



**District Administration®**

September 2022

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How it could help increase teacher retention **24**

**Student monitoring**  
It's meant to help students, but is it really hurting them? **26**

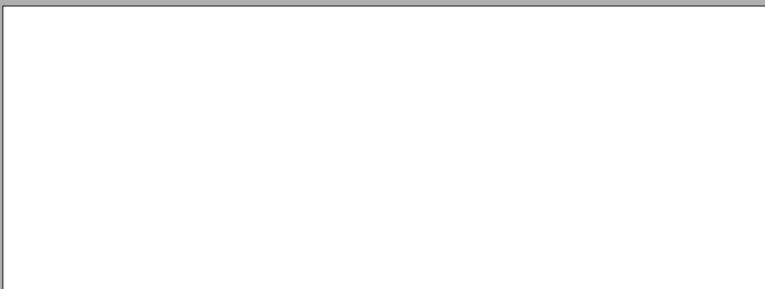
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Welcome back to the school year. I hope you found time to relax and enjoy the company of your friends and family, and to recharge mentally,

before diving back in.

The proverbial waters are turbulent, to say the least. From teacher shortages to student mental health, the challenges are bigger than ever. At the same time, district leaders around the country have gotten creative to overcome these and other obstacles.

The topic of a four-day school week, which comes up every couple of years, is again emerging as an approach to increase teacher retention and satisfaction. A recent study also shows it can have positive impacts on a district's budget. Page 24

In this issue we also spotlight the innovative efforts of five superintendents who have made significant changes in their districts that are paying off. From reorganizing the central office to establishing community and school-based equity teams, these leaders have transformed their districts in ways that better serve students and teachers. Page 34

When it comes to student mental health, some states and districts are offering mental health days. But experts agree that days off alone are not enough to address the problem. Read about what additional measures schools can take to help students suffering from this growing crisis. Page 42

All of us at *District Administration* wish you a safe, productive, and satisfying school year.

—Eric Weiss, executive editor

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### DeSantis announces civics curriculum for high school and undergraduate students

Three universities are coming together to implement a program designed to prepare students for careers in public service and leadership.

[bit.ly/fla-civics](https://bit.ly/fla-civics)



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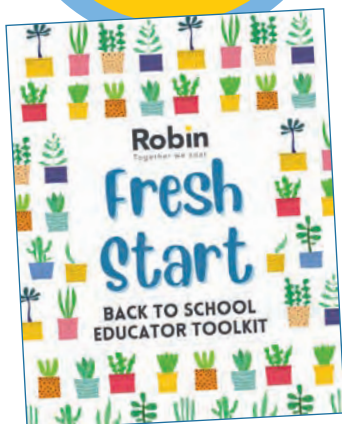
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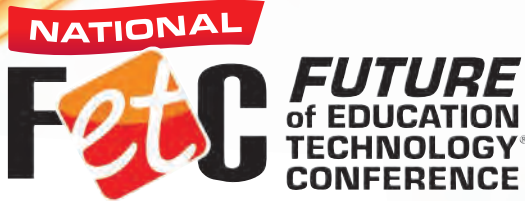
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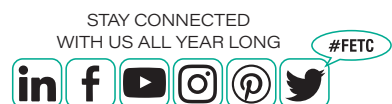
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# Is your district located in one of America's most educated cities?

*More highly educated cities and regions are better suited to withstand recessions and other economic shocks.*

The most educated cities in America might not all keep their spots atop the rankings over the next few years if the nation experiences an uneven academic recovery. Most superintendents and their teams know all too well that achievement gaps between low- and high-poverty districts widened and standardized test scores dropped sizably in many schools.

Still, if your district is in a tech hub or is near a major university, there's a better chance your hometown ranks higher on the list compiled this summer by the personal finance website, WalletHub. Those most-educated regions are also experiencing the highest growth.

"Throughout the United States, cities or regions with higher education institutes are registering growth," said Aneesh Aneesh, professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which is the No. 4-ranked city. "A quick look at the map of education levels will reveal that high-growth areas are also highly educated."

The quality of a city's public-school systems was a key measurement, along with the share of adults 25 or older with high school or college diplomas. The availability of summer learning programs and racial and gender gaps in educational attainment also figured into the rankings. On a timely financial note, more highly educated cities and regions are better suited to withstand recessions and other economic shocks.

Inequities are likely to persist as long as schools are primarily funded by property tax revenues, which, of course, will always be higher in more affluent communities. When these gaps begin in early childhood, they make impacts through higher education

and beyond, said F. Chris Curran, an associate professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Florida. "Our greatest opportunity to improve the education and skills of our workforce comes through ensuring that all students receive equitable and high-quality educational experiences beginning in early childhood and continuing through higher education."

Here are the top 20 most-educated metropolitan areas:

1. Ann Arbor, Mich.
2. San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, Calif.
3. Washington, D.C.-Arlington-Alexandria, Va.
4. Madison, Wisc.
5. San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley, Calif.
6. Boston-Cambridge-Newton, Mass.
7. Durham-Chapel Hill, N.C.
8. Raleigh-Cary, N.C. 77.08
9. Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, Wash.
10. Austin-Round Rock-George-

town, Texas

11. Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk, Conn.
12. Provo-Orem, Utah
13. Colorado Springs, Colo.
14. Denver-Aurora-Lakewood, Colo.
15. Trenton-Princeton, N.J.
16. Portland-South Portland, Maine
17. Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, Ore./Wash.
18. Tallahassee, Fla.
19. Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, Minn.
20. Albany-Schenectady-Troy, N.Y.

The lowest-ranked cities tend to be in agricultural regions of California, along the U.S.-Mexican border and in west Texas. Visalia, in California's Central Valley, ranked last at No. 150. Modesto to the north and neighboring Bakersfield came in at No. 146 and No. 147, respectively, while McAllen and Brownsville, Texas, followed.

*By Matt Zalaznick*







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### Students are showing growth during a K-12 recovery that could take years

Here's the good news: Academic recovery is underway for many students. Now the bad news: At the current rate of growth, full recovery will not be reached until after federal COVID relief funds expire and may not close achievement gaps.

Those are the hopes and concerns emerging from a comparison of pandemic-era NWEA test results to students' scores in the years leading up to COVID. The upshot of this new research—which analyzed more than 8 million math and reading exams—is that educators must continue to prioritize academic recovery and make equity a key part of their plans, said Karyn Lewis, director of the NWEA's Center for School and Student Progress.

NWEA's reports on its own test results have been highly influential on K-12 leaders and policymakers shaping initiatives to tackle learning loss. "These signs of rebounding are especially heartening during another challenging school year of more variants, staff shortages, and a host of uncertainties," said Lewis, who co-authored the analysis. "Any signs of hope are reasons to celebrate, and we must take that moment to do so, and then push forward with renewed energy and a sense of urgency because we're just at the initial steps of addressing the tremendous impact of this pandemic on our students."

Academic gains from fall 2021 to spring 2022 matched pre-pandemic trends, with the biggest rebounds seen in math and among younger students. Growth, which accelerated compared to 2020-21, also climbed back to pre-COVID rates across school-poverty levels though more affluent students had less ground to make up and should recover more quickly, NWEA says.

But student achievement remains behind what it would have been had



the pandemic not occurred. And a recovery that continues at current growth rates will take years, and outlast ESSER funds without closing achievement gaps, the company warned. "We must temper our celebration as significant gaps between current and historic achievement levels still exist, and especially so for students of color and students attending high-poverty schools," the authors wrote. "If achievement gains remain parallel with pre-pandemic trends in the coming school year, these gaps will also persist."

The unequal impacts seen between districts and even between schools within the same district mean that education leaders must tailor their initiatives to meet the needs of all students, the company says. NWEA says it has been helping administrators through this process by teaming up with policymakers and the civil rights community to shape and support pandemic recovery plans, said Lindsay Dworkin, senior vice president of policy and communication.

"Beyond investing in research-based interventions that are targeted at students most impacted by the pandemic, education leaders will need the resources, support, and flexibility necessary to expand instructional time for students as well as provide more professional learning opportunities to their teachers," Dworkin said.

Ultimately, administrators, teachers and policymakers must better define "academic recovery" because returning to pre-pandemic norms will not solve the inequities that plagued education prior to COVID, the authors said. "A one-size-fits-all approach to pandemic recovery means that some students will have their needs met while others will continue to be left behind, effectively perpetuating disparities for historically underserved groups," they wrote. "Truly achieving recovery requires above-average growth—and for some students, that growth will have to be well above average."

*By Matt Zalaznick*

# The Department of Education launches a new plan to combat learning loss

***President Biden urges schools to use the \$122 billion in funds provided by the American Rescue Plan (ARP) to invest in strategies that will support academic recovery.***

The U.S. Department of Education has announced a partnership that will tackle learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Now more than ever, students need to feel supported, seen, heard and understood by adults in their schools and communities,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona.

President Biden urges schools to use the \$122 billion in funds provided by the American Rescue Plan (ARP) to invest in strategies that will help support students’ academic recovery from the pandemic. As steps are being taken to do so, Americans can now serve their communities by becoming tutors and mentors to help make up for classroom

time that was lost due to COVID.

The DOE is teaming up with organizations to launch the National Partnership for Student Success (NPSS) to provide exceptional tutoring services and other mentoring programs by recruiting 250,000 new tutors. The alliance will allow school districts, non-profits and universities to recruit and send trained adults to serve as success coaches, mentors, tutors and more.

“Today’s announcements and the launch of the National Partnership for Student Success will mean more students have a trusted adult in their corner, and more adults are prepared to address students’ academic, emotional, social and mental health

needs,” said Cardona.

The DOE also plans to expand practices that support academic and mental health recovery. For one, the Best Practices Clearinghouse will share evidence-based policies implemented by districts intended to support learning recovery and student mental health.

School districts are also being called on to be transparent about how federal funds are being used to support their students, a result of the department’s launch of the National Parents and Families Engagement Council last month to promote and encourage powerful relationships between schools and parents.

*By Micah Ward*

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# Tutoring is tops for academic recovery. Can schools make it work?

A big rebound in student confidence was a surprise benefit of tutoring in a Tennessee district aiming to fuel academic recovery from learning loss. The keys to Rutherford County Schools' program were recruiting its own certified teachers to provide small-group tutoring at students' home schools and using a high-quality curriculum, says Elizabeth David, the district's learning loss supervisor.

"Teachers overwhelmingly saw students grow not just in their skill abilities, but in their belief in themselves," Davis says.

The district launched the three-year, after-school tutoring initiative in January with ESSER funds and a matching grant from TN ALL Corps, a statewide academic recovery initiative. About 5% of Rutherford's first- through 8th-graders participated this school year. The district also provided transportation and a snack for the hour-and-a-half sessions.

### Tutoring troubles

Ultimately, Rutherford County leaders expect 15% of the district's 1st- through 8th-graders to participate in tutoring within the next three years. But in many other parts of the country, district administrators are facing several hurdles as they try to provide large-scale, high-dosage tutoring.

Finding enough tutors is the biggest challenge, says Robert Balfanz, director of the Johns Hopkins University School of Education's Everyone Graduates Center, which, along with AmeriCorps and the U.S. Department of Education, is spearheading the federal effort to help schools recruit more educators.

The leaders of the National Partnership for Student Success initiative are working to connect school district leaders to nonprofits, businesses, and colleges and universities that could

provide tens of thousands of tutors, mentors and coaches. "Principals and other district leaders have been left to figure this out themselves, and right now they have lots of other responsibilities as they bob and weave through the pandemic," Balfanz says. "No administrator has time to evaluate multiple tutoring providers."

### Tutoring essentials

Research backs the following best tutoring practices:

- **Frequency:** Three times per week, 30 minutes per session
- **Scheduling:** Offered during the school day. After-school can also be effective.
- **Consistency:** Students do better when they work with the same tutor over time.
- **Coordination:** Tutoring content must match a student is learning in the classroom.

*(Source: Robert Balfanz, Everyone Graduates Center)*

The federal effort hinges on five areas of academic recovery: high-dosage tutoring, academic and SEL coaching, post-secondary advising, mentoring, and out-of-school support for students. "Each of those requires more people," Balfanz says. "We're elevating the call to service."

The Partnership intends to recruit a portion of the nation's approximately 700,000 college work-study students to join the effort. It is also working with large companies with national reach, such as Starbucks and Target, that could incentivize employees to tutor K-12 students. Also, volunteers from YMCAs, Big Brother-Big Sister and 4H are already in schools and can be trained in evidence-based tutoring strategies, Balfanz says.

Tutoring programs of the past, such as those implemented during the

No Child Left Behind Era, have been less successful because the content wasn't always aligned with what kids were learning in schools. "It's not as simple as just asking what skills students missed during the pandemic," Balfanz says. "Tutoring has to be done in coordination with the skills kids need to be using in the classroom that week."

### Getting teachers on board

In Rutherford County, recruiting teachers to provide after-school tutoring was not a challenge. Teachers were actually looking for an opportunity to help their students bounce back, Davis says. Also, the district offered teachers \$50 an hour, a higher rate than many surrounding districts, she adds.

When Davis put out a call for tutors this summer for the coming school year, she had half the educators she needed within just 24 hours. "Teachers want to give kids as much as they can," Davis says. "And we want to invest in them and grow them in their capacity, and I think they're feeling that."

To design the tutoring curriculum, administrators and instructional coaches analyzed student data and other screeners to determine each child's academic needs. Rutherford County is focusing its program on students whom educators believe would have reached proficiency if not for the disruptions of the pandemic.

"It does take some communication with parents, who frequently say they think their child is doing well and doesn't need tutoring," Davis says. "We have to talk them through the data to show their child is doing OK but can do even better with tutoring."

*By Matt Zalaznick*

# Safety expert: We're in for another challenging year

*The earlier emergency drills are practiced, the better.*

District leaders should count on having another challenging school year and prepare by teaching school safety on “day one.”

So says Kenneth Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services. Security threats are already occurring just days into the new academic year: Two students were found with guns at Rome High School in Georgia in the first week of classes. Another student was taken into custody after a gun was discovered in their bookbag at Greenbrier High School, also located in Georgia.

While there are many important issues for leaders to juggle in the early stages of the school year, school safety must be at the top of the list.

“Schools should practice their first emergency preparedness drills soon after students return,” says Trump. “Real emergencies follow no schedule and will not wait until it is convenient for school officials.”

He also points to how the pandemic produced a buildup of aggression in students, which will likely spill over into this school year. “Last year we saw an unprecedented amount of aggression and violence that many attribute in part to students having been learning remotely for so long,” says Trump. “There is every indication that what we saw manifest last year will continue to exist and escalate in the upcoming school year.”

Weaknesses in the current state of safety protocol were exposed in the

school shootings that occurred last year. If leaders focus on the basics and fundamentals and less on “hardening,” students and faculty will be better prepared.

“The Uvalde shooting and other cases of violence last year only reinforce the need to focus on training, communications, supervision and other human factors that make a difference in preventing and responding to a critical accident,” says Trump.

He adds that supporting students through using the “invisible things,” such as emotional security, relationship-building and creating a culture of school safety, is what makes a difference.

*By Micah Ward*



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# Odds are, monkeypox won't disrupt your schools...but COVID still might

*Only a few children have contracted monkeypox, even though parents may be at risk.*

Monkeypox is making the news, but health experts say school leaders shouldn't worry too much about the infection becoming as disruptive as COVID. The illness, which has sparked public health emergencies in a handful of cities, is largely spread through skin-to-skin contact and only a few children have contracted the virus so far, says Dr. Sten H. Vermund, a professor of pediatrics at the Yale School of Public Health.

Still, educators and school nurses can encourage vulnerable parents to take precautions, such as being fully clothed when hugging their children. "We do not think it's going to be a major issue within the pediatric population," Vermund says. "Still, if a parent is at risk for monkeypox, that should modulate their behavior."

School nurses will be on the lookout for monkeypox as they care for students this school year and assess whether a referral to an outside health-care provider is necessary. "One of our roles is to do surveillance," says Linda Mendonça, president of the National

Association of School Nurses. "School nurses will have [monkeypox] on their radar even though this age group is not in the high-risk category."

### COVID remains a bigger threat

In guidelines just released for the 2022-23 school year, the state of Connecticut recommends school leaders use a strategic "test-mask-go" approach. This would allow children and staff with mild respiratory disease symptoms to attend school in person if they test negative, have no fever, wear a mask, and do not live with someone who has recently had COVID.

Administrators must continue to keep track of community transmission to prepare for—or prevent—potential outbreaks in their buildings. "Everyone wants to get back to how things were," Mendonça says. "Realistically, that probably isn't the smartest thing to do as we still have variants."

Schools should continue to offer flu and COVID vaccine clinics, and, as the state of Connecticut suggests, strongly consider requiring masks

if there is a local surge in cases. "Masking is tricky, but we know that wearing a mask does work," Mendonça says.

Child vaccination rates remain "suboptimal," Vermund says. "It used to be that vaccinating adults was very challenging and difficult, and vaccinating children was more straightforward," he says. "Now it's the other way around, for reasons that are not completely apparent."

Public health officials remain concerned that COVID will surge again during respiratory virus season in the late fall or winter. If that occurs, administrators will have to consider mask mandates and ramping up other safety measures. "We could have some of the same disruptions that we've had over the past two years, which we want to do everything we can to avoid," Vermund says. "The evidence is abundant that home-based learning through a child's computer is not as effective as school-based learning."

*By Matt Zalaznick*



## K-12 customer service: Families want dialogue, not broadcasts

*Trust grows when parents are satisfied with the customer service provided by their districts.*

Customer service in your school or district may not be as strong as you might hope. Most parents—just over 60%—said that “helpfulness, timeliness, and courteousness” in their interactions with school district personnel could improve, a new analysis has found.

Those feelings can, in turn, erode parents’ trust in schools, according to the latest survey of 450 parents by K12 Insight, which provides communication solutions to districts.

“Our nation’s public schools have a lot to lose and it is absolutely critical that districts improve customer service to increase family, student, and staff satisfaction,” said Krista Coleman, chief customer officer at K12 Insight. “Every interaction is an opportunity to build trust with stakeholders.”

Some 87% of the parents surveyed said they reached out to their schools more than once during the 2021-22 school year, and a little less than half reported contacting the district *at least six times*. This could amount to more than 26,000 inbound inquiries in a 10,000-student district.

The upshot is that trust grows when families are satisfied with the customer service provided by their districts, K12 Insight’s analysis says. This can lead to parents giving a district positive word-of-mouth and online recommendations at a time when public schools face growing competition from choice programs, online, charter and private schools, and homeschooling.

The survey also found:

1. 74% of survey participants were

very satisfied or satisfied with the communication from their district

2. 26% of parents said they received either “not enough” or “too much” communication from schools

3. Nearly 70% of parents reach out to their child’s district or school by phone or email

4. 70% of parents expect a response within a day

But a 24-hour news cycle churning on multiple channels—with some spreading misinformation—can also chip away at parents’ trust in schools. “What families want in 2022 and the years ahead is a dialogue, not a broadcast, from their school district,” Coleman said. “They want to be seen, heard and served.”

*By Matt Zalaznick*



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# Why transparency between administrators and parents matters

*Being upfront about sharing your vision for your schools and allowing parents to share in the planning process will help earn their trust.*

“The parent outreach and engagement process cannot be an afterthought,” says Kevin Chavous, president of technology-based education company Stride Inc. “Many superintendents, when they apply for a job, talk about curriculum and all the new things they want to do, and they put parent engagement at the bottom [of the list], *if* they include it at all.”

As K-12 schools open their doors for the first post-pandemic school year, leaders must carry the lessons they’ve learned into the future. The past two years have taught educators and leaders:

- Mental health matters
- School safety is a growing issue
- Students fell behind in their learning

learning

The list goes on. But another important takeaway from the pandemic is that parents have learned to become educated consumers when it comes to K-12 education, according to Chavous.

“Parents are focused not just on safety or curriculum; they’re focused on the basics,” he says. “There’s going to be a recognition that parents are deeply concerned about the basic purpose of schooling... in addition to the things that are in the headlines today.”

A recent survey conducted by Stride Inc. highlights the increasing need for transparency between school leadership and parents.

Here are the key findings:

- 81% of parents report wanting to know more about what their children are doing at school
- 60% support public education
- 50% would likely enroll their



child in online school if it was an option

- Teacher quality and school safety were the top two most important factors for choosing a school for their children (72% vs. 65%)
- 54% of parents expressed concern about gun violence in their child’s school

In light of school safety, experts say practicing successful safety protocol should be a top priority. “School safety matters,” he says. “There’s so much tension in our country. There’s more violence playing out in America’s streets and schools. One of the reasons why parents are drawn to the online experience is school safety is more important than ever before.”

He adds that schools should not

only voice policies they’re thinking about implementing to tackle certain issues, but they should also share data on policies that *aren’t* working and talk about their next planned steps with parents. “We need to make sure that school leaders are aggressively letting parents know the things they are going to stop doing that don’t seem to work and any new things they’re going to do.”

Sharing metrics with parents will empower them and allow them to be important partners in the process, Chavous advises. Meeting parents where they are will go a long way toward helping schools resolve issues as they enter the new academic year while supporting the needs of students and their parents.

*By Micah Ward*



# Academic recovery strategies are working, according to new data

*Schools are implementing more strategies to address learning loss among K-12 students, according to new data from the 2022 School Pulse Panel.*

More than half of schools have implemented strategies to address mental health, meet students' needs, and offer high-dosage tutoring.

Specifically, 72% of public schools implemented strategies for mental health, 79% used diagnostic assessment data to identify individual needs, and 56% used high-dosage tutoring. That's according to the latest data from the 2022 School Pulse Panel released by the Institute of Education Sciences.

The Department of Education released a statement celebrating the work in schools to address academic recovery. "This data shows that students have made significant progress

over the course of the 2021-2022 school year," said U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona.

Although substantial efforts are being made to support students, it's important to address the number of students who are still a grade level behind. Before the pandemic, 35% of public schools reported that 0 to 25% of their students were below grade level. By the end of the 2021-22 school year, 33% of public schools reported that 0 to 25% of their students finished below grade level. Of those schools that reported having students behind grade level, 52% say the pandemic had a significant influence on students' academic achievement.

## Other noteworthy statistics

- 21% of all public schools say extending the school year is very effective; 50% say it's moderately effective.
- 5% of all public schools say extending the school day is extremely effective; 20% say it's very effective; 43% say it's moderately effective.
- 75% of all public schools offer summer learning and enrichment programs; 33% have increased their summer learning programs.
- 8% of all public schools say high-dosage tutoring is extremely effective; 35% say it's very effective; 45% say it's moderately effective.

*By Micah Ward*



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## Online schooling helps students feel confident about their futures

*A recent survey reveals promising results that contradict the negative stigma surrounding online learning.*

Should schools continue to utilize virtual learning? That's the question districts are trying to answer. But the solution isn't so clear-cut, as the reviews are incredibly mixed.

*The Washington Post* released an article in July, for example, titled, "Online Schooling Is the Bad Idea That Refuses to Die." And research exists that has shown online learning can negatively impact students' academic outcomes.

Regardless of any negative perspective, however, online instruction seems too valuable to let go of, especially among high school graduates.

A recent survey released by the tech-enabled solutions provider Stride, Inc. highlights the effectiveness of K-12 powered online schools compared to traditional brick-and-mortar public schools.

Here are the key findings:

- 74% of K-12 graduates reported

feeling optimistic about their future careers, compared to 56% of their peers who didn't participate in an online school.

- 78% of K-12 graduates reported they were excelling at their current job, compared to 46% of those who didn't participate in an online school.

- 71% of K-12 graduates say their online schooling taught them the importance of having a strong work ethic, and 66% say they obtained complex problem-solving skills.

"This research proves what we've known for two decades: online learning not only works for students in their K-12 years, but it gives them what they need for future success," said James Rhyu, CEO of Stride.

It has also become an increasingly popular tool for higher ed institutions in creating the next generation

of teachers. Lewis University recently partnered with Proximity Learning to provide education students with the opportunity to become virtual teachers.

Perhaps best of all, online learning gives students options.

"It comes down to one word: choice," says Kip Pygman, director of virtual schools at Proximity Learning. "When we go to dine out at a restaurant, the first thing we do is open the menu to view the wide variety of options they have. You get excited about all those options because they meet your needs, wants and goals directly in the moment. With virtual learning, when students open their academic menu, how awesome is it that they now have options? I can take it face-to-face, I can take it hybrid, or I can take it virtually."

*By Micah Ward*



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# District leaders: Do your students practice accelerated learning?

*K-12 students are falling behind academically, especially in math. New research suggests leaving remediated instruction in the past.*

The impact COVID-19 has had on student learning is profound. 33% of public schools reported that 0 to 25% of their students finished below grade level, according to the latest survey results from the Institute of Education Sciences' 2022 School Pulse Panel.

Districts are allocating resources provided by federal programs, like the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, to help close the gap in learning loss.

One subject that students are particularly falling behind in is math. Data released in July by NWEA, a research-based non-profit organization that creates assessments for pre-K-12 students, revealed a decline in math-related academic achievement (5 to 10%) among 3-8 grade students in the 2021-22 school year, despite early signs of progress.

However, new research suggests that accelerated learning can be the key to

helping students successfully complete more grade-level math assignments.

Thirty-nine percent of all public schools used accelerated instruction in the 2021-22 school year, according to the School Pulse Panel data. Additionally, 25% of all public schools say accelerated instruction is "very effective." 4% say it's "extremely effective."

Zearn, a math learning platform, released a report this week highlighting the benefits of accelerated learning compared to remediated learning.

### Key findings

- Students struggled 17% less in math when they practiced accelerated learning vs. remediated learning.
- Students who underwent consistent accelerated learning successfully completed twice as many grade-level lessons compared to students who underwent consistent remediated learning.
- Schools with a majority population of Black, Latino or low-

income students are more likely to be remediated, even after they successfully completed grade-level assignments.

- Students enrolled in schools with a majority population of Black, Latino or low-income students struggle 19% less in math when they practice accelerated learning.

### Recommendations

The report concludes with several suggestions for districts to consider:

- Use core instructional materials that make it easier for teachers to practice accelerated learning.
- Prioritize technology designed for acceleration, not remediation.
- Give students access to high-impact instructional time if they're struggling with math.
- Support teachers by giving them comprehensive and professional knowledge to facilitate accelerated learning.

*By Micah Ward*





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# Teachers prefer using mastery learning to close learning gaps

*Every student learns differently. Ensuring each one has “mastered” a skill before moving to the next is key to their success.*

As schools prepare to reopen their doors for the upcoming school leaders need to be proactive in addressing learning loss that resulted not only from the pandemic but also from summer break.

A 2020 study from the American Educational Research Journal revealed that students lost 17-34% of the previous year’s learning gains during the summer. The pandemic only made these matters worse, and leaders across the country are developing strategies to combat the resulting learning loss.

In July, the Department of Education unveiled a plan to recruit 250,000 new tutors to support K-12 students. “Now more than ever, students need to feel supported, seen, heard and understood by adults in their schools and communities,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona.

However, a recent study by Khan Academy provides another potential solution for closing pandemic-related learning gaps: mastery learning. From a survey of 639 teachers across K-12 schools in the U.S., 84% support the idea for tackling pandemic-related learning loss.

“Mastery learning is an instructional strategy where we give students the opportunity and the incentive to reach a high level of proficiency—that we call mastery—in a skill before they proceed to the next skill,” says Khan Academy Chief Learning Officer Kristen DiCerbo. “If you think about the gaps that students come with because of the pandemic, if you try to build new knowledge on top of a shaky foundation, it becomes really difficult to keep building on that.”

According to the data, more than half of teachers (53%) already use mastery learning in their classrooms, and an additional 35% would like to begin using it.

Furthermore, most teachers believe the traditional letter grade system causes more harm than good for their students for the following reasons:

- 61% of teachers believe D’s and F’s lead to less motivation among students.
- 58% of teachers believe letter grades lead to students feeling labeled.
- 46% of teachers believe letter grading is an unfair way to accurately assess student achievement.

DiCerbo suggests two ways schools can begin implementing mastery learning in their classrooms:

### 1. Allow for more flexibility when scheduling pacing guides.

Every student learns different topics at different rates, she says. “Many districts have what they call pacing guides, where they lay out for every topic to be covered in a domain and how many weeks they should be covering them and when they move on to the next phase,” says DiCerbo. “One of the things that teachers told us in the survey was having a little more flexibility in those pacing guides would be helpful.”

### 2. Reevaluate the meaning of grades.

“Is a grade a score on a test, or are we trying to encourage both students and everyone who’s involved in learning to think about mastering skills?” DiCerbo says. “If we think about that, we can do things like offer students multiple opportunities to show

what they know. And then offer them instruction and different ways to practice in between those opportunities so that students who are struggling have a chance to rebound and try again with some instruction and intervention.”

In addition to understanding the effects of mastery learning, the data suggest a need for better emotional and behavioral support for students.

Teachers were asked, “What do you think are the most important change(s) that would help make up ‘unfinished learning or the learning gaps that developed during the pandemic?’”

The most common response was related to student mental health, with 60% of respondents supporting increased emotional/behavioral support. “There are also a lot of things around social and emotional issues that students need to deal with and work through before they’re able to really be effective learners and fill in some of those gaps,” DiCerbo notes.

The pandemic has had a profound impact on students’ emotional and behavioral states, according to DiCerbo. She says as students were out of school for months on end, they lost the necessary social skills necessary for effective learning. They also had to reestablish the norms and routines of daily in-person instruction after being away from the classroom for so long.

“All of that is important for them being ready to learn,” says DiCerbo. “Those kinds of things that we probably all lost a little bit of in those days of talking over video all the time are really important in being able to think about being successful in school.”

*By Micah Ward*



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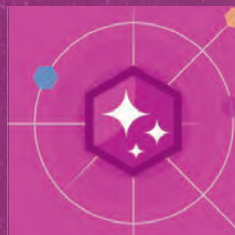
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# Culture of fear: Do LGBTQ+ students get enough support at school?

*One in three teachers said the history and experiences of the LGBTQ+ community should not be taught in school.*

LGBTQ+ students are the least likely population to have their needs met at school, said teachers in a recent survey. And teachers of color were even more likely to say their school is not supporting these students adequately, according to a recent “Voices from the Classroom” report by Educators for Excellence, a nonprofit that advocates for K-12 equity.

Just more than 20% of all teachers said schools are assisting the LGBTQ+ subgroup sufficiently but only 6% of teachers of color said the same.

When it comes to academics, about 70% of all teachers—and nearly all teachers of color—said students should learn about the history and experiences of LGBTQ+ people. On the other hand, these topics ranked last when teachers were asked to choose, from a list of 14 subjects, what was most important to cover in the classroom. The educators gave higher priority to the Civil War, racial inequality in America today, and the history and experiences of Latinx people.

And one in three teachers said the history and experience of the LGBTQ+ community *should not* be taught in school. Only 3% of teachers of color agreed with that sentiment. Three-quarters of teachers of color—but only 42% of all teachers—said LGBTQ+ topics should be covered as early as middle school.

“Because of the culture of fear that’s been created, teachers are afraid to have these conversations with their students,” Leona Fowler, a special education instructional support teacher in New York City, told Educators for Excellence. “They have to find subtle ways to bring it up; to challenge gender

stereotypes and censorship. But we don’t have the supports, resources or curriculum to know how to do that effectively.”

But some have accused schools of “glamorizing” the transgender lifestyle to the detriment of students’ social-emotional well-being. Christopher Rufo, director of the initiative on critical race theory at Manhattan Institute think tank, wrote in *City Journal* that Los Angeles USD is training teachers to provide gender-affirming instruction and support but not highlighting the mental health struggles of transgender students. “It is, of course, a noble goal for schools to provide a safe environment for minority groups and to affirm the basic dignity of all children regardless of their sexuality,” Rufo wrote. “But Los Angeles Unified’s program goes much further, promoting the most extreme strains of transgender ideology.”

## **LGBTQ+ students face an uncertain climate**

National surveys show rising support for protecting the wider LGBTQ+ community from discrimination. Eight in 10 Americans favor laws that would protect LGBTQ+ people in jobs, public accommodations and housing. That’s an 11% increase in the number of Americans who opposed discrimination in 2015, according to the Human Rights Campaign. Even in states where anti-LGBTQ+ laws have been approved or proposed, two-thirds of Americans surveyed said they oppose discriminatory legislation.

Yet, Florida’s so-called “Don’t Say Gay” law—which restricts the teaching of LGBTQ+ topics in kin-

dergarten through third grade—has inspired lawmakers in other states to pass similar measures. Alabama schools cannot teach about LGBTQ+ topics in kindergarten through fifth grade. Laws limiting instruction have also been proposed in Arizona, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Tennessee.

Responding to the Florida law, the advocacy organization GLSEN accused Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and other elected officials of erasing LGBTQ+ communities from the K-12 curriculum and silencing teachers. “This latest attack has already had a chilling effect on LGBTQ+ youth, who already experience victimization such as bullying, harassment, and discrimination,” GLSEN’s leaders said. “The ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill is an exclusionary curriculum ban that deprives LGBTQ+ youth of the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the classroom and their non-LGBTQ+ peers from learning about LGBTQ+ communities.”

Multiple studies have shown that LGBTQ+ students are at higher risk for suicide and self-harm, and that discrimination is a contributing factor. LGBTQ+ students perform better academically and are healthier when they feel accepted and supported at school, research has found.

Educators for Excellence is also encouraging educators to support LGBTQ+ students by lobbying their members of Congress to support the Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2021. The bill would require districts to adopt evidence-based strategies for preventing and responding to all forms of bullying and harassment.

*By Matt Zalaznick*



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## How the 4-day school week model can increase teacher retention and satisfaction

Districts may also find the strategy beneficial for their budgets.

BY MICAH WARD

**T**he education experience in schools across the U.S. has been suffering. Teachers are quitting in record numbers. Students feel more unsafe than ever. Aggression among students has increased as a result of the pandemic.

Now, district leaders are taking steps to resolve these issues. When it comes to the teacher shortage crisis, one potential solution that's been oft-discussed is the idea of a four-day work week for students and teachers. Some schools, like those in Twin Rivers School District in Missouri and Prairie View High School in Colorado, have already made the decision to implement it (in fact, more than 120 districts have been operating on a four-day school week in Missouri since 2010). But is it an effective way to attract educators?

In a study conducted by Paul N. Thompson, assistant professor at Oregon State University, released last fall, researchers assessed the implementation of a four-day school week policy. Their findings suggest that such a policy may be beneficial for attracting teachers but would likely have little impact on other important factors.

Districts may also find this strategy beneficial for their budgets. While the study found that a four-day work week has minimal impact on overall savings, it may provide schools with greater flexibility. For example, the researchers suggest that districts can use the three-day weekend as a form of non-monetary compensation.

Another dilemma to consider is the ability to maintain steady academic growth. On average, students who attend school four days a week lose nearly 85 hours at school per year. The impact that loss has on student academic achievement is relatively mixed, according to results. One study cites research explaining that a four-day work week is especially more detrimental for students from low-income households, while another finds no statistically significant effects on academic achievement.

Researchers have also explored whether this policy could increase student attendance. The results from one study show that students attending school four days a week missed fewer days than those who attended the full five-day week. However, there was no

statistically significant difference between absence rates.

Despite the potential negative implications research has shown, some schools have been successful with this model. Prairie View High School in the 27J School District, for example, has had it in practice for four years. The school's initial plan was to provide an incentive to attract more teachers. District superintendent Chris Fielder told Denver 7-ABC News that they're able to continue employing teachers while spending much less than neighboring schools.

The bottom line: Districts that are battling with the negative effects of the pandemic should consider whether the four-day school week could help create competition and increase teacher retention and satisfaction. Teachers report spending that extra day off catching up on work and taking care of personal matters, such as doctor's appointments. And both parents and students report high levels of satisfaction with this model.

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*Micah Ward is District Administration's staff writer.*



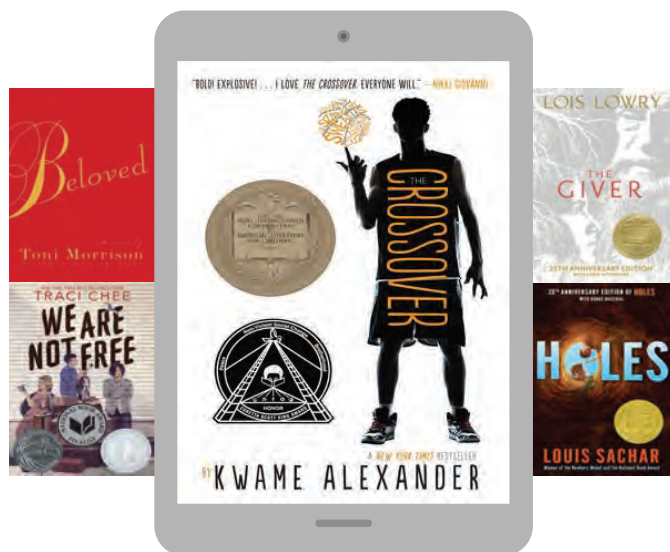
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## Monitoring students online should keep them safe. Here are 7 problems with it

A majority of teachers say the purpose of tracking at their school is to identify disciplinary violations. BY MATT ZALAZNICK

**T**he pandemic shift online only increased the pressure on educators to shield students from cyberbullying, invasions of privacy, poor choices on social media, and other digital threats. But teachers say tracking technology is more frequently used for disciplinary purposes, according to the Center for Democracy and Technology's "Hidden Harms: The Misleading Promise of Monitoring Students Online" report.

"Parents and students show the strongest support for student activity monitoring when it is used to keep students safe; in particular, to stop students from harming themselves or others," the authors of the report said. "However, that is not how student activity monitoring is most commonly used."

Current software allows schools to view students' screens, record browsing and search histories, and scan their messages and documents stored online or on school devices. Online monitoring, therefore, raises significant equity concerns, the researchers said.

Firstly, students' sexual orientations and gender identities are being disclosed without their consent. LGBTQ+ students whose online activity is being monitored are also more likely to be contacted by law enforcement about committing a crime. Because students from low-income families, Black students and Hispanic students

rely more heavily on school-issued devices, they are subject to more surveillance than students who use personal computers and are more likely to be disciplined and contacted by law enforcement.

The report identified several other problems:

1. **Monitoring is used for discipline more often than safety.** More than two-thirds of teachers say the purpose of tracking at their school is to identify disciplinary violations. Only 47% say the technology is used to spot students who are having a mental health crisis.

2. **Teachers are often tasked with monitoring students online but haven't been trained to use the technology.** Teachers are expected to respond to alerts generated by tracking software but don't know how to report the activity privately or securely.

3. **Monitoring is often not limited to school hours.** Parents and students say they are most comfortable about activity being monitored when school is in session.

4. **LGBTQ+ students are disproportionately targeted.** About 30% of LGBTQ+ students reported they were outed because of something they did online. They were also more likely to get in trouble for visiting what educators believed to be an inappropriate website.

5. **Students from low-income families, Black students, and Hispanic stu-**

**dents are at greater risk of harm.** Six in 10 Black students, six in 10 Hispanic students, seven in 10 rural students, and seven in 10 students from low-income families use district-owned devices, which are more likely to be monitored.

6. **Students' mental health could suffer.** On the positive side, students say they are being referred to school counselors, social workers, and other adults for mental health support. Monitoring, however, has also convinced some students not to express their thoughts and feelings online.

7. **Large knowledge gaps in how monitoring software functions.** There are often significant differences between what a teacher reports about online activity and how parents and students perceive that same activity.

Administrators should assess whether their online monitoring efforts are helping or harming students, and even consider ending the practice, the researchers concluded. The Center for Democracy and Technology is also urging the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights to develop national policies that would prevent students from being harmed by online monitoring. The organization also hopes to see continued scrutiny of monitoring software.

*Matt Zalaznick is District Administration's senior writer.*

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## Student behavior is the leading cause of teachers leaving

A recent survey of midwestern teachers provides insight on why they are choosing to abandon the profession. BY MICAH WARD

**A**mong a variety of factors that have contributed to the national teacher shortage crisis, student behavior is the number-one reason most teachers are opting out of the profession, according to a recent survey released by Chalkboard Review.

Teachers have been making their voices heard as they're urging district leaders and legislators to make changes to help improve teacher satisfaction and retention. The Mineral Wells Independent School District in Texas, for example, is implementing a four-day school week to help increase competition and attract more teachers.

What has gotten little attention, however, is the role student behavior is playing in contributing to the crisis.

Tony Kinnett, co-founder and executive director of Chalkboard Review, set out to understand why so many teachers are leaving the classroom, choosing either to abandon their careers forever or simply switch school districts.

In a survey of 615 midwestern K-12 teachers, respondents were asked their primary reason for leaving. Survey-takers were presented with the following questions:

1. Given the reasons below, what is the largest reason you're leaving your position?

2. If salary were considered an ancillary reason, i.e. "I'm not being paid enough to deal with \_\_\_\_\_," what would you suggest is the largest reason you're leaving the classroom?

3. Were you a member of a local or national teachers union at some point during the previous academic year?

4. If the present administration could provide evidence that this specific problem is being dealt with satisfactorily, would you return to this classroom?

Here are the main findings:

- Of the 615 respondents, 319 said they left for reasons related to student behavior. 138 respondents listed "progressive political activity" as their primary reason. The third-highest response was "salary insufficient" with 134 votes.

- Once pay became an ancillary reason, the responses shifted dramatically. Of the 615 respondents, 447 listed behavior as their main reason for leaving. 128 listed "progressive political activity" as their primary reason.

- 356 of the 615 respondents reported being part of a teachers union in the previous year.

- Only 21% of respondents said they would return to the classroom if their complaints were resolved.

As district leaders continue to develop and implement strategies to increase incentives and improve teacher retention, consider whether the classroom environment is a factor.

One potential solution that benefits all students is to increase communication between principals and counselors. Counselors can have a profound impact on their student body when they are given the proper communication and resources to do their job.

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*Micah Ward is District Administration's staff writer.*

# Keys to developing effective school lockdown procedures

Modern access control systems are one crucial component of a comprehensive strategy

In the wake of several recent school shootings, many K-12 leaders are reexamining lockdown procedures and conducting a thorough review of the capabilities of their schools' access control systems. And for good reason; investigations into recent tragedies have found that miscommunication, a lack of clear responsibilities and procedures, and insufficient building access for first responders were serious problems during these horrific events.

In Uvalde, Texas, it has been reported that the classroom doors at Robb Elementary could not be locked from the inside. Some school safety experts have been warning about this vulnerability for decades. In recent years, billions of dollars have been spent on modernizing school infrastructure and building security, and yet today, an estimated 1 in 4 U.S. public schools lack classroom doors that can be locked from the inside.

Here are some key questions to ask when developing comprehensive lockdown procedures for any school or district.

## What are the best practices for schools instituting or upgrading their lockdown capabilities?

Because the size and characteristics of schools and districts vary widely across the country, a universal school safety plan or lockdown procedure does not exist. While each school might be better suited to a particular security system, require different hardware, or have specific vendor commitments, the "5P's" are universally applicable when it comes to security: Planning, Process, Protocol, Practice, and Prevention.

## What are your procedures for conducting a school lockdown?

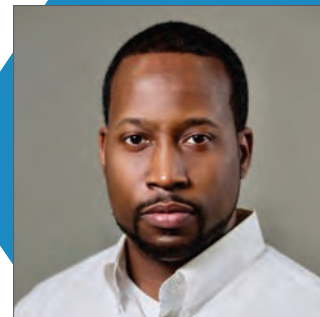
It sounds simple, but it is vitally important to review your security procedures and protocols and develop a thorough understanding of every step. School administrators often want to focus on the capabilities of their access control systems and other security technologies first. But the first step should be defining the process and then establishing specific lockdown protocols—identifying exactly what happens (and doesn't happen) during a live lockdown scenario. Access control systems are very important, but they are one component of an overall lockdown strategy.

## Who has the responsibility for instituting a lockdown, and giving the "all clear?"

Another crucial step is to identify not only who has lockdown responsibility and capabilities, but who is responsible for giving the "all clear" when the situation has been resolved. In addition, think about accountability: how do you measure the effectiveness of drills? This brings us to another of the 5P principles—Practice. Did everyone do what they were supposed to do and at the right time? How do you know? Some access control systems give you auditing capabilities so you can objectively answer these questions.

## How will first responders access your buildings?

If all the doors to your building are locked in an emergency, how will first responders get into the school? This question is too often overlooked. Do your local first responders have



physical keys to your schools? Modern access control systems offer the advanced capability of delivering mobile credentials that grant first responders immediate access for a specific amount of time, such as during a lockdown.

## What are the capabilities of your access control systems?

It is also vitally important to understand what your access control systems are capable of, and what they are not capable of. Can one person lock down the exterior and interior doors of an entire school from one location? Can they do so from their mobile device, or do they have to be in an office or a certain room? Will your access control systems function even if your network is down, or if the school has lost electrical power? Try to envision as many scenarios as possible.

Finally, the last of the 5P's is Prevention. As part of that, your access control system should restrict, or prevent, entry to school property by any unauthorized users.





## Here's a new way for your teachers to get innovative projects funded

Providing direct classroom funding shows professional respect for teachers and supports student success.

BY MATT ZALAZNICK

When a teacher in New Castle County, Delaware, had to get reading materials to her English learners during lockdown in 2020, she used a brand-new funding tool to turn her car into a bookmobile. The teacher received state COVID relief funding through DonorsChoose, and was able to drive through her community on weekends distributing books so students didn't fall behind in literacy.

Before the pandemic, DonorsChoose connected educators with philanthropists and other organizations to fill funding requests. In fact, four in five public schools have at least one teacher who has posted a project on the platform, the organization says. It has now partnered with several state education departments—Arizona, Utah, Oklahoma, Nevada, Hawaii and Delaware—to bank \$42 million in ESSER funding to respond quickly and directly to the needs of educators and students.

Here's how it works: Once a teacher posts a request for assistance, DonorsChoose confirms the project is legitimate and is designed to improve student outcomes. Then, the school's principal is notified of the funding and DonorsChoose orders the appropriate resources, which can show up within just a few days, says Ali Rosen,

the platform's vice president of business development. No money changes hands throughout the process. "It's a really, really rapid way to respond to impacts of coronavirus," Rosen says. "It allows every single teacher to address the unique situation they are in and it allows states to reach teachers directly in their classrooms.

This school year, a teacher in Arizona saw students having trouble working together after schools reopened. She got funding through DonorsChoose to redesign her classroom with flexible seating—wobbly stools, lap desks and small tables—that allows her students to re-acclimate to collaboration, cooperation and small-group instruction.

Providing direct classroom funding shows professional respect for teachers and supports student success, says Kathy Hoffman, Arizona's state superintendent of public instruction. "Students gain access to resources they would not have without these funds, from unique learning opportunities like STEM or art projects or even a new classroom library," Hoffman says. "Teachers know their students' academic needs better than anyone and can design tailored projects."

The current DonorsChoose campaign is rebuilding teacher morale and the newly funded projects are helping

students bounce back from the ordeals of the pandemic. "While it is too soon to tell if Arizona teachers were retained because of our initiative, we know from past DonorsChoose campaigns that teachers with a funded project were more likely to stay in the classroom than those who did not participate," Hoffman says.

The ability to connect directly with state and philanthropic funding sources is empowering teachers with additional decision-making power. One University of Michigan study commissioned by DonorsChoose backs up what Hoffman says about retention. Research has shown that access to the platform can reduce by 22% the likelihood teachers will leave their school. A second University of Michigan study linked DonorsChoose funding to an increase in the number of students passing year-end exams.

In Hawaii, two teachers received about \$2,200 from the state department of education to team their middle school students up to plant and harvest a school garden. "Even though many of these projects are small, they have an outside impact," Rosen says.

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*Matt Zalaznick is District Administration's senior writer.*





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# Research-Based Program Helps Boost K-5 Word Study Efforts

## Millington Elementary School Seeing Promising Results from Using Scholastic W.O.R.D.®

For one North Carolina elementary school, a new vocabulary program is garnering significant attention from both teachers and administrators for its effectiveness and impact in just a few months of use.

Stanly County Schools in Albemarle, North Carolina serves more than 8,400 students in grades preK-12 and employs 750 certified teachers in 21 schools. The district places a strong emphasis on promoting career and college readiness, lifelong learning, and citizenship.

Millington Elementary School is a K-5 school located in a rural area of Stanly County and qualifies as a Title 1 school, with about 40 percent of its 190 students receiving free or reduced-price lunches. Bobbie Throneburg has been the curriculum coach at Millington for the past five years and has had a 31-year career as an educator. "My role is to help teachers by sharing best practices, identifying which curriculum resources are most effective, looking at our achievement data, and sharing what I've learned from my years in the classroom," she says.

### Addressing setbacks and prioritizing needs

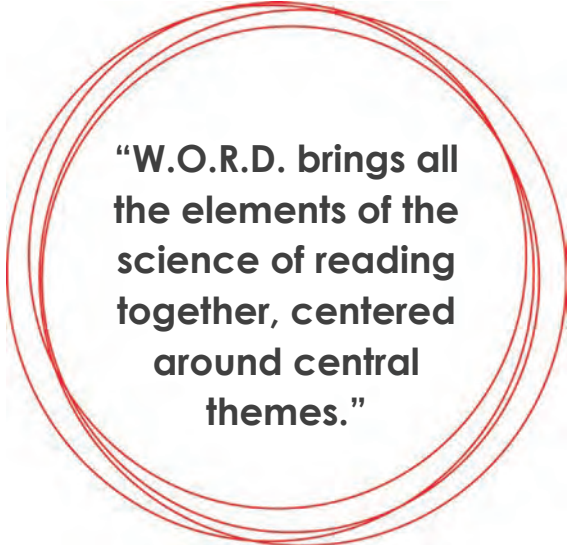
Like so many schools and districts, Throneburg says the pandemic interrupted what was a steady trajectory of improvement over the past several years. "We've been on a roller coaster in terms

of achievement scores. We had made a lot of academic progress and by the 2018-2019 school year, we had improved from being a D-rated school to a B-rated school," she says. "Then the pandemic brought a lot of upheaval and dragged our academic scores back down again, unfortunately."

While Throneburg and Stanly County administrators were looking for strategies to get students back on track, in April 2021 the state of North Carolina passed legislation mandating that K-12 literacy instruction be based on the science of reading and requiring the use of the research-based program *LETRS*® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) for professional development across the state.

Throneburg joined other curriculum coaches in Stanly County in *LETRS* training in 2021. "We had just gone through the section of the training that was focused on vocabulary and comprehension when a representative from Scholastic met with us and told us about W.O.R.D., which is a vocabulary and comprehension program," Throneburg says.

"I was immediately interested in the program, because vocabulary has always been a point of weakness in our district, and we've struggled to find a solution



**"W.O.R.D. brings all the elements of the science of reading together, centered around central themes."**

that met our needs in this area. It turned out to be perfect timing for us, and I was excited to move forward with W.O.R.D."

### Words Open Reading Doors (W.O.R.D.)

Grounded in the scientifically-proven research of Dr. Elfrieda "Freddy" H. Hiebert, Scholastic W.O.R.D. helps K-5 students acquire core vocabulary while deepening comprehension through game-based learning. W.O.R.D. takes a thematic approach and teaches words in context across content areas like science and social studies, helping build background knowledge for core instruction.

The digital program differentiates and personalizes learning based on students' vocabulary knowledge and provides educators with robust real-time reporting in a dashboard to help monitor student progress and inform instruction.

## Putting the science of reading into everyday practice

Throneburg says W.O.R.D. perfectly complemented what she had learned in *LETRS*. “The program is so well-correlated with the science of reading,” she says. “I wanted to start slowly, so as not to overwhelm our teachers. I used W.O.R.D. with a small group of intervention students at first. After seeing how the students responded and how engaged they were but also how challenging it was, I got even more excited. Our students were asking for permission to use W.O.R.D. in their free time.”

After seeing this initial enthusiasm, Throneburg then decided to offer the program to Millingport teachers in February 2022 to use in reading rotation stations, three times a week for about 15-20 minutes at a time. “Our teachers were excited to use it, because we know that building vocabulary is so important not just for reading comprehension, but for other academic subjects as well,” she says.

“W.O.R.D. brings all the elements of the science of reading together, centered around central themes. It was exciting to see and understand how it corresponded with everything I had learned in *LETRS*.”

### Data informing instruction

Throneburg says that the program has addressed an ongoing need at the school. “Our teachers have often struggled with finding ways to teach vocabulary. By seeing how students interact with the activities in W.O.R.D. and looking at the data dashboard in the program, our teachers get a better understanding of what to teach, what to focus on, and what students are struggling with,” she says. “For example, the data in W.O.R.D. showed us that understanding antonyms was a weak point for our students. We



never knew that before, and now it has become an area of focus.”

Throneburg says that already, the school is seeing an impact from the use of W.O.R.D. “Our students were two or more years behind grade level after the pandemic. Back in 2018-2019, our students were 88 percent proficient in vocabulary. At the end of this year, they came in at 80 percent,” she says. “That was a significant increase from the middle of the year when we first started using W.O.R.D. Fluency also improved to 88 percent overall. We’re catching up to where we were before the pandemic, and that’s exciting.”

### Gaining ground with teachers and district leaders

The impact of W.O.R.D. has also been seen beyond reading and literacy, Throneburg says. “Vocabulary was a key part of what was missing in our instruction. We also started seeing an impact on other subject areas because students’ vocabulary and comprehension had improved,” she says. W.O.R.D. was purposefully designed with ten cross-curricular themes that build on each other at each level and are based on topics that students typically encounter in school. “Our math and science teachers have begun to understand

the importance of vocabulary knowledge in their instruction.”

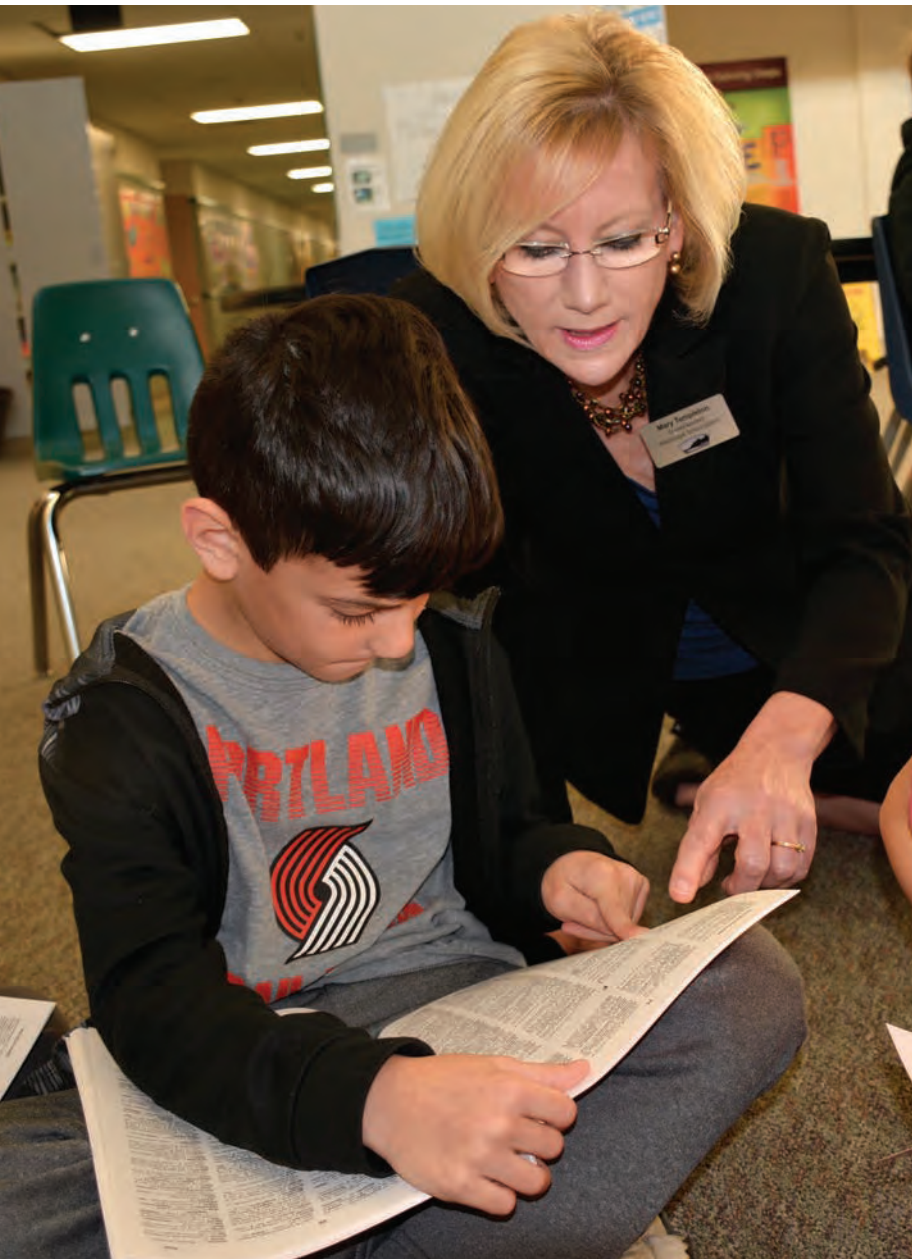
The results Millingport has seen in such a short time also attracted interest from administrators. “I met with our district leaders and shared the data and what teachers were saying about W.O.R.D., and they were very impressed,” Throneburg says. “They visited one of our first-grade classrooms and saw how engaged and challenged the students were. We’re now looking at using it throughout the district.”

### Building on what works

Moving forward, Throneburg says she is excited about the possibilities. “Next year I want to explore more of the features in W.O.R.D. since our teachers are now familiar with the program. I’m looking forward to adding the writing and conversation elements that help students build on their new vocabulary by using it in different ways. I want our school to be enriched in vocabulary.”

“We saw such great results in just half a year that I’m very much looking forward to seeing the results after a full year of having students use W.O.R.D. and having our teaching informed by the data it provides.”

To learn more about W.O.R.D., go to [Scholastic.com/WORD](https://www.scholastic.com/WORD)



# SUPERINTENDENTS TO WATCH

**How innovative leaders around the country are placing students and teachers at the center of everything they do.**

BY MATT ZALAZNICK



It was a savvy superintendent and old-fashioned technology that got instruction to students when Mobile County Public Schools shut down in 2020. Though the district, Alabama's largest, provided devices and Wi-Fi hotspots to all students, families living in more rural areas remained completely cut off from the internet.

So, master teachers filmed lessons in the district's studio that two local TV stations broadcast on a regular schedule, Superintendent Chresal Threadgill says.

The classes were also available on YouTube. "Districts from different states reached out and asked permission to use our channel," says Threadgill, Alabama's 2022 Superintendent of the Year. "That was huge for us to showcase our teachers and for them to teach not only our kids but kids throughout the U.S."

Threadgill and his team have now partnered with local utility companies to cover the entire district with Wi-Fi. "Improving the reputation and perception of public education is a huge thing for me," he says. "Public education gets beat up a lot so it's very important for us to have a positive outlook."

Back in 2018 when Threadgill took over in Mobile County, he was faced with raising the district's state report grade from its long-held C. When asked how he and his team raised that grade to a B, his first answer has nothing to do with curriculum, technology or even professional development. "We started from the top—we had to change the mindset and hold everyone accountable, including myself," Threadgill says. "I had to

◀ Superintendent Mary Templeton says she and her team at Washougal School District are even more committed to overhauling practices that have led to unequal outcomes for historically marginalized students.

make sure we got the right people in the right spots for the right reasons.”

One of Threadgill’s first moves as superintendent was “starting over” by restructuring and streamlining the central office. Some of its employees were shifted to school sites while new administrators with more multidimensional skills were moved in. “We hired fewer people and produced more work,” he says.

To continue recruit high-quality teachers, the district is now offering signing bonuses of \$3,000 to \$5,000 and holding regular job fairs. “In the past, low-performing teachers were put in low-performing schools—that doesn’t make sense,” he says. “You need a teacher who understands the school and the environment and is going to pull the best out of the kids.”

Mobile County’s efforts are an example of how the leaders profiled in *District Administration’s* latest round of “Superintendents to Watch” are placing students at the center of instruction.

### Tickets to the future

The challenges of the last few years have led to the biggest shift education has experienced in decades, says Superintendent Mary Templeton of the Washougal School District in Washington. “We’ve seen the movement of systems that had never moved before,” Templeton says. “Schools are thinking about being future-driven and reinventing how we do school by looking at the whole child and equitable outcomes.”

Templeton and her team are now working even harder to overhaul practices that have led to unequal outcomes for children from historically marginalized groups. That starts with helping staff reflect on their beliefs and recognize their own biases. Then, educators can begin to build culturally responsive classroom environments for each student, Templeton says.

The district has established a community equity advisory team that’s open to parents and families. And its contract with the local teachers’ union specifies the creation of equity teams at each of



Students at Naperville Community Unit School District 203 are high achievers (top) who face high pressure. That’s why district leaders have worked to gain family support for embedding SEL into every aspect of instruction.

its schools. The groups allow teachers to share ideas for culturally responsive instructional practices.

This work is why Washougal was chosen as an equity model in the Lighthouse Schools Systems program developed by AASA, the Superintendents Association. Templeton and her team are also rethinking staffing structures to expand the number of adults in each classroom. She envisions paraprofessionals, student teachers, language pathologists and other specialists joining teachers for each day of instruction.

“Information is no longer something students need to memorize or have somebody tell them,” she says. “We need children to make meaning out of pieces of

information so we can make sure that every child is exceeding their potential and that they have a ticket in hand for their future.”

### Reframing the idea of success

The mission of the Maine Township High School District near Chicago is for educators, students and parents to reimagine the purpose of education. Superintendent Ken Wallace says the K-12 system has been overly focused on students getting the right answer and then penalizing them for failure—which is not the way to create lifelong learners.

“We are reframing the idea of success—it’s not about how students did in high school, it’s about how they’re doing

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five years after high school,” Wallace says. “We design schools to punish those who don’t succeed and who don’t succeed right off the bat. If we taught kids to ride bikes that way almost nobody would ride a bike.”

Students are more engaged when the learning process is more like the way people approach video games, Wallace says. Gamers will play for hours on end because the cost of failure is low, and they get multiple chances to succeed. “They learn something on level 17, and

they can’t wait to get back and apply it on level 18,” Wallace says. “We need to create learning conditions that allow trial and error and embrace being less than perfect.”

Those learning conditions include allowing students to follow their own passions as they craft courses of study that include a heavy dose of career exploration. The district’s many business partners provide students with internships, job shadowing and other “deep dives” into the workplace. Students also partici-

pate in ROI counseling where they can project their future income and potential for growth. Students are therefore less likely to enroll in college and head down a career path in which they later lose interest, Wallace says.

### Designing SEL days

The emotional well-being of students is the north star for educators in Linden Public Schools, an urban district in New Jersey. The district’s all-encompassing social-emotional cognitive growth initia-

## 8-mile turnaround: Fighting for students in Eastpointe

By Chris Burt

As enthusiastic as Christina Gibson was about forging a new career in education nearly 20 years ago, she never truly envisioned becoming a superintendent, calling the position “really daunting.” Some districts can be tougher than others.

That is especially true of Eastpointe Community Schools, where Gibson landed after 17 years as a principal and educator in Port Huron, Michigan. It is located in the Detroit suburbs along 8 Mile Road, an area profiled in the film of the same name by Eminem, who went to nearby Lincoln High School. Once the “crown jewel of Macomb County,” Eastpointe has undergone a massive demographic transformation from majority white to now 87% students of color that was further divided by the introduction of Schools of Choice. White students have left to attend schools in more affluent areas and the freefall has been severe. Eastpointe was the only one to survive an economic redesign by the state, and only because teachers were willing to take a 25% pay cut.

Gibson arrived during those dire moments. She saw the way teachers and administrators fought for Eastpointe and wanted to be a part of it. “How do you walk away from people who have survived an economic takeover, who have survived schools of choice, have survived charter schools, have survived a state takeover?” she asked. “How do you try to make it better for the future?”

**ANSWER:** By becoming superintendent. After a change of heart and a rise through the Eastpointe system, against the odds Gibson decided to accept an offer to become the next district leader. Gibson knows that gaining new ideas to empower

her district is important, so she decided to attend one of District Administration’s National Superintendents Academy to hear perspectives from others across the country. Collaborating with a cohort of leaders and aspiring superintendents on communication and skill-building—and listening to their stories—will be helpful as she shifts into her new role.

“It was right now, right on time. It was exactly what I needed to learn as I’m navigating moving into the superintendency,” she says. “The big takeaway from the group was how to really craft a great story to share with any stakeholder group that helps them better understand my orientation to service.”

There are myriad challenges still facing Eastpointe. Teachers are “hot commodities” and often bail rather than stay to fight. In fact, Eastpointe had to shut down a middle school this year after half a dozen teachers resigned. Gibson has introduced a hybrid model to better support families who often need their teens to work to make ends meet. And she is working to ensure kids not only have internet and devices but is pushing to become uniquely 2-to-1 for many students because they toggle between homes.

Among the strong features the district boasts is a preschool early childhood center that is now five times bigger than it was when Gibson arrived. Eastpointe also has eight Great State Readiness Program classrooms and free preschool with daycare for staff and families. “Thinking about serving the needs of families and children, and assuming a role of advocacy, is really helping me to get excited about the superintendency.”

tive is now a national model, Superintendent Marnie Hazelton reports. “A lot of people look at SEL as something they can take off the shelf when they need it and then put it back,” she says. “For cognitive growth, it has to be embedded in the daily curriculum from the beginning of the school year.”

To organize “SEL days,” Hazelton turned to her student advisory councils, who started with board games and then added fundraising campaigns and chess competitions, among other activities. Teachers also began sharing hobbies and passions such as crocheting, which can incorporate math skills. And a fifth-grade teacher who taught her class how to use exercise bands brought a dose of physical education into her classroom. “Students often see us as one-dimensional—we’re just teachers or a superintendent,” Hazelton says. “This is showing them we have a human side, that we have lives outside the workplace.”

Naperville Community Unit School District 203 is a high-achieving school system where students face high expectations and high pressure. That’s why educating the community—and winning family support—was crucial as the Chicago-area district’s educators worked to balance academic rigor with mental health, Superintendent Dan Bridges says.



Superintendent Marnie Hazelton is letting students shape SEL at Linden Public Schools



Superintendent Chresal Threadgill (far right) had his teachers film lessons to be broadcast on local TV to reach students who had no access to Wi-Fi when Mobile County Public Schools were close early in the pandemic.

“SEL is often viewed as something that it is not,” says Bridges, whose district is an SEL model in the Lighthouse Schools Systems program. “We’re educating the community that it’s an integral part of an inclusive school community where students have a sense of belonging and feel they have a voice.”

High school students use that voice in twice-weekly advisory sessions designed to help them build stronger relationships with teachers and other staff members. Third-graders work to identify emotions and socially acceptable behavior. In fifth grade, students describe situations that cause a variety of behaviors.

The district also offers webinars so parents can continue the SEL work at home by supporting student mental health and practicing responsible digital citizenship. Bridges and the members of his leadership team have also tasked themselves with conducting wellness checks on the district’s educators.

In the coming years, Bridges and his educators will work to further personalize both academic and social-emotional learning for each student. “We know students who engage in social-emotional learning and who get mental health sup-

port, see better outcomes in school and in life,” Bridges says. “Our vision is for all students to utilize SEL and their academic skills to become resourceful, resilient, lifelong learners.”

### Keeping pace with the world

The “Portrait of a Lion Learner” is a future-ready mindset that emphasizes critical thinking, lifelong learning, compassion and courageous inquiry, South Fayette Township School District Superintendent Michelle Miller says.

These concepts form the basis of the Pittsburgh-area district’s “portrait of a graduate” initiative to empower students to find their place in the world after high school. “We believe that a future-ready learner is one who has had their individual passions, interests and strengths deeply enhanced so that whatever their future holds, they are equipped and prepared to make a successful transition after graduation,” Miller says.

The Portrait of a Lion Learner skills have been embedded into South Fayette’s curriculum and teachers are continuously refining them in their classrooms. To support these efforts, Miller and her team are conducting classroom walkthroughs





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to get a better sense of how students are self-assessing their development of these skills. Next on the district's to-do list is developing a "Portrait of a Lion Educator" to ensure teachers and administrators are honing their lifelong learning skills, Miller says.

Computational thinking skills are another major component of the future-ready focus. The district has been at the forefront of the push to expand STEAM instruction, open maker spaces at school, and make coding a regular part of the curriculum, Miller says, adding that the efforts are paying off.

More girls are engaging in science-related subjects, teachers are incorporating multidisciplinary units in STEAM instruction, and South Fayette's graduates are now more likely to study computer science or engineering in college.

"We cannot live in the past or assume the present will be our students' reality," Miller says. "Instead, we must be visionaries. We must be thinking about the skills and attributes that a person needs to successfully navigate their future."

Educators at the Maine Township High School District are reframing their idea of success to focus on how students are doing five years after high school, Superintendent Ken Wallace says.

The district's 2022-2025 strategic plan, which was approved in May, sets several goals for the future.

- Support the well-being of the whole learner and school staff
- Increase academic growth and achievement for all learners
- Address future growth and demographics in enrollment to anticipate needs and plan for expansion
- Create a comprehensive communications plan to engage and involve our community, families, and learners
- Expand and strengthen learning opportunities for learners to support the Future of Work
- Graduates possess at least one col-

lege credit and/or a professional/industry certification

- Align curriculum and instruction with an embedded focus on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging

"A school district's biggest challenge is keeping pace with the ever-changing world," Miller says. "Each day, technology is changing and evolving. As a student enters kindergarten, we must remain diligent in creating experiences over a 13-year period for a world that will be vastly different from the one they experience as a 5-year-old."

*Matt Zalaznick is District Administration's senior writer.*



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—LaKeisha Thomas, middle school counselor, Global Scholars Academy, North Carolina

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Allowing students to take mental wellness days is a positive step but won't solve the wider crisis K-12 leaders are confronting.

By Matt Zalaznick

Every day should be a mental health day at school, says Dr. Gene Beresin, a child psychiatrist.

The growing number of school districts and states that are allowing students to take mental health days off when they are struggling emotionally are taking a positive step. But the practice won't solve the wider mental health crisis that K-12 leaders are confronting, says Beresin and other child psychiatrists and pediatricians.

"For the first time, we're realizing psychiatric problems—which are more common than strep throat—need to be part of the general framework in which we look at ourselves and our kids," says Beresin, the executive director of The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital.

"But five mental health days are not going to take care of the problem."

#### Destigmatizing mental health care

When a student at Oak Park and River Forest High School near Chicago takes a mental health day, student services staff will follow up to check on that student's wellbeing. In the coming school year, the team will get a weekly report of students who have cited mental wellness as their reason for being absent.

The staff will make a priority of reaching out to students who take multiple mental health days, district spokesperson Karin Sullivan says.

Of course, educators across the nation were seeing anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness and suicidal thoughts worsening in their classrooms long before COVID. Students are struggling

with layer upon layer of compounding pressures, from family financial troubles to mass shootings to social media, overscheduling and the pressure to excel academically. A mental health day may only "recharge a kid's batteries" for about 24 hours, says Beresin.

A big positive is that health days go a long way in destigmatizing the act of asking for help, adds Dr. David Kaye, a professor of psychiatry at the University at Buffalo's Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

"The worrisome side to this is that it can promote avoidance for kids," says Kaye, who also directs Project Teach, a nonprofit focused on pediatric and maternal mental health. "A huge problem with COVID is the many, many kids who do not want to go back to school. And we know the longer you avoid



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something you're anxious about, the more difficult it gets to face.”

### Support beyond mental health days

Educators, parents and other stakeholders hoping to ease the mental health crisis must consider redesigning school in several ways, Beresin says. Students in Finland, for instance, get several breaks during the school day. They also collaborate extensively and often on projects and are subjected to very few high-stakes exams.

With many schools now using COVID relief funds to hire more counselors, Beresin says the nation also needs to expand its workforce of child psychiatrists and psychologists. Another part of the solution is ensuring that parents, teachers, administrators, and other educators have a better grasp of the scope—and the warning signs—of the current “mental health emergency.”

“If you ask the average parent, teacher, principal, administrator or coach what teenage depression is, they probably couldn't tell you,” he adds.

Understanding the “3 W's”—what to look for, when to worry and what to do—leads to more meaningful conversations with students, which paves the way for prevention and early intervention, Beresin says.

Also, there is no risk in asking young people if they are depressed considering suicide. “Kids are relieved when you ask them if they are thinking about hurting or killing themselves,” Beresin says.

### ‘Preventative maintenance’

Now that individual schools, districts and states are offering mental health days, it's time for policymakers—such as the U.S. Department of Education—to develop standards and best practices

## WHAT IS THE MENTAL HEALTH ROLE OF SCHOOL NURSES?

When a student is feeling physically ill, they go to the school nurse. A student in emotional distress who seeks help is likely to do the same thing—rather than visit a counselor, says Linda Mendonça, the president of the National Association of School Nurses.

“Mental health days are certainly something school nurses would support and be on board with,” Mendonça says.

Though school nurses may not be trained in behavioral psychology, school nurses can act as mental health “sentinels.” They spend

much of the day assessing students and can refer them to school counselors or to outside providers for more extensive mental health care. They could also suggest that the student goes home.

In the decision-making process around allowing mental health days, administrators can rely on the expertise of school nurses—many of whom are trained in disaster preparedness. “If a student has an injury in PE, we immediately call rescue service,” she says. “But if a student has a mental health issue, it's been so much more challenging.”

for K-12 social-emotional support services, says Kaye, at the University of Buffalo.

For example, a handful of states have passed laws requiring mental health days but have not addressed the lack of access to mental health care. Many policies also don't specify how the problem will be solved, says Kaye.

“I haven't seen coherent statements about the rationale for mental health days and how they address a problem,” says Kaye. “I do think there are positives to these laws but am quite concerned about how this will play out.”

There is a risk of creating more conflict between students, parents, and schools if students begin to see mental health days as a way out of difficult or challenging situations. “Mental health days are best thought of as preventative maintenance rather than something to be used routinely for kids who are having long-term mental health issues,” he says. “When kids miss more school, they get further behind academically and social-emotionally, and it becomes a bigger hill to climb to get back.”

### Risks of overreacting

Pediatricians should be consulted as educators and families allow students to take mental health days, says Dr. Sten H. Vermund, a professor of pediatrics at the Yale School of Public Health.

“It's hard to generalize,” Vermund says. “Parents, pediatricians, and teachers can all help guide the way for when mental health days can be used effectively and when they should not be deployed.”

If a child is bullied, for instance, taking a day off from school may not be as effective a solution as confronting the problem with school administrators. Or, taking a mental health day may be appropriate for one child when a grandparent passes away, while another student in the same situation might benefit from returning to school as quickly as possible.

“Childhood is not easy, and childhood does have its emotional and psychological challenges,” Vermund says. “If a parent overreacts to those, then the result may be absenteeism that could exacerbate the mental health challenge.” DA

*Matt Zalaznick is District Administration's senior writer.*

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# Changing the Narrative in Public Education: Three Steps All Districts Can Implement Now

Students are starting this school year with disjointed and varied educational experiences. In a study commissioned by the California Department of Education, School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A) reported LEAs without Attendance Management Systems (AMS) had **chronic rates above 40% at each grade**.

Students not reading on grade level by 3rd grade are **four times** more likely to drop out of school. Additionally, **chronic absenteeism** is the most significant indicator in predicting high school dropouts. Our youngest students have not built good attendance habits and many have already missed over 100 days (half a year) before 3rd grade. High school students without a middle school experience are even more challenged.

For the past two years, LEAs have experienced a shift in the decorum and focus of school board meetings, mostly concerned with COVID protocols. This challenging political environment has zapped time and energy away from an academic focus. This negative narrative has plagued public education, and we must **shift the narrative back to student achievement**.

Pre-pandemic, SI&A client data showed 64% of students with good attendance (nine absences or less). In 2021-22 it was 47% while chronic/severe rose to 27%. For LEAs without an AMS, the **chronic+ rate is over 40%**. Nationally, **more than half of all students** are missing 10+ days of school, with over 40% missing 25 or more days!

## Changing the Narrative

Due to the pandemic, over the past three years, educators constantly shifted educational delivery methods. It will take 3-5 years of concerted effort to restore confidence and trust in public education. **Educational leaders need to return to their roots as teachers** and facilitate new dialogues reinforcing the benefits of public education to our stakeholders.

---

*Nail the basics first, detail the details later* – Chris Anderson

---

## Step 1: Back to the Basics

In construction, erecting a solid foundation comes first because enhancements are worthless if the building is not structurally sound. **Showing up every day is foundational – both a skill and a habit – which must be nurtured and reinforced** resulting in:

- Increased student learning time
- More students meeting early literacy goals
- Increased graduation rates
- Higher reclassification rates
- Increased parent/guardian engagement
- Decrease in dropout rates
- Reduction in school discipline incidents

## Step 2: Educating Parents and Students on the Importance of “Showing Up”

LEAs include welcome to school letters within a back-to-school packet. Research shows that one-off messaging’s impact on habits is low. Marketing anticipates **between 6 and 20 impressions** are necessary to instill recognition of an issue. To change behavior requires **continual reinforcement**. Our families, especially in K-3, have not learned the importance of regular attendance or the long-term benefits from showing up every day.

Traditional attendance monitoring is mostly reactive; parent notifications begin only after students miss school and trend toward chronic absenteeism. Without an AMS, many LEAs require schools to manage the process, resulting in an uneven and inequitable process.

**Traditional approaches tend to be negative and do not connect with all students and families.** Superintendents can change this narrative through a **targeted approach of ongoing, proactive messaging** that provides **encouragement**, relevant

grade-span information and strategies for student success.

## Step 3: Create a Culture of Accountability

Our current “lost learning” dilemma primarily exists as a result of lesser attendance.

By June 2021, most educators felt they “did not have any more bandwidth for anything new.” Our students were at that point, too. **Expecting students and teachers to return and put in even more time is missing the point.** Superintendents should instead focus on rebuilding attendance habits that emphasize “showing up” in all communications.

LEAs who **implement a structured AMS to track results with data, and uses that data to inform** will be better positioned to restore confidence in public education within their community. In a time where finding day-to-day staff is a challenge, our current employees need tools, so their time is best focused on direct outreach to families/students.

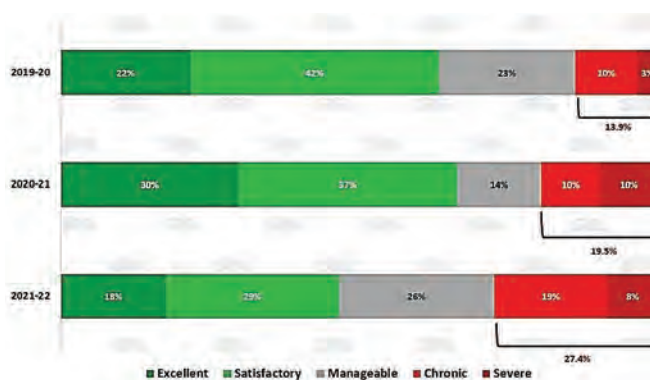
The **opportunity for confident leadership** to seize the moment starts with a focus on showing up and building habits. No doubt, this will help the **entire educational system to stabilize and work together toward improving student achievement**.

*How much per student is your LEA investing on strategies for parent and student engagement to improve attendance and student outcomes?*

by Tony Wold, Ed.D.

**The Achievement Initiative<sup>SM</sup>**

**The Attendance Crisis Has Gotten Worse**



# Teamwork and technology

How District Administration's latest group of "tech innovators to watch" are helping teachers and students seize the future.

By Matt Zalaznick

Andre Daughty is looking forward to 2019. No, the well-known urban educator and workshop facilitator didn't invent time travel during lockdown. Rather, he's anticipating a first day of school in 2022 that looks more *pre-* than *post-*pandemic.

"I'm hoping for a first day of school where everybody can shake hands, high-five, hug, fist bump without fear that we might shut down because of x, y or z," says Daughty. He's also eager for teachers and educators to capitalize on the innovations that emerged from three difficult school years.

"Teachers have learned so many new tools and this is first summer they've had since the pandemic started that a lot of them didn't teach summer school," he says. "They had two to three months to relax and recover, so I'm excited to see what a fully rested educator looks like this year."

Daughty's hopes are an example of how *District Administration's* latest group of "tech innovators to watch"—all of whom are featured speakers at FETC© 2023—are guiding their dis-



Andre Daughty

tricts in harnessing the power of teamwork and new tools.

## Why teachers are phenomenal

The new technological skills teachers have developed are another source of Daughty's optimism for the 2022-23 school year. In workshops, he has been guiding teachers in new and novel ways to engage students in hybrid learning environments. "One of the things I've

picked up on during the pandemic is that our teachers are phenomenal," he says. "We are the most flexible professionals. We adjust at the drop of a hat, and we use whatever tools we can find at each moment."

Shortly after COVID shut down schools in March 2020, Daughty began hosting free Zoom sessions to train teachers to use online tools such as Zoom itself, webcams, Nearpod and Google Classroom. When it comes to online learning going forward, he recalls a quote he heard on his first day as a teacher over 20 years ago: "If you observe students, they will teach you how to teach them."

"There were a lot of students who excelled during the online portion of COVID," he says. "There's a place for online learning at school." This applies particularly to students who are strong independent learners and thrive when they are allowed to work at their own pace. This method of learning can also help many students in the transition to college, where they will be forced to be more self-motivated.

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# Real or fake? Librarians lead the investigation

It's all about information literacy for Jennifer LaGarde, a longtime school librarian who now works as an education consultant and teaches pre-service media specialists at Rutgers University.

LaGarde has lately been working with districts on teaching students to determine the credibility of the information that is bombarding them. The traditional information literacy approach has become outdated because it relies on simplistic checklists and the binary question "Is this real or fake?" with the presumption that there is a right answer.

LaGarde's approach, which has four "lenses," starts in the social-emotional realm by helping students recognize their emotional reactions to news, social media posts and other information. Next, she encourages educators to teach with mobile devices, which is where most students consume information "surrounded by the community reading experience" of comments, likes and shares. "All of those things influence whether we trust the information or not,"



Jennifer LaGarde

she says. "When we share something and want to be part of the community, we may also be letting our guard down in terms of credibility."

Educators should also replace checklists—which focus on URLs and publication dates—with curiosity-driven investigations that force students to consider the motivations of online content creators. "We should focus less on the right answers and more on the right questions," she says.

When it comes to her own college students, she finds that a growing number now are fearful about having to face book-banning campaigns and other political challenges. This environment raises the risk of self-censorship and not stocking books that might cause backlash. "So many of the books that are challenged and removed feature and normalize the stories of historically marginalized populations—people of color and LGBTQIA+ storylines," she says. "Some librarians have just decided that they're just not going to order books with those characters."

She encourages her students to consider who is harmed when books are removed or information is censored. "The library is the one remaining egalitarian institution where you can go no matter what you believe, who you love or how much money you make," she says. "And you can get access to resources that are magical and necessary without a transaction. A coffee shop will make you buy a latte and give up some personal information to get on the Wi-Fi."

Daughty and his wife, Danielle, are also the hosts and producers of the wide-ranging "See, What Had Happened" education podcast, which they launched during the pandemic and just completed a second season.

Each episode features a guest telling an insightful, funny or heartfelt story about their K-12 experiences. On a recent podcast, librarian Jameka

B. Lewis discussed the challenges she and her colleagues have faced from a resurgence of book-banning campaigns in communities around the country. "She shared how books are going to be uncomfortable at times," Daughty says. "And she explained the important work she is doing by helping librarians around the country stand their ground and say, 'Yes, this book is going to be

a challenging read, but here's why and here are the lessons we're going to get from it.'"

That ties in with one of his personal goals for the coming school year, which is to continue to advocate for equity for all students. "In certain circles of school, they're not only trying to ban books, but they're also trying to make people uncomfortable, whether that person iden-

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## Teamwork and technology

tifies in different ways or is pronoun-affiliated,” he says. “There’s an erasure of identities.”

### A tech-inspired skills forecast

U.S. schools must complete the shift from teaching students the rote skills needed for the jobs of the past, says Mario Herraiez-Velazquez, a former teacher who, along with his twin brother, Alberto, leads the international eTwinz educational consulting firm.

“If I told you 30 years ago that someone was going to get paid to manage a company’s social media, you would’ve laughed,” says Mario Herraiez-Velazquez, who, like his brother, spent eight years teaching in a Utah school district and is now based in Spain. “There is no way to predict the future, but we can predict what skills are going to be needed across many different jobs.”

Developing a student-centered mindset is the key to making this transformation. That means fewer lectures and more inquiry-driven, independent learning anchored by effective use of technology. “Let’s move the spotlight from the teacher to the student,” Mario says. “Instead of having the teacher do a

PowerPoint for 45 minutes, do a short lecture and have the teacher guide students through activities to discover knowledge.”

This mindset also applies to assessment, which, Alberto says, too often tests outdated skills such as memorization and rote learning rather than critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and other modern-day essentials. Self-regulation and time management will also be crucial as employees more often work from home full- or part-time, he adds.

“The classroom also needs to be a tool by replicating the environment where students are going to work,” Alberto says. The modern classroom should be modeled after tech companies, where employees can move between formal and informal workspaces that facilitate collaboration, movement, independence and comfort, he adds. Educators also must figure out how to create this climate in the virtual world. “The skills have changed, but we keep using the same classroom setting,” Alberto says.

The Herraiez twins’ work around the world gives them some perspective on how U.S. education stacks up. On the one hand, they say, the U.S.



Jeni Long and Sallee Clark

spends more on K-12 education than all but a few other countries. For instance, along with government funding, U.S. schools have access to a vast number of grants. “But it can also be hard to find meaningful ways to spend that money,” Alberto says.

Their biggest concern about U.S. schools is time swallowed up by preparing for standardized testing and meeting other requirements. These obligations leave teachers with little opportunity to be more creative in the projects they assign to students, Mario says.

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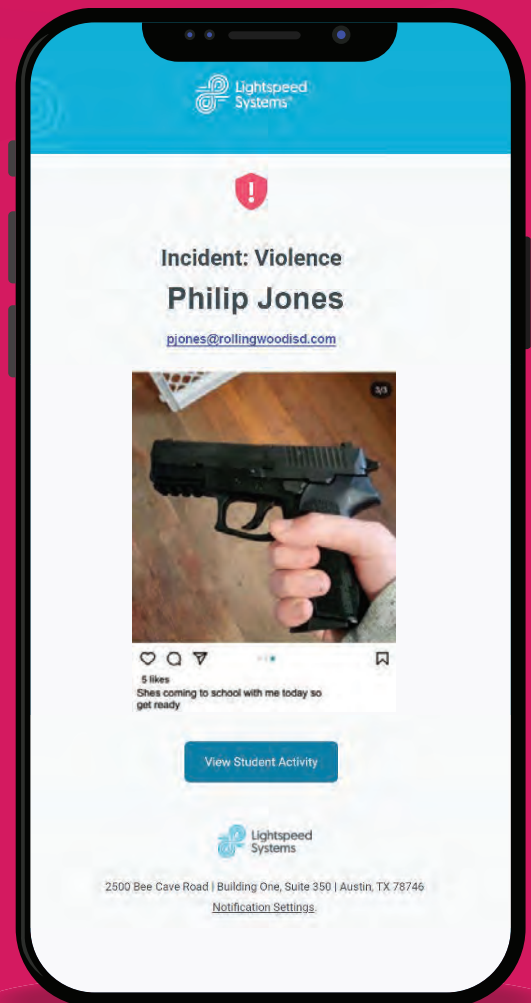
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“We need to assess and we need tools to know where students are,” he says. “But the problem with standardized testing is that there are so many skills that the tests don’t measure—the kinds of skills that are going to be crucial in the future.”

### Embracing your strengths

A lot of kids love Minecraft, but the ubiquitous online game can scare some teachers off. Sallee Clark and Jeni Long, the ed-tech partnership behind the #Jenallee Show, have a simple solution for classroom educators. “We say empower your students to teach you,” says Long, who, like Clark, is an innovation leader at Castleberry ISD near Fort Worth.

This idea jibes with the pair’s focus on having teachers and students embrace their own strengths as they build

relationships during the school year. “We track student data and test scores, but we may not be tracking students’ interests and strengths and backgrounds,” Clark says. “We encourage teachers to track those as they are preparing and creating lessons and activities. We encourage teachers to know their students.”

Recognizing these characteristics can help teachers more effectively pair students on group projects to create more productive and streamlined learning environments. The pair further encourages teachers to seek connections outside their schools to get ideas from other educators on Twitter, TikTok, Facebook and other platforms. “It’s a global community that we cherish and have learned a lot from,” Clark says.

Digital citizenship will drive much of Jenallee’s work in the new school year.

After the ups and downs of the pandemic, teachers and students are now getting much more comfortable with many ed-tech tools and have a clearer view of the benefits of technology. “Students have access at home, access at school, unguided access, access they may be too young for,” Clark says. “Educating parents is going to be a big part of what we do now that they’ve been in our education system for three years.”

The pair also intends to work with Castleberry ISD students this school year to launch a podcast on digital citizenship. “We have to teach students and adults how to use technology for good,” Long says. “They have to learn to be positive and supportive online because that is their digital footprint.” **DA**

*Matt Zalaznick is DA’s senior writer.*



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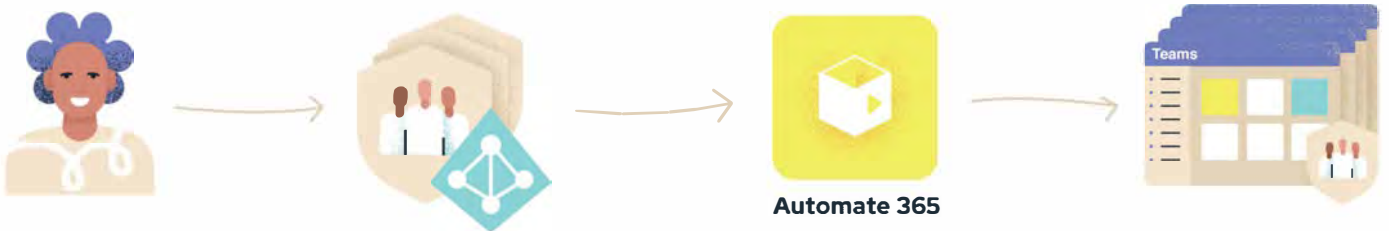
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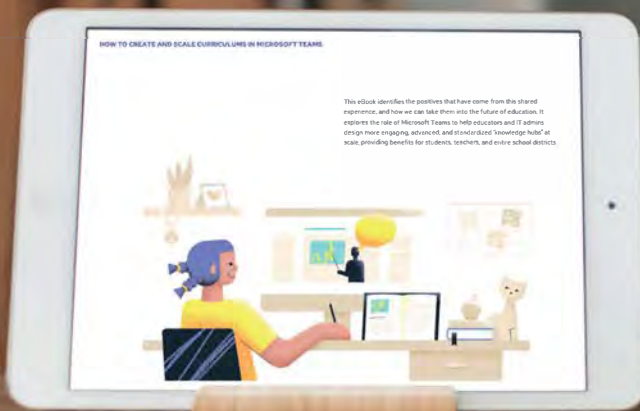
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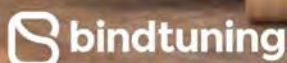
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## K-12 leaders reflect on last year, COVID's challenges and what's next

By Amy Bennett

**B**efore each new school year, educators and administrators must strategize new approaches, assess the efficacy of old solutions, and chart a course for students and teachers that considers a constantly changing landscape.

Following years of upheaval, preparation for the 2022-2023 school year presents unique challenges. I spoke with school leaders about how they're preparing for the new school year and how they've approached ongoing challenges from COVID.

### **Biggest takeaways from COVID's impact on schools**

For the educators we spoke to, COVID completely changed the educational landscape—and those changes will be long-lasting. For one thing, COVID highlighted both the importance of schools and the need for adequate education funding. "Schools are a critical component in societies," says Amy Grosso, director of behavioral health services at Round Rock ISD in Texas. From daily meals to mental health services to medical screenings, the experiences of the pandemic proved that schools provide students with far more than just education, Grosso said.

Anthony Padrnos, executive director of technology at Osseo Area Schools in Minnesota, agreed: "COVID highlighted [and] amplified the disparities that existed in our system and created a greater prioritization of resources towards strategies that have an impact in reducing those disparities." But, he added, the pandemic also helped all educators reassess how they teach—and showed the potential of instructional technology to create personalized learning for all students.

In the same vein, Steven Langford, chief information officer at Beaverton School District in Oregon, says, "We need to not 'get back' to learning prior to COVID, but take what we have learned to design new ways for students to learn." Teachers, students, and administrators rapidly implemented and adopted new devices and methodologies for remote and distance learning on a never-before-seen scale. "The speed and scale of change reset our assumptions of what was possible and how fast we could accomplish change," says Langford.

### **COVID initiatives that leaders are planning to keep**

For all the initial challenges COVID presented to the learning environment, it also showed the potential virtual learning offers to schools. And the educators we spoke with agreed that virtual in some form is here to stay. "COVID removed limitations in our thinking about how to support students and parents when they are not physically in school," says Langford. For example, to make family access more equitable, schools are moving to make virtual—rather than in-person—parent education sessions permanent.

"We had such a better response to parent education sessions when they were virtual, and this is something we will continue to do," says Grosso. "Parents can jump on a virtual session so much easier than physically going somewhere. I really feel this increased access."

Other schools are keeping online learning options available for their students. "Even after most classes returned [to] face-to-face, our district

implemented an all-virtual academy," says Ethan Dancy, technology support manager at Iredell-Statesville Schools in North Carolina.

Padrnos says Osseo Area Schools will keep its full-time online school open for students who prefer remote instruction. "The full-time online school provides scholars an opportunity to engage in a learning environment that best meets their needs," he says. "It provides options for families as they look at what learning for their students looks like and [what] supports them [best]."

Other lasting initiatives include:

- The implementation of IT help desks for students
- In-person tech helpdesks for both students and staff
- Emphasis on creating and maintaining a Learning Management System
- The adoption/reimagining of SEL plans

### **Top priorities for the 2022-2023 school year**

Mental health was a major focus for many of the educators we spoke to. "Safety, security, and mental health," are top of mind for the coming school year, says Dancy, summing up what many school leaders we spoke to said. To address this, schools are investing in:

- Support programs
- Extended summer programs
- Renewed focus on educating and supporting the "whole" student
- Rolling out SEL programs to further support students' mental health and wellbeing **DA**

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*Amy Bennett is chief of staff at Lightspeed Systems.*



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EDUCATION



## Schools are making 5 common safety mistakes. But you can fix them.

Each building within the district needs a customized response plan tailored to its infrastructure.

By Joe Hendry

I wish this wasn't an article I had to write, and this wasn't a subject I had to be an "expert" in. But the reality of present-day America overwhelmingly dictates otherwise as there were 42 school shootings in the 2021-22 school year. Despite the Senate recently passing the Safer Communities Act, the same talking points are being heard ad nauseam from the media, law enforcement and politicians, which can leave anyone feeling as though nothing will change.

But there is one thing we can control, and that's making sure schools are as prepared as possible for security emergencies.

In the aftermath of recent school shootings, we've learned where school safety measures have failed—and this is not an issue specific to the schools where the tragedies have taken place. In school districts around the country, I've seen the same common mistakes in school safety plans, due in large part to "anchoring bias." In this case, schools are anchored in their initial understanding of what to do in an emergency and continue to teach outdated (and thus dangerous) tactics that are thought of as "best practices" rather than letting new research and data guide them.

With that in mind, I want to share the five most common mistakes I've seen schools make and, more importantly, how to correct them.

### 1. Traditional lockdowns must change to "multi-option" responses.

Traditional lockdowns, originally designed as a response to drive-by shootings, focus on a single location

(the classroom), and a single response (pretending you are not there). However, after multiple incidents where the response failed, the federal recommendation is now a multi-option response to make a lifesaving decision based on your circumstance—evacuating the scene, locking a door, and barricading a room to prevent entry, and as a last resort, contact with the threat.

### 2. One size does not fit all.

School districts typically have a district-wide safety plan, but district-wide plans don't take certain variables into consideration, such as the layout of the building, the school's outside environment, and students' locations. Each building within the district needs a customized response plan developed specifically for the building's infrastructure, surroundings, and the capabilities of its students. Also, safety drills should be practiced at varying times of day with students and staff in various locations.

### 3. Operate as a team.

A common mistake made by school districts is to appoint one individual to develop and oversee a safety plan—from identifying any and all safety threats to implementing appropriate actions. The most effective safety plans include an entire team of participants who undergo the same training and work together to develop a collaborative plan customized to their school. Operating as a team increases efficiency for the shared goal of keeping schools safe.

### 4. Continuous training.

Proper, ongoing training is the foundation for any successful violence prevention program. As new information becomes available, it's important to provide updated training so everyone understands the modifications and can practice the new tactic in the next scheduled drill. After each drill, gather feedback from teachers and staff and make adjustments so corrections can be implemented.

### 5. Communication is key.

It is imperative that everyone within the school community—students, parents, and staff—are aware of the school's safety plan. Announce drills in advance so parents can help children prepare for a scary situation, as well as process what they've learned afterward.

Behavioral threats are a comprehensive issue for everyone, not just students. Employees have crises, too, and forgetting this could have a detrimental impact.

Many school districts approach behavioral threat assessments and training in a piecemeal manner that consists of outdated—and potentially dangerous—tactics. While I'm a proponent of telling people not to believe everything they hear, in this case, I hope you'll take these tips to heart. They could just save lives. **DA**

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*Joe Hendry is a preventative measure specialist with a background in law enforcement, and the senior director of on-site services at Navigate360.*



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## Choosing new ed-tech? Try asking students what they want

The consequences of not considering student viewpoints can be counterproductive and detrimental to learning.

By Grace Lee

School environments that rely only on control and compliance deter autonomy, which leads to disengaged students. Whereas fostering student agency leads to ownership. This same principle applies when making technology decisions for classrooms.

Logitech researchers recently surveyed parents about what influences their family's technology purchases. The good news is students are getting more involved with technology decisions at home. In our research, over half (55%) of parents involve their kids in tech purchases. We found that kids who are involved in purchasing decisions at home feel knowledgeable, powerful, important, confident, responsible, and excited.

### How schools can involve students

Getting students involved in technology decisions can't be a one-size-fits-all approach. Just as digital learning is best when it centers on choice, so should we also engage students in decision-making for the technology tools that enhance the learning experience. Choosing one or many of the strategies below can help administrators and teachers effectively engage students and foster student agency in the school.

**1. Conduct surveys and polls:** Surveys and polls are the easiest ways to gather feedback from a wide range of students. Best of all, even the youngest of students can participate. Students in kindergarten can participate in a "raise your hand if" poll led by a teacher. Surveying and polling students can help gather input on features and capabilities, as well as opinions and reviews of tech they currently use.

To increase student ownership, administrators and teachers can invite students to lead surveys and polls (as well as the next tip: focus groups). In addition to giving students agency, student-led research teaches young people how to collect and analyze data as well as consider others' opinions—skills they'll need for the rest of their lives.

**2. Host focus groups:** Students rarely hold back their true feelings—teachers can certainly attest to that. Focus groups provide students the opportunity to air their authentic opinions. Hosting student focus groups can reveal opinions and considerations that will be missed if schools only talk to adults.

We talk to students to ensure all voices are heard throughout our development process, from the weight of a tool to how students will use it to learn. For example, while developing the Logitech Pen, input from over 100 students led to the

addition of an extra-long silicone grip to ensure comfort for beginners who are still learning handwriting techniques.

**3. Invite students to form or join a technology committee:** A technology committee might seem like a novel idea, but plenty of student groups, such as student councils or student boards, already exist. Asking students to join or form a committee gives them the opportunity to be part of decision-making and creates a space for students to explain what they would use the tech device for and how they would use it.

Involving students in committees will depend on existing school rules and cultures but there are a few opportunities to explore. Students could:

- Run their own committee, leading efforts such as initial research and gathering input from the larger student body.
- Work with school leaders to co-create a list of desired features and capabilities. This provides students an up-front opportunity to share their thoughts.
- Join vendor demonstrations to ask questions and give input.

An important part of involving students is making sure they are empowered. Administrators and teachers should frame the objective for students, intentionally engage them in conversations, and create real space for them to be heard.

**4. Give students individual choice (when possible):** Many of the tips above relate to how to involve students in district- or school-wide technology decisions. Creating opportunities to apply choice to personal decisions is just as important. Consider allowing students to choose between tools such as a keyboard or a stylus, make choices such as the color of a product, or customize a solution to work better for them. Keeping these opportunities in mind when evaluating technology will create a throughline of choice from the district level to individual students.

### Co-creating an experience through choice

As administrators and teachers continue to explore ways to activate student voice and choice, technology procurement is an area that will have a meaningful impact on districts, schools and students. By joining in the process of choosing technology, students will have the chance to co-create their learning and also practice skills like decision-making, initiative, and data analysis that they'll continue to need in their school journey, life and career. **DA**

*Grace Lee is the head of design for education at Logitech.*



# THE EASIEST GAP TO CLOSE IN EDUCATION.

New research finds a gap between the information educators and families need from one another to build strong school-family connections — a critical finding since family engagement translates to better learning outcomes for students.

## Top 3 areas teachers want to learn about from families:



Social-emotional challenges



Important family circumstances



Behavioral challenges

## Top 3 areas families want to learn about from their children's teachers:



Academic progress



Behavior reports



Missing homework

In short, families want **more academic progress and behavior updates** from educators, while educators want **more information on student social-emotional wellness and family circumstances** from families.

By sharing this information regularly, schools and families can close this gap and ensure more student learning.



Read the research and learn more about how to close this education gap at [www.talkingpts.org/educationgap](http://www.talkingpts.org/educationgap)

*Data comes from TalkingPoints' Spring 2022 Impact Survey designed by its research team, led by Dr. Rina Park, Director of Research at TalkingPoints. The survey includes responses from 9,913 educators across early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school, and 1,217 English and Spanish-speaking families.*

*TalkingPoints is a non-profit, mission-driven organization that supports schools and districts in achieving student academic and wellbeing goals. We do this by providing the platform and support so schools can build partnership and connection to drive student success for each and every student.*



## 3 keys to using Universal Design for Learning as a powerful antiracism tool

UDL empowers all students by providing multiple means of engagement, representation and expression.

By Andratesha Fritzgerald

Universal Design for Learning—also known as UDL—plays an important role in promoting inclusion and antiracism in classrooms. The underlying idea is that students come to us with a unique mix of strengths, weaknesses, values, and lived experiences—and we need to honor these in our teaching.

To reach every student, educators cannot just adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to instruction. That approach reinforces the institutional racism that has historically been present in education because it caters to a mythical “average” learner—one who is white, middle class, self-regulating, and learning on grade level.

To eliminate barriers to learning, Universal Design for Learning empowers all students by providing multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of expression. This means that students will have more ways to interact with content, more ways to personalize their learning, and more ways to show what they know.

By embracing UDL, teachers gain a powerful tool for creating a learning environment in which every student feels welcome, and their unique gifts and capabilities can shine.

Here are three key steps to incorporate antiracism UDL in your school or district.

### Step 1: Self-assess

The first step is to take stock of where you are currently as a school system. This sets the stage for meaningful changes in practice.

Have you listened to racially and culturally diverse voices in designing your curriculum? Are people of color reflected in the curriculum as subject matter experts? In other words, do students learn about Black and brown mathematicians in their math classes? How often are the voices of Black and brown family members, community members, and other stakeholders invited to the table and included in the decisions you make?

Identifying what you’re doing well and where there is room for growth will show you how to improve.

### Step 2: Confront biases

Many of the barriers to learning arise from teachers’ own expectations of what their students are capable of. Being aware of their own implicit biases helps educators intentionally design instruction to be more inclusive for all learners.

In 2018, Black students were suspended at a rate three times higher than their white counterparts.

Educators should ask themselves: What thoughts do I have when I hear that a new student is coming to me with an IEP? Do I automatically think about how to dial down the rigor instead of ways to communicate the standard clearly? What do I expect from children of various races and ethnicities? Do I stereotype different groups of students based on what I think they’re like or what I assume their preferences are?

In 2018, Black students were suspended at a rate three times higher than their white counterparts. When we look at how discipline rates and special education referrals vary dramatically based on the color of a student’s skin, it’s clear how much work we must do to eliminate bias from our education systems.

### Step 3: Connect

Successful UDL involves designing learning experiences for all kinds of learners. This is easier when educators know their students well. To support this, K–12 leaders should foster a culture of connection—where teachers actively work to build relationships with all of their students.

When teachers can effectively design activities that play to students’ strengths (and minimize barriers that could stand in their way) students’ outcomes are more likely to reflect their true capabilities.

### Breaking down barriers

UDL addresses systemic barriers to learning for students of color by ensuring that every student feels supported, welcomed and valued. When implemented well, it’s a critical antiracism solution that gives all students a chance to blossom and learn with the brilliance they were born to show. **DA**

*Andratesha Fritzgerald, founder of the education consultancy Building Blocks of Brilliance, has two decades of experience as an urban school administrator and teacher. She is the author of Antiracism and Universal Design for Learning: Building Expressways to Success (CAST, 2020).*



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## Can we imagine a future where there are no teacher evaluations?

Complex teacher evaluation systems have not produced measurable academic improvement.

By Allyson Burnett

**E**stablishing strong teacher accountability and effective teacher evaluations have long been a priority for K-12 districts. But nearly a decade of reforms have created complex and rigorous teacher evaluation systems without producing measurable improvement in reading, math, or high school graduation rates, according to a recent study.

Considering the flawed foundation of “traditional” teacher evaluations—one-off observations, confusing rubrics and complex formulas—this finding shouldn’t come as much of a surprise. Traditional evaluation systems often fail to accurately capture educators’ day-to-day instructional practices.

I propose an alternative approach: short, informal, and more consistent observations powered by video recordings, instructional coaching and collaboration. Here are a few ways to implement these methodologies in your school or district.

### **Promote self-reflective learning through video**

Much like an athlete reviewing game tapes to improve their skill, a teacher who can review their methodologies by watching themselves teach in a classroom allows for greater self-reflection and growth.

Teachers, in partnership with administrators, instructional coaches, and peers, can create their own professional learning goals that are connected to the state or district teaching standards, and then use video to record evidence of their practice.

### **Supporting and retaining teachers has become a key priority in K-12 education. To achieve this, educators should consider replacing outdated evaluation systems with something more flexible and meaningful.**

Video followed by self-reflection is more impactful than rubrics and formulas used for the purpose of evaluation because this process helps teachers see how their instruction is truly impacting student learning in the classroom.

With frequent video recordings of a teacher using targeted strategies during direct instruction, administrators have access to a larger sample size of a teacher’s performance. This will result in fair and constructive feedback for teachers instead of “gotcha observations”.

### **Build a culture of trust with upward feedback**

Open collaboration and the ability to engage in productive conversations with all stakeholders, from principals, coaches and central office staff, ensures that teachers have the resources they need to be successful. This open communication can help school and district leaders avoid cases of “initiative fatigue” and ensure their educators feel supported. When teachers have

space to freely express their opinions, struggles, and needs, it can help K-12 leaders build trust and a stronger foundation for communication within schools and districts.

### **Don’t forget the students**

Students know good teaching when they experience it. They also spend more time with teachers than any observer ever will. At colleges and universities, students’ feedback is routinely gathered through surveys—this approach is rarely used in K-12 education.

Research validates the crucial role well-crafted student surveys play in evaluating teacher effectiveness, so school and district leaders would be well-advised to include them in their teacher evaluation systems.

### **Out with the old, in with the new**

Amidst the pandemic and other stressors, supporting and retaining teachers has become a key priority in K-12 education. To achieve this, school and district leaders should consider replacing those outdated evaluation systems with something more flexible and meaningful. A modern approach to observation and evaluation not only benefits teachers—it benefits students, families and the district community as a whole. **DA**

*Since retiring from public education, Allyson Burnett has worked as a national educational consultant specializing in helping new and struggling teachers and an adjunct professor who teaches students on the path to becoming urban educators. She created the virtual coaching professional services at Sibme.*

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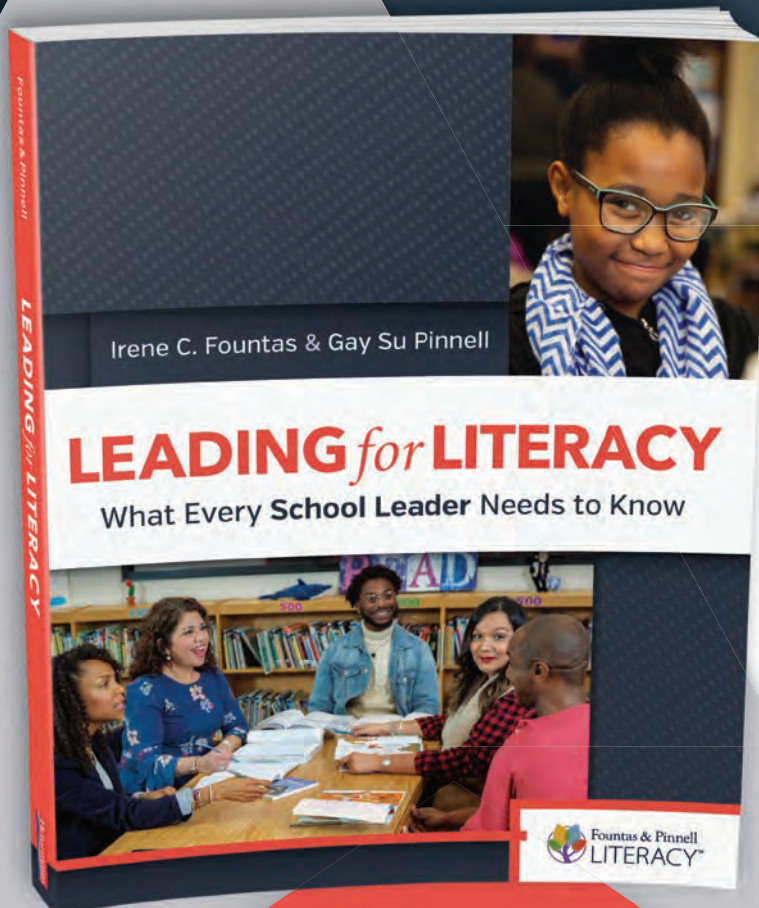
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