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April/May 2022

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While superintendents have had to maintain a so-called 30,000-foot view of the ever-shifting situations in their districts

as COVID waxed and waned, it's the principals who have been on the ground driving the charge to innovate and adapt, leading their schools to pivot time and again to provide the best education possible under shifting conditions.

The tireless efforts of school leaders in districts big and small have helped their learning communities navigate the pandemic, as well as contentious social and cultural issues. Many principals have emerged as superheroes at a time when the world has often felt frightening to students, and staff for that matter.

They've seized the opportunity to tackle issues of social justice and mental health, explore outdoor learning options, and deemphasize test scores in ways that empower students and create a sense of belonging.

Read about what principals across the country have been doing to make their schools better during the last two difficult years, on page 14.

Their stories serve as examples for others seeking ideas to address the post-COVID recovery. They really are making a difference.

Eric Weiss, executive editor



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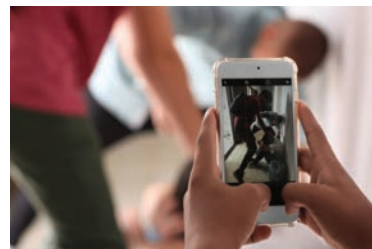
Wellness centers and restorative justice are leading to better outcomes than traditional disciplinary practices.

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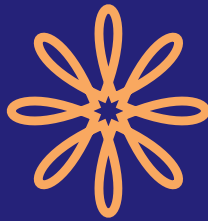
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PD Isn't a Waste of Time

Plus 5 other myths about teacher development.

Several of the most frequently heard criticisms of teacher professional development may not have a shred of evidence to support them. Many anecdotal perceptions of professional learning do not stand up to scientific study while other commonly held beliefs are based on outdated research, say the authors of *Dispelling the Myths*, a new report by the Research Partnership for Professional Learning, a coalition of PD experts and providers based at Brown University's Annenberg Institute.

The report's top takeaway for administrators is that quality is more important than quantity when it comes to PD, says Heather Hill, a professor of teaching and teacher leadership at the Harvard Graduate School of Educator and a visiting faculty member at the Annenberg Institute. "Well-placed professional development that helps teachers build skills they will use in class fairly immediately is probably the sweet spot, much more so than PD that is more abstract on content

knowledge absent a focus on specific practices," she says.

The effectiveness of teachers is the No. 1 factor in student success. But while school districts, states, and the federal government spend as much as \$8 billion a year on professional development, the institutions also lack data about which programs work best and why some fail, the Annenberg report says.

"There's a clear focus on helping teachers with the task they have to do in classrooms every day, whether that's implementing curriculum really well, assessing student work and understanding what's going on with that student, whether that's creating a positive atmosphere—when PD focuses on these things, those programs do tend to improve student outcomes," Hill says.

Here's a breakdown of the reality behind the biggest misperceptions around PD:

Myth #1: Professional learning is a waste of time and money.

Truth: Evidence shows that PD improves teachers' skills and instructional practice to significantly improve student learning.

Districts have been criticized for spending heavily on PD with little to show for it. But a meta-analysis of dozens of studies has found that "the difference in effectiveness between teachers with instructional coaches and those without was equivalent to the difference between novice teachers and teachers with five to 10 years of experience." An analysis of STEM professional learning programs showed increases in student test scores.

Myth #2: PL is more effective for early career teachers than veterans.

Truth: PL opportunities have been shown to support teacher development at all levels of experience.

Teachers do grow their skills more rapidly during the early years of their careers, partly because they receive more on-the-job learning opportunities. But research proves that teachers continue to expand their abilities as their careers continue. Recent studies have found that the average teacher improves their effectiveness at raising student achievement by about half as much between years five and 15 as they did during the first five years of their career.

Myth #3: PL programs must be job-embedded and time-intensive.

Truth: Programs of varying lengths and formats can produce wide-ranging benefits.

Intensive on-the-job training can be highly effective, but it's not the only way to build teachers' skills. Recent research has not been able to link the length of PD programs to better



student outcomes. Analysis has also shown that summer workshops—during which teachers are away from their classrooms—provide significant boosts in student learning. Spreading PD out across several semesters also appears to be just as effective as short-term, high-intensity training.

Myth #4: Improving content knowledge is key to improving instructional practice.

Truth: PD that targets instructional practices is more likely to shift student learning.

Researchers have found no correlation between better student outcomes and time-intensive PD that produced modest improvements in content knowledge. On the other hand, PD focused on shifting instructional practices tended to improve student outcomes. Helping teachers learn why and when to use

specific strategies seemed also benefited students.

Myth #5: Research-based PD is unlikely to work at scale or in new contexts.

Truth: With strong implementation, programs can have positive effects across a wide range of schools.

K-12 leaders sometimes worry that even evidence-backed programs may not suit their schools’ or districts’ unique needs. Also, some PD programs have buckled at scale. But recent evaluations have found that several large-scale PL programs are working over a wide range of schools. Also, variability of effectiveness can be driven by variability of implementation. “For example, new programs that suffer from a lack of support from school leadership, or that fail to make time and space for teachers to sustain learning, appear more likely to fail,” the Research Partnership for

Professional Learning report says. The chance of success increases when leaders are invested in PD programs that are aligned with other district instructional guidance.

Myth #6: Districts should never modify research-based PD programs.

Truth: Practice fidelity first and then adapt.

Over the long term, PD programs do not have to be implemented exactly as intended by their designers. And while shoddy implementation can sink a program, recent studies of PD in new curricula suggest that “adaptation with guardrails” can even improve student outcomes beyond a program’s initial intent. Teachers can begin to modify elements of a program while keeping its core concepts in place.

By Matt Zalaznick

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- Phonics Blah Blah Blah Card Game
- Fun cards with words like "NA HAI"

High School Sports Help Students Grow

Here's how to make the idea more appealing.

One of the best ways for students to continue to build social-emotional skills is to participate in some form of high school sports, a growing number of education experts now say.

The benefits extend from formally organized athletics department programs to more causal fitness activities; yet, prior to COVID, fewer than four in 10 public high school students played sports. Only 23% get the recommended level of daily physical activity, according to Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program. Still, most students who play a sport do so through their school. "Many high schools are unable to deliver sports programs that meet the needs and hopes of students," the think tank says in a newly released guide, "A Playbook to Develop Every Student Through Sports."

The top reasons students don't play are homework and a sense that, outside of recruited athletes, sports don't add much to a college transcript, the Institute found in a survey of 6,000 kids. Among the other top reasons that students don't participate is they don't enjoy sports, their school doesn't offer a sport they like or don't think they're good enough; others cited work schedules and family responsibilities as barriers.

Also, "athletic departments do a lot with a little," the report says. Even high schools that are innovating to get more students involved spent just 2% to 4% of their budgets on athletic programs. And there are also stark equity problems: "high schools populated predominantly by students of color have 25 roster spots for every 100 students; at heavily white schools, there are 58 spots per 100 students," the report says.

Solving the problem

The Aspen Institute playbook guides school leaders in how to improve

sports for students who are already playing and better engage those who are not. To start, school leaders and coaches should work together to ensure resources are spread beyond just the top athletes to reach a wider swath of the student body.

Also, prioritizing health and safety with a sufficient athletic training staff can attract students who don't play because they are worried about suffering a serious injury.

Here are several more steps to take:

1. Align school sports with the school mission: Beyond winning championships, the purpose of athletics is not always clear. In fact, among the top reasons students give for playing sports, "winning games" falls far below having fun, exercising and making new friends. One school, for example, updated its mission statement for athletics to say the program provides a competitive and safe environment where "student-athletes connect with caring coaches and experience physical, social and emotional growth leading to positive transformation."

2. Elevate student voice to gauge interest: Polling students is the best way to find out what sports they want to play. The most effective surveys also ask questions that will allow administrators to break data down by gender interests, disability, race and ethnicity, and grade level, and find out whether some students would prefer other health and fitness activities.

3. Create personal activity plans: Helping students develop a four-year athletic plan can be as beneficial as having them map out their high school



academic goals. Such a plan can cover both formal competition and physical fitness. "Call it a Personal Activity Plan, or any name you prefer, to underscore its deeper purpose – for students to acquire and retain the physical, cognitive, social and emotional benefits from physical activity that will help them succeed in life," the study says.

4. Introduce other forms of play: Administrators should also provide options for student-led club sports or intramural sports in which classmates compete against classmates. These activities offer the same benefits as interscholastic competition—exercise, teamwork skills, mental health and a sense of belonging. The top four sports students want their school to add are archery, gymnastics, lacrosse and bowling.

5. Bolster coaching education: A high school coach can be the most important adult in a student's life. But coaches aren't often trained to make sports a safe, healthy and positive experience for students. Athletics directors should provide more regular internal and external training for coaches, encourage them to network with their peers in other schools and hold coaches accountable to creating positive experiences that increase participation.

By Matt Zalaznick

What Do Superintendents Earn Now?

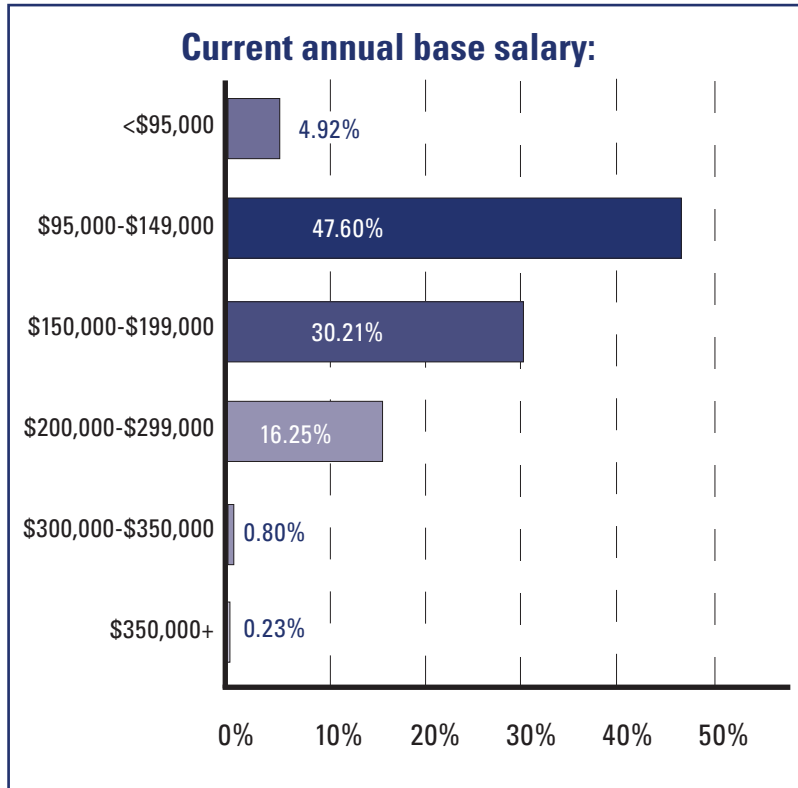
Median salaries range from \$105,000 to \$228,000, depending on district enrollment.

Male superintendents continue to earn higher salaries than their female counterparts at the same time district leaders are getting younger, a recently released survey reveals.

In a persistent trend, female superintendents earn approximately 96% of what male superintendents earn, according to the 2021-22 version of the annual “Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study” by AASA, The School Superintendents Association.

“This report is a longstanding resource that serves as one of the few reliable and comprehensive data sources on the working conditions of school system leaders in the nation,” said Daniel A. Domenech, AASA’s executive director. “It is now more important than ever, given the significant school staff turnover we are seeing across the country, to determine what it means for superintendents.”

Superintendents’ median salaries ranged from \$105,000 to \$228,541, depending on district enrollment. The median salaries identified in the 2020-21 ranged from \$140,172 to \$180,500. But the ranges likely don’t tell the complete picture at the higher end of the scale. In this year’s report, for instance, ASAA notes responses from superintendents of districts with



more than 49,999 students were low and therefore “not useful for statistical purposes.” Low responses also made it difficult for ASAA to gauge salaries variations among superintendents of different racial and ethnic groups.

The survey also found that K-12 superintendents are getting younger. In 2022, more than four in 10 (42.5%) were between 30 and 50, compared to 35.1% in the age range in 2012. Only about 10% of superintendents were over 60, compared to 19.4% in 2012.

Other major findings include:

- In terms of longevity, nearly half (46%) of respondents have five years or fewer experience as a superintendent
- Nearly 43% of respondents hold a doctorate in education

(Ed.D.), followed by 38% with a master’s degree and 9.4% hold a doctoral research degree (Ph.D.)

- Where numbers are sufficient, a higher percentage of female superintendents hold an Ed.D. (48%), compared to males (41%)

The report also analyzed superintendents’ benefits packages, how often they receive performance evaluations, and what professional organizations they belong to.

What other educators are earning

The report also examined the salaries of principals, teachers and other educators. The ratio of superintendent-to-teacher salaries ranged from more than 5-to-1 in larger districts to about 2.5-to-1 in smaller school systems.

Here are the salary ranges for other key positions, depending on district enrollment from less than 300 students to more than 100,000:

- High school principals: \$78,000 to \$115,000
- Middle school principals: \$75,000 to \$111,397
- Elementary school principals: \$75,000 to \$108,397
- Beginning teachers: \$40,000 to \$48,500

By Matt Zalaznick

Addressing Student Data Protection

Students are at risk of having their identities stolen. Here's what schools can do to protect them.

A recent data breach at a large Texas school system exposed personally identifiable information (PII) of potentially hundreds of thousands of students dating back to 2010, reports the nonprofit Identity Theft Resource Center. It's just one example of a growing trend in which hackers steal, and then post or sell, student data. This crime affected potentially thousands of K-12 schools in 2021 and is expected to skyrocket as much as 86% in the current academic year.

Student data can include name, date of birth, Social Security number, family financial status, and medical conditions. Criminals can use the information to open a bank or credit card account, apply for loans, rent a place to live, apply for government benefits, and more. This identity theft can haunt students for years, disrupting their ability to obtain credit, college financial aid or other government assistance.

Yet many school systems are unaware of student identity theft—or even the breadth of student data in their datastores. This lack of awareness exposes them to cybercrime, lawsuits, and financial loss, and it impedes their ability to protect the data—along with students past and present.

Student identity theft also presents a potential equity gap. School systems with adequate budgets often have the resources to ensure cyber protections. Those in areas with a lower tax base are more likely to remain unprotected.

The solution? School administrators and IT decision-makers need to understand relevant regulations, assess their data, and think beyond existing network safeguards—leveraging cost-effective encryption technology to protect the data itself.

Understanding relevant regulations

Multiple laws at the federal and state levels allow students and their families to access and modify their own PII as well as consent to how it's disclosed. One example is the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA), which requires schools to allow parents to review instructional materials and surveys that could reveal certain types of PII. Another is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which allows parents and students over age 18 to control access to their PII in school records. Some states also have their own compliance requirements, such as New York and its Education Law 2-D, which focuses on maintaining the privacy and security of student and staff PII. Complying with these regulations requires schools to understand the types of PII they maintain and protect that data wherever it's stored and shared. Failure to comply can result in a loss of funding.

Assessing data stores and protections

Many schools believe they have a clear picture of their student data. But they might be surprised to discover that sensitive data is often shared with parents, state and local government organizations and other entities outside the school

system. This data can also be stored and shared across the district, from the nurse's office to the registrar, to individual teachers' email inboxes. Without an end-to-end view of what data is ending up where, they can't ensure regulatory compliance. Just as important, they can't be certain essential data safeguards are applied wherever that data is stored and as it's transferred from one location to another.

To safeguard data, schools traditionally have focused on antivirus, firewalls, intrusion protection and other network protections. These measures are necessary, but they're no longer sufficient, especially in a virtual schooling environment. If cyber attackers can get through these defenses—and there's a significant risk they eventually will—they have an opportunity to steal student data.

The solution is to achieve security at a more fundamental level, by securing the data itself. Encryption is one solution that applies computer algorithms to scramble data so that it can be read only by an authorized user who holds the digital key to decrypt it. Even if cybercriminals steal the data, they can't read it, which means they can't sell it. The data—and the student—remain protected.

Cybercriminals aren't about to stop targeting students for identity theft. And their methods, from phishing to ransomware, will grow ever more nefarious. But by better understanding the issues at stake and by making necessary, cost-effective investments in data encryption, schools can go a long way in protecting student data—and the students they serve.

Sam Windfield is a Sales Director at Virtru, where he works closely with schools, school districts and universities to safeguard the sensitive data they're entrusted with protecting.



Just how effective were masks at stopping COVID from spreading in schools?

Very, it turns out.

A majority of districts, including some of the nation’s largest, have lifted—or will soon lift—their mask mandates, leaving only a slim minority of schools still requiring face coverings for in-person instruction.

And with the masking decision in most parts of the county now left up to students and families—and many choosing *not* to wear—the CDC in early March released new data clearly showing that mandates lessened the spread of COVID in school buildings significantly.

Districts that required masks experienced a 23% lower incidence of COVID-19 among staff members and students compared with districts without universal mandates, according to

a CDC study of transmission rates in Arkansas schools last spring and fall. The CDC called the report, which covered 233 districts, the first large-scale evaluation of mask mandates and their effectiveness in blocking COVID.

“School mask policies were associated with lower COVID-19 incidence in areas with moderate to substantial community transmission,” the study says. “Masks remain an important part of a multi-component approach to preventing COVID-19 in K-12 settings, especially in communities with high COVID-19 community levels.”

School leaders should also take note that the CDC’s Arkansas study also found that weekly COVID-19

incidences among students and staff members were higher than those in the surrounding communities and higher than expected based on community incidences for all mask policies. One reason for this appears to be low vaccination rates among students.

“This highlights the potential for incidence within schools to be higher than that in communities in settings where community transmission levels are moderate to substantial and where the majority of students are unvaccinated,” the study said, also noting that there were no school-based testing programs in place while the analysis was being conducted.

By Matt Zalaznick

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All Schools Plan to Spend ESSER Funds on This in 2022

But there are significant differences among rural, urban and suburban districts when it comes to the use of relief funds.

How are local districts planning to spend their critical Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER III) funds?

The majority—whether in cities, suburbs, towns or rural locations—plan to devote key portions to boost their academic workforce. That’s no surprise given how challenged school districts nationwide have been in retaining and maintaining educator and substitute levels before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, there are plenty of differences among those different subgroups when it comes to the monies they’ll outlay toward other needs. They are nicely outlined in a study done by the think tank FutureEd, which closely surveyed data of around 2,500 districts provided by the National Center for Education Statistics.

For example, while transportation will be a key target for rural districts, it won’t garner nearly the same attention in suburban districts. City systems are far more likely to be spending on connectivity than those in towns. And both city and suburban districts will devote nearly double what rural districts plan to invest in mental health and social-emotional learning.

“While there are shared challenges, the pandemic frequently looks different in a small, rural school district than in a big city or suburb,” said FutureEd Director Thomas Toch. “Transportation challenges are magnified, with fewer students spread across wider areas. And mental health professionals are often harder to find.”

When it comes to top priorities other than educator staffing, all locations were fairly aligned in stating they will be focused on summer learning as well as improving their

HVAC infrastructure. Numbers for each category were either at 50% or higher (with cities most wanting new ventilation and air conditioning at 58%). A third or more of all districts plan to further invest in afterschool and instructional materials, with FutureEd noting that a couple of them plan to devote more than 10% of their budgets to improved technology and devices. For now, those are all the results of pandemic impacts.

“The plans could well change over the three years that local agencies have to use this round of federal aid,” said FutureEd Associate Director Phyllis W. Jordan, co-author of the analysis. “But this gives us a real sense of what districts are prioritizing for Covid recovery.”

Here is a breakdown of the top five spending priorities for each area from the sample size of the districts, which account for half of all the \$122 billion spending plans:

City districts: 1. Teachers (58%) and HVAC (58%); 3. Summer learning (56%); 4. Professional development (46%); 5. SEL (43%)

Suburban districts: 1. Teachers (63%); 2. Summer learning (52%); 3. HVAC (50%); 4. Professional development (41%); 5. Afterschool and instructional learning (32%)

Towns: 1. HVAC (54%); 2. Teachers (53%); 3. Summer learning (51%); 4. Professional development (43%); 5. Instructional materials (36%)

Rural districts: 1. Teachers (54%); 2. Summer learning (52%); 3. HVAC (51%); 4. Professional development (43%); 5. Instructional materials (42%)

As far as the lowest priority for individual locations, support staff ranked lowest for rural and city districts at 15%. Connectivity is not as needed as most other line items in suburbs and towns, at less than 20%.

By Chris Burt



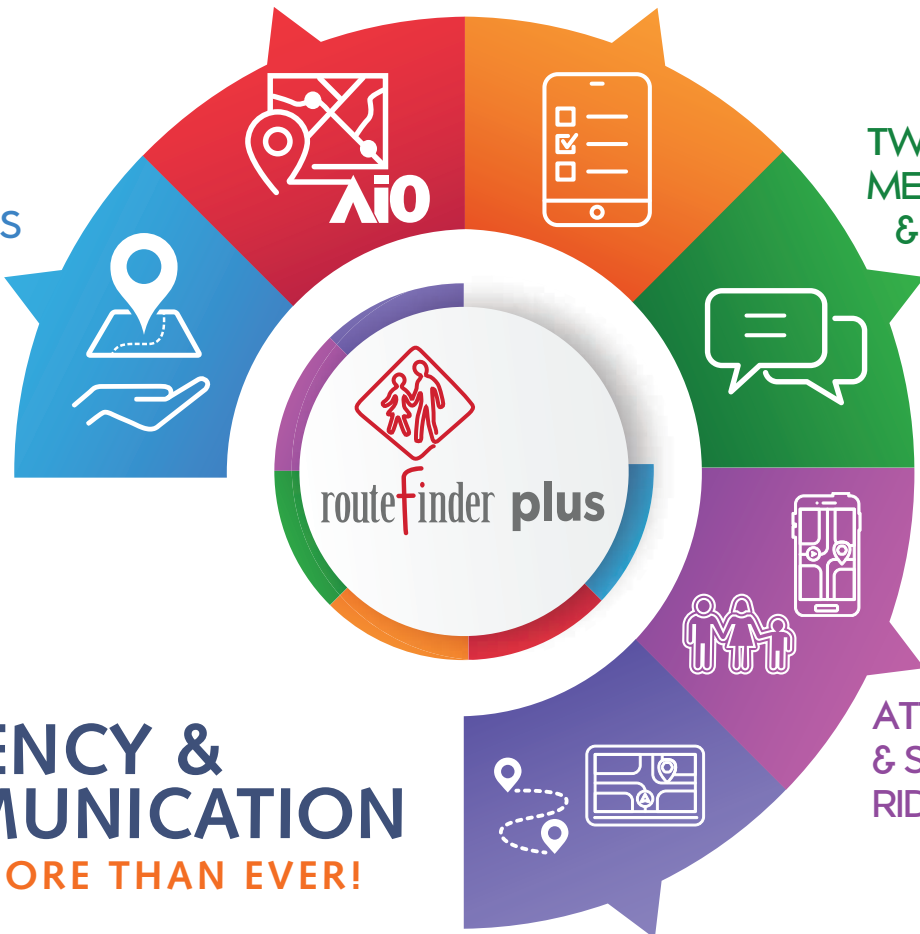
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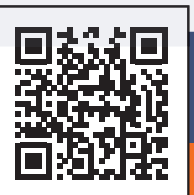
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No More LGBTQ+ Topics in Schools?

More than half of adults oppose censoring LGBTQ-themed books and curricula, according to a recent poll.

Despite a wave of new laws that hit schools in recent months, a majority of adults oppose banishing LGBTQ topics from U.S. classrooms.

The most controversial of these new measures, Florida's Parental Rights in Education Bill—which critics are calling the “Don't Say Gay” bill—prohibits classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through 3rd grade. Any LGBTQ-related instruction or discussions in later grades must be “age-appropriate.” It also requires administrators to notify parents when there is a change in the mental, emotional or physical health care being provided to their children at school. “Parents have every right to be informed about services offered to their child at school and should be protected from schools using classroom instruction to sexualize their kids as young as 5 years old,” Florida Gov. DeSantis said in a statement after signing the bill.

And recently, the governors of Arizona and Oklahoma became the latest in a string of GOP state leaders to ban transgender athletes from girls' K-12 sports.

But a poll released in late March found that more than half of adults oppose censoring LGBTQ-themed books and curricula. Respondents also

said that elementary school was the most appropriate time for students to learn about LGBTQ topics in classes such as history, English and health education, according to the survey by The Trevor Project, a suicide prevention and mental health organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning youth.

“This poll emphasizes just how out of step recent political attacks aimed at LGBTQ students and their families are with public opinion,” said Sam Ames, The Trevor Project's director of advocacy & government affairs. “A majority of adults reject the government overreach we're witnessing across the country—whether it's banning books, censoring school curriculums or intervening in medical care decisions that are best left to doctors and parents.”

Here's a closer look at some of the survey's numbers:

- 57% of adults oppose blocking students from accessing LGBTQ content on the internet at school
- 56% oppose banning books on LGBTQ topics from school libraries
- 52% oppose barring classroom discussions about LGBTQ topics, including sexual orientation and gender identity

- More than half of adults agree that transgender minors should have access to gender-affirming hormone therapy if it's recommended by their doctor and supported by their parents

- Only one-third of the adults polled said lawmakers should be able to outlaw gender-affirming medical care for minors

The poll of 2,210 adults was conducted on Feb. 18-19. “All LGBTQ young people deserve access to safe, affirming learning environments and the health care they need,” Ames said. “We urge lawmakers to look at these data and to listen to their constituents' concerns before pushing politically unpopular, misguided policies that will cause real harm.”

“Don't say gay” challenged

A coalition of students, parents, educators and advocacy organizations has filed a federal complaint against Florida's new parents' rights law. The group, which includes organizations such as Equity Florida and the National Center for Lesbian Rights, contends that the “Don't Say Gay” law will “erase for an entire generation of Florida public school students the fact that LGBTQ people exist and have equal dignity.”

The plaintiffs also say that they have already been harmed by the law, which they argue was purposely left vague to intimidate administrators and teachers from covering LGBTQ topics. “I am frightened that this new law will prevent my daughter's teachers from protecting her from bullying at school,” Lindsay McClelland, mother of plaintiff Jane Doe, a transgender 5th-grader at a Florida public school, said in a statement. “All I want is for my daughter to be able to learn in a safe environment like any other student.”

By Matt Zalaznick





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Principal Power

Social justice, outdoor learning, mental health and less focus on test scores are keys to the post-COVID recovery process, principals say.



Prin cipals have never had a greater opportunity to be superheroes than they do now as they help their school communities rebound from COVID and other turbulent events of the last few years, S. Kamar Khoshaba says.

Part of that recovery process is allowing students, families and staff to discuss the pandemic, race relations and social-emotional wellbeing, among other pressing issues, says Khoshaba, principal of Western Branch Middle School in Virginia's Chesapeake Public Schools.

Khoshaba has formed three separate social justice advisory councils comprising staff, parents and students. The councils began work by reading the book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, which sparked

some robust and candid discussions around race relations. "We came at this in a vein of trying to understand instead of trying to be understood all the time, and people felt like they had a real voice and they were heard," he says. "I believe we now have deeper relations coming out of this adversity."

To gauge students' sense of belonging, Khoshaba stationed an "office on wheels" whiteboard in the school hallway. He asked students to write whether they felt comfortable in school. Feedback from students who said "no" has prompted the administration to alter dress codes and create another gender-neutral bathroom, among other actions. "This is real stuff," he says.

"This is qualitative data that's more important than any number generated by

a state test. This is how we can help kids feel better about themselves."

A better use for test scores

Don't worry about test scores.

That's what Frank Galligan, principal of Warwick Neck Elementary School in Rhode Island, told his teachers as the scale of the pandemic became apparent. That message hasn't become any less important even as students have returned to in-person instruction. Low test scores are not a big surprise after two years of disruptions. "We're using test scores to guide discussions, not to target teachers for not doing their jobs," says Galligan, who was recently named an outstanding first-year principal of the year. "We know test scores are going to be low. It's not anyone's fault, but it would be someone's

fault if we were not being proactive about addressing it.”

To reverse the academic impacts of COVID, Galligan and his teachers are focused on providing more small-group instruction while other students work in station rotations that include independent reading and an online ELA and math platform.

In New Mexico, project-based learning shifted outdoors during the height of the pandemic. That’s a change that will continue, says Principal Patricia Gallegos at San Antonito STEM Magnet Elementary in Albuquerque Public Schools. “We did a lot of thinking about how to get kids outside and tie in our lessons—how to get them moving and not keep them in front of a screen for five hours a day,” says Gallegos, who was just named a principal of the year by Magnet Schools of America.

At San Antonito, over the last two years teachers integrated STEM learning more deeply into hikes and scavenger hunts, allowing students—and their families—to collect objects and make

PowerPoint reports about their explorations. Tech integration is also key at the 1-to-1 school, so teachers—even during remote instruction—encouraged students to use their Chromebooks to photograph the environments in their own backyards.

Last summer, the school built a second outdoor classroom so teachers could bring even more learning activities outdoors, allowing students to apply concepts they learn in the classroom to the natural world, Gallegos says.

“It made us a better school”

Newly created “Take a Break” stations offer both students and staff at West View Elementary School in rural Tennessee a place to calm themselves as the stress of the pandemic lingers, Principal Robin Street says.

Students can let teachers know they need a break and go to the supervised break station that offers puzzles, books and writing prompts. Adults can check in on students and bring in a counselor if needed. Other times, students just need

to sit for a few minutes before they return to class, says Street, whose school is part of Washington County Schools. West View Elementary remained on remote instruction for large parts of 2021, she adds. “The kids weren’t used to sitting still and learning,” Street says.

And when teachers need a break, they can go to a designated room with comfortable furniture and soft music. Street or the assistant principal covers that teacher’s class while they are recharging. And she continues to provide teachers with ample time to collaborate and share ideas about instruction and social-emotional support. “Even though the pandemic was a terrible thing to go through, it made us a better school,” she says.

Attending to the heart

Training educators and staff on trauma-informed care became a COVID priority that will remain imperative as Principal Sabrina McClard’s students recover from the turbulence of the past two years. That work began in March 2020 when schools shut down and McClard’s team at J.W. Wiseman Elementary School in Tennessee’s Sumner County Schools began conducting weekly check-ins with each student and their families, McClard says.

“Sometimes in schools, you have adults who want what’s best for kids but don’t understand trauma because they didn’t experience it as a child, so it’s hard for them to relate when a kid has a major meltdown,” she says. “It’s hard to separate the behavior from the reason the behavior is occurring.”

Another part of trauma-informed and social-emotional work is mentoring students. McClard herself mentors several students with whom she meets weekly, regardless of academic performance or any behavioral issues with which they may be struggling. “Kids come to school and expect academic support, which is always there, and sometimes they need more,” she says. “They need somebody who’s going to attend to the heart; someone who is going to sit and talk about their interests that have nothing to do with academics.” DA

Making room for mental health

Many barriers can prevent students from getting adequate mental health care. The surging need for treatment seen early on in the pandemic motivated principal John Gies to open a mental health clinic in his building, Shelby High School.

COVID relief funds allowed the district, Shelby City Schools in Ohio, to forge a deeper relationship with its local counseling partner, says Gies. Counselors visit the school at least once a week and can also be called in as needed. “Our counselors are maxed out,” Gies says. “This is taking the kids who have some really big issues off their plates.”

The district is also putting relief funds toward co-pays so counseling is free for students and families. On-site treatment also means parents don’t have to take time off work, Gies says. The counselors provide other services as well, such as conducting drug and alcohol assessments if student-athletes fail drug tests.

“The rise in anxiety and the stress levels have just been pushed to a height that we haven’t seen for a long time, or maybe ever,” Gies says. “We have situations where kids are screaming over something that a couple of years ago wouldn’t have been a big deal. You have to figure out what’s causing the behavior.”

Matt Zalaznick is DA’s senior writer.

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Phoenix district adopts its third McGraw Hill curriculum

Madison School District continues eight-year partnership by adopting *Inspire Science* to better align with Arizona standards

When the state of Arizona updated its science standards in 2018, the Madison School District had already been using an outdated science program, so the Phoenix-based school system decided it was an ideal time to adopt a better aligned curriculum.

The district soon sent out an RFP, and one of the publishers that responded was McGraw Hill Education.

Coming out on top of “a rigorous adoption process”

A team of educators, including the district’s instructional coach and Executive Director for Curriculum and Instruction Mike Winters, compared each proposal against the district’s evaluation rubric. “We have a very rigorous adoption process at Madison,” says Winters. “First and foremost, the new curriculum needed to be aligned to the new standards.” Other high priorities included hands-on learning opportunities, both print and digital formats, high-quality customer service and PD resources.

McGraw Hill Education and a few other publishers were given the opportunity to present their programs to Winters, the district’s instructional coach and two teachers from each of the district’s 15 schools. The committee then chose to pilot McGraw Hill’s *Inspire Science* and another program for one quarter each in grades 4 through 8. These pilots were then followed by surveys that the district sent to teachers, parents, students and the community that asked for their opinions of the programs. “I have done four adoptions at Madison, and this one received the most community input,” says Winters.

Based on the pilot and survey results, he and the committee selected



Inspire Science, and presented their choice to the district’s governing board, which approved the program for an August 2019 implementation. Winters says the program met all the district’s criteria for a new science curriculum.

One-stop shop eliminates learning curve, streamlines online learning

One advantage of *Inspire Science* was that Madison had already been using McGraw Hill programs for math and ELA, so teachers were already familiar with how the curriculum worked. “This created a one-stop shop for us when it comes to online access, which would come in handy a few months later when COVID-19 hit,” says Winters. “We use single sign-on, so when a student logs into Google, they have access to all our McGraw Hill programs. When we went fully online due to the pandemic, there was no learning curve in terms of how to access these programs.”

In addition to having an online component, Winters says that *Inspire Science*’s embedded videos helped keep students engaged and inspired during remote learning.

Importance of ongoing PD

Since PD was a deciding factor in choosing McGraw Hill, Madison took advantage of the professional learning included with the program. Right before the school year began, McGraw Hill trainers came on-site for a three-hour training session. These trainers then returned a month into the fall semester to conduct a follow up session.

“They listened to our questions and concerns, then tailored their PD to meet our needs,” says Winters. The district also provided its own PD due to its familiarity with McGraw Hill.

“I have been working with McGraw Hill Education for eight years now, and it has been a pleasure,” adds Winters. “They have been nothing but responsive. I can’t say enough about their customer service.”

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Making Summer School More Like Summer Camp

By Matt Zalaznick



Here's one idea for K-12 educators now designing their summer school programs: You can teach literacy through fishing.

Here's an idea for K-12 educators now designing their summer school programs: You *can* teach literacy through fishing.

That, along with dozens of other integrated activities, is what Washington County Public Schools in Maryland has in store for summer. The camp-like atmosphere was a big success last summer, and administrators expect the same for 2022 as they look to help students reengage and rebound from another year of disruptions, says Gary Willow, the district's associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction. "You can build literacy all around a fishing camp—what's the best type of bait, what's the best type of hook, what's the best time to go fishing," Willow says. "Kids will read that. You can incorporate writing. If kids are signing up, they already have that interest."

Closing gaps that are growing

Like last summer, any Washington County elementary or middle school student can attend the various camps in robotics, athletics, coding, cooking and dance, among other subjects. Students can sign up for multiple camps, one week after another. The ideas for the camps were generated by teachers who have expertise in each subject and who will work with administrators to incorporate math and literacy standards.

"This summer, we're going to focus more on embedding the literacy and

math skills more consistently within the camps," Willow notes. "Last summer, just getting students engaged and back in school was the big priority."

The district will again offer small group tutoring to middle and elementary schoolers, and students moving from 8th to 9th grade will also be able to participate in a transition program. An extended high school program will be more traditional, allowing students to earn new credits and recover lost credits, Willow says.

"We had academic gaps before COVID and COVID expanded them," Willow says. "Now, everything we're doing is centered around closing those gaps."

Hyper-collaboration and hyper-creativity

Summer school can be both the most entrepreneurial and most unequal season in education—a time when students can learn in more engaging ways or continue to face long-embedded inequities.

The divide is yet another reason why district leaders should work to build summer camp-style activities, says Aaron Philip Dworkin, CEO of the National Summer Learning Association.

It's also why Dworkin prefers the phrase "summer learning" to "summer school"—because the latter has connotations of punishment, remedial enrichment, stuffy classrooms and adults making all the decisions. "Summer learning can be

academic plus enrichment plus health and fitness, and it doesn't have to happen in buildings—you can have certified teachers working at an aquarium," Dworkin says. "Combine summer school and summer

What are your summer priorities?

A survey of educators by Savvas Learning Company identified the top curriculum needs heading into the summer:

1. Reading/English language arts—especially reading comprehension and writing support
2. Math skills
3. Curriculum to remediate and close learning gaps
4. Staff/teachers
5. Three-way tie: social-emotional learning, online lessons, engaging materials

About half the respondents also said they would use a screener or diagnostic test to identify students' areas of need and to monitor progress during summer school. "This summer will be a critical time to re-energize learning, and school districts are looking for evidence-based learning materials that are easy to use," said Bethlam Forsa, Savvas' CEO. "That is why it is important to develop flexible, high-quality math and reading programs designed to maximize valuable teaching time."



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Making Summer School More Like Summer Camp

camp. Make it so fun and engaging that it's voluntary and people will come."

Thanks to American Rescue Plan relief funds, districts have an unprecedented level of funding to develop more appealing summer programs to help students recover learning disrupted by the delta and omicron variants this school year. But Dworkin urges district leaders not to try to be experts at everything. If they have been laser-focused on academics, they should strongly consider partnering with a community organization that can provide social-emotional enrichment and outdoor activities or field trips.

Summer is also an opportunity to engage students in different settings. High school students looking for summer jobs will be most eager to participate in paid internships. Some districts have developed programs in which students are paid to take math or English in the mornings and then go to internships where they may also begin working toward certifications. Students in Charlotte, North Carolina, for instance, can earn certifications in Microsoft programs.

Administrators can contend with the challenge of enrollment by ensuring their summer programs are widely publicized and tailored to the families who will be best served by the programs. Districts can use The National Summer Learning Association's DiscoverSummer website as one recruitment tool. "There's a lot of hyper-collaboration and hyper-creativity at the local level," Dworkin says. "This is on people's radar in ways it's never been before."

Summer school is "our jam"

On the other side of the country, the Umatilla School District in Oregon will again offer a blend of traditional instruction in the morning and STEAM camps in the afternoon. Students who participated last summer showed significant growth, Superintendent Heidi Sipe says.

Like Washington County, Umatilla's summer programs are open to all students. Still, the district can maintain a student-to-teacher ratio of 10-to-1 or lower. And the STEAM camps run the gamut from art to social-emotional learn-

ing to outdoor survival, robotics, drones and career-and-technical education.

An added element for high school students will be visits to area community colleges and certificate programs. High school students will also be hired to help teach the STEAM camps. Additionally, the district has hired a liaison to encourage migrant families to enroll their children in summer school.

Because there is wide acceptance of summer school in the community, about 35% of the district's students were en-

rolled last year, Sipe says. Last summer, high schoolers recovered a substantial number of credits. Students transitioning into kindergarten also showed significant gains from summer school, Sipe says.

District educators will continue to look at data to determine what academic skills should be the focus of summer school instruction. "We love extended learning," Sipe says. "After-school and summer school, that's our jam." **DA**

Matt Zalaznick is DA's senior writer.



5 keys to planning summer learning programs

Summer schools can produce big gains for students in math, reading and social-emotional skills. Districts now have a surplus of American Rescue Plan relief funds to support the extensive planning needed to build effective, high-quality programs, says Catherine H. Augustine, a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation. Augustine detailed five keys to creating high-quality summer learning:

- 1 Begin planning early in the school year.** Federal relief funds could allow administrators to hire or reassign an employee to be solely responsible for managing the summer school planning process, which also requires work on transportation, nutrition, human resources and other components of the regular school year.
- 2 Get your curriculum in place early:** Administrators should have lessons plans in place because during the summer even the best teachers don't have to build a curriculum. Designers must also understand what progress students made during the school year to ensure the summer curriculum meets their learning needs.
- 3 Summer learning takes time:** Students need at least five weeks of instruction and an hour-and-a-half per subject each day. This schedule also accounts for the probability that students won't have perfect attendance during the summer.
- 4 Climate is crucial:** Kids are most likely to attend when they feel wanted by educators who have created warm and welcoming climates. Schools can also improve attendance by blending in activities like rock climbing and flag football in the afternoons.
- 5 Recruit your best teachers:** Even the most dedicated teachers need enticements to work summer schools; these can include higher pay, bonuses and on-site childcare—"whatever districts can do to make it more attractive for high-quality teachers who are going to bring energy and enthusiasm, and who believe in the mission of helping kids over summer."

The additional funding can also enable schools to add a tutoring element to the summer program. While Augustine recommends a summer school class size of 12 or less, students may also need one-on-one or small group interventions if they struggle. "A quality summer program is really hard to pull off," Augustine says. "At a time when a lot of kids don't have the opportunity to go to a fancy summer camp or do other things, why not provide them with the same opportunity that their wealthier peers will have."

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How the pandemic highlighted the need for digital literacy education

Q&A with [Keith Oelrich](#), CEO, Learning.com

A pioneer in the K-12 online education market since 2000, Keith Oelrich joined Learning.com as CEO in 2012. He has served as CEO of several companies which have collectively provided K-12 online education programs to thousands of districts, tens of thousands of schools and millions of students and their families.

How has the pandemic highlighted the digital divide?

Two years ago, the digital world suddenly became significantly more important, when so much of our lives switched to being remote. Unfortunately, the pandemic also highlighted—and even redefined—the digital divide. The sudden, widespread transition to telehealth, remote work and online learning required people to figure out how to live their lives in an almost entirely digital way. As a result, there was a big increase in awareness of the digital skills gap, and recognition that many K-12 students—as well as adults—lack the digital skills they need to successfully navigate this new normal.

One of the effects of that is that we've seen a change in the definition of the term "digital divide" itself. It was once defined as the gap between those with devices and internet connectivity, and those without. But now, people are realizing that there is a third leg to that stool. It isn't just about devices and broadband access; people also need digital skills in order to use these tools effectively and safely. In other words, you can buy someone a car and fill it with fuel, but they also need to learn how to drive. More people are understanding that the digital divide also includes this gap in digital skills.

What is digital equity and why is it important?

Digital equity is the end goal of closing the digital divide. It is about ensuring that all citizens and communities have access to our digital economy and digital society. The world is only becoming more reliant on digital services, and digital skills are only becoming more important as a result. When it comes to the workforce, there are estimates that low productivity due to a lack of digital skills costs the U.S. economy \$2.5 trillion every year. It is a huge challenge that is only becoming bigger.



We know that a large percentage of lower skilled jobs have been and will continue to be replaced by automation and artificial intelligence in the future. On the other hand, millions of new jobs are going to be created in the future, but those will be higher skilled, knowledge economy jobs that will require digital skills.

What are some of the most common barriers to digital equity?

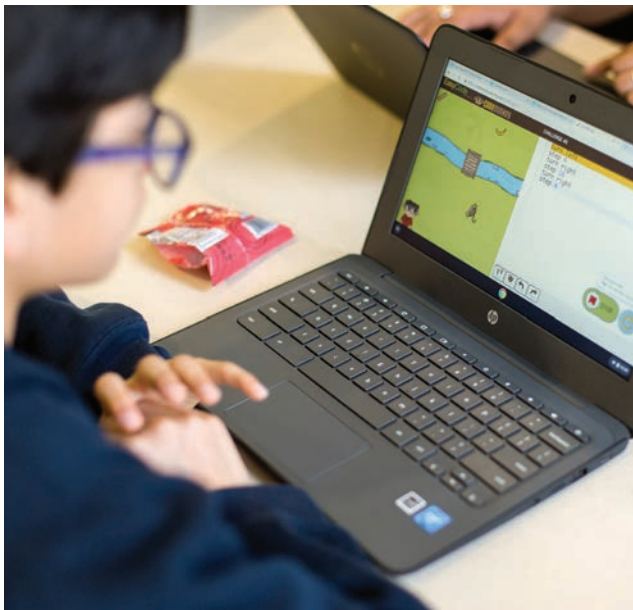
The two most common barriers are simply economics and geography. The places where the digital divide is greatest tend to be low-income or physically remote areas. Part of the reason for that is that commercial broadband providers don't have an economic incentive to go the last mile into those areas.

Beyond those, not understanding the importance of digital skills is another barrier to equity. It is commonly believed that kids are born "digital natives" because they had access to smartphones and other devices right away, and therefore don't need to learn digital skills. That misconception can also prevent us from taking action to reduce digital inequity.

Fortunately, that is beginning to change. Efforts are being undertaken at the state and federal levels all over the country to address digital equity in a variety of ways.

Why is it a misconception to think that young students today are "digital natives" and innately know how to use technology effectively?

Kids today have access to incredibly sophisticated technology, and while they know how to swipe touchscreens, text their friends and post to social media, that is different from having the digital skills required to be successful in school, as well as in college and later on in their careers.



Digital skills education is about teaching kids to be *creators* with technology, instead of just being *consumers* of technology. That requires a more advanced set of skills, which kids don't just have innately or acquire on their own.

Learning.com offers a Digital Literacy Assessment, which is aligned to the ISTE Standards for Students and tests kids on their digital skills based on those standards. In over five years of conducting those assessments with tens of thousands of K-12 students, we found that only 25 percent of students tested as proficient. Clearly, it's a misconception that kids already have all the digital skills they need.

What is the difference between digital literacy and media literacy?

Media or information literacy is just one aspect of digital literacy. Teaching kids to discern fact from opinion and understand the reliability of sources has become so vitally important in today's media environment, in which so many people get their news from social media, for example. It has been said that people often look online not for information, but for affirmation of what they already believe, and that should be a big concern for everyone. Many educators today are beginning to understand the importance of information literacy and that it needs to be taught to students from the earliest grades.

Thinking in terms of teaching kids to become creators instead of just consumers, digital literacy is about the creative side, while media or information literacy is about bringing critical thinking to the consumption side and learning how to be discerning about the media we consume and its reliability.

“Kids today have access to incredibly sophisticated technology, and while they know how to swipe touchscreens, text their friends and post to social media, that is different from having the digital skills required to be successful in school, in college and later in their careers.”

The good news when it comes to these issues is that there are solutions, resources and lessons to help, like the EasyTech curriculum from Learning.com.

What are some ways that districts can work to close these digital divides, and better ensure that students and teachers can use technology safely and effectively?

There are four main strategies that administrators should focus on. First, start early, by making sure we introduce these concepts in the earliest elementary grades. Second, increase awareness by addressing misconceptions and reinforcing the need for and importance of digital skills education in your district. Third, look for evidence of efficacy by closely monitoring the effectiveness of your digital tools and connecting them to achievement measures. Digital skills instruction can have a direct positive impact on learning and test scores. And finally, adopt a comprehensive digital skills curriculum that can be used across grades K-12.

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To learn more about the EasyTech digital literacy curriculum, go to [Learning.com](https://www.learning.com)

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Next Gen Family Engagement

In many places, parents and educators are working more closely together than they did two years ago.

By Matt Zalaznick

Among the lasting impacts of the pandemic experience in Chelsea Public Schools, which is 87% Latino, are the bilingual family liaisons Superintendent Almi G. Abeyta has hired at each of her schools over the last two years.

The liaisons in the Boston-area district have helped families with emergencies, such as providing support after a house fire, and assistance with day-to-day needs, such as serving as interpreters. The liaisons are now working with families to ease students' transitions from elementary to middle school. "I have always believed that our families know more about our students in many ways than we do," Abeyta says. "Parents are our partners, and we need to co-design with them and work alongside them and welcome them into our schools."

Transformative togetherness

Chelsea Public Schools' moves are reflective of the ways district leaders across the country have ramped up family engagement efforts even further over the last two years. In many places, parents and educators worked more closely together than ever before as schools supplied students with

instructional technology early in the pandemic and families helped students with remote instruction.

The district will also continue to hold some meetings over Zoom because that option has increased family participation substantially, says Abeyta, adding that family engagement was a top priority in the strategic plan she implemented prior to COVID. Still, she and her team kicked family engagement into even higher gear when schools shifted to remote learning in 2020. During the following summer, Abeyta, with support from the union, sent teachers to students' homes anticipating that the 2020-21 school year would begin virtually.

These meetings, which the district calls "trust visits," took place on porches and sidewalks, in front yards and under tents outside school buildings. Teachers were given some professional development in how to conduct the visits and some ideas for family discussions. The teachers also delivered books, art supplies and other learning materials. "We called it the Hopes and Dreams protocol," Abeyta says. "It was, 'Tell me about your students.' 'What are your hopes and dreams for your children?'"



The effort paid off when Abeyta heard a teacher teaching remotely from a classroom at the beginning of the school year. As students logged on, the teacher talked to the students about how fortunate it was that they'd already met in person. It also meant the teachers could reach out to parents, whom they'd also already met, if a student wasn't logging on or was struggling in other ways. "It was a very positive way to start a year in remote learning," she says. "It meant the first interaction with a parent wasn't going to be a negative one."

Home visits are among the best ways to build strong relationships with families, says Alison Socol, assistant director of P-12 Policy at The Education Trust, which advocates for equity in the education system.

"As a former educator who did home visits, I saw firsthand how it transformed my relationships who did not feel welcomed or empowered to come and talk with me and my colleagues," Socol says.

The wholesale switch to virtual learning in 2022 and the ongoing disruptions



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of the pandemic have led many districts to enhance and diversify their family engagement work beyond the most vocal parents. Leaders have been particularly focused on underserved and marginalized families, Socol says. “As terrible as the pandemic has been, it has given families unique insight into their child’s learning,” Socol says. “Many families now feel more empowered to demand equity and high-quality education.”

Families are sharing more

Educators in Metro Nashville Public Schools are continuing their regular check-ins with students and families this spring through an initiative the district launched at the outset of the pandemic when instruction was fully remote.

In summer 2020, with the school year set to begin virtually, educators were particularly concerned about not being able to connect with students. So, all 80,000 students were placed into cohorts of about 10-12, and paired with an educator who would check in on them every two weeks, says Keri Randolph, the district’s chief strategy officer who developed the Navigators program. The check-ins, then and now, cover students’ mental health and academic needs as well as their family’s food, housing and other immediate needs.

Nowadays, teachers and other staff conduct their monthly check-ins in person during the school day. Each week, students use an online platform to describe



How to Be More Welcoming

The American Rescue Plan identified family engagement as a key priority. Relief funding, for example, is allowing district leaders to provide more extensive translation services for the families of English learners and do more one-on-one outreach to parents.

“We’re seeing more districts recognize that traditional ‘parent nights’ at a single time and in one language aren’t logistically accessible or welcoming to all families,” says Alison Socol, assistant director of P-12 Policy at The Education Trust, which advocates for equity in the education system.

District leaders may be able to leverage the strong partnerships they’ve formed

with families and community organizations as they grappled with staff shortages from the classroom to the lunchroom. The nonprofit Future Forward Literacy combines tutoring and family engagement to address unfinished learning. The program also provides guidance and resources for families in supporting their children’s literacy development at home, Socol says.

Administrators should also be holding their states accountable around family engagement, and not just when it comes to funding. States can also set family engagement goals, share best practices and provide districts with feedback and access to professional development programs.

how they’re feeling and then complete a self-reflection exercise. The system sends alerts to staff if a student appears to be in crisis and many need more intensive attention from the district or from outside providers. This is occurring about once out of every 100 check-ins, Randolph says.

“This has been a very powerful tool with social media and the way students communicate now,” Randolph says. “Students can enter without having to say to an adult how they’re doing. We have been able to intervene and support students in a more robust way, particularly around mental health.”

Standing up the Navigator program in a district of 130 schools does come with challenges of scale. Professional de-

velopment, however, is not among them, Randolph says. The district created short videos on family outreach for staff to watch and provided scripts for the check-ins. Each school has a program lead who can provide further support for staff.

The data can be viewed at the district and school levels. Heat maps can show hotspots of particular needs that help educators establish support hubs in various communities. The data collected is also helping educators set academic goals with students. “As these relationships build over time, families and students are sharing more about their needs,” Randolph says. **DA**

Matt Zalaznick is DA’s senior writer.





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“Anytime, anywhere” PD is in for 2022

Given staffing shortages, it’s hard enough to keep schools open, let alone allow time for teachers to be out of the classroom for trainings. Technology is enabling us to flip this outdated model.

By Amy Dunkin

Dynamic digital platforms, remote access anytime, anywhere, artificial intelligence, data-driven insights, and differentiated instruction: The pandemic has accelerated ed tech usage in the classroom, and most students are already engaging with innovative technologies today. We may not talk about it as much, but the same technological advancements have the power to transform teacher education and professional development.

Teachers are welcoming the opportunity to control the pace and place of their own learning based on their unique needs. HMH’s latest Educator Confidence Report showed that not only are educators more confident in their use of technology than ever before, but 77% believe that technology will help them be better teachers moving forward.

The needs of a first-year teacher compared to one with a decade of tenure are also invariably going to be different, so a one-size-fits-all approach is not the best use of everyone’s time. Teachers want training and coaching that is aligned to the needs of their instruction and their students, learning from both peers and experts alike as part of a community of practice.

Now, technology is enabling us to really meet teachers where they are in their professional journey.

The “New PD” is:

On-demand and flexible

With integrated technology, learning is ongoing and does not stop once the ‘PD day’ is over. At HMH, this takes many forms, and one is on-demand coaching. Teachers value the continuous opportunity to connect with a coach, all former or current educators. Through

The needs of a first-year teacher compared to one with a decade of tenure are also invariably going to be different, so a one-size-fits-all approach is not the best use of everyone’s time.

live, on-demand virtual sessions, teachers receive immediate useful guidance when they need it most, as compared to the old model of in-classroom observation followed by feedback afterwards. They always have a “coach in their corner.” This is more respectful of the teacher as a learner, reduces disruption and increases flexibility and access to professional services. PD is an ongoing process and teachers learn best when given the flexibility to choose their own PD structure.

Built with cutting-edge tech

Like differentiated learning for students through A.I., an algorithm can consider teaching experience, what’s being taught and more, and then personalize tools. The algorithm learns and gets more sophisticated, providing better feedback and recommendations, enabling a personalized pathway to teacher success. This makes professional learning smarter over time and improves the experience for educators, giving them time to focus on critical connections with their students.

An opportunity for two-way conversation

Tech not only provides teachers with improved access to information and ideas,

but it also allows for a stronger feedback loop. There’s been so much focus on innovation for students—how might that innovation be used to support teachers? And might we let teacher voices inform how we innovate as a learning technology company? Listening to teachers and hearing their concerns is a fundamental way to meet the needs of educators and the students in their care.

The time is now

We’ve seen progress, but still, educator confidence in the profession is at its second-lowest since HMH launched the Educator Confidence Report six years ago. More than ever, there is a desire for control, flexibility, and the integration of on-demand technology in the workplace. At HMH, we see this as a call to action. By reworking and reexamining our professional development practices, we are focusing on the future of education. With teachers newly attuned to the tech world from having to pivot so quickly into hybrid and remote environments, they are primed to push the boundaries of tech not only in their classrooms but in their own growth.

2022 will be the year for the ed tech industry to better support teachers through on-demand and tech-integrated professional development that helps get greater, faster results for teacher, and ultimately student, success. **DA**

Amy Dunkin is EVP and general manager of Professional Services at ed tech company Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. She has a Master of Business Administration from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Arts from Northwestern University.



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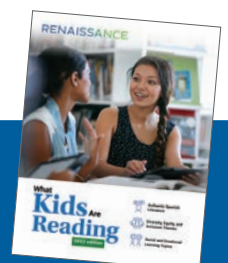
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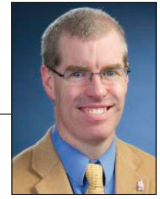
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To Improve Ed Tech, Focus on Feedback

Automated feedback can supplement in-person instruction by making teachers' jobs easier while personalizing student experience.

By Neil Heffernan

The pandemic seriously tested the state of educational technology. In a lot of respects, it was found wanting. Teachers complained that, even before the pandemic, ed tech was often rolled out without their input and without sufficient training. Students complained that ed tech was impersonal and confusing. And parents grew frustrated with misfiring apps, dropped connections, and lost learning.

As students—hopefully—finally return to their classrooms, some are calling for a serious reappraisal of the role of ed tech in students' education

There is certainly a great deal of room for improvement, but as we rethink the role of ed tech in a post-pandemic world, it's worth focusing on what works well in the field and building on it; in particular, automated feedback, which can supplement in-person instruction by making teachers' jobs easier while personalizing the student experience.

One of the most common complaints about ed tech—especially in subjects like math, where pencil and paper still dominate—is that it lacks the rich, in-depth interactive quality of one-on-one teaching. Without the constant feedback provided by the best teachers and tutors, students get lost, lose interest or spin their wheels in frustration.

It doesn't have to be this way. Lots of ed tech products are integrating automated tools to improve student engagement and success while making grading and feedback easier for teachers.

Ed tech platforms and tools, like Carnegie Learning and Zearn, have shown success with formative feedback, giving students immediate, scaffolded feedback to support improved student performance. Although the earliest successes with integrated feedback have come with math platforms, automated feedback on tasks like writing is rapidly evolving as well, leveraging advances in natural language processing technology.

The best feedback tools recognize there is more than one way to come to a solution; it can offer students and teachers multiple feedback types; and it can adjust depending on the individual student's particular struggle and context. In other words, it must respond to students' input more like a human tutor might.

The next steps for automated feedback, therefore, involve testing feedback to determine what works best for students

There is certainly a great deal of room for improvement, but as we rethink the role of ed tech in a post-pandemic world, it's worth focusing on what works well in the field and building on it.

and teachers. ASSISTments, a math homework platform I developed at the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, is piloting a feedback tool called QUICK-Comments that allows teachers to quickly select from several different recommended feedback messages selected by AI. The AI improves its recommendations over time, learning through iteration what works best for students and teachers.

Moreover, feedback can become more responsive if we leverage the best human tutors and integrate them into automated feedback tools. One thing good human tutors consistently do well is to detect frustration or disengagement in their pupils and adjust instruction accordingly. High-cost physical sensors can detect student affect, but sophisticated lower-cost detectors that respond to students' actions within the software are being developed as well. As we continue to improve our understanding of the interaction between students and tutoring programs, so will the feedback these systems can offer students to keep them engaged, challenged and learning.

Finally, we should also begin to work on supporting tutors with AI the ways we have been supporting teachers. Through programs like Education, Innovation and Research grant, the Department of Education is helping researchers and technologists like my team explore enhancing in-person tutoring to help remediate COVID-related learning loss.

After the pandemic, ed tech can resume doing what it does best, supporting human teachers and tutors rather than trying to stand in for them. If we learn the right lessons from the pandemic, the improvements to instruction and student learning can be great. **DA**

Neil Heffernan is the William Smith Dean's Professor of Computer Science at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. He developed ASSISTments, a web-based learning platform, with his wife Cristina Heffernan.



Robot Education

How **coding robots** are helping shape the future of STEM education

iRobot CEO Colin Angle shares his path to STEM and his company's commitment to empowering the next generation of builders

Q&A with **Colin Angle**, CEO, iRobot

How did you discover your passion for STEM?

Even as a small child, I was drawn to building things, tearing them apart and fixing them. That set the stage for a path of hands-on learning and interest in how things work from a technological perspective. Then I remember growing up, I couldn't memorize my multiplication tables. I ended up in remedial math where one of my teachers noticed I was bored, and a magical thing happened: They gave me a calculator. Having this tool helped me discover my knack for evaluative thinking, and my interest in applying it to solve open-ended, real-world problems. These skills are what later led us to invent our Roomba robot vacuum, now in homes across the globe.

What do you believe impedes STEM education in K-12?

The idea used to be that someone was smart if they could remember things, but we need to challenge ourselves about the relevancy of that definition, because nowadays facts are found easily. The more valuable commodity that's emerging is how we look for those facts. How do we synthesize those facts into solving problems we might face?

When I'm interviewing someone, the question is less "what do you know?" and more "what have you accomplished that will convince us you're a good fit?" We ask how they solve problems, where they go to solve them, and what skills or tools they employ. I think there's value in shifting to a teaching model that gives students the tools they need to come up with meaningful solutions. It's a complicated mission, but I think that that's where I would like to see our education going.

How does the iRobot Root® coding robot help overcome these barriers to STEM education?

When students see a robot in front of them, and not just on TV, their wonder and curiosity multiply beyond what you might expect. Then, when you tell them that they can learn how to control it, all they want to know is "how?" So, when thinking about how iRobot can improve access to and interest in STEM education, the idea that we can teach with robots is something we find incredibly powerful. And our Root coding robot does that in some super-cool ways.

The robot comes to life—drawing, making music and exploring its surroundings—through coding commands given by students in its companion iRobot Coding App.



"Students are unknowingly practicing multi-disciplinary learning and redefining what STEM can mean in their lives."

The Root is equipped with a multitude of sensors, giving it the ability to drive, draw, detect touch, light up, and play music. iRobot also offers educators a number of lessons in the iRobot Education Learning Library that support social and emotional learning (SEL) skill competencies, like peer interaction and responsible decision-making. These lessons, such as "The Kind Playground," provide educators with new resources that help students build emotional intelligence and become responsible global citizens, through a STEM lens.

What is unique about the Root® robot's approach compared to other coding robots?

What makes Root unique is its interactive capabilities and programming dimension—you can program the robot across three levels, so it grows alongside students as their skills advance. At Level 1, code is purely icon-based, ideal for beginners and non-readers. At Level 2, it infuses text with icons, providing greater precision with math, logic, and flow control statements. At Level 3, it reaches a complete text block interface teaching Python, a high-level programming language. With Root—as classrooms work together to navigate Root through a math maze, use code to finish a story, or program the robot to draw a rocket ship—students are unknowingly practicing multi-disciplinary learning and redefining what STEM can mean in their lives.

For more information, please visit edu.irobot.com/root



Let's Just Teach

A director of math and science argues that going back to basics is the way forward.

By Dr. Christine Schepeler

Something is happening in our schools. After two years of upheaval, and in some cases, trauma, we are all dysregulated. We do not have the energy to invest in going above and beyond. We do not have the patience to navigate the quagmire of “well-intentioned” policies and procedures, layered on top of one another, that have ruled our classrooms and our lives for the better part of our careers. The only way to move forward is to go back to basics and embrace the core functions of our jobs in ways that have sometimes felt impossible.

Burnout is real, and precedes COVID

While there's currently no indication that teachers nationally are leaving the profession en masse, according to an EdWeek Research Center survey, more than half of teachers said they were somewhat or very likely to leave the profession. About a third said they would have answered that way if they'd been asked before the pandemic began. In fact, as EducationWeek reported, in 2015, “78% of teachers reported feeling physically and emotionally exhausted.” Imagine what that number is likely to be today.

Essential roles

One thing that likely makes burnout difficult to navigate is the differing roles of principals from district to district. Is the principal also the instructional leader? Do they represent the parents? Is their focus compliance with state and federal guidelines? Are they the chief safety officer—and if so, how does that role change in a pandemic that seems like it will ebb and flow forever? As a teacher, I want to see school leaders give teachers autonomy, support growth in their



practice, be consistent with student behavior, respect teachers' time, and cover teachers' backs in tough parent conversations.

What can we do?

Systemic change takes time, but as individuals we can begin working toward healthier and more nurturing classrooms every day. Here are a few steps we can take.

Social-emotional learning is hugely important, especially right now. We have to stop thinking about it as a separate thing that we do as a break from our other work. SEL should be embedded with content.

Community building must be more intentional than ever before. Educators just don't have the same “street cred” we had with students before remote learning, and administrators have lost it with teachers. We can rebuild that credibility through something as simple as getting out of our silos. Grade papers in the hallway, so you can see students as they go to the restroom or grab books out of their lockers. Schedule lunches with small groups of students. Just get your face in front of them. If there is something

that can be achieved in a five-minute conversation versus an email or logging information into a database, err on the side of face-to-face interaction.

Reevaluate grading practices. Do you really need to grade four assignments each week? Do those grades provide the students receiving them with valuable feedback, or would they get more out of a 5-10-minute conversation?

Teacher accountability practices are necessary, but so many systems and processes end up piling onerous busy work and bookkeeping on teachers, robbing them of time and energy that should be devoted to helping students grow. If administrators invested time in visiting classrooms, they could tell pretty quickly who an effective teacher is and who is not. It would also give them insight into what specific professional development opportunities are appropriate for individual teachers.

Democratic principles in the classroom will encourage the growth of both community and individual relationships. We can be a little less prescriptive and allow students' voices and interests to lead our teaching as much as possible.

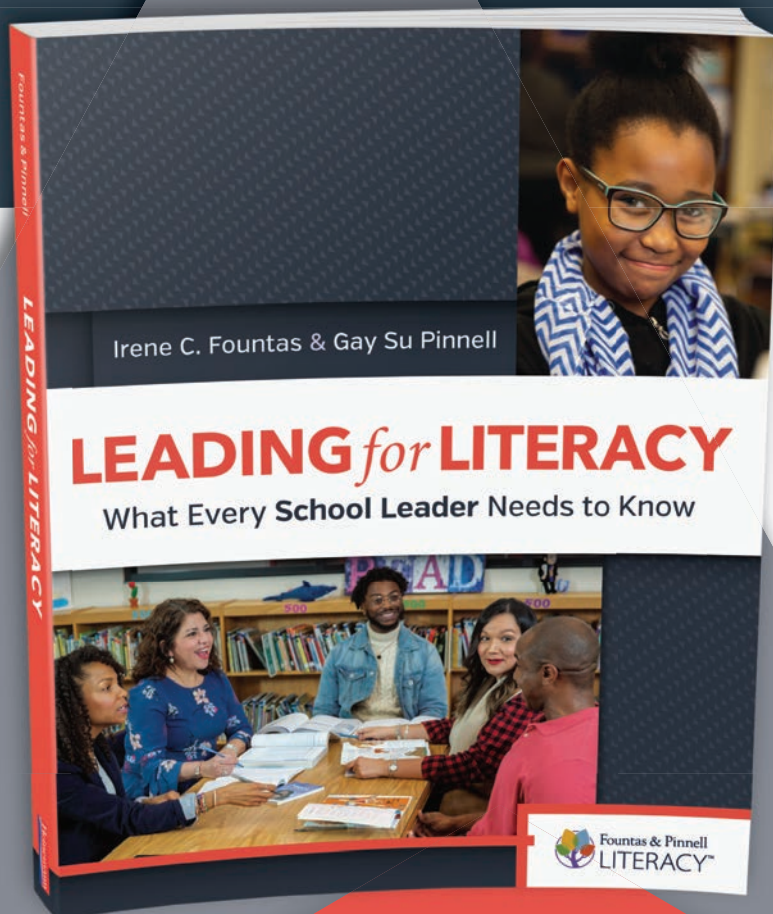
Our processes are often cumbersome and not in service of focusing on the things that make education better. Now is the time to reevaluate our policies and practices and do our best to get back to basics. **DA**

Dr. Christine Schepeler is the director of partnerships at STEM Ed Innovators, a nonprofit committed to democratizing STEM education. She can be reached at christine.s@stemedinnovators.org.

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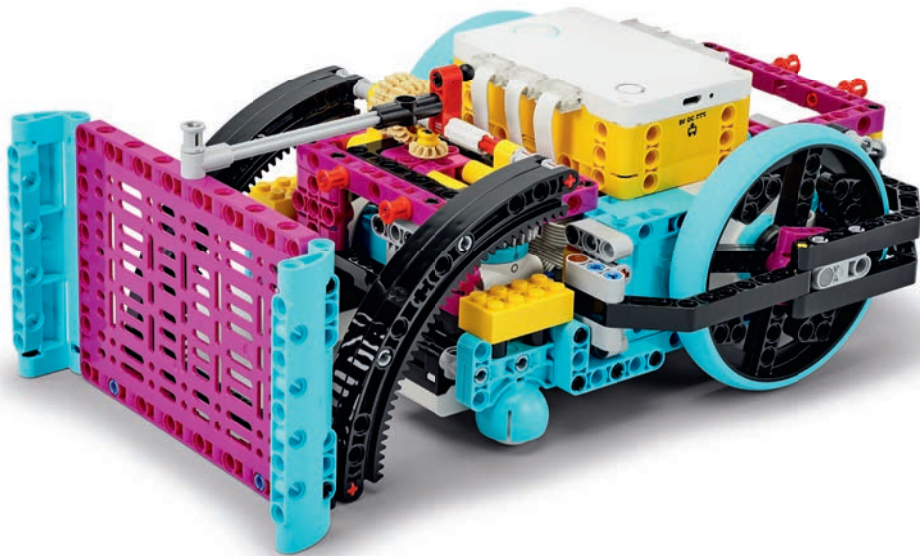


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