-Driven Decisionmaking** • Differentiated Instruction • Dropout Prevention • E-Learning • ELL Assessment and Teaching • ELLs in the Classroom • Flu and Schools • Getting The Most From Your IT Budget • Gifted Education • Homework • **Implementing Common Standards** • Inclusion and Assistive Technology • Math Instruction • Middle and High School Literacy • Motivation • No Child Left Behind • Pay for Performance • **Principals** • Parental Involvement • Race to the Top • Reading Instruction • Reinventing Professional Development • Response to Intervention • School Uniforms and Dress Codes • Special Education • STEM in Schools • **Teacher Evaluation** • Teacher Tips for the New Year • Technology in the Classroom • Tips for New Teachers



VIEW THE COMPLETE COLLECTION OF EDUCATION WEEK SPOTLIGHTS

www.edweek.org/go/spotlights