

COMMENTARY

Understanding, Measuring, and Addressing Student Learning Needs During COVID-19 Recovery



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The response to the COVID-19 crisis will have [multiple phases](#). Though we are still consumed with responding to the ongoing demands of the pandemic, we will soon be looking toward re-entry and then to recovery. These phases will be upon us quickly, which means that now is the time to focus on how to prepare for re-entry, looking toward the fall. Students are likely to experience severe learning loss as a result of school closures associated with COVID-19. We must therefore develop a systematic way of assessing the academic and social-emotional needs of students when they re-enter school. To meet the heightened needs of students and the uncertain context in the next academic year, schools will need resources, clear guidance, and flexibility.

RESEARCH ON LEARNING LOSS

We already know that students experience learning loss over the summer—information that researchers can use to predict the likely effect of being out of school as a result of COVID-19. This [research](#) suggests that students in some grades may return in fall 2020 nearly a *full year* behind what we would expect in normal conditions. Moreover, there is [some evidence](#) that the so-called “summer slide” may be worse for low-income students, as they are less likely than their higher income peers to have enriching opportunities over the summer.

Achievement gaps can also be expected to grow as a result of COVID-19, since students are being impacted by the crisis in very different ways. There is [wide variation](#) in how distance learning is being implemented across the state, in large part due to [students’ varied access to computers and WiFi](#) but also due to local decisions about [curriculum and instruction](#), and speed at [offering virtual learning](#). We also know that typically virtual learning is [less effective](#) at meeting the needs of students learning English, students with disabilities, or students who were already behind and needing targeted support.

Many students are also experiencing very difficult conditions in their homes as a result of the crisis. In the most dire cases, students will have experienced trauma as issues of poverty, housing access, and food insecurity are compounded by grief, loss,

and even abuse. Already the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 have disproportionately affected [low-income](#), [African American](#), and [Latinx](#) families. All of the research points to the fact that students' needs will be incredibly varied, and it will be critical to assess their needs in a detailed way that can prompt action.

DEVELOPING A SYSTEMATIC WAY OF ASSESSING STUDENTS' ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEEDS UPON RE-ENTRY

It is not enough to know that students will be behind grade level *on average*. All students re-entering school will need academic assessments that determine exactly which skills they have or have not acquired, and what skills and content will need to be (re)taught. This information is needed to make decisions at [multiple levels](#). Teachers and schools need to be able to make instructional decisions that support specific students. And system leaders at the district-, county-, and state-level can use this information to make decisions about policy and resource allocation.

The most efficient and cost-effective path in California would be for the state to develop a centralized assessment. The foundation for this already exists. Each year the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) test is administered to California's students in grades 3–8 and 11, but this year [the test was cancelled](#). Since the SBAC assessment has been developed to be tightly aligned with California's content standards, an SBAC "diagnostic" could be developed to be administered in the fall. SBAC already has a suite of interim assessments (such as the Interim Assessment Block (IABs), which assess learning in specific content areas, and the Interim Comprehensive Assessment (ICA)), and this new assessment could build from these existing tools. These existing assessments were developed to be utilized by teachers for [formative](#) purposes and would need some modification to be used as a diagnostic assessment at scale; to be parsimonious yet provide wide coverage in assessing student learning needs. Developing this assessment at the state-level would ensure that all educators have the tools to diagnose student learning needs—a far more efficient approach than each teacher, principal, or district administrator having to develop their own.

A statewide diagnostic would ensure consistent assessment of student need across schools and districts that could then be used to inform policy and resource allocation. It would also reduce assessment costs to districts. Although it is free for districts to *access* interim assessments, the existing assessments have items that require hand scoring, and costs associated with hand scoring are the [responsibility of the local educational agency \(LEA\)](#). In order to be rapid, reliable, and scalable, this assessment would need to leverage artificial intelligence for the otherwise teacher-scored items and have a mechanism for consolidating assessments across classrooms, schools, and districts. A potential funding source for this assessment could be savings from the spring SBAC that wasn't administered (over \$75 million [had been allocated](#) for 2019–20 test administration).

Beyond academics, intake assessments also need to be developed to take stock of students' social-emotional needs and assess their general wellbeing in terms of food and housing security; sense of belonging and safety at school; readiness to learn; and physical and mental health needs. PACE is working now with the [CORE Districts](#) and [Education Analytics](#) to develop open-source tools that can be used for this purpose.

SCHOOLS WILL NEED RESOURCES, GUIDANCE, AND FLEXIBILITY

None of us knows yet what school will look like in the fall, but we do know that it will look different than it did before the pandemic. The Governor has announced that schools [should be prepared](#) to redesign to support social distancing and periods of remote learning. Beyond even this major undertaking, schools will need to make substantial shifts to meet the unprecedented level of student need. They may need to use a blended instructional model that uses in-person and online instruction together, or develop new approaches in grouping students to provide more targeted supports.

The state can help by providing guidance and setting clear expectations, as well as offering flexibility around school calendars, seat-time requirements, class sizes, and staffing models. We also need to invest in physical and mental health professionals in

schools. Even before the crisis hit, [California ranked at or near the bottom](#) for student access to healthcare and mental health services, and we know we need more of these professionals in schools to support students and teachers.

Perhaps most importantly, we need to [protect funding](#) for education. In the short term this includes: funding education above the constitutionally guaranteed [minimum funding level](#) and shielding supplemental and concentration grants from reductions; demanding [more federal aid](#); and targeting any one-time funds on schools serving vulnerable students. And now is also a good time to start looking ahead; California's schools had already been [underfunded](#), but we could lay the groundwork now for fixing [longstanding issues](#) in how our state generates and distributes funds. As we look toward recovery, we need to make the kind of significant investments in our public schools that reflect their true importance to our state.

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