RECOVERY FOR U.S. STUDENTS IN 2021

What Schools and Districts Can Do to Make Up for Lost Learning Time

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CRPE REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION
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Executive Summary

After eighteen months of school closure and disrupted learning, civic leaders, researchers, and educational leaders are getting a clearer picture of how students fared through the pandemic, and what new reality school systems face as they return to in-person schooling in 2021–22. Increases in community infection rates and parent hesitancy have thrown districts back into uncertainty, making it all the more critical to ensure continuity of learning and well-being for students who may not be able to return to classrooms as quickly as planned, and may face continued disruptions due to quarantines.

As students return to a third year of disrupted learning, school and system leaders cannot lose sight of our schools' most critical charge this year: addressing unfinished learning and restoring student well-being.

While gauging the academic impacts of the pandemic through spring 2021 has been challenging, a body of evidence is emerging from a range of public and private institutions studying this question from different angles. The best interpretations of the most reliable information available underscore a few critical observations:

- The average student mastered less academic content this year because of the pandemic and associated disruptions to schooling.
- The pandemic's average impacts on academic achievement, while significant, mask substantial variation in impacts across subjects, grades, demographic groups, and geography.
- The evidence to date likely understates both the average academic impacts of the pandemic and the opportunity and achievement gaps it has produced.
- Declines in student well-being indicators could diminish future conditions for successful learning.

We propose the following six principles, some of which districts are already applying, to ensure students experience a positive, healthy, and restorative schooling experience this year.

I. Provide each student an individualized, three-year instructional plan that uses data to address their academic, social, and emotional needs.

II. Prioritize strategies that honor and re-engage students most impacted by the pandemic.

III. Use tutoring, extended learning time, and early diagnostic systems to strengthen student foundations in math and early literacy.

IV. Provide at least one quality remote option while safely reopening schools in person.

V. Pilot new structures for learning, such as flexible schedules, prioritizing content mastery over seat time, and new ways of structuring school.

VI. Create coherent, aligned systems of support for educators and families.

This moment demands new, bold leadership from all of us who touch the lives of students—from civic leaders to policymakers to system leaders to educators. Fast action and transformative change can prevent long-term harm.

Background

"And how are the children?" The oft-referenced African Masai traditional greeting emphasizes that a community is only as healthy as its youngest members.

After eighteen months of disrupted schooling for America's children, it has been difficult for civic leaders, researchers, or educational leaders to clearly answer this question. But even as disruptions continue, a clear picture is emerging of how schools and systems can reorganize themselves to better address what our students need and value.

After a summer focused on getting students back in class, school systems have been thrown into new uncertainty. Reopening efforts are once again fraught with health and safety concerns. As students return to a third year of disrupted learning, school and system leaders cannot lose sight of our schools' most critical charge this year: to address unfinished learning and restore student well-being.

Gauging the academic impacts of the pandemic through spring 2021 has been challenging, since schooling disruptions upended the assessment systems used to monitor students' progress.

However, a body of evidence is emerging from a range of public and private institutions studying this question from different angles. The Center on Reinventing Public Education has convened experts to make sense of these diverse data sources. Together, they show the pandemic and its disruptions to schooling have significantly hurt students' academic progress, and that many of the demographic groups schools struggled to serve effectively before the pandemic are under-represented in the available data.

While there are still many gaps in our picture of the pandemic's impact on learning, the best interpretations of the most reliable information available underscore the following critical observations.

The average student mastered less academic content this year because of the pandemic and associated disruptions to schooling.

This fact is demonstrated by measures including test scores, instructional time, engagement, and academic progress. Most estimates put lost academic progress in the range of four to five months' worth of instructional time.

This was especially the case for the nation's youngest students. Children ages birth to eight experienced steep declines in enrollment (up to 40 percent for preschool-age students) and slower academic growth. Older elementary-school students exhibited similar academic declines. National testing data shows that academic declines for students in grades three to five were larger in magnitude than those for older students by 1 to 3 percentile points in reading and 3 to 4 percentile points in math.

Academic declines likely occurred at different paces in different subjects and different times of year. Students lost the most ground in math in spring 2020—learning almost no new content in the final months of the 2019–20 school year. They resumed learning in 2020–21, but at a slower pace than usual. Students continued to progress in reading in spring 2020, but demonstrated an overall lower growth rate in 2020–21 than in math.

These results are not surprising. In general, remote instruction did not always include live student-teacher interactions. Teachers also reported they covered much less material than usual. Many school districts reported significant increases in course failure rates, especially for students from low-income households and students of color—in some cases despite explicit reductions in grading standards.

The pandemic's average impacts on academic achievement, while significant, mask substantial variation in impacts across subjects, grades, demographic groups, and geography.

We know that historically marginalized and economically disadvantaged students, including Black, Hispanic, American Indian and Alaska Native subgroups, had larger declines in math and reading than their peers this year. Students in majority-Black schools ended the year with an estimated six months of unfinished learning, while students from low-income schools finished seven months behind. This fall, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds missed significantly more learning than the previous year, particularly in English language arts. The same was true for English language learners in both English and math.

States and localities adopted different policies governing remote or in-person learning, instructional time, and support systems that helped students stay connected to school during the pandemic. These policies were shaped by local public health conditions, politics, and the pandemic's impact on local economies. As a result, how much learning a student missed varied depending where they lived.

The evidence to date likely understates both the average academic impacts of the pandemic and the opportunity and achievement gaps it produced.

The available data may not reflect the pandemic's full impact, and these data may be particularly misleading when it comes to economically disadvantaged students and students of color.

Far fewer students participated in standardized assessments in 2020–21 than in a typical school year. Economically disadvantaged students and students of color—groups that were hardest hit by the pandemic's health and economic consequences—were less likely to participate in tests compared to their more advantaged peers. Students who studied remotely were likely under-represented in end-of-year assessments that were administered in person.

Given data showing that remote learners experienced slower academic growth than students learning in person, it is quite possible that students who missed out on more learning are also more likely not represented in the test results states and school systems are reporting.

Declines in student well-being indicators could diminish future conditions for successful learning.

Pandemic-related impacts on students' living environments, family health and economics, and social connections must also be taken into account, as these factors correlate with the conditions necessary for successful learning.

National parent surveys find that the vast majority of parents are concerned about their children's mental health and social-emotional well-being, especially for parents of secondary-age children. Reports of clinical mental-health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, social withdrawal, lethargy, and irrational fears, have increased.

Chronic absenteeism for eighth through twelfth graders has increased this year, especially for student populations with historically low absentee rates. Estimates suggest that as many as eight million eighth- through twelfth-grade students were chronically absent from school this year, according to parent reports and national enrollment data. Given the historical link between chronic absenteeism and dropout rates, another estimated one million eighth through twelfth graders could drop out of school altogether next year because of the pandemic.

Older students are rethinking postsecondary education and facing growing economic stress. Nationwide, college enrollment was down this year, with students citing a preference to join or remain in the workforce instead. High school seniors from low-income households are especially likely to make this decision—more than a quarter reported so in a 2021 survey—because of cost. Affluent seniors say they are more likely to delay attendance by waiting a year to apply or enrolling in a gap-year program.

In sum, students are missing key building blocks of success in K–12 preparation, college pursuits, or career readiness. This, compounded with deepening mental-health needs and heightened chronic absenteeism, require school districts to support students better and differently in the coming school year. We now turn to some of the most effective options.

Recommendations for Restoring Unfinished Learning and Student Well-Being

There is little doubt that the average student is academically behind past peers as a result of the pandemic-fueled school closures and disruptions. At minimum, a large portion of U.S. students seems to have learned very little in core subjects this year, failed classes at high rates, and been absent or missing from their schools. Schools must begin the difficult work of providing students increased and individualized opportunities to get back on track for grade-level learning—while also keeping them safe from continued public health threats.

Diverse impacts require diverse solutions. Educators and policymakers should immediately work together to provide intensive academic and social-emotional support. Schools must engage families and communities—who took on new roles supporting students during the pandemic—in the critical work of recovery. Systems should use data to identify priority students, measure the efficacy of strategies they use to support them, and adjust course based on what the data show. Educators need time and direct support to put high-quality, high-impact strategies in motion.

We propose the following six principles, some of which districts are already applying, to ensure students experience a positive, healthy, and restorative schooling experience this year.

1 | Provide each student with an individualized, three-year instructional plan that uses data to address their academic, social, and emotional needs.

Student supports and learning experiences since March 2020 have varied widely, and many districts chose to forgo their typical assessment schedules this spring. At best, district leaders have a fuzzy understanding of where each student stands and what they need to move forward in school successfully.

Restoring unfinished learning for students with wide-ranging needs this year will require alignment and acceleration. The alignment of grade-level instructional strategy, social-emotional interventions, assessment, professional development, and curricula creates the conditions for effective student learning. Absent clear direction from the top, teachers are left to figure these things out on their own and students are likely to receive inefficient and inconsistent support.

Learning acceleration is an instructional strategy focused on providing every student the support they need to participate in lessons on their grade level. While it is particularly effective for students of color and those from low-income families, those very students are more likely to experience remediation—instructional approaches that assign lessons below grade level—even when they had already demonstrated success on grade-level content.

To ensure every school is prepared to execute a coherent strategy to support every student to accelerate toward grade-level learning, districts must meet a checklist of actions:

1. Ensure each school is collecting data on student academic progress and well-being using broad-based assessments, and using it to target resources so students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic are provided immediate, quality learning opportunities.
2. Align diagnostic and ongoing formative assessments so educators can monitor student progress throughout the year and ensure each student receives the support necessary to access knowledge-rich course content on their grade level.
3. Use academic and well-being data to develop an individualized instruction plan for every student that accounts for the short- and long-term supports they may need. School systems should use individual instructional plans to apply evidence-based intervention strategies for every student who needs them, while targeting additional resources to the groups most disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and pre-pandemic systemic inequities.
4. Train and support educators to focus on deep content mastery of priority grade-level units while providing targeted interventions for key foundational reading and math skills. They cannot plan to teach all the content students missed. Instead, they must identify the critical skills and pieces of knowledge students must have to prepare them for this year, as well as for future years' goals.
5. Be prepared to reorganize school time and personnel to support accelerated learning. Districts should help dismantle or block any systemic barriers to schools' ability to radically support students this year.
6. Invest in great teaching. Districts and schools must support every teacher to provide targeted support anchored in strong knowledge of students' needs and progress, while maintaining grade-level rigor.

Education nonprofit TNTP's Learning Acceleration Guide lays out tools to plan a three- to five-year strategy to accelerate every student back to grade level, and set goals and metrics that span learning, well-being, and other aims voiced by students, families, caregivers, and communities.

2 | Prioritize strategies that honor and re-engage students most impacted by the pandemic.

Districts must prioritize strategies that are proven to specifically re-engage historically marginalized students. Students are more likely to learn when they are motivated by relevant content and safe, authentic relationships with the adults who work with them.

First, districts must continue to proactively recruit, support, and retain educators of color. Teachers of color tend to hold more positive perceptions of students of color and less likely to perceive their behavior as disruptive. Studies find that students who have even just one teacher

of color experienced lower dropout rates and higher rates of college interest. School leaders should harness this knowledge to hire teachers and interventionists who share the identities and life experiences of their students.

Districts must also strengthen their use of culturally relevant curriculum this year to support students' unfinished learning. Research shows that people learn by drawing on their cultural and community context, and when they can investigate personal curiosities and questions. Students disengaged during school closures will benefit from culturally responsive tasks and inquiry projects connected to their backgrounds and experiences.

Academic interventions are best paired with whole-child strategies that support students' social-emotional well-being, mental health, and physical health. Districts should tightly pair academic strategies with holistic ones, such as increasing counseling staff, ensuring food security programs, and conducting home visits for wellness checks for students and their families. It is as important to collect data on students' well-being across multiple measures—physical health, mental health, housing stability as some examples—as it is on academic measures. Students are best served by holistic, multiyear support strategies that rely on a diverse array of academic and well-being diagnostics.

3 | Use tutoring, extended learning time, and early diagnostic systems to strengthen student foundations in math and early literacy.

Schools have myriad effective intervention strategies at their disposal. High-dosage tutoring, extended learning time interventions, and early diagnostic systems are all likely to help students build a stronger foundation in literacy and numeracy that is critical for future academic success.

High-dosage tutoring

High-dosage tutoring that is directly tied to classroom content—helping students succeed in their coursework—can substantially accelerate learning in both math and reading for the students who struggle most. The design elements of an effective tutoring program include frequency (three or more sessions per week), small groups (no more than four students), varied personnel (teachers, volunteers, college students), consistent tutor-student pairings (as opposed to rotating tutors), regular use of data, use of high-quality instructional materials aligned with classroom content, and prioritization (targeting programs to students who need the most support can increase cost-effectiveness, but making programs accessible to all students can reduce stigma).

While tutoring is found to be effective at all grade levels, the evidence is strongest in reading-focused tutoring for students in early grades and in math-focused tutoring for older students. Tutoring conducted during the school day results in greater learning gains than after school or during the summer. Intensive tutoring also establishes strong relationships and customizes teaching directly to student readiness and needs and is recommended in lieu of tracking, which can feel punitive for the natural range in students' entering skills.

The impact of high-dosage tutoring is so powerful that similar tutoring programs could eventually eliminate expected learning losses brought about by pandemic-driven school closures, according to a 2020 study by Georgia State University. Boston's Match Education tutoring model, The Match Corps, led to gains of one to two additional years of math in a single school year above and beyond what students typically learn in a year. Follow-up studies in Chicago and Houston have validated the approach. A randomized trial of daily four-on-one reading tutoring for middle-school students found positive effects on attendance and language arts test scores, especially for Black and Hispanic students.

Such programs come with a heavy price tag—as high as $2,500 or more per student per year—but is made more possible in the short term given the availability of Elementary and Secondary Student Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds. Schools should explore models that leverage community volunteers and connect students with tutors remotely, like an Italian program that connected middle-school students with university student volunteers, or summer learning hubs implemented in cities like Oakland and Indianapolis. These models have the potential to be more cost effective and to reach students who might be hesitant to return to school in-person or unable to access tutoring during the school day, while still achieving many of the design elements associated with successful programs.

Extended learning time interventions

Many districts plan to fund extended learning time for their students this year with ESSER funds. A substantial body of evidence suggests these investments have the potential to support academic recovery:

- Weeklong acceleration academies staffed with highly effective teachers and schedule changes that double the amount of time students spend in math show strong evidence of effectiveness.
- One 2020 study found lengthening the school day by an hour could reduce pandemic-related learning losses by as much as one third. Another 2020 study, using a model developed by examining the impacts of school closures following natural disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey, predicted that increasing the school year by up to 5 percent for the 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic years would allow Atlanta students to recoup all the academic progress they lost during the pandemic in less than four years.
- One study of an "acceleration academy" that provided students with targeted, small-group instruction in a single subject and delivered by select teachers over week-long vacation breaks led to student gains of approximately three months of student learning. In Chicago, students with low algebra test scores received extended time to study complex algebraic thinking via student-centered instructional practices similarly accelerated a quarter of a year of academic growth and had higher course grades.

Some studies show extended school days have a statistically significant positive effect on students' academic performance. Others have been inconclusive. The effectiveness of longer school days on increased student academic performance appears to depend on other factors:

- Instructional quality, class size, student ability, and the classroom environment, as well as a school's learning model and community served all influence the efficacy of extended learning time.
- Studies on extending the school year found elementary-school, low-income, and struggling students can benefit if all learning days are used efficiently.

Professional development to prepare teachers to maximize additional school days and frequent communication with students and parents about expectations will help school communities use additional time effectively.

Early intervention systems that track student academic and socio-economic data

Districts would do well to ensure schools use strong early student-warning systems this year to catch students who need additional support. When paired with strong norms and routines, such systems help students recover emotionally and engage academically.

This is especially important for re-engaging older students in 2021–22, as the previous year's data demonstrates a marked increase in both academic and social-emotional stressors. Districts should assess what students need socially and emotionally (as well as academically), provide support to address trauma or stark academic declines, and help students identify the next steps they are ready to take in their learning.

Systems that track student attendance, assignment completion, and grades help schools individualize services and match specific interventions to unique student needs. Incorporating well-conducted, school-based social-emotional interventions has the potential to positively impact the culture and climate of classrooms and student well-being, and improve academic outcomes in the long run. Mindfulness programs have shown promise in improving cognitive performance and resilience to stress in children. Such approaches can successfully create predictable norms and routines that heal students' physical and emotional safety, post-trauma.

4 | Provide at least one quality remote option while safely reopening schools in person.

The longer students learned remotely during the first eighteen months of the pandemic, the greater the social, emotional, and academic harms they suffered. Now that vaccines are widely available and school leaders have experience implementing safety precautions, it is inescapably clear: students need to return to in-person schooling.

Some professionals have estimated that another year of school closures would so severely impact wealth inequality and disparities that American democracy could be at risk within a decade.

However, not all parents are likely to return their children to in-person schooling this fall. This is disproportionately the case for families of color: about a third of Black families are still not convinced they will choose in-person instruction for their children this fall. All of this risks

heightening long-term segregation and increases in inequity. The emergence of new COVID variants and a fall delay in vaccinations for children under twelve years old are reinforcing this sentiment.

Districts cannot afford for sizable portions of their students, who are cautious to return to in-person schooling, to lose another year of quality learning just because it provides no quality alternatives. State leaders must ensure that districts have the funding, capacity, and infrastructure to provide quality virtual options that build on data and lessons learned from this past year. These statewide priorities will ensure students have access to elements of effective remote learning.

Districts should consider working with partners to set up fall learning hubs in order to mitigate some of the known downsides of remote learning. Such hubs can provide personal relationships, stable internet connections, and wraparound enrichment programming—all factors that improve the effectiveness of remote learning. Community-based organizations can provide a smaller, more socially distanced environment and may hold more trust with families not yet willing to send their children back to the classroom. Districts who invested in hubs in 2020–21 have been able to use these hubs as continued sites of learning and connection for students this **summer** and **fall**.

5 | Pilot new structures for learning, such as flexible schedules, prioritizing content mastery over seat time, and new ways of structuring school.

While the current state of students' learning and well-being requires immediate efforts to repair their foundations of math, literacy, and social-emotional development, school systems must simultaneously rebuild a better public education system capable of meeting the needs of every student. While innovating in the midst of a global pandemic feels daunting at best, school systems that assume they will return to their old ways of doing business will re-create a system that was never designed to prepare every student to thrive.

Districts might start with small-scale innovations made possible this year with the ESSER stimulus funds. States and districts have a responsibility to direct funds toward community preferences, as well as data-informed strategies targeting students most adversely impacted by school closures and the pandemic.

Instead of districts simply returning to what they have long known and done, it's critical that they take advantage of this disrupted moment to consider new school structures and cultures grounded in the latest science of learning and development. This would include shifts in policy and practice so that schools continue to close the digital divide, strengthen remote learning and integrate it with face-to-face experiences, redesign assessments around the needs of students and educators, provide greater support for social-emotional development, emphasize culturally responsive learning, and prioritize relationships.

In addition to strengthening the foundational elements of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, now is the moment to incorporate new and different school structures, areas of

study, and definitions of schooling. Parents are more open to their children attending something other than the traditional brick-and-mortar schools, having opted for homeschooling and microschools in record numbers this past year. Students and staff are also far more equipped to use technology to engage together in self-directed assignments outside school walls.

After studying community- and district-led learning hubs nationally this year, the Center on Reinventing Public Education has identified a range of new school prototypes that are emerging as potential roadmaps for piloting innovation. For example, Hybrid Homeschool Co-ops, like a district version of Workspace Education, can provide a range of opt-in courses and common learning spaces for homeschooling students who stay enrolled in the district. Flipped Social Service Schools can wrap academics around social and emotional needs for students who require intensive support in social skills or cognitive behavioral training by situating students in a learning hub operated by mental health specialists and served by visiting teachers. Simply revisiting the high school schedule and credit attainment requirements to better accommodate the needs of students who traditionally drop out—such as students working jobs or young parents—could re-engage youth currently missing from school.

6 | Create coherent, aligned systems of support for educators and families.

The best-laid intervention and support plans will go awry if resources are not strategically directed to well-trained on-the-ground educator teams. Districts that want to adopt universal learning acceleration strategies will especially require significant investments in their teaching force to pull it off. Rapid and full implementation will make new demands on teachers and school leaders to track student progress and provide targeted just-in-time support. Teachers must have adequate resources and knowledge of priority standards, and schools will need data systems that allow cross-departmental teachers, interventionists, tutors, and potentially counselors to coordinate strategies.

Coherent, systemwide resources and collaboration

Interviews with dozens of system leaders about lessons learned last year, as part of the American School District Panel (ASDP) project, found that districts and charter school networks with shared instructional visions and curricula navigated the pandemic's disruptions more effectively than decentralized systems. Systems had an easier time ensuring access to grade-level content when they had a vision for standards-based instruction before the pandemic. Districts should task central office support teams to provide digital resources and high-quality, standards-aligned lessons that are ready to go for both educators and parents working with their children.

In order to coherently support educators systemwide, central office support teams must collaborate with one another on rolling out professional development and tools to educators, and school leaders must ensure that school teams collaborate on rolling out support to students. ASDP interviews revealed that systems found the most success when curriculum and instruction departments and administrators who oversee principals coordinated regularly. At the school level, department heads had to meet regularly to tightly coordinate across teams' use of data and ensure each team worked on parallel intervention strategies. Schools should link special education, language support, and mental-health departments with academic departments to identify and provide coherent responses to high-priority students.

Job-embedded training and support

School staff need extended time for start-of-year professional development to align on the intervention strategies they will lead this school year. They would also benefit from ongoing—ideally job-embedded—support and training throughout the year on intervention and instructional strategies, student data analysis, and connecting with students and families. Districts might also consider compensating mentor teachers and school administrators to model best practices and train others.

Effective intervention strategies rely on teachers to diagnose student needs, use ongoing data to track student progress, and adapt instruction based on what the data show. This requires teachers to receive training and professional development, and that they are allowed and empowered to adapt the curriculum they typically are required to fully cover.

Districts must also take explicit precautions to prevent lowered expectations for working with students who have unfinished learning and should consider strategies to incentivize their most effective teachers to teach in their classrooms or schools with students most impacted by the pandemic and school closures. They could train teachers in prioritizing rigorous and foundational learning standards and learning acceleration intervention strategies

There are also opportunities to leverage technology in new ways to advance teacher growth and learning. Teachers can be encouraged and financially incentivized to take online courses in high-priority skills or content areas. Virtual professional learning communities could be reimagined to connect teachers with peers across the district, mentor teachers across the country, study common areas of interest or subject matter, or receive ongoing coaching throughout the school year. Monthly in-person staff meetings could be replaced with virtual meetings at more convenient times or venues.

Communication

Systems should ensure there is adequate time for teachers to communicate across grade-level teams and with interventionists and tutors. Effective tutoring programs, for example, require tutors and teachers to regularly communicate and align on student progress and data.

Extend training to families

Given the extent of students' learning loss, districts should consider families, community leaders, and organizations as part of the solution. Developmentally, younger students benefit the most from face-to-face instruction given they are still developing self-regulation and attention skills. And during the pandemic, both parents and children report having grown closer during the pandemic, particularly if parents helped their children with school at home.

Districts can work with families to help them lead at-home, face-to-face learning. They can do this by providing at-home training in effective literacy instruction, take-home books, family engagement programs, and strategies to keep teachers in constant communication with families, especially around reading.

Approaches to Restoring Unfinished Learning and Student Well-Being

The American School District Panel Case Studies

School and system structure changes required to effectively execute learning acceleration

The American School District Panel (ASDP), a joint project between the Center on Reinventing Public Education, the RAND Corporation, Chiefs for Change, the Council of Great City Schools, and Kitamba, an education consulting firm, studied the impact of school closures on school systems nationally in 2020–21. A series of nationally-representative surveys of school districts, as well as in-depth interviews of dozens of leaders on the ground in six public school systems, unearthed new lessons about learning acceleration's simultaneous potential and requirements for system change.

Across the six systems studied, leaders were nearly unanimous on one point: rather than diverting struggling students to remediation, they hoped to push forward with teaching grade-level content.

They piloted multiple strategies to accelerate learning and reimagine recovery during the pandemic, including:

- Hybrid or blended instructional models that combine in-person and online learning
- Fully remote options
- Learning pods where students work independently or receive one-on-one support
- Mixed-age classes based on proficiency level
- Grade-band progression as opposed to grade levels
- Self-paced individualized instruction
- Co-teaching
- Weekend and intersession camps and instructional programming
- Evening learning opportunities (e.g., time in CTE shops, art studios)
- Enhanced summer programming
- "Do-over years" (where students aren't identified as having been "retained")

Critically, leaders found that acceleration alone forced big changes in teacher practices and created a need for a vastly more flexible system of student academic and social support than existed before the pandemic. Schools also required stronger support and guidance from central offices. This combination of classroom responsiveness and central steering required unprecedented levels of acceptance on the part of teachers, unions, district administrators, state regulators, and parents.

A majority of the districts had less developed or more fragmented instructional systems, however. Leaders of larger systems of this kind were less confident of their system's capacity to execute an acceleration strategy. They faced the daunting task of developing a shared instructional vision and adopting new curricula while tackling the urgent demands of the pandemic. In some cases, improving instruction alone may not be enough.

For some system leaders, learning acceleration alone did not feel like an adequate solution. These systems recognized the need for more fundamental shifts, including new teacher roles and training, different uses of instructional time, length of school days and years, and involvement of community partners and independent providers. Some of these ideas (e.g., competency-based progressions that allow students to move at their own pace) were in tension with the emphasis on grade-level work associated with acceleration.

The implications will continue to play out this 2021–22 school year. Parents might be slow to accept unfamiliar approaches to schooling. Teacher roles may need to diversify in ways that state regulations, funding systems, pay scales, and local collective bargaining agreements didn't allow before the pandemic. Teachers exhausted from the past year could be overwhelmed by additional changes, and labor shortages could occur. It's not clear how systems that are committed to mastery-based learning will reconcile those ideas with the acceleration strategy's commitment to grade-level content expectations. And transformation will require a lot of money, which is available in the short term because of the federal stimulus but which will have a lot of claimants.

Edgecombe County Public Schools

Systematizing student-centered learning through hubs

Edgecombe County Public Schools in North Carolina launched learning hubs in fall 2020 to support students who were learning remotely. But now, the rural district is building on the hub concept to more fundamentally reimagine what school can be. The district is rolling out a hub-and-spoke model, where students spend half their time learning core content (the "hub") and half engaging in enrichment activities aligned to learning standards (the "spokes"). Enrichment activities for K–8 students will involve interest-based projects in science and social studies; for high schoolers, activities could include exploring their passions through targeted English language arts and social studies projects or getting work experience. The district is redeploying staff and leveraging community-based partnerships to enable these smaller-group activities with trusted adults who mirror the demographics of the students.

Great Hearts Online

Reimagining remote learning for academic success

Great Hearts Academies, a K–12 public charter system operating in Arizona and Texas, will open a new, permanent virtual school this fall called Great Hearts Online. Like Great Hearts Academies, the online school offers a tuition-free, rigorous, classical liberal arts curriculum, including advanced math and science, robust arts, and foreign languages. It currently serves grades K–8 with plans to open a virtual high school by 2024–25.

Great Hearts Online students will learn the same subjects and take the same courses as they would in person. The organization describes the instructional experience as "equivalent, but not identical" to its brick-and-mortar schools, with pre-recorded and live lessons, shortened and more frequent tests, and independent study time. Students are expected to master the same standards, but classes may be paced differently. Great Hearts helps students connect to each other and to their school through activities like class celebrations, themed social events, and school assemblies.

This school year, Great Hearts Online is piloting a new initiative that gives families the option to build microschools, or in-person co-learning spaces. They can elect to participate in two or three days per week of co-learning in a shared space. On these days, students spend mornings in live, online classes from home or at the co-learning space. After live classes conclude, the microschool community completes asynchronous work independently or collaboratively. A Great Hearts microschool guide supports families in identifying additional enrichment, hands-on projects, experiments, and play time.

Henry County Public Schools

Restoring math and literacy foundations through clear priorities

Henry County Public Schools took a systematic and proactive approach to monitoring student learning last spring. First, the district identified essential skills and standards, streamlining its pacing guides for the 2020–21 school year. Next, it assessed all students in reading and mathematics in order to identify a "year-end" proficiency level by May 2021. If the results indicated that a student's proficiency level was behind a certain threshold (e.g., twelve or more months behind in reading), students received individual intervention plans that included everything from summer interventions to computer-adapted acceleration programs to early summer programming. Henry County's plan depended on intense collaboration between its Divisions of Learning and Performance, Family and Student Support, Information Systems, and Leadership to ensure that resources and expectations were aligned and supported across the system.

The Oakland REACH

Empowering families and community to drive virtual literacy learning

The Oakland REACH, a parent advocacy organization in Oakland, CA, spent years before the pandemic demanding better schools. After COVID caused universal school closures, The Oakland REACH built an academic learning hub designed to supplement the education students received at school while also elevating parents' voice. The Oakland REACH takes a multipronged approach to learning and community empowerment—grounding itself in rigorous, culturally relevant literacy instruction while also training, supporting, and empowering parents through resources like the Parent Power Playbook. After the first three months of programming, students outpaced the district's spring remote learning attendance (83 percent versus 35 percent) and their literacy skills grew at twice the rate of other students in the district.

Their Citywide Virtual Hub offers rigorous literacy instruction grounded in the science of reading, smaller class sizes, and more culturally responsive curriculum. In addition to academics, the hub offers extracurricular experiences like creative writing, martial arts and arts education for

students, along with workshops and social gatherings for parents. Every participating family is assigned a liason, who helps families access remote instruction, supports increased student attendance, and assists families when it's time to advocate for higher-quality services from their schools. The hub also offers parents adult education and career development opportunities. The hub served over 500 students this year, and starting this fall, The Oakland REACH is partnering with the Oakland Unified School District to provide supplemental support to virtual learners at the district's remote learning school, Sojourner Truth Independent Study.

The Oakland REACH's goals are to radically improve its students' literacy rates, ensure parents can speak from experience about the instructional approaches that truly work for their students, and standardize and optimize the literacy instruction every Oakland student receives by curating proven and community-centered resources and learning opportunities.

Conclusion

The cumulative effects of the pandemic will likely reverberate for decades for an entire generation of students—affecting their educational achievement, lifetime earnings, health outcomes, and political participation.

And, as new COVID-19 variants threaten to throw a third consecutive school year off course, it is now clear the disruptions aren't over. This moment demands new, bold leadership from all of us who touch the lives of students—from civic leaders to policymakers to system leaders to educators.

We must keep students at the center of all decision-making, and increase the transparency with which decisions are made this year. We must have an honest debate about what works and what must change. And we must fiercely commit to reimagining a future for this generation of students that is brighter than the data currently predict.

For further reading on addressing unfinished learning and restoring student well-being, CRPE recommends its consensus panel series including findings on academics, social-emotional well-being, and students with disabilities.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K–12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.