EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES
Your education policy team.

Response to information request

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Your Question:

You asked about learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic school closures during spring 2020 and how states can support learning acceleration to relieve such learning losses.

Our Response:

Given the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, few data are available to assess the precise implications of the associated school closures on student learning. Research suggests that students likely **lost ground academically** during spring 2020, with the possibility of variation in learning loss across grades, subjects and student populations. Some variation may stem from the **range in student experiences** during school closures, as disparities in **device and internet access** and the **quality of instruction** reduced learning opportunities for students in communities with fewer economic resources and those who have been historically underserved. These gaps in student access to learning are likely to continue given the **continuation of remote learning** in many communities. While student experience differs, concern has been widespread: in a **survey** conducted by The Education Trust in four states, nearly 9 in 10 parents responded that they are "worried about their children falling behind academically due to coronavirus-related school closures."

Educational research suggests both promising practices and practices to avoid when considering how to assess and alleviate learning loss. This response includes two sections: 1) understanding the extent of learning loss and 2) supporting students through learning acceleration. Each section includes relevant research and state examples.

Equity Implications

Due to long-standing systemic inequities, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disproportionately impact the **health outcomes**, **economic well-being** and **educational opportunities** for communities of color and communities with lower incomes. The added stress for children in these communities is likely to **contribute to additional learning loss.**

Evidence also suggests the pandemic may be particularly harmful in reducing learning opportunities for **English learners** and **students with disabilities.**

Understanding Learning Loss

Evidence from historical school closures related to teacher strikes, natural disasters and other disruptions typically demonstrates a **negative impact on student learning**. Furthermore, the majority of studies examining **learning loss during the summer** conclude that most students' academic progress stalls or regresses when schools are closed, and that students from families with lower incomes tend to lose more academic progress when schools are closed (note: **some scholars** challenge these findings). **One study** also found that students with disabilities experience more summer learning loss than their peers.

Recent **projections** from NWEA based on summer learning loss research predict a similar, even exacerbated, negative impact on student achievement as a result of the pandemic. NWEA projected that students may lose up to an average of 30% of yearly academic progress in reading and up to 50% of yearly progress in math as a result of pandemic-related closures in spring 2020 (for more, see this **related blog post**). The authors and **other researchers** emphasize that these projections should be interpreted with caution, as the current crisis differs significantly from a typical summer break – including the additional stress many families are facing due to illness and job loss, as well as the varied remote learning options students are experiencing.

In seeking to understand student learning and the extent of learning loss, experts recommend integrating multiple sources of information and clarifying the **intended purpose for assessments**. Many **experts suggest** assessing student needs holistically, including social-emotional well-being, before attending to academic achievement. To understand academic implications of the pandemic, experts suggest that assessments **aligned with local curriculum** may be more useful than standardized measures, such as traditional state assessments (for more on assessment types, see **here** and **here**). **Experts** also emphasize the importance of schools adopting a "growth over remediation" stance when reviewing assessment results, focusing on additional support to advance students toward grade-level expectations, rather than emphasizing missed skills (through grade retention or over-remediation). See the "Accelerating Student Learning" section for more.

State Examples

Education policymakers are considering ways to better understand potential learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including ongoing learning loss as disruptions to in-person education continue. While Education Commission of the States has not completed a comprehensive 50-state scan on this issue, below are some examples of state action and guidance on the issue. Please note: some of the guidance below assumed students would return to school in-person. Guidance is still developing regarding use of specific assessments during remote learning.

- **Arizona**: The Arizona Department of Education released a **Roadmap for Reopening Schools**, including considerations for teachers, **students** and leaders. In the considerations for students, the guidance includes "Student Learning: Identifying Gaps and Mastery in Learning." Considerations include reviewing the scope and sequence of the previous year's content to identify which critical standards were not taught and to determine gaps in student learning using valid assessment tools.

- **California**: **Guidance** outlines a variety of tools available to districts to assess student progress. The guidance emphasizes that "in a return to school as complex as that anticipated this fall, teachers likely will want to use a variety of informal tools to assess student learning and performance — as well as their social-emotional well-being and home situation — in the first week or two of school and plan for a more formal diagnostic assessment after students have grown comfortable in the learning community."
- **Kentucky:** The Kentucky Department of Education released **guidelines** about how districts can evaluate where students are academically and how to adjust the curriculum. Guidance encourages schools to consider administering diagnostic assessments and using classroom assessments, interim assessments and formative assessments as potential tools to understand learning loss.
- **Louisiana:** In the state's **Strong Start 2020 guidance**, assessing students' academic needs is listed as a priority for districts, including creating individual learning plans for students using the information. The state has also developed guidance on **Diagnostic and Screener Assessments** and **Implementing Assessment and Individual Plans**.
- **South Carolina:** **Guidance** for the 2020-21 school year emphasizes the importance of evaluating student needs as schools reopen, particularly for students with disabilities and English learners. The guidance specifically mentions the use of "learning preparation days," or LEAP days, to administer diagnostic assessments.

Accelerating Student Learning

While the disruptions to public education from the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented, policymakers can look to prior educational research to understand **how to best support students in recovering from potential learning loss**. The following approaches have shown promise in improving student learning toward grade-level standards, though these methods have yet to be tested in the context of a pandemic and may be challenging to implement during remote learning.

- **Intensive Tutoring**: Research supports intensive tutoring, or **high-dosage tutoring**, as a cost-effective strategy for boosting student achievement. In HDT, tutors usually work with students in one-on-one or two-on-one settings in addition to students' regular instruction. Given the strong research base for this approach, many researchers and policymakers have suggested creating a **national service corps** to provide such tutoring.

- **Increasing Instructional Time:** One approach to catching students up is to increase the time students spend learning, through an extended school day, extended school year or changes in how time is spent during the existing school structure. **Studies** demonstrate that a longer school year can have positive effects on student learning, particularly for English learners, students with disabilities and students performing below grade-level. **High-quality summer programming** and other **out-of-school programs** can also support students' academic achievement. **Acceleration academies** have also shown promising results, providing additional instruction during traditional school vacations to students who need additional support.

- **Prioritizing Learning Acceleration and Avoiding Over-Remediation:** Many educators have suggested a need to backfill content students missed in the spring, but research suggests that **students benefit more from brief, "just-in-time" review** when prior knowledge and skills are needed, rather than extended coverage of previous grades' content or remediation programs that supplant regular instruction. Furthermore, research shows that grade retention, where students are required to repeat a grade, may have **long-term negative impacts** for children.

The research above focuses on academic interventions, but research demonstrates that **student** and **family** engagement, including supports for social and emotional learning, are also key ingredients for academic success.

State Examples

While many supports for learning acceleration are occurring at the district level, and Education Commission of the States has not completed a comprehensive 50-state scan on this issue, the following examples demonstrate actions states have taken to support student learning during the crisis.

- **Alabama:** Gov. Kay Ivey **allocated $9 million** of the Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund to support "intensive before and after school tutoring resources." Another $26 million of GEER funding was allocated to provide "additional academic support to bridge learning and achievement gaps."
- **Arizona:** The **AZCares: Flexibility and Funding for Schools and Families** plan outlines $20 million of funding for Acceleration Academy Grants. The grants "will be made available for high-need Arizona schools to bring in math and reading specialists, teams of paraprofessionals or other types of structure for learning and remediation, to help kids in need of extra support get back on track."
- **Louisiana:** State guidance regarding **Addressing Unfinished Learning Gaps** emphasizes the importance of grounding instruction in grade-appropriate, quality instructional materials, along with **specific guidance for learning acceleration for a range of instructional materials** in use in the state.

- **Maryland:** State **guidance** includes information on "Out of School Time" (OST) programs, particularly the role these programs can play in supporting students for academic enrichment. The guidance also calls attention to the research around tutoring, increasing instructional time, and the importance of mental and emotional well-being.
- **Massachusetts:** The state coordinates a program of **Acceleration Academies** through the Sontag Prize in Education that pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic. In this program, teachers recognized for outstanding instruction are paired with small groups of students in select communities for additional instruction during traditional school breaks. A **study** of the program in Springfield, MA demonstrated positive results for student test scores, as well as lower suspension rates for program participants.
- **Mississippi:** **Executive Order No. 1476** required local districts to submit a plan for summer learning and enrichment on or before June 1 to mitigate disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic closures and to enhance learning in preparation for the 2020-21 school year.
- **Missouri:** The department of elementary and secondary education convened a **Task Force for Learning Acceleration** in May 2020. The task force resulted in guidance that includes assessment practices and learning acceleration resources.
- **Nebraska:** The **Launch Nebraska** guidance for the 2020-21 school year includes guidance for use of high-quality instructional materials for on grade-level instruction, stating that such materials "support coherence and offer consistency as students move between remote and in-person learning scenarios and have multiple teachers and/or family members support them." The state also released guidance for Student, Family and Community Engagement, Wellbeing and Connection, Assessment, and Students with Disabilities.

Additional Resources

EdResearch for Recovery released **several briefs** to support education leaders in making evidence-based decisions, including: **Broad-Based Supports Academic Supports for All Students** and **School Practices to Address Student Learning Loss**.

The Learning Policy Institute's **Restarting and Reinventing School** resource names ten priorities "that speak both to transforming learning and to closing opportunity and achievement gaps." Priorities include assessing student needs and expanding learning time.

A paper from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), **Learning as We Go: Principles for Effective Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic**, outlines findings from a panel of assessment experts on diagnostic assessments.

The Collaborative for Student Success created a newsletter, the **COVID Slide Quick Sheet**, to collect news and updates related to addressing learning loss.

EdWeek released a guide to **Overcoming COVID-19 Learning Loss**. The guide draws from interviews with researchers and educators to identify interventions with a promising track record in accelerating student learning. The guide includes details around assessment, tutoring, extended learning time and other strategies.