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Illinois Superintendent Peer-to-Peer Focus Groups

Introduction

As Illinois schools moved toward reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS) identified a need for coordinated statewide COVID-19 forums for district leaders to discuss immediate challenges faced by educators as schools reopened in fall 2020. IARSS and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) wanted opportunities for leaders in districts to have peer-to-peer (P2P) conversations centered on instructional supports during this unprecedented time.

The Region 9 Comprehensive Center (R9CC), in partnership with IARSS, established P2P focus groups across the six IARSS service areas in Illinois. The goal of these focus groups was to serve as a timely and useful forum for district leaders to discuss current challenges, share successes, and examine strategies to deal with reopening of schools as well as an opportunity to learn about evidence-based resources to support their school communities.

The P2P focus groups facilitated timely sharing of knowledge, best practices, and evidence-based interventions through facilitated discussions between local superintendents and national experts. R9CC, in collaboration with IARSS, initially developed a needs-sensing survey that gathered information to inform the topics to be explored by the focus groups. Based on the findings from the survey, the following top five topical areas were identified: Student Well-Being; Staff Well-Being; Student Learning Loss; Equity and Access; and Grading and Promotion. The expected outcomes for this effort primarily centered on building the knowledge and organizational capacity of district leaders through the evidence-based resources and best practices shared during the four focus group sessions outlined in the following section. Student Well-Being and Staff Well-Being were identified by the majority of the superintendents as priority areas, and the topics were combined into one session. This report shares an overview of each P2P focus group session that highlights the topic and local and national experts who contributed to the conversations. Each topical session overview also includes a set of key takeaways and relevant evidence-based practices to address district and school needs. Additional resources for each topic can be found in the Appendix at the end of this report.

Focus Group Sessions

Session 1: Student and Staff Well-Being

> *"We need to be intentional on the strategies we use*
> *to address well-being and to build relationships."*
> *(Illinois Superintendent)*

During this initial session of the Illinois P2P focus groups, several local and regional superintendents joined together to discuss COVID-19-related topics that were of importance to them and their school communities. This session addressed educator and student well-being. The session's purpose was to give participants the opportunity to explore practices pertinent to well-being that are essential for educator effectiveness and student success. Attendees learned from their peers about how they are fostering educator and student well-being in their districts and identified actionable next steps in this area.

The session began with a presentation by Dr. Jennifer Kelsall (Ridgewood High School District #234 Superintendent). She shared several strategies that she has employed to support student and staff social and emotional well-being. Professional development in social and emotional learning has allowed staff to gain strategies to support their students as well as their own social and emotional health. Student advisories were created to offer opportunities for school counselors and teachers to hold office hours for student check-ins to discuss academic and social and emotional strengths and challenges. These check-ins served as vehicles to communicate with parents and other teachers as well.

Kathleen Guarino (National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments and the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders [GTL Center] at AIR) and Dr. Tammie Causey-Konaté (REL Midwest and R9CC) were the subject matter experts for the session. They connected the recent work of the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest and the GTL Center to the strategies Dr. Kelsall illuminated. Ms. Guarino referenced the READI Framework that helps guide states and districts as they design programs and related supports for students. Another consideration shared by Dr. Causey-Konaté was the need for trauma-informed self-care and strategies that support student and staff well-being and resilience.

Superintendents then participated in brief break-out room conversations where they shared what they currently do to support student and staff well-being in their schools as well as strategies they would possibly explore for use in their districts.

Key Takeaways From Participants

- Develop ideas for creating a sense of community and connection for the remote learners.

- Intentional strategies to help create shifts in mindset and practice are needed to adequately address well-being.

- Remember that teachers miss each other and the in-person collaboration; be intentional when reaching out to teachers.

- While doing a daily check-in with remote learners, ask parents about how their students are doing.

- Consider adding a non-school person, such as a college student, on calls just to have open conversations or to serve in a supporting role.

Consider These Evidence-Based Resources

Educator Resilience and Trauma-Informed Self-Care: Self-Assessment and Planning Tool (April 2020). This guidebook is designed to help educators self-assess and plan to use strategies for supporting their own well-being and resilience. (https://gtlcenter.org/products-resources/educator-resilience-and-trauma-informed-self-care-self-assessment-and-planning)

Supporting Student Resilience and Well-Being With Trauma-Informed Care Self-Assessment and Planning Tool (April 2020). This guidebook is designed to help educators self-assess and plan to use strategies for supporting students using trauma-informed care. (https://gtlcenter.org/products-resources/supporting-student-resilience-and-well-being-trauma-informed-care-educator-self)

Session 2: Student Learning Loss

"The emotional impact has been more of an issue than learning impact."
(Illinois Superintendent)

"…[I]f I can't address [the social-emotional side of things], then it doesn't really matter where my learning loss is at because I'm losing a student. If I can't address some of the other needs on how this pandemic has hit our families and our students, then every resource that I throw in for instruction and academics is just throwing money out the window. That, right now, is our biggest barrier, and if we don't address that, then the learning loss is going to continue to grow."
(Illinois Superintendent)

During the second P2P focus group, superintendents considered issues pertaining to student learning loss in their districts. During the session, participants explored practices that addressed student learning loss and promoted academic success. They also had opportunities to interact with one another about strategies they were already using to lessen student learning challenges and accelerate learning through student-centered instructional approaches. Experienced researchers presented about evidence-based approaches, tools for monitoring

learning, and interventions that included student well-being supports. Finally, superintendents were made aware of examples of and opportunities for actionable steps to mitigate student learning loss in their districts.

Superintendents began with a brief activity to prompt thinking on what they were currently doing to mitigate student learning loss. Then participants heard from the featured panel of researchers who presented tools and methods for identifying and remedying student learning loss. Dr. Emily Ackman, a senior researcher at AIR who is serving as a graduation coach for a U.S. Department of Education mid-phase Education Innovation Research grant, focused on student summer learning loss and the use of early warning systems to provide information that can lead to interventions and support students' need to stay on grade level or proceed toward graduation. Dr. Ackman emphasized that early warning systems are about data-driven decision making and presented research results showing how using data indicators and acting on information collected made a difference for reducing students' chronic absenteeism and course failure in schools. She also informed participants about a current recruitment effort in high schools to implement early warning and monitoring systems that will provide coaching support to selected high schools for 2 years.

Drs. Dominique Bradley and Susan Burkhauser from REL Midwest presented the learning loss [toolkit](#) that was developed in partnership with the Ohio Department of Education to assess learning changes after the spring 2020 COVID-19 school closures. Dr. Bradley shared that the toolkit was designed in five modules with step-by-step guidance and methods for district leaders and researchers to plan, collect, analyze, and take action on student learning changes data. The last module provides additional suggestions and resources for continuing to examine data about student learning changes after COVID-19. The toolkit was provided to superintendents along with additional links to the REL Midwest work in this area.

Superintendents then participated in brief break-out room conversations where they shared about ways they currently track student learning changes, learning loss they have or have not seen among their students to date, interventions they were employing to support students, and barriers mitigating learning loss.

Key Takeaways From Participants

- High poverty is the biggest barrier to mitigating learning loss along with ever-changing learning situations due to increased pandemic cases.

- Staff and interventions are in place to address academics and instruction. Efforts include partnering with an outside organization for COVID impact analysis, using training they had received on setting and acting on smart goals, using an assessment coordinator to navigate assessment data, and using support-level staff for one-on-one remediation for remote students as well as those learning at school.

- The result of efforts like these is that they have not seen student learning loss or change overall except in concentrated areas, for example, for primary students.

- Mitigating the social and emotional impact of the pandemic on students is a significant focus area for district efforts.

Consider These Evidence-Based Resources

Lessons Learned: What Research Shows About Students' Experiences With Online Learning (2020). AIR has studied online learning for more than a decade, and although none of our studies took place in a situation like the current pandemic, this research provides insights that could inform education leaders who are working to promote and support student learning from afar. (https://www.air.org/resource/lessons-learned-what-research-shows-about-students-experiences-online-learning)

Meeting Students Where They Are: Assessing Learning Changes After COVID-19-Related School Closures: (2020). To gain insight into the impact of school closures on student learning and how that impact varies by student and classroom characteristics, REL Midwest worked with the Ohio Department of Education and Ohio regional data leads to provide trainings and develop a toolkit for learning more about the changes in student learning after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to remote learning. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lyV_cQbLJE)

Session 3: Equity and Access

*"Some of even our own team members have not been given the same access
to experiences as other members of our team…
How do we ensure that everybody has access to opportunity?"
(Illinois Superintendent)*

*"We have kids where mom is a PA, dad's an attorney, and they are exposed and have
access to conversations in their home that are at a level that is unique—
maybe while other students in our district don't have that kind of access."
(Illinois Superintendent)*

*"I hate to say this, but school segregation still exists….
We still have segregation based on geography."
(Illinois Superintendent)*

During the third P2P focus group, superintendents focused on issues pertaining to equity and access. During the session, participants explored equity and access as they relate to leadership and district initiatives. An experienced researcher and practitioner presented equity and access from the perspective of leadership, intersectionality, and how we operationalize equity and access through our commitments. Dr. Teresa Lance, assistant superintendent in school district U-46 and R9CC advisory board member, shared her experiences at operationalizing equity supports in her district, including how the district personnel looked at data, the milestones they accomplished, goals pertinent to their equity plan, and initiatives the district is implementing. Finally, superintendents who participated in the session were given the opportunity to reflect on the material presented and share their own processes and strategies for addressing equity and access.

Superintendents began with a brief activity to prompt thinking on how they would describe equity and access. Then the participants heard from the featured panelists. Dr. Tammie Causey-Konaté, subject matter expert for REL Midwest and R9CC, focused on leadership for equity and access as it relates to self as well as a system. She defined intersectionality and framed the discussion around appreciating the dimensions of diversity. She shared eight opportunities for operationalizing equity and access including recruiting and retaining a diverse teaching force as well as increasing early postsecondary opportunities for students and how the research supports these initiatives. For example, students completing AP courses attend college at higher rates, earn higher grades in college, are less likely to drop out of college, and graduate at higher rates than non-AP students (Shaw et al., 2013).[1]

Dr. Teresa Lance presented how she is operationalizing the eight strategies Dr. Causey-Konaté shared in her district. She reviewed chronic absentee and discipline data that her district is using to guide their equity conversation and detailed their equity committee's major milestones, which included revising the gifted selection process and conducting a student equity and inclusion survey. She emphasized that equity and diversity look different in different areas and that is a work in progress.

Superintendents then participated in brief break-out conversations during which they shared what they are currently doing to address equity and access in their schools as well as equity strategies from the presentation that are relevant to their school communities.

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[1] Shaw, E. J., Marini, J. P., & Mattern, K. D. (2013). Exploring the utility of Advanced Placement participation and performance in college admission decisions. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 73*, 229–253. doi:10.1177/0013164412454291

Key Takeaways From Participants

- COVID has exacerbated inequities and changed how schools and districts focus on addressing issues like food insecurity, connectivity, and mental health needs.

- When a district's student and education populations are not diverse racially, leaders and practitioners are encouraged to consider other areas of diversity when working to increase equity and access.

- Identify opportunities to promote racial and cultural awareness for students and staff.

Consider These Evidence-Based Resources

Three Strategies to Help States Elevate Educational Equity (2020). This resource shares three promising strategies to assist states in their equity efforts. (https://www.air.org/resource/three-strategies-help-states-elevate-educational-equity)

Building Equity: Policies and Practice to Empower All Learners (2017). This resource provides an outline of the components of an equity review for a school and district. (http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/siteASCD/publications/books/building-equity-sample-chapters.pdf)

Session 4: Grading and Promotion

> *"When you start grabbing at straws, you tend to abandon your evidence-based practices. They are evidence-based practices for a reason."*
> *(Illinois Superintendent)*
>
> *"We are more interested in mastery and proficiency than modifying our current grading and proficiency processes."*
> *(Illinois Superintendent)*
>
> *"During this time, all students are going to need additional supports."*
> *(Illinois Superintendent)*

The group of local and regional superintendents joined once again to address the specific topic of grading and promotion. The purpose of the session was to give participants the opportunity to explore practices pertinent to grading and promotion for student academic success during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants also had an opportunity to learn from peers about how they are currently addressing grading and promotion in their school community. Participants then moved into identifying actionable steps to support grading and promotion in their district.

The session started with Dr. Beth Howard-Brown (principal TA consultant R9CC) presenting a foundation for best practices for instruction, assessment, and provision of academic support. The next segment was a question-and-answer session with Dr. Antoinette Taylor, Illinois Accessibility Consultant, and Joshua Stafford, superintendent (Vienna High School district). Both

shared teaching strategies focused on the utilization of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) by schools to support student learning. Mr. Stafford also shared practices that his schools are using—small-group instruction and the more active involvement of stakeholder groups.

Jenny Scala, a researcher on multiple RELs, served as a subject matter expert to the information presented by Dr. Taylor and Mr. Stafford. She reinforced the need to provide supports for all students using MTSS strategies and discussed the work of the Progress Center. The center focuses on improving access and outcomes for students with disabilities.

Key Takeaways From Participants

- A comprehensive approach to reviewing grading and promotion systems must include the right stakeholder groups, which include teachers, parents, and if applicable, students so that their voices are heard in the decision-making process.

- Early childhood, special education, and multilingual learners, especially twice exceptional children, need to have representatives at the table when decisions are made.

- Analyzing the data will tell you what student groups and academic areas to address.

- Create classroom learning environments to focus on the academic progress of a smaller number of students to ensure that no student fails.

- Even in virtual settings, school climate affects instruction, which influences student learning.

- Overall, the participants felt that mastery of content is more important than grades.

Consider These Evidence-Based Resources

A Framework and Resources for Measuring Student Needs and Development: During Remote and Blending Learning (2020). Representatives from Illinois schools and districts indicated that it would be helpful to have a tool to guide the development of their information-gathering systems in remote and blended learning and to reference successful models and useful research. This framework organizes the types of information pertaining to student needs and development into three overarching categories: Engagement, Social-Emotional and Physical Needs, and Academic Progress. (https://edsystemsniu.org/a-framework-and-resources-for-measuring-student-needs-and-development-during-remote-and-blended-learning/)

Promising Practices: Improving Student Engagement and Attendance During COVID-19 School Closures (2020). In this Promising Practices Brief, Insight and AIR share an overview of the research on engagement and attendance in online environments and the findings from our conversations with five districts across the country about their efforts to support student attendance and engagement. (https://insightpolicyresearch.com/white-papers-issue-briefs-and-articles/promising-practices-brief-improving-student-engagement-and-attendance-during-covid-19-school-closures/)

Closing and Considerations

As stated previously, each session topic was identified based on the needs-sensing survey provided to superintendents. These topics are also areas of concern nationwide in districts and schools. Following every session, participants were provided evidence-based resources that were shared by the subject matter experts during the conversations. In addition to the resources shared, the R9CC team identified other resources that could also assist district leaders in the key priority areas, which can be found in the Appendix.

Based on these conversations, several considerations for districts and schools were identified:

- Leaders must first provide for their own self-care before they can successfully take care of their school community. Evidence-Based Resource: *Self-Care for School Leaders Starts Now* (2020).

- Social and emotional well-being of students and staff must be taken into consideration before interventions can be put into place to support academic and professional learning. Evidence-Based Resource: *What the Research Says on Supporting the Social and Emotional Well-Being of Students* (2018).

- Learning loss experienced by students is exacerbated by poverty and the lack of access to supports for both themselves and their families. Evidence-Based Resource: *COVID-19 and Student Performance, Equity, and U.S. Education Policy* (2020).

- School district leaders stressed the need to focus on students' social-emotional learning, equity issues in how students are being educated, and whether students are ready for the next step in their academic endeavors. Evidence-Based Resource: *Navigating SEL From the Inside Out – Looking Inside & Across 25 Leading SEL Programs: A Practical Resource for Schools and OST Providers* (2017).

Appendix

Student and Staff Well-Being Resources

Ask A REL (n.d.). This collaborative reference desk service is provided by the 10 RELs and functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. It provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations on research-based education questions.

Building Trust and Well-Being Through Trauma-Informed Communities: Leader Self-Assessment and Planning Tool (July 2020). This guidebook is designed to help school leaders self-assess and plan to use strategies for fostering trust, well-being, and resilience for all in a learning environment.

Development of Student and Teacher Measures of Happiness Curriculum Factors. (August 2020). This report provides a summary of the factors believed to contribute to happiness, as reflected in the Happiness Curriculum, information about the process undertaken to develop a survey approach to measuring these factors, and a description of the issues confronting educators as they move to evaluate the program.

Educator Resilience and Trauma-Informed Self-Care: Self-Assessment and Planning Tool (April 2020). This guidebook is designed to help educators self-assess and plan to use strategies for supporting their own well-being and resilience.

Educator Stress Spectrum (accompanying Interactive Version) (2020). These resources, designed specifically for teachers and leaders working through the COVID-19 pandemic, can be used by educators, teacher teams, and leadership teams to gain greater awareness of how their current personal and professional context affects their levels of stress in the time of COVID-19.

Improve Teacher Wellbeing With Self-Care Strategies and Formalized Peer Connections (May 2020). This post explores some of the causes and impacts of teacher stress and two strategies district leaders can implement to support their well-being.

Mindfulness for District Leaders: Resource Pack (n.d.). This is a resource pack with activities and tools from expert organizations and the Panorama team. These resources are for self-care and for principals, teachers, counselors, and other staff in districts to support their well-being and provide ideas for mindfulness activities with students.

Navigating SEL From the Inside Out – Looking Inside & Across 25 Leading SEL Programs: A Practical Resource for Schools and OST Providers (2017). This report was designed to provide information about the specific features that define SEL programs and that may be important to stakeholders who are selecting, recommending, evaluating, or reporting about different SEL programs, or to those who are aligning efforts across multiple schools, programs, or regions.

[The Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety](#) (2020). The Center has compiled lists of internal and external resources to support states, districts, and schools as they serve students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

[The Five Essential Elements of Well-Being](#) (2010). Gallup scientists have been exploring the demands of a life well-lived since the mid-20th century. More recently, in partnership with leading economists, psychologists, and other acclaimed scientists, they began to explore the common elements of well-being that transcend countries and cultures. As a result, five distinct statistical factors emerged. These are the universal elements of well-being that differentiate a thriving life from one spent suffering. They describe aspects of our lives that we can *do something about* and that are important to people in every situation we studied.

[READI Framework](#) (2020). The READI Framework guides states and districts through five key barriers to consider as they design programs and related supports for success in the highest need schools. These design considerations help education leaders tailor programs to surface and accommodate the unique characteristics of underserved schools and have the potential to decrease achievement gaps.

[Supporting Student Resilience and Well-Being With Trauma-Informed Care Self-Assessment and Planning Tool](#) (April 2020). This guidebook is designed to help educators self-assess and plan to use strategies for supporting students using trauma-informed care.

Student Learning Loss Resources

[Lessons Learned: What Research Shows About Students' Experiences With Online Learning](#) (2020). AIR has studied online learning for more than a decade, and although none of our studies took place in a situation like the current pandemic, this research provides insights that could inform education leaders who are working to promote and support student learning from afar.

[Meeting Students Where They Are: Assessing Learning Changes After COVID-19 Related School Closures](#) (2020). To gain insight into the impact of school closures on student learning and how that impact varies by student and classroom characteristics, REL Midwest worked with the Ohio Department of Education and Ohio regional data leads to provide trainings and to develop a toolkit for learning more about the changes in student learning after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to remote learning.

[Regional Educational Laboratory Evidence-Based Resources](#). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 10 RELs have collaborated to produce a series of evidence-based resources and information about teaching and learning in a remote environment and other considerations brought about by the pandemic.

Solving for Learning Loss. There are some proven methods for identifying students who fall behind academically and intervening to help them catch up on learning, but there are also some essential components that schools need to have in place for any of the academic supports to be successful. This is a guide to what that looks like.

Equity and Access Resources

Building Equity: Policies and Practice to Empower All Learners (2017). This resource provides an outline of the components of an equity review for a school and district.

Leading an Equity-Focused Response Through and Beyond COVID-19 (2020). This resource serves as a guide to support principals and school system leaders in leading an equity-focused response to the ripple effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure they are best equipped to support their students, families, and staff.

Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook (2018). This playbook was developed by a statewide team of school, district, community, higher education, and state leaders with substantial feedback received from a comprehensive set of stakeholder groups. It features an action plan, equity continuum shifts, and key actions and resources that can be used by districts and schools.

Three Strategies to Help States Elevate Educational Equity (2020). This resource shares three promising strategies to assist states in their equity efforts.

Grading and Promotion Resources

A Framework and Resources for Measuring Student Needs and Development: During Remote and Blending Learning (2020). Representatives from Illinois schools and districts indicated that it would be helpful to have a tool to guide the development of their information-gathering systems in remote and blended learning and to reference successful models and useful research. This framework organizes the types of information pertaining to student needs and development into three overarching categories:

- Engagement
- Social-Emotional and Physical Needs
- Academic Progress

Back-to-School Blueprint: Planning for a Brighter Future After COVID-19 (2020). This action guide highlights the importance of grade-appropriate instruction. It provides strategies to diagnose unfinished learning, assess the strength of instructional materials, provide "just-in-time" scaffolds, and deliver effective professional learning that helps educators navigate a new set of instructional needs.

Illinois Priority Learning Standards 2020–21 (2020). To maximize learning and help students recover, we need to engage in deep and meaningful learning, not shallow remediation. To support efforts to accelerate learning in classrooms across the state, the Illinois State Board of Education assembled a diverse and skilled team of Illinois educators to identify Priority Illinois Learning Standards. The educators who drafted the Priority Standards that comprise this document carefully considered the full set of Illinois Learning Standards and selected those that most effectively address learning loss, engage students deeply, and maximize learning. They specifically considered which learning standards

- are the most foundational/essential knowledge, skills, and competencies for all students;
- are the most critical for continued learning success at subsequent grade levels;
- are best suited for interdisciplinary and/or project-based learning; and
- depict the knowledge, skills, and dispositions we want all students to possess to successfully complete in a given grade level or stage of their education.

Promising Practices: Improving Student Engagement and Attendance During COVID-19 School Closures (2020). In this Promising Practices Brief, Insight and AIR share an overview of the research on engagement and attendance in online environments and the findings from our conversations with five districts across the country about their efforts to support student attendance and engagement.

Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond (2020). This report provides an overarching framework that focuses on how policymakers as well as educators can support equitable, effective teaching and learning regardless of the medium through which they are delivered. This framework provides research, state and local examples, and policy recommendations in 10 key areas that speak to transforming learning and closing opportunity and achievement gaps. Each of these 10 policy priorities will help schools reinvent themselves around principles of equity, authentic learning, and stronger relationships, and require shifts from policymakers and educators alike.

School Practices to Address Student Learning Loss (2020).This brief is one in a series aimed at providing K–12 education decision makers and advocates with an evidence base to ground discussions about how to best serve students during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.