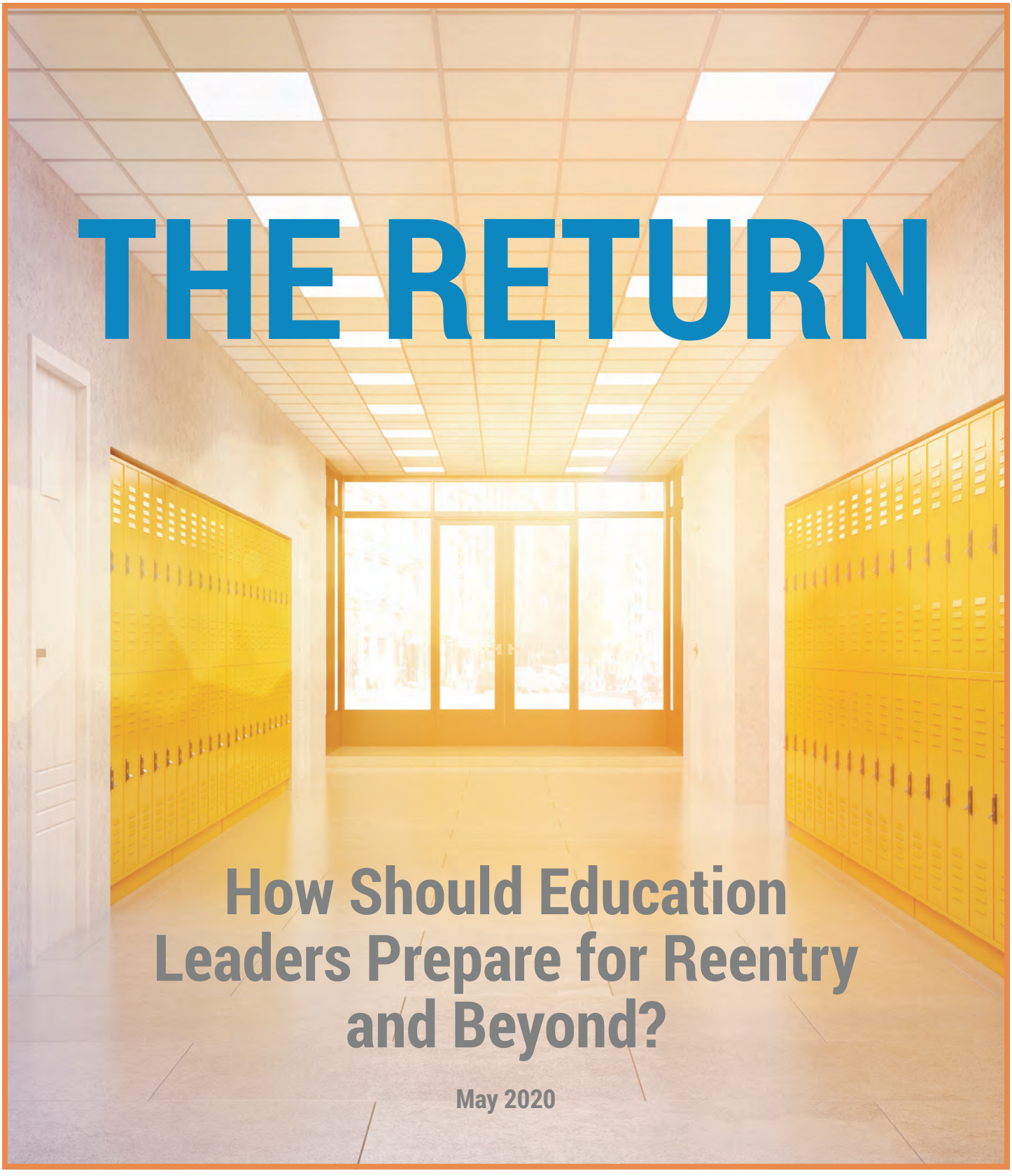

THE RETURN

How Should Education Leaders Prepare for Reentry and Beyond?

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CHIEFS for CHANGE

JOHNS HOPKINS SCHOOL of EDUCATION
Institute for Education Policy

The Return:

How Should Education Leaders Prepare for Reentry and Beyond?

The COVID-19 crisis has brought school closures to every state in the country; district, charter, and private schools alike have scrambled to provide remote learning in short order. While the current restrictions on student learning will not last forever, the consequences of the crisis on students' academic progress—let alone on their and their families' economic and emotional wellbeing—are likely to persist well into the future. How can school systems prepare for what will be anything but business as usual?

Every system in the country will be making decisions around reopening school buildings. It is increasingly clear that the health and safety of school communities will depend on the dramatic restructuring of facilities and schedules. There are lessons to be learned from nations such as Denmark and Japan that have recently reopened, but also stark differences between what is possible there and what will be possible here.

All reopening plans should begin with two goals in mind.

First, the physical school environments should embody public health guidelines to prevent a COVID-19 outbreak and additional closures. Such planning will likely include not only significant changes to physical spaces, transportation plans, and calendar schedules, but also testing and contact-tracing capabilities, in partnership with and under the guidelines of health agencies.

Second, the plan must produce enough confidence that families, students, and educators feel ready for face-to-face teaching in school. Communication with all stakeholders will be key.

Detailed plans are only beginning to emerge, but a few salient features are coming into focus. Facilities may well have to be reorganized to accommodate social distancing—something few classrooms, let alone entire schools, can accomplish at full enrollment. If necessary, school attendance will have to be staggered. This may mean that some amount of distance learning will need to continue as part of a plan to address space constraints. In the use of school facilities, we recommend prioritizing elementary school students for academic, social, emotional, and economic reasons.

Middle and high school students also need the academic, social, and emotional benefits of physical proximity to their peers and teachers. We recommend reorganizing students into small mentor groups of fewer than a dozen of their peers and a mentor teacher, with whom they can learn throughout the year—whether in a physical school building or not. This mentor teacher may not, in fact, be in charge of their instruction, which could be delivered online by another teacher with subject matter expertise—meaning that students need not be assigned to groups by academic aptitude. However, for reasons articulated below, it makes sense for trusted adults to serve as group mentors, with the support of other staff as needed. Reorganizing in this manner would accommodate social distancing, honor the need for ongoing social interactions, and account for health and safety precautions within the limitations of school facilities.

Districts are working with public health officials to determine when to reopen schools and are cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting their buildings. *(Guilford County Schools, North Carolina)*

We also acknowledge that any plan to make school facilities safe for reopening—even one that involves a substantial amount of continued distance learning—will come with costs. As but two examples, school furniture seldom allows students to be six feet apart, nor are schools outfitted for frequent hand sanitation. As education leaders determine when to shift schools from distance learning to in-person, they must consider not only public health guidelines and updates, but also the availability of personal protective equipment. New forms of COVID-19 monitoring will be another unanticipated expense. To accommodate small group settings, schools will need to change food service, transportation, custodial services, and staffing. Many contracts, including collective bargaining agreements, will have to be renegotiated. In an environment in which budgets will surely go down, federal stimulus will have to play a critical role in the implementation of plans.

Most importantly, the organization of teaching and learning requires a sound and adaptable operational strategy. Drawing on extensive research and advice from system leaders, we offer recommendations in four key areas:

- **Time** (What does a multi-year approach to re-organizing time look like?);
- **Talent** (How should we organize adults?);
- **Social and Emotional Wellness and Skills** (How do we continue to support student social and emotional health as well as student agency, self-direction, and other habits of success?); and
- **Academic Plan** (What does this crisis require to ensure that reentry succeeds over a multi-year period?).

Solutions will emerge in the field from leaders who have a commitment to evidence, a deep knowledge of the obstacles of their community, and the trust of families. We lay out below strategies for their consideration that are supported by strong research. In the weeks ahead, we will provide strategic updates to this guidance.

The needs of multilingual learners and students with special needs will have to be addressed in the key recommendations that follow with a commitment to equitable access. This includes making curriculum resources and videos available in multiple languages. Federal offices have emphasized a balance between flexibility and compliance but, at the time of writing, have not issued guidance for the return to school. The Council of Administrators of Special Education has provided useful guidance for district and state leaders, raising—among other considerations—the possibility of extended learning time to accelerate student progress when we return to face-to-face instruction. The departments of education in both Tennessee and Louisiana provide toolkits for districts to help support special populations. Their guidance includes leveraging the use of centralized sites for instructional materials and language assistance, and operating hotlines in multiple languages. Other important steps to support all learners include coordinating services across multiple providers, standing up telehealth online platforms, and developing virtual professional learning communities that allow providers and experts to share resources and materials.

Families practice social distancing while waiting in line at a middle school in California's Oakland Unified School District. *(Reuters)*

End the Agrarian School Calendar

In the midst of the pandemic, the majority of schools and systems are struggling to provide rigorous, grade-level learning; this is exacerbated by the uneven distribution of devices and internet connectivity among urban and rural areas and families of different socioeconomic circumstances. Many students will finish the school year academically behind—some, substantially so. Suggestions abound, from holding all kids back a year, to designating "half-year" status; from summer school in 2020, to an extended school year in 2021.

To date, only summer school and year-round academic programming have been studied. The evidence is clear: Intensive summer programming in 2020 will not compensate for COVID-19 learning losses. The RAND Corporation's research team has studied summer learning for more than a decade. While some programs they studied do indeed boost student learning, to yield such effects they must take place for at least two years in a row and have high attendance rates. Even in optimal conditions, programs may alleviate some gaps in learning, but will not necessarily reverse them in full. For example, RAND's 2018 report indicates that success requires significant lead time in planning for the summer; teachers who possess content expertise; and written instead of individualized curriculum. RAND's research also finds, however, that even well-crafted summer learning programs cannot mediate the summer learning losses experienced by low-income students. Summer programs require consistency and significant effort to ensure high attendance over multiple years.

At the same time, nascent research indicates that extending the school year beyond the typical 180 days, and/or restructuring the summer holiday, can benefit students. A 2010 study showed that 10 additional days of math instruction led to gains of .2 standard deviations on annual test scores (which would reduce the black-white student learning gap by 25 percent). As another proof point, the outsized gains often seen in urban charter schools are due, at least in part, to their extended days and years.

The National Center on Time and Learning (NCTL) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) have led the movement to extend both the school day and the school year, having issued their first call to radically alter the school calendar in 1994 (*Prisoners of Time*). Many systems have done so, such that 1,200 district and

Guilford County Schools

Workers prepare laptops for distribution. *(Guilford County Schools, North Carolina)*

800 charter schools reported either longer days or years during the 2013-14 academic year. When NCTL and ECS published a 2015 update, they found that longer days and years often formed part of district turnaround efforts and innovation zones.

The most extensive experiment with expanded learning to date, the report noted, has occurred in Florida. In 2013, the legislature funded 100 low-performing elementary schools to provide an additional hour of reading per day. This led to a substantial boost in reading scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and, as a result, the Research-Based Reading Instruction Allocation program included funding for 300 schools to offer an additional hour of reading instruction per day. Under the current statute, each district with at least one of the lowest-performing schools is, "Given priority in being provided an additional hour per day of intensive reading instruction beyond the normal school day for each day of the entire school year for the students in each school."[1] The program was funded again in 2019.

Still other states, such as Michigan and Virginia, began (in 2014) to provide grants for "year-round" schooling. As the NCTL and ECS update put it,

> Typically, these so-called "year-round calendars" are structured with four cycles of 45 days (9 weeks) of instruction, followed by 15 days (3 weeks) of vacation/intersession. The result is still a calendar of 180 instructional days, but one that does not subject students to large gaps in school time and, consequentially,

1 Source: Written communication with a legislative research assistant of the Florida House of Representatives Education Committee, on April 23, 2020.

in learning. According to the Congressional Research Service, today approximately 4 percent of all schools in the country operate year-round.

Many "year-round" changes in the United States, in other words, have reconfigured holidays to good effect—but have not increased the total number of school days.

For more radical models, we can look abroad. Many countries in Europe have longer school years in absolute terms, and most of them spread holidays out across the school year. Italy and Denmark, for instance, have 200 days of school per year; Czechoslovakia, Norway, and all countries within the United Kingdom (UK) have 190 or more; Finland and the rest of the Nordic nations have more than 180. (Many do not count the exam periods in that number of days.) Central European nations and those of the UK take six to eight weeks over the summer, with half-term holidays every spring and fall.

Non-European countries also reflect this pattern. Children attend school for more than 200 days a year in Japan and Israel; 200 days a year in Australia and Singapore; 190 in Hong Kong; and an average of 187 in Canada.

Does it work? A meta-analysis of international studies does show that increased instructional time benefits student achievement (although there may be a "ceiling effect"), and some studies of individual countries find the same (*e.g.*, Switzerland and Germany). And a McKinsey study of international school improvement models noted that adding hours of instruction to the day was a hallmark feature that worked to boost student outcomes, particularly in systems that are moving from "poor" to "fair."

Children in Norway attend school for 190 days or more. Here, children listen to their teacher during a class in Oslo. *(Reuters)*

Children in Italy attend school 200 days a year. Here, a teacher near Milan prepares a lesson for his students. *(Reuters)*

It is time to make the academic calendar far more flexible in order to expand the amount of time American kids spend in the classroom—not only as part of a multi-year acceleration effort following the pandemic, but as a permanent feature of America's schools. Year-round school has the potential to produce not only academic benefits for students, but logistical and financial benefits for families. Many parents and caregivers who work find it difficult to arrange summer child care; many cannot afford enrichment camps and other programs. In addition, nearly a quarter of high school students work in part-time jobs that are more necessary now than ever, given the economic downturn. Students will need the flexibility to hold a job, participate in internships, and take dual-enrollment courses that allow them to earn free or low-cost college credit.

All of these factors underscore the need for not only *more* instructional time, but for more *flexible* instructional time. The school calendar must align with modern realities.

Our first recommendation is to transition from the agrarian calendar to a longer and more flexible school year with shorter holidays. Doing so will accelerate student progress and promote rigorous instruction.

Create More Nimble, Effective Staffing Models

Students need outstanding teachers. As David Steiner, executive director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, wrote in 2018, "The strongest education research finding in the last twenty years is that the quality of a teacher is the single greatest in-school determinate of student outcomes." A high-quality teacher not only bolsters students' academic success in the short term, but also their economic productivity and social wellbeing in the long term. "High-quality" means, among other things, holding students to high standards. Research continues to affirm—often via different angles (see here and here)—that teachers matter.

But children need more than effective instructional leaders; they also need to feel seen and known by at least one caring adult in their school context. Strong and supportive relationships between students and teachers lead to improved and enduring social-emotional and academic outcomes for students; having a good relationship with an adult in the school can yield greater student motivation, satisfaction, self-esteem, and social skills and can help to reduce student dropout, disruptive behavior, and absences. This connection is particularly important for first-generation students and students of color (here).

Indianapolis Public Schools was the first district in the nation to include Opportunity Culture roles in its teacher contract. Here, Superintendent Aleesia Johnson speaks with students. *(Indianapolis Public Schools)*

William Hite, superintendent of The School District of Philadelphia, takes a photo with students. *(Chiefs for Change)*

The COVID-19 crisis is forcing all of us to revisit how we understand and therefore configure teachers' roles. System leaders are looking to strategic staffing models that maximize students' instruction from the teachers who have deep subject-area and instructional expertise, and students' experiences with teachers who excel at forging real connections. Both roles are critical and require retooling teams for the collective responsibility of students. Models that expand the reach of outstanding instructors, while freeing up other educators to provide much-needed one-on-one academic and relational support to help all kids stay on track, hold extraordinary promise for our students.

Such models also fit well with the small-group learning that is likely to continue well into the future. In addition, as systems consider reentry and the operational requirements of their classrooms and buildings, re-shaping teacher time and role will be a necessity. Such models are inherently more flexible, enabling both small in-person or remote class sizes and larger lectures. Any school reopening plan must also be able to accommodate ongoing shifts between distance and in-person learning.

Do such staffing models work? Public Impact focuses on establishing, and studying, the format above. As a result, systems across the country have begun to adopt the Multi-Classroom approach to good effect. Research

on what Public Impact calls "Opportunity Culture" shows that elevating excellent teachers so that they reach more students, and compensating them appropriately, led to robust student gains and teacher retention. Other teachers and paraprofessionals—which Public Impact calls the "Reach Team"—not only learn from "master teachers" but also devote more time to small-group instruction. Such findings comport with international research on the importance of effective teacher ladders for student success. This approach is highly amenable to remote learning, which will likely continue episodically next school year. We note that this approach may require regulatory changes, including those related to class size, teacher certification, and even compensation ladders. Leaders will need to think through these considerations in the context of their political and economic environment.

As students reenter schools, it will be more important than ever that each student receives an individualized plan for their academic, social, and emotional needs. Individual learning plans are not new—these are required for students with special needs—but will now be something all educators should do upon reentry as they diagnose student learning, set specific learning goals, identify social and emotional learning needs and supports, and coordinate interventions with multiple providers and educators. The suggested staffing model makes meeting these very different needs more likely.

Reconfiguring teacher and paraprofessional roles to maximize high-quality instruction and connections with individual students is therefore a priority that will place our students and schools on better footing in the years to come.

We recommend immediately reconfiguring state regulations and local contracts as necessary to allow for meaningful teacher role differentiation, to maximize high-level instruction and stronger relationships, beginning fall 2020.

Focus on Students' Social and Emotional Wellbeing—Especially Their Self-Regulation and Self-Direction

This pandemic has illuminated the urgent need to help students foster their own growth and development. The shift to distance learning has come more easily in systems that already employ an online learning platform and an integrated focus on habits of success, self-direction, and agency, as well as in districts that over the last few years have embedded evidence-based approaches to social and emotional learning into their school cultures and classroom instructional practices. Student agency matters to student success—and it can be developed in schools. Some systems, such as San Antonio Independent School District, already had a dual focus in place. San Antonio's reentry plan includes a coherent approach to closing out this school year, with the last two weeks centered on family connections and the entire community's social and emotional wellbeing.

Many schools seek to promote students' engagement with their own learning through student-centered practices, such as centers from which young children can choose, or by direct instruction about what Carol Dweck calls "growth mindset," *i.e.*, believing that one's actions can influence results. The Aspen Institute's 2019 Nation of Hope recommended that students direct parent-teacher conferences, choose assignments, participate in advisory groups, and enter into "collaborative decision-making structures" to advance their sense of responsibility and control. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) emphasizes the

The San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) has implemented district-wide plans to connect with families about their social and emotional wellbeing. Here, a teacher speaks with students at SAISD's Young Women's Leadership Academy Primary in 2019. *(Chiefs for Change)*

role schools can play in supporting students' sense of efficacy, and organizes its competencies into five areas: self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness, and self-awareness. CASEL also offers evidence-based rubrics to assess the development of these skills, which will be especially important to students' functioning in the school building environments to which students return in the fall—environments that are likely to feel, at best, unfamiliar.

Another mechanism that advances student agency is natural consequences for academic behaviors, such as the "productive struggle" that lets kids wrestle with a problem before giving them the answer, or allowing them to receive a low score for a job poorly done. The Chicago University Consortium on School Research has studied the importance of non-cognitive traits such as persistence and optimism, *and* their inseparability from academic work. The "habits of success" noted above can be most readily inculcated in a learning environment structured around high standards and high support, where the responsibility for learning falls not only upon teachers but also upon students.

A clear way to promote this level of student agency is through content-rich assessments, which are common in high-performing school systems (*e.g.*, Alberta, Canada, here). As West & Woessman reported in 2012:

> Students perform substantially better in countries that have external exit-exam systems than in countries without external exit-exam systems. This is true in TIMSS, TIMSS-Repeat, PISA 2000, and PISA 2003, as well as in other previous international achievement tests. Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests that the effect may well be larger than a full grade-level equivalent.

Students' ownership over their learning can then be reinforced with external standards that ensure a substantial knowledge build. More on curriculum-based assessments is below.

Another way to norm schools for success is to build practice with online learning into school calendars. The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003 and natural disasters prompted Asian nations to do so; see here. A 2003 essay noted, for instance, that when students in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore returned to school after SARS took them online, *few of them were behind academically* because they knew how to self-manage in online learning environments.

Students wearing masks to protect themselves from contracting SARS attend class in Hong Kong in 2003. *(Reuters)*

> Thousands of Asian students logged in to Web-based, virtual classrooms, where they took notes and spoke to their teachers and classmates using technologies such as Web cameras, audio-video phones, Web- conferencing software, instant-messaging tools, and multimedia animation programs.
>
> More than 8,000 students in 60 schools in Hong Kong, for example, clicked into powerful, interactive Websites developed by the publicly financed Hong Kong Baptist University and the government-run Hong Kong Education City Limited, to continue their lessons.
>
> "The virtual-classroom program [brought] us to a new horizon of school education," said Jonathan Lai, the vice principal of the 800-student Yan Chai Hospital Wong Wha San Secondary School, in Hong Kong. "It made us aware that learning can go on effectively and efficiently outside the classroom. ... The SARS school-closure period proved that this idea work[s]."

Hong Kong University's Centre for IT in Education noted that SARS had taught the nation that teachers and students must practice online learning; appropriate learning platforms "must have been set up and used" before another crisis.

This is an international issue that school systems around the world can and need to solve. The World Bank's 2014 *Education and Technology in an Age of Pandemics* notes that while Asian societies—and their schools—remain ahead in connectivity and therefore flexibility in the event of "external shocks," sub-Saharan countries began to consider similar concerns after outbreaks of Ebola.

The National School Safety Center has said online learning could be integral to districts' emergency plans for not just medical crises but also severe weather events such as snowstorms. *(Reuters)*

Policymakers in the United States have long urged schools to be prepared for exogenous crises, including pandemics; see the National Association of School Psychologists and the US Department of Education's guidance on continuity of learning during epidemics (2009), here. As the director of the National School Safety Center, Ronald D. Stephens, noted back in 2003, online learning "could be integral to a school district's emergency plan, not just for drawn-out medical crises like SARS, but also for situations like [2002] sniper shootings in the Washington area; a biological-weapons attack; and even more familiar crises such as snowstorms and tornadoes." Routine preparation for a panoply of events that could cause disruptions makes sense.

Such preparations in the future cannot solve the current crisis, in which a substantial number of students will return to school with not only learning loss but also emotional consequences of isolation and lack of predictability. Here again, the benefits of a coherent approach to students' social and emotional wellbeing and the cultivation of their own emotional resources will be numerous.

We recommend that school systems build in targeted, online practice during the year so that all stakeholders (including family members) become accustomed to remote learning models. Schools should also make sure that students are developing important skills of responsibility, self-regulation, and ownership over their learning.

Base All Learning on High-Quality Instructional Materials and Curriculum-Based Assessments

Curriculum matters. The research record on the difference that a knowledge-rich curriculum can make for student learning is extensive and growing (for summaries, see here, here, here, and here). As leaders prepare their school communities for the challenge of re-starting face-to-face as well as hybrid models, a coherent pathway for learning recovery and acceleration needs to include greater reliance on high-quality materials and instruction, and completing the circle with curriculum-based assessments.

Our heterogeneous population requires, additionally, that such resources and videos are available in multiple languages, and that they are robust and content-rich. Creating user-friendly, multilingual, online hubs, and ensuring telephone hotline supports are available in multiple languages to field questions and concerns is critical. For a recent example, see Alberta, Canada's, COVID-19 education plan. The province provides access to curriculum-related resources online, subject by subject, that were designed to align with the province's curricular frameworks—in both English and French.

But first, and immediately, state leaders can seek to recover assessment funds. Tennessee Commissioner of Education Penny Schwinn was able to recuperate, and redirect, the funds paid to her state testing vendor. All states should follow suit with test publishers, so as to deploy the funds towards immediate teaching and learning needs.

Tennessee Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn speaks with a student about a lesson. *(Tennessee Department of Education)*

Second, they can begin to support new assessment models that reinforce high-quality materials and instruction. Research supports the importance of coherent, knowledge-rich curricula and assessments that ensure students have mastered the content. Our two institutions have highlighted the research (see here and here) and provided new resources and practical guidance to the field.

COVID-19 has brought the message home: students and teachers need access to high-quality, sequenced, and knowledge-rich materials in every subject—and during dramatic disruptions, even more so. Moreover, school systems need assessments that not only inform differentiated instruction, but also help mitigate the kind of confirmation bias that often leads to lowering expectations for what historically disadvantaged students can achieve.

We recommend formative and summative assessments tied to specific curricula that can be implemented under various circumstances. Teachers would thus receive interim, actionable data on not only skills but also conceptual and specific knowledge that reflected classroom content. As we wait for the development of new formative assessments, we should rely on the interim assessments created by high-quality curriculum providers.

As for summative assessments, they should follow suit to the extent that time, capacity, and resources allow them to do so. Louisiana's pilot assessment project shows what is possible when states invest in the continuum between high-quality curricula and assessments. This initiative, currently focused on middle school students in districts that opted in, assesses students on the most commonly used English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum in the state (*Guidebooks)*. The pilot tests the usual ELA skills, but also asks students to think deeply about specific sources they've read in class, integrate new but related content thoughtfully, and synthesize ideas that arose across the year in an end-of-grade essay.[2]

This model takes time and negotiation among state leaders. It need not rely upon federal pilot authority but could, rather, rest upon carve-outs such as the Portfolio Districts in New York State. Other states could collaborate with assessment companies and additional curriculum providers to create a handshake between teaching and learning in their contexts.

We recommend partnerships between states, curriculum providers, and testing companies to create a mutually reinforcing, systematic approach to teaching and learning for our country's children. The key to success is curriculum-aligned formative and summative assessments.

This report is a collaboration between Chiefs for Change and the Johns Hopkins University Institute for Education Policy.

Chiefs for Change is a nonprofit, bipartisan network of diverse state and district education chiefs dedicated to preparing all students for today's world and tomorrow's through deeply committed leadership. Chiefs for Change advocates for policies and practices that are making a difference for students, and builds a pipeline of talented, diverse Future Chiefs ready to lead major school systems.

The Johns Hopkins University Institute for Education Policy is dedicated to integrating the domains of research, policy, and practice to achieve educational excellence for all of America's students. Our work focuses on ensuring that all students have access to deep and intellectually challenging curricula; highly-effective educators; and school models that meet students' diverse needs.

2 Like Pedro Martinez, superintendent of SAISD referenced above, former Louisiana State Superintendent John White is a member of the Chiefs for Change board; the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy is a partner on the pilot assessment project.