





PREPARING FOR POST-COVID-19 STUDENT RE-ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

Districts across the country are currently preparing for the inevitable impacts of COVID-19 on learning loss, student engagement, and shifting learning standards. In planning for the upcoming school year, districts need to understand how extended remote learning will impact long-term student achievement and how educators should plan to re-engage students in traditional in-person education once it is safe to return to the classroom. To support member districts in planning for re-opening, Hanover Research (Hanover) reviewed academic literature and practical resources to synthesize best practices for fostering and enhancing student engagement and student achievement during remote learning and classroom re-entry.

The following research brief offers strategies for planning for learning loss; discusses how students returning to school after an extended illness, natural disaster, or traumatic experience struggle with re-engagement and learning loss; and recommends specific strategies for re-engaging students following disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

-  **Facilitate coordination across grade levels** to address academic content gaps from the 2019-20 year throughout the 2020-21 academic year.
-  **Assess students formally or informally** to understand academic achievement levels and gaps.
-  **Prioritize multiple weekly check-ins, student goal-setting, and other personalized supports** to re-engage students.
-  **Design, administer, and analyze a re-engagement survey for students and teachers.** This survey can gather students' perceptions about how their school meets their social, mental, and emotional needs, as well as teacher perceptions of student re-engagement practices.

Key Findings

- **Districts should anticipate short-term, long-term, and inequitable impacts of learning loss due to the COVID-**

19 pandemic. Studies suggest that students will enter the fall 2020 school year with 63-68 percent learning gains in reading and 37-50 percent learning gains in math relative to gains in a typical school year, and that it may take several years for students to overcome school closure-related learning loss. Research from prior natural disasters also demonstrates that students already at-risk for academic challenges disproportionately experience negative academic impacts. In particular, low-income, Latinx, and Black students will likely see higher-than-average learning loss due to COVID-19-related school closures.

- **Strategies to address COVID-19 learning loss focus on creating individualized learning plans and facilitating collaboration across grade levels.** Individualized learning plans enable educators to assess and address students' different levels of learning following spring 2020 COVID-19-related school closures. Teachers should identify skill gaps from the 2019-20 school year in consultation with students' prior-year teachers and address these gaps during the 2020-21 school year. Actions to implement these strategies include an emphasis on student attendance, communication, customizing content delivery mediums, weekly schedules, and goal setting.
- **Districts have addressed students' needs as they returned to school following past crises by creating long-term education recovery plans and strategies, implementing structured frameworks, and providing trauma resources.** For example, New Orleans high schools post-Hurricane Katrina found that "spiraling" (re-teaching content over the length of a course, in greater depth each time) helped increase students' persistence in school and after graduation. However, as COVID-19 is unprecedented in modern history due to its length and breadth, prior natural disasters and crisis events generally do not offer applicable, specific strategies for re-engagement.
- **Strategies for re-engaging and supporting students experiencing trauma in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic prioritize addressing students' mental, social, and emotional needs.** These strategies include creating and fostering community, psychological safety, and personalized supports. Additionally, encouraging students to set their own goals can help create a sense of ownership over their work in a virtual environment.

Planning for Learning Loss

Districts should plan for greater than typical learning loss when students return for the 2020-21 school year, particularly in math. Indeed, an Annenberg Institute study examined regular learning loss between academic years using a national sample of five million students in Grades 3-8 who took the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) Growth assessments in the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years. The study compared the typical growth trajectories across a standard-length school year to projections that assumed students missed the last three months of the 2019-20 school year. Based on these projections, students will return for the 2020-21 school year with “approximately 63-68 percent of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year and with 37-50 percent of the learning gains in math.” Students may return to school nearly a full year behind in math in some grades. However, learning losses are not likely to be universal, as the top third of students may potentially make reading gains.¹

Similarly, research shows that students will most likely still experience learning loss in a full-time virtual learning setting. In June, McKinsey & Company (McKinsey) modeled three scenarios for the 2020-21 school year to assess extended learning loss: Scenario 1) full-time, in-person class instruction for fall 2020; Scenario 2) full-time, virtual instruction in fall 2020 as well as part-time schedules and school closures in spring 2021; and Scenario 3) full-time, virtual instruction for the entire 2020-2021 academic year. McKinsey estimates in Scenario two that students who remain enrolled could still lose three to four months of learning even if they receive average remote instruction and up to 12 to 14 months if they do not have any instruction at all (see Figure 1 below).²

Figure 1: Average Months of Learning Lost in Scenario Two Compared with Typical In-Classroom Learning, Projected Grade 6 NWEA Math RIT Scores

Remote Learning Quality	Average Months of Lost Learning
Average	3-4
Low-Quality	7-11
No-Instruction	12-14

Source: McKinsey³

Additionally, McKinsey projects that learning loss will be most pronounced among low-income, Black, and Hispanic students, with students in these demographics averaging more months of learning loss in scenario two than the 6.8-month average for all students (see Figure 2).⁴ Factors that may influence this learning loss include the higher rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the Black community, the inability of many Black and Latinx parents to work from home, and the “digital divide” in technology and internet access by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.⁵

Figure 2: Average Months of Learning Lost in Scenario Two Compared with Typical In-Classroom Learning

Demographic	Study Effective Size Bench
Overall	6.8
White	6.0
Black	10.3
Latinx	9.2
Low-Income	12.4

Sources: McKinsey⁶

Students across all grade levels will require more support than usual at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. While similar data and projections are not currently available for high school grade levels, these studies suggest that incoming Grade 9 students may enter high school more behind than typical in both English and math. Low-income, Latinx, and Black students will also likely need additional resources to close any learning gaps caused by extended remote learning.⁷

Districts can use individual learning plans to assess and address different levels of learning caused by COVID-19 school closures. The Michigan Department of Education outlines several principles that districts can use in creating individualized learning plans, including developing weekly schedules and ensuring ongoing communication with families (see Figure 3).⁸ These strategies may help account for the wide range of learning individual students achieved at the end of the 2019-20 school year. Individual learning plans also allow districts and schools to develop targeted supports for both academic and social-emotional needs.⁹

Figure 3: Strategies for Developing Individualized Learning Plans

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build on the student’s strengths, interests, and needs; and use this knowledge to affect learning positively. Develop a weekly plan and schedule that offers routines and structures for consistency and for the balancing of think time, work time, and playtime for health and well-being. Contact families to support student learning through ongoing communication and collaboration. Communication will not look the same for every student and family—safety remains the priority. Provide translations as necessary.
EQUITY AND ACCESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set individual goals for each student using knowledge about them and content area standards. Consider how to deliver content depending on tools and resources accessible to each student. Alternative modes of instruction may include the use of online learning, telephone communications, email, virtual instruction, videos, slideshows, project-based learning, use of instructional packets, or a combination to meet diverse student needs. Communicate with families about engagement strategies to support students as they access the learning as families are critical partners.

ASSESS STUDENT LEARNING

- Use a variety of strategies to monitor, assess, and provide feedback to students about their learning.
- Use formative assessment results to guide educators' reflection on the effectiveness of instruction and to determine the next steps for student learning.
- Communicate with families about assessment results to inform them about any needed next steps.

Sources: Michigan Department of Education¹⁰

To account for anticipated learning loss, districts can facilitate vertical curricular review and collaboration across grade levels and courses. Teachers should identify 2019-20 school year competency, topic, and skill gaps due to COVID-19-related school closures in consultation with students' prior-year teachers and develop plans to address these gaps during the 2020-21 school year. Figure 4 lists five actions to help districts and schools create a foundation in fall 2020 for further learning interventions.

Figure 4: Five Actions for Creating Foundations for Future Interventions

Action 1	Prioritize attendance and check-ins with families and students multiple times weekly.
Action 2	Teach grade-level for all core courses.
Action 3	Use a core curriculum across the district and avoid using online supplements.
Action 4	Ensure teachers have uninterrupted teaching time.
Action 5	If health and logistics permit a hybrid schedule, prioritize in-person instruction for students needing extra help and those in transition grades (Grades 1, 6, and 9).

Source: Education Week¹¹

Furthermore, prior school closures suggest that districts should develop a long-term strategy to address lost learning beyond the current school year. A 2019 study of the 2009 Australian bushfire found that a disaster may erode learning across multiple academic years. The study analyzed students' test scores from Grade 1 (the year of the bushfire), Grade 3, and Grade 5. When comparing results for Grades 3 and 5, the authors determined that students attending the most affected schools recorded significantly less improvement in reading and math.¹² Similarly, research on learning loss after Hurricane Katrina found that it took two years for students to recover in terms of academic achievement.¹³ This research indicates that districts will need long-term strategies for helping students recover from learning lost during COVID-19 school closures.

Re-Engagement Strategies

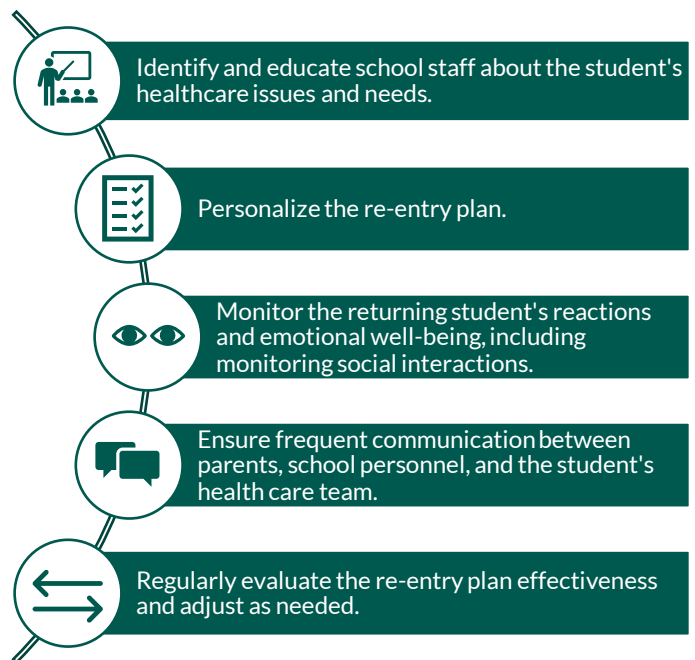
In the following subsections, Hanover details best practices for re-engaging students returning to school after non-COVID-19 extended absences or school closures (e.g., extended illnesses, natural disasters), and personal trauma, as well as re-engaging students during and after COVID-19-related school closures.

Re-Engaging Students After Extended Absences or School Closures

Extended Illness

A structured framework is critical in helping schools re-engage students returning after an extended illness. The student, family, health care provider, and school staff all need to be involved in planning a re-entry plan.¹⁴ All plans should be child-specific, and schools need to monitor the student's reactions and emotional well-being during and after their return to the classroom. Figure 5 lists how schools can create and execute re-entry plans for students returning to school after an extended illness.

Figure 5: Strategies in Creating and Executing Re-Entry Plans for Students Returning to School After an Extended Illness



Sources: Multiple¹⁵

Natural Disasters

Academic impacts from natural disasters disproportionately affect students who are already at-risk. In a 2018 study of the academic recovery of schools impacted by Hurricane Ike, the study classified students as having a high-stable academic recovery trajectory or a low-interrupted trajectory. The study found that high attendance was associated with a high-stable trajectory while a high

percentage of economically disadvantaged students was associated with the low-interrupted trajectory. These results show that natural disasters “do not affect all people or communities equally...[and] highlight the need for policy initiatives that focus on low performing schools” during the recovery period.¹⁶

However, school reforms implemented during a period of disaster recovery have resulted in favorable long-term student academic achievement. For example, while the unique circumstances around both the immediate and long-term aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans make comparisons difficult, studies show that reforms that New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA PS) implemented following the disaster had long-term positive impacts on multiple indicators of student academic achievement, high school graduation, and college enrollment, persistence, and graduation.¹⁷

Researchers identified that particular success factors for NOLA PS’ post-Katrina reforms included financial investment, educator availability, and student achievement levels prior to the disaster. While unlikely to be replicated in other situations, the following strategies may offer some insight for current district and school leaders:¹⁸

- **Financial Investment:** Relative to comparable districts, NOLA PS reforms after Hurricane Katrina involved more financial investment.
- **An Ample Educator Workforce:** New Orleans and the school district benefited from an influx of early career educators and school reform leaders seeking to rebuild the city.
- **Existing Student Achievement Levels:** Before Hurricane Katrina, student academic achievement in New Orleans was worse than comparable districts, suggesting that low-performing schools and students may benefit the most from major reforms after a disaster.

Schools in New Orleans also tried several strategies to recover from learning loss, including remedial classes and placing elementary school students in courses based on readiness, not age. New Orleans high schools developed and utilized one of the most effective strategies tried for middle and high school learning recovery: “spiralizing.”¹⁹ Before presenting regular course materials, teachers introduced topics traditionally taught in blocks (e.g., math, science) in smaller blocks, spread them out over a longer period, and came back to the topic multiple times in greater depth throughout the course.²⁰ These high schools found that “spiralizing” significantly improved students’ persistence in school and graduation.²¹

In the context of crisis recovery, academic recovery broadly relates to how schools will restore the learning environment and instruction. Given the ongoing nature of COVID-19, academic recovery may include full-time digital learning, a hybrid in-person/online learning, or entirely in-person

instruction, depending on the district. Topics to consider for ongoing academic recovery include:²²

- Use of alternative instructional delivery;
- Use of alternative school day schedules; and
- Use of temporary or alternative instructional spaces.

Re-Engaging Students After Experiencing Trauma

As traumatic events negatively impact students’ sense of well-being, districts and schools can help re-engage students by utilizing trauma-informed practices that focus on routines, relationships, and social-emotional support (see Figure 6). Predictable routines, for example, create stability, helping students feel safe. Supportive relationships not only offer concerned students an added layer of protection but also tend to their emotional and psychological needs. Successful implementation of a trauma-informed approach requires a comprehensive set of strategies and the involvement of stakeholders across the school community.²³

Figure 6: Guiding Principles of Trauma-Informed Practices



Source: Transforming Education²⁴

Trauma-informed schools typically *realize* “the widespread impact of trauma and pathways to recovery,” *recognize* the signs and symptoms of trauma, *respond* “by integrating knowledge [of] trauma into all facets of the system,” and *resist* “re-traumatization” by minimizing “unnecessary triggers.”²⁵ Figure 7 outlines the areas that trauma-informed schools typically prioritize to re-engage students who have experienced trauma.

Figure 7: Strategies for Re-Engaging Students Who Have Experienced Trauma

RAISE AWARENESS	Foster an understanding of childhood trauma, including the causes, symptoms, and potential effects on social-emotional and academic outcomes.
IDENTIFY NEEDS	Create mechanisms for identifying students currently or at risk of experiencing trauma. Learn, if possible, the histories of any past traumas students and families suffered. Determine appropriate supports.

ENSURE SAFETY	Ensure all students feel physically, socially, and emotionally safe. Create calming, welcoming learning environments. Avoid stimuli (e.g., lights, colors, sounds) that trigger students. Provide reassurances. Use de-escalation techniques.
CREATE CONSISTENCY	Establish a sense of constancy and predictability by creating schedules and routines and communicating clear sets of rules and expectations.
BUILD RELATIONSHIPS	Foster positive, healthy relationships among students, as well as between students and teachers. Create connections and establish trust. Check in regularly.
TEACH SELF-REGULATION	Cultivate skills that enable students to avoid becoming hypervigilant in stressful situations (i.e., preventing a fight, flight, or freeze response). Build resilience.
ENGAGE FAMILIES	Help families assist students at home with effective stress management strategies. Encourage families to seek additional supports as needed, understanding that parents also may exhibit signs of trauma. Respect cultural differences.
FORM PARTNERSHIPS	Collaborate with community-based organizations and providers to connect students and families with necessary services and supports.

Sources: Multiple²⁶

Re-Engaging Students Post-COVID-19

As with engaging students who have experienced other types of trauma, the literature recommends that districts and schools prioritize students' mental health and social and emotional needs during and post-COVID-19. For example, the National Education Association suggests that schools consider suspending classes for the first two weeks of the school year to "focus on social-emotional learning activities that include(s) trauma screening and supports to help students and adults deal with grief, loss, etc."²⁷ As re-engaging students will likely require significant time and occur throughout the school year, educators should be prepared to provide continuous mental, social, and emotional support in dealing with the ongoing effects of COVID-19. Figure 8 details strategies for districts and schools to engage students once they re-enter the classroom.

Figure 8: COVID-19-Specific Strategies for Districts and Schools in Re-Engaging Students






CREATE AND FOSTER COMMUNITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide additional supports for students who may feel vulnerable returning to school (e.g., Asian American and Pacific Islander students who have faced COVID-19 related xenophobia, homeless students, under-resourced students). Promote communication and connection among students.
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PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand and address troublesome behaviors in context with compassion and understanding. Encourage teachers to show feelings in order to model how they deal with vulnerability. Engage students in designing their support systems.
PERSONALIZED SUPPORTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow and encourage students to express grief over people and things they have lost during COVID-19. Quickly identify students who are not transitioning back successfully to school. (common signs include withdrawal, anxiety, and depression). Offer personalized supports, such as counseling, adult mentors, and community organizations offering social services.

Sources: Multiple²⁸

Furthermore, setting goals can help engage students in a virtual format. Educators must balance the need to teach content to those who experienced learning loss this past spring while still challenging those students who excelled in distance or home-based learning. Educators also face the additional challenge of achieving these objectives while likely conducting instruction via an online platform.²⁹ Indeed, the NWEA found that students performed better on MAP assessments when they took ownership of their work by setting goals and creating a personalized learning path (see Figure 9). Goal setting can take place in both physical and virtual environments.³⁰

Figure 9: Five Elements of Goal Setting

 START EARLY	Goal setting should start as early as kindergarten. While students may not be ready to set individual academic goals, teachers can set classroom goals for behavior and skill development.
 DO IT OFTEN	Short-term goals, usually lasting no longer than four to six weeks, enable frequent check-ins with students. Having short-term goals allow for the regular revision of plans based on student progress, preventing students from feeling discouraged.
 MAKE IT VISUAL	Developing a variety of visual tools and artifacts help solidify a goal-setting culture. For example, utilize the SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely) acronym to write an effective goal.
 MAKE IT RELEVANT	Ensure that students' goals align with the learning goals for their grade, development level, and personal development.
 CENTER STUDENT CHOICE	Students maximize their ownership of learning when they feel a sense of agency and choice.

Source: NWEA³¹

Project Evaluation Form

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Endnotes

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