



A RE-ENTRY GUIDE

Forward to school through learning science

Introduction

This past year, we have seen a historic level of commitment and investment from the federal government to meet every child where they are, to prepare every child to succeed, and to provide every teacher with the resources they need in order to support them. There has never been anything like it. And with this investment, we have a moment in which we can make good on our country's promise of equitable opportunity for every child. We have the will to do so.

But there are very real and present concerns that we must address if we are to seize this opportunity. Already our discourse is leading us down a path that may stray far from what the science already tells us and what our own schools already know is the foundation of real learning. If we fail to heed the science and succumb to the pressure to recover what we've lost and restore what was, we will miss an opportunity to understand and remove the obstacles that are impeding students' innate abilities to engage in their learning—now and for the next generation.

If we don't ground our approach to reintroducing institutional learning post-COVID in the learning sciences, we are at risk of repeating the same mistakes and oversights of the past. Now is the time to ask ourselves some honest questions about what it would look like for every student in our community to be fully engaged in learning, how that looks different from learning pre-COVID, what stands in the way of our vision for an engaged learning environment, and what we're ready to do about it.

Every district in this country should have a set of adopted principles underlying its pedagogical approach, in three critical areas:

How do we identify what students should know and be able to do (e.g. learning standards)?
How do we assess this knowledge and understanding (e.g. summative, interim, formative assessments)?
In response to these insights we gain from our assessments, how do we design instruction and instructional materials to ensure that every student reaches an adequate level of academic progress (e.g. scopes and sequences, instructional resources)?

Schools can't do it all, but they do have the power to make important decisions that will have a direct impact on the readiness of all students to engage in learning. Here, we'll discuss what this moment means for learning science and student engagement, and outline potential risks as well as ways to address them as students return to school.

Defining engagement

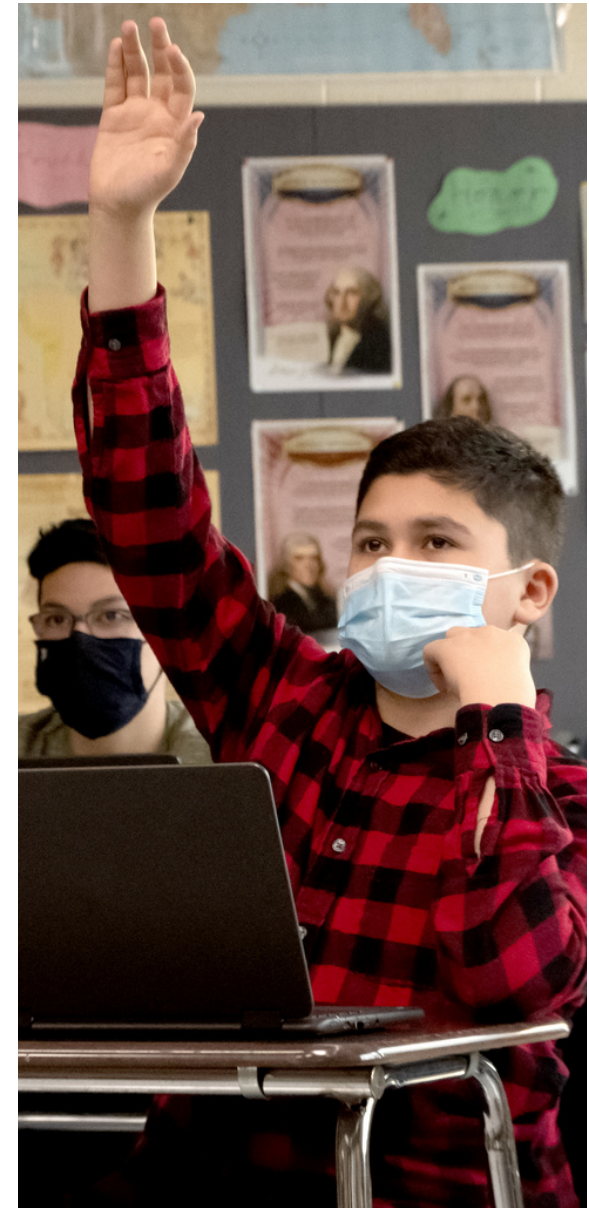
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Defining engagement

Even before the pandemic, we've seen stagnation in our attempts to increase student engagement. A 2009 report based on a survey of more than 40,000 Indiana high school students indicated that the students were bored because the material wasn't interesting (81%) or relevant (42%) and they didn't see the value of the work they were being asked to do (42%). A 2016 Gallup survey found that the longer students spent in school, the less engaged they became. From 74% of students feeling engaged in school in grade 5 to only 34% feeling this way by grade 12.

That diminished engagement was exposed — and then amplified — during distance learning. When kids weren't engaged, they checked out.

Today's concerns about academic progress are symptoms of a larger systemic issue that existed before the pandemic: the design of our learning environments creates impediments that stand in the way of a student's desire to engage in classroom learning.

Broadly speaking, students are motivated to engage in order to learn about their world; they're wired for this. And if our institutional learning environments do not make themselves both accessible and engaging, students will turn their engagement elsewhere, where those conditions are more readily evident.

Simply put: we think we have a "learning loss" problem, but what we really have is a student engagement problem.

Concerns about academic progress need to be seen as symptoms of a larger issue: the design of our learning environments is inhibiting students' ability to express their engagement and thereby to self-actualize, to become who they are capable of becoming.

95% of
educators

reported that
student engagement
is important in
addressing learning
loss.

[Education Week Research Center Survey, April 2021](#)

On learning science

Student learning engagement is a construct that helps us to articulate the components that are necessary but not sufficient for academic achievement. Studies have shown that the amount of time students are actively engaged in learning is a strong predictor of academic achievement (Gettinger & Ball, 2007). Student engagement is also a construct made up of several different dimensions. It is typically classified into three categories: cognitive (deep processing, “minds-on”), affective (emotional response, “hearts-on”), and behavioral (on-task behavior, “hands-on”). It sometimes also includes a fourth, social (peer or group-related behavior).





The learning sciences have been around for a long time, and despite steady advances in visibility and adoption, are not yet “required reading” in many teacher training programs. For example, even the relatively “settled” science of learning to read remains, in practice, unsettled in many districts.

ON LEARNING SCIENCE

Until relatively recently, the science of learning wasn't accessible in a form that could be made actionable by instructional leaders. Even if a district wanted to select a set of learning science "standards," they weren't readily available. Fortunately, these insights have begun to make their way into everyday "hallway conversations" among educators aided by several highly accessible frameworks.

2016

Turnaround for Children published the [Building Blocks for Learning: A Framework for Comprehensive Student Development](#), which articulates a set of research-based skills and mindsets that are highly correlated with academic achievement.

2018

Digital Promise launched the [Learner Variability Project](#), which produced the [Learner Variability Navigator](#). The Navigator is an explicit framework addressing the core learning science within math and reading, by grade span, to highlight the factors and relationships among them that have been shown to have the greatest impact on learning.

2020

Transcend Education released the [Designing for Learning Primer: A Synthesis of Key Insights from the Science of Learning and Development](#).

2021

The Science of Learning and Development Alliance is due to release a set of [Essential Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design](#) in order to provide further articulated guidance to learning designers.

One thing that the learning science behind all of these guidelines has in common is a recognition that academics and whole child development are inextricably linked and co-dependent.

One reason that we at Newsela seized on the Transcend Education framework is the accessible phrasing that the authors use. Each of their principles is derived from key insights in the learning science shares the same “People learn best when...” syntax. What this framework is doing is to clarify and establish a set of circumstances that are true for people —not just students — when they are learning best.

These statements give us the conditions that we should be looking to create for learners. We should be striving to make these conditions as true as possible for as many of our students for as much of the time.

Importantly, these conditions don’t describe exactly how they may be achieved — though there are numerous illustrative examples — just as learning standards don’t prescribe the form of assessment or the instructional pathway.

Here is how Newsela thinks about this framework and how we use it: we know from learning science that motivation is necessary but not sufficient for students to engage in learning, and learning engagement is necessary but not sufficient for academic progress. Motivation is not directly observable, but engagement is. And this is where we as a company center our efforts.



Use learning science to...

- ✓ Identify what students know and should be able to do
- ✓ Assess this knowledge and understanding in a holistic manner
- ✓ Design instruction to ensure that every student reaches an adequate level of academic progress

5 risks to avoid during reentry



THE RISK

Jumping into high-stakes academic assessments



THE FIX

Implementing an approach for whole-child instruction



THE RISK

Approaching extended learning in isolation with skill and drill tools



THE FIX

Prioritizing essentials and carrying them through each school year



THE RISK

Treating SEL programming as distinct from academic content



THE FIX

Utilizing instructional content that is affirming of identity



THE RISK

Conflating personalized learning with computerized programming



THE FIX

Using empathy as an approach to personalized learning



THE RISK

Undermining teacher agency



THE FIX

Enabling teachers with HQIM and ability to differentiate at scale



THE RISK

Jumping into high-stakes assessments / academic assessments

A flawed approach would be to sign our kids up for any pre-programmed solution — such as using “skill and drill” products — that isolates them from their peers and teachers at precisely the moment when they will benefit most from the affordances of social learning.

Another mistake would be to choose materials that fail to account for the life experiences in a way that helps students to make sense of the world in which they are living. Escapist fantasy narratives have their place, but this is also a moment when our materials need to offer the kinds of culturally responsive approaches that center the student experience, affirm their identity (especially in light of persistent negative portrayals), and build from their culture as an asset rather than a deficit.

To varying degrees, socially and emotionally, students and adults may need to rediscover and reclaim personal, in-person relationships that provide them the psychic resources to rebuild their readiness for learning. This will take time, space, and clear, accessible, and inclusive routines that re-establish a dependable rhythm to social interactions.

**80% of
educators**

say high-stakes
assessments play a
role in their approach
to addressing learning
loss

[Education Week Research Center Survey, April 2021](#)



THE FIX

Implementing an approach for whole-child instruction

In order to get an accurate picture of this human-wellbeing dimension of readiness, districts should turn to organizations with expertise in social-emotional learning and whole-child instruction, such as [Panorama Education](#), [Turnaround For Children](#), or [Move This World](#). In partnership with these providers, districts can adopt programs to enable educators to understand where each child is from a wellness perspective before undertaking academic programming. The goal of the recovery effort is to design a learning environment that removes the obstacles for students to learn and teachers to teach at their best.

When students are sufficiently able to regulate themselves, good assessments that are well-administered can play a useful role in diagnosing where best to resume classroom learning, always with an eye towards preparing for the future.

Academic assessments can be used formatively as an input to inform the instructor's next instructional move - where to begin, how to continue the student's learning. The data can then be used to design learning activities that are differentiated and informed by the strategies indicated by the results. It is important to note that now is not the time to introduce assessments to students for the first time or frame them as a high-stakes activity. Adding additional academic pressure can negatively impact students' mental well-being and self-concept, potentially putting them back into a dysregulated state.



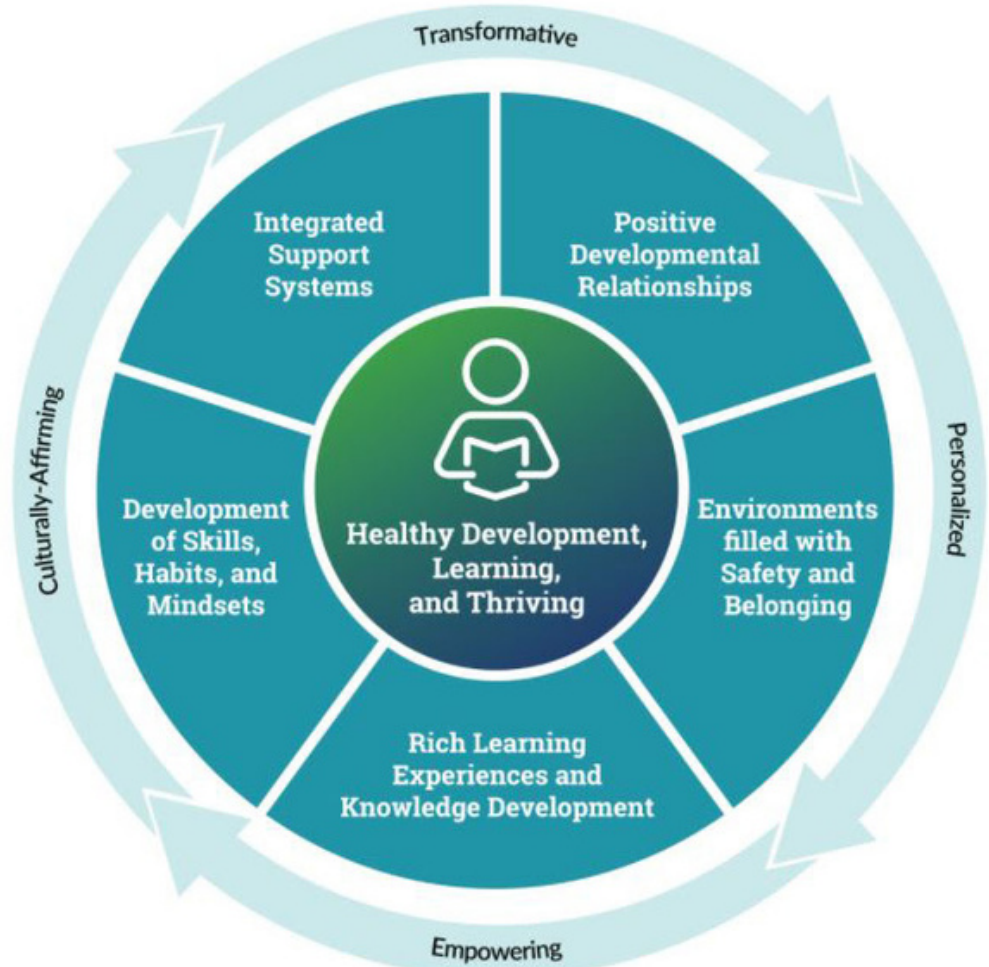
FEATURED VOICE

“Today, we can use the principles of Whole Child Design to build environments in all of our classrooms, schools and other settings for learning that enable children to cope with stress, build resilience, and develop the 21st century skills and mastery level competencies they need to live lives of fulfillment and choice.”



Pamela Cantor, MD

[SOURCE: THE SOLD ALLIANCE](#)





THE RISK

Approaching extended learning in isolation with "skill and drill" tools

The so-called "skill and drill" approach puts an emphasis on **massed practice** (repetition of a specific procedure or learning task), rather than **interleaved practice** (practice across different contexts) or **spaced repetition** (resurfacing learned concepts just at the point of forgetting in order to cement knowledge into memory).

We're not describing a one-and-done intervention that will "catch kids up" in time for the fall. The summer can be the first step in a journey to reaccelerate learning to best prepare all students for the future. But it cannot be a standalone program.



**75% of
educators**

plan to prioritize what
students need most to
be successful in the
next school year

[Education Week Research Center Survey, April 2021](#)



THE FIX

Prioritize essentials and carry them through learning sessions

What we're aiming for is a deeper type of learning behavior that enables students to build background knowledge by going into depth within priority areas of the curriculum. This approach avoids the kind of superficial, decontextualized learning behaviors that may lead to gains on short-term measures but has not been shown to result in longer-term, deeper learning that results in transfer to solve new problems.

Practically speaking, this means that programs should establish and maintain cohesion between summer plans, the past school year, and the school year to come. Much less effective will be an isolated experience of “summer learning” that has no clear relationship with this school year, is not informed by SEL and academic readiness assessments, and what students will need to know and be able to do in school year '21-22.

These decisions to take a scalpel to the learning objectives in order to prioritize the essentials have implications for instructional content, as well.

FEATURED VOICES

“Throughout the world, educators face a critical challenge: how to design aspirational and future forward (post-pandemic) learning experiences rather than a temporary fix (triage). [We propose] the importance of beginning with input from students, parents, and teachers about what they are experiencing, what lessons they are learning, and what they will need moving into the next school year. We also looked at factors to mull over what will matter most in the planning for the year rather than jumping onto the “let’s pick up where we left off” bandwagon.”



Dr. Heidi Hayes Jacobs
and Allison Zmuda

[BUILDING THE FUTURE NOW: DECIDING WHAT TO CUT, WHAT TO KEEP AND WHAT TO CREATE](#)

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL CHOICE



What to
cut out?

What to cut out?

Make room for deeper investigation and development of key concepts and skills



What to
cut back?

What to cut back?

Move into foreground important cognitive and technical skills, content that is central to the big idea, and commitment to demonstrations of learning that are most revealing and helpful.

What to
consolidate?

**What to consolidate?**

Combine elements to make more effective coherent whole.

What to
create?

**What to create?**

Provide fresh perspective for learners bringing multiple subject areas on common topics, problems, issues, and themes.



THE RISK

Treating SEL programming as distinct from academic content

Imagine: I am a student participating in the world's greatest SEL and whole child wellbeing program, which restores my belief in myself, my trust in my learning community, my ability to self-regulate. Then I enter my classroom and am told to open my curriculum to read outdated stories about people who look nothing like me, whose narratives reinforce my lack of belonging, while I'm assessed on my ability to regurgitate the testing objectives. It is critical to acknowledge that SEL and academics are inextricably linked and failure to acknowledge one will counteract any success in the other.

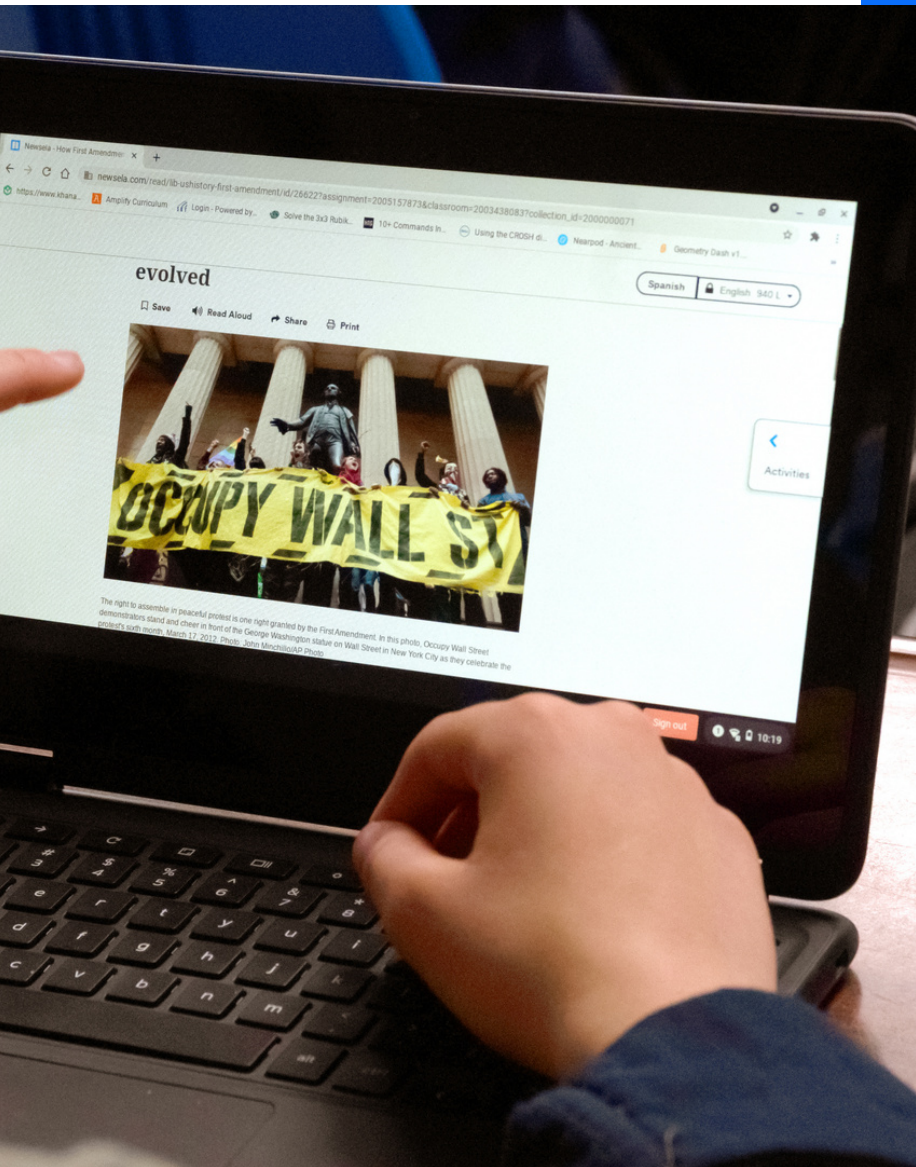




THE FIX

Utilizing instructional content that is affirming of identity

Research demonstrates that students can best improve their reading comprehension skills when they are reading in a content area such as social studies. This is an opportunity to help students build background knowledge in core content areas like social studies and science, especially in the elementary grades. “When it comes to improving reading comprehension, strategy instruction may have an upper limit, but building background knowledge does not; the more students know, the broader the range of texts they can comprehend.” (Willingham) And following from this, students can more easily build comprehension strategies in the context of reading high-interest texts in domains where they already have background knowledge.



FEATURED VOICE

To transform your practice, seek out the expertise of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color) scholars, and weave their scholarship into your curriculum. Pull excerpts from their scholarship and put it in the hands of students to grapple with. Do your best to eradicate the “banking” model of teaching, as Paulo Freire articulates in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and practice facilitating communal learning strategies detailed in *Culturally Responsive Teaching* by Zaretta Hammond. Attend the annual Teaching Black History Conference hosted by Dr. LaGarrett King, director of The Carter Center for K12 Black History Education. Use the lessons from Brown University’s *Racial Slavery in the Americas: Resistance, Freedom, and Legacies* (the lessons are free until September 2021).



Demetrius Hobson

[SOURCE: TEACH FOR AMERICA](#)



THE RISK

Conflating personalized learning with computerized programming

The Aurora Institute defines personalized learning as “Tailoring learning for each student’s strengths, needs and interests—including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible.”

Any plans for learning recovery must center around a teacher. If we just plunk students down in front of a computer for their “personalized learning” program that is so highly personalized it has no room for the teacher or the classmates, for the student themselves to express agency in their learning, nor for any social learning experiences that we know are the foundation for my academic success, we have not removed any obstacles to re-engage learning.

Only
11% of
educators

said their instructional materials were highly effective in engaging their students in learning this past year.

[Education Week Research Center Survey, April 2021](#)



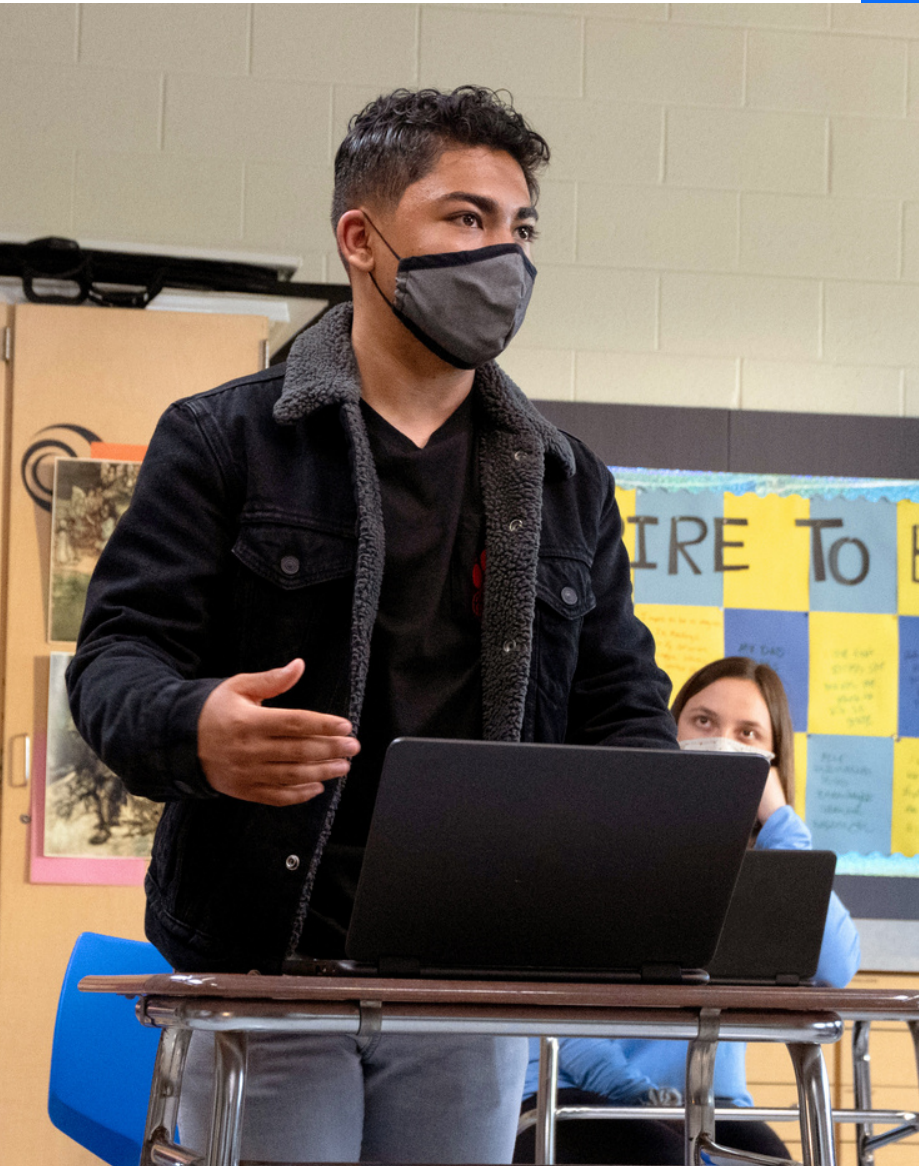
THE FIX

Empower teachers to design learning around empathy

The conversation around "learning loss" has reached a fever pitch, and teachers around the country are facing rapidly changing directives for the coming months. In this moment, we should be supporting teachers at what they do best: building deep connections with their students, rooted in empathy. Matthew Perini, Harvey Silver, and Jay McTighe wrote about the significance of empathy in instructional design:

"With social isolation and political divisiveness at all-time highs, there has never been a better time to invite empathy into our classrooms and online learning environments. Empathy, or 'being able to walk in someone else's shoes,' engages the distinctly human capacity to step out of ourselves so we can see and experience the world as others do. Note that teaching with empathy does not amount to content-free 'fluff.' Just the opposite, in fact: Empathy can establish a conceptual lens to help students make meaning of abstract and high-level content. What's more, empathy greatly increases students' personal engagement with the content, which helps make the learning 'stick'. Such active learning is especially important in virtual and hybrid settings where students can easily lose focus when staring at a screen."

Read more about specific strategies [here](#).



FEATURED VOICES



Jay McTighe and Harvey Silver

[SOURCE: ASCD](#)

One school of thought ties the concept of deep learning to content knowledge. Advocates for a content orientation point out that the ability to assimilate new knowledge is significantly influenced by one's prior knowledge and that the key to deep understanding lies in helping students build a broad knowledge base (Wexler, 2019; Hirsch, 2016). Another group of educators put the emphasis on the development of process skills, especially "21st-century skills" such as critical thinking, creativity, and communication, which cut across disciplines (Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2018; Vander Ark & Schneider, 2014). Advocates for this position call for schools to increase their focus on cultivating these skills, especially through the use of authentic, project-based learning.

We agree with both these important schools of thought—students need content knowledge and process skills for rich learning experiences. Nonetheless, our conception of deep learning is a little different. It aligns more directly with the definition proposed by the National Academy of Sciences (2018): Deep learning is a "process through which an individual

becomes capable of taking what was learned in one situation and applying it to a new situation." More specifically, we contend that deep learning occurs when students come to understand and make sense of important ideas and processes—and are able to transfer those understandings to new content and contexts.

For educators, the most important thing to recognize is that this kind of understanding isn't something that teachers can transmit by telling. Indeed, the phrases "coming to understand" and "making sense of" suggest that deep learning occurs over time and requires active meaning-making by the learner.

93% of district leaders and principals

believe their reliance on
remediation tools will be the same
or higher in this upcoming school
year.

[Education Week Research Center Survey, April 2021](#)



THE RISK

Undermining teacher agency

The teacher is the ultimate learning designer. The choices that the teacher makes to identify and remove barriers to student motivation, engagement, and ultimately academic progress, are the basis on which all students can be set up for success. But the teacher must be set up for success as well, with immediate access to authentic, accessible materials that reinforce students' sense of belonging and competence while communicating clearly relevance and value to their lived experience.

Consider three statements from Transcend Education that should inform instructional design decisions. What do we know about the conditions we're aiming for in ideal learning environments? Here are three things we know:

High-Quality Feedback: People learn best when they receive timely and targeted feedback to guide their improvement.

Sense of Belonging: People learn best when they feel connected to, as well as accepted by, the people and environment around them.

Learning Differences: People learn best when their unique learning needs are identified and resources and supports are aligned with these needs.





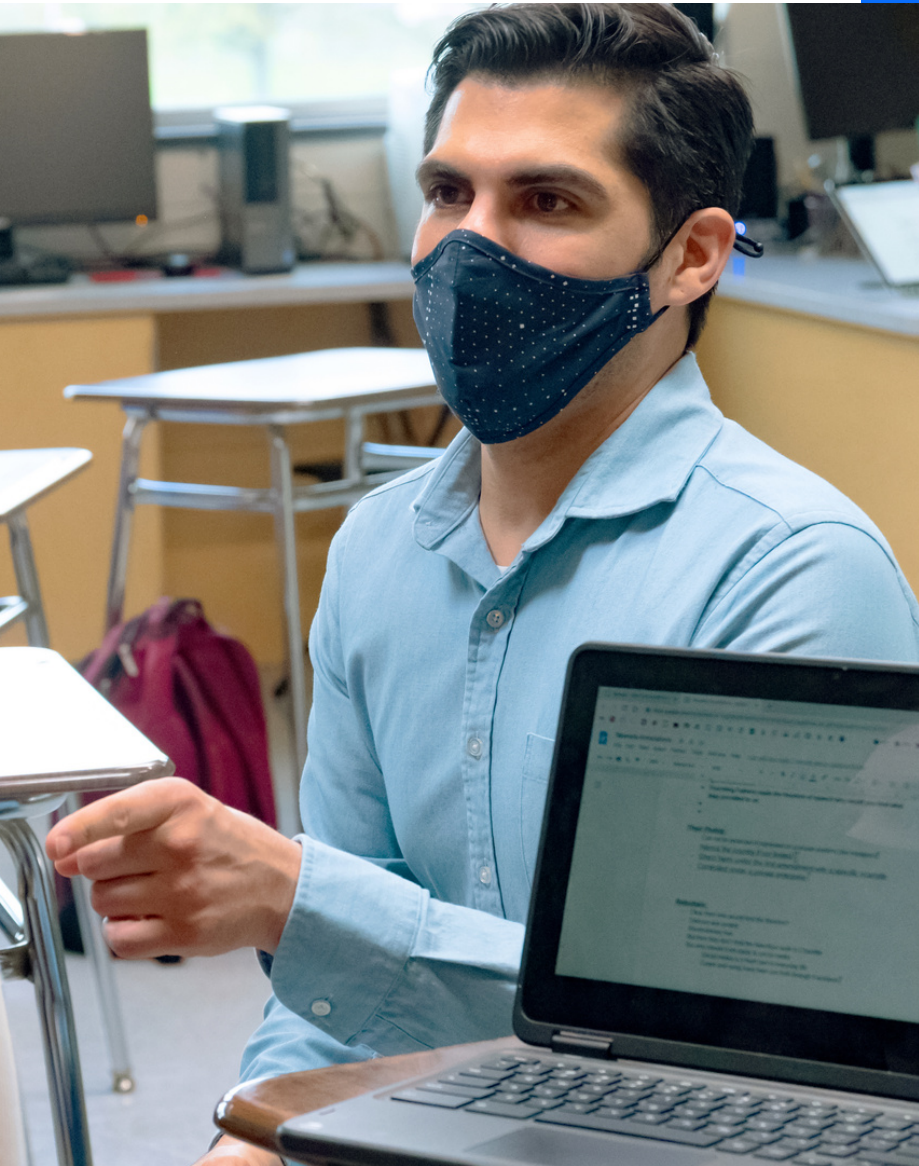
THE FIX

Enable teachers with HQIM and ability to differentiate at scale

Making these conditions true for a classroom of learners requires the full time and attention of a teacher, as well as high-quality instructional materials (HQIM). There is no substitute for the timely and targeted feedback of a teacher reading a draft of a student essay. There is no substitute for the feeling of connecting and acceptance that a teacher constructs in their classroom learning community, always affirming and inviting every student to bring their best self to class. And there is no substitute for knowing the unique learning needs of each student and identifying the right supports (and setting them up to identify these for themselves through techniques like “quality criteria”) in order to ensure that they can be successful.

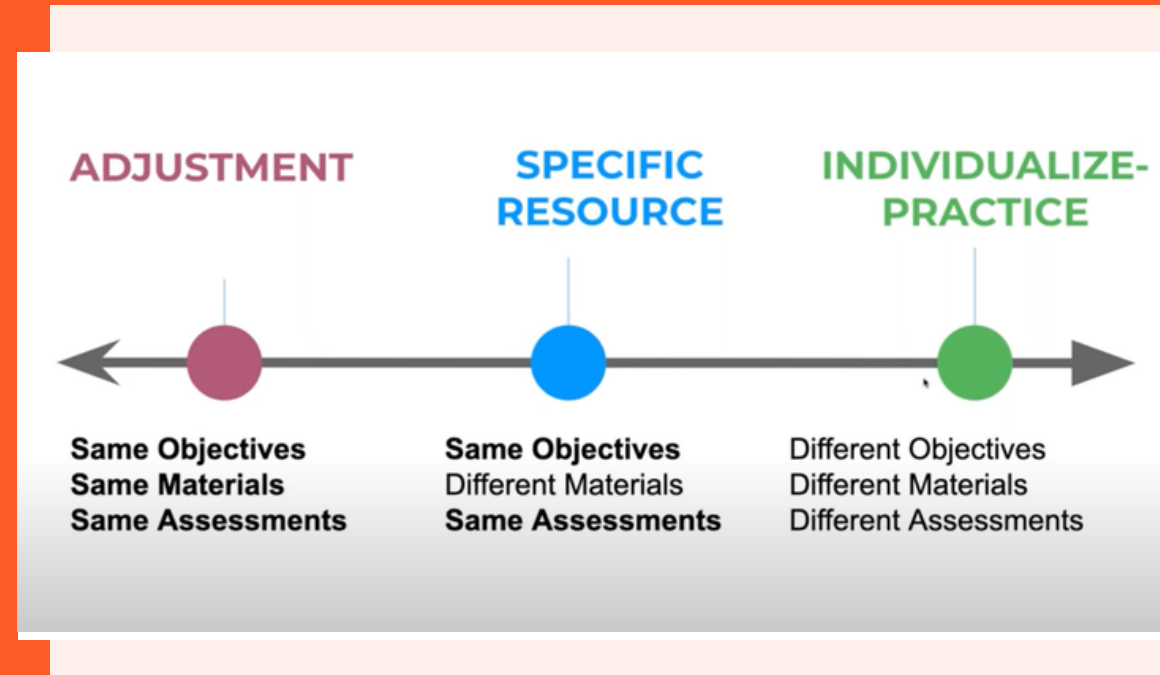
Every one of these moves takes a rock off the road that might otherwise impede a student’s ability to engage and learn at their best. Getting students back in the classroom is an important first step to reigniting the spark of engagement, but if the instructional materials do not reinforce these supportive learning environments - or if teachers need to spend time and energy searching for those that do - we are undermining teachers’ ability to succeed.

As we look ahead to summer 2021, the research points to the efficacy of high-dosage tutoring, especially in younger grades. If we’re going to leverage these findings and take tutoring to scale, instructional content is going to need to do more, not less, to support effective instruction. As additional adjunct instructors, college students, and volunteers are drafted into service to provide the human capacity to scale high-dosage tutoring, the need will increase for content and lesson delivery to carry a greater portion of the responsibility for student engagement.



FEATURED VOICE

“During lessons, teachers use a three-part decision-making process to differentiate instruction. First, teachers look and listen for academic diversity that will strengthen or impede effective and efficient learning. Second, teachers analyze their perceptions of academic diversity in terms of students needing increased clarity, access, rigor, and relevance (CARR). Third, teachers change instruction for all, some, or individual students to increase CARR. Then the process repeats as teachers perceive the impact of their changes to instruction on student learning.”



Dr. Rhonda Bondie

SOURCE: DEMYSTIFYING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

**53% of all
educators**

think remediation tools
are neutral or ineffective.

While more than half of
administrators say this
approach is effective,

**fewer than
1 in 3 teachers
agree.**

[Education Week Research Center Survey, April 2021](#)

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start with the
best content.

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