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Start Smart:
Reopening School After COVID Learning Loss

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Edmentum Learning Design
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Introduction

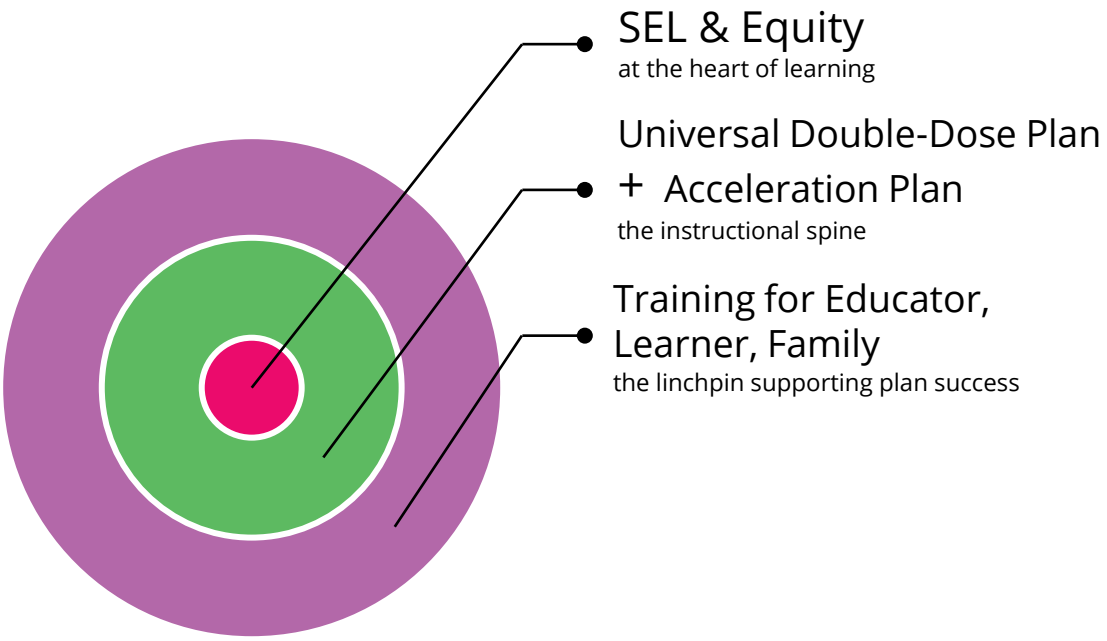
Most states have issued frameworks to guide districts on reopening schools in the fall. While most documents offer recommendations to support districts to make decisions, the lack of mandates combined with increasing health concerns adds to the overall confusion. Edmentum has maintained its #EducatorFirst commitment by providing guidance and support from the beginning of the pandemic. (See *COVID-19 Response Plan to Learning Disruption*, Edmentum, 2020.) And we will continue to provide exceptional support to educators during these complicated times. This paper combines a review of state recommendations with information taken from educational research groups to build a cohesive picture of recommendations and best practices that can guide educators in maximizing learning outcomes in the 2020–21 school year.

Recommended School Reopening Plan

An overarching picture of the instructional model for school reopening is shown in the graphic below:

- Social-emotional learning (SEL) and an equity focus are at the heart of learning.
- The combination of a Double-Dose Plan and an Acceleration Plan are the instructional spine.
- Training for educator, learner, and family surround this solution, making these components work together, in school and at home.

Recommended School Reopening Instructional Plan

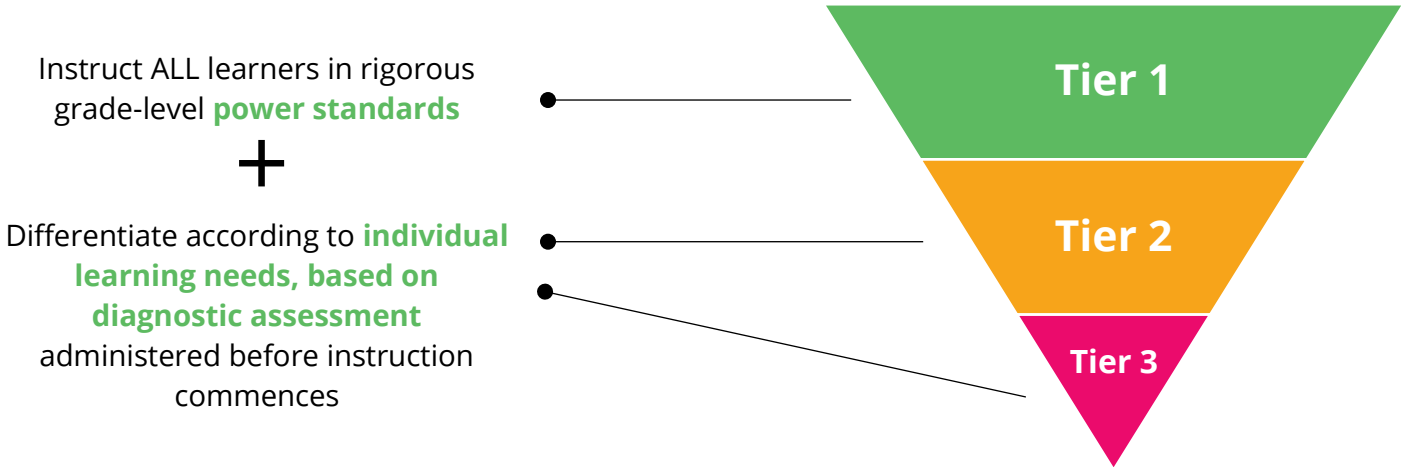


Universal Double-Dose Learning Plan

In the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model, students in Tiers 2 and 3 receive additional support, sometimes referred to as a Double-Dose model. Some researchers are advocating the viewpoint that *all* learners will have learning gaps due to the unanticipated school shutdown that occurred earlier this year, warranting a Universal Double-Dose Plan.

To make rapid progress in current grade-level learning and recover from COVID learning loss, schools should approach reopening school in the fall with a dual-approach to accelerate learning. Students will need to begin *immediately* on the current grade-level's curriculum with a focus on **essential knowledge** *and* simultaneously get to work on addressing targeted **learning gaps** in a high-powered differentiation model.

Two Components of the Universal Double-Dose Plan



This fall, educators should design a learning implementation model that accounts for the immediate instruction of **grade-level** essential knowledge, or power standards, *and* for simultaneously tackling learning loss of **prior-grade** essential knowledge as well.

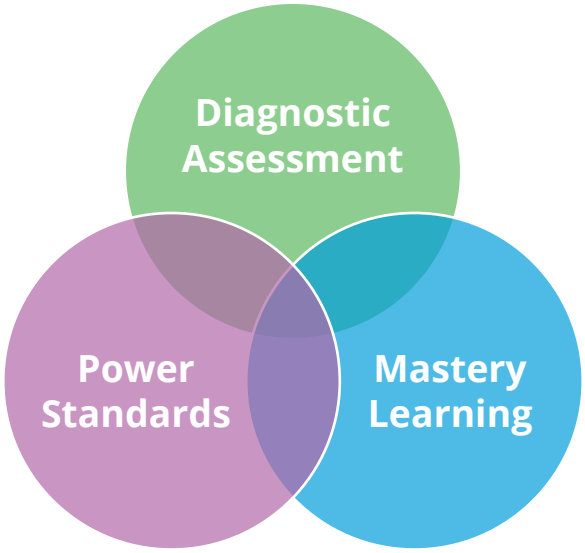
School reopening programs should include:

- scheduling that supports the Universal Double-Dose Plan
- focusing on core subject areas and power standards
- securing resources for this plan
- training of staff, students, and parents

Acceleration Plan for Learning Loss

A key component of the Universal Double-Dose Plan is an Acceleration Plan for overcoming learning loss to quickly address student gaps in essential prerequisite knowledge. The three key elements of a powerful acceleration plan are depicted in the following graphic.

Acceleration Learning Plan



Diagnostic Assessment for Understanding Learning Loss

An overwhelming majority of states' "Return to Learn Plans" recommend that districts administer an adaptive diagnostic assessment to students *before instruction commences* this fall. So far, a handful of states are requiring that diagnostic assessments be woven into district planning. Based on recent shifts in pandemic statistics, states are suggesting districts arrange for home administration with creative home-proctoring solutions—a suggestion that would have been radical in pre-pandemic times. We have also begun to see a small, but growing number of states open processes for granting Spring 2021 state assessment waivers.

The goal in administering a diagnostic assessment is to provide a learning profile for all students that outlines individual strengths and needs—and, ultimately, the point at which each student should begin their learning journey by content area (and domain). Universal personalized learning avoids the stigma and isolation that can be associated with traditional pull-out interventions.

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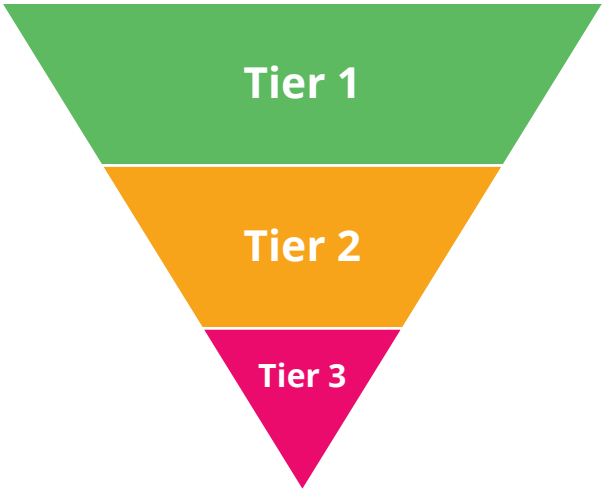
Predicted Fall 2020 Student Population Changes in MTSS Tiers



Tier	Pre-COVID Slide Student %	Likely Fall 2020 Post-COVID Slide Student %
1	80%	60%
2	15%	15%
3	5%	25%

Edmentum's research scientists have used learning-loss projections to predict a significant increase in Tier 3 student percentages.

The Center for Assessment recommends that districts focus on a diagnostic assessment that can:

- be delivered to students and scored **very quickly**.
- dip into **previous grades' content** to determine learning loss from, at minimum, the previous year.
- provide meaningful data for **differentiating and scaffolding** instruction.

The following chart can help districts evaluate the value of implementing an adaptive, diagnostic assessment or a benchmark assessment as a method for gathering key data about students' needs *at the beginning of school this fall*.

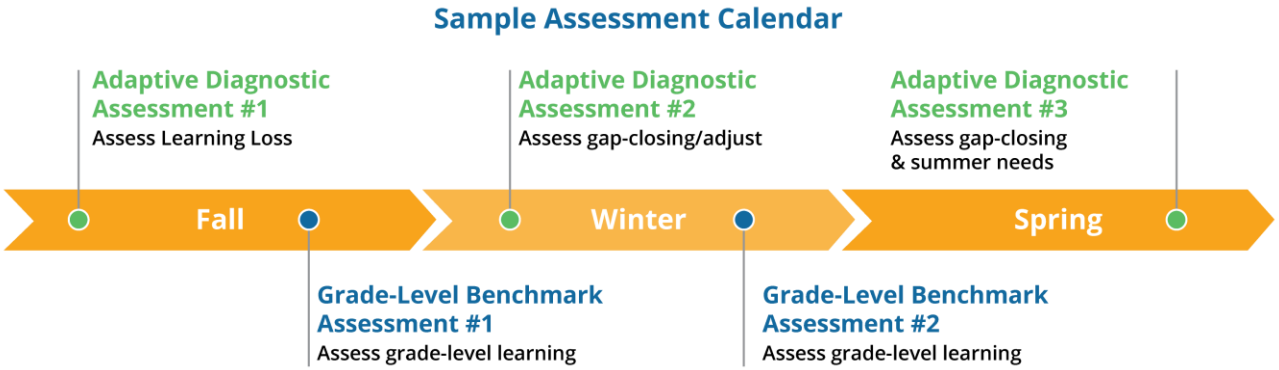
Evaluating Diagnostic Assessment vs. Benchmark Assessment as School Reopening Measure

Factors to Consider	Adaptive Diagnostic Assessments	Benchmark Assessments
Information Collected	Identifies learning gaps that impact differentiation and remediation of learning loss	Identifies which grade-level skills some students have already mastered and informs how to tailor on-level instruction
Social-Emotional Impact	Uncovers what a student can do to empower future learning	Tests untaught knowledge as a baseline for growth, which could lead to a feeling of failure upon school reopening
Best Timing	Home-proctored before school re-entry or during in-school time prior to instruction	Several months into school given student SEL needs & testing untaught standards

Note: This evaluation is based solely upon the fit of these tools to school reopening Fall 2020.

Ideally, districts will round out their assessment program with benchmark assessments or short curriculum-embedded formative assessments that check learning progress against grade-level standards. Curriculum-based measures can provide rapid information about how students are progressing throughout the year and can further indicate when to slow down and provide more support for key concepts of essential knowledge, i.e., power standards (Council of Great City Schools, 2020).

The following graphic shows a sample assessment testing window to inform instruction throughout the academic calendar.



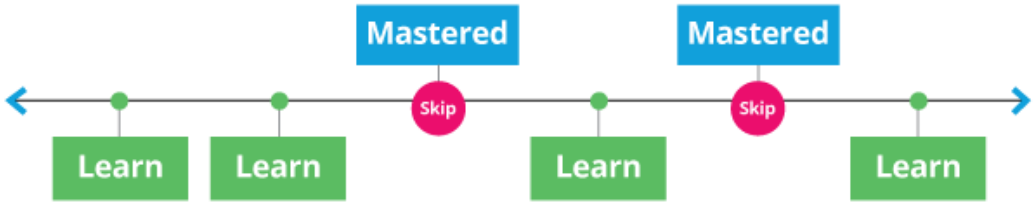
A diagnostic assessment is most powerful when coupled with an online instructional curriculum so that students are automatically placed into instruction, practice, and progress monitoring that ensure a mastery-learning approach. Diagnostic assessments can also inform Tier 1 instruction for all students by identifying which students are likely to struggle in certain learning domains, allowing teachers to scaffold learning in a just-in-time model.

Mastery Learning

Mastery learning, also known as competency-based learning, ensures that students learn what exactly they need to learn, skip over what they know, and receive additional support for concepts in which they struggle. With mastery learning, students take an assessment, which identifies the skills that they need to master and those that are already mastered so that students don't waste instructional time on what they know.

Students at all proficiency levels who use mastery-learning systems have been shown to achieve meaningful acceleration by learning more in less time. (Brodersen, 2020)

Mastery Learning: Assessment-Powered Velocity



According to research on students who are a year or more behind in school and use mastery learning, 43–47% complete one year of learning in *less* than a year's time. A meaningful percentage (17–22%) of on-level students who use mastery learning also complete their current grade-level's learning in *less* than a year's time (Brodersen, 2020). In other words, students at all proficiency levels who use mastery-learning systems have been shown to achieve meaningful acceleration by learning more in less time. These findings highlight mastery learning as an absolutely essential practice to build into school reopening plans in an effort to support educators in addressing COVID learning loss.

Power Standards

Researchers point out that the amount of instruction required by our K-12 standards would require 15,500 instructional hours to cover 3,500 benchmarks assessments—or about 22 years of school packed into the available 13 years of the U.S. educational system (Marzano, 2003). And this assumes pre-COVID educational conditions. So, what changes do districts need to make this fall?

One answer lies in prioritizing the content areas (likely, math and ELA in the lower grades) and instructional experiences that matter most. A critical element for fall acceleration of learning will be identifying the essential knowledge, or power standards, for key content areas.

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To identify the essential knowledge for each grade level and content area, educators should identify **power standards** that reflect (Ainsworth & Donovan, 2019):

- **endurance**: the skills and concepts that will serve students beyond a single grade and that reflect broad life expectations
- **leverage:** those skills that exhibit crossover application between multiple content areas
- **readiness:** skills that students need to be successful in the next grade level and are typically assessed by external exams

(See also Student Achievement Partners: *2020-21 Priority Instructional Content in ELA/Literacy and Mathematics*.)

Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health Needs

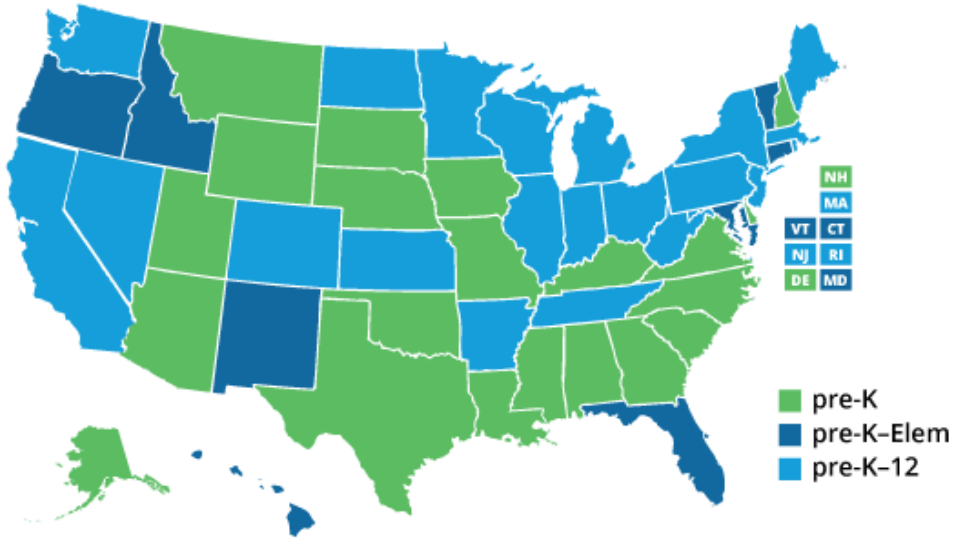
Consider for a moment: A rising first grader will have experienced about 6 months of formal in-school education, followed by feelings of loss of friendships, frustration at upheaval in daily structure, and confusion about stress among adults at home. What is this student's emotional state when approximately 17% of their life has been spent in an environment of disrupted learning and relationships?

When we do return to our fall learning (in school or remotely), reintegrating students into learning will present new challenges. Students might feel worried about the future and anxious about change. For those moving to in-school environments, switching to a more structured school day might be jarring compared to the relative freedom of the relaxed structure of the distance learning. Everything students once understood about going to school will need to be reestablished.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL). Across the country, state plans are acknowledging the importance of addressing the mental health and well-being of students as a fundamental component of learning in the face of lost social groups, structure, and, in many cases, family stability (Yoder et al., 2020). In this environment, using a mental health-focused and clinically based SEL curriculum (as opposed to curricula focused on character education) will be critical.

The educational community has come to widely embrace the importance of SEL as a necessary component of learning in the last 5 years. SEL standards have exploded at the state level, rapidly expanding from 4 states with pre-K–12 SEL standards in 2015 to 22 states today. Additionally, all 50 states now have pre-K SEL standards.

SEL Standards Adoption in the United States



Increased educational focus on SEL occurred on the heels of understanding that embracing the whole learner is a necessary step in ensuring that all learners are ready to learn. In fact, educational research has shown that the implementation of a strong SEL curriculum is correlated to an 11-point academic gain in core subject areas (Durlak, et al., 2016).

As districts approach constructing their plans for resuming school in the fall, they should ensure they have access to SEL curriculum, both for in-person and distance-learning.

This educational shift has occurred just in time to aid educators and students in facing the trauma of the pandemic and the associated school shutdown with preparation and training. As districts approach constructing their plans for resuming school in the fall, they should ensure that they have access to SEL curriculum, both for in-person and distance-learning, and that educators are trained to deliver the full gamut of SEL instruction.

While educators made brave inroads into SEL in their spring instruction, instructional practices too often relied on simply asking students how they were doing and show-and-tell. These practices are a good start, but students require and deserve a more well-defined SEL curriculum.

Equity, Not Equality

The above phrase has become a central tenet of the MTSS framework, which provides additional supports to students with specific needs. While learning loss due to COVID-19 will pose an issue for all students, its impact will be felt more keenly among historically underserved populations—e.g., students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English learners (ELs)—who may have experienced limited technology access, effective digital learning, and specialized services.

During the Spring 2020 school shutdown, many school districts distributed technology devices and hot spots either universally or as necessary, to provide all students equitable access to distance learning. State plans are overwhelmingly suggesting that districts conduct an equity audit to see how these various populations have been impacted and to appropriately address needs as school reopens.

In alignment with the MTSS framework, some educational advocacy groups recommend that CARES funds be directed to groups most negatively impacted during school shutdown and, therefore, with the highest learning loss. In addition, states are recommending similar measures that may prove invaluable as we experience periods of distance learning in the upcoming school year.

Distance learning recommendations include:

- documenting home technology capabilities—broadband, household devices per student, device types.
- obtaining state-of-the-art assistive technology for students with disabilities.
- training students on built-in accessibility/language supports available in digital learning platforms.
- offering educators professional development for special education and language-learning evidence-based practices for online instruction.

- procuring targeted EL digital curriculum and translation software for communicating with families with limited English.
- distributing print packets in areas with digital learning blockers.
- creating parent videos in multiple languages for communicating distance-learning procedures to families with low literacy.

It is critical that information obtained in the spring be *updated to capture changing family circumstances*, which may have been caused by the wide-scale unemployment and employment gaps during the pandemic.

Prioritize Students Most Impacted by the Pandemic

As reflected in the chart showing a predicted shift in student population (Predicted Fall 2020 Student Population Changes in MTSS Tiers), more students will be inhabiting Tier 2 and Tier 3 performance levels this fall based on COVID learning loss than ever before—creating a widening achievement gap for the nation. With each passing month, students who require additional support and do not receive it will become more and more difficult to accelerate to Tier 1 performance levels.

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Given the need to socially distance, reduce classroom size, and limit potential exposure, districts are carefully constructing diverse experiences that will span the gamut between distance learning instruction exclusively, to offering wide-scale in-school learning. In this environment, states and education advocacy groups are emphasizing the need to provide the highest access to in-person learning for students most impacted by a distance-learning environment. This is consistent with the widely used approach of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) discussed earlier in this article by providing additional support to students who will have the largest learning gaps when school reopens.

According to the MTSS Framework, ELs, students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and students experiencing homelessness, for example, can catch up to their peers by receiving multi-tiered supports targeted to their specific academic and social-emotional needs.

Here are four examples of how district plans, state plans, and education news sources describe the approach of focusing on these highly impacted students, who will likely fall into Tiers 2 and 3 this fall.

Chicago Public Schools' *Reopening Framework*

This framework describes a hybrid approach (distance + in-person learning) for most students and offers increased in-person learning for certain populations: "To follow through on the equity promise set forth in our Five-Year Vision, Success Starts Here, our reopening framework also takes into account the unique needs of our most vulnerable populations, including our English Learners

and students with diverse learning needs. We are working on a plan to bring many of these students back into the classroom during all in-person instruction days" (p. 4).

Virginia's *Recover, Redesign, Restart* Reopening Plan

This reopening plan emphasizes that schools should "identify and prioritize acceleration needs [for] early learners, English Learners, students experiencing homelessness, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students with social/emotional needs," including accelerated and gifted students. The plan also offers local education agencies (LEAs) an Equity Audit planning checklist (p. 132).

Education Week: "Hybrid School Schedules"

When describing hybrid models, *Education Week* identified the following as one common theme across state and district plans: "Children who are English-learners, in special education, or come from low-income families receive priority for live-school attendance" (Superville, 2020).

Massachusetts' *Initial Fall Reopening Guidance*

In its reopening plan Massachusetts outlines that "high-needs students should be prioritized for full-time in-person learning when feasible. That is, even if most students are not in school each day, schools should consider setting up small programs that would run daily for one or more cohorts of high-needs students, including students with disabilities and English learners who are most in need of in-person services" (p. 14).

Also highly impacted by distance learning are primary grade learners, due to their need for hands-on learning and concept development, as well as increased learning supervision and developing literacy skills. Differentiated district blending model plans can maximize the youngest students' in-school time while providing structured distance learning experiences for older, more independent learners. For example, some district plans call for pre-K to be onsite 5 days per week. Other districts are using all available school sites for small classes of elementary learners.

Differentiated district blended model plans can maximize the youngest students' in-school time while providing structured, distance learning experiences for older, more independent learners.

Tiers of Support Within Differentiated Blended Learning Models

<table>
<tr><th>Practice</th><th>Example / Description</th><th>Benefit to Learners</th></tr>
<tr><td>In-School Rotation: A/B days</td><td>
<table>
<tr><th></th><th>M</th><th>T</th><th>W</th><th>Th</th><th>F</th></tr>
<tr><td>In-School</td><td>A</td><td>B</td><td>A</td><td>B</td><td>None or B</td></tr>
<tr><td>Distance Learning</td><td>B</td><td>A</td><td>B</td><td>A</td><td>All or A</td></tr>
</table>
</td><td>

Small groups reflect CDC guidance
Provides regular teacher and peer interactions
Tiered Option: A cohort of most impacted learners gets higher level of teacher support

</td></tr>
<tr><td>In-School Rotation: Weeks</td><td>
<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Week 1</th><th>Week 2</th></tr>
<tr><td>In-School</td><td>A: 4 days</td><td>B: 4 days</td></tr>
<tr><td>Distance Learning</td><td>B: 4 days
All: 1 day</td><td>A: 4 days
All: 1 day</td></tr>
</table>
</td><td>

Small groups reflect CDC guidance
Continuous teacher and peer contact on weekly basis builds greater learning power
Tiered Option: 5-day Cohort C for most impacted learners

</td></tr>
<tr><td>Grade-level Prioritization</td><td>
<table>
<tr><th>Grade K-5
All Campuses</th><th>Grades 6-12</th></tr>
<tr><td>In-School Small Classes</td><td>Distance Learning</td></tr>
</table>
</td><td>

Small groups reflect CDC guidance
Focuses in-school learning on youngest learners 100% of time
Offers distance learning to more independent learners
Tiered Option: Cohort C always in school for most impacted learners

</td></tr>
<tr><td>Looping K-8</td><td>
<table>
<tr><th>Grade K-8
Traditional Model</th><th>Grade K-8
Looping Model</th></tr>
<tr><td>Student move to next grade
Teachers stay in same grade</td><td>Students move to next grade
Teachers move to next grade
2-year cycles</td></tr>
</table>
</td><td>

Jump-starts teacher-student relationship
Can be combined with other models (rotation, etc.)
Tiered Option: Limited looping for most impacted learners

</td></tr>
<tr><td>Non-departmental Teaching</td><td>
<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Traditional</th><th>Revised</th></tr>
<tr><td>3-5</td><td>2 teachers for 4 subjects per day</td><td>1 teacher teaches all subjects</td></tr>
<tr><td>6-8</td><td>5 teachers for 5 subjects per day</td><td>2 teachers for 5 subjects</td></tr>
</table>
</td><td>

Small groups reflect CDC guidance
Maximizes teacher-student relationships
Pares down subjects offered
Tiered Option: Collaborative classrooms with one specialist paired with multiple content teachers throughout the day

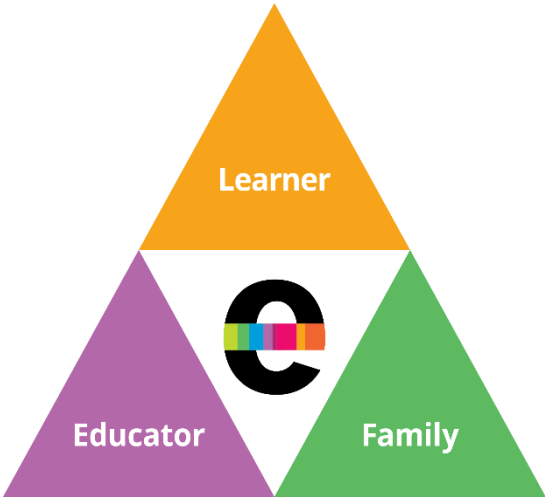
</td></tr>
</table>

Note: Distance-learning options provide flexible programming based on the needs of learners and district.

Training for Blended Models

A triangle is a highly stable structure in which the top is supported by the wide base at the bottom. Similarly, a student's learning journey is supported by the twin bases of family and educator partnership.

The partnership between educator, family, and learner came into stark relief in March 2020 when schools shutdown in the wake of shelter-in-place orders. Teachers were facing new roles as virtual educators, and students were experiencing new roles as virtual learners. Family members became "co-educators," a role many never imagined for themselves and for which they were ill prepared.



As a result, families have become more invested in their children's education and are asking for increased voice in school district decisions. Clearly, this is the year for educators to invest in family partnerships as a center-point to student success.

When distance learning went into effect this spring, none of the three parties in our learning triangle were prepared for new roles, and schools struggled to provide appropriate training to teachers and students.

For back to school, most state plans are recommending that districts provide training on best practices of distance learning for educators and families, with an emphasis on digital learning systems, communication structures, and the roles and expectations of each member of the learning triangle.

Educator Training

Educators need training and support in how to weave together the digital and offline elements (printables, hands-on experiences) of distance learning, in-class sessions, online video lessons, and one-on-one or group check-ins.

Educator training should include:

- administering diagnostic assessments and interpreting results to differentiate learning and address learning loss
- instructing power standards, focusing on essentials, and streamlining learning
- integrating social-emotional learning on an ongoing and meaningful basis
- scaffolding learning for ELs and special needs students
- constructing activities for early learners that are effective across school and home
- streamlining communication and assignments to prevent family overwhelm
- providing effective, teacher-directed instruction online and hands-on activities for home
- building synchronous interactions that are instructional, not simply a "sit and get"
- establishing routines for distance-learning help and discussion
- maximizing digital tools, including large-scale learning management systems

Learner Training

Most families reported a significant 2–4 week gap between the 2020 school shutdown and a reliable system of distance learning/information sharing. To support strong 2020–2021 learning outcomes, schools will need to create plans that support both students and families. States agree that understanding the procedure for continuing learning at home due to a potential COVID-19 spike at any point is essential training for students in both distance learning as well as the brick-to-click plans.

Learner training should include:

- clarification of the components of their learning journey: in-school sessions, diagnostic assessments, independent digital or print learning, and online teacher-driven sessions
- easily understood written instructions for accessing digital content and a confidence of which tool is used for each purpose
- written daily and weekly expectations of the learner
- protocols for contacting the teacher and self-accessing help
- preparedness for a brick-to-click plan

Family Training

Families and caretakers need knowledge and resources to support remote student learning and to serve as virtual teachers' co-educators. First and foremost, they should understand the classroom system for learning, communication, and student expectations to help make remote learning effective for their student. Families need a transparent view into student learning that allows them to support seamless learning between home and school.

Family training should include:

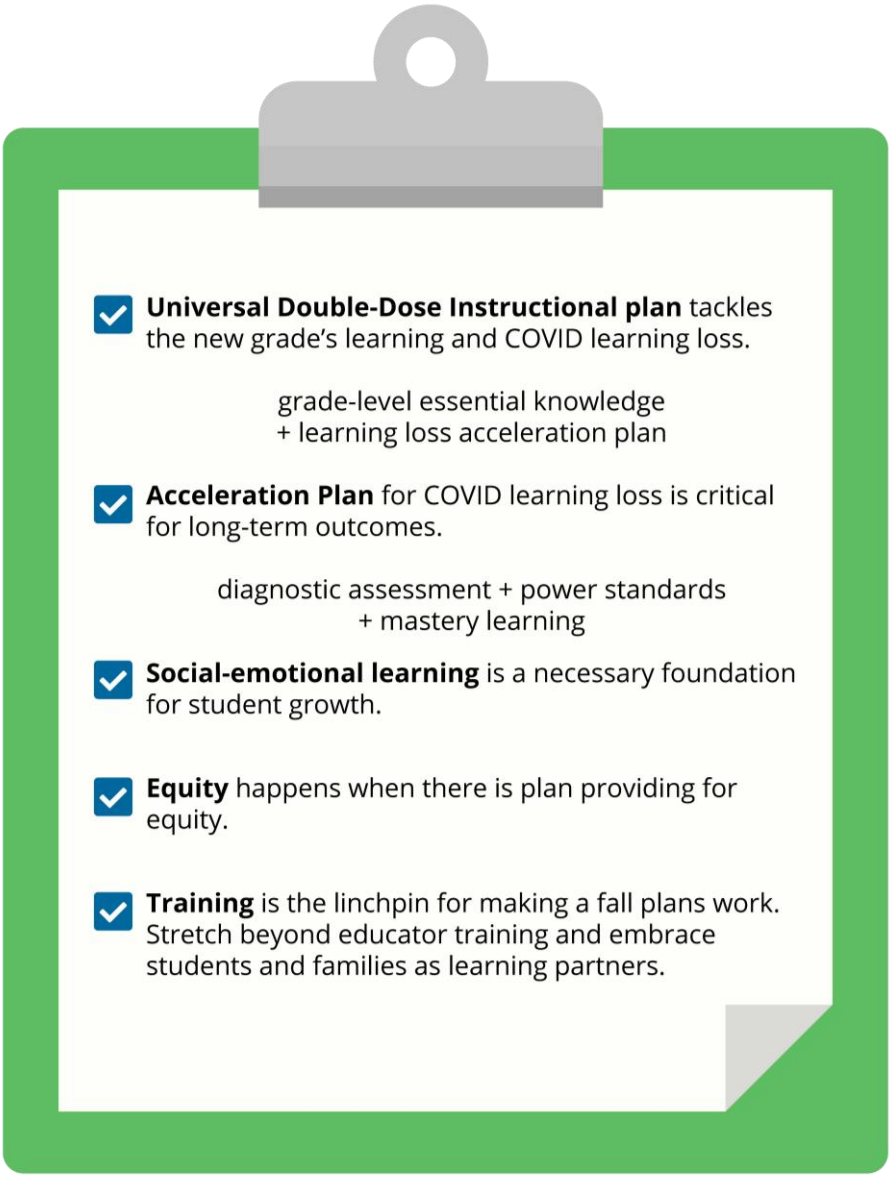
- the bulleted list shown above for Student Training
- tips for managing student learning while working
- strategies for assisting their child in learning
- accessing and understanding student data
- ways to keep lines of communication and make setting family limitations "safe"

Conclusion

There is certainly no shortage of considerations in planning for school reopening. We have recently heard of multiple large school districts throughout the country opting for distance-only learning scenarios. As the end of August nears, this may become a widespread phenomenon; the landscape of education will continue to change over the coming months.

Even with the most carefully considered planning process, school systems will need to remain agile and adjust as new pandemic statistics impact their locations. Good plans require contingency measures that will sustain students, families, and educators in reacting quickly to changing needs.

In these turbulent times, finding clear solutions requires forethought, flexibility, and resiliency—including the ability to continue to pivot to what works and away from failing initiatives. Here is a round-up of our top recommendations for reigniting learning this fall.



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