FACTSheet

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Keeping Pace: Strategies for Ensuring Equitable Continuity of Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic
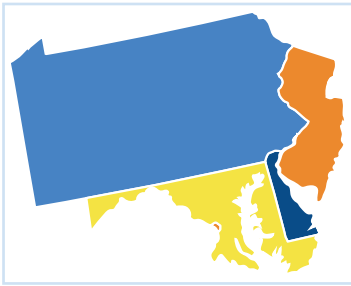
As a result of COVID-19, schools are transitioning their instructional programs from in-person to blended learning environments to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus once schools reopen and to prepare for the possibility of additional school closures during the 2020–2021 school year. What steps can schools take to ensure that students continue to progress academically whether at home or at school? This fact sheet highlights evidence-based and promising practices that local education agencies can consider when developing or updating their continuity of learning plans.[1]

What continuity of learning strategies are promising?

- **Use curriculum-based assessments and curriculum-based measurements.** These tools can help schools evaluate summer learning loss and place students appropriately at the start of the school year or upon enrollment for those who join after the school year has begun. Curriculum-based measurements such as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) enable educators to collect valid, repeated measures of a student's literacy skill development within a single school year to monitor progress and inform ongoing instruction.[2]

- **Establish community homework centers.** Schools' shifting focus from traditional face-to-face instruction to remote learning underscored concerns about the digital divide and inequitable access to education. Identify and partner with local shelters, hotels, motels, subsidized housing, community centers, community colleges, and faith-based organizations that serve highly mobile or economically disadvantaged families to connect students with tutoring and mental health services. These centers can also provide Internet access and distribute free meals or snacks, parent resources, and school packets to support offline, self-paced learning.[3]

- **Plan alternative scheduling models.** When schools reopen, they have an unprecedented opportunity to explore more student-centered scheduling, such as looping. In the looping model, a cohort of students stays with one group of teachers for two or more years. One study found that looping can support student academic growth in math.[4]

- **Provide ongoing, real-time, synchronous feedback and interaction with teachers.** Studies have found that learning environments that rely largely on asynchronous instruction are less effective. To the extent possible, creating opportunities for live support such as through virtual office hours and talking by phone can help build trust and motivation.[5]

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- **Implement a universal social-emotional learning (SEL) program.** SEL programming can improve student engagement, motivation, and sense of belonging in school. It may also have a positive (if modest) impact on test scores.[6]

Designing and implementing systemwide summer learning programs

The premature end of the 2019–2020 school year raised concerns about the potentially negative impact of an extended summer vacation on students' academic progress.[7] Referred to as the "summer slide" or "summer learning loss," research has demonstrated that student achievement in math and reading can decline over the summer, often requiring remediation in the fall. These declines tend to disproportionately affect the most vulnerable students, such as students experiencing poverty who may not have access to academic enrichment opportunities over the summer.[8] However, summer learning loss is not inevitable.[9]

Summer programming can mitigate learning loss, accelerate learning, and improve achievement in math, science, and social studies.[10-13] Successful strategies require substantial planning and partnerships such as:

- Taking advantage of community partnerships to establish book distribution, bookmobiles and reading programs through public libraries, and free book vending machines in low-income neighborhoods.[14]
- Establishing reading programs that pair students with peers or older students.[15]
- Building parent or caregiver capacity to support literacy development at home.[16]
- Increasing student engagement and motivation with student-selected and culturally relevant texts.[17]

Recovering from prolonged or recurring school closures and instructional disruptions is a long-term process. Schools should prepare now to provide summer learning opportunities to all students in summer 2021.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: Leveraging Municipal and District Infrastructure to Improve Elementary Reading Achievement in Detroit

In partnership with the Detroit Parks and Recreation Department and four local literacy programs, Detroit Public Schools implemented a free six-week systemwide summer literacy program. The program was offered in multiple sites, and most participants were Black or African American (98 percent) and experiencing poverty (85 percent). A pilot study found that the program's high-intensity but short-duration tutoring helped prevent summer learning loss for elementary-aged struggling readers. Eighty percent of participants did not experience summer learning loss.[28]

What do high-quality summer learning programs that serve vulnerable children and youth look like?

Research suggests that high quality summer learning exhibit the following characteristics:

- Offer both enrichment and academic activities that are preplanned and sequenced.[18]

- Assign a dedicated employee to direct the program who is responsible for centralizing planning, managing the summer program, making decisions, and committing at least half time to the role.[19]

- Devote sufficient time to academic learning such as operating five to six weeks with at least two hours of daily instruction.[20]

- Promote consistent attendance with clear and firm enrollment procedures and attendance policies.[21]

- Employ high quality academic and enrichment teachers and program providers with appropriate grade-level and subject-matter experience.[22]

- Train staff on the summer curriculum before the program starts to include guidance on maximizing instructional time and checking for student understanding.[23]

- Train enrichment teachers who may not have classroom experience in positive behavior management.[24]

- Maintain small class sizes.[25]

- Promote a positive and enjoyable experience rather than a punitive culture of remediation.[26]

- Encourage participation of both struggling and high-performing middle and high school students by providing leadership opportunities, unique enrichment opportunities, and honors such as paid internships and course credit.[27]

Learn More:

Visit the following sites to browse resources on continuity of learning:

U.S. Department of Education

Comprehensive Center Network

Regional Educational Laboratories

ENDNOTES

[1] None of the studies cited in this fact sheet has been reviewed by the What Works Clearinghouse.

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