Combating COVID-19 Learning Loss – Accelerate or Remediate?

A New Report from the National Center for Learning Disabilities Aims to Help Schools Accelerate Students' Progress as We Return to In-Person Learning

The National Center for Learning Disabilities ("NCLD") recently published a timely report entitled, "Promising Practices to Accelerate Learning for Students with Disabilities During COVID-19 and Beyond." As described further below, the report examines a number of strategies that schools have employed to accelerate learning and the recovery of lost learning during and in the aftermath of hybrid and distance learning. All of these strategies are applicable to general as well as special education, but the NCLD report is particularly focused on their integrated implementation and how students with disabilities can benefit.

The report begins with a review of the rampant learning loss attributable to COVID-19, particularly among students with disabilities, English language learners and students of color and a pointed takedown of remedial instruction as the "go to" means of dealing with it:

> *"Generally, remedial instruction that simply reteaches content has been the default approach to bringing struggling students up to grade level. The major shortcoming of this approach is that students are pulled out of class to work on skill development in the target academic area, and the time spent away from their general classroom results in less engagement in grade-level curriculum. In other words, while remediation may help students improve isolated skills, the gap in these students' subject-specific knowledge continues to widen. Additionally, while the remediation may prevent a widening gap in certain skills, it may not be sufficient to close the gap or to help students catch up as their peers forge ahead."*

In search of viable alternatives to remedial instruction, the NCLD researchers explore a number of research-based approaches to accelerated learning. The report suggests that all successful accelerated learning program share five common traits. First, effective acceleration programs streamline content, reducing redundancies in curriculum in order to focus on rigorous, grade-level content while familiarizing students with prerequisite skills at critical junctures. Second, such streamlining must still allow for additional time for students to integrate necessary prerequisite skills. Customized instruction based on student strengths and growth areas is another hallmark of fruitful acceleration efforts. Also, leveraging student interests is key to maximizing student engagement in accelerated learning. And finally, the report observes that

implementation of Universal Design for Learning, multiple modalities and small group instruction are keys.

One of the best examples NCLD found of accelerated learning on a large scale is the "power standards" initiative in Milwaukee public schools:

> *"The district designated "power standards" — the most important grade- level goals — as priorities for the first six weeks of school, and provided sample lessons for educators to use when teaching those standards. In other words, the district expected teachers to condense and focus on critical grade-level content with time carved out to address prerequisite skills."*

This approach has shown promising results in that city's re-opening, in both general and special education contexts.

Another model that was producing good outcomes for students with disabilities prior to the pandemic that appears to translate well to distance learning and the transition back to in-person learning is the competency-based approach. This highly personalized methodology allows students to work through course content at their own pace, working with coaches and peers on different topics through a series project cycles to demonstrate mastery of course content. NCLD points to Purdue Polytechnic High School as a leader in this particular strategy.

With regard to math specifically, NCLD highlights the "Teach to One 360" as a holistic instructional model that leverages analytics from historical learner patterns and individual learner attributes to tailor accelerated learning plans to student needs. A consistent stream of short formative assessments are key to understanding student progress to create and adjust individualized learning progressions as needed. This approach features a mix of modalities—independent practice, small group teacher instruction, computer instruction, small group practice —as students engage in flexible teacher and peer-led groupings based on their mastery of various skills. One recent study, published in 2019, indicated that schools whose students enrolled in Teach to One over a three-year period saw an average of 23 percent more growth than a national reference sample.

Ultimately, the report makes three overarching state-level policy recommendations. The first calls for states to allocate resources to design and implement acceleration approaches with fidelity. Hopefully, with the influx of federal stimulus money, Rhode Island will invest wisely in accelerated learning as students return to in-person education. NCLD also recommends that state education agencies cultivate the knowledge and skills to reimagine learning. For example, RIDE might identify certain "power standards" for learners at different grade levels statewide, just as Milwaukee did in the example cited above. Whatever accelerated learning strategies are adopted at the state and/or district level, it is clear that resources will need to be allocated judiciously to build those curricula and to support ample professional development for the educators charged with implementing new ideas and approaches.

Finally, NCLD urges states to establish guardrails so that acceleration approaches may be implemented in an inclusive and equitable manner. The report concludes that it is absolutely essential to ensure that struggling students and those with identified disabilities have access to

grade-level content and rigorous learning opportunities. This is especially true for students with disabilities:

> *"States should monitor data and COVID reentry plans to ensure that all students will have access to accelerated curriculum, especially those who were most negatively impacted by school closures in the spring of 2020 and during the 2020–2021 school year. Specifically, states should clarify that accelerated approaches should not be used to "track" students — or put certain student groups on different learning trajectories. For instance, states should monitor and ensure that students with disabilities will benefit from accelerated curriculum approaches alongside their peers without disabilities."*

This crystalizes the report's major finding – that acceleration is a better path forward than remediation when it comes to mitigating and overcoming learning loss from the pandemic.

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