

IDEAS FOR THE “NEW NORMAL”

from the Marshall Memo – Updated August 30, 2021

What new approaches did we discover during the pandemic that we should continue as schools return to in-person instruction? Here is a collection of quotes, ideas, and resources from Marshall Memos, updated each week.

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QUOTES

“There is nobody more dangerous than one who has been humiliated, even when you humiliate him rightly.”

Nelson Mandela

“At least half of what people need in conflict is to be heard, even if they don’t get their way in the end.”

Amanda Ripley

“If we accept the learning-loss narrative, we’re more likely to focus on remediation, which would mean slowing down and focusing on isolated skills. This makes students feel punished, embarrassed, and inferior. Often, they are bored in remediation efforts and pay little attention to the experience. Instead, we should focus on acceleration.”

Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher

“What did you long for when we couldn’t physically meet? What did you not miss and are ready to discard? What forms of meeting did you invent during the pandemic out of necessity that, surprisingly, worked? What might we experiment with now?”

Priya Parker

“If your third grader can’t read, that’s a problem. If your algebra student doesn’t have automaticity with multiplication, that’s a problem. If your physics student doesn’t know algebra, that’s a problem. If your high-school graduate isn’t prepared for college or work, that’s a problem. Schools and districts and states and other professionals in the education sector should be figuring out how to fix this problem, not arguing about what to call it (or worse, pretending that it isn’t one).”

Dale Chu

“The Declaration of Independence promised Americans unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If we want that pursuit to bring us bliss, we may need to create a Declaration of Interdependence.”

Adam Grant

“We find our greatest bliss in moments of collective effervescence.”

Adam Grant

“We can try to return to the pre-pandemic *status quo*, or we can decide to do better. Let’s choose wisely.”

Kevin Gannon

“What we’ve seen is that when we try to meet kids where they are, we never build a bridge to where they should be. We just stay where they are forever.”

Bailey Cato Czupryk

“Until we reach the day when intrinsic motivation is enough to get most kids and teenagers to prioritize their schoolwork (in other words, never), or when we’ve transitioned to a system focused on mastery, we’re going to need grades to get kids to put in the necessary effort.”

Michael Petrilli

“Young people are dragging themselves to the finish line of a frustrating, depressing, and, for some, unbearably isolating year of school.”

Lisa Damour

“When thinking about how to spend this [ESSER] money, teachers, students, and families should know what will be concretely different and improved in schools both a year from now and when federal dollars end in 2023.”

Will Austin

“The future of education is less about adopting online learning just because we are better at it, and more about using it to design learning experiences that move schools closer to agency, equity, and transfer.”

Eric Hudson

“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... Weekly or bi-weekly assessments and check-ins... and coaching supports need to be in place to leverage when appropriate progress is not being made.”

John Kim and Kathleen Choi in [“Accelerating Learning to Address Learning Loss”](#) in *District Management Journal*, Spring 2021 (Vol. 29, pp. 16-29)

“Even advocates of longer school days and years emphasize that extra time by itself often doesn’t have an impact. What you do with the time matters. Devoting the extra time to a daily dose of tutoring seems the most promising. But tutoring can work equally well even when the school day isn’t lengthened... What is clear is that using the extra time for just more hours or more days of traditional instruction doesn’t appear to achieve much.”

Jill Barshay in [“Proof Points: Could More Time in School Help Students After the Pandemic?”](#), *Hechinger Report*, May 24, 2021

“Perhaps the greatest tragedy to come from Covid-related distance learning would be *not* learning from this experience to improve our teaching when we physically return to classrooms.”

John Hattie

“Students want to come back to school – to see their friends. But after they see their friends, how long will they want to submit to a structure that they have not had for a year and a half? Getting up at 7:00 a.m., classes that last 45 to 90 minutes, three-minute passing periods between classes, sitting in a seat with no food or drink allowed in class, and no access to social media?”

Ruby Payne

“Returning to my classroom, some students have forgotten how to carry on a face-to-face conversation. They’re rusty. And now they’re relearning how to treat friends, belong to a community that’s been ephemeral, and, yes, court each other. They are probably more aware of their bodies now, and more insecure, having spent a year considering what their cameras capture in daily Zooms.”

Andrew Simmons

“All sorts of solutions have been proposed, but only one, tutoring, has both a solid and substantial research base and a significant number of proven, practical, cost-effective solutions.”

Robert Slavin

“My bet is that the biggest shift from Covid will not be any one tool or technique, but a broadening sense that engagement is not merely something that students ‘bring to class,’ but is a result of the environment of the class itself, and that environment can be designed to better support or encourage engagement.”

Clay Shirky

“Now’s the time to finally face the reality that not every academic standard is equal.”

Douglas Reeves

“It’s a mistake to spend class time doing things that can be done just as well remotely.”

Rick Hess

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IDEAS

Some Kids Did Better with Remote Learning. What Now?

In this article in *Education Week*, Alyson Klein says that although many students struggled during remote and hybrid instruction, some thrived. For example, in an Arizona high school, three students on the autism spectrum “blossomed,” according to their teacher. Liberated from the difficulty of dealing with social distractions, they were able to focus on their work and excel academically. Teachers report that this was true for a number of students with learning and thinking differences, anxiety, and mental health conditions. In addition, some high-performing students enjoyed the autonomy made possible by remote instruction.

Now that most schools are once again in-person, how can all students be successful in an environment that wasn’t effective for many of them in the past? Klein reports that some schools are conducting surveys, asking students what worked and what didn’t during remote and hybrid instruction. Insights from these surveys can help improve in-person instruction. “You might find they really benefited from the freedom to use their time more flexibly or focus without interruption,” says Claire Schu at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Klein lists ideas from interviews with Schu and other educators:

- Explicitly teaching social skills: “Even the most extroverted kids may need help getting back into the swing of things socially after an extended period of relative isolation at home,” says Klein;
- Allowing some students to work alone during lunch and unstructured parts of the day rather than forcing them into unwanted social activities;
- Sticking to a consistent, predictable sequence of activities in each lesson;
- Not rushing instruction (despite the pressure to cover unfinished learning at a rapid pace) and having students periodically do meditative breathing;
- Providing more opportunities for one-on-one, personalized interactions;
- Using apps like Kahoot to “gamify” lessons, increasing student engagement and allowing teachers to make immediate corrections to errors and misconceptions;
- Encouraging students to go over material – for example, watching videos of teacher lectures several times;
- As much as possible, giving students choices on projects and the sequence in which they do their work – for example, deciding to do the “worst first” or waiting till the end of the day to tackle difficult assignments.

[“Virtual Learning Was Better for Some Kids. Here’s What Teachers Learned from Them”](#) by Alyson Klein in *Education Week*, August 25, 2021 (Vol. 41, #2, p. 9)

Skillfully Handling Hot-Button Issues in the Months Ahead

In this *Education Week* article, author/journalist Amanda Ripley says many U.S. schools are experiencing a “superstorm” of fraught issues, including masks, vaccinations, and what parts of American history should and should not be taught. “Having studied high-conflict elections, divorces, gangs, and even civil wars,” says Ripley, “I can say that the behavior is chillingly predictable. People become very certain of their own moral righteousness, and they make a lot of mistakes” – which can end up harming children.

But bad outcomes are not inevitable, she says, if we realize the ways in which high conflict is a trap and take these steps:

- *Avoid polarization.* Ripley quotes Nelson Mandela: “There is nobody more dangerous than one who has been humiliated, even when you humiliate him rightly.” Leaders need to avoid binary characterizations of others, she says, lower the temperature, and think about stakeholders “as complicated human beings who can change.”

- *Articulate the hidden agenda.* Under the surface in high-conflict situations, says Ripley, is often fear. “Sometimes it is justified, sometimes not. Either way, it will just metastasize until it gets surfaced.” Leaders need to be curious, ask questions, engage in active listening, acknowledge their own uncertainty, and keep the focus on the kids. “At least half of what people need in conflict is to be heard,” she says, “even if they don’t get their way in the end.”

- *Don’t be afraid of “good conflict.”* This kind of disagreement can be heated and stressful, says Ripley, but if it’s built on a foundation of relationships, it’s often productive: “Questions get asked. We experience flashes of anger and frustration – alongside flashes of humor and curiosity. That is the kind of conflict that pushes us to be better people.” That will happen only if there’s rapport and trust – over time, a five-to-one ratio of positive to negative interactions. Ripley has a few suggestions:

- School leaders standing outside in the morning warmly greeting every student and chatting with parents;
- Inviting the head of the teachers’ union to lunch;
- Giving positive feedback to a reporter who wrote a thoughtful article about schools (with a copy to the editor);
- Buying masks with students’ favorite sports team logo and giving them out free.

“These fleeting moments matter,” concludes Ripley, “and we’ve had precious few of them for the past 17 months. Think of each connection, no matter how simple, as an investment in your own future sanity.”

[“Schools Are Facing a High-Conflict ‘Superstorm’](#) by Amanda Ripley in *Education Week*, August 25, 2021 (Vol. 41, #2, p. 24)

Deciding Between Virtual and In-Person Meetings

In this *Harvard Business School* article, executive coach Rae Ringel (Georgetown University, the Ringel Group) suggests six questions to help decide when meetings should be face to face and when they should be remote:

- *Should this even be a meeting?* “Now that serendipitous in-person interactions are possible,” says Ringel, “and now that we know how to do virtual work well, let’s think very carefully about whether time spent meeting might be better spent thinking, writing, or engaging in other projects.” If the purpose of the meeting is sharing information, that can probably be done more efficiently in writing. But if the purpose is to brainstorm and build off one another’s ideas, in person makes sense.

- *Are my meeting goals relationship-based or task-based?* Tasks like updates and planning events are best handled in virtual meetings (or via e-mail). If the goal is strengthening or repairing connections among team members and conveying difficult feedback, in person is usually best. “Challenging group conversations should also take place in person,” says Ringel, “where destructive and distracting parallel side chats can’t overshadow the central discussion.” That said, she’s found during the pandemic that for some people, “the screen creates a sense of psychological safety, and with it the freedom to share views and take risks.”

- *How complex are my objectives?* In-person meetings are almost always better when goals are complex – for example, conflict mediation, leadership development, team building, group forming, performance reviews, and group coaching. More straightforward goals like updates and skills training can be done virtually.

- *Could my meeting take an entirely different form?* For example, key information might be shared via a prerecorded video that colleagues can watch while they exercise or prepare dinner, with an optional follow-up Q&A. Asynchronous videos have the added advantage that they can be watched more than once. “This approach honors different types of learners,” says Ringel; “some of us actually retain information better when we’re able to multitask.” She’s also experimented with using breakout rooms during meetings with a scribe in each “room” taking notes in a Google doc, and then having the whole group take a “gallery walk” to review the notes from other groups. This avoids what she calls “death by report back,” in which everyone has to sit through one group summary after another while at the same time figuring out what they’re going to say.

- *What kind of meeting will be most inclusive?* During the pandemic, Ringel has been surprised by the way virtual meetings have opened participation in key meetings to people in other time zones – and working parents – who were previously unable to take part. Going forward, her group at Georgetown University will conduct half of its international meetings virtually, half in person.

- *Does my facilitator have the skills and tech setup to pull off a hybrid gathering?* The skillset and technology involved in running hybrid meetings (some people in person, some remote) is formidable, says Ringel. She suggests that if everybody can’t be there in person, have

all-remote meetings until fully in-person meetings are possible. The only exception is if the leader is truly adept at handling hybrid meetings.

[“When Do We Actually Need to Meet in Person?”](#) by Rae Ringel in *Harvard Business Review*, July 26, 2021

Putting a Positive Spin on Wearing Masks in School

In this *New York Times* article, Judith Danovitch (University of Louisville) acknowledges parents’ and educators’ concern that masks in school may compromise children’s ability to learn language and socialize. It’s certainly true that masks have been “inconvenient, uncomfortable, and bothersome,” she says, but cites five reasons not to worry.

- “Children in cultures where caregivers and educators wear head coverings that obscure their mouths and noses develop skills just as children in other cultures,” says Danovitch. “Even congenitally blind children – who cannot see faces at all – still learn to speak, read, and get along with other people.”

- There’s evidence that wearing a mask in school can improve some social-emotional and cognitive skills, including self-control and paying attention. When they can’t see people’s mouths, students need to pay more attention to their eyes (already an important source of cues), as well as prosody, gestures, and context to understand what’s being said. “A classroom full of people wearing masks,” says Danovitch, “is a great opportunity for children to practice paying attention to those cues, such as a peer’s tone of voice or a teacher’s body language.”

- Wearing a mask all day teaches self-control and self-regulation. Younger children have to resist the urge to pull the mask off, and everyone needs to monitor the position of their masks and know when it’s okay to take it off. “For children who habitually bite their nails or pick their nose,” says Danovitch, “a mask could also be precisely what they need to kick the habit.”

- Mask wearing gives students important insights on how germs spread from person to person. The counterintuitive notion that invisible particles coming out of a person’s mouth can transmit a disease is being driven home to everyone during the pandemic.

- Wearing masks can make children feel part of a community effort to bring the coronavirus under control. “Stressing that the discomfort and inconvenience of mask wearing are forms of generosity and public service,” says Danovitch, “might motivate children to address other social problems in their lives – like bullying.”

[“Masks Can In Fact Help Kids Learn”](#) by Judith Danovitch in *The New York Times*, August 19, 2021; Danovitch can be reached at j.danovitch@louisville.edu.

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Ideas for the “New Normal”

“The past year we learned that everything in schools that looks fixed and hardened is actually contingent and flexible,” say Justin Reich (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Learning Systems Lab) and Jal Mehta (Harvard Graduate School of Education) in this Teaching

Systems Lab update of their earlier report (July 27, 2020, summarized in Memo 847). “Grades, curriculum, seat time, schedules, settings, groupings – all of these features can be changed. For all the suffering and hardship of the past year, some of the changes we made really were for the better, paving the way toward reinventing more humane school communities.”

Those insights notwithstanding, say Reich and Mehta, there are three possible scenarios as schools begin the 2021-22 year:

- Returning to the status quo before the pandemic;
- Focusing on remediation of learning loss;
- Using the events of the last 19 months to reflect and reinvent.

To help map the way forward, Reich and Mehta interviewed 50 teachers, asked 200 teachers to interview their students (about 4,000 in all), and facilitated ten design meetings with groups of educators, students, and parents. What emerged was a clear preference for the third scenario, with an emphasis on healing, community, and “humane reinvention” in schools.

“Students and teachers,” say the authors, “told us that the best things about the pandemic year were when it created opportunities to slow down and build real relationships between teacher and students and their families, and when students were given more independence to be in charge of their learning, their bodies, and their development... Overall, we were struck by how different students’ accounts were from prevailing narratives. Young people talked about loss in profound ways, but in their telling, what had been lost was a year of childhood or adolescence, not particular content standards from algebra or social studies.”

Based on the interviews and focus groups, Reich and Mehta suggest three guiding principles:

- Don’t define the coming year as a return to normal. “For too many students,” they say, “normal schooling wasn’t meeting their needs.”
- Start the school year with some noticeable changes: amplify key ideas from the pandemic year, and eliminate or scale back practices that were proved to be ineffective.
- Engage in reflection that allows for celebration of the successes of the pandemic year, grieving for losses, and harnessing the energy from the emergency to build better experiences for students, educators, and families.

Here are some of their specific recommendations.

• First, Reich and Mehta suggest five questions to ask students about the year from which they’ve emerged:

- What are the aspects of remote learning that you’ve appreciated the most, and would like to see carried back into in-person schooling?
- What was really hard about remote learning that you hope you never have to manage again as a student?
- After this pandemic, what do you hope adults will do to make in-person school better for this year? What do you hope they don’t do in the coming year?
- What do you feel like you missed out on or lost in school because of the pandemic?
- What are you most proud of from the past school year?

• Second, Reich and Mehta list things that should be amplified in the key areas of relationships and trust, school schedules, the curriculum, student agency, mastery-based learning, assessments, social and emotional learning, equity, and humane treatment of students. Some specifics:

- Home visits that build relationships between families and school;
- Advisors, advisories, and office hour check-ins;
- Zoom-style chats to give introverted students more opportunities to thrive;
- Virtual meetings;
- A quarterly schedule with three classes at a time (versus rushed seven-period days);
- Teachers' loads limited to 65-80 students;
- Longer breaks between classes;
- Marie-Kondo-ing the curriculum – narrowing down to a smaller set of priority standards;
- Curriculum relevance and choice to keep students engaged;
- Regular examination of student work;
- No more averaging grades and zeroes;
- Mindfulness practices and emphasizing the mental health of adults as well as students;
- Meeting students' basic needs, including nutritious and tasty meals;
- Meeting students where they are academically and emotionally;
- Listening more to students and involving them in co-designing antiracist practices;
- Less behavioral policing of students' dress and other choices;
- More student choice on when to eat and use the bathroom;
- More outdoor learning;
- Later school start times for adolescents.

(See the full report for ideas on areas that need less emphasis and things to create.)

- Finally, the report suggests several metaphors for the work going forward:
 - School as church and temple;
 - Schools as a place of healing;
 - Schools as family reunion.

[“Healing, Community, and Humanity: How Students and Teachers Want to Reinvent Schools Post-Covid”](#) by Justin Reich and Jal Mehta, Teaching Systems Lab, July 21, 2021; the authors can be reached at jreich@mit.edu and jal_mehta@gse.harvard.edu.

Adam Grant on “Collective Effervescence”

“Most people view emotions as existing primarily or even exclusively in their heads,” says University of Pennsylvania/Wharton School psychologist Adam Grant in this *New York Times* article. “But the reality is that emotions are inherently social; they’re woven through our interactions... We find our greatest bliss in moments of *collective effervescence*.”

That term was coined by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim in 1912 to describe the feeling of energy and harmony when people are engaged in a shared purpose. Some examples:

- Sliding into rhythm with strangers on a dance floor;

- At a concert, singing along with a song that everybody knows;
- Engaging in a lively brainstorming session with colleagues and solving a problem;
- Singing in a chorus;
- Stretching in a group yoga class;
- Executing a successful play with soccer teammates;
- Enjoying a religious service with family members;
- Laughing with friends at a comedy show.

Researchers have found that in normal times, people experience this collective *joie de vivre* quite frequently – once a week, even daily.

But during the pandemic, there was a marked decline of collective effervescence. Negative emotions like fear and loneliness spread from person to person like the disease, amplified by social media, e-mail, and texts. “The number of adults with symptoms of depression or anxiety spiked from one in 10 Americans to about four in 10,” says Grant. He believes that Zoom fatigue is partly the result of “hours of communicating with people who are also sad, stressed, lonely, or tired.” When the pandemic began, there was speculation that introverts would thrive in an environment that limited social contact. But introverts have suffered as much as extroverts during this period of isolation; they, too, missed the joy of sharing positive in-person experiences with others.

As the pandemic wanes and we return to something approaching normalcy, people want to be joyful again, says Grant. He believes this is the perfect time to realize that we are hardwired to experience the greatest happiness with others. “We should think of flourishing less as personal euphoria and more as collective effervescence,” he says. “The Declaration of Independence promised Americans unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If we want that pursuit to bring us bliss, we may need to create a Declaration of Interdependence... Joy shared is joy sustained.”

[“The Joy We’ve Been Missing”](#) by Adam Grant in *The New York Times*, July 11, 2021; Grant can be reached at adam@adamgrant.net.

Getting Off to a Strong Start in Algebra 1 This Fall

In this *Education Week* article, Sarah Schwartz reports that mathematics has suffered more than other subjects during the pandemic. Why? Math teachers she interviewed said remote teaching made it more difficult to:

- Show enough visual representations;
- Get students working with manipulatives;
- Have structured student conversations about math concepts;
- Work out problems collaboratively with students;
- Orchestrate student collaboration on whiteboards and informal peer-to-peer help;
- Evaluate student understanding in real time;
- Quickly follow up on misunderstandings, misconceptions, and learning problems.

Teachers said they anticipate that Algebra 1 is going to be especially challenging as the 2021-22 school year begins. This gateway course, often taken in ninth grade, is a prerequisite to advanced math, and passing Algebra 1 is key to on-time graduation and college and career readiness.

“Even in a regular year,” says Schwartz, “...students come into Algebra with varying degrees of readiness. But this year, the range might be even greater, depending on what opportunities and resources they had during remote learning.” The teachers and experts she interviewed had the following recommendations:

- Be explicit about class norms, especially not being afraid to ask questions and make mistakes.
- Set aside time for students to get to know their classmates. This is vital since many students are strangers to each other and will be hesitant to engage in turn-and-talks and group work until they build relationships.
- Teach the on-grade curriculum.
- For each unit, be clear about the prerequisite knowledge and skills.
- Give quick assessments of those items to gauge students’ needs.
- Give a task or mini-lesson to shore up gaps, making clear to students the connection to the rest of the unit.
- Give multiple representations for new concepts – for example, the way a linear function looks written as a mathematical expression, a graph, and an equation, then showing real-world applications.
- Listen to students during group work, ask guiding questions, address misunderstandings, and reinforce the use of mathematical language.
- Get students to practice, practice, practice so they build fluency and confidence.

This kind of just-in-time help is better than remediation, which slows things down and is demotivating to students. The key is diving into on-level material and catching students up as needed.

[“Algebra 1 Is a Turning Point. Here’s How to Help Incoming Students”](#) by Sarah Schwartz in *Education Week*, June 22, 2021

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Supporting English Learners in the Wake of the Pandemic

Many of the nation’s five million English learners faced especially difficult challenges during the pandemic, reports Ileana Najarro in this *Education Week* article – limited access to computers, a weak Internet connection, glitches with remote learning, and less time for informal conversations with educators and peers. However, says Najarro, “it’s important to remember that being immersed in their families’ languages and cultures also offered some potential benefits to this group.”

For example, a girl might have helped to prepare family meals, learning a number of recipes, and spent hours listening to her grandmother telling stories in Spanish, boosting her vocabulary and background knowledge. The same girl might also have picked up useful tech skills. “As she steps into a new grade this fall,” says Navarro, “her teachers will have to sort out

just how big an impact the remote setting had on her English-language proficiency progress, and how to incorporate the silver linings that emerged over the past year into their teaching plans.”

The experts Navarro interviewed stressed the importance of not making assumptions, implementing language- and content-rich instruction, and not getting bogged down in remedial drilling of knowledge and skills in isolation. Additional recommendations:

- Check in with students and parents on what occurred during the pandemic, which might include economic hardship, illness, deaths in the family.
- Continue to do wellness checks through the year.
- Take time up front to build relationships with students, among students, and with families.
- Look at previous language proficiency assessments, which might date back to 2019.
- Do quick informal assessments of listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency in English to see how much catching up is needed, and take note of strengths in the native language.
- A thorough assessment is especially important for students who were newcomers to the U.S. during Covid-time and might not be proficient in reading and writing their native language.
- Set ambitious goals for the school year, with student buy-in.
- Give ELs frequent opportunities to practice their English in class and with peers.
- Provide in-class scaffolding and continuous assessment of progress.
- Provide social-emotional support, with native language speaking staff when possible.
- Continue to use online technology to provide extra support and feedback to ELs.
- Organize summer school, after-school, and tutoring support closely linked to classroom instruction.

[“English Learners May Need More Support This Fall. But That Doesn’t Mean They’re Behind”](#)
by Ileana Najarro in *Education Week*, June 22, 2021

Michael Petrilli on Covid-Time Ideas We Need to Kiss Goodbye

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Michael Petrilli says the pandemic we’ve just experienced “can accelerate changes that were already underway but otherwise would have taken root much more slowly,” including:

- Parent conferences and PTA meetings via Zoom – a boon for working parents;
- Using online curriculum materials instead of hard-copy textbooks;
- Highly effective teachers recording lessons that can be used in multiple classes, freeing up teachers to provide support and one-on-one instruction.

But some K-12 Covid developments should be dumped, says Petrilli. Here are his top nominees:

- *Simultaneous roomies and zoomies* – Teaching half a class in person and the other half remotely is not “humanly possible,” said AFT president Randi Weingarten. Petrilli agrees, saying hybrid instruction meant huge amounts of stress for teachers and less-than-ideal learning for students. Petrilli does think it’s workable for a few students to watch a class remotely if they

need to be home or are doing an in-school suspension in another part of the school – as long as it’s clear that the teacher is not expected to actively engage them. Longer term, interactive remote teaching may also be feasible for medically fragile students, and to replace snow days, but the key is that remote classes have the full attention of their teachers.

- *Waiving seat-time requirements* – Petrilli likes the idea of competency-based education, with students demonstrating mastery of content versus putting in a certain number of hours in classrooms. But he says *not so fast* to continuing pandemic-era seat-time waivers without putting good summative assessments in place and guaranteeing that students are having robust learning experiences.

- *Asynchronous days* – During the pandemic, the Maryland district that Petrilli’s two sons attend made every Wednesday an asynchronous day, with custodians doing deep cleaning and all students at home working independently (or getting remote one-on-one help from teachers). “I don’t think I’m ratting out my sons by reporting... that very little independent work was happening on Wednesdays,” he says, “beyond some regular homework that would and should be expected any day of the week.” Petrilli likes the idea of innovative scheduling at the high-school level, with time for rigorous project-based work and internships, but he cites a recent report on lower student achievement in districts with four-day weeks [see Memo 890]. “There is no reason to keep asynchronous learning days once the pandemic is over,” he concludes.

- *Grade inflation* – When schools first shut down in March 2020, many districts decided it would be unfair to apply normal grading standards, and used students’ previous grades or shifted to pass/fail. This was a necessary emergency measure, says Petrilli, but when it was continued over time, kids got the message that they weren’t accountable for paying attention and doing the work. Petrilli’s conclusion: “Until we reach the day when intrinsic motivation is enough to get most kids and teenagers to prioritize their schoolwork (in other words, never), or when we’ve transitioned to a system focused on mastery, we’re going to need grades to get kids to put in the necessary effort.”

- *Graduation standards* – Petrilli is deeply concerned that many districts have graduated thousands of students from high school – and boasted about high graduation rates – without those students passing key courses or exit exams. Waiving requirements during the pandemic was understandable, he says, and of course, “helping more students graduate high school is an urgent goal. But it is also urgently important to make sure they graduate well prepared for what’s ahead.” In other words, a high-school diploma must signify real competence in reading, writing, math, and other key areas.

[“Five Pandemic-Era Education Practices That Deserve to Be Dumped in the Dustbin”](#) by Michael Petrilli in *Education Gadfly*, June 24, 2021

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How Will Acceleration Work This Fall?

In this *Education Week* article, Stephen Sawchuk and Liana Loewus report that many schools are planning to deal with students’ unfinished learning by teaching on-grade material

while providing “just in time” supports and scaffolds to help students catch up. “But what about an entering 1st grader who’s only learned phonics lessons on a computer screen, or in-person through masks?” ask Sawchuk and Loewus. “Or a student navigating the rocks and shoals of freshman-year Algebra I who still has difficulties plotting points on a graph?” Or a class of English learners who are at many different proficiency levels?

In a three-part report, *Education Week* picked those three examples because they represent points in the K-12 continuum where acceleration is especially challenging. Time-honored advice to teachers is to meet students where they are, but that won’t work with those who have missed large chunks of instruction. “What we’ve seen,” says Bailey Cato Czupryk of TNTIP, “is that when we try to meet kids where they are, we never build a bridge to where they should be. We just stay where they are forever.”

The summary just below addresses the challenge for first graders. Next week’s Memo will cover what can be done for ninth graders learning Algebra I and English learners.

[“Understanding Learning ‘Acceleration’: Going Slow to Go Fast”](#) by Stephen Sawchuk and Liana Loewus in *Education Week*, June 22, 2021

The Daunting Challenge Awaiting Next Year’s First-Grade Teachers

In this *Education Week* article, Madeline Will says many students entering first grade this fall will have significant learning deficits. “Kindergarten is typically where 5- and 6-year-olds learn how to be students,” says Will. “They learn how to regulate their own behavior and their emotions; how to raise their hands and listen to the teacher’s instructions; and how to take turns, share, and work together with their classmates.” They also acquire important knowledge and skills in reading, math, and other subjects.

Remote instruction was more challenging for kindergarten teachers than other grades, says Will, because most kids that age aren’t schooled in paying attention, working independently, or using a keyboard. Teaching through a digital keyhole was especially difficult because it lacked the kinds of hands-on, over-the-shoulder work that builds reading and writing skills. On top of that, kindergarten enrollment was down in many schools, meaning that a fair number of students who are old enough for first grade won’t have had the kindergarten experience at all.

All this means first-grade teachers will be dealing with a wider-than-usual variation in students’ academic and social skills, including:

- Children whose parents kept them from interacting with children outside the home;
- Children who had poor Internet connectivity and missed a lot of instruction;
- Children whose parents worked with them throughout the school day;
- Children who had the advantage of being in a learning pod with other families;
- Children who lost family members to Covid-19 or dealt with illness;
- Children whose families experienced economic hardship, perhaps violence;
- Children who sat out kindergarten.

“The hardest part will be the variability,” says Deborah Stipek of Stanford University. “Some of the kids will be gung-ho and ready for 1st-grade curriculum as planned, and others, both academically and socially, are going to be clueless.”

Drawing on interviews with almost a dozen experts, Will summarizes their advice for first-grade teachers:

- *Make sure students feel safe and supported.* A foundation of strong teacher-student relationships will be essential to academic learning. “You can’t assess the brain without first passing through the heart of a student,” says Michigan educator Laura Chang.

- *Spend time building interpersonal and non-academic skills.* This includes getting children accustomed to not having a parent at their elbow and learning to share, work in groups, take turns, raise hands, use manipulatives, hold a pencil, and handle scissors.

- *Find out what students know and don’t know.* This includes quick assessments of decoding skills, number sense, recognizing quantities and numerals. Teachers may be pleasantly surprised by unexpected strengths. “Students might have done more cooking with their parents this year,” says Will, “and learned about numbers that way. They might have learned about the world around them through family walks or outside play. Or they might have learned vocabulary or other skills from watching educational TV programs like *Sesame Street*.”

- *Create dual-purpose lessons.* Building science and social studies knowledge and vocabulary can go along with standard reading and math lessons. In addition, lessons should include as much social interaction with classmates as possible. That’s especially important for English learners, who might have heard less English during remote schooling.

- *Monitor for disabilities.* Learning problems may have gone undetected during remote kindergarten instruction (or with children who were out of school), says Will. The challenge is distinguishing a genuine disability from trauma, undeveloped social skills, behavior problems, or gaps in learning.

- *Don’t forget joy.* Students won’t thrive in a humorless, driven classroom. One Chicago parent said she was looking forward to her son getting away from passively looking at his laptop screen. “I’m looking forward to him having a little more joy in his learning,” she said, “and not being so stuck with the limitations he’s been under.”

- *Surround first-grade teachers with other supports.* This includes robust summer school programming, intensive tutoring, professional development, time for team collaboration, and, if possible, smaller class sizes.

[“The Tough Task Ahead for 1st-Grade Teachers”](#) by Madeline Will in *Education Week*, June 22, 2021

Rethinking Instructor Evaluation in the Wake of the Pandemic

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Kevin Gannon (Grand View University) explores the implications of Covid disruption on faculty evaluation. Some universities are pausing the “tenure clock” (the countdown for a tenure decision) to compensate for the impact of

the pandemic on instructors' productivity. But there's been pushback on equity grounds: did the disruption disproportionately affect those who shouldered child care and had to supervise children receiving remote instruction?

"Lack of consensus on how to evaluate faculty work during this unprecedented year, however, should not mean inaction," says Gannon. "The challenge for institutions and their decision makers is to discern varied and flexible solutions that benefit *individual* candidates for contract renewal, tenure, and promotion as well as *institutional* well-being." Here are his suggestions for evaluating faculty work during and after the pandemic:

- *Acknowledge that the past 14 months have been difficult for many colleagues.* "As seductive as 'back to normal' sounds," says Gannon, "we cannot pretend that trauma isn't part of the institutional landscape that we all now occupy. That recognition should inform all of our post-pandemic practices."

- *Leverage that awareness to evaluate existing policies and practices.* Gannon suggests this might be the time to put more emphasis on advising and mentoring colleagues and students, which has often been undervalued as "women's labor" in the past.

- *Understand that "equality" and "equity" are related but not synonymous.* A single mother is simply not operating on the same playing field as an instructor who lives alone, says Gannon. "The goal of our contract and tenure processes is a fair evaluation of a faculty member's performance and future contributions to the institution. To accomplish that goal, we cannot apply the same criteria to both of those hypothetical cases after a year of Covid."

- *Be as flexible with junior colleagues as you've been with students.* "Compassion," "empathy," and "grace" were the watchwords as students struggled in the early weeks of the pandemic. "We need to recognize that what happened to our students this past year also happened to us, collectively," says Gannon – and much more acutely to some.

- *Evaluating flexibly and compassionately doesn't mean weakening standards and accommodating the less deserving.* Faculty evaluation still needs to be rigorous so that all students will receive effective instruction, says Gannon. But he believes we should use this "hinge moment" to apply what we've learned during a year of profound disruption – flexibility, empathy, innovation, and experimentation – to reshape how educators are supervised, coached, and evaluated. "We can try to return to the pre-pandemic *status quo*, or we can decide to do better," says Gannon. "Let's choose wisely."

["Faculty Evaluation After the Pandemic"](#) by Kevin Gannon in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 25, 2021 (Vol. 67, #21, pp. 42-43)

Ideas for the Effective Use of ESSER Funding

In this article in *CommonWealth*, Will Austin (Boston Schools Fund) marvels at the amount of federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding coming to Massachusetts; Boston's schools alone will receive \$435 million. Adjusted for inflation, ESSER

is comparable to what the U.S. spent to rebuild Europe after World War II. Austin suggests five principles to maximize the positive impact on teaching and learning:

- *Transparency* – “The magnitude and gravity of this investment demands public input,” he says: “Families, students, educators, and taxpayers have a right to know how these funds will be distributed.”

- *Proximity* – Decisions should be made close to the classroom level, with local budgetary autonomy, coupled with training, to support children’s academic, social, and emotional recovery.

- *Equity* – The pandemic has hit some children, families, and communities harder than others, and funding should prioritize those who have the greatest needs.

- *Innovation* – “When thinking about how to spend this money,” says Austin, “teachers, students, and families should know what will be concretely different and improved in schools both a year from now and when federal dollars end in 2023.”

- *Boldness* – The Covid-19 crisis, for all its associated disruption and trauma, has been a rare opportunity “to rethink systems and structures that haven’t fully served all students,” says Austin. “Funding now exists to test bold theories and ideas for education grounded in research and best practice.” Some possibilities:

- The length of the school day and the school year;
- Schoolwork that happens in the classroom versus remotely;
- Later high-school start times to match teens’ brain development.

[“5 Principles That Should Drive Boston’s Enormous Federal School Aid”](#) by Will Austin in *CommonWealth*, May 12, 2021; Austin can be reached at waustin@bostonschoolsfund.org.

Teens Need to Chill Out This Summer

In this *New York Times* article, psychologist/author Lisa Damour says that in her 20 years working with adolescents, “I have never seen teenagers so worn down at the end of an academic year as they are right now... Young people are dragging themselves to the finish line of a frustrating, depressing, and, for some, unbearably isolating year of school.”

Damour suggests the analogy of a vigorous workout with weights: muscles are built by strenuous exertion followed by a period of rest. To put the “psychological workout of their lives” to work, she says, teens “need time for recovery so that they can enjoy increased emotional resilience by fall.” Her suggestions:

- *Let grieving run its course.* Teens have lost loved ones, friendships, milestone birthday parties, holidays with grandparents, graduations, sports seasons, field days, and other ceremonies and events that can’t be rescheduled. Rather than saying kids should move on to brighter days, it’s wise to let them process what’s happened in the company of friends – or alone. One teen wrote poems reflecting on “how the pandemic sucks, and how things are still going on in the world that are really horrible.” Damour says grieving is a healthy process that will help teens, “over time, savor what remains and embrace what lies ahead.”

- *Be open to negotiating the necessities.* “Everyone has different emotional settings,” she says. “What energizes one person might leave another spent.” Teens fortunate enough to have choices will hopefully find summer activities that refresh and replenish – an interesting job, travel, learning a new language, an academic enrichment program. Parents may be worried about academic deficits, but if the school hasn’t raised a red flag, Damour advises, “it may be best to let it go.”

- *Don’t let guilt ruin restoration.* Teens may think that after a year of not doing very much, it’s sinful to relax over the summer. Help them see past this misconception, says Damour. “The point of recovery is not to relax, but to grow. And if downtime is soaked in guilt, that growth is going to suffer.” Kids need to “go through the quiet work of rebuilding themselves.”

[“A Pandemic Recovery Period for Teenagers”](#) by Lisa Damour in *The New York Times*, June 8, 2021

Keepers from Covid-Time

“The future of education is less about adopting online learning just because we are better at it, and more about using it to design learning experiences that move schools closer to agency, equity, and transfer,” says Eric Hudson in this *Global Online Academy* article. He believes a number of online instructional practices are worth continuing as schools return to in-person instruction (for screenshots and links to resources, click the full article below):

- *An online learning hub* – Accessible to students anytime, from almost anywhere, a robust platform can display all the information needed for a class or course, including: the schedule, philosophy, goals, learning objectives, modules, homework assignments, teaching videos, rubrics, assessments, final projects, reminders, and housekeeping details.

- *Student choices* – Hudson says an online platform can also “offer students a variety of learning pathways, or the opportunity to design projects that matter to them, or the chance to explore the world beyond the classroom and present their learning using tools they know well.”

- *Pre-recorded videos* – Teachers can flip instruction, having students view online mini-lessons outside school hours and then engage in discussions and hands-on learning in the classroom. Videos don’t have to have great production values, says Hudson, as long as the pedagogy is sound.

- *Student-made videos* – Tools like Flipgrid give students an alternative, creative way to demonstrate learning and explain their thinking asynchronously.

- *Digital portfolios* – Students can use online platforms like Seesaw to curate evidence, share artifacts, describe their learning process, and demonstrate understanding.

- *Online assessments* – Quizzes, polls, and asynchronous discussions are more flexible and avoid the social pressures of in-class tests. Students can take an online quiz several times and use immediate, automated feedback to figure out errors and misconceptions.

- *Differentiated pacing* – Students can work at their own speed as they follow an online content playlist to complete a unit, project, or other learning experience.

- *One-on-one video conferences* – A platform like Zoom “can make targeted support more accessible and flexible,” says Hudson, “whether it’s via teacher-hosted office hours or individual conferences or small discussion groups.” Students can check in while doing independent projects, fieldwork, internships, and community-based work.

- *Asynchronous discussions* – Tools like Padlet and Jamboard can “broaden our notion of ‘class participation’ and make it more meaningful for more students,” says Hudson. They give students more time to “compose and express their thoughts, and shift the power dynamic in discussions from favoring the extrovert or the more verbose.” In addition, students can share ideas via text, audio, or video.

- *Improved feedback* – Quizzes, polling, and assessments built into learning management systems can give students real-time feedback, and screencasts and multimedia tools like Mote support feedback via video or audio. Peers can also provide feedback, improving the quality of work that’s submitted to teachers and lightening their correcting load.

- *Open gradebooks* – “An essential element of grading for equity,” says Hudson, “is that grading structures and learning outcomes are transparent and understandable to students.” Online gradebooks, included in most learning management systems, help teachers collect, visualize, and use data – and nudge them to rethink outmoded grading practices, emphasizing mastery over compliance. Online gradebooks also allow students to monitor their work and see a pathway to success.

- *Student project management and collaboration* – Tools like Kanban Boards and Greenlight Spreadsheets give students responsibility for monitoring their work, with the teacher looking over their shoulders electronically. Tools like Microsoft Teams and Slack can support students as they share and coordinate with each other inside and outside of the classroom.

- *Partnering with families, communities, and the outside world* – One of the most positive developments during the pandemic has been improved communication with families – both in remote conferences and by making the curriculum more transparent. Teachers have also learned how to bring a wide variety of outside speakers and resources into their classrooms and give students authentic audiences for their learning products.

[“13 Online Strategies for All Learning Environments”](#) by Eric Hudson in *Global Online Academy*, May 27, 2021

Continuing Effective Covid-Time Practices in the “New Normal”

In this article in *Ed. Magazine*, Lory Hough compiles suggestions from educators on practices implemented during the pandemic that should continue when schools return to fully in-person instruction. Some excerpts:

- *Cultivate trust.* “The pandemic has reminded me just how important it is to listen, care for one another, seek perspectives, solve problems together, stay true to core values, and follow through,” says Jennifer Perry Cheatham (Public Education Leadership Project). She hopes “active trust-building emerges as a necessity in education – a foundational tenet through which we perform all our work.”

- *Rethink grading.* “We must realize that our century-old inherited grading practices have *always* disproportionately punished students with weaker support nets and fewer resources, students of color, from poor families, with special needs, and English learners,” says Joe Feldman (author, former teacher and administrator). During the pandemic, it became apparent that problems with grading affected many more students, waking up educators to the need to more accurately and fairly measure student learning.

- *Truly include parents.* “For all their pieties,” says Frederick Hess (American Enterprise Institute), “schools have seemingly gotten into a habit of treating parents as a nuisance... [giving] the gentle brush-off to parents concerned about discipline, special education, or testing.” With remote learning, parents have had a front-row seat on their children’s curriculum content, how teachers teach, and how school time is used. Reactions have ranged from positive (*I had no idea teachers were so organized*) to helpful (*Now I see why my daughter is confused about parts of speech*), to negative (*I never knew how little learning occurs during my kids’ school day*). “There’s great power in all this,” says Hess. “This kind of openness can strengthen school communities, enable valuable oversight for what schools are doing, and provide students more of the support they need. Here’s hoping that we find a way to keep it, long after the kids are out of the kitchen and back in the classroom.”

- *Learn from the positive anomalies.* Some students, perhaps one in 20, have actually performed better on schoolwork during the pandemic, observes author/former principal Tracey Benson. Perhaps this happened, he says, because of “the truncated direct instruction time, the streamlined curriculum, or the absence of the social stimuli of being constantly surrounded by other students.” We can learn a lot from these positive outliers: “What is it about the distance learning environment that has helped them turn the corner, and how can we preserve these strategies as we return to traditional in-person instruction?”

- *Stop teaching by telling.* Teacher lectures and plodding through textbook chapters have been even less effective via Zoom than they were beforehand, says Chris Dede (Harvard Graduate School of Education). Seeing students tuning out, many teachers shifted to problem-based and project-based activities, teaching science, technology, engineering, and math with materials found in students’ homes and communities and using family members as mentors and co-teachers. “Let’s not give up the powerful, novel models of learning and motivation that are a silver lining in the dark cloud of this human tragedy,” says Dede.

- *Continue creative assessing.* While there’s definitely a role for standardized testing, says New York City social studies teacher Tyler Tarnowicz, being liberated from high-stakes testing for two years has led to some creative ways to assess student learning and growth in real time, involve students in the process, and hold educators accountable. As standardized tests return, Tarnowicz urges us to keep them in perspective and continue to get valuable insights from lower-key classroom practices.

- *Keep opening doors to higher education.* During the pandemic, several changes have been implemented to level the playing field for college admissions, says Brennan Barnard (Making Caring Common):

- Wider access to college counseling;

- High-quality virtual visits to colleges;
- Test-optional policies;
- Better understanding of applicants' family responsibilities and other circumstances that affect their educational opportunities;
- Admissions officers having more insight about who is being left behind.

Barnard hopes these practices will continue in the years ahead.

• *Rethink attendance policies.* Thousands of students have “gone missing” during school closures, says Bree Dusseault (Center on Reinventing Public Education), often students who were already struggling. This has led many educators to implement strategies like these:

- Collaborating with families to reengage missing students and bridge technology gaps;
- Ensuring that every student has at least one consistent relationship with a caring adult;
- Providing options like evening classes, flexible schedules, and independent study;
- Focusing on content mastery versus seat time.

“The solution to chronic absenteeism does not revolve around truancy boards or court dates,” says Dusseault. “We need to incentivize schools to use wellness-centered approaches that hold students to high expectations but avoid punishments that only set them back.”

• *Expand learning time.* Many students lost months of learning during the pandemic, says Karen Hawley Miles (Education Resource Strategies), in some cases a full year. As schools return to regular schedules, she points to schools that have reorganized staff, time, and technology to help those students catch up. Among the options: extended learning time, high-dosage tutoring, and after-school learning opportunities.

• *Change teacher-student ratios.* During remote learning, some high schools shifted from seven-period days to a quarter system with students taking no more than three subjects at a time, says Jal Mehta (Harvard Graduate School of Education). This frees teachers to focus on 80 students at a time, versus 160, making it much easier to build relationships and rapport. This is a practice that should continue, says Mehta.

• *Ask what matters.* “It was a wild ride,” says graduate student Kelsea Turner. “We were teleported into breakout rooms where we found ourselves taking solace in a familiar face or marking time in a silent standoff, waiting for someone to initiate the conversation. In this two-dimensional world, we realized that the back of your hair didn’t matter anymore and that we could show up to class barefoot. We learned that ‘I had an unstable Internet connection’ was the new ‘my dog ate my homework,’ and that the effort required to click ‘unmute’ somehow made us feel like whatever we said had better be worth it – most of us, anyway. We discovered that vibes transmit through Wi-Fi and we can feel them without ever knowing how a person moves through the world...”

“So many variables demanded radical flexibility, forcing us to try what we would have resisted before, to fail, then to try something else. We learned how to learn again in this bizarre here and now. And to both our chagrin and delight, this year inspired us to ask and really mean it: What matters now in education? As we prepare to depart Zoomland to return to classrooms or embark on new endeavors, may we remember to never stop asking this question, and to mute ourselves to listen for the answers. And if we are lucky enough to work with students, let’s not

forget the tenderness we felt when someone greeted us warmly by name when we arrived in class – and how sometimes it was the only proof we had that we were actually there, in person or not.”

“[For Keeps](#)” by Lory Hough in *Ed. Magazine*, Spring 2021 (#168, pp. 26-35); Hough can be reached at lory_hough@gse.harvard.edu.

Jennifer Gonzalez on Revitalizing Classrooms After the Pandemic

“As humans, we’re wired to go for the easy button,” says Jennifer Gonzalez in this *Cult of Pedagogy* article. At home it might be eating fast food and watching Netflix rather than cooking a nutritious meal and reading a book. In classrooms, it might be using multiple-choice tests or only getting to know the students who demand the most attention. As in-person schooling resumes, there’s an understandable desire to return to normal. “But normal didn’t work for a lot of kids,” says Gonzalez. “It also didn’t work for a lot of teachers. Too many systems and structures were set up for automation, to make things as efficient and convenient as possible for the people in charge.”

As schools reopen, she suggests that we resolve, “No more easy button.” That doesn’t mean putting in more hours – just using them *differently*. Here are her ideas:

Lesson Design:

- Fewer “busysheets” and more activities that take less time but are “densely packed with learning.”
- More active, hands-on, project-based learning, and venturing out of the classroom more frequently.
- Increasing the amount of collaboration among students, and teaching the important life skills of working harmoniously and productively with others.
- More pre-recorded videos that students watch on their own time (as many times as necessary), freeing up class time for more interactive learning.

Assessment:

- More feedback, fewer grades – “A letter grade will never help a student grow the way specific, timely feedback will,” says Gonzalez.
- Multiple opportunities to improve through an iterative, mastery-based process that allows students to re-do work and gradually hone their products.
- Flexible deadlines – “We can carry the grace we gave each other during the pandemic into the next phase,” she says, “setting up assignments so that they have more fluid deadlines or, if the assignments are larger, incremental check-ins so that we know students are making progress and can provide feedback and troubleshooting to keep them going.”
- A new kind of test – With remote learning, students discovered that it was much easier to “cheat.” Rather than returning to cheating detection, what about open-book, open-note, open-resource assessments that require a real demonstration of understanding?

Inclusivity:

- Universally designed learning experiences – This means teachers presenting material in written, video, and audio formats and allowing students to demonstrate learning in different ways.
- Introvert-friendly options for participation – Remote learning revealed new ways for quieter students to participate; we can carry those practices forward, giving those students greater voice in the classroom.
- Remote and hybrid pathways – Even when schools are fully back to normal, there should be options for certain students to participate from home.
- More-representative classroom materials – Students should see their culture, history, and circumstances in all parts of the curriculum.

Relationships:

- Building connections – It’s been harder to get to know kids teaching through the Zoom keyhole, says Gonzalez; “As we regain the privilege of being in the same room together, let’s not waste it.”
- More restorative practices – Done right, dealing with disciplinary infractions this way deals with root causes and gets better results.
- More anti-bias work on ourselves – “The starting point for improving relationships with all students and creating an environment in our schools that feels safe and welcoming for everyone,” says Gonzalez, “is to study our own biases.” She cites a number of resources (see the link below).
- More fun – Make time for joy and laughter, every day.

[“No More Easy Button: A Suggested Approach to Post-Pandemic Teaching”](#) by Jennifer Gonzalez in *Cult of Pedagogy*, May 16, 2021

Reasons for Teenagers to Come to School – and Keep Coming

“Students want to come back to school – to see their friends,” says Ruby Payne (Aha! Process) in this article in *Principal Leadership*. “But after they see their friends, how long will they want to submit to a structure that they have not had for a year and a half? Getting up at 7:00 a.m., classes that last 45 to 90 minutes, three-minute passing periods between classes, sitting in a seat with no food or drink allowed in class, and no access to social media?” On top of all that, students may be dealing with mental health challenges and trauma. Many teachers have dialed back their expectations, giving good grades for just handing in work – and students have learned they can get a day’s work done by noon.

So how are educators going to keep students coming back after the initial round of camaraderie? Focusing on secondary-school students, Payne suggests the following:

- *Build a future story.* She likes the idea of a nine-box storyboard in which students picture themselves at age 25 and think about what they want to have, be, and do:
 - High-school diploma
 - College, technical school, or military
 - Work (*What do you love to do that you would do even if you didn’t get paid?*)

- Car or other vehicle
- Pay/money
- House/apartment
- Friends
- Relationships/marriage
- Fun/hobbies

Having found images for each box, students think about their plan to get to their desired future – and how classes in school right now are part of that plan.

- *Create opportunities for belonging and relationships.* An example: one high-school principal shaved a couple of minutes off each class and scheduled 20 minutes of socialization time right after first period when clubs met and students were allowed to be on their cellphones, talk, and eat. One catch: students could participate only if their grades, attendance, and tardies were at an acceptable level.

- *Organize consistent mentors.* “Each student should have a key relationship with an adult on staff who makes daily contact and does not give up on them,” says Payne. If a student doesn’t have at least one adult serving this purpose in their life, the school mentor spends 3-4 minutes talking to them every day.

- *Access support systems.* The school must ensure that students who are struggling with homelessness, abuse, emotional and mental health issues, and housing insecurity connect with professionals in the school and community agencies that can help them.

[“Getting Students to Come Back – and Remain – for In-Person Learning”](#) by Ruby Payne in *Principal Leadership*, May 2021 (Vol. 21, #9, pp. 22-23)

John Hattie on Continuing Practices That Worked During the Pandemic

“Perhaps the greatest tragedy to come from Covid-related distance learning would be *not* learning from this experience to improve our teaching when we physically return to classrooms,” says research guru John Hattie (University of Melbourne) in this article in *Educational Leadership*. Hattie points to several positive developments he hopes will continue:

- *Focusing on equity* – The pandemic dramatically highlighted gaps in technology and access, and some progress was made. As in-person schooling resumes, Hattie urges that we double down, “shifting from measuring seat time to learning engagement; prioritizing assessments that illuminate student growth and learning; supporting acceleration in learning, not remediation; and identifying safe, culturally responsive practices.”

- *Listening to the troops* – What succeeded over the last 15 months – rapid adaptation to new technology and new instructional practices – did not happen because of top-down mandates but through the initiative and ingenuity of teachers and other school-based educators. In the future, Hattie hopes that district leaders will be more willing to listen to their teachers and build collaborative teams.

- *Self-regulation* – Remote and hybrid instruction put a premium on teachers and students working more independently. “Teachers who talked a lot in class, asked questions that required less-than-three-word responses, and focused myopically on the facts and content had trouble engaging learners remotely,” says Hattie. Students who already possessed (or picked up) the skills of independent learning thrived, as did teachers who focused on content and deep learning, taught in engaging ways, and gradually released responsibility. He urges educators to continue those practices in the new normal.

- *Connections* – Many educators used online tools to communicate more effectively with families and get them invested in deeper learning for their children. Teachers also had to get a better handle on how students were thinking, what they already knew, and what mastery of skills and content looked like. All of this should make teaching and learning more efficient and effective in post-Covid schools.

[“What Can We Learn from Covid-Era Instruction?”](#) by John Hattie in *Educational Leadership*, May 2021 (Vol. 78, #8, pp. 14-17); Hattie can be reached at jhattie@unimelb.edu.au.

“Learning Loss” – Wrong and Right Solutions

In this online article, Harvey Silver and Jay McTighe worry that “lost learning” is an unfortunate way to define the challenge schools face as they reopen for in-person instruction. By framing the challenge as instructional time *lost*, there’s a tendency to think the solution is rapidly covering the curriculum that students missed – which has two downsides. “At the classroom level,” say Silver and McTighe, “this solution could take the form of cutting out any of those time-consuming learning activities such as discussions, debates, hands-on science investigations, art creation, and authentic performance tasks and projects” – instead “trying to blitz through lots of factual information.”

Rather than focusing on the content that wasn’t covered during remote and hybrid instruction, they propose two more-productive approaches:

- *Prioritizing the curriculum on outcomes that matter the most* – A simple but effective way to accomplish this is preceding the title of each curriculum unit with the words, *A study in...*

Several examples:

- The calendar – *A study in systems*
- Linear equations – *A study in mathematical modeling*
- Media literacy – *A study in critical thinking*
- Any sport – *A study in technique*
- Argumentation – *A study in craftsmanship*

Preceding a unit title with those three words, say Silver and McTighe, “establishes a conceptual lens to focus learning on transferable ideas, rather than isolated facts or discrete skills.”

It’s also helpful to frame the unit around Essential Questions. For the five units above, here are some possibilities:

- *How is the calendar a system? What makes a system a system?*

- *How can mathematics model or represent change? What are the limits of a mathematical model?*
- *Can I trust this source? How do I know what to believe in what I read, hear, and view?*
- *Why does technique matter? How can I achieve maximum power without losing control?*
- *What makes an argument convincing? How do you craft a persuasive argument?*

Well-framed Essential Questions are open-ended, stimulate thinking, discussions, and debate, and raise additional questions.

- *Engaging learners in deeper learning that will endure* – “To learn deeply,” say Silver and McTighe, “students need to interact with content, e.g., by linking new information with prior knowledge, wrestling with questions and problems, considering different points of view, and trying to apply their learning to novel situations.” The most important skills are comparing, conceptualizing, reading for understanding, predicting and hypothesizing, perspective-taking, and exercising empathy.

A kindergarten example: challenging students to predict how high they can stack blocks before a tower falls down, then having them try different hypotheses and see what works best, and note the success factors. “This focus on cause and effect will become a yearlong inquiry for students,” say Silver and McTighe, “as they learn to use it to examine scientific phenomena, characters’ behavior in stories, and even their own attitudes and motivations as learners.” (The full article, linked below, includes a middle-school unit on genetically modified food and a high-school unit comparing the educational philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois.)

This two-part approach to curriculum is not just “a stopgap measure tied to current anxieties about learning loss,” conclude Silver and McTighe: “Framing content around big ideas and actively engaging students in powerful forms of thinking is good practice – in any year, under any conditions.”

[“Learning Loss: Are We Defining the Problem Correctly?”](#) by Harvey Silver and Jay McTighe on McTighe’s website, May 7, 2021; McTighe can be reached at jmctigh@aol.com.

Three Cautionary Notes as Regular School Resumes

In this *Education Gadfly* article, consultant Dale Chu says there are three issues that could potentially “gum up the works” as the pandemic recedes:

- *Mask mandates* – Some educators and students may continue in-school mask wearing in perpetuity, and there should be no objection to that. Requiring students to wear masks can help families feel comfortable sending their children back to school, but as vaccination rates rise, mandates are already provoking strong opposition in some quarters. If schools don’t find the middle ground, says Chu, “this fracas could pose a real distraction to getting schools back to any semblance of the ordinary.”

- *Standardized testing* – Students, educators, and parents “have grown accustomed to the absence of a yearly academic checkup,” he says, and anti-testing activists are making the

argument that no harm has been done. A growing number of educators and parents are questioning the whole premise of annual testing and the important insights it generates.

- *The four-day school week* – Before the pandemic, a shortened school week was mostly limited to the intermountain West, says Chu, but the idea has since spread “as thousands of districts have used the discredited pretense of deep cleaning to dial back the amount of live instruction per week.” If districts decide to make the four-day week a permanent fixture, that will mean fewer instructional hours at a point when academic learning time is more essential than ever.

“We are nothing if not creatures of habit,” concludes Chu, “and in the case of keeping masks on, testing off, and four-day school weeks the new normal, these routines may prove to be stubborn habits to break... So while it’s heartening to know that teachers are setting their sights on the tutoring and other programming that may soon be required – with policymakers laying out the tools to help – we would do well to keep an eye on the abiding crisis-mongering and bad-news bias that continue to shape habits and threaten to handicap the best laid plans for reopening schools.”

[“Three Things to Watch for in Schools’ Post-Covid Recovery”](#) by Dale Chu in *Education Gadfly*, April 29, 2021

Priorities for Dealing with Unfinished Learning in Math and ELA

With an eye to closing significant learning gaps in the wake of school closures and hybrid instruction, this paper by Harold Asturias, Phil Daro, Judy Elliott, and Lily Wong Filmore from the Council of the Great City Schools, has specific suggestions on the most important mathematics concepts and skills for these key transitions:

- To grade 3 (page 11-12 in the link below)
- To grade 6 (page 13-14)
- To algebra I (page 15-17)
- From algebra I to geometry (page 17-19)

The authors also have suggestions for priorities in English language arts for these transitions:

- To grade 3 (page 21-27)
- To grade 6 (page 27-32)
- To grade 9 (page 33-38)

In addition, Asturias, Daro, Elliott, and Filmore make strong recommendations on how educators should handle unfinished learning as schools emerge from the pandemic:

- *Stick to grade-level content and instructional rigor.* There will be a tendency to immediately identify deficits and reteach/remediate. “According to research,” say the authors, “both are largely ineffective practices, resulting in student disengagement with school and greater inequities in access to grade-level instruction and educational opportunity.” Instead, teachers should move ahead with the grade’s curriculum, scaffolding and addressing learning gaps as needed. “This daily reengagement of prior knowledge in the context of grade-level

assignments will add up over time,” they say, “resulting in more-functional learning than if we resort to watered down instruction or try to reteach topics out of context.”

- *Focus on the depth of instruction, not on the pace.* Similarly, there will be a tendency to rush to cover all the gaps in learning from the 2020-21 school year. But that will mean “rushing ahead of many students, leaving them abandoned and discouraged,” say the authors. “It will also feed students a steady diet of curricular junk food: shallow engagement with the content, low standards for understanding, and low cognitive load – all bad learning habits to acquire.” This will be especially inappropriate at a time when schools need to attend to students’ social and emotional wellbeing. The authors say that “taking the time to provide patient, in-depth instruction allows for issues related to unfinished learning to arise naturally when dealing with new content, allowing for *just in time* instruction and reengagement of students in the context of grade-level work.”

- *Prioritize content and learning.* Teachers need guidance on “where to invest their time and effort, what areas can be cut, and where they should teach only to awareness level to save time for priorities,” say the authors. This will allow teachers to slow down and take the time to fill gaps – in context – and allow for the kind of “constructive struggle” that will build students’ confidence and understanding. Curriculum leaders should not be asking what needs to be *covered* at each grade level, but rather, *What is the importance and purpose of this topic?* See the full text below for specific suggestions at several strategic points in the math and ELA curriculum.

- *Ensure inclusion of ELLs and students with disabilities.* The authors caution against excessive pullout of these students for remediation, advocating instead for including them in Tier 1 instruction and having them present in regular classes at least 80 percent of the day. They advocate building unit and lesson plans guided by an asset-based approach and universal design for learning (UDL). Now more than ever, they say, “it is essential to ensure that each and every student has equitable access to engaging grade-level content and instructional rigor.” To support this, families need to be informed of the curriculum expectations and how they can support learning at home.

- *Identify and address gaps in learning through instruction, avoiding the misuse of standardized testing.* “The first instinct of many districts will be to immediately test students upon their return to school in order to gauge their academic levels and needs,” say the authors. “This would be a mistake for many reasons” – especially if it results in achievement grouping and lower expectations for students who have fallen behind. The authors say the priority in the opening weeks should be on helping students reacclimate to school, rebuild relationships and trust, and gain a level of self-confidence. From the beginning, the priority needs to be “strong, attentive instruction, with embedded formative assessment,” responding to students’ needs in real time in the context of grade-level instruction. Several weeks along, diagnostic assessments can serve as “temperature checks” to identify key areas that will need attention.

- *Capitalize on people’s shared experience during the crisis.* Some students will reenter school with significant trauma as well as unfinished learning, say the authors. But they contend that educators should focus on the commonalities of the pandemic. “The virus, school closures,

social distancing, and nationwide protests have created new common experiences that can serve as the basis for work across subjects in the first weeks of school,” they say. “This will allow schools and teachers to reengage students, directly address student and adult hardship, stress, or trauma, and resume instruction in a way that feels contextualized and responsive, helping students comprehend the world around them.” Every subject area – science, ELA, math, social studies, and more – can be part of this effort.

[“Addressing Unfinished Learning After Covid-19 School Closures”](#) by Harold Asturias, Phil Daro, Judy Elliott, and Lily Wong Filmore, Council of the Great City Schools, Council of the Great City Schools, June 2020, spotted in “Using Feedback to Support Students’ Critical Learning” by Cathy Martin in *Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12*, April 2021 (Vol. 114, #4, pp. 266-268)

Reinventing Schools for the “New Normal”

In this article in *High Tech High Unboxed*, Virginia school administrator Jay McClain says that many believe this has been a lost year. “It certainly has been a year of great loss,” he says. “Loss of an incomprehensible number of lives. Loss of the basic human connections and interactions that we crave and take for granted. But a ‘year of loss’ and a ‘lost year’ is not the same thing. When we say ‘lost year,’ the loss we are describing is ‘normal school.’”

But was the old normal so terrific? Fundamentally unchanged over the last century, our pre-pandemic schools failed to engage more than half of students by the time they reached high school, and didn’t come close to producing equitable results for students of color. The coronavirus has compounded these long-standing deficiencies, widening health and achievement gaps. “Can we really respond to these two crises by just returning to ‘normal’?” asks McClain. “Let’s look at this year as a welcome jolt to find the soul of what education should be for our students and families.” He suggests four “persistent elements” in education – time, place, group, and curriculum – that we should now rethink:

- *Time* – During the pandemic, following the traditional bell schedule was not sustainable, and schools experimented with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities with more choice for students, more sleep for adolescents, and more deference to the needs of working parents. As regular schooling resumes, McClain believes we should open up choices for when older students are in school – morning, afternoon, or evening. “Think of the impact that this could have,” he says, “for high-school students who need to have a job, watch their siblings, or whose parents work a late shift. We are due for a mindset shift in which the time of school gives students and families the best options for success.”

- *Place* – With schools closed by the virus, learning was no longer linked to classrooms, a school building, or even an attendance zone. As “normal” returns, many families will exercise choice on a sliding scale from full-time in a building to full-time remote, sometimes crossing geographic boundaries. “All of this depends on ensuring that we have the WiFi infrastructure and accessibility to technology across communities that has been so lacking,” says McClain. “Access to the Internet is understood now, more than ever, as not only essential to commerce and the operation of government in a pandemic, but also to the learning of students.”

- *Group* – Over the last year, most schools didn’t change how they grouped students; third-grade classes still functioned as such, as did algebra groups. But there was some loosening up – students grouped by needs, teachers specializing in areas of strength, students from different schools being taught together. Returning to “normal,” says McClain, “the potential to rethink learning/class groups goes far beyond this.” With time and place more flexible, there’s potential for a variety of groupings in synchronous and asynchronous settings, from lectures to lessons on topics chosen by students to small-group activities to individual teacher-student check-ins. In addition, teachers can work across boundaries with colleagues and students and have much more flexibility regrouping students during the year.

- *Curriculum* – “A fundamental shift that has long been needed,” says McClain, “is with the balance between a common curriculum and the context of each child – [their] needs, interests, styles, and passions.” He believes that now is the time to pare each grade’s curriculum standards down to a smaller set of high-leverage standards in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies, and give students more choice in how they master them while pursuing their passions. “In this way,” he says, “we can be more culturally responsive to our students and cause our students to feel a sense of belonging and purpose and not just be taught how to conform.”

In short, McClain concludes, we have the opportunity to build a great deal more choice and customization into time, place, groupings, and the curriculum. “Choice does not mean we need to take away the elements of our current system that work for some families,” he says. “Rather, it means we provide a variety of pathways that will work for all families... The needs of families, the passions of our students, and our own humanity demand that we meet students and families where they are and give them choice so that we wrap around them, not the other way around.”

[“A Found Year”](#) by Jay McClain in *High Tech High Unboxed*, April 9, 2021; McClain can be reached at jmccclain@hopewell.k12.va.us.

Pandemic-Inspired Classroom Practices That Should Continue

In this *Edutopia* article, California English teacher Samantha Pack says there may be a silver lining from this challenging year: a set of insights and ideas that can, when schools return to normal, improve instruction and increase student agency:

- *A living agenda* – Instead of writing the daily schedule and assignments on the board, Pack has been creating a digital agenda for the unit that includes an outline of the day’s lesson, the rationale for each activity, relevant hyperlinks, and homework. This constantly updated agenda, which provides access to all unit materials, lets students see how the unit is progressing, provides talking points for teacher-student conferences, and supports self-paced learning. With this agenda at their fingertips, students shouldn’t have any, “Wait, what did we do today?” moments at home.

- *Orchestrating back-channel engagement* – The way the chat function has been used in remote instruction – soliciting quick feedback, checking for understanding, engaging quieter students, doing one-on-one check-ins, and a space for “parking lot” ideas – can definitely be

incorporated in regular classes. This can be done with high-tech tools like Mentimeter and Google Docs, or low-tech whiteboards and chart paper, providing nonverbal channels to get more students engaged with the content.

- *Mindful breaks* – “Remote learning has made breaks nonnegotiable,” says Pack, “and there’s no reason why we should abandon those benefits...” During longer blocks of in-person instruction, breaks are a must, with student input on when they take place. Pack recommends not taking breaks in the first 20 minutes of a class, and giving students accountability tasks to complete before and after breaks. Pauses in instruction are also good for teachers – to check work for misunderstandings, figure out student groupings, reflect on the lesson so far, and model screen-free mindfulness.

- *Splitting whole-group discussions in half* – Zoom classes have made it possible for teachers to have two simultaneous discussions, which gives each student more air-time and takes conversations to a deeper level. Pack suggests modifying this process with in-person classes by assigning half the class a quiet independent task (perhaps using headphones to avoid being distracted) while the other half has a discussion, then flipping the groups.

- *Soliciting student feedback* – “Remote learning has found many teachers eager to know what’s going on behind those small squares of students on their screens,” says Pack. Many teachers have used polls and surveys to check in with students on pacing, learning modalities, and homework load – and to get a sense of their morale and mental health. This practice certainly should continue with in-person instruction, she says, fostering mutual understanding and student voice and choice.

[“Enduring Practices from Remote Learning”](#) by Samantha Pack in *Edutopia*, April 2, 2021

Options for Spending Recently Approved Federal Funds

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Marguerite Roza and Chad Aldeman say district policymakers have a lot of leeway for spending \$122 billion of K-12 relief funding approved by Congress last month. It’s clear, however, that the money is short-term, which means, say Roza and Aldeman, that “leaders who commit to things they won’t be able to afford once the money runs out are setting themselves up to fall off a funding cliff in a few years.”

The new funding comes to about \$2,450 per child, with variations by state and school district. Roza and Aldeman present five options for addressing unfinished learning, each costing about \$1,000 per child. They encourage districts to open up a discussion on which combination will have the greatest impact:

- **Option A:** Reduce class sizes by two students for a year. This would ease teachers’ workload a little, but it wouldn’t add instructional time for students who have fallen behind. It would also mean hiring more teachers, which would get tricky when the funding stops.

- **Option B:** Extend a school year by four weeks for all students. This would add instructional time, but wouldn’t focus extra help on the students who need it the most.

- Option C: Provide one-third of students with a year of intensive tutoring. This supports the neediest students and would work only if schools organized a large-scale, effective tutoring program above and beyond regular instruction and persuaded students to participate.

- Option D: Offer four-week learning camps for all students for the summer of 2021 and 2022. The impact would depend on whether lagging students attended, which depends on competing summer activities and family preferences.

- Option E: Let principals decide what makes the most sense for their school. This would spur creativity and customize interventions to each school's needs, but there would be inconsistencies and a need for accountability.

“One thing's for sure,” conclude Roza and Aldeman: “District leaders should prepare to be judged for how they spend their federal relief money. Big one-time sums draw big scrutiny.”

[“Reduce Class Sizes, Lengthen the School Year, Provide Tutoring – or Let Principals Decide?”](#) by Marguerite Roza and Chad Aldeman in *Education Gadfly*, April 8, 2021

Maximizing the Impact of 2021 Summer Schools

In this article in *Chalkbeat*, Matt Barnum reports on what researchers and districts have learned about running effective summer school programs:

- *Find ways to get high attendance.* The evidence is that only students who regularly attend summer school make gains – but threatening to hold students back if they don't show up is often counterproductive. The best strategy is to avoid drudgery and make summer school attractive by including music, art, dance, and field trips to live theater and art museums, as well as reading and math. A highly engaging summer program goes beyond test-score gains, building students' connections to school and willingness to take advanced courses.

- *Reach out to families and address barriers to attendance.* Many parents need to be coaxed to sign up their children. It's helpful to identify students who will benefit the most, make personal contact with their families, and reassure parents about transportation, accommodating working hours, and Covid safety measures.

- *Make summer school appealing for teachers.* Those who are on the fence about teaching in the summer after a very difficult year need to think, “Oh, I could do this.” Enticements might include higher pay, small class sizes, curriculum resources, and the option to work half days and have fewer preps.

- *Go with in-person instruction.* The difficulties with online instruction that educators and children have experienced in 2020-21 will only be magnified over the summer, and studies conducted before the pandemic show few gains from summer programs conducted remotely.

- *Spin summer school as getting a head start on the coming school year.* Better yet, have teachers from the school year loop with students into summer school, or summer school teachers remain with students into the 2021-22 year (although these approaches are likely to be logistically challenging and should be used only when looping is easy to orchestrate).

- *Don't over-promise.* After all, summer school is only a few extra weeks of instruction. But there may be gains beyond book learning, including students reengaging with school, reconnecting with friends, and giving their parents a break from 24/7 child care. “The challenge is so substantial,” said one school leader. “It’s not a one-year approach. It’s a three-year approach.”

[“Summer School Programs Are Set to Grow. Here Are 6 Tips for Making Them Successful”](#) by Matt Barnum in *Chalkbeat*, March 30, 2021

Grading for Learning, Not Sorting

“Now is the time to ask straightforward questions about what we’ve learned in this extraordinary year,” says Justin Wells (Envision Learning Partners) in this article in *Edutopia*. “In general, things that worked during the pandemic are things we should do more of. Things that broke down or exacerbated inequities deserve serious rethinking.”

Wells’s nominee in the latter category: point-based grading. Students getting zeroes for missed assignments, and having those averaged into their overall grades, has been a major factor in a spiraling failure rate in recent months. This is one of several problems with points. Another is turning school into a numbers game. A student is asked how she’s doing in a course. Her answer: “I’m getting a 74.” Nothing about learning goals, skills that need work, or a pathway to improvement.

There’s nothing inherently wrong with points, says Wells. Some aspects of learning are measurable – there are right and wrong answers – and teachers need to keep track and assess students on objective criteria. But there are ways to avoid the negative effects. Here are Wells’s suggestions:

- *Don't add up all grades.* A lot of the work students do is formative in nature – homework, practice exercises, short quizzes – intended to build mastery. But when these pieces are aggregated and become part of a summative grade, bumps on the road to learning have a disproportionate impact. “As a teacher,” says Wells, “when I kept my students’ practice data discrete (or ignored the aggregations that grading software would do without my asking it to), I was better able to preserve an analytic lens when surveying evidence of student learning. My conversations with students were more nuanced. I found it easier to awaken them, rather than coerce them, into the understanding that practice and performance are strongly correlated.”

- *Have students think in terms of a portfolio.* Often used in visual arts, the idea is to have students curate demonstrations of learning and think of the collection as a photo album. “Portfolios tend to move assessment in healthy directions,” says Wells, “opening more paths to success, inviting more student engagement, focusing more on the work, and creating more opportunities for revision and redemption.”

- *Use a 4-point rubric for course grades.* It’s significant that GPAs, most rubrics, and letter grades use roughly the same 4-point scale, translated by one teacher thusly:

4 – You nailed it

3 – You got it.

2 – You almost got it.

1 – Something isn't working here.

Describing each level in a straightforward 4-level course rubric is very helpful to students, especially those who are struggling, whereas byzantine point systems are confusing and demoralizing. “My students’ relationships to their grades changed dramatically when they used a rubric to self-assess,” says Wells. “Their conclusions almost always matched my own. When they didn’t, important conversations ensued, and sometimes I would have to rethink my judgment.” Using this approach, a grade is “a description of the student’s learning, as demonstrated through evidence.”

• *Listen to students for whom things are not working well.* Many successful students have figured out how to do well in a points-based grading system and don’t see a problem. But struggling students are the canary in the mine, and improving the system for them will improve it for everyone, says Wells.

[“What’s Wrong with Points?”](#) by Justin Wells in *Edutopia*, April 2, 2021; Wells can be reached at justin@envisionlearning.org.

Which Covid-Time Practices Will We Carry Over to the New Normal?

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Beth McMurtrie shares pandemic-driven innovations instructors say they will keep using when in-person classes return. Although written for a university audience, most of these suggestions also apply to K-12:

• *Make connections* – Several instructors told McMurtrie that taking time to “simply talk to students” before and at the end of classes “paid off in ways both expected and surprising.” Giving students time to talk about what was on their minds helped build relationships and know “the competing pressures in their students’ lives.” It’s part of teachers’ realization that the teacher/student ratio of classroom talk needs to bend more toward student talk. “My bet,” says Clay Shirky of New York University, “is that the biggest shift from Covid will not be any one tool or technique, but a broadening sense that engagement is not merely something that students ‘bring to class,’ but is a result of the environment of the class itself, and that environment can be designed to better support or encourage engagement.”

• *Online guest speakers* – “I know I could have been doing this for years,” says Andrea Bixler of Clarke University in Iowa, “but I was never forced to, so I never did. Now I have guest speakers from around the region (and they could be from much farther afield) join my classes to discuss various topics.” And, she added, it’s more environmentally responsible because there’s no travel.

• *Online tutoring* – Several instructors reported that offering one-on-one instruction via Zoom greatly increased the number of students who showed up. Continuing this after the pandemic seems worthwhile for tutoring, advising, coaching writing, and other individual support. “Definitely a keeper!” said one instructor.

- *Flexibility with due dates and grading* – The concern here is accusations of unfairness or favoritism when an instructor “goes easy” with some students. But during the pandemic, being flexible with deadlines has not been seen as giving students a pass. Kari Morgan, an instructor at Kansas State University, started giving full credit for late work. She checked with her students on adopting that policy going forward, and hearing no complaints, she plans to continue flexible deadlines with no penalty when regular classes resume. “Treating students with respect and care builds trust,” says Morgan. “This serves as a foundation for learning. It also allows me to focus on the ‘big’ issues, and not the nitpicky ones. I mean, really, if I am not going to grade at the stroke of midnight, why does it matter if their work is a bit late?” But she is strict on assignments that need to be handed in as preparation for a specific class, and explains why.

- *Virtual faculty workshops* – “We have gotten double or triple the attendance we used to have,” says Karyn Sproles, dean of faculty development at the U.S. Naval Academy, “and the workshops have been even more interactive through chat and small groups... Not only did they answer questions we asked them to respond to in chat, but they asked questions, answered each other’s questions, and posted links to resources.”

[“Teaching: After the Pandemic, What Innovations Are Worth Keeping?”](#) by Beth McMurtrie in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 1, 2021

Supporting Students As They Emerge from Remote Instruction

In this *Phi Delta Kappan* column, Phyllis Fagell counsels a third-grade teacher who writes, “These eight- and nine-year-old kids can’t manage little setbacks well, whether it’s a tough worksheet problem or a missed chance to be line leader, and I think it’s because they’re also coping with big disappointments.” Her students hate Zoom and lack the resilience they exhibited in the past. The teacher asks how she can reacclimate next year’s students when they’ve been through so much.

“The pandemic has had a huge impact on children,” Fagell responds, “changing how they learn, live, and play. And no two kids are going to respond exactly the same way, because everyone has a different backstory and risk factors.” Teachers are a vital part of kids’ support system, she says, and quotes two experts with suggestions:

- *The 80/20 rule* – “Typically, after a disaster, around 80% of kids will be just fine and recover well, and around 20% will struggle,” says Jonathan Wilson, director of OpSAFE International. Adults who focus on the 20% “end up playing whack-a-mole, jumping from crisis to crisis. It’s better to work with the 100% to rebuild community, talk about feelings, and reduce distress. Then the whole group helps you support the 20% and everybody builds resilience.”

- *Anticipation and problem-solving* – If, for example, students are having problems with new classroom groupings that separate them from friends, the teacher might suggest after-school play dates to keep those connections, suggests Ryan DeLapp, a child psychologist at Montefiore Health Systems in New York City. Problem-solving skills need explicit instruction, followed by praise when students apply them successfully, and when they deal well with disappointments. An

important teacher skill: knowing when a student meltdown is coming and putting aside academics for a few minutes of quiet reading, mindfulness, or play.

[“Career Confidential: A Teacher Wants to Help Students Manage Disappointment Better”](#) by Phyllis Fagell in *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2021 (Vol. 102, #7, pp. 66-67); Fagell can be reached at contactphyllisfagell@gmail.com.

Robert Slavin on Tutoring as a Crucial Post-Covid Intervention

In this article on his website, Robert Slavin (Johns Hopkins University) bemoans the fact that so few U.S. schools are using research-proven programs. Medicine used to have an evidence-to-practice gap, but in the 1900s, penicillin, morphine, sulfa drugs, and cures for polio changed people’s mindset. “These breakthroughs,” says Slavin, “were explicitly engineered to solve health problems of great concern to the public, just as the Covid-19 vaccines were explicitly engineered to solve the pandemic.”

What is to be done about the unfinished learning of millions of students in the wake of the coronavirus? “All sorts of solutions have been proposed,” says Slavin, “but only one, tutoring, has both a solid and substantial research base and a significant number of proven, practical, cost-effective solutions.”

Slavin and several colleagues are launching a new initiative, Proven Tutoring, <http://www.proventutoring.org> to promote 14 effective tutoring programs for reading and math and organize training and support to take them to scale. The goal is 100,000 tutors who can serve 4 million students. Slavin suggests recruiting and training college-educated tutors “because evidence finds that well-supported teaching assistants get results as good as those obtained by certified teachers” – and getting thousands of tutors certified is not practical in the short term. The idea is to give schools and districts a choice of the proven tutoring programs and then provide PD via webinars to make sure the quality of tutoring is maintained as it’s taken to scale.

If the initiative is successful, says Slavin, this might be the “penicillin/polio/Covid moment” for educational research, proving that it can solve big, practical problems in schools. This could lead to much more widespread implementation of proven programs for teaching reading, algebra, science, ELL instruction, and other areas.

[“ProvenTutoring.org: Getting Proven Tutoring Programs Into Widespread Practice”](#) by Robert Slavin, March 2, 2021; Slavin can be reached at rslavin@jhu.edu.

Douglas Reeves on Unfinished Learning

In this article in *School Administrator*, author/consultant Douglas Reeves offers advice to teachers and school leaders who face the challenge of catching students up on unfinished learning from the pandemic:

- *Face reality on state standards.* The learning objectives for each grade level, which were often too numerous before 2020-21 school closings, are beyond the pale now. This puts teachers in the position of making idiosyncratic choices unless leaders help them to...

- *Focus on the essentials.* Some standards are more important than others, and by identifying and addressing those “power standards,” we can give students the knowledge and skills they need to be successful at the next level of learning.

- *Practice zero-sum pruning.* For every worthy new item that is added to the curriculum, something that would use the same amount of classroom time needs to be subtracted.

- *Attend to social-emotional learning.* “Many students have been traumatized by illnesses and deaths of loved ones and the isolation from friends associated with the Covid-19 pandemic,” says Reeves. “It’s hard to focus on prepositional phrases, the map of South America, and the quadratic equation when you are not physically and emotionally safe.”

[“Too Many Standards? My Four Answers”](#) by Douglas Reeves in *School Administrator*, March 2021 (Vol. 78, #3, p. 14); Reeves can be reached at douglas.reeves@creativeleadership.net.

Accelerating Elementary Students’ Post-Covid Achievement

This open-source Thomas B. Fordham Institute paper by Barbara Davidson and Greg Woodward (with input from numerous educators, including Kim Marshall) has 129 pages of suggestions on how elementary schools can address unfinished learning in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. The table of contents:

- *School Culture and Climate:* Positive school culture; adult mindsets; professional learning; safe and supportive climate; family engagement.
- *Curriculum:* High-quality, knowledge-rich curriculum; reading; writing; mathematics; science and social studies; social and emotional learning.
- *Instruction:* Instructional strategies; assessing student progress; supports for students with disabilities; supports for English learners; supports for low-income gifted and talented students.
- *Recovery:* Targeted help and high-dosage tutoring; expanded mental-health supports; implementation.

[“The Acceleration Imperative: A Plan to Address Elementary Students’ Unfinished Learning in the Wake of Covid-19”](#) Version 1.0, edited by Kathleen Carroll, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, March 23, 2021

Is Tutoring the Best Intervention for Covid-19 Unfinished Learning?

In this Thomas B. Fordham Institute paper, Michael Goldstein (Match Education) and Bowen Paille (University of Amsterdam) say that high-dosage tutoring has “huge potential” for addressing the lost learning of so many students due to the coronavirus. But they worry that implementing tutoring at scale will produce disappointing results. First, the research on tutoring is not unanimously positive: a good many unsuccessful programs were terminated before being

written up; plus, there's the problem of implementing tutoring on a large scale.

Goldstein and Paulle list some attributes that have been suggested for an effective tutoring program:

- Substantial tutoring time each week;
- Mandatory for targeted students;
- Strong, sustained tutor-tutee relationships;
- Aligning tutoring with the school curriculum;
- Close monitoring of student knowledge and skills;
- Oversight of tutors to assure quality interactions.

Sounds straightforward, right? “If you believe tutoring is simple,” say Goldstein and Paulle, “then the path to scale is easy: Get some cash, use it to pay smart and kind adults to sit across from kids and teach, create some rules, and get to work.”

But sometimes tutoring flops. Natalie Wexler, a noted education writer, described a recent one-on-one session she conducted in a school. The tutee stared straight ahead, refused to answer questions, “clearly hated the whole exercise, and eventually refused to come.” This student wished she was back with her classmates where she might actually be learning something, as opposed to practicing the skill of the week – summarizing – with a book about the Golden Gate Bridge.

“Natalie’s example was with one student,” say Goldstein and Paulle. “Frequently there are two to four kids in a tutorial. Some are not paying attention, eyes drawn to the windows, or covertly scanning phones in their laps. Some are confused, brows furrowed. Some are irritable, lips pursed, sighing theatrically at the slightest challenge, rolling their eyes at each task change. Often the tutor is talking too much, over-explaining. Often both parties are bored with the curriculum. Maybe the Zoom session just timed out. Maybe Kid 1 was tight with Kid 2 in September, but they had a big fight, and now they hate each other. Maybe Kid 3 was ‘sort of OK’ with tutoring but became resentful when the tutor called her mom and mentioned missed assignments.”

Likening tutoring in schools to the challenge of creating a new vaccine, Goldstein and Paulle say that in human cells, things are constantly changing, and successful vaccines have to be designed to adapt to those changes. Similarly, school conditions are always in flux: “New schedules. New leadership. New priorities. New internal politics.” A tutoring program that tries to create a recipe (a list of best practices) and apply it consistently won’t do well in this environment. Conventional, rule-following managers are not good at adapting to change, say Goldstein and Paulle. A different kind of leader is needed for tutoring programs to succeed at scale: people who thrive on solving problems.

“These unusual managers obsessively look for problems caused by school changes,” they say, “fiercely try to fix them, and humbly realize that often their first and second and third ‘fix attempts’ might not work. They persist until they get the right result.” Their hypothesis is that if tutoring programs are led by managers like this, they can succeed at scale.

But first there needs to be an open competition, as with Covid-19 vaccines, for “candidate” tutoring programs tried out with small populations of students. Those that are

successful (which will be a small percentage) should then be tried with a larger population of students, and again, the failures discarded – and so on. Again, the key ingredient is managers who embrace failure and uncertainty, keep trying, and constantly improve tutoring interventions.

[“The Narrow Path to Do It Right: Lessons from Vaccine Making for High-Dose Tutoring”](#) by Michael Goldstein and Bowen Paulle in a Thomas B. Fordham Institute paper, March 2021; Paulle can be reached at B.Paulle@uva.nl.

What Will Change When We’re Back To Regular School?

In this interview with Suzanne Bouffard and Elizabeth Foster in *The Learning Professional*, Jal Mehta (Harvard University) says the disruption of the pandemic has spurred new thinking about schooling – for example, teachers using “flipped” instruction, with students listening to recorded mini-lectures at night and having lively synchronous discussions about them the next day. As schools return to in-person instruction, says Mehta, “it might be a really positive opportunity to incorporate what’s working and let go of what’s not working.” To jump-start that process, he suggests asking questions like these:

- What have you learned about your students and their families this year?
- How could that shape the way you connect with families and students next year?
- What has worked well this year, and how could you amplify those things as you transition out of emergency education mode?
- What are you not looking forward to about going back to “regular” school?

During remote schooling, educators have really missed the informal connections with colleagues in hallways and lunchrooms but appreciated the slower pace of life, not commuting, and having more time with family. Mehta says we need to allow for a period of “hospicing” as we let go of things that have been important to us but now seem less helpful.

Gearing up for a “new normal,” timing is important. “Teachers are not going to have the bandwidth for significant reimagining during the school year,” says Mehta. This June and July, during paid professional time, will be the best opportunity for teachers and administrators to brainstorm about what worked well and do some initial planning for the school year ahead. “Then, in August,” he says, “when there is fresh energy, a lot of schools have at least a few days of professional learning time, and that would be a natural time to talk about what will be different in the coming school year.”

School and district leaders have a vital role in orchestrating these conversations. The research points to four tasks:

- *Naming* practices that have worked well during the pandemic, like better connections with families;
- *Nourishing* practices that are starting to take root and helping them grow;
- *Connecting* educators with similar instincts and interests so they can think things through, which means scheduling common time and using remote connections;
- *Growing* expertise by drawing on the best thinking inside and outside the school.

“But overall,” says Mehta, “we don’t currently have the time we need for adults in schools, and that’s a huge barrier to everything else we’re trying to do. That needs to be addressed.”

In that regard, he describes how educators in Chelsea, Massachusetts negotiated an extra 10 days for professional learning at the beginning of the school year. After reflecting on their own experiences as students, teachers conducted “trust visits” with families on sidewalks outside students’ homes, elsewhere outside the school buildings, and on Zoom. Then the district convened nine “working tables” in which teachers, educators, and families across different schools focused on an issue (with parents doing most of the sharing and educators most of the listening) and made recommendations for the upcoming year.

Mehta closes with a question: “What’s the equivalent of the chat box when we go back to in-person learning? I don’t have a good answer yet, but I’m hoping some teachers will have a good answer.”

[“Crisis Creates Opportunity. Will We Seize It?”](#) Jal Mehta interviewed by Suzanne Bouffard and Elizabeth Foster in *The Learning Professional*, February 2021 (Vol. 42, #1, pp. 32-35); Mehta is at jal_mehta@gse.harvard.edu, Bouffard at suzanne.bouffard@learningforward.org, and Foster at elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org.

Some Recommendations for the Fall

In this *Education Gadfly* article, Michael Petrilli shares a preliminary set of crowd-sourced recommendations for the hoped-for reopening of fully in-person instruction:

- Aim for acceleration, not remediation.
- Build everything around a set of high-quality, content-rich instructional materials.
- Ensure that tutoring and other extended-learning opportunities are closely tied to regular classroom instruction and curriculum.
- Offer beefed-up mental health services.
- Work hard at getting the school’s culture right “since a great culture is what’s going to largely determine whether kids get the social and emotional support they most need,” says Petrilli.

He continues to advocate for schools to insert a “second 2nd grade” to accommodate the unfinished learning of many students in the wake of the pandemic.

[“Personalized Learning for the Wee Ones in the Wake of the Pandemic, Part I”](#) by Michael Petrilli in *Education Gadfly*, March 4, 2021

Douglas Reeves on How PD Must Change After the Pandemic

In this *Educational Leadership* article, author/consultant Douglas Reeves suggests how the current crisis should reshape teacher learning:

- *Beyond one-shot events* – Workshops and keynote addresses may be entertaining, but to change teaching and learning, says Reeves, what’s required is *deliberate practice*: “practice that

is motivated by a compelling desire to improve, requires extra effort, is sustained over a long period of time, and is accompanied by feedback.”

- *Tailored PD* – “If we are to practice the personalization that we preach,” says Reeves, “then every faculty member will have a professional learning profile that shows current knowledge and skills, immediate and long-term professional learning needs, and the ability and willingness to support colleagues in critical skill areas.”

- *Less inspiration, more perspiration* – Rhetoric about racial injustice is hollow, says Reeves, without specific actions to remedy inequitable practices – for example, toxic approaches to grading. “The notion that feelings and beliefs must precede changes in actions and practices is unsupported by the evidence,” he says. “On the contrary, behavior often precedes belief.”

- *From evaluation to coaching* – Reeves is sharply critical of the traditional teacher evaluation process of infrequent, announced classroom visits and compliance-driven end-of-year paperwork. “As time is inherently a zero-sum gain,” he says, “every hour devoted to this pointless evaluation drill is an hour that could have been devoted to coaching and supporting teachers and leaders throughout the year.”

- *From fragmentation to focus* – Because of the unfinished learning experienced by so many students during the pandemic, he believes it’s more important than ever to focus on the “power standards” for each grade level: those that have leverage across disciplines (e.g., writing), recur from one grade to another, and are essential for success at the next grade level. In addition, too many schools are succumbing to the Christmas-tree effect, taking on one enticing program after another. “The essential task of the leader,” says Reeves, “is to say no to every temptation that fragments the time, attention, and energy of students and teachers.”

[“Five Professional Learning Transformations for a Post-Covid World”](#) by Douglas Reeves in *Educational Leadership*, February 2021 (Vol. 78, #5, pp. 44-48); Reeves can be reached at douglas.reeves@creativeleadership.net.

Reimagining Schools When We Return to a New Normal

“It’s looking as though all schools should be able to open fully in the fall,” says Jal Mehta (Harvard Graduate School of Education) in this *New York Times* article. “The pandemic is giving us an opportunity to make a pivot that we should have made long ago.” His suggestions:

- *Rethink one-size-fits-all schooling*. The pandemic has produced a wide variety of student responses: some kids haven’t missed the social pressures and anxieties of in-person schooling, while others feel lonely at home and can’t wait to be back in school. Some shy students have learned how to participate more fully in class via the chat function, and others have enjoyed small-group interaction in breakout rooms. “When we reopen schools,” says Mehta, “could we do so in a way that creates different kinds of opportunities for all kinds of students – introverts and extroverts, fast processors and reflective thinkers?”

- *Make schools more human*. Paradoxically, the distance created by remote classes has forced schools to get in closer touch with students’ and families’ life circumstances – and how those intersect with what schools expect. “We are often in such a rush in school – from one class

to the next, from one topic to another – that we don’t remember that the fundamental job is to partner with families to raise successful human beings,” says Mehta. “The pandemic is helping many of us to think about our students in a fuller and more holistic way.” Many teachers are building stronger relationships, having frequent check-ins, delving into relevant curriculum topics (including racial injustice), designing tasks that give students agency and purpose, and allowing students more choices - including the music they play during breaks. Another important development: adolescents are getting more sleep, which one study credits for reducing mental health issues in recent months.

- *Rethink the high-school schedule.* The seven-period day is “unsafe in person, unmanageable at home” says Mehta. Some schools have experimented with a quarter system where students take no more than three subjects at a time, allowing teachers to work with far fewer students (for example, 80 instead of 160) and focus more on relationships and deeper understanding of content. One Wisconsin high school took personalization a step further, assigning every adult 10-15 students and to be “on call” for them as they navigate their virtual classes.

- *Reconcile the interests of educators and families.* In some districts, says Mehta, teachers have been “demonized” for pushing back on school reopening to protect their own health and safety. This is a shame, because teachers are essential workers, and “the success of students is intimately connected to the success of teachers... Coming up with ways to build trust and find solutions that are good for both students and adults is one of the meta-lessons of the pandemic,” he says.

- *Make up lost ground.* In one recent survey, 56 percent of teachers said they’ve taught only half the curriculum they cover in in normal times, if that, and the impact has been greatest in lower-income communities and for children of color. “The right choice here,” says Mehta, “is to get very specific on what needs to be made up and what does not; teams of teachers and administrators could work together to decide what is essential to keep and what can be pared.” The goal: “greater depth on fewer topics.” Funding and access to counseling, technology, and broadband need to be equalized, and Mehta believes there should be a moratorium on standardized testing this spring.

[“Make Schools More Human”](#) by Jal Mehta in *The New York Times*, December 27, 2020; Mehta can be reached at jal_mehta@gse.harvard.edu.

Is This Looping’s Moment?

In this article in *Education Drive*, Texas first-grade teacher Mark Rogers says that every year, the two months after spring break are precious – “an opportunity to crystallize an entire year’s worth of human connection, learning, and special classroom memories.” But not this year, with almost all students and teachers deprived of in-person connections. Rogers sees the transition from this year to 2020-21 as the perfect time for looping – teachers keeping their students for the next grade level. Here’s why he believes principals should support looping:

- Teachers bring into the next year all the human connections from this school year;

- With high-need students, teachers can carry forward the trust that was earned this year, again saving time and emotional energy;
- Teachers hit the ground running in the fall by saving the time normally spent learning names and family information and establishing classroom routines;
- Teachers know exactly what wasn't covered in the previous year and will be able to more quickly fill in those gaps;
- Teachers are in a better position to decide what can be skipped as they merge the 2019-20 curriculum with 2020-21.

“This year, more than any other, our kids need continuity,” says Rogers, “our kids need their teachers to know them, and, as a result, our kids need their same teacher next year.”

“Why Students Need Looping Now More Than Ever” by Mark Rogers in *Education Drive*, April 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2RRR9Co>

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LINKS AND RESOURCES

The Massachusetts Acceleration Roadmap – Here are suggestions from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for returning to in-person instruction after the pandemic: [School Leader Edition](#) and [Classroom Educator Edition](#).