PROMISING PRACTICES DRIVE PROGRESS

Closing Learning Gaps for Students with Disabilities

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Introduction

Many students started the 2020 school year a little behind academically, but students with disabilities have been especially impacted by the pandemic. With the added benefit of federal stimulus funds, what can schools do to support students with disabilities as they start planning for next year? And what, if anything, can schools learn from pandemic-driven innovations to narrow long-standing opportunity gaps?

The charter school sector may hold some answers to these questions. Public administrative data in Washington state, as well as in Massachusetts and New York City, suggests that charter schools attracted families during the pandemic. In Washington, this was especially true for students with disabilities: enrollment for these students increased 14 percent in charter schools while decreasing by 6.5 percent in neighboring districts in the fall of 2020; this increase has held steady throughout the school year. To understand why this may be, and to learn more about how charter schools were serving students with disabilities during the pandemic, we interviewed leaders, teachers, staff, and families in three charter schools in Washington (see inset, *School Selection and Methodology*).

All three schools prioritized the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, as well as relationship-building with students and parents. The schools were not simply thinking in terms of addressing lost learning time through remediation. They were focused on accelerating learning so all students, including diverse learners, could be on grade level.

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We identified six specific practices that took hold during the pandemic—practices that interviewees said helped students maintain academic progress:

- Kicking off the year with a multigrade "intersession" to prepare students academically and socially.
- Leveraging new technology to support the learning needs of students with disabilities.
- Dedicating time for special educators and general educators to collaborate.
- Allowing for "open time" during the day for intervention and acceleration.
- Combining mastery-based grading policies with interventions.
- Collaborating with families through streamlined and regular communication.

Not every practice was used by every school, and the scope of this brief doesn't allow us to determine whether they increased student learning or engagement. But leaders and staff in the schools were clear that these approaches were critical for keeping students with disabilities on track at a time when many feared the worst. Interviewees noted that students with disabilities often exceeded teachers' expectations. And in every school, average daily attendance for all students remained above 90 percent, whether instruction was remote, hybrid, or in person.

School Selection and Methodology

This study focuses on three charter schools in Washington state. Two school sites were selected because they had enrolled among the highest proportions of students with disabilities of all charter schools in both March (when the pandemic started) and September of 2020: Rainier Valley Leadership Academy (RVLA), which serves middle school students in Seattle, and PRIDE Schools, which serves middle and high school students in Spokane. Because the charter sector in Washington is relatively new, we wanted to balance our selection of two well-established schools with one recently opened school: Catalyst Public Schools, a K–8 school in Bremerton, opened in 2020. While not generalizable, our sample includes a range of school contexts, with different grade spans, locations, and years of experience. For more information about the schools, see Appendix A, Schools in the Study.

In January and February of 2021, we interviewed 20 parents, principals, directors of special education, special education teachers, and general education teachers across the three schools. We used semi-structured protocols to ask administrators and teachers how they understood students' learning needs, what academic and engagement strategies they used, and how they communicated with families. When we interviewed parents, we asked about their children's learning experiences and ways the school engaged them during the pandemic. To analyze our data, we recorded and transcribed all interviews and then used a combination of team discussion, memos, and matrices to identify trends across schools and specific strategies. We only included strategies in this report that (a) were discussed by multiple interviewees, (b) were perceived to be effective, (c) were identified as strategies that leaders will continue using next school year in some form, and (d) originated during the pandemic.

Organizational Conditions

The six practices we will discuss all have one thing in common: they were not special programs designed for special groups—they were part of the schools' DNA. All three schools prioritized the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Even in remote and hybrid environments, students with disabilities remained in general education classes for most of the school day.[1] Schools hired additional staff or used co-teaching models to make sure students had the support they needed. Because students with disabilities were educated in general education classrooms, they also benefited from the schoolwide strategies leaders implemented for all students, such as regular progress monitoring and differentiated instruction.

Leaders were committed to inclusion in each school. At PRIDE Schools, the principal is a former special education teacher who has hired a special education teacher for every grade

1 This differed by school but in all three cases, science, social studies, electives, and advisory were inclusive. At PRIDE Schools and Catalyst, so were English and math.

level. Catalyst's special educator works closely with the school's two co-founders. At RVLA, the school's culture is designed around principles of anti-racism and anti-ableism. Says CEO and Principal Baionne Coleman, "We're anti-racist in nature. That is a part of our professional development time. Our hiring practices are anti-racist. . . . We say ADHD is an ability, it's not a disability. It allows for scholars to use their brain in a completely different way."

Although the six practices were integrated throughout the schools' approach, teachers never assumed that they would work the same way with all students. Instead, we found that educators and staff were committed to a culture that valued students with disabilities and problem-solved to meet their specific needs.

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Leaders in every school were also committed to relationship-building with students and families in ways that particularly benefited students with disabilities. Schools built meaningful relationships with all students through beginning-of-year activities and by adjusting assignments to suit student interest. They supported student well-being with strong two-way communication with parents, even as physical barriers kept them apart. During the pandemic, schools were intentional about collecting parent feedback through surveys and virtual conferences while providing consistent, streamlined updates to families about student progress.

Analysis: Six Specific Practices

The following practices were strategies that leaders, teachers, and families said were especially helpful for keeping students with disabilities engaged and learning throughout the school day.

Kick off the year with an intersession to prepare students for the year

In the fall of 2020, PRIDE Schools did something it had never done before. Rather than starting the school year with their typical slate of middle and high school classes, all students were put in multigrade, 15-student advisory groups for the first six weeks. The superintendent, Brenda McDonald, envisioned this as a time to address two problems PRIDE had observed in the spring: math and motivation. By looking at student grades from the spring, leaders knew that gaps had widened in students' math knowledge. And from talking to parents, McDonald knew that students had been struggling emotionally: "In the spring there was a lot of like, 'My kid's just super depressed. And, they have all these issues. I'm just not going to make him do school.'"

Within their advisory groups, students were grouped according to math ability. Because the groups were small to begin with, this allowed for small-group and 1:1 tutoring with peers at their same level. A middle school teacher who led one advisory explained, "One student in 8th grade, their IEP has goals similar to 6th grade goals. I pushed her into that particular group. And then as I saw where she was at, I was able to modify what she was doing even further." Because all

groups were multigrade, students with disabilities could focus on appropriate content without feeling stigmatized.

Remotivating students to be at school was also a key goal of the intersession. PRIDE Schools did that by giving students an opportunity to learn through topics that interested them and to rebuild relationships with peers in a small-group setting. The advisory teacher taught English, science, and social studies using curriculum that department teachers had created. And every student was required to complete a personal project. One student with a disability built a miniature computer that he could program, and wrote a paper about the experience. His mother said the six-week intersession helped her high school son, who struggles with social anxiety, thrive this year. She said, "It was awesome. . . . It helped him get remotivated. It helped re-establish those relationships."

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Even after school returned to regular class periods, students continued to meet with their advisory groups throughout the year. The relationships built during the first six weeks helped the teachers know how to motivate students and communicate with families when students fell behind. One middle school advisory teacher said, "I learned that one kiddo knows he has an IEP, and he feels like it is a giant label, so he fights any sort of modification that we give him. . . . [I learned that] when I could pull him one-on-one, then he would use his modifications." The advisory teacher, who is also one of his subject teachers, uses this insight when he is in her classroom.

PRIDE Schools does not plan to implement the intersession again next school year, but the experience has informed how they will support students next year. Teachers will implement a robust set of diagnostics at the beginning of the year to pinpoint students' academic levels, and advisors will work with students to help address learning gaps.

Many students will return to school next year having spent all or most of the past 18 months online. Returning students in 2021 will likely have many of the same needs as PRIDE Schools students: gaps in academic learning and anxiety about coming back to school. Well into the future, summer slide and new transitions could create the same challenges. The pandemic has shown us that time in school can be used in a variety of ways. If schools get creative, as PRIDE Schools did, they can help students re-engage and ramp up to grade-level instruction.

Leverage new technology tools to support the learning needs of students with disabilities

Catalyst Public Schools, which opened in fall 2020, used newly adopted technology platforms to provide extra learning support to students with disabilities, even when they returned to in-person classes four days a week. These tools were so helpful that the school plans to continue using them during the 2021–2022 school year.

In addition to using Google Docs to streamline and organize assignments for students—which teachers say students with disabilities have found especially helpful—the school experimented with several new tools. Using EdLight, students upload paper or electronic assignments in

class so teachers can give immediate feedback, which students use to revise their work. With the youngest students, the school uses Seesaw, an app that allows students to send pictures, drawings, or even videos to demonstrate learning. Amanda Gardner, co-founder of Catalyst, noted that the quick feedback cycle "is great for all kids but especially helpful for kids with diverse learning needs."

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Some apps assist teachers to scaffold and differentiate learning, which school leaders say helps them best meet the needs of students with disabilities. Actively Learn embeds an interactive dictionary, text-to-speech, annotation features, and other comprehension supports into texts and videos. The school has used ALEKS and Lexia to help teachers identify learning gaps, which they use to differentiate lessons and communicate with families.

"We'll definitely be sticking with technology," the school's 5th grade teacher said. "Our scholars' being proficient in technology, whether they have an IEP or not, is really important, and the iPads just break so many barriers for having a text read out loud. If we can teach our scholars who need those tools how to use them independently and not rely on a teacher, we've opened a world for them." Text-to-speech, a form of assistive technology, can help readers decode words and increase attention on reading comprehension, and works with nearly any digital device.

To help students use their technology effectively, the school supported students, teachers, and families. In the summer, the school offered "Catalyst Camp" to 100 prospective students; the free, three-week virtual session offered practice lessons and a preview of what school would look like in September. At the beginning of the year, teachers built time into their lessons to explain all of the tech platforms. During parent-teacher conferences at the beginning of the year, teachers made sure families had internet access and devices, oriented families to the platforms, and showed them how to monitor their children's progress. For teachers, the school designed professional development modules that teachers could access any time using a staff launchpad. As a new school, Catalyst leveraged the previous experiences of its founders and looked to other schools that had quickly pivoted to remote learning at the beginning of the pandemic, such as Impact Public Schools.

In the midst of technology, teacher attention during instructional times has been important in keeping students engaged. "[My student looks] attentive [but] he's not listening. He's somewhere else," a parent of a student with an IEP said. "So one of the things that [the teacher] does is he calls his name a little bit more . . . they will do breakout rooms . . . and he would say, '[Student], I want you to lead the breakout rooms.' " She was grateful for these subtle cues.

The need to support continued remote learning, combined with an influx of federal funds, means that many schools can continue to use computers and devices in daily instruction next year. This may be a boon for students with disabilities and schools' desire to maintain inclusion. Technology can provide students with new ways to access content and practice skills, and allow for teachers to discreetly embed supports that reinforce lessons for all students.

Dedicate time for special educators and general educators to collaborate

RVLA sets aside time for general education and special education teachers to discuss individual students' progress and brainstorm how to better meet their learning needs. They do this during weekly grade-level, subject, and multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) meetings. Teachers base the conversation on observation, attendance, and classwork. CEO and principal Baionne Coleman explained the process using a hypothetical 7th grade student: "This is a scholar who's reading at an 11th grade level, but they might be at math in a 6th grade level, right? And so we need to make sure that we're modifying assignments in their 7th grade math class. But we also need to make sure that they're moved to the 8th grade English class."

This is also the time that special education teachers review upcoming IEPs so general education teachers can weigh in on student progress. Said Coleman, "We are very, very intentional about the collaborative time where teachers have the opportunity to discuss scholars' needs specifically." Weekly, teachers across middle and high school upload classroom lessons into an online repository, which special education teachers check as they plan their pull-out and push-in times. Special education staff on the modifications team regularly check this information to flag assignments that should be modified. Said one ELA teacher, "I feel like we're taking the time to really talk as a team about special education and find ways to accommodate those scholars the best way that we can."

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>
> ***- ELA teacher***

Over the past year, schools across the country increased time for professional development and gave teachers additional time to plan and collaborate with peers to help them prepare for remote learning. A large literature base finds that collaboration between special education and general education teachers contributes to student learning in an inclusion setting. As schools return next fall, they would be wise to use this as an opportunity to maintain structured time for data-informed planning and collaboration so teachers can continue to work together to address students' academic and social-emotional needs.

Allow for "open time" during the day for extra support and acceleration

PRIDE Schools kept one period per day open, called "Project Time," for all middle and high school students. This gave students extra time to master grade-level skills or accelerate beyond grade-level. The mother of a student with autism said that having the extra time and support enabled her son to take AP math and AP science classes in 10th grade. As the parent said, "The teacher knows him really well so he's allowing him to work ahead, and he's already planned out extra work for him to do when he's finished this year's curriculum."

During project time, teachers support students with classroom assignments or teach mini lessons on topics they are struggling with. Students who do not need to catch up in any of their classes use the time on a passion project based on their interests or to advance in their classes. The groups are based on ability, not grade, and students move in and out of groups based on academic performance and teacher recommendations.

Researchers have identified several different approaches for helping students close pandemic-induced learning gaps, including small-group instruction or high-dosage tutoring. PRIDE Schools ensured that students received high-impact interventions by making it part of the school day, rather than offering the service before or after school when students are not required to be in attendance. They resolved staffing issues by making it part of teachers' regular load, but other schools could consider using trained paraprofessionals.

Combine competency-based grading policies with interventions

To ensure every student masters grade-level content, RVLA rolled out a new grading system this year, Grading for Equity. The mastery-based grading model reduces the number of graded assignments so students are assessed only on essential standards. And students do not get failing grades—just "complete" (meeting the learning standard) or "incomplete" (missing or not meeting the standard). Students can repeat assignments as many times as they need to pass. RVLA had already been planning to roll out Grading for Equity before the pandemic hit, but they reported that the model, combined with new scheduling flexibility, allowed them to focus instruction and intervention in a way that supported all students, especially their most vulnerable.

Given the added importance of each assignment, the school quickly learned that offering students additional time to complete missing assignments wasn't enough: they needed to provide direction, create time, and provide skills-focused instruction. Teachers invited students with missing work to meet with them during regularly scheduled office hours. Subject teachers also proactively reached out to parents and other staff for help so the effort did not fall on any one person. Said one general education teacher about a specific student, "I sent the parents a letter saying the assignment is missing and put exactly where they go in Google Classroom [for the student] to complete it." For another, she noted: "I only had two assignments [for the student] to complete in office hours because the special education team helped the student with the other two."

All the extra support paid off: students with an incomplete assignment decreased by 14 percent.

Several months into the school year, RVLA pivoted further by adding Panther RISE, a class held three days a week and mandatory for students with at least one missing assignment. Special education teachers were there to provide additional supports to students with IEPs; other teachers and staff rotated through Panther RISE to tutor students. At the end of the first semester, the school realized that this still had not been enough for some students. To make sure they were staying on grade level, the school set aside two full days to help students complete outstanding assignments. As the

multilingual director, Erica Carmichael, put it, "It was all teachers on deck, every teacher in the building," opening their doors for one-on-one and small-group support. All the extra support paid off: from January to March 2021, students with an incomplete assignment decreased by 14 percent—from 40 percent to 26 percent.

The support doesn't stop there. Carmichael noted, "So after doing all of that and you're still missing a significant amount of assignments, now I have enough information to say, 'I tried this, this, and this, but now we need to come after school to work, not on assignments but work on skills to help you get through assignments, because there's a gap somewhere.'" The school offers a study skill class that is open to any student who demonstrates a need.

In response to the pandemic, schools across the country experimented with mastery-based grading models that gave students multiple opportunities to show they had mastered essential skills and content. Using these models, students who struggled with remote learning or a disrupted home life—like unemployment and sickness—were not penalized for circumstances outside their control; they could redo assignments as needed. But this is not only useful during a pandemic. Many students struggle to meet grade-level expectations because of a life circumstance, because of a disability, or because they are learning English. RVLA effectively combined a competency-based grading policy with regular progress monitoring and proactive supports. This way, students with disabilities were supported to be successful with grade-level content in inclusion classrooms.

Collaborate with families through regular communication

Before the pandemic, parents often asked teachers questions when dropping students off at school. But with remote learning and social distancing in place, Catalyst's leaders realized that they couldn't rely on impromptu chats to keep parents connected to their children's classroom experiences.

In response, the school started using the ParentSquare app. This gives families weekly "Brave Reports" with explanations of what students are learning and guidance for how families can support their children that week. For example, a teacher said she might write, "Your scholar is really struggling to write in complete sentences, and so it would be great if when you were reviewing their work, you point out which of those sentences are not complete." For students with IEPs, the report includes progress toward meeting IEP goals.

The school also uses the app to communicate about planning and decision-making related to COVID. One hundred percent of families use ParentSquare, which can be customized to text or email a parent if they prefer not to use the app notifications. ParentSquare can also be used by parents to communicate back to teachers. Prior to launching the app, the school contacted every family to identify who did not have access to wifi or devices; if they didn't, the school provided them.

Amanda Gardner, Catalyst's co-founder and CEO said, "Families have reported that they feel pretty connected and engaged. . . . I think I've been more transparent this year with faculty and families than I ever have been before. I think it's paid off. . . . We established trust with our families and our faculty because we've been so transparent and open."

Parents have been called upon to be greater partners in their children's education than ever before, but this may be a positive change. Providing frequent, actionable information about a student's academic and social progress, in addition to school-level updates, supports this partnership, especially for students with disabilities. When teachers, students, and parents are all operating from the same playbook, families can feel more comfortable sharing their needs and remain engaged in their children's education long past the pandemic.

Conclusion

The six practices we highlighted all have one thing in common: they were part of the schools' approach to educating all students. These were not special programs designed for special student groups, nor did teachers assume that practices would work the same with all students. Instead, we found educators and staff were committed to a schoolwide culture that valued students with disabilities and kept them front of mind when implementing strategies this year.

These schools have shown that students with disabilities can be supported to achieve at high levels, even in the midst of a global pandemic. Whether it is differentiated instruction, technology-enabled supports, or relationship-building, educators have learned a lot about how to meet students where they are and how to encourage them to thrive at grade level and beyond.

The more successful schools have not simply reacted to the pandemic, they have responded to the challenge. The new challenge for educators everywhere is to keep up the momentum, try new ideas, and to build upon their efforts. Even as the siren call of "returning to normal" grows, equity demands that we build a system that serves students with disabilities better than we did before. This will require a commitment to innovating and iteration long after the pandemic ends.

Appendix A. Schools in the Study

	Rainier Valley Leadership Academy	PRIDE Schools	Catalyst Public Schools
Year opened	2015	2015	2020
Grades served	6–11	6–12	K–8
Location	Seattle, WA	Spokane, WA	Bremerton, WA
School mission	"Rainier Valley Leadership Academy is and anti-racist collaborative community school focused on dismantling systemic oppression through scholar leadership. We fulfill our vision by ensuring scholars are college and career ready by providing an anti-racist education, opportunities for collaborative problem solving, and community leadership experiences."	"The mission of PRIDE Schools is to honor the diversity and capacity of people through innovative education design. Our students are inspired to create, innovate, and challenge the status quo in a world that demands better designed systems, new solutions, and increased communication."	"We support our diverse scholars to live full lives and to succeed in college, career, and life. Scholars will find their purpose and passion so that they can cultivate the critical hope, optimism and leadership essential to be catalysts in their community and world."
2020–21 learning model	Virtual for the first term. Hybrid in the second term, initially for students with disabilities and multilingual learners, and then for all students.	Virtual for the first six weeks, hybrid for the rest of the school year.	Remote September to November. By the end of January, in-person four days a week with Wednesdays for remote learning. About 90% of students attend in-person.
Total enrollment April 2021	164	695	168
Student demographics	Asian: 2%, Black/African American: 72%, Hispanic/Latino: 15%, Two or more races: 10%, White: 3%	American Indian/Alaskan Native: 4%, Asian: 2%, Black/African American: 5%, Hispanic/Latino: 12%, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander: 1%, Two or more races: 8%, White: 69%	American Indian/Alaskan Native: 1%, Asian: 2%, Black/African American: 10%, Hispanic/Latino: 14%, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander: 1%, Two or more races: 13%, White: 60%
Students from low-income households	78%	58%	0%
Students with IEPs	23% (37 students)	17% (118 students)	10% (17 students)
Students with 504 plans	3%	5%	0%
Students who are multilingual learners	12%	0%	0%
Average daily attendance (2020–21) for all students	97%	91%	98%

***Source Notes*:** Enrollment and enrollment of students with disabilities is from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) 1251H Headcount, April 2021. Student demographic data is from the OSPI School report card for the 2020–21 school year. Daily attendance for the 2020–21 school year was not publicly available at the time of publication; we relied on school self-reporting. Attendance is based on Zoom logins and teacher attendance-taking.

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