

Finding What Works to Speed Learning Recovery

How improved student engagement, a dedicated SEL program, and strong credit recovery programming can help speed post-pandemic learning recovery

Greater Inequity Results in Widening Learning Gaps

The severe impact of the pandemic on K-12 education has been well-documented so far, one year in. Ongoing long term, large scale studies across wide demographics are likely to show an even more dire impact. The pandemic has further overwhelmed much of an already overstressed K-12 education system. It has increased widespread inequity and widened existing learning and opportunity gaps through:



- Lack of equal access to devices and the internet
- Challenges in delivering the systems of support students need for social emotional learning, special needs learning, and for English learners in need of academic language development and other foundational areas
- Limited access to diagnostic tests, needs-based assessments, and other tools that help pinpoint student gaps in understanding to adapt instruction accordingly
- Widespread, chronic absenteeism
- Sustained interrupted learning resulting from a rapid and often frequent shift between learning modes (remote, hybrid, and in-person learning)



According to a recent Pew Research Center study of parent views on K–12 learning during the COVID-19 outbreak, 65% of K–12 parents express concern that their students are falling behind in school, with that number increasing to 72% for lower income families. (Horowitz& Igielnik, 2020)

In another survey commissioned by the National Parents Union, “nearly two-thirds of parents are eager to see schools develop new approaches to instruction. Full-time virtual schools that operate independently from the practices and stakeholder expectation of existing brick-and-mortar schools can be the innovation hubs where districts continue to experiment.” Lessons from the successes of these full-time online schools during the pandemic can help shape the practices that will lead to learning recovery. (Hawkins, 2020, paras 4,5)

Student Engagement, Social Emotional Learning, Student–Centered Credit Recovery, and Professional Learning Support Facilitate Rapid Recovery

While there is so much yet to be solved for the repair and recovery from the current education crisis, some instructional supports and approaches have been shown to yield positive results during the pandemic.

In this paper we will look at how student engagement best practices and a dedicated, systemic social emotional learning (SEL) program, along with student-centered credit recovery and professional learning support have proven key to slowing learning loss during the pandemic. These are now critical factors in speeding learning recovery and accelerating a faster track back to academic solid ground.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Without adequate time to prepare; without consistent and appropriate access to devices and the internet; and without the opportunity for adequate onboarding and training before going remote, many, if not most, schools were unable to implement effective and engaging virtual learning environments at the outset of the pandemic. Many missed the opportunity to tap into the strengths of virtual learning and leverage technology to maintain pre-pandemic engagement levels or increase student engagement.

Systems built to support and track engagement

Engagement takes multiple forms in today's K-12 online and hybrid learning environments. At the top level is the challenge of ensuring students are engaged with school overall. In another well-documented area of pandemic impacts, the alarming rates of absenteeism speak to a crisis of disengaged students across the country. As we move forward, schools need to be ready for future periods of interrupted learning for whatever reason (state of emergency, weather related closures, personal illness, etc.). Current systems were stressed or shown to be highly ineffective when tested with the full scale shift to online or blended learning during the pandemic. Districts need to implement a system with “dedicated personnel to monitor student engagement, and implement systematic student intervention methods when students fail to engage in their virtual learning environment.” (Stride, 2020, p. 6)

Strategic supports designed specifically for virtual learning

In a recent study on supporting student engagement at Stride's K12-powered schools, data shows that learners need key elements in order to be successful in a virtual learning environment. At the heart are strategic supports that are designed specifically for the virtual learning environment. These create the backbone for success in better connecting students so they stay engaged with school online and in blended settings.

The key strategic supports needed in a virtual setting are:



1. Equitable access to the equipment needed for online or blended school
2. Onboarding programs that:
 - Teach students how to navigate the learning platform
 - Prepare teachers with platform training and preparation
 - Provide coaching for how to maximize instruction in an online or blended learning environment
3. The establishment of clear expectations for behavior that is specific to the virtual setting
4. Systematic interventions to address early signs of engagement issues:
 - Systems and staff to track and respond quickly to student absenteeism
 - Embedded course content tools, assignments, and activities that track student engagement during instructional time
 - Ongoing and frequent needs-based assessments, diagnostics, and formative assessments to check for understanding, respond to gaps, and meet learners where they are

Student-centered learning environments

To ensure engaged learning goes beyond attendance within online and blended learning requires environments that leverage the strengths of technology to create student-centered learning during class time and that prepare teachers for success in these environments. Research shows that during the pandemic, virtual instruction via Zoom or Google Meet was focused on replicating what would have happened during in-person instruction without success. (Arnett, 2021)

To change course and begin to recover from the pandemic education crisis, districts can start with a focus on providing the resources and professional learning to support student-centered practice delivered virtually—including:

- Materials designed specifically for online and blended learning
- Learning platforms that adapt to provide personalized learning paths
- Learning management systems that support students and teachers as they work to close learning gaps

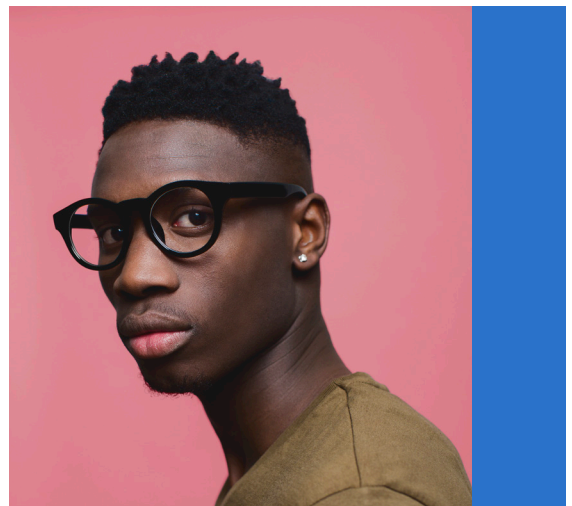
Student-centered learning is critical to student engagement as it puts students in an active role in their learning and discovery. To do that generally involves new models for instruction. Let's look at an example. During the pandemic, 79% of teachers said they found and used new materials to support online learning. In a next step toward student-centered learning, teachers would make these materials available on-demand so they could flip their teaching model and use their live interactions (in-person or virtually) to focus on active discussion, collaboration on practice problems, and project-based learning where students are actively driving their learning on relevant topics that interest them. Technology is a key driver in delivering these learning experiences as it more easily supports 1:1 personalized, individually paced, and mastery-based student-centered learning. (Arnett, 2021)

Student-centered learning settings that have yielded less learning loss and demonstrated student gains leverage the following approaches:

Build learning around a student-centered curriculum and tools. Equip classrooms with instructional materials that are designed to be used virtually. Promote mastery-based learning where students learn at their own pace as they master knowledge, skills, and dispositions as part of their individual learning pathway.

This includes practices like:

- Project-based curriculum that encourages hands-on, real world, relevant learning
- Diagnostic-driven credit recovery curriculum designed to support personalized learning paths
- Game-based adaptive learning to capture and retain student interest (Stride, 2020)





Prepare teachers as experts in virtual teaching where they maximize the potential of technology. Help them to deliver effective, engaging instruction that is designed or adapted for the environment, rather than just doing what has been done face-to-face. This includes implementing easy-to-use and easy-to-integrate materials that are created from the start to be student-centered and intended for online learning. (Arnett, 2021)

According to the Christensen Institute's January 2021 report, *Breaking The Mold: How a global pandemic unlocks innovation in K-12 instruction*, "currently, 83% of teachers

teach in hybrid or remote modalities that, in most cases, require extensive use of online learning. Yet only 16% of teachers report using online learning 'a lot' pre-pandemic." As a result, districts need professional learning that is focused on preparing teachers to create and deliver instruction that has been developed specifically for online learning. (Arnett, 2021, p. 8)

Give teachers the tools they need for efficient classroom management within a virtual setting. In the same Christensen Institute report, 85% of teachers say they spend more time now on classroom preparation (finding, creating, and adapting materials for remote learning) than they did a year ago. This takes a significant portion of time away from focusing on activities that directly impact student learning and relationships and communication with students. (Arnett, 2021, p. 10)

Online solutions that provide personalized, student-centered learning materials help to streamline classroom management so teachers can take the time previously spent sourcing materials and invest it back in time with students.

Design classroom time around active learning where students are engaged, even if virtual. In active learning students are engaged because they are actively participating in their learning. This approach replaces a more traditional "sit and get" model. Using tools like collaboration, conversation, think/pair/share, hands-on activities, and project-based learning, students engage in more experiential learning to stay motivated and interested. (Stride, 2020)

Implement improved methods of communication between students and teachers. Help maintain engagement in and outside of the virtual or blended classroom. Platforms that facilitate more frequent and dynamic interactions between teachers and students are key. When teachers have access to video conference tools, virtual breakout rooms, digital whiteboards for collaboration in a shared online setting, screen sharing, and other tools, students stay engaged.

Focus classroom instruction on new material. Save review for independent work with follow-up on gaps. At times during the pandemic, with scattered attendance and inconsistency in instruction, class time was often spent reviewing old material rather than introducing new material. When new material was the focus of instruction, students remained engaged in their learning. (Stride, 2020)

Provide learning platforms that were built for education. Zoom and other platforms filled a necessary gap for K–12 learning during the pandemic, but they were designed for the business work of meetings and not for collaborative, active classroom learning. Platforms designed specifically for education that support online sharing, collaboration, interaction, and communication through features like breakout rooms, online screen sharing, digital whiteboards, and live quizzes make it more likely for students to stay connected and active in their learning. (Stride 2020)

Introduce innovative programs that leverage the strength of technology. Video call mentoring, virtual tutoring to support remote learning, learning pods organized by families, and learning hubs for central access to curated learning resources and activities are all approaches that represent more innovative ways to use technology to connect and support students so they stay engaged.

Overcoming the Waterfall Effect: The Importance of Credit Recovery and Planning for After Graduation

With alarming rates of absenteeism leading to widespread student disengagement, the levels of learning loss at the high school level have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving many students vulnerable and in need of solutions that boost their success. In some cases, the quality of education delivered remotely did not match the quality of education that can be delivered in the brick-and-mortar classroom. As a result, student engagement has fallen. For those students who experienced lower-quality remote learning during the pandemic, the drop below grade level in terms of expected skills continues to grow. Persistent achievement disparities across income levels and between white students and students of color have been amplified by school shutdowns. All research points to the risk of decreasing graduation rates, with students unprepared for the rigors of college, the workplace, or a career.

Implementing effective credit recovery programs within a motivating learning environment and designed especially for students who need extra support is essential in the post-pandemic education landscape. To engage students and recover academic losses requires credit recovery programs that are:

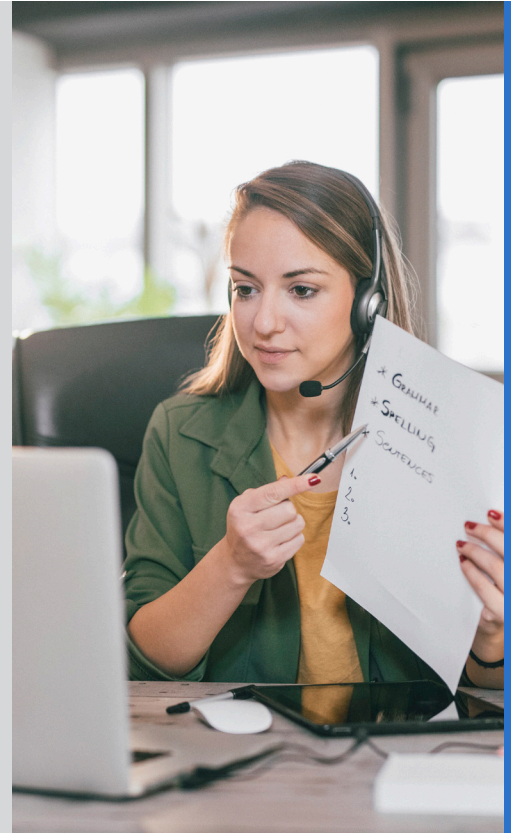
- Flexible to fit a wide range of implementations and modes of instruction
- Self-paced using diagnostic testing to deliver the right instruction for where the student is as they retake a course they have failed. Using an adaptive-release model allows students to progress at their own pace and test out of previously mastered material.
- Designed with socioemotional learning and support tools embedded

These programs help students develop the resilience and growth mindset they will need to recover learning loss, graduate on time, and prepare future success after high school.

The most successful credit recovery approaches include proactive, consistent, and deliberate attention to what happens after graduation. This plays a significant part in helping ensure high schoolers get and remain engaged with school. Having a vision and creating an individualized pathway that includes the path after high school has proven to be a key factor in limiting learning loss that can occur throughout high school, especially in the past year. (Shafer, 2020) (Dorn, et al, 2020)

Proven Models from Leaders in Virtual Learning

In a study conducted by Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), “students enrolled at Stride K12-powered schools, and who participate in one of NWEA’s growth assessments, did not experience the same level of learning loss as their peers. In fact, they were more likely to maintain or grow academically than to slide. Researchers concluded that the decreases in the ‘Sliders’ category in both reading and mathematics during the pandemic is likely due to Stride’s experience and expertise in online learning and the company’s capacity to provide stable, continuous instruction throughout the pandemic.” The study also found that “driven by the dedicated wraparound support services available to all students enrolled at Stride K12-powered schools, student engagement remains strong during the COVID-19 pandemic.” (Stride, 2020)



The Critical Role of Social Emotional Learning

Never has the need to focus on the whole child been greater. The alarmingly negative impact that the pandemic and quarantine have had on mental health is unfortunately another well-documented issue. Well before our current crisis, there has always been a need for more widespread focus on social emotional learning (SEL) for students. And in the recent past, we’ve heard a loud cry for consistent and cohesive implementation of SEL.

According to CASEL, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, SEL “advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities.” (Casel, 2020)

As we look to emerge from the pandemic and focus on repair and recovery, doubling down on the academic gaps alone won’t suffice.

Erica Seybert, Director of Curriculum, Instruction & Strategic Programs at Stride, shares,

“We can’t help students grow academically if we aren’t meeting them where they are holistically. This support goes beyond just academics to include attitudes, relationships, perception of class and school climate, behavior, self-management skills, and more. To begin the important work of recovery requires a dedicated, well-planned, system-wide social emotional learning program.”

The key approaches to SEL shown to work during the pandemic in supporting student success are now expected to help speed recovery and include the following:

Create system-wide social emotional learning programs that reach every aspect of the school district and community. Integrate SEL as part of a multi-tiered approach to systemic interventions for all students. Establish a school-wide team and provide coaching in social emotional learning so they have the foundation to support full-scale implementation.

“Implement a proven, research-based SEL solution designed to help schools sustain positive school cultures rooted in relationships. Begin with nurturing the mindsets of educators, and then students, empowering each member of the school community to live a life of purpose, passion, and meaning.”
(7 Mindsets, 2020 para 4)

Integrate a strong online curriculum that fully integrates social emotional learning into teacher practice and student learning to create a sense of belonging and connect with students for more engaged learning.

Support teachers with tools that make classroom integration of SEL more seamless and efficient. Supporting teachers fully as they incorporate SEL as a core factor in their instruction, not as a separate factor, is essential in system-wide rollouts of SEL programs.

Leverage credit recovery curriculum designed especially for at-risk students that drives motivation, combining grit, growth mindset, and social emotional learning.

Provide professional development and ongoing coaching designed to care for the overall well-being of teachers. Prepare them with the training and ongoing coaching to be successful in supporting social emotional learning for their students.

Understanding what instructional approaches and practices work best in limiting learning loss from successful implementations during the pandemic can help serve as a map for the road to recovery. Without doubt, student engagement resulting from strong systemic supports and student-centered learning is essential. System-wide, consistent, and deliberate social emotional learning programs are another critical factor. Strong, student-focused credit recovery that fosters student engagement and supports the whole child through social emotional learning is a third key driver. Finally, wide scale professional learning support that prepares teachers to implement instructional practices intended for virtual learning will help ensure students are engaged so they achieve their best possible academic success.



About Stride Learning Solutions

Since 2000, Stride Learning Solutions has been a leader in strategic solutions to solve district challenges. Today our solutions have expanded to include credit recovery with SEL support to engage middle and high school students, and rapid recovery for learning loss at all ages amplified by school closures amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Stride's flexible and highly engaging online and blended learning options are designed specifically for virtual learning and supported by professional learning for educators—led by experienced Stride virtual instructors. With an innovative platform, comprehensive digital courseware, adaptable technology, and extensive support, Stride will help your school or district empower a brighter future for learners.

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