

SPOTLIGHT

Accelerating Learning to Address Learning Loss

by John Kim and Kathleen Choi

Originally published in the *District Management Journal*, v.29, Spring 2021

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those students who have fallen farthest behind.*



Accelerating Learning to Address Learning Loss

DMGroup's Approach and Framework

John Kim and Kathleen Choi

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has been causing dramatic disruptions to learning for our nation's students. Some schools have been fully remote for over a year, some implemented hybrid models, some resumed in-person schooling with sporadic disruptions related to outbreaks or rising infection rates, and some have pivoted among these models. Even the 2021-22 school year may not be a return to full in-person learning for all students; our nation's youngest students likely will not be vaccinated for a portion of the school year and there are still some looming concerns about new variants and rising infection rates.

For many students, these disruptions to learning have resulted in what is commonly being referred to as "learning loss." In truth, this term is being used to encompass true learning loss — loss of knowledge students had once gained — as well as the tremendous amount of missed learning — learning that never happened; it also generally encompasses missed opportunities for social and emotional development. For simplicity's sake, we will use the term "learning

loss" to refer to all of these components. Regardless of the label you choose to use, the effect for students is alarming. As early as fall 2020, the average growth in math of students in grades 3–8 was already 5 to 10 percentile points lower than in fall 2019 (*Exhibit 1*).¹

And students of color have been affected disproportionately. By the end of the 2019-20 school year, students at schools with more students of color lost significantly more learning in both reading and math (*Exhibit 2*). This is particularly alarming given the historic opportunity gaps that already existed.

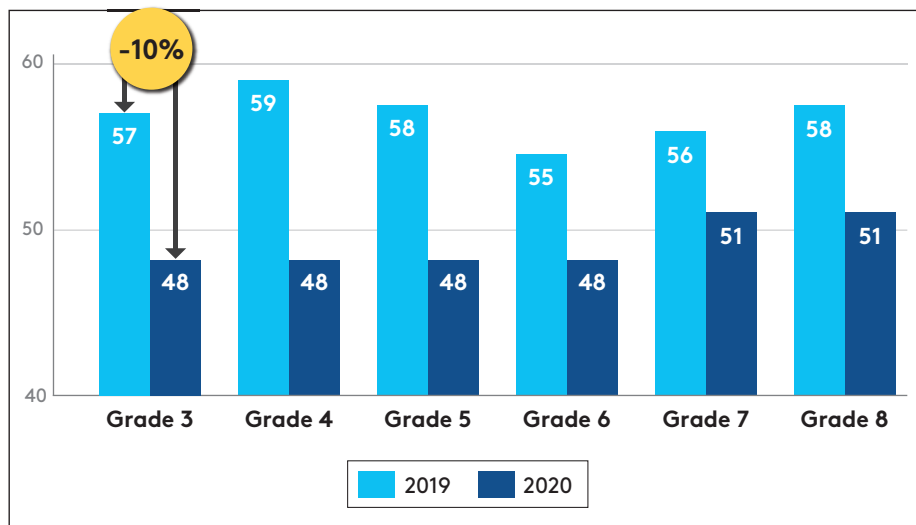
There are as yet few estimates about the amount of learning loss expected by the end of the 2020-21 school year, but it is projected to be substantial. Learning loss is expected to be particularly significant in mathematics — students on average are likely to lose five to nine months of learning by the end of the 2020-21 school year; students of color could be six to 12 months behind in math, compared with four to eight months for White students.²

DMGroup Spotlight represents the thinking and approach of District Management Group.

“What is the long-term impact? How long will it take for our students to catch up?” are frequently voiced questions. A McKinsey & Company report references the effect on education of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, which resulted in schools in part of the country being shut down for 14 weeks. Four years later, researchers found that students who were directly affected by the quake ended up being 1.5 years behind peers living in unaffected regions. And students furthest from opportunity were hit hardest; the 16% of students whose mothers had completed primary school were found to have not lost any ground four years later.³ While the relevance of this example may be limited, it does suggest that actions to provide supports for learning are critical.

Fortunately, federal funding is available to support K-12 schools in this work, and much of the funding allows for unprecedented flexibility so that districts can address their most pressing problems. To date, there have been three rounds of federal legislation: the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES), which provided the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) totaling \$13.2 billion; the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), which provided \$54 billion; and the American Rescue Plan, passed in March 2021, which will provide \$123 billion to K-12 public schools (*Exhibit 3*). The

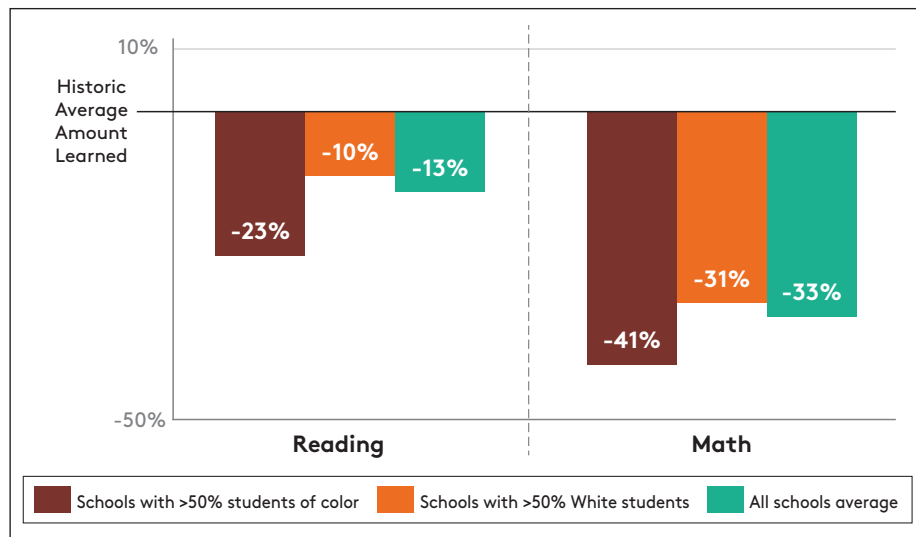
Exhibit 1 MAP GROWTH ACHIEVEMENT PERCENTILES, FALL 2020 AND FALL 2019



Source: Kuhfeld et al., “Learning During COVID-19,” NWEA, November 2020. See note 1.

American Rescue Plan specifies that districts must spend at least 20% of the money addressing learning loss and must make public a plan for returning to in-person schooling safely.⁴ This now places the onus on districts and schools to take action and make plans to use these resources wisely to accelerate learning for our nation’s students.

Exhibit 2 LEARNING LOSS DISPARITIES IN SY2019-20 IN K-5



Source: Dorn et al., “COVID-19 and Learning Loss,” McKinsey, March 1, 2021. See note 2.

Accelerating Learning in SY2021-22: DMGroup's Perspective and Guiding Principles

To construct an effective approach to accelerating learning in the next school year, we needed to begin by acknowledging that next year will not be a return to normal. We sought to identify the many new or heightened challenges ahead. We also felt it necessary to articulate our guiding principles to ground our work.

The Year Ahead: Different from Before

Much as we all yearn for a familiar “back to school” plan, next year will not, or rather should not, be a return to how things used to function. As districts and schools look to the year ahead, it is essential to first identify and acknowledge the many new challenges resulting from the disruptions of the past year:

- **Broader disparities in skills and readiness:** Students’ range of skills and readiness will likely be much broader this fall than ever before, presenting greater challenges for teachers.
- **Students and staff will need to learn how to attend “normal” school again:** Many districts have been closed for over a year or have had a hybrid schedule, optional in-person attendance, or sporadic in-person schooling. Getting students and families/guardians used to attending on a regular basis will require rebuilding attendance habits. Going to school has to once again become normal and expected.

- **Parents’/guardians’ role and engagement need to be redefined and reestablished:** Many parents/guardians “attended” virtual classes with their students, and some feel as if they played the role of a teacher. As a result, many will approach their role with more agency. Defining how to engage parents and guardians productively after this past year will be a different challenge than before.
- **Decisions will be scrutinized:** All plans will need to be able to stand the scrutiny of experts, community members, and “the court of public opinion.” While this is certainly not a new challenge for district and school leaders, scrutiny of district decisions, policies, and practices has been extremely high during the pandemic, and it is reasonable to expect that it will remain intense. Health and safety protocols, handling of curriculum and instruction, and types of social-emotional supports will all likely be topics of significant discussion.
- **Shifting circumstances:** School districts will need to remain agile and innovative. Throughout the fall and perhaps beyond, there are likely to be many challenges requiring nimble responses. We will most likely still be monitoring infection rates and variants, especially because elementary students will probably not be vaccinated for at least the first part of the year.

Addressing these factors adds substantial complexity to planning for the next school year, but it is critical to tackle these challenges proactively to get the year started off right.

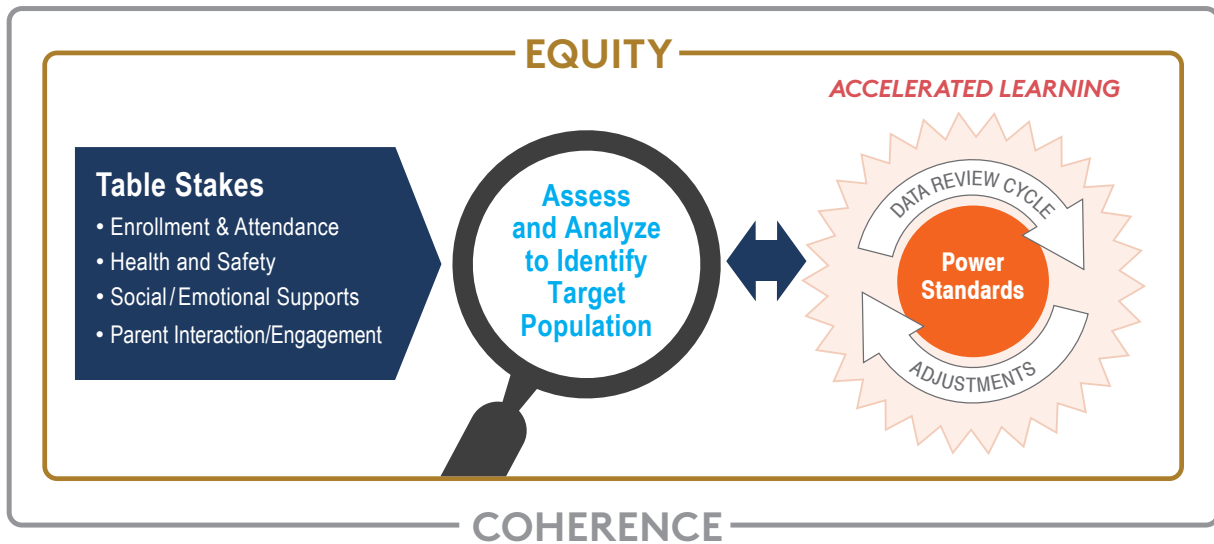
Exhibit 3 CONGRESSIONAL COVID FUNDING FOR K-12

	CARES Act 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief & Economic Security Act (Established ESSER funds) Signed into law March 2020	COVID Relief Package Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act Signed into law December 2020	American Rescue Plan Signed into law March 2021
K-12 Funding	\$13.2BN	\$54BN	\$123BN** to be distributed through the federal Title I formula for funding schools and districts with concentrated poverty
Allowable Uses:*	Stabilizing school operations	Addressing learning loss	Making investments for permanent improvement
Obligated by:	9/2022	09/2023	09/2024

*The allowable use of these funds is broader than in previous legislation, enabling local districts to directly address the specific needs of their students, teachers, and communities. Most “supplement not supplant” provisions found in ESSA Title I are waived for these allocations.

**\$123 billion for K-12 schools to be distributed through the federal Title I formula for funding schools and districts with concentrated poverty. Funds are to be focused on helping schools reopen and helping students catch up on learning they have missed during the pandemic. Districts must spend at least 20% of the money addressing learning loss and must make public a plan for returning to in-person schooling safely.

Source: P. W. Jordan, “What Congressional Covid Funding Means for K-12 Schools,” *FutureEd*, last updated April 23, 2021; DMGroup analysis.



Source: DMGroup.

Guiding Principles

At DMGroup, we believe it is important to establish a set of guiding principles to ground us and guide us in our work; having a clear set of guiding principles helps to determine priorities as well as what we are *not* going to do. A year ago when we supported more than 80 districts in planning to open schools for the 2020-21 school year, DMGroup similarly recommended creating guiding principles as the first step.⁵

In our work to structure a framework for accelerating learning, our guiding principles are as follows:

- Current teachers and staff are able to successfully address the gaps in learning and accelerate learning for all students provided that school and district leaders create the conditions and provide the supports to both empower them and build their capacity (e.g. district and school leaders need to create focus and accountability, and provide coaching, data, tools, and other applicable supports).

Numerous studies over the years confirm that teacher quality is the key driver in student achievement. Investing in building teacher capacity and investing in providing the necessary supports will result in sustainable benefits for students.

- Existing instructional materials and curriculum are adequate for the majority of districts and schools. New curriculum and instructional materials are

often alluring, but the coming year is rife with so many challenges that rolling out new curriculum is unlikely to be a wise use of time and resources. While DMGroup is enthusiastic about innovation and does not want to discourage innovations to instructional materials and curriculum, we believe that in the coming year, good delivery of existing instructional materials and curriculum should be sufficient, in general. Teachers and staff should not have the added challenge of adopting new curriculum during what is likely to be another stressful year.

- Resources need to be used wisely for sustainable improvements. An unprecedented amount of federal funding is making its way to districts. In the past, many districts have used funds to add programs and staff only to later face a fiscal cliff and have to discontinue the programs and supports that students had come to rely on. Districts and schools will need to use resources wisely by investing in building the capacity of teachers and staff, and investing in systems and facilities that will promote lasting improvements.

District Management Group's Accelerated Learning Framework

With a clear understanding of the unique challenges ahead and with guiding principles to ground the work, District Management Group has created the following framework (*Exhibit 4*) to help districts plan to accelerate learning in the 2021-22 school year.

Table Stakes

Acknowledging the new and heightened challenges ahead, we must first address what we refer to as “table stakes” — the minimum requirements that need to be addressed to get back to school and get the year kicked off successfully. Much of the work to address the following list of table stakes needs to happen this spring and summer.

- **Enrollment and attendance:** After the disruptions to in-person school over the past year, getting families/guardians to enroll or reenroll their students and to rebuild attendance habits is likely to be a challenge. Districts and schools will need a robust outreach plan to ensure enrollment in addition to a plan to get students and families back in the habit of attending school.

Public school enrollment has dropped nationwide, with the sharpest declines evident in the earliest grades: prekindergarten and kindergarten. A Chalkbeat/AP analysis showed that the drop in kindergarten enrollment accounted for 30% of the total reduction across the 33 states in the study — making it one of the biggest drivers of the nationwide decline.⁶ As yet, there is limited data looking at the enrollment declines by socioeconomic status and race, but there are indications that kindergarten enrollment has dropped in neighborhoods with the lowest household incomes. Getting students to enroll and getting them used to regular attendance will be fundamental to even beginning to get students back on track in learning.

- **Health and safety:** Ensuring health and safety will continue to be a concern in the coming school year, particularly for younger students who likely will not be vaccinated by the fall. Districts and schools will need to make the necessary preparations to buildings and classrooms, transportation, and schedules, and provide personal protective gear, etc., in accordance with CDC and state guidelines.

In addition, districts and schools need to focus on communicating to their students, teachers, and staff that health and safety have been appropriately addressed. Messaging needs to communicate that school is a safe place to be and that students are expected to come back to school. Attendance needs to be normalized again.

- **Social-emotional supports:** A wide variety of social-emotional supports will be needed for both students and staff. After spending all or portions of last year in remote-learning or hybrid-learning mode, many students are suffering from stress and isolation and will need supports to foster social connection. Many may also need supports to deal with the traumas of the past year, ranging from loss of family members, illness, food insecurity, to mental health challenges. Districts and schools will need to plan to have supports in place by the start of the school year to cover the range of needs.
- **Parent/guardian interaction/engagement:** After a year in which many parents/guardians were highly engaged in their student’s learning, it is advisable to have a plan for clear and regular communications with parents and guardians. Providing regular communication at a predictable cadence will likely help this transition. Also, seek to define and communicate the role that families and guardians can play in their student’s learning this coming year.

In addition to responding to these new and heightened challenges, education leaders will need to continue to be prepared to respond to shifting circumstances and to explore a new normal. Taking action to make sure all students have internet access and devices is fundamental to preparing for next year. (The American Rescue Plan makes \$7.2 billion available for the E-rate program, which makes it easier to connect homes and libraries to the internet.)⁷ Once again, making plans to be prepared to pivot from one modality to another — particularly for younger students — is also advisable for the coming year. This includes thinking through alternative schedules, having good contact information for students and their families/guardians, and having effective learning management systems in place, among other steps.

While remote learning was challenging for the majority of students, it proved a good option for some students.⁸ Also, asynchronous learning and flipped classroom models have been used much more over the past year. While everyone longs for a “return to normal,” these practices and other innovations developed over the past year should be explored further to see if perhaps they should become part of our new normal.⁹

Enrollment and Attendance

STRATEGY TO CONSIDER

Take a “Distributed” Community-Led Approach

After a year of disruptions and stop-and-go in-person learning for many, districts need to focus on achieving full enrollment and consistent attendance for staff and students in the fall. Instead of the typical approach where district personnel lead the majority of enrollment efforts (e.g., a “top-down” approach), DMGroup suggests taking a “distributed” (“bottoms-up”) approach in which everyone — staff, teachers, parents, students, and the community — is involved and actively working to achieve full enrollment and high attendance for the new school year.



HOW?

- **Leverage behavioral science** to create momentum: Behavioral science tells us that people’s decisions are not always rational; their decisions and behavior are often influenced by what others are doing. “Nudges” — subtle interventions — can help people make better decisions.ⁱ
- **Leverage trusted sources:** Research shows that friends and family, teachers, school leaders, and district leaders are among those most trusted by families for information.ⁱⁱ

Below are just a few examples of how to leverage trusted sources and behavioral science to “nudge” students and families to enroll:

- Have your principals and/or teachers **make a short video** introducing themselves or doing a walk-through of the classroom and school before fall term starts in order to build excitement.
- **Share FAQs and “points of pride”** from district and school leaders to generate enthusiasm.
- Have this year’s teacher write a one-line note on a mailing or **send personalized postcards** with a picture of the classroom. Research shows that personalization can make a big difference.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Leverage past relationships** between teacher and students. For example, have a past year’s teacher write a one-line note on a mailing or leave a phone message.
- **Publicize how many others are already enrolling** through email, social media, and signs in highly visible areas in the community.

Once school is in session, encourage attendance by providing “nudges” from trusted sources:

- Educate and communicate with families about **the importance of attendance**. Families often do not understand the cumulative effects of missing school. Research shows that sending parents/guardians their student’s total number of absences and how it compares to those of other students is **proven to decrease absenteeism**. Utilize low-cost, targeted, personalized mail campaigns that incorporate lessons from behavioral science and that have been proven to decrease chronic absenteeism.^{iv}

ⁱ Cass R. Sunstein and Richard H. Thaler, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

ⁱⁱ “EveryDay Labs: Family Insights ToolKit 2020,” *EveryDay Labs*, 2020, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/569623/2/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Todd Rogers and Avi Feller, “Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents’ Misbeliefs,” *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1038/41562.2397-3374>.

^{iv} “Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents’ Misbeliefs: A Summary of Research,” Research Brief, *EveryDay Labs*, December 2020, <https://f.hubspotusercontent40.net/hubfs/4875399/Reducing%20Absenteeism%20at%20Scale%20K-12%20Brief%20Final%202020.pdf>.
N.B. District Management Group has a strategic partnership with EveryDay Labs.

Strategies

Enrollment and Attendance (cont.)

- Have central office, schools, and teachers **work collaboratively** to focus on early and intensive interventions:
 - **Analyze data** to identify students who are chronically absent and other groups for whom absenteeism is a challenge.
 - **Identify barriers to attendance:** This summer, conduct student, staff, and family surveys; focus groups with families and teachers; and social media polls to assess barriers to attendance. Examine this data with an “attendance lens” to identify issues at a granular level. *Attendance Works* details specific barriers in the categories of “negative school experiences,” “lack of engagement,” “misconceptions about attendance,” and other barriers such as illness, transportation, etc.^v
 - With specific barriers identified, involve teachers as well as school and district-level staff to **develop targeted interventions**. For example, unsafe walking paths were identified as a problem for a group of students, which was addressed by creating neighborhood walking buses.^{vi}
 - Have a system and process in place to **actively monitor** why students are absent throughout the school year.
 - **Develop an outreach plan** to activate when targeted students are absent
 - Who will do the outreach? Secretaries, trusted adult, guidance counselor, paraprofessional, etc.
 - What form will it take? Call, email, text, home visit
 - When? Outreach can start 15 minutes after the first bell or after first period, for example
 - **Engage parents**, allowing them to text or email when students will be absent.

Health and Safety

STRATEGY TO CONSIDER

Focus on Communication and Leverage Social Comparison Theory

Districts need to make sure all students, family, and staff feel safe in the buildings. For the past year, districts across the country have implemented enhanced health, safety, and cleaning protocols. Going forward, while districts and schools must continue to ensure compliance with CDC, state, and local guidelines, greater emphasis will need to be placed on communications plans to establish credibility.



HOW?

- **Leverage social comparison theory:** Social comparison theory, developed by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954, is founded on the idea that there is a drive within people to compare themselves to others.^{vii}

^v “Why Are So Many Students Missing So Much School?” *Attendance Works*, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/teaching-attendance-2-0/use-data-for-intervention-and-support/strategy-2-consider-needed-supports/why-are-so-many-students-missing-so-much-school/>.

^{vi} “Starting a Walking School Bus,” *Walking School Bus*, National Center for Safe Routes to School of the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center, accessed May 4, 2021, <http://www.walkingschoolbus.org/>.

^{vii} Leon Festinger, “A Theory of Social Comparison Processes,” *Human Relations* 7, no. 2 (May 1954): 117–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>.

A few examples of putting this theory into action include:

- Positioning your protocols in relation to **guidance by the CDC** and other experts
 - **Evaluate:** Compare to CDC and experts' guidelines everything you have been doing this year, what needs to stay the same, and what will be adjusted. Share this information clearly.
 - **Enhance:** Highlight what you have heard from stakeholder feedback (staff, family, and student surveys; focus groups) and share the actions being taken in response.
- Making your actions **public and visible** because people will be comparing your district's practices with those of others
 - Take a lesson from the **hospitality industry**, which has incorporated "housekeeping theater"; their customers witness health and safety protocols in action.^{viii} Schools can prioritize cleaning during the day to increase visibility.
 - **Create videos** to show cleaning and safety protocols.
 - Allow teachers to **access cleaning supplies** for their own classrooms.
 - **Create escalation protocol for staff** to raise concerns about safety and cleanliness.
- **Facilitate communications** from trusted teachers and staff
 - Provide communication templates for teachers or principals to send to families about classroom safety.

Social-Emotional Supports for Students and Staff

STRATEGY TO CONSIDER FOR STUDENTS

Utilize One-to-One Mapping to Support and Engage Students

District and school leaders recognize the importance of addressing students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs in order to achieve academic outcomes. Students are much less likely to learn math, reading, and critical thinking skills when they feel insecure, overwhelmed, or stressed. Districts and schools already have many social and emotional supports to deploy when students return to school.

But given how disconnected many students may feel after the past year, one strategy to be considered is ensuring a one-to-one relationship with an adult for every student. One-to-one relationships between students and adults have been shown to reduce bullying, lower dropout rates, promote higher reading scores, and lead to higher levels of effort and perseverance in learning.^{ix}



^{viii} Natalie B. Compton, "What Hotels Are Doing to Sanitize Rooms During the Pandemic," *Washington Post*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2020/04/29/what-hotels-are-doing-sanitize-rooms-during-pandemic/>.

^{ix} Jung-Sook Lee, "The Effects of the Teacher-Student Relationship and Academic Press on Student Engagement and Academic Performance," *International Journal of Educational Research* 53 (2012): 330-40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2012.04.006>.

Strategies

Social-Emotional Supports for Students and Staff (cont.)

HOW?

- **Create a relationship map** to ensure each student has a trusted adult to turn to at school.^x
 - Research shows that the pool of adults can extend beyond classroom teachers.^{xi} Consider paraprofessionals, sports coaches, lunch workers, AmeriCorps fellows, secretaries, community partners, etc.
 - **Create thoughtful pairings.** Some strategies include:^{xii}
 - Ask all school staff to list students with whom they have an established trusting relationship
 - Form pairings based on shared interests
 - Identify students who do not have any strong relationships. Consider assigning additional adults to those students identified as struggling
 - **Establish protocols and coaching** to support adults in building strong relationships. Provide proposed structures and activities. Consider providing a relationship-building “look-for” document.
 - **Provide time in the schedule** such as morning meetings for elementary students and advisory periods for secondary students or teacher-led lunches or snack time once per week.
- **One-to-one mapping** can help identify at-risk students. Some reminders include:
 - **Develop a protocol** for the one-to-one trusted adult to elevate a student in need of support
 - **Implement an SEL Universal Screener** to identify students who may need more support
 - **Gather information** from staff and parents to identify students who may be at risk
 - Allow students to **self-nominate**
 - Create a **combination** of one-to-one and small-group counseling services

STRATEGY TO CONSIDER FOR STAFF

Create the Conditions and Space for Staff to Support One Another

After the challenges of the past year, all staff will need to feel connected and supported. Consider encouraging and supporting the development of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). ERGs are voluntary, employee-led groups made up of individuals who join together based on common interests, backgrounds, or demographic factors. ERGs bring people together who are the same in some dimension; that shared dimension can help foster bonds of trust, especially if combined with a perceived climate of psychological safety. In the corporate sector, ERGs have been shown to increase retention, enhance mental health, and improve trust in leadership.^{xiii}

^x “Relationship Mapping Strategy,” Making Caring Common Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education, May 2020, <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/relationship-mapping-strategy>.

^{xi} Carly D. Robinson, Matthew A. Kraft, Susanna Loeb, and Beth E. Schueler, “Accelerating Student Learning with High-Dosage Tutoring,” Ed Research for Recovery: Design Principles Series, Annenberg Institute at Brown University, February 2021, https://annenberg.brown.edu/sites/default/files/EdResearch_for_Recovery_Design_Principles_1.pdf.

^{xii} Robinson et al., “Accelerating Student Learning with High-Dosage Tutoring.”

^{xiii} Shelton Goode and Isaac Dixon, “Are Employee Resource Groups Good for Business?,” *SHRM*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/0916/pages/are-employee-resource-groups-good-for-business.aspx>.

HOW?

To implement employee resource groups in schools and districts, identify leaders, create the conditions, and support implementation. These include the following:

- Identify leaders interested in volunteering to run a group. Some examples of ERGs include:
 - New Teachers Group
 - Mental Health Advocacy Group
 - Parents' Group
 - Community Impact Group
 - BIPOC Group
 - LGBTQ Group
 - Women's Network
- **Create dedicated time and space:** Dedicated time at a regular cadence is essential; consider possibly carving out some time normally set aside for professional development and faculty meetings.
- **Encourage each group to establish protocols:** Encourage the setting of clear intentions for the group and the establishment of ground rules; these ground rules are essential, as they offer a sense of security not found in sporadic gatherings.

Parent/Guardian Engagement

STRATEGY TO CONSIDER

Take an Asset-Based Approach to Parent/Guardian Engagement

After watching and actively supporting their child or children attend remote school this past year, many parents and guardians have developed a deeper understanding of what happens during classroom time as well as a stronger sense of agency. Surveys indicate that parents want more frequent communication and involvement.^{xiv} One strategy to consider is to make parents and guardians an ongoing "everyday" partner in schooling, not an "event-based" partner.



HOW?

Some ideas for putting this into action:

- **Define the role parents can play.** Be specific. Roles will likely vary by school and by grade.
- **Communicate effectively** and establish a regular cadence of communication. Create a habit for parents/guardians to check their email or mail on certain days and times for communications from school, e.g., every Thursday at 5 PM.

^{xiv} "EveryDay Labs: Family Insights ToolKit 2020."

“Using an equity lens, district and school leaders need to target and plan to support those students who have fallen farthest behind.”

Focus Efforts and Identify Target Populations

Realistically, it is impossible to accomplish all of the learning that is supposed to happen in the coming year while making up for all of the missed learning and lost learning since March 2020.

Thus, priorities for learning — power standards¹⁰— must be set for each grade level and for each subject. Clarifying these priorities will be essential to providing focus for teaching staff. Over the past year, we saw many schools choosing to focus on core skills such as literacy and numeracy in the younger grades. In high schools, students will need to be supported to gain the skills and credits to graduate, as well as to identify and develop the skills needed to prepare for post-secondary education or a career.

Almost all students have suffered in one way or another during the pandemic, and the instinct of educators is to try to serve all of the needs they can. However, the words of Patrick Lencioni come to mind: “If everything is important, then nothing is.”¹¹ Districts, schools, teachers, and staff need to recognize that they cannot do everything and that certain groups of students will need greater support to begin to catch up. Using an equity lens, district

and school leaders need to target and plan to support those students who have fallen farthest behind.

Articulating the objectives and identifying target populations over the summer will be important so that teachers and staff can focus their efforts from the very start of the school year. If they are not already in place, developing the data systems to do this analysis more easily will be necessary for the long term.

Accelerated Learning Cycles

With table stakes addressed, priorities for learning defined, and target populations clearly identified, the work can then begin to accelerate learning.

To accelerate learning, it is essential that districts and schools have the systems, processes, and practices in place to allow teachers to know quickly whether students are making appropriate progress. No time can be wasted. If a teaching strategy or intervention is not working, there is not time to wait a month or two to find this out. Weekly or bi-weekly assessments and check-ins need to assure that appropriate progress is being made. The necessary assessment tools and data-tracking tools need to be available for use from Day One. And coaching supports

Strategies

Focus Efforts and Identify Target Populations

Districts and schools need to bring an equity lens to the work and identify target populations that will require special supports to make up for lost learning. District and school teams should examine available data from the most recent year as well as the year before in order to identify those students most at risk.

Some examples of students whom districts may choose to target include:

- Students living in poverty
- Kindergarten students living in poverty
- Students who are homeless or in foster care
- Students who have been chronically absent
- Students with disabilities
- Students with special education needs
- Students with social/emotional needs

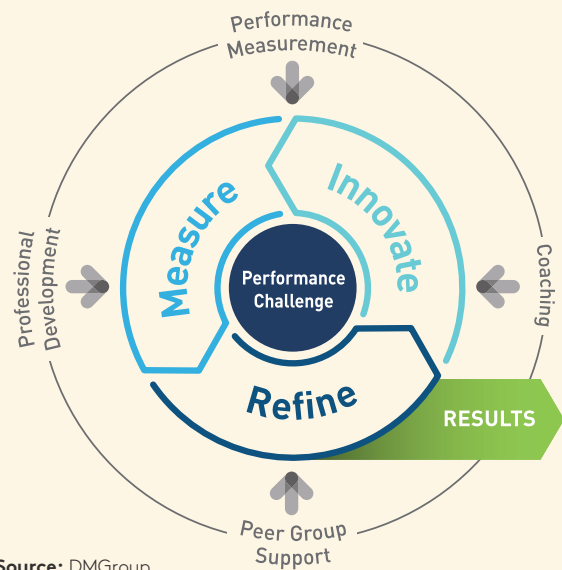
Accelerating Learning

Before the beginning of the new school year, districts need to identify “power standards” for each grade level and for each subject, as they will be essential to provide focus for teaching staff.¹² Given the overwhelming number of standards that each subject and each grade level has, there is great benefit to prioritizing certain standards so that teachers will dedicate a greater amount of time to teaching those standards. It does not mean that other standards are being eliminated. This approach allows for teachers and students to focus on mastering some key standards which also support overall outcomes.

With power standards defined and target populations identified, leaders and teachers can begin to tackle the work of accelerating learning for these groups. It is critical to have tools for frequent assessments as well as the systems to collect data. Then, a frequent and regular cadence for teachers to review the data needs to be established, with time on their calendars reserved for this work. Finally, coaching support needs to be provided to help teachers make adjustments if desired results are not being achieved.

District Management Group has been supporting districts to put these steps into action with our **DMBreakthroughTeams** approach.¹³ This approach combines a highly focused goal, coaching, and rapid cycles to drive student achievement. Districts simultaneously launch multiple school-based teams, each with five to seven team members. Each team sets a very specific goal to achieve for a target group of students in a short burst of time (usually about 10 weeks). The team measures progress weekly and then meets to review the progress data together. Each team has a dedicated DMGroup performance coach who attends every weekly meeting and is on hand to provide just-in-time coaching and support. Throughout the 10-week cycle, coaches are responsible for providing individual and team coaching, as well as offering real-time, practical professional development grounded in quantitative and qualitative analysis. Coaches guide teams in the analysis and monitoring of progress toward goals using data dashboards designed and maintained by DMGroup. Together, they discuss how to adjust their approach and then they try again.

This approach has been used to address early literacy, middle school math, attendance, and high school graduation rates,



Source: DMGroup.

among other issues, and it achieves measurable results that energize teachers and staff.

Why does this approach work so well?

- **Focused goals with accountability:** Teachers and staff are focused on a highly specific goal. In weekly meetings, they are held accountable to their team and to their DMGroup performance coach, who is singularly focused on supporting the team to achieve its goal.
- **Bottoms-up and top-down:** The sponsorship team at the district level sets the overall strategic priority and is responsible for removing barriers to implementation. But it is the team at the school level that is empowered to innovate and get results. The approach is a coherent and coordinated implementation of strategic goals.
- **Outcomes-focused as opposed to inputs-focused:** Real, measurable results are the goal. The entire organization is energized by the results they achieve.

DMBreakthroughTeams not only achieve measurable results, but simultaneously build capacity for longer-term benefits. Coaching is embedded in this approach, and the skills developed during the process far outlast the 10-week cycle of work. Research shows that with effective coaching, individuals retain up to 90% of the learning, even weeks after the lessons occurred, whereas most individuals lose 50% of what is learned within an hour and retain only 10% of the knowledge after one week.¹⁴

need to be in place to leverage when appropriate progress is not being made. A short-cycle, data-driven, iterative model is the way to ensure that students are making the appropriate progress.¹⁵

In conjunction with this rapid-cycle approach, districts also might want to consider how to extend the reach of their most effective teachers. The most effective teachers may play a coaching role, may be charged with designing lessons, or may be charged with delivering direct instruction while other teachers focus on small group work and exercises. Having the most effective teachers record lessons to allow for flipped classroom models, asynchronous learning, or reinforcing of lessons may be an interesting alternative to explore. DMGroup has long advocated unpacking and redefining the role of teachers.¹⁶ Classroom teachers are expected to fill many roles simultaneously and expected to be competent at all of these roles. Especially now, when the needs of students are so great, having teachers play to their strengths may relieve some stress for teachers and may allow students to be better served. Also, while the majority of students, teachers, and staff are eager to be back in person, districts and schools should consider how some online, asynchronous options can be incorporated into the regular school curriculum.

The Frame: Equity and Coherence

All of the work preparing for the new school year must be planned with an equity lens and with coherence in mind. Therefore, in DMGroup's Accelerating Learning Framework, the process diagram (see *Exhibit 4*) sits within a frame of equity and coherence.

- **Equity:** The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of color and less affluent communities in terms of number of deaths, incidence of disease, economic impact, and impact on learning.¹⁷ Therefore, as we approach the work of planning for the new year, equity must always frame our decisions. Indeed, the American Rescue Plan specifies that much of the funding is to go to help support students of color and students from underserved communities.
- **Coherence:** Defined as the quality of forming a unified whole, coherence is essential in designing a plan for moving forward and building a system of sustainable improvement. While we discuss the need to target certain efforts, we do so in the context of thinking about the whole.

For example, DMGroup is frequently engaged by districts to review special education practices. DMGroup's approach is to look not only at special education data and services, but to zoom out to look at the supports for any students who struggle, the process for identifying students for special education, and much more. Our recommendations often are not limited to special education practices but address the needs of students who struggle and all students. Taking a systemic approach and ensuring that the district's and schools' efforts form a unified whole leads to more significant and more sustainable results.

In Closing

DMGroup's Accelerating Learning Framework seeks to provide an outline for approaching the enormous challenge of planning to accelerate learning in the coming school year. The techniques and practices touched upon above are just initial examples of some of the ideas we think should be considered as districts and schools make their plans. At DMGroup, we will be continuing to work to provide more research and promising practices.

Given the enormous disruptions to learning over the past year and the twin trauma of the pandemic and the national reckoning on race, educators will undoubtedly feel overwhelmed, wanting to meet the many and varied needs of students. At such a crucial moment, educators need to be realistic and strategic. Focusing efforts to make measurable progress on key skills will position students for long-term success.

The funding being directed to the education sector provides hope for the future. We encourage district and school leaders to think strategically about using these funds to invest wisely. Districts need to avoid the funding cliffs that have plagued the sector in the past. Investing in capacity building of teachers and staff and investing in what works for the long term will be key to the future success of our nation's schools and our nation's students. ♦

Tess Nicholson and Laura Smith contributed to this article.

NOTES

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DMGroup's 2021

Accelerating Learning Institute

District Management Group is currently working with a cohort of districts to support them in developing plans to accelerate learning in the 2021-22 school year. The cohort of districts is in the process of working its way through DMGroup's framework for accelerating learning.

The Accelerating Learning Institute includes:

- ✓ **presentations** by DMGroup and guest speakers to share methodology, research, and promising practices for each step of the framework
- ✓ **a structured approach** to planning based on best practices
- ✓ **coaching** to support plan design
- ✓ **feedback** from DMGroup on plan design
- ✓ **peer reviews** to share ideas, get feedback, and leverage the expertise of peers

Throughout, the focus is on equity, coherence, and the cost-effective use of resources.

This Institute runs from mid-April through the end of June. Stay tuned for DMGroup's Breaking Through to Accelerate Learning Institute, which will launch this fall.

Learn more about the 2021 Accelerating Learning Institute and DMGroup's other structured professional development programs at www.dmgrouppk12.com/services/dminstitutes



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