



How We Go Back To School

Thank you to those who joined us for this event, which took place on Wednesday, August 19, 2020. Below, you can read the reporter wrap-up our journalists wrote for you.

Here are takeaways we've distilled from those discussions with you, the Education Week readers.



The 'COVID-19 Slide': Measuring And Addressing Learning Losses

Moderator: Lesli A. Maxwell, Assistant Managing Editor, Education Week

New research is already showing major setbacks to academic achievement in the months of disrupted schooling forced by COVID-19, with estimates that some students will have lost as much as a full school year's worth of learning gains. How can districts and schools effectively measure and diagnose the learning losses? What types of interventions and staffing changes can be deployed to address the losses?

Guests:

- **Luvelle Brown**, Superintendent, Ithaca City School District, Ithaca, N.Y.
- **Misael Ramos**, Teacher, Springfield, Mass.
- **Nathaniel Schwartz**, Professor of Practice at Brown University and leader in Brown's Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Key Takeaways:

Focus on social-emotional learning and routines first. The panelists noted that building relationships, routines, and trust with teachers will need to take precedence over immediate attempts to diagnose students' learning losses. Superintendent Brown noted that adults will need extra mental-health supports, too, to ensure they're ready to help students who come in after months of isolation, dramatic news developments, and economic disruption.

Prioritize formative feedback to diagnose learning loss over standardized tests. As Schwartz outlined, researchers generally say large-scale tests return results too slowly that prove not to be granular enough to help with teaching and learning. Some districts may choose to continue a cycle of interim assessments, but likely the most important form of diagnosis will be the daily, embedded formative assessments teachers use to plan and tailor instruction. In Springfield, Mass., teachers will begin lessons with "activators" connecting to the prior day or week's learning to determine what needs to be refreshed or retaught before the day's lesson.

Enlisting parents' help means communicating with them on their terms. The Springfield district sends nearly all paperwork home to ELL students translated in their home language, and it assists with questions parents have not only about academics but also technology and social-emotional resources, teacher Misael Ramos said. Translation apps and local community organizations can help with these efforts. Districts can also use text messages to help inform parents about literacy steps they can take to assist their children and provide parents with take-home books can also help stem learning loss.

Brainstorm ways to deploy staff creatively. Springfield is "asset mapping" its staff and adjusting teaching loads to match: For example, a P.E. teacher who has a math license could be paired with a core math teacher to support a caseload of students, for example. Some ELL teachers who are bilingual are now tapped to reach out to parents who are also English-learners.

Re-think content and pedagogy. Superintendent Brown said the current situation gives schools an opportunity to "prioritize the content we engage students with and how we do it. I am hoping instead of filling in gaps, we create a new approach that is much more culturally responsive and inclusive. If giving more voice and choice to students we may not realize gaps, but instead new opportunities." The nation's newfound conversations about race, bias, policing, and public health may be fruitful places to start. In addition, as Schwartz detailed, emerging research suggests that synchronous teaching can't just replicate normal lessons. is most effective when it is built around small-group peer interactions and direct teacher-to-student feedback.

Resources:

Overcoming COVID-19 Learning Loss (Education Week)

[EdResearch for Recovery](#) (Annenberg Institute, Brown University)



Supporting Students' Social-Emotional and Mental Health Needs

Moderator: Arianna Prothero, Staff Writer, Education Week

Students will return to schools this fall with profound social-emotional and mental health needs. Some will be traumatized by COVID-19's impact on their families and communities and many could be anxious about their health and safety. How can schools and districts prioritize and balance those needs with addressing deep academic losses?

Guests:

- **Stephanie M. Jones**, Gerald S. Lesser Professor of Child Development and Education in the Harvard Graduate School of Education
- **Ray Lozano**, Executive Director, Student and Family Empowerment, El Paso Independent School District, Texas

Key Takeaways:

Relationships will be key this school year. But how can educators build relationships with students while starting the academic year remotely—or maintain those relationships, should school have to move online? Start by thinking carefully about ways to slow down and connect with students at the beginning of any interaction, whether it be with an individual or a group, recommended Stephanie Jones of Harvard. This can be done by asking simple questions or a feelings “check-in,” just so long as everyone has a chance to share without judgment. Another quick and easy practice to implement, according to Ray Lozano of El Paso Schools, is to do a daily check in routine where students use emojis to communicate how they are feeling that day. These exercises can be done both in-person or in a virtual lesson.

Teachers need to tend to their mental health as well. It's an oft-cited example when it comes to self-care: when flying you must put on your own oxygen mask first before you can help others. Teachers can't take care of their students' social, emotional, and mental health needs without also taking care of their own. El Paso Schools is requiring administrators to conduct 5-minute check-ins with teachers to provide them with dedicated time to share what's on their

mind and give feedback on the virtual learning rollout, said Lozano. The district is also including a self-care activity in a weekly newsletter for teachers and school leaders. Jones also recommends sharing strategies or tips for self-care, but self-care tips shouldn't be time-consuming or overwhelming in and of themselves. Taking a mini-break—a five-minute rest, a cup of coffee, or a deep breathing or stretching exercise—can go a long way, said Jones. Creating avenues for adults to connect and support one another is also crucial, said Jones. This can take the form of Zoom support sessions or informal “happy hours.”

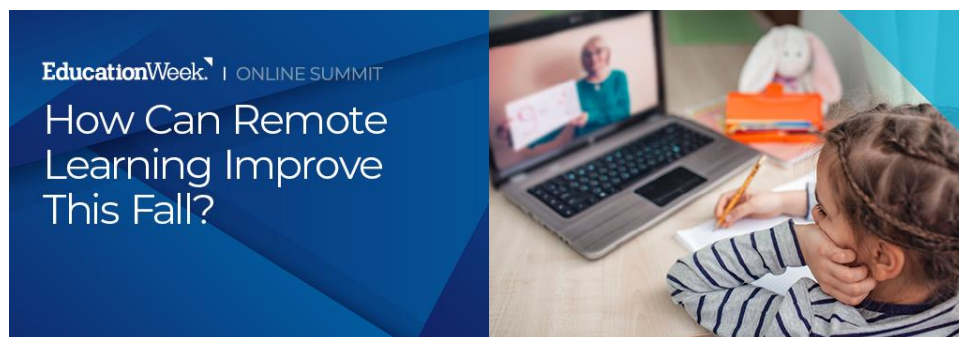
Making time for SEL will be tough, but it can be done. If crunched for time and resources, and facing big learning losses from school closures last springs, school leaders may be tempted to shelve social emotional learning and double down on core academics. That would be a mistake, say Jones and Lozano. Research shows that focusing on social emotional skills and competencies can boost academic progress, so Jones recommends investing in SEL up-front to get students to a place where they are ready to really learn. She suggests educators look for bite-sized SEL strategies or practices that can be deployed and adapted for many settings, rather than attempting to adopt a large-scale SEL curricula at this time.

Resources:

[How to Teach Social-Emotional Learning When Students Aren't in School](#), Education Week

[SEL Kernels](#)—explains what kernels are, why they are important, and gives examples of “bite-sized” SEL activities that can be filtered by developmental level and duration.

[Reunite, Renew and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening School from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#)



How Can Remote Learning Improve This Fall?

Moderator: Mark Lieberman, Staff Writer, Education Week

Even if most schools reopen with live attendance on some or all days, there's almost no question that they will need to continue some remote learning—to protect high-risk teachers and students and as a way to manage numbers of people in a building at any given time. How can schools and districts be better prepared to deliver robust instruction more consistently? What are the major lessons from the spring's abrupt and chaotic shift to virtual teaching?

Guests:

- **Jhone Ebert**, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Nevada Department of Education
- **Oscar Rico**, IT Director, Canutillo Independent School District, Texas.

Key Takeaways:

Help is out there, if you know where to look. Many attendees said they're wondering where to find materials that will help them build and enhance online instruction offerings for students. K-12 schools in many cases haven't invested significant time and resources to developing online courses, but that doesn't mean all of them have to start from scratch. State departments of education, existing statewide online schools, and open educational resource (OER) repositories offer a wide range of options for schools that want to quickly ramp up course infrastructure and give teachers a foundation from which to build.

Engagement will be a key challenge this fall. Getting devices and wi-fi in the hands of students is important, and virtual learning can't succeed without those basic accomplishments. But the true success of remote learning efforts will be measured by the degree to which students are actively engaged in the learning process and remaining in contact with teachers over the long haul. Many questions surfaced about how to ensure that students are paying attention to live lectures, that they're staying on track during asynchronous learning, and that the efforts to assess their progress are effective and fair. Teachers shared tips for engaging students by emphasizing interactivity and avoiding lectures, as well as reminders that the learning experience will necessarily be imperfect during a profound public health and economic crisis.

Expectations must be reasonable. Headlines from this spring emphasized schools' struggles to maintain effective remote learning that consistently reached and engaged all students. These experiences, coupled with the frenzied nature of their development during the abrupt closure of the nation's school systems, may have led many parents and students to frown upon the prospect of more online learning this fall. On the other hand, families also expect that schools will have improved their remote learning efforts now that they've had several months to prepare to keep them going. Those expectations may end up being too great as schools struggle under the weight of budget shortages, conflicting guidance from local, state, and federal officials, and the unpredictable twists and turns of the pandemic, which has persisted far longer than many anticipated earlier this year. Schools should keep parents' expectations for improvements in check and strive wherever possible to be transparent about the successes and challenges of the new paradigm.

Resources:

[COVID-19 & Remote Learning: How to Make It Work](#)

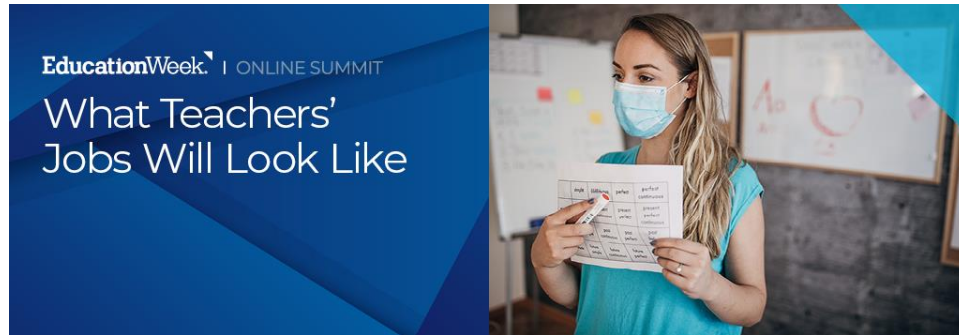
[How to Address Big Tech Equity Challenges](#)

[The Pivot Back to Remote Learning: Checklists for Teachers, Principals, and Ed-Tech Leaders](#)

[Knowing How Students and Teachers Use Tech Is Vital](#)

[How to Make Lessons Cohesive When Teaching Both Remote and In-Person Classes](#)

[What to Do for Families With Internet Access Too Slow for Remote Learning](#)



What Teachers' Jobs Will Look Like

Moderator:

- **Catherine Gewertz**, Senior Contributing Writer, Education Week
- **Sarah Schwartz**, Staff Writer, Education Week

Wearing masks or face shields. Smaller class sizes. One day in the building. Another day teaching from home. There are countless scenarios for how teaching will look this fall. What will teachers need most to be prepared to face an unprecedented start to an academic year and what can districts and schools do to support the transition back into the classroom?

Guests:

- **Emily Freitag**, Co-Founder and CEO, Instruction Partners
- **Scott Marion**, President and Executive Director, National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment

Key Takeaways:

When planning for instruction in a new environment, start by articulating what you want students to be able to do. It sounds simple, but it's a key way to figure out what methods and tools will best suit your needs. Want students to collaborate in a virtual environment? You could try digital shared documents, or breakout rooms. Scheduling has changed, and now you're planning for a much longer block? Think about how you want students to spend that time and what you want them to have done by the end.

Don't try to cover everything students missed last spring. Experts said it's important to prioritize which skills and content students need for the next lesson. One district created a shared Google doc showing skills and content that weren't covered, to help teachers plan. An instructional coach asks a few carefully designed questions to see what students need for the next lesson.

Take advantage of the moment to rethink assessment. Remote teaching offers an opportunity to focus on a deeper approach to instruction and assessment and move away from low-level, multiple-choice tests. “It hard to do, but now’s the time to try,” Marion said.

Teachers need wellness support. Participants reported being in “survival” mode, stressed and exhausted, in part because it’s difficult to draw a clear boundary between work and personal time when they’re teaching remotely from home. They reminded one another that it’s important to avoid the “superman/superwoman syndrome” and take care of themselves. Building supportive networks with other educators, within and outside your district, is particularly important right now, they said.

Resources:

EdWeek’s special report, [“Taking Care of Teachers”](#)

[How to create learning environments that ease stress on children](#)

[Don’t Rush to Diagnose Learning Loss With a Formal Test. Do This Instead.](#)

[Classroom Routines Must Change. Here's What Teaching Looks Like Under COVID-19](#)



Creating an Equitable Return to School

Moderator: Christina A. Samuels, Associate Editor, Education Week

As classrooms reopen, how can districts and schools guarantee that the students who need the most support for their learning actually get it? What decisions should be made through an “equity lens?” and what strategies can administrators use to ensure that students who’ve fallen most behind by the prolonged closures of school buildings don’t lose even more ground?

Guests:

- **Stephanie Hawley**, Chief Equity Officer, Austin Independent School District, Texas
- **Ace Parsi**, Director of Innovation, National Center for Learning Disabilities

Key Takeaways:

One size fits all will not work when it comes to ensuring equity: Though all students need access to rigorous education, providing access and opportunity may look different depending

on that individual student's needs. For example, the family of an English-language learner may need outreach in their home language in order to support access for their children; students with disabilities may need greater access to assistive technology.

Enlist families in these efforts and capitalize on their strengths: Too often, students and their families are viewed through the lens of what they lack and what the school district must provide for them. Rather than continue that mindset, talk directly to those families and build on their knowledge and skills. "We've found ensuring equity while reopening for learning, has required us to focus on the students who are the marginalized in our system and the community. When we center their strengths and needs, we make better decisions for everyone," Hawley of the Austin district said.

Getting devices to students is just the beginning: Equity conversations have often focused on getting devices that can facilitate long-distance learning. But providing high quality teaching and ensuring student progress are the real goals, Parsi said. There's a "need for intentionality and raising and having a plan for these groups of students. A system on auto drive will always lead to inequity and injustice. Only when we are paying attention and showing up do we begin to undo the vicious cycles that have been reality for systemically marginalized learners before the pandemic and even more so now," he said.

Resources:

[Covid-19 Education Coalition](#) a group dedicated to supporting equity in learning during the pandemic crisis

[6 Ways Leaders Can Build Racial Equity](#)

For more information about the "How We Go Back To School" special report, read the entire report [here](#).

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