# Back to School

## A Guide for School and District Leaders

Introduction by Dr. Bill Daggett
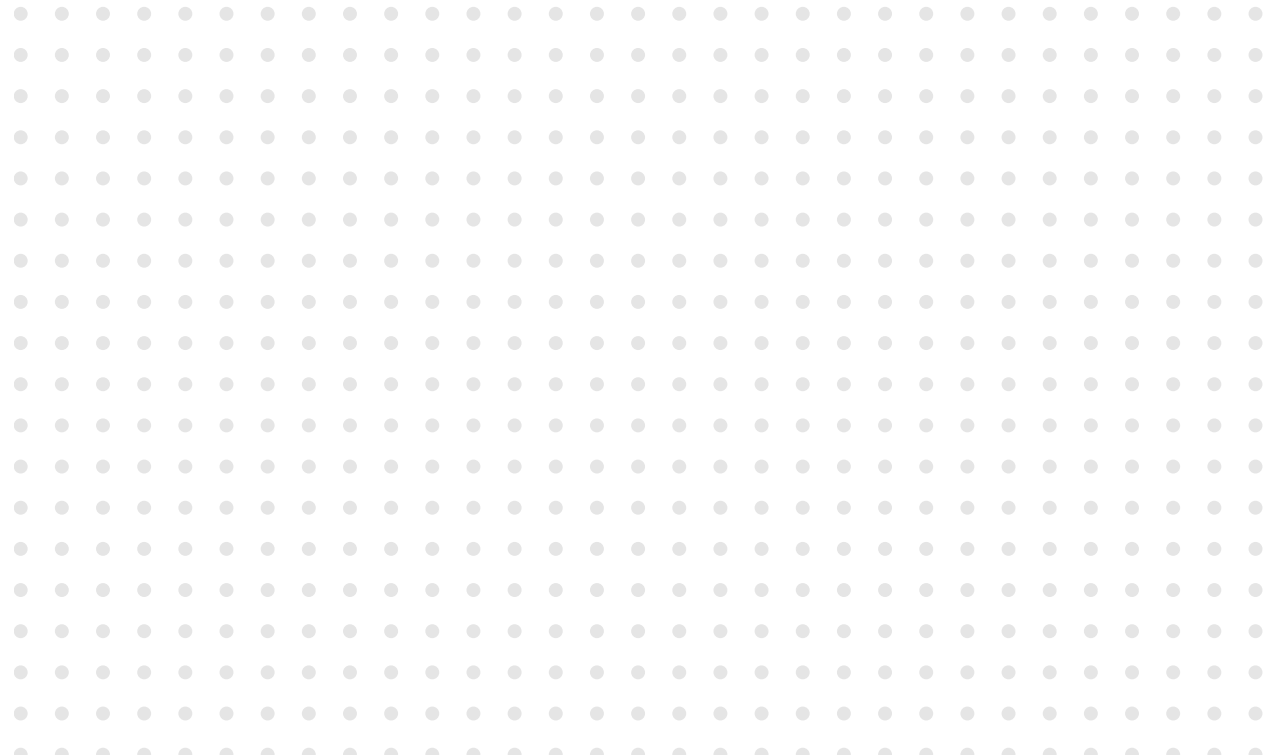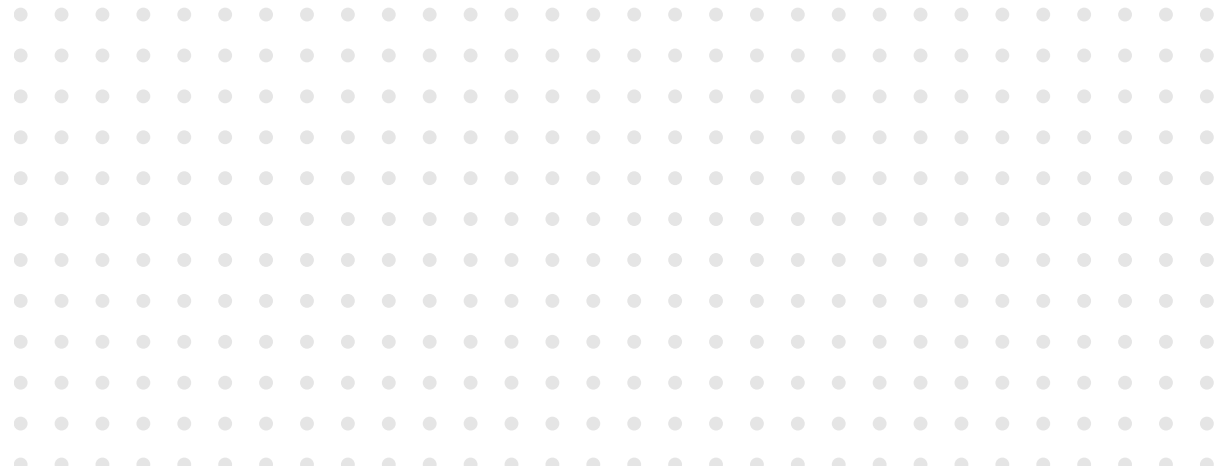
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# Prepare for the Future
## Not a Return to the Past

### A Note from HMH's Dr. Bill Daggett

John Dewey is often quoted as saying, "We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience" (Dewey 1933). With so many new opportunities posed by the unexpected and unparalleled changes in the American educational ecosystem caused by the global pandemic, educational leaders and policy makers have a moral imperative to ask, "What have we learned? What should we continue doing, stop doing, start doing—to ensure that our schools prepare all students for the next decades of work?"

The global pandemic created a cultural tipping point. Forced isolation shined a spotlight on the need to accelerate our quest to improve the skills, knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions that will shape and prepare students for jobs and home and societal responsibilities.

We must shift education to a new norm of a learner-centered rather than school-centered model. There are points of light across the country where learner-centered learning happens, but it is not the norm in every school. With high percentages of children in poverty and large numbers of family members out of work, the needs of children have changed greatly. We as educational leaders and policy makers must recognize that we must all focus on more than academics and test scores. We must ensure that we care for the

> "We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience."
> **John Dewey**

whole child, ensuring that each student is healthy, safe, supported, and taught at levels that stretch their thinking.

To accomplish this, we must nurture a growing awareness among educators, family members, and the general community that the current model of American education was designed for a different purpose at a different time in our history. Despite the hard work of educators, the one-to-many approach of teaching is increasingly failing to serve children, especially the most vulnerable, including many children of color and students at an economic disadvantage. We need to transform education to a learner-centric model that meets the needs of every student by harnessing the potential of digital learning to extend learning beyond the classroom and create the capacity to adapt rapidly to advances in technology.

To initiate the transformation, educators should seize this opportunity to reconceptualize the American educational system so that we capitalize on what we have learned from being plunged unexpectedly into remote digital learning at scale. Students will need to demonstrate mastery of skills, knowledge, and behaviors required for success in jobs and in society. Graduates will need more than a broad range of vague concepts. A clear, unified vision is needed from which specific programs and instructional practices can be re-created to transform an outdated educational system.

The pandemic caused us all to acknowledge that wide-scale transformation of the education system—from boardroom to classroom—is necessary. School leaders and thought leaders must create a unified vision for our nation's children that is worth fighting for. That vision should not involve a return to our overly stressed and eroding system. Now is the time to look to the future and capitalize upon this opportunity to transform education.

**Dr. Bill Daggett**
Founder, International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE)

# Using Lessons Learned to Transform Education

By Eric Sheninger

There was no shortage of challenges that were leveled on schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. As educators grappled with these challenges, pivotal lessons materialized that can pave the way for needed change. Each can play a part in laying a foundation to improve school culture now and in the future. One thing is crystal clear: education can ill afford to revert to the way things were done in many districts and schools. If the pandemic taught us one major lesson, it's that the system has not worked for many learners. The time is now to seize on the opportunity to do something about it while it is fresh on everyone's minds.

What follows are some topics where vital lessons have been learned. Even though some were prevalent prior to the pandemic, there should be a renewed sense of urgency to right the ship prior to the start of a new school year.

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# Equity

The lesson here is that many learners have suffered from inequity because of socioeconomic status, inefficient resources, or insufficient pedagogy. If all kids are doing the same thing, at the same time, in the same way, and in the same place, a red flag should be raised. Equity is about providing learners what they need when and where they need it. A move to real personalized learning at scale is the most logical step. At the same time, the digital divide has to be tackled where all learners have equitable access to a device, reliable Wi-Fi®, and quality resources.
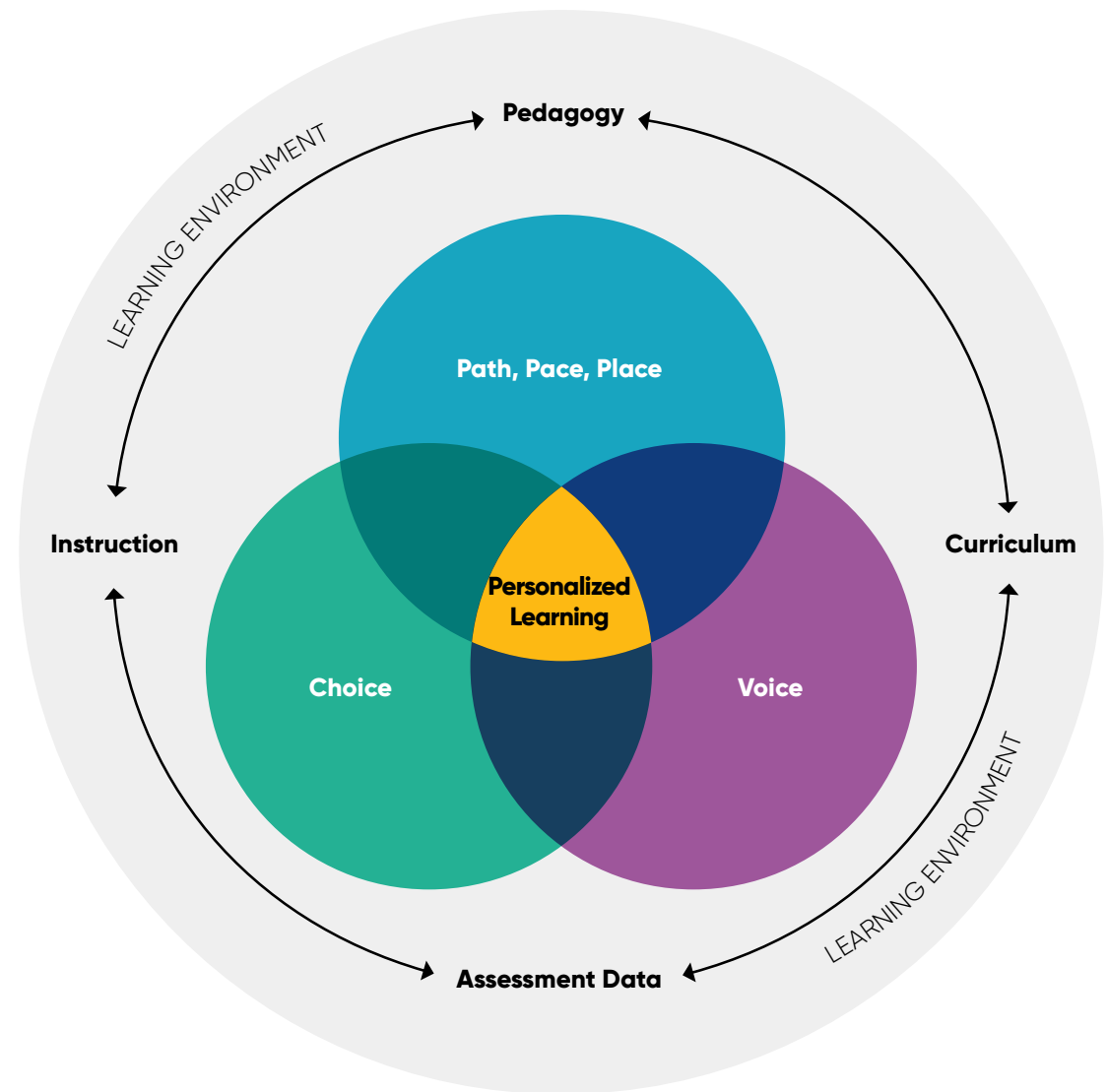
## Infrastructure

Health and safety were and continue to be of utmost concern right now. Long-term planning should commence to install or upgrade air filtration systems and make hand sanitizer stations permanent. New classroom furniture that is flexible should be considered so that it can be arranged in ways to support collaboration and blended pedagogies that were implemented remotely. As many schools decided to purchase devices for students as a means to ensure equity during remote and hybrid learning, investments will likely need to be made to boost Wi-Fi throughout buildings.

## Social Interaction

Social distancing and remote learning shined a light on the importance of interaction. It is the foundation on which relationships are built and sustained. A lesson learned is how critical it is to develop virtual experiences that incorporate discourse and collaboration. We must also look for opportunities to increase human interaction in both face-to-face and virtual settings.

## Use of Time

One of the biggest challenges for educators during the pandemic was time, especially when it came to implementing a hybrid model. A lesson learned through this ordeal as we advance is to rethink how time is used in the classroom and pursue innovative ways to give educators more of it during the workday. Both pathways require taking a critical lens to current practice and reflecting on potential improvements. It is also vital to think about moving from traditional requirements such as the school calendar, seat time, and Carnegie Units (first rolled out in 1906, by the way) to competency models.

"A lesson learned through this ordeal as we advance is to rethink how time is used in the classroom and pursue innovative ways to give educators more of it during the workday."

# Transforming Teaching

| Traditional Approach **LOW AGENCY** | | Transformed Approach **HIGH AGENCY** |
|---|---|---|
| Deliver instruction | | Facilitate instruction |
| Teacher-centered | | Student-centered |
| Classroom learning | | Learning anytime/anywhere |
| Standardized approach | → | Personalized, differentiated |
| Learn to do | | Do to learn |
| Content focused | | Application focused |
| Looking for the right answer | | Develop thinking |
| Teaching segmented curriculum | | Integrating curriculum |
| Passive consumption | | Active learning opportunities |

## That's the Way We've Always Done It (TTWWADI)

Everyone was presented with a clean slate. In the midst of an unprecedented period in education, the pursuit of innovative practices that break from the mold of what has always been done should be the imperative. Now, this is not to say that some "traditional" methods won't still have value. It is up to each school system to determine what should be continued, which particular practices need to be shelved, and which areas of focus will benefit all learners. This includes digital pedagogy with purposeful use, a move to personalized learning through blended strategies, use of data to differentiate, innovative assessment, and performance tasks. The big shift overall is to make a move from low- to high-agency methodologies.
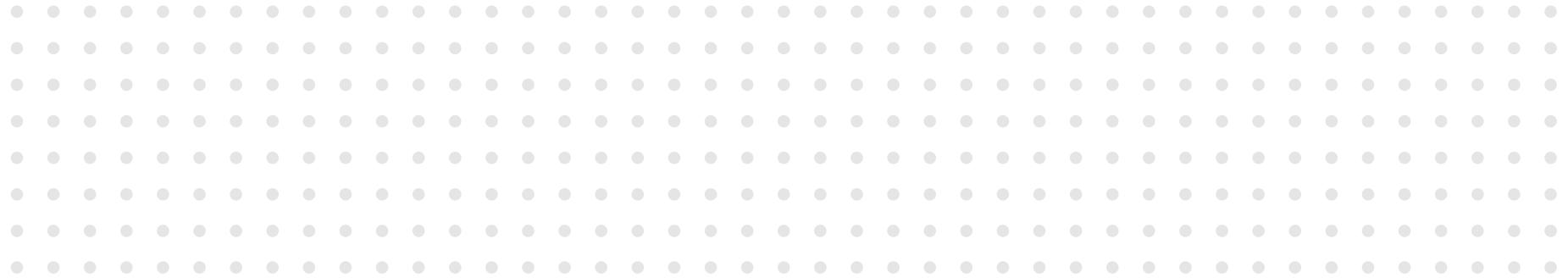
## Importance of a Learning Management System (LMS)

Before the pandemic, many districts had an LMS (for example, Canvas®, Schoology®, or Google Classroom), but its uses varied greatly. Many have realized how vital they were to continuity in learning, whether it was remote or hybrid. The key is to continue to ensure systemic K–12 use to support pedagogically-sound blended learning, self-paced activities, and the continuation of quality learning during extended school closures. It can also set the stage to the creation of a viable virtual learning option for students who prefer this model.

## Improved Professional Learning

If there were ever a time to transform professional learning, it is now. The majority of educators will agree that one and done, as well as drive-by days or events, don't lead to meaningful changes to practice at scale. One important lesson learned is the shift to job-embedded and on-going experiences. Another critical change is how professional learning is structured, along with which areas to focus on. There is a need to create conditions that are reflective of the environments teachers and administrators work in currently. This should then be connected to relevant ideas and strategies that can be implemented in a practical way. The International Center for Leadership in Education® (ICLE) partners with schools and districts across the world to facilitate research and evidence-based professional learning in all the areas emphasized in this chapter.

## SEL and Our Own Well-Being

Social and emotional learning was a hot topic prior to the pandemic. It is even more imperative now as family members have become sick or lost their jobs, learners are still reeling from social isolation, and everyone is spending a great deal of time on technology. We might not know for years, or ever, the full impact all of this has had on learners, which is why a proactive approach is needed that focuses on SEL competencies. Professional learning can fill this void. We can't forget about the adults and what they are currently dealing with, especially teachers and the time being put in to implement and manage hybrid learning. Although not directly tied to pedagogy, consistent efforts need to be made in the areas of mindfulness and health for all. Now is the time to think not just about where you are, but also where you—and your learners—need you to be. The lessons learned today will help build a path to a brighter future.

"Consistent efforts need to be made in the areas of mindfulness and health for all."

# 6 Research-Backed Ways to Close the COVID Learning Gap

By Francie Alexander

This past school year has been an unprecedented testament to student resilience and teacher creativity. And there's much to consider as education leaders plan now for the 2021–22 school year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continually revises its guidelines for schools. Vaccine trials for children and youth are now underway. These are just a few examples on a long list of social, academic, public health, and financial variables impacting instruction in the next school year. Through it all, educators have demonstrated their dedication to students while working within a continuous improvement framework to provide a path forward.

Students are now attending school in a variety of in-person, hybrid, and remote formats. Drawing on the evidence from the past year, educators have learned a lot about what works and what doesn't.

## Strategies to Address Interrupted Learning

These six strategies for administrators will support efforts to improve student outcomes—academically and socially—and help address the issue of interrupted schooling.

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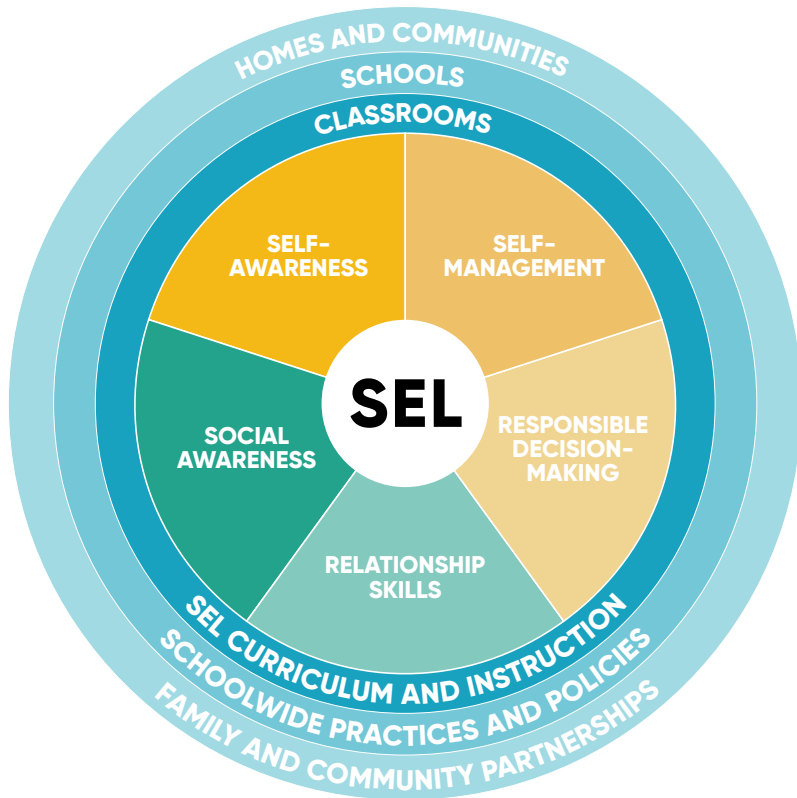
© CASEL, 2017

## 1. Prioritize Social and Emotional Learning and Mental Health

The pandemic has been an event that everyone, everywhere, experienced. For many, it was a time of loss and tragedy. All that's happened will influence today's youth throughout their lives.

Educators had already expressed an elevated sense of urgency about social and emotional learning (SEL) issues. For the last two years, HMH's Educator Confidence Report—published in collaboration with YouGov®— has identified SEL as the top concern among educators. Recent events have only heightened this concern, raising concerns about the mental health of children and adolescents (Howley 2021).

Most districts now have robust plans in place but feel constrained by not having the counseling and other resources needed to support students and families. Research makes clear that students perform better academically when their social and emotional needs are met, and this happens when we integrate SEL into all aspects of schooling (CASEL 2021).

This is not just critical to student success and happiness but also to the well-being of families and adults in the education system. In a recently updated survey by HMH® and Kelton International, a top concern among educators is the use of time, and juggling new initiatives in a new environment has been challenging. Student behavior and difficult conversations were replaced on the list by issues such as isolation and loneliness. Teachers also reported showing themselves and their colleagues more patience and empathy.

## 2. Focus on Equity

Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple®, when writing about the urgency of racial justice, identifies education as the "essential place to focus [our] work" (2021). Schools have responded by bolstering their culturally responsive teaching and ensuring that children are not only physically safe but also socially safe. This means schools are places where racism isn't tolerated and where youth experience a sense of belonging. This means children and youth feel seen, respected, and valued.

**Equity is most often defined as each student getting what they need to succeed in school and life.** For educators, equity is the lens for making all decisions about professional development and instructional resources (including assessments) and setting up the physical environment for both in-person and remote instruction. The latter is an area where disparities have been well-documented and a major focus during COVID.

Our commitment to equity is demonstrated by using language to better focus on student strengths as well as what they need. This asset-based approach is also more semantically precise. During these perilous times, our renewed commitment to equity is a cause for optimism. Working together, we will improve schooling so that it's fairer and safer.

## 3. Make Personalization Possible

One major change coming out of the pandemic—and a positive one, at that—is that most schools across the nation have attained a one-to-one student-to-device ratio. We shouldn't overlook the fact that there are still districts where students are underserved when it comes to devices or connectivity. But we're closer to being able to personalize education for all students more than ever before.

Personalized or tailored learning is an approach that adapts learning experiences to a student's strengths and areas of improvement. A student's interests are also taken into consideration. This leads to the delivery of learning experiences that provide tailored content, pacing, and preferences.

Learning technology can help you pursue a high degree of personalization. Easy-to-administer formative assessments help teachers understand where a student is academically. Teachers get the information they need to group students for both direct instruction and tutoring. Teachers can then maximize the effectiveness of individual practice, and digital tools can provide support. This approach will address interrupted schooling for students who now need accelerated intervention as well as students who are ready to take on more advanced work.

I intentionally mentioned how personalized learning informs grouping because sometimes the term evokes a mental model of all students working on their own. But there are ways to personalize learning with students in small groups and even with the whole class.

## 4. Leverage Digital Tools

Technology can enable teachers to do what they do best, starting with building trusting relationships with their students. An impediment to this—as reported in the HMH/Kelton study—is time. Technology can help you get more done.

What would teachers do if they had more time? They would offer more support to the students who need it most. When the potential of educational technology is fully realized, teachers will have more time to provide targeted instruction, elaborate when needed, and conduct collaborative conversations. They would also focus more on academic and equity issues, including how learning disruptions are handled, and lessen the potential for burnout while maximizing their time with students.

Overall, tools can support teachers in four main areas, as identified in the HMH/Kelton study:

1. Workflow
2. Social Interaction
3. Data Usage
4. Instruction

## Time in the Classroom

### 2018

- Time was a daily struggle.
- Grading, lesson planning, and talking to parents took time.
- Teachers were positive about the potential of technology saving time.

### 2021

- Time was saved on grading and organizing.
- Time was expended on setting up for virtual learning.
- Once a digital environment is set, optimism remains about saving time.

## 5. Deepen the Family Connection

It's widely agreed upon that the experiences of the past school year have permanently altered educators' relationships with families. Generally, families came to school for special events like Back-to-School Night, sports events, arts showcases, and parent-teacher conferences. Even before COVID, there were disparities when it came to which parents or caregivers could attend due to work, childcare, and other commitments. At the beginning of the pandemic, school took place in their homes every day, and even as the school year ended, many students continued to participate in schooling, at least some of the time, away from school.

> "New protocols are being established for proctoring tests remotely and involving families in learning activities."

Family members are more aware of what their children are doing, including when it comes to learning. New protocols are being established for proctoring tests remotely and involving families in learning activities. There will continue to be interruptions in learning beyond the pandemic—and it's already being proclaimed in some places that there will be no more snow days. No longer do parents or caregivers have to wait for twice-a-year conferences to check on progress. We're at a time when deepening your relationships with families is not only key, but can be ongoing.

I spoke with one teacher about her Back-to-School Night last year versus this fall. It was a virtual event in 2020, and for those families who couldn't attend live, there was a recording they could view when they had the time. She's looking forward to having families back in her classroom but will record the event for those who can't make it. This is one way she is applying what she has learned in the pandemic about working with families, which will benefit all students.
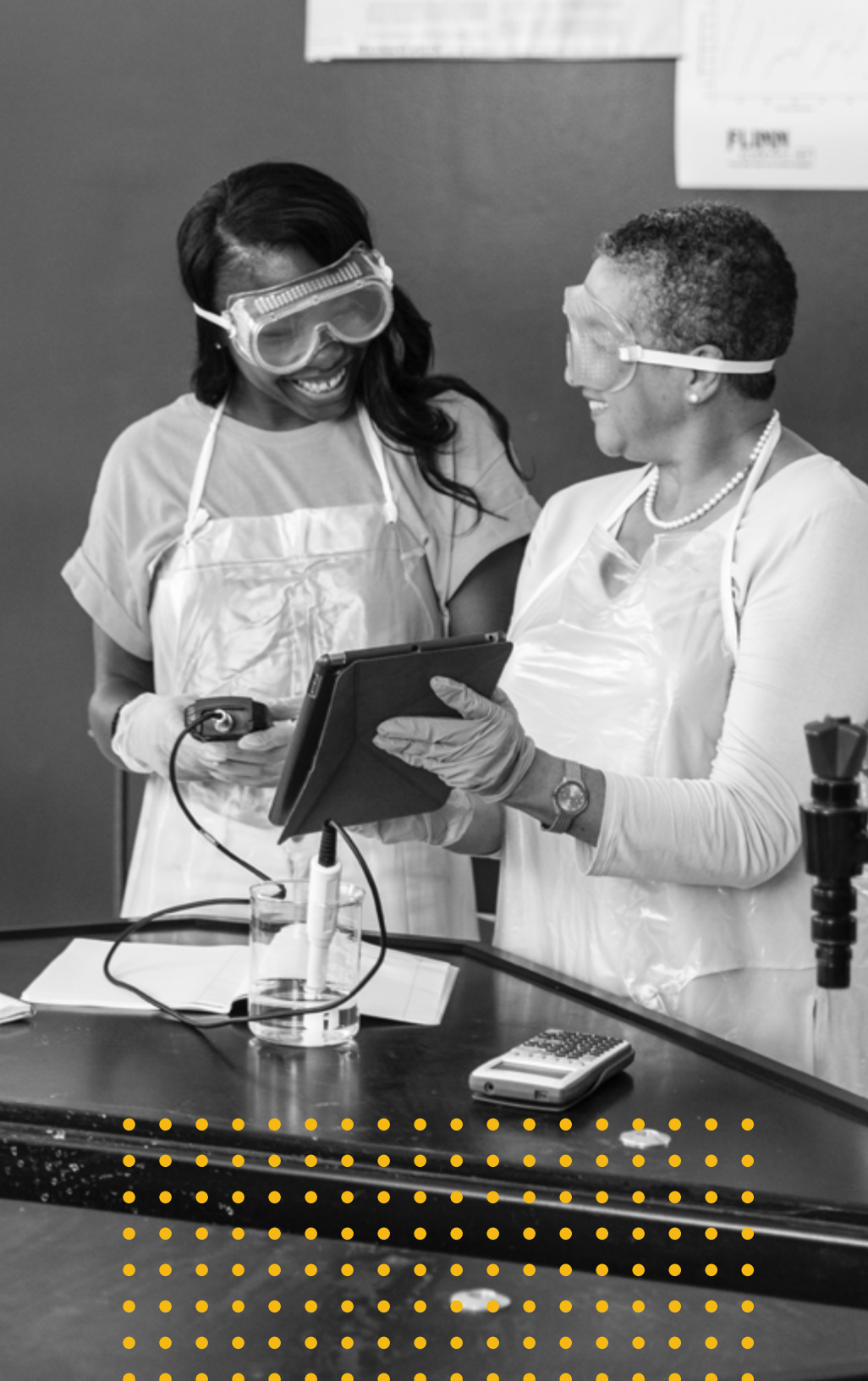
## 6. Lead by Mentoring

For educators, empathy seems to be a starting place for all interactions. Right now, teachers are less concerned about performance on tests and more concerned about **the emotional well-being of their students and the communities they serve**. Leaders and experienced teachers, like the rest of the world, are seeing the results of more automation. This gives teachers space to focus on more challenging tasks and personal relationships.

Those who research the future of work predict that leadership skills will be expressed more through mentoring than managing—that is, focusing more on development and less on performance or completion of tasks. Research shows collaborative learning produces positive student outcomes, and positive results are achieved when everyone in the system works together.

After one year of school interruptions, there continues to be a long list of unknowns against a backdrop of a worldwide pandemic. However, educators have demonstrated the will and skill to keep what's working and create new ways of learning, doing, and being for our children and youth.

# A School Leader's Influence on Successful SEL

By Venola Mason

As I write this, we are still living amid the pandemic. People continue to get infected, and many are still dying. Yet with vaccine rollout underway nationally, and with the weight of 2020 behind us, it feels possible that we just may be turning a corner to a less fraught and more familiar reality—in our homes, classrooms, and communities. And as we do turn the corner and approach a new school year this fall with renewed hope and optimism, we must carry forward the lessons learned during this crisis, specifically around serving the needs of the *whole child*.

Writing a piece about the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) right now feels like writing about the importance of having vaccines for COVID-19—isn't it obvious? But the truth is that for many of us, 2020 was an abrupt reawakening around the deep role that school plays in the lives of our kids. Day upon day during the pandemic we continually, persistently put our students'—and our own—most basic human needs on the front burner while relegating state standards, testing, and grading to the back.

"As we do turn the corner and approach a new school year this fall with renewed hopeand optimism, we must carry forward the lessons learned during this crisis."

We've witnessed firsthand the value of positive relationships and ensuring student well-being, and while we know intuitively that these create the conditions for a child's ability to learn, it's important to also reflect on what the underline research tells us underline about the link between social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning, and why SEL is necessary for effective whole-child development (The Aspen Institute 2018). And to be clear, while the COVID-19 pandemic put the need for SEL in stark relief and catalyzed us into a crisis response, the demand to prioritize SEL will remain a strong constant even as we enter a post-pandemic world.

The supporting literature on social and emotional learning is expanding fast, and it is with tremendous gratitude that I witness the research grow and see districts and schools responding in order to align to the recommendations put forth. But the volume of SEL literature can also be overwhelming for leaders looking for a natural entry point: **What framework do I choose? Do I purchase an SEL curriculum? What SEL variables should I be tracking? How do I know what's working?**

All good and reasonable questions—and there are many more—and so without going deeper down the rabbit hole here, I would like to leave leaders with a few core elements to successful SEL practices that they can heavily influence—directly, immediately, and continually.

## 1. Walk the Walk

School leaders help set the tone, shape the culture, and create an environment where adults and students alike feel safe, welcome, and empowered to grow. By embodying and modeling underline caring, respectful behavior, leaders exert a tremendous influence on the ability of social and emotional learning practices to see success in classrooms and beyond (Mahfouz, Greenberg, and Rodriguez 2019). Remember that SEL encompasses adults, too, and that ensuring that teachers and other school staff are listened to, supported, and cared for allows for a solid culture built on strong relationships to flourish and for all adults in the school to have the capacity to be their best.

## 2. Empower All Staff

SEL isn't just about hugs and high-fives (but these are great). There are research-based strategies that can and should be integrated into daily lessons and other school activities that we can't expect all teachers and staff to have in their existing playbooks. Ongoing professional learning opportunities, including regular one-on-one coaching, will ensure that all adults in the building(s) can understand why SEL is important, review the supporting research, know how it affects them and their role, and buy into the related efforts meant to ensure success for the students they serve. Professional development should be customized based on the role of the person implementing the plan and should include a space for the adults to build their own SEL skills.

## 3. Rely on Data

Data-driven decision making is crucial for leaders in so many ways, across both organizational and instructional leadership dimensions, and approaching SEL in a like manner is no exception. School leaders must review current data to determine the stress points on the community, looking at not only student behavior and engagement with instruction, but also the usage levels of mental health supports and any downward shifts in the local economy. Allowing this information to guide strategic planning will ensure that supports will land where they are needed the most. You don't need to do this alone! Rely on professional learning support to explore what data points are available and how you can use them to best serve your students.

I feel that **a silver lining in our having lived through the pandemic is that we are provided with a new awareness, openness, and sense of urgency in addressing the needs of our students**—socially, emotionally, and cognitively. Recognizing that SEL is fundamental to learning and academic success, and not a nice-to-have add-on, is a necessary part in achieving our ultimate goal of realizing whole child growth. By starting with the core elements outlined above and having these be the bedrock of whatever direction your SEL activities take, education leaders will have a solid foundation at all times through their SEL journey.

# Tips for Greater Family Engagement

By Dr. Adam Drummond

While driving we use mirrors to help us see where we were and what's coming. The mirrors give us time to monitor and adjust in the flow of traffic.

As educational leaders we have just passed one of the most challenging times in educational history. The new year is before us, and we need to use our metaphorical mirrors to examine what we just left and what might be coming next. We must use our past experiences and what we see coming our way to expertly plan for the next year.

But we also should note who is in our educational car on this journey. We have teachers, students, families, and the larger community that are depending on us to provide a safe and expertly driven school year. They count on us to build an educational community that is built upon trust, consistency, and ingenuity. We can't shift in reverse and deliver the same education we had pre-pandemic. We must innovate.

As an active social media consumer and educational consultant, I have witnessed incredible shifts in education across the country. A global pandemic has required educators to shift to new policies, procedures, and practices for remote, hybrid, and face-to-face learning. We have been tested on building a positive school culture, creating masterful instructional planning, developing great learner engagement, and integrating the community— including families—into our classrooms and schools.

We know this still to be true: the success of any student is a partnership among the student, educators, and family members. Now more than ever, the ways in which we connect with parents or caregivers to build that successful partnership is vital. As we move into the 2021–22 school year, let's commit to maintaining positive and open lines of communication. To make that commitment a reality, considering the following tips.

"We can't shift in reverse and deliver the same education we had last year or pre-pandemic. We must innovate."

# Tips for School Leaders

As a K–12 administrator, consider the following actions when it comes to interacting with students' families.

## 1. Conduct Focus Groups

Communicate directly with families and students to inquire about their experiences with remote or hybrid learning and how those experiences can enhance our work this year. Perception is reality, and there's no better way to gain perspective than by asking the folks involved. Based on your focus groups' feedback, create a list of positives (what to keep) and a list of opportunities (ways to improve). Share the findings with your teachers and family members. Let the families know you are listening by including their feedback in the adjustments you make for this year.

## 2. Host Live Weekly Updates

Your typical channels of communication have evolved in the last year. Weekly newsletters that went home, take-home folders for students with information, and meetings are no longer the only options we have. An important tool is social media. Host live weekly updates that families can view in a matter of minutes. Keep the update brief—most people don't like watching long videos. Less is more. Have one or two topics that you want to make your families aware of—perhaps the importance of a routine at home or maybe how to check students' progress on assignments.

Offer these videos live and also record and post the videos for families to view later. They become great resources to share both in the moment and in the days to come.

## 3. Start Family Intervention Early

One of the challenges we heard from last school year is the number of students who were not consistently engaged in learning with their home or hybrid environment. At this point in the year, educators are overwhelmed and frustrated. We have a new opportunity to start fresh with each family as the 2021–22 year unfolds.

We need to ensure we have the proper support in place to intervene early and often with families. As the new year starts, provide a list of expectations where family members discuss their role in the learning process. We also need to be engaged early. If a student misses a day, we should reach out by telephone and find out why. This begins to create the expectation that we are serious when it comes to learning. We have to be mindful that this may be laborious in the beginning. But we are setting the expectation that we want learning to happen for all students.

## 4. Invest in a One-Stop Shop

From the family lens, I hear frustrations that students are having to use many different systems for their learning. They are jumping between platforms, LMSes, and educational apps. This becomes hard for parents or caregivers who are not educators to navigate, and often, it becomes challenging to understand the objective of each app or platform. As an administrator, consider investing in one easy-to-use platform that all students in Grades K–12 can access away from school. Families then need to learn just one system to navigate as they start the year.

# Tips for Teachers

Of course, we as leaders cannot do this alone. It takes a team to ensure success. Teachers already have their plates full, but there are a few quick actions for teachers to consider.

## 1. Communicate Absences

If teachers can make the first calls to families when students are absent, it can go a long way. Speaking with the child and family member on the phone (not over email) can have an impact. Then, communicating to administrators when multiple absences occur is critical. Don't wait until it's too late.

## 2. Amplify Outreach Tactics

Your school may be taking several steps to connect with families. Teachers can amplify the work that is already being done—you don't need to create everything from scratch. For example, if your principal is recording weekly videos with school updates, take the time to send them out to students' families. Read the results of focus group data that has been collected and determine what you can tell families about how you are using that information to enhance the learning experience.

## 3. Celebrate the Small Wins

Take time to celebrate the good that happens. If you have perfect attendance one day in class or all students complete an assignment on time, make sure the students know it's important. Don't celebrate for the sake of celebrating—tell them the why!

There are many other great suggestions for connecting with families that can be found within your own professional learning network. Find what works for your community, build the plan, execute the steps of the plan, reflect on the impact, refine, and do it again! **Remember, learning is a marathon and not a sprint.**

We have the unique opportunity to impact three generations—the students, their families, and the students' future children. Make the most of your time with your students' families. The year is long, but the days are quick. It's a new year to make memories with your students and families. Buckle up and adjust your rearview mirrors so you can truly be the change you wish to see in your school. I believe in you.

# Assessment in K–12 Schools This Fall:
# What Education Leaders Should Expect

By Dr. Vytas Laitusis and Dr. Johnny Denbleyker

It's difficult to talk about the state of assessment for back-to-school season 2021 when the current picture of the next school year still seems so unclear. Although states were given waivers for their assessment requirements in spring 2020, the U.S. Department of Education is calling for state testing to resume in spring 2021 (Camera 2021). To respond to the current challenges states now face, the federal government is allowing for greater flexibility in how and when testing takes place.

The absence of testing last spring—and the specter of a perilous testing season in spring 2021—has left many educators wondering about how to address gaps in their understanding of student progress. The challenge is understanding the role of and need for formal testing and what those assessment systems should look like come this fall.

When the school year resumes, regardless of where we are, the disruptions of the past year will continue to impact instruction in different ways. How each state implements its testing this spring will also have implications for this fall when it comes to assessment and making instructional decisions. Given this uncertainty, there are several considerations for school administrators to think about at this time. Here is a set of key questions administrators should ask as they begin their preparations.

> "When the school year resumes this fall . . . the disruptions of the past year will continue to impact instruction in different ways."

## How will we assess eligibility for special programs?

With the possibility of modified testing conditions and the potential for significant numbers of missing students this spring, districts that usually use state assessment data to determine eligibility for special programs, such as intervention, may need to instead rely on alternative sources—for instance, teacher recommendations, course grades, and locally-administered interim benchmark assessments like *HMH Growth Measure* with *Waggle*®.

## How will programs that relied on student performance data be evaluated?

Similar to questions of eligibility, users of existing educational programs, tools, or curricula such as *Read 180*® or *HMH Into Reading*®, who would previously rely strictly on state assessment data to gauge efficacy, may need to identify additional key performance indicators. These include but are not limited to grades, interim assessments, social and emotional learning (SEL) constructs, and attendance. The specific indicators chosen may vary from district to district. But regardless, they should be measurable, meaningful, and valid for the intended outcomes of the program.
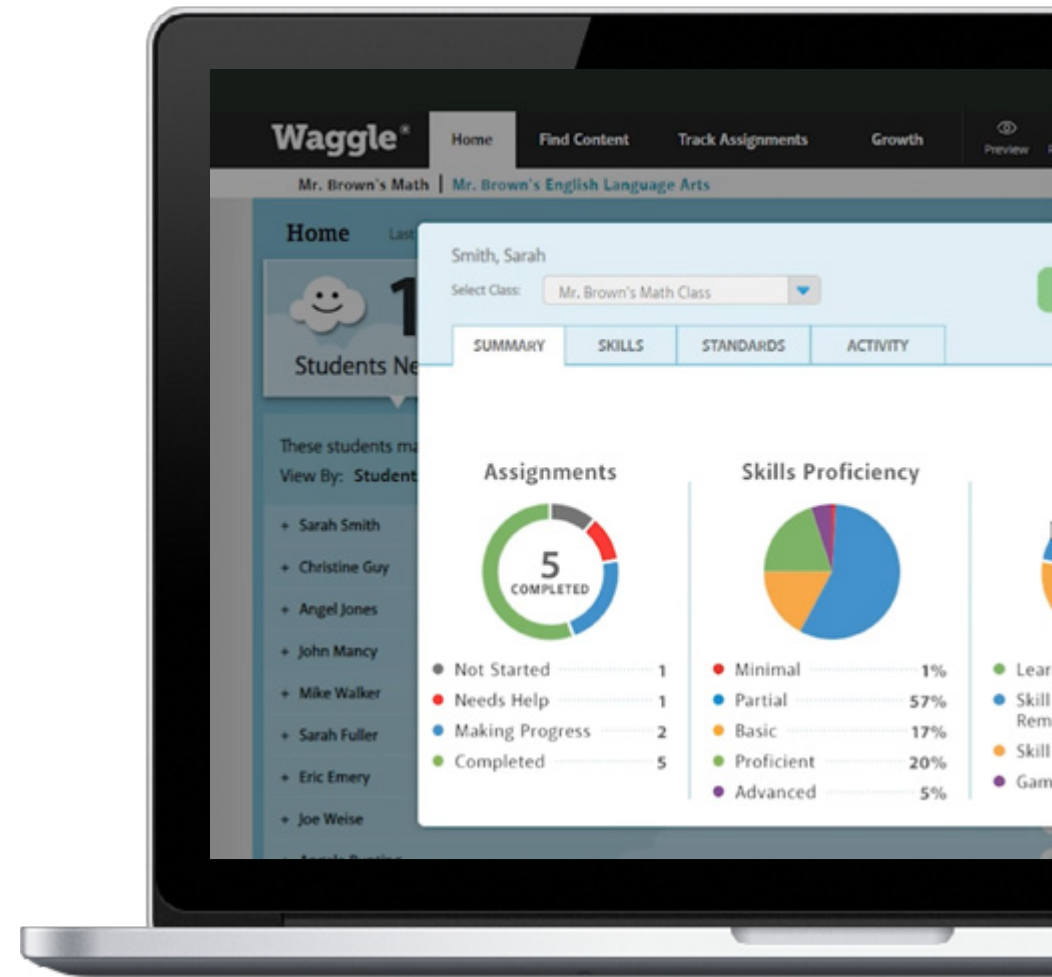
## How will researchers conduct studies to evaluate the impact of COVID-19?

The true impact of COVID-19 has yet to be fully realized. Although there have been some attempts to quantify the effects on student learning, **there's still a lot we don't know.** Early evidence points to students who are traditionally at risk feeling the greatest negative effects. Unfortunately, it's still unclear how much ground they are losing because they disproportionately make up the volume of students who aren't taking assessments. We need to understand where students are in their educational achievement to recognize the impacts of COVID and identify solutions.

## How will a lack of test scores from the current and previous school year affect growth model calculations this fall?

Testing in spring 2021 will provide some vital information for educators, but addressing the loss of a single year is still not without its challenges. Some growth models, such as the popular Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs), will be better equipped to estimate growth even without a prior spring test score. However, even in the best of circumstances, the missing test score from the prior year can wreak havoc on the estimation of student growth.

Damian Betebenner and Adam Van Iwaarden, co-authors of the SGP package, discussed a number of considerations for educators to measure student growth post-COVID (2020). Importantly, when it comes to educational equity, measuring growth can help in identifying the impacts of COVID on student learning and ultimately narrow the widening achievement gap. Measuring growth is what interim benchmark assessments tend to excel at, given that these assessments are administered multiple times during the school year.
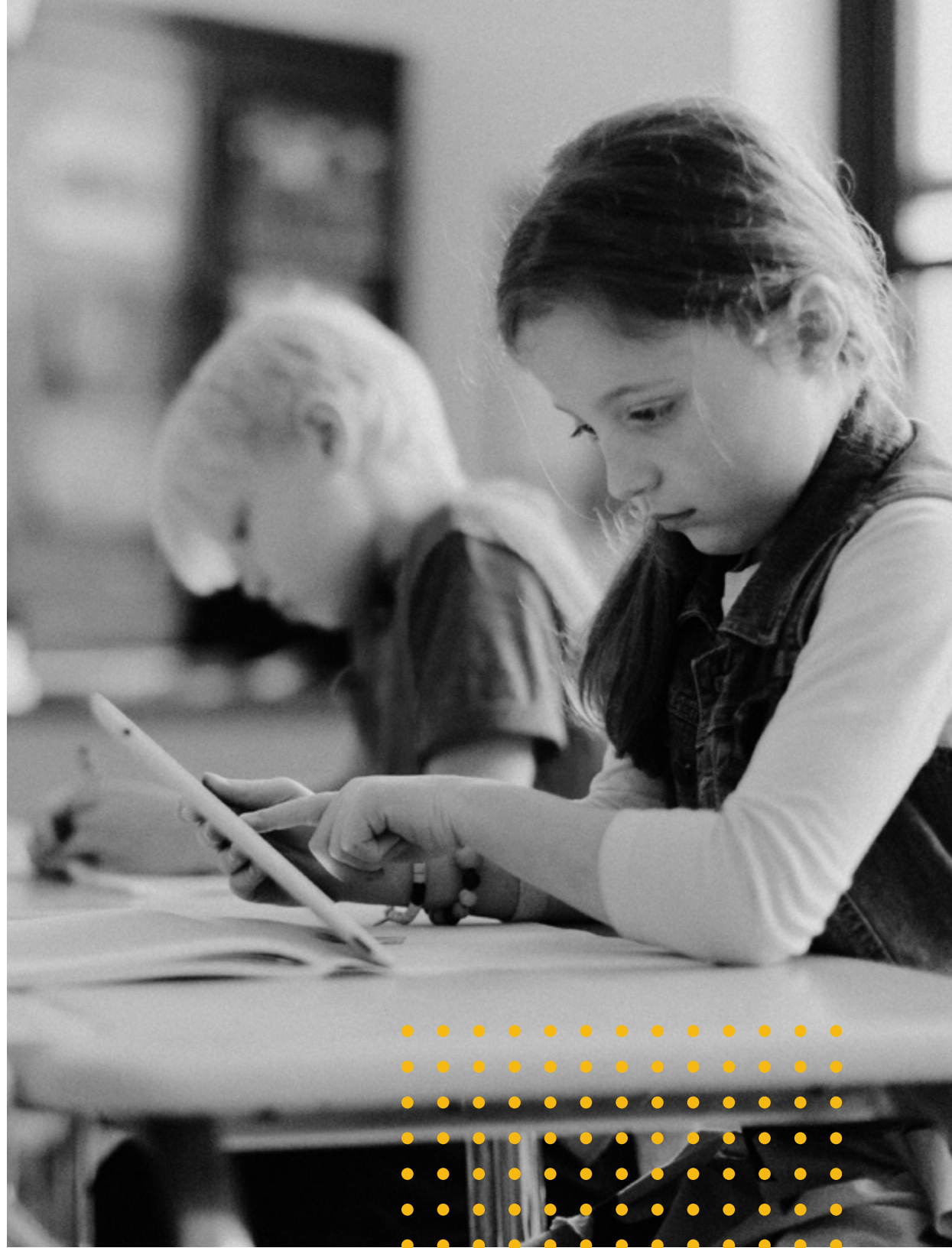
## How will multi-year growth models account for a missing year of data?

A strength of a consistent yearly assessment model is the ability to compare student performance from the previous year with the current year to gauge whether schools and districts achieved their stated goals or at least moved in the right direction. When there exist multiple years of longitudinal data, the model becomes even stronger and more useful to evaluate growth and gap trends.

When a single year is missing from this trend data, there are methodologies that exist to provide estimates via statistical modeling. However, when there are multiple years of missing data, which could be the case if the state testing results are not comparable to previous years, continuing to evaluate these trends becomes much more challenging.



Assessment Score

2017    2018    2019    2020    2021
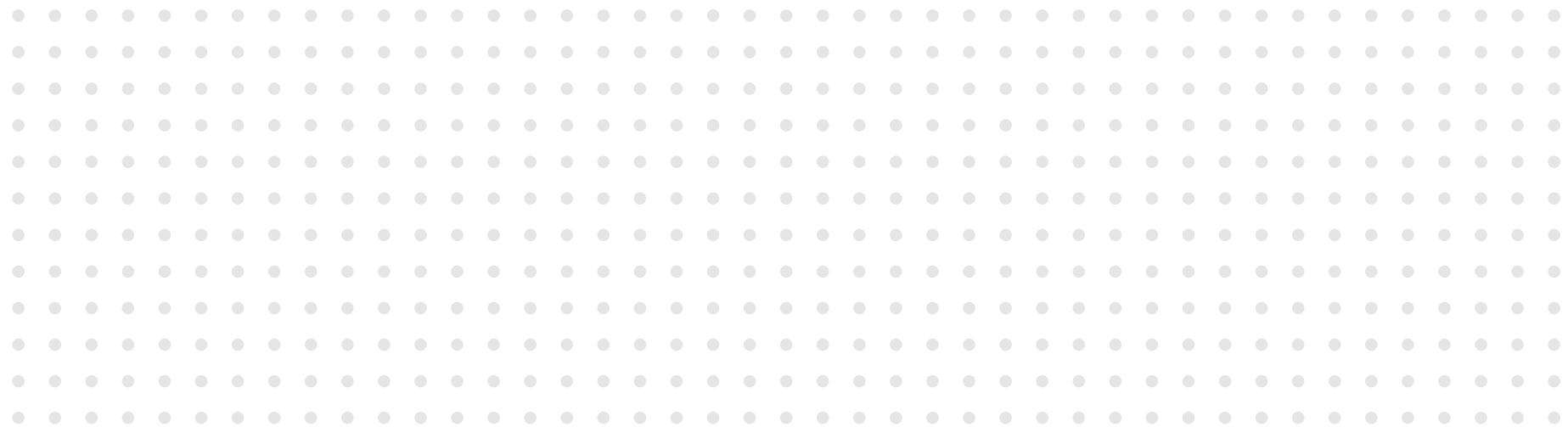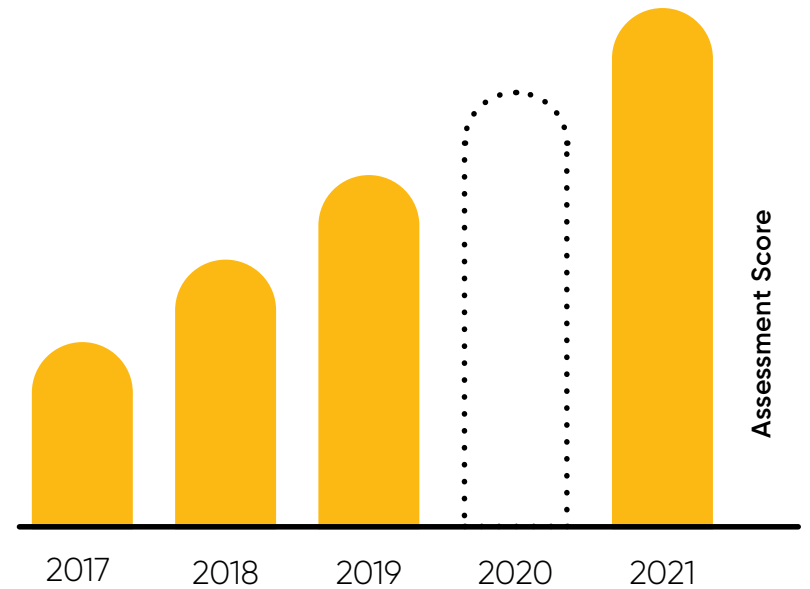
## What alternative testing formats can educators use to offset the lack of state accountability testing?

District leaders regularly turn to state tests as a critical, though flawed, way to understand their schools' strengths and weaknesses. But for the first time in many years, state summative assessment data was unavailable or—at best—unreliable. Districts turned to interim benchmark assessments for the data they needed to help inform their decision making. Interim benchmark assessments, such as the newly developed _HMH Growth Measure,_ have been in the market for some time. They can provide achievement data for multiple points throughout the year, which allows schools and districts to not only track year-to-year gains, but more importantly, track gains within the school year.
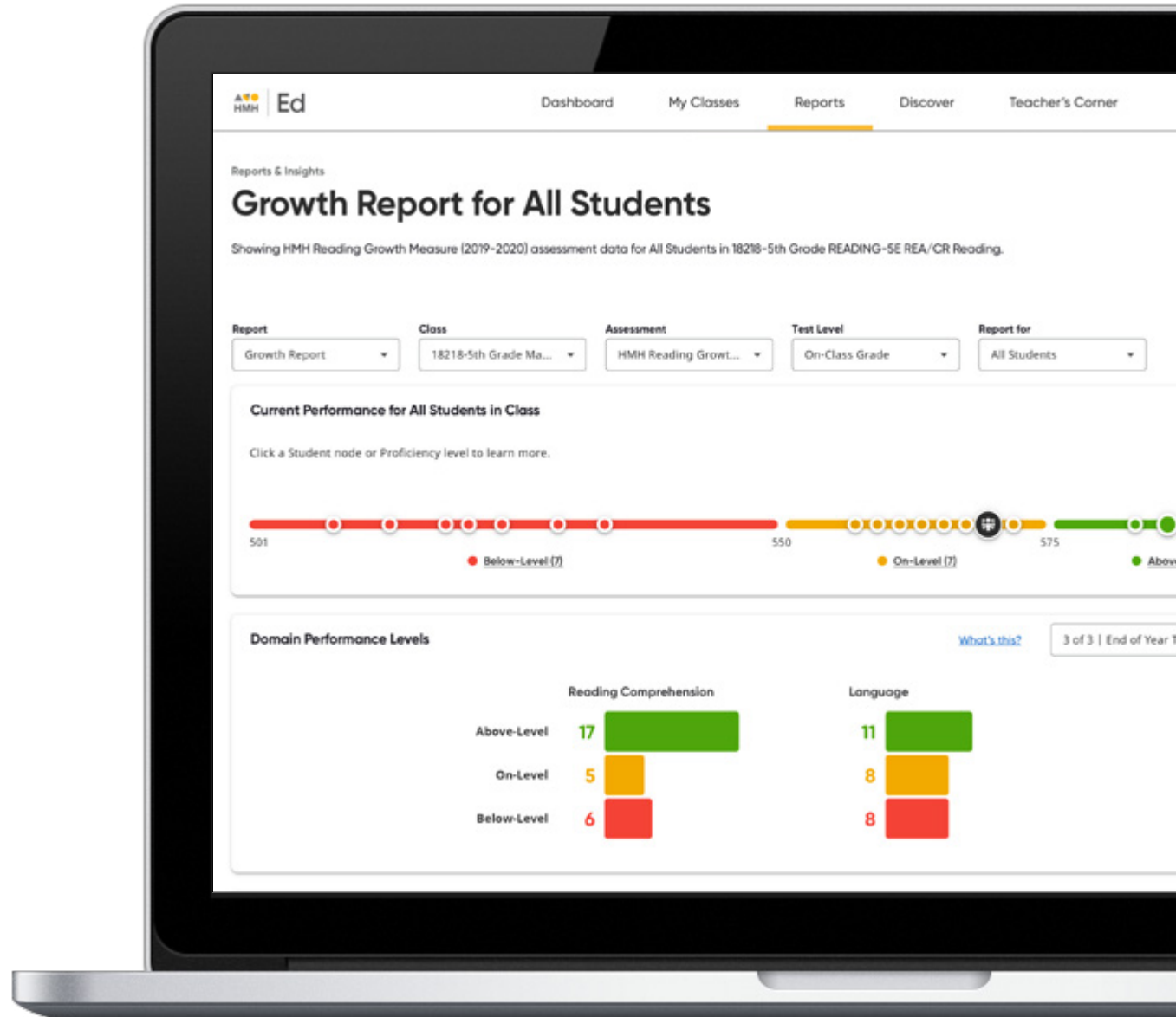
Despite their flexibility, these assessments are limited when it comes to the rigor and accuracy of their results, and state assessments offer certain advantages. State assessments focus on an individual state's content instructional standards, whereas most of the popular interim benchmark assessments only have some varying degree of content standard coverage. State assessments also tend to have more comprehensive testing accommodations available for students.

However, interim benchmark assessments have their advantages as well. Due to their adaptive configurations, they are capable of tailoring to any given state's specific standards. If this alignment is conducted with a large degree of specificity, this can improve the assessment results' validity. **These assessments can also give back instructional time to teachers**. Although they are typically administered up to three times within a school year, they generally interfere less with classroom instruction than traditional state accountability assessments. So as long as the content administered by these assessments is close to that of the state assessment, they can play a key role in a district's filling a void from any missing state accountability data.
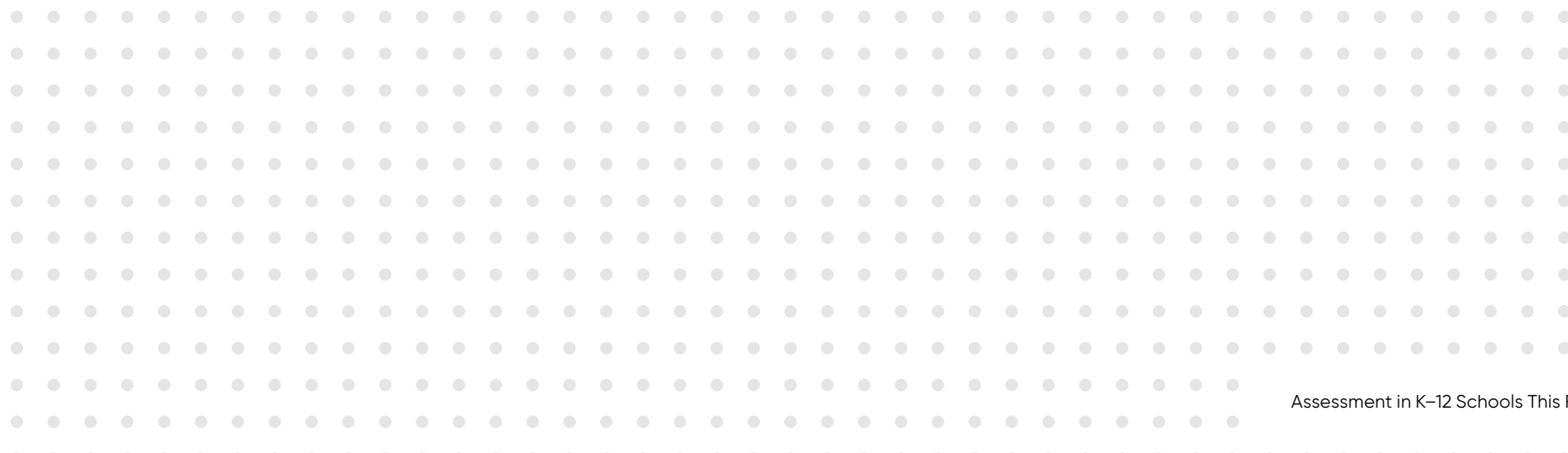
## Multiple Assessments Can Help Fill Data Voids

### State Assessments

- Focus on individual state standards
- Comprehensive testing accommodations
- Highly rigorous and accurate

### Interim Benchmark Assessments

- Multiple achievement data points throughout year
- Customizable
- Don't interfere much with instructional time

## Are test scores comparable from in-class testing versus remote testing?

Districts are currently utilizing a series of instructional models to provide lessons to their students. Variability inherently exists within a district or school where some students opt to attend in person and others opt to learn away from school. However, an important factor in delivering assessment is a similar test-taking environment.

There's a certain amount of standardization that can be accomplished at home, but it has its limits and can be difficult to verify. Allowing some students to test online and others in person can create serious threats to the validity of these scores. It's important to account for this when comparing student performance across different modes of administration.

> "Testing in spring 2021 will provide some vital information to educators, but addressing the loss of a single year is still not without its challenges."

## Should state testing proceed without the attachment of high-stakes embedded into ESSA legislation?

One feature that raises the stakes of state assessments is their connection to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the availability of federal funds. Perhaps we should consider removing this element from the equation and free up districts to focus solely on using test scores to monitor their students' progress toward educational goals. This appears to be happening with some state education departments, where they are evaluating using through-course assessments, such as adaptive interim benchmark assessments, to serve as their revised accountability programs.

The national educational accountability landscape will surely change, and it will be interesting to see how flexible the USDOE will be in approving ESSA accountability plans. District leaders may focus instead on growth within the school year (as opposed to across years) and, in effect, place even more emphasis on student growth as part of the accountability measure. Growth measured using through-course assessments can be measured at a more direct individual level. Moreover, teacher accountability will likely be pushed toward using student growth measures, not state assessments.
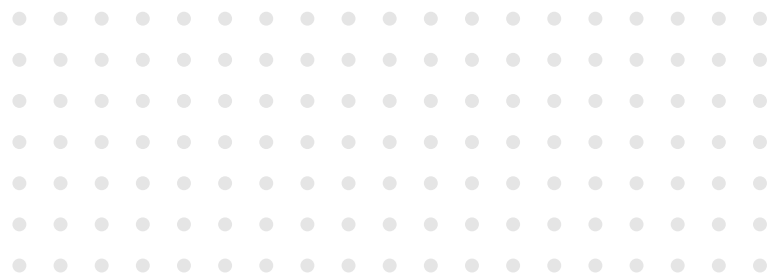
## Final Thoughts

Regardless of the testing outlook, the need for assessment has *still* not changed. Assessment data is still needed to drive instructional decision making and accelerate learning. The value of data is as important as ever, considering we still don't know the full effects of this pandemic on our educational system. We must continue to adapt as the educational landscape evolves to meet the needs of all our students.

# Planning for 504 and IEP Success in a Post-Pandemic World

By Dr. Suzanne Jimenez

The interrupted learning experience of the past year had many school teams scrambling to figure out how to support students who typically receive special education services in the general education classroom. How could specialized instruction be delivered online, and how could teachers ensure that students with disabilities continue to have opportunities to learn the same curriculum as their peers?

Complying with federal law, state regulations, and local policies was also a consideration. It is already a carefully choreographed dance to implement the Individualized Education Program (IEP) or provide 504 accommodations in the usual face-to-face instruction. With remote and hybrid learning in place, the complications of providing for students with disabilities rose to a new level.

Teachers largely met the challenge head on. They realized they would have to make adjustments in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and they did so in innovative ways. In most cases, districts didn't try to address remote and hybrid learning by amending IEPs. Instead, they created companion documents referred to as "remote learning" or "continuity of instruction" plans to document how services would be delivered. Innovative approaches, including teletherapy and online synchronous instruction, became mainstays for ensuring that access to instruction and specialized services continued.

"With remote and hybrid learning in place, the complications of providing for students with disabilities rose to a new level."

## Rethinking IEPs and 504s

Despite teachers' efforts, a year of figuring out how to deliver remote learning likely contributed to significant learning loss for students with disabilities. So, as we return to in-person instruction, IEP teams are considering the impact of interrupted schooling. They are asking: Are COVID recovery services needed? What data was collected over the last year to determine student progress and develop new goals? What does a recovery plan look like?

One thing is for sure: we should incorporate the lessons teachers learned from online schooling into IEP and 504 planning going forward. These steps will help you rethink IEP and 504 plans to ensure you're setting all students up for academic success post-COVID.

> "We should incorporate the lessons teachers learned from online schooling into IEP and 504 planning."

## Look at the Data

We have heard a lot about the harm from interrupted instruction, particularly for vulnerable populations. How have students in your district been affected? **The best way to find out is to look at the data**. Even as testing was paused during the pandemic, there were many ways that teachers measured progress, including observations, teacher-created formative and summative assessments, curriculum-based measurements, and student work samples. Many districts also had the advantage of using digital tools that provided performance and progress insights. Teachers can use this data to plan instruction, consider IEP goals, determine needed 504 accommodations for learning and assessment, and report to caregivers about how their children are doing.

The bottom line is this: we need baseline data that is valid, reliable, and easy to gather for large groups of students, and that provides the data teachers need to plan. With a clear picture of where students are in relation to their goals, IEP teams can develop new goals for the coming months and year.
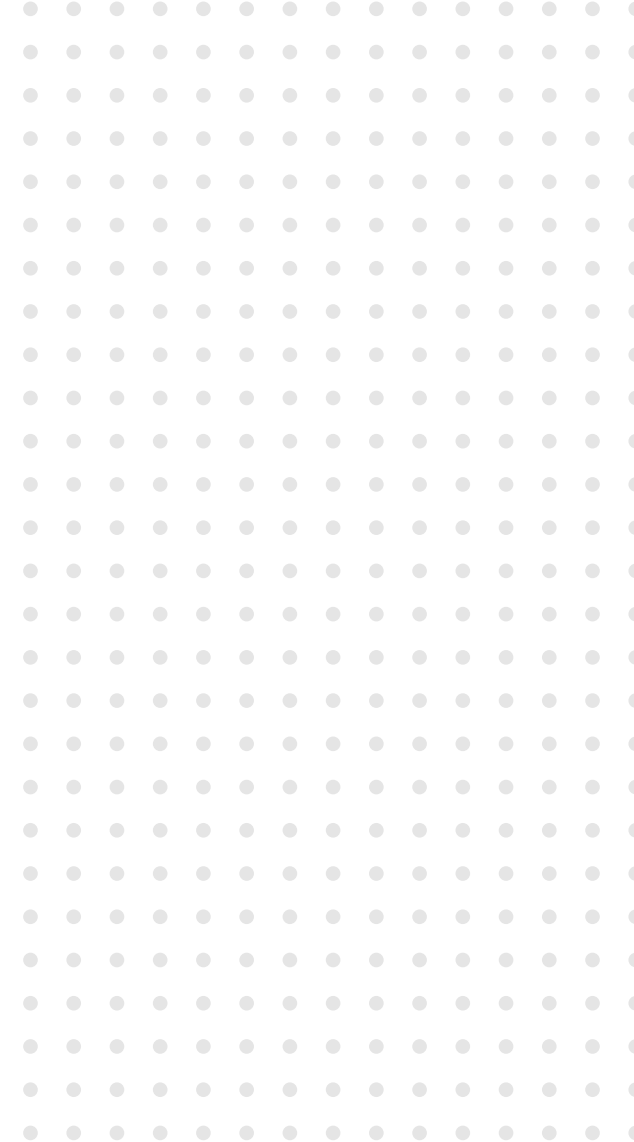
## Plan for Recovery and Resurgence

Don't ditch the variety of digital tools you may have used to give students with disabilities an edge during the experiment with remote learning. One-to-one devices were available in many districts, allowing students to use accessibility features like speech-to-text and screen readers across content areas. Apps and web-based programs have given students a whole new way to capture, organize, and use information. Digital platforms with adaptive capabilities and gaming features that promote engagement (like *Waggle*) have sparked student motivation and allowed them to experience success.

Other helpful resources include content videos and lecture recordings that allow students to rewatch as many times as they need to understand a concept. Some digital tools can even help students build executive functioning skills like organization, flexible thinking, and self-control. Multisensory learning that leverages technology and manipulatives allows students to make connections in new ways.

There's no reason students shouldn't continue to make use of these supports once they return to the classroom. The IEP of the future will likely benefit from the innovative ways digital tools can support instruction and monitor student progress.

# Keep Moving Forward

It has taken a village to keep things going this past school year. General and special education teachers, therapists (speech, occupational, and physical), counselors, and families have formed collaborative relationships. Kirk Dolson, supervisor of high school education in Loudoun County, Virginia, has witnessed the benefits of such cooperation firsthand. At Park View, a Title I high school in Loudoun where he served as principal, teachers went to extraordinary lengths to establish relationships with students with IEPs and provide services. Thanks to the efforts of staff and family, the cycle of assessment, progress monitoring, and rigorous instruction did not change.

"It would be easy to make excuses this year, but our students with IEPs need to continue to get ahead, and there is only one way to do that," Dolson says. "We must keep moving forward."

It is vital that we keep those lines of communication open. Transparency and frequent communication build trust. The abundance of digital tools allows teachers to easily access student progress reports and share them with teammates or caregivers, along with positive anecdotes or photos to keep everyone informed. EdTech apps with built-in communication features make it easy to stay in touch with caregivers and reassure them as students return to in-person schooling.

As we transition to post-pandemic learning, our most important tools are patience, kind hearts, strong shoulders to lean on, and open minds. Together, we have braved the unthinkable, and we will use this strength and resilience to carry us forward. ◁

> "It would be easy to make excuses, but our students with IEPs need to continue to get ahead, and there is only one way to do that. We must keep moving forward."

# How to Reset School Culture Post-COVID

## Tips on Building a Positive, Inclusive Environment

By HMH Staff

Principals strive to build a culture that's safe, welcoming, and inspiring to the students who walk through the school's doors or log on to its learning platforms. But the pandemic has made it difficult, if not impossible, to bolster school spirit.

At the start, some 3 million students vanished from school rosters, and the rest have been moving from in-person to remote and hybrid learning (Korman, O'Keefe, and Repka 2020). So, when the pandemic ends and it's safe to bring kids back to school, the task of building a sense of belonging and a motivation to learn will start anew. And it will have to be different from the efforts we made before the pandemic, with a greater emphasis on students' well-being as opposed to assessments.

## 6 Ways to Build Positive School Culture Post-Pandemic

Dr. Bradford Hubbard, superintendent of Antioch School District in Illinois, and Neil Lesinski, principal of Cary-Grove High School in Community District 155 in Illinois, know how challenging it can be to boost school spirit under normal circumstances. They say it's important to start planning now for the next school year.

Here are their recommendations for building positive school culture post-pandemic.

"At the start, some 3 million students vanished from school rosters, and the rest have been moving from in-person to remote and hybrid learning."

## 1. Be Prepared to Address School Avoidance Issues

The first few weeks of the transition to full-time learning will be critical. Some students may have missed more than a year of school and may not be too keen on returning. Principals will have to win them over. Lesinski advises: "Don't just tell students to get involved. Don't ask them to do more. Instead, motivate students to fully engage during the course of a normal school day."

**Plan for small-group brainstorming sessions on how to make school a place where kids feel invested**. Maybe that's allowing students to start clubs based on their interests, whether it's playing video games or making TikTok videos just for a laugh. It might be soliciting their advice on holding a community fundraiser or how to fix areas of the school that could use a spruce. When Dr. Hubbard served as a principal, his school held "Feedback Fridays." This was a day when kids in student council walked around school asking their peers, "How can the cafeteria be improved? What's your experience in math class?"

But if you're going to solicit student feedback, Dr. Hubbard warns, make sure you're prepared to demonstrate that their voices hold power. You don't want them to get the message that sharing their ideas is a waste of time. When students told Dr. Hubbard that there were no locks on the doors in the girls' bathroom in the science wing, he fixed the problem right away. When students pushed for the privilege of leaving campus during lunch, he didn't say no, even though he was hesitant.

"We started talking about one day a semester where students who met a benchmark—perfect attendance, for instance—could potentially leave campus for lunch," Dr. Hubbard says. "We always tried to find a way to get to 'yes.'"

## 2. Do an Equity Audit

This step should be ongoing, of course, but it will be especially important due to the inequities many students suffered during the pandemic. Walk through the school's hallways and classrooms. Take note of what you see, from the pictures on the walls to the trophies in display cases. **Are all of your students' stories being told? Will they see themselves represented?** Make sure there are just as many awards displayed for academics and the arts as there are for sports. Survey the books in the library to ensure the ones on display reflect the diversity of the student body. Students shouldn't have to go hunting for books that reflect their experience. (Consider this list of culturally responsive books for your school library.) The same goes for the artwork and posters displayed throughout the building. (Print our free posters celebrating the lives and accomplishments of Black scientists.)

"The ultimate goal is for every kid, no matter their interests, abilities, or where they come from, to feel like they belong in our buildings," Dr. Hubbard says. "That's the point of a positive culture, to make sure that every kid feels seen, heard, and loved. That might sound pie-in-the-sky, but it's what we all should be working toward."

## 3. Support the Student Services Team

Student services teams—counselors, social workers, school psychologists, special education staff—are going to be in even higher demand when school starts after the pandemic. Teachers aren't trained to deal with students' depression and anxiety. So, schools are going to need to make sure they have qualified staff in place who can provide social and emotional support.

Teachers can help by having conversations with kids that don't revolve around academics. This can be as simple as scheduling one-on-one time, just to ask how they're doing. Dr. Hubbard suggests pairing every kid with an adult to whom they feel they can go with anything. He implores educators to be intentional about social and emotional support and not simply throw assessments at students to find out where they are academically.

At Cary-Grove High School, where Lesinski is principal, teachers have been trained to recognize trauma and how it impacts kids' learning and brain development. "Students have been through a lot, and content is not necessarily the thing that is going to get them through this," says Lesinski. "Nor is it going to always help us build those necessary relationships that every student deserves."
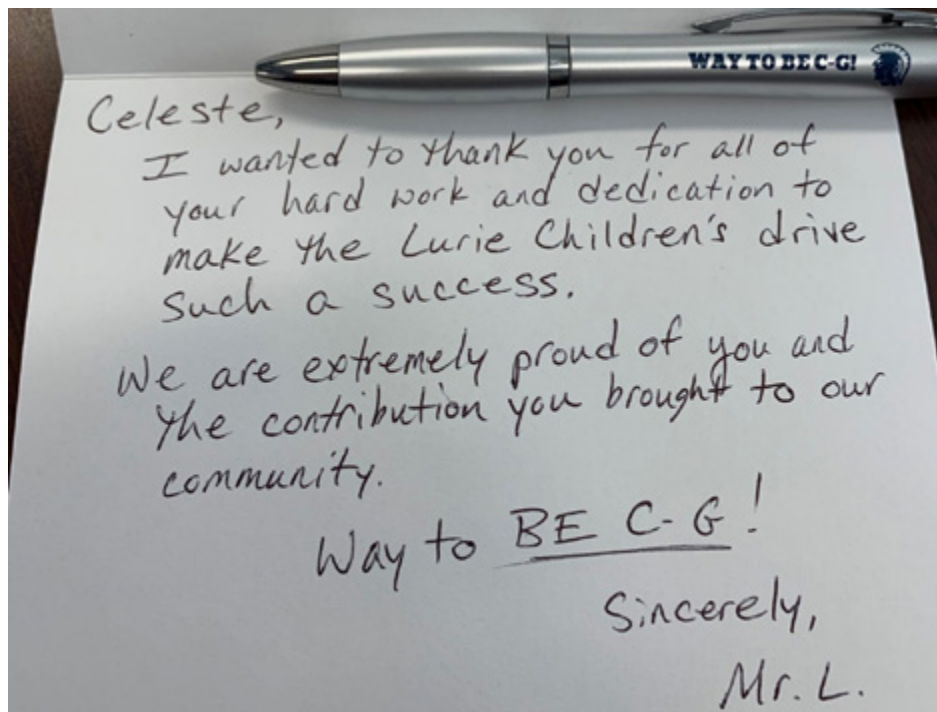
## 4. Rethink What Your School Represents

Take a second look at your school's core values, Lesinski advises. Ask: What do we stand for? What does it mean to be an Eagle or a Hawk or (insert your school mascot here)? What makes your students unique? Have students, teachers, and parents weigh in. Then put together a list of guiding principles for students to follow.

In every Cary-Grove classroom hangs a poster highlighting the school's pillars: self-advocacy, perseverance, integrity, engagement, responsibility, and citizenship. "Of course, we want students to be smart and focused on their careers and aspirations," Lesinski says. "But at the end of the day, we want them to be really good people. We say that we want to create honorable students, not necessarily honor students."

Lesinski rewards students who exemplify the school's principles and makes a big deal when students show that they can "Be C-G" (Cary-Grove). Teachers nominate students who show leadership in class, mentor another student, volunteer for an organization like a senior living center, overcome a life obstacle, or simply show kindness. Students are called to the office, where they receive a certificate, a laptop sticker with the school logo, and T-shirt that says "Be C-G." Lesinski even pens a thank-you letter.
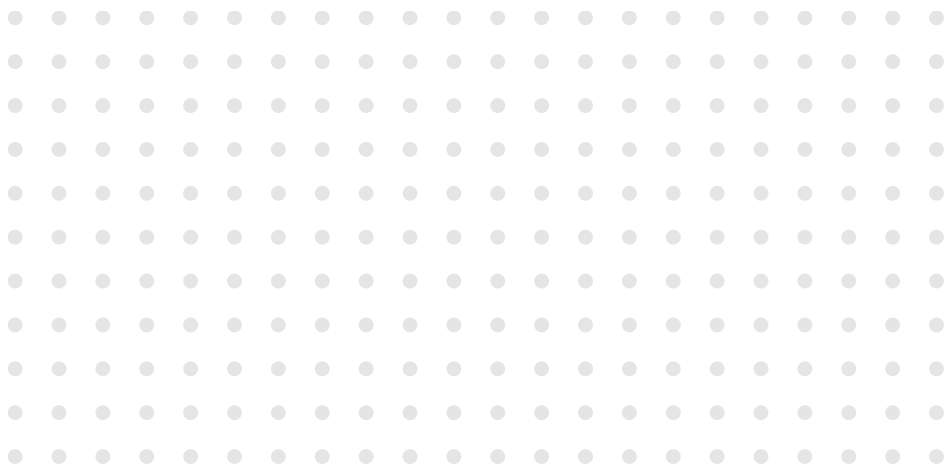
## 5. Get School Staff on Board

If you want teachers' support in building school culture, involve them in it. Some Cary-Grove teachers didn't want to nominate students for rewards for picking up trash or helping others, because they felt students should do what's right with no expectation of a pat on the back. But Lesinski knew teachers would change their mind if they saw the effect something as simple as a laptop sticker could have on a student. So, he videotaped kids receiving their rewards and played them at staff meetings. He explained that some of the students who were recognized may never earn straight A's or be the star of the basketball team. **Recognition from a teacher may be the highlight of their year**.

"When teachers see the kids and hear the story, they really buy into the idea," Lesinski says. "These are small tokens of gratitude, but they mean the world to these kids. The following week, I had probably 100 kids coming to the office because teachers got the message."

## 6. Remember the Teachers!

Teachers deserve recognition, too. Lesinski says Cary-Grove students have recognized teachers for extra tutoring, helping with college decisions, or for showing support during a challenging time. Parents have also shown their appreciation for teachers who are "always there for kids, providing guidance as a coach and a mentor," he says.

Here's how the nomination process works. Students or parents usually write Lesinski an email describing how the teacher went above and beyond. Then, Lesinski gets to have some fun.

"I go into the teacher's classroom and embarrass them a little bit," he says. "That's one of the greatest joys as an administrator for me—going into teachers' classrooms to honor their work and reward them in front of their students. The students always clap and cheer. Getting recognized for your work in front of your students—there may be nothing more valuable than that."

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As the creator of the Rigor/Relevance Framework, Bill is a leader of school reform. A former teacher and administrator, as well as director with the New York State Education Department, Bill has a special commitment to individuals with disabilities and has written numerous books, reports, and articles about learning and education.

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Venola is passionate about creating practicable solutions to increase student achievement using data and support implementation efforts. As a teacher for five years, she led her students to consistently make one to three years of academic growth across all content areas. She also served as a Site Manager and Central Site Manager for The New Teacher Project (TNTP).

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Adam has served as a consultant, manager, director, and keynoter for the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE). His mantra—100 percent of the students, 100 percent of the time—offers the opportunity to engage teachers and leaders in helping them build their own leadership capacity and skill set to ensure all students receive the very best education possible every single day.

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Suzanne has provided leadership for instruction and special services for general and special education focusing on equity and opportunity for students at all levels. Prior to HMH, she served as a teacher, principal, district leader, and university professor in public and private schools in the U.S. and in Brazil.

The views expressed in this guide are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of HMH.

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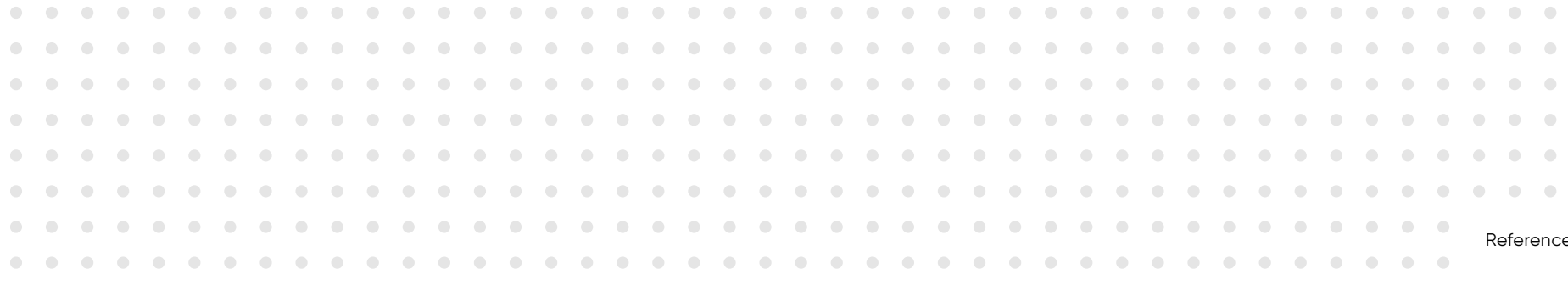
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