From Crisis to Opportunity: Recovering California's Commitment to Equity

Assessment of Student Learning

The Challenge: Learning loss – particularly for the most underserved students – is a clear challenge in the era of distance learning. One estimate[1] suggests students will start the coming school year, with about 70 percent of typical learning gains in reading and less than 50 percent of average learning gains in math. Results from ETW's K-12 parent poll[2] underscore learning loss concerns, with 65 percent of parents expressing they are very concerned about their child falling behind academically. Further, with California understandably receiving a federal waiver from assessment and accountability requirements for the 2019-20 school year, the statewide assessments that stakeholders have traditionally relied on to identify and address systemic opportunity and achievement gaps will not be administered this year.

Without this data, it's even more important that districts, teachers, and families have access to information about student learning so they can tailor academic and non-academic supports to meet students' needs. There is widespread support, from teachers (59 percent) to community advocates and policymakers (70 percent), for schools to administer a quality assessment at the beginning of the coming school year to understand the impacts of learning loss.[3]

State and local education leaders should begin developing plans now to provide educators and families with accurate information at the beginning of the school year about academic performance to address students' needs. However, the stress and anxiety students face as a result of COVID-19 requires leaders to prioritize the social-emotional well-being of students when they return to school this fall. Therefore, regardless of the method for understanding students' academic needs, this information should be gathered in low-stakes ways that minimize disruptions to learning and that are done solely to identify how to serve students best going forward – with considerations for a range of possible virtual and in-person learning scenarios at the start of the 2020-21 school year.

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Opportunities for Assessing Student Learning

For the Governor, State Leaders, and California Department of Education:

1. **Work with curriculum publishers and testing companies to create curriculum-aligned formative and summative assessments** to use in both online learning and classroom environments that help teachers adjust planning and instruction. The state of Texas is offering free, optional, beginning-of-year assessments to all schools.[4]

2. **Provide guidance to LEAs around best practices for assessment**, including considerations for:
   • Using assessment results to allocate district equitably- and school-level resources that provide tailored supports to meet students' needs
   • Assessing in different learning environments (virtual, in-person, and hybrid models), including considerations for setting up physical testing environments that reflect potential physical distancing needs and supports for families with online assessments, including language translation supports
   • English learners and students with disabilities, who may have unique assessment needs; for English learners, this includes assessing in the language most likely to produce valid results
   • Academic assessments in languages that match the language of instruction, for students in dual language programs
   • Alternative local assessments of basic skills to support English learner reclassification decisions in the absence of Smarter Balanced Assessments
   • Professional learning for educators around how to use assessment results to plan, differentiate instruction, and tailor supports to meet students' social, emotional, and academic needs

3. **Create a Fall 2020 assessment window for administration of the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC)** for students who did not have the opportunity to take the assessment in Spring 2020, particularly for English learners who need to demonstrate English proficiency (level 4) to be reclassified.

4. **Plan to resume administration of statewide testing in Spring 2021** so families, educators, and policymakers at all levels know how students are doing and where they need additional support. If the school year is significantly disrupted, consider modifications to statewide assessments to provide critical information to decisionmakers and communities.

5. **Add a student growth measure to the California School Dashboard** to assess the long-term impacts of learning loss.

6. **Recover assessment funds** allocated to testing vendors to redirect funds to immediate teaching and learning needs, as Tennessee's Commissioner of Education[5] did.

For School, District, and County Office of Education Leaders:

1. **Craft a plan now for collecting data that will be used to accelerate student learning**. Consult tools like this Equitable Learning Recovery Toolkit[6] and this Learning Acceleration Guide[7] for planning considerations.

2. **Provide a high-quality, standards-aligned diagnostic assessment for all students at the start of the school year** to identify and act on collective and individual academic needs quickly. Districts should, at a minimum, use the same diagnostic assessment in all its schools for a given grade span to ensure comparable information that will help direct within-district resources.

3. **Identify additional tools and resources to help determine knowledge and skill gaps to target collective and individual students' needs.** Consider:
   • Available data collected during distance learning in the 2019-20 school year.
   • Evidence gathered about individual students' learning loss levels and needs to assess their academic and non-academic needs more comprehensively.
   • Innovative approaches to assessing student progress and understanding, regardless of the learning environment. (For example, having students assume the role of asking questions rather than the teacher, as Stanford Associate Professor Maria Araceli Ruiz-Promo suggests[8]).

4. Support educators and administrators to administer assessments and **act on available data to address students' needs**.
   • Survey educators to understand their readiness to assess student learning online. Consider questions included in this readiness quiz.[9]
   • Determine sustained and collaborative professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators that can support assessment and subsequent grade-level instructional planning to address students' academic needs in virtual and other learning environments.
   • Make assessment results available to educators as quickly as possible to inform planning. Ensure that learning plans for the year prioritize focus standards through quality grade-level instruction with supports rather than over-remediation, and incorporate extended learning opportunities and targeted intervention strategies that can work in different contexts.

5. **Report assessment results to parents and families** to ensure a clear understanding of students' needs and whether students are on track academically at the start of the school year.

[1] Megan Kuhfeld and Beth Tarasawa, "The COVID-19 Slides: What Summer Learning Loss Can Tell Us About the Potential Impact of School Closures on Student Achievement" (Portland, OR: NWEA, April 2020), https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/05/Collaborative-Brief_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf.
[2] The Education Trust-West, "Educational Equity in Crisis. Listening to Parents: The Results of our Statewide Survey of Public School Parents," April 2020, https://west.edtrust.org/ca-parent-poll-covid-19-and-school-closures/.
[3] "A National Survey to Explore How Students Will 'Catch Up'"(Collaborative for Student Success, 2020), https://forstudentsuccess.org/our-campaigns/catching-up/.
[4] Texas Education Agency, "State Provided Optional Beginning-of-Year Assessment – May 19, 2020," (Austin, TX: TEA, 2020). We share this sample resource with the caveat that assessments should be aligned to the curriculum being used in a given context.
[5] Chiefs for Change and Johns Hopkins University Institute for Education Policy, "The Return: How Should Education Leaders Prepare for Reentry and Beyond?" (Washington, D.C.: Chiefs for Change, May 2020; Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University, May 2020), https://chiefsforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CFC-TheReturn_5-13-20.pdf.
[6] Pivot Learning Partners and UnboundEd, "Equitable Learning Recovery Toolkit" (Oakland, CA: Pivot, 2020; UnboundEd, 2020), https://www.pivotlearning.org/learning-recovery-toolkit-download/.
[7] TNTP, "Learning Acceleration Guide: Planning for Acceleration in the 2020-2021 School Year" (New York, NY: TNTP, April 2020), https://tntp.org/assets/set-resources/TNTP_Learning_Acceleration_Guide_Final.pdf.
[8] Maria Araceli Ruiz-Primo, "Beyond tests and quizzes: Getting creative with assessment during COVID-19," *Stanford Graduate School of Education*, May 4, 2020, https://ed.stanford.edu/news/beyond-tests-and-quizzes-getting-creative-as-sessment?sf122257632=1.
[9] Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation, "Fall 2020 Course Preparation" (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2020), https://teaching.cornell.edu/teaching-resources/planning-remote-teaching.

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