Return to In-Person:

Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

Spring 2021

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Illinois State Board of Education

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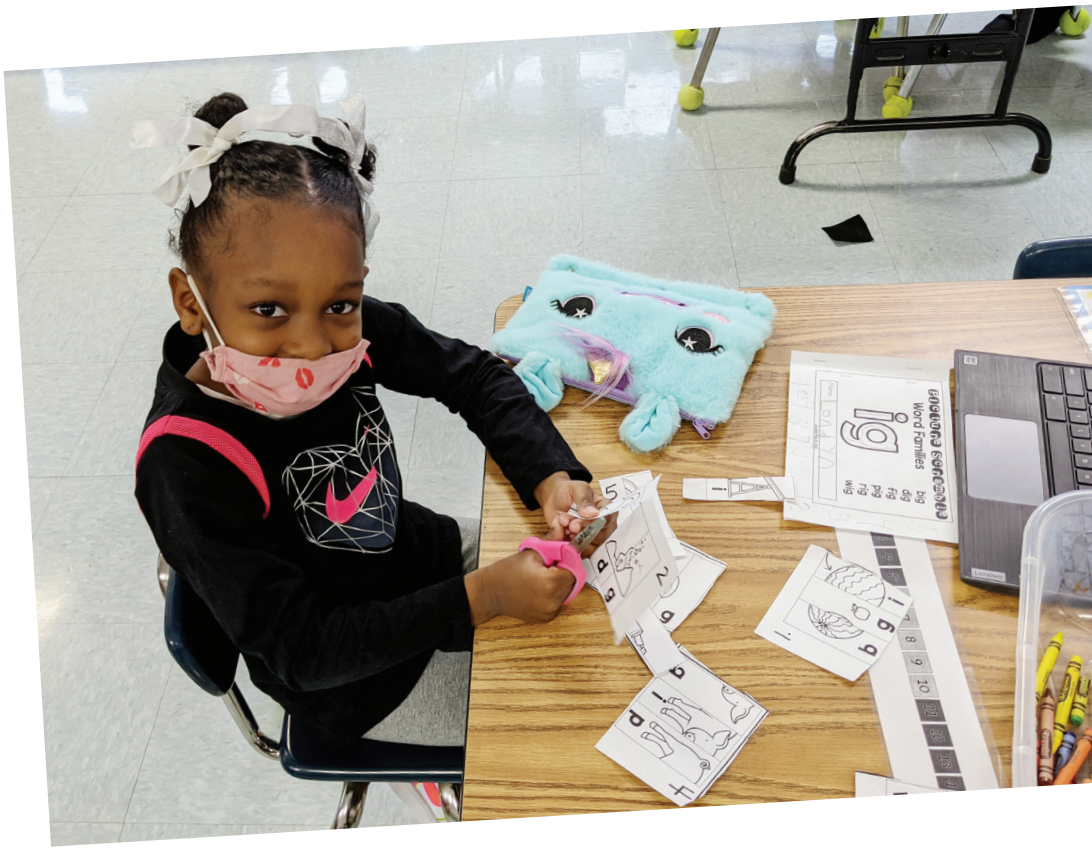
"...But one thing is certain:
if we merge mercy with might and might with right, then **love becomes our legacy and change our children's birthright**..."

— Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*

The words of Amanda Gorman stand out in our desire to provide a different narrative for every student in the State of Illinois. To change our student's "birthright," we must be united in our singular goal of providing the best quality education despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) believes the message of equity is even more urgent today.



The Illinois State Board of Education consistently messaged throughout the pandemic that it supports the safe return to in-person instruction — in consultation with local departments of public health and in adherence to public health requirements — as soon as practicable in every Illinois community. Joint public health guidance from ISBE and the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) also acknowledges that public health conditions may vary locally and provides school districts as much flexibility as possible to adapt to local needs.

ISBE has leveraged stakeholder input to provide instructional recommendations to help educators navigate through these uncertain times. Much of what was shared in previous recommendations is certainly still relevant today. For example, Part 3 — Transition Joint Guidance from June 2020 states:

The COVID-19 crisis shook our structures of teaching and learning to the core, but we have an opportunity to emerge stronger and to make lasting changes in the ways we support, teach, connect with, and value each of the 2 million students in our care. This return to school is not "business as usual" but rather the convergence of a new reality in educational excellence in Illinois.

And the Fall 2020 Learning Recommendations note:

These recommendations will assist educators as they develop an approach that is inclusive of, and equitable to, all students, regardless of their race, age, location, background, and available resources by promoting innovation and outside-of-the-box thinking and providing examples of success and possibilities to serve as models and catalysts for districts/teachers to prepare and implement an appropriate learning model.

The key here is we have an opportunity. Each of our school districts across the state are charged with identifying what works best to serve students and families across their local community. The 2020-21 school year is ending, but the outside-of-the-box thinking that will help us prepare for in-person instruction is a bridge to the 2021-22 school year. Some considerations for doing that are provided in this document. Like previous instructional recommendations, this document is a supplement to the ISBE/IDPH guidance and should be used as such.

As you continue to plan for in-person instruction in fall 2021, please remember that a district receiving American Rescue Plan Act funds "must within 30 days of receiving the funds, make publicly available on its website a plan for the safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services." We strongly encourage all educators to go deeper now and challenge your students, while effectively differentiating and scaffolding their learning. We do not need to go "back to basics" to meet student needs; in fact, we need to do the opposite. This is a time for master teachers to display their full array of exceptional strategies and for newer teachers to learn and try new techniques for every student to go deeper and achieve higher.

You might also consider the P-20 Council's Learning Renewal Resource Guide, which provides a wealth of research-based strategies to help improve student learning. Four statewide strategies are part of the P-20 document: High Impact Tutoring, Social-Emotional Learning, Interim Assessments, and Bridging Strategies for Transitioning Students from Pre-K to Kindergarten and High School Seniors to Postsecondary Opportunities.

We hope that our collective wisdom gained through this COVID-19 pandemic will be a catalyst for all on how to renew, reengage, and rebuild the quality of education across our state.

LESSONS LEARNED

The pandemic has challenged educators at all levels in new ways, but has also taught us tremendous lessons that can be leveraged to improve our educational systems as we move forward into a new school year. This section highlights some of the most salient lessons, as shared by teachers, librarians, principals, and superintendents from across Illinois.

Lesson # 1: Human welfare comes first.

We have learned many lessons during the COVID-19 public health emergency, but among the most salient is that humanity is far more important than any other priority. We learned that "Maslow before Bloom" is right and just — always. We learned that great leadership with relationships and communication as the foundation will always get us through even the toughest of situations and the darkest of days. We learned that clear, concise, timely, and straightforward communication is essential. We were also reminded that students care about being at school. When they are told why things need to occur in a certain way, they are more likely to respond and comply. Students have had to adapt and change both at home and at school, and they have risen to the occasion while having a unique school year and sacrificing much to help keep others safer.

When schools first transitioned to remote instruction in response to COVID-19, our first focus was nutrition/survival and food security. In our state, there are around 2 million students — 49% of them depend on their school districts for daily meals. We immediately worked with our food services teams all around Illinois and made sure we would feed our children.

A focus on general welfare, well-being, and social-emotional learning (SEL) for staff, students, and community remained crucial as the pandemic continued. While our "front facing" work is teaching and helping our students learn, we are also responsible for the well-being of all people in our educational systems, including adults. Wellness strategies for adults can best be described as any resource or technique used to support an educator's social and emotional well-being. These strategies can also be called self-care. The pandemic has reminded us that when educators take time to manage their own health and happiness, everyone in the school community benefits.

Lesson #2: Learning differently is still learning.

This once-in-a-century event has caused many of us to "unlearn" — to approach needs in new and novel ways and to create original pathways. To impact the future, leaders must always focus on what is best for students and their learning experiences. When we return for the 2021-22 school year, we must meet students where they are and understand they will be different upon their return after the traumatic experience of being relatively isolated for more than a year.

Despite the challenges — or perhaps because of them — our students may have learned more about learning and life during this time than during a traditional school year. Although the concept of "learning loss" is a common topic of discussion after a year of learning differently, we are left to question if learning loss is real. To make this assumption, we are left to believe that every student learns the same information every year at the same pace as others across the state or country. Students have lost a lot in the past year, including experiences, freedoms, and loved ones. However, they have all continued to learn, grow, and adapt. The lessons learned over the past year, both formally and informally, will shape the remainder of their lives, and the generation of students that has survived the pandemic will be different as a result. Just as generations before that have survived wars, economic challenges, or natural disasters, today's group of students will think differently because of the experience they have had — and the results will change the future of the world. Students have not lost learning through the pandemic — they have learned differently. As a result, our children, our world, and our schools will need to adapt.

Lesson #3: Relationships. Relationships. Relationships.

We've all found ourselves alone throughout this pandemic, or at least "socially distanced." However, many educators have found pockets of tremendous success by connecting in new ways with students, even virtually. For instance, student daily check-ins have proven to be effective. Having students respond to questions — such as, "How are you feeling?" and "Are you here and ready to learn?" — or having them identify feelings on a color spectrum (from green being calm and peaceful to red indicating an inability to focus) have helped educators reach out to students and provided a sense of connectedness during this isolation. Furthermore, offering or reassuring students that support can and will be provided for academic, social, and emotional concerns continues to build opportunities to connect with students. In addition to daily student check-ins, weekly reflections (e.g., on attendance, behavior, student achievement) not only for students but for staff have been helpful and should continue post-pandemic.

Relationships between adults have become even more critical, too. Relying on professional learning communities to help drive instruction, create content, build assessments, and garner authentic engagement has been essential for teachers this past year. We have learned to reach out and network with those outside our country, our state, and our school districts (e.g., Global Read Aloud, Virtual Author Visits, etc.), all to our benefit. Thus, harnessing the technology available to us as a true tool for global connections to enrich our teaching and learning must continue. Moreover, being cognizant of our collective digital footprint has become a part of our day-to-day routines. Collaborating not only with those in our curricular teams and grade levels, but also with our school librarians (instructional resources, fostering literacy, targeted text sets); technology coaches (pedagogy and instructional technology support); Multi-Tiered System of Supports coordinators

(individualized interventions); and counselors (SEL, postsecondary planning, small groups, outreach to families) have proven to be so valuable and should continue.

As schools transition back to full in-person learning, educators need to evaluate how they will keep parents abreast of their children's learning. This can include a teacher's webpages or district/school learning platforms. The best practice would call for educators in the same building to have uniformity with respect to platforms for delivering information to students, parents, and each other. Educators should keep in mind that not only are our students transitioning to in-person learning; the parents are transitioning as well. Educators should make known to students and/or parents the different supports that are available, when, and how the student and/or parents can access them. Educators should gauge parents' biases before reaching out to them and use a seek-to-understand mentality. Many families' circumstances have changed or are changing, and that may affect student(s) and/or parent engagement.

School systems are still facing many uncertainties as they resume in-person schooling, so it is important for leaders to reach out and to get help from others to lead impactfully and effectively. Lead with all skills — technical and adaptive — to get through the unknown. Often, we are faced with situations that have been encountered before by others, so we can analyze their actions and determine their success and their failures. Our technical skills, our "known" experiences, and our toolkits are not always relevant in this COVID-19 situation. Instead, we had to adapt and venture into the unknown to create a new reality. We had to let go of some of the rituals and routines and create new ones that fit the reality that to this date is still unfolding.

Lesson #4: Leverage technology in new, inventive, and meaningful ways.

Our schools and how we do school will always look differently and change. It is critical to keep a perspective that, as leadership expert John Maxwell writes, "Change is inevitable. Growth is optional." This is our chance to look at things from a growth perspective and be deliberate about making long-lasting changes that will better serve our students and communities. If in five years things are relatively the same as they were last year, then we will have missed a huge opportunity for meaningful, adaptive change. On the technical levels, we have all become far more adept at web conferencing; we have used innovative technology (Zoom, Meets, Teams, etc.) to interact with parents, students, teachers, and colleagues. Of course, technology existed prior to the pandemic, but it has now become commonplace as everyone was forced to use it and, in many cases, rely on it. Our teachers and students are now comfortable using these tools, and we believe that now is the time to harness and expand what we have learned to reach new horizons. Opportunities to save time and money by creating new efficiencies and adaptive changes are right in front of us. Taking deliberate action now with a future-oriented approach is certain to benefit our students and communities across the state.

Lesson #5: Narrow the content and use authentic assessments.

Academic content streamlining was implemented during this past school year to teach the essential standards as completely as possible. Teachers worked with the end in mind to implement backward design for units, mini lessons, and rigorous practice. Teaching strategies that are known to be impactful, such as scaffolding and summarizing, were utilized. Inquiry-based/project-based learning evolved as the need for engagement and the availability for students to use various methods for fact retrieval became evident. Assignments and projects that were rooted in real-world problems allowed for creative, critical, and innovative thinking. Connections with global learning communities began and new avenues of resources and support were formed. Digital citizenship (appropriate online behavior) became a focus across grades. Teachers and families were increasingly cognizant of screen time expectations. A balance of independent work, synchronous lessons, asynchronous experiences, and teacher-supported work sessions was imperative.

Individualized interventions to meet student needs were especially challenging. Continued work toward meeting students' needs and assisting their growth must be intentional.

Maximizing learning requires creative and innovative classroom assessment solutions. This included well-crafted discussion prompts. It also included classroom assessments that allowed students to use varied resources to highlight their learning. Practices, such as having clear learning objectives and goals, targeted formative classroom assessment (daily, weekly), and meaningful specific feedback (written or 1:1), were implemented. Educators quickly found some practices, such as linking academics to compliance in behavior, were not effective. One important lesson learned is that to have an authentic classroom assessment means creating one that aligns to today's world. These include project-based assessments, case studies, collaborative work, open note tests, and using resources. Many educators realized their traditional classroom testing methods could be compromised and therefore were invalid. Instead of wasting time deterring and monitoring cheating, many educators took a step forward in terms of classroom assessment that can continue to improve outcomes in future school years.

Lesson #6: We can do whatever we put our minds to doing. There are no unsolvable problems.

The smartest medical people in the world put their minds together and had a vaccine available and tested within six months of our school buildings closing. School leaders, educators, and the public learned new health guidelines and discussed topics they had never thought of, such as personal protective equipment, testing, new cleaning protocols, ventilation systems, quarantine and exclusionary practices, technology tools, and every aspect of going to school — from temperature checks for students before they left the house to how they would work inside their homes. School districts worked together

and found ways to expand internet access and provide devices to students in less than one week's time. Many districts provided millions of meals to students. Daily and weekly classroom cleaning plans and COVID-19 quarantine procedures were developed. Symptom checking, rapid testing, and contact tracing were developed and communicated to our parents and students. Schools had to research and buy supplies they had never heard of and develop responses to questions we had never thought of. Teachers had to learn new skills and new interactive classroom software. They retooled attendance and homework planning and developed a comfort in teaching students in the classroom and at home synchronously throughout the school year. In short order, everyone one of us became a rookie all over again.

Next year's students will be unlike any group we have had before with newly found skills that no group of students has ever had. They are returning to in-person schooling knowing that learning can happen differently and anywhere. In addition, these students should expect their schools to help fix the failures from the past year and retain the methods that worked. In the end, schools exist to give students what they need, and we all must be willing to do that again for another year knowing that many things have changed — and many things are going to have to. As our state's public and private PK-12 schools continue to support community growth, educational opportunities, and excellence for each child, we look forward with hope and anticipation to what the future holds. We just proved we can do anything, and we can change fast and deeply no matter what obstacles we face or have faced before!

RESOURCES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

Financial Considerations

As we continue to read about, review, and discuss the most effective ways of addressing student learning, it will be critical to dedicate thoughtful planning to how we can meet educational needs through the additional pandemic relief funding provided by the federal government. Our hopes are that the ideas below can be used to help inform our critical analysis of inequities that exist in our educational systems and that the additional funds will help us provide the best quality education in a setting that is conducive to innovative ideas and student learning.

The American Rescue Plan (ARP) specifies that a district receiving Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) III funds must, within 30 days of receiving the funds, make publicly available on its website a plan for the safe return to in-person instruction and continuity of services. As you continue to prepare for summer programs and the upcoming school year, please consider the following questions and notes:

- What are the challenges you need to overcome as a school district as you plan and prepare for Phase 5 during the 2021-22 school year? (Use your school/district improvement plan, or strategic plan, if one exists). Have you done a problem identification review process to determine where to target the additional ESSER or carryover Title funds for maximum results?
  - What data do you have available to identify which students are experiencing the most unfinished learning and in which areas?
  - Based on the data, what specific, evidence-based support will most benefit students?
  - What data will the district collect to ascertain the impact of the support on student learning recovery?
- Have you done an after-action review with your leadership team to reflect on what innovation looked like for your district during the 2020-21 school year and what it may look like in the future?
- What are the one to three takeaways that you want to highlight to move your district forward?
- Have you aligned your plan to your school improvement plan?
- How can the P-20 Resource Renewal Guide provide you with additional strategies to support teachers and students?
- Start by building your narratives as you move into your plan for full in-person instruction. This is your own local context, and it is time to tell your story. Innovation is defined by what works for your unique school district and can look different from rural communities to suburban and urban areas, but we can learn and grow together.

Some districts are building the foundation for innovation while others are expanding their innovative practices and sharing with others in the field. We must learn and grow together across our 852 school districts.

Using your ESSER stimulus funds - blending and braiding

- Layer and braid ESSER I, II, and III funds and remember that the law requires school districts to dedicate 20% of our largest allocation to date (ESSER III) "to address learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions, such as summer learning or summer enrichment, extended day, comprehensive after-school programs, or extended school year programs, and ensure that such interventions respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on underrepresented student subgroups."
  - "Braiding" refers to coordinating funds so that they work toward the same purpose but also retain their distinct identity in your accounting system.
- All other revenue sources, such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Title funds, and Evidence-Based Funding (EBF), can and should be considered when determining how your finances align with your plan for a safe return to fully in-person instruction. These funds can also be braided with the ESSER funds.
- Will any specific spending allocation under consideration benefit a broad group of students or for a specific group of students?
  - If the latter, does this specific group overlap with a student group identified by another federal grant program?
  - If so, consider first using Title funds, IDEA funds, or EBF dollars designated for specific student groups to cover all or part of the expenditure. Generally, districts are encouraged to first consider funding sources limited to certain types of expenditures. ESSER I and II funds have broad application and may be most useful where more restricted funds cannot be applied to support student needs.
- Consider the one-time nature of ESSER funds when planning spending allocations. Staff investments example: New hires and across-the-board salary adjustments are typically difficult to support with one-time funds. Stipends, hazard pay, and one-time bonuses may accomplish similar goals in a more sustainable way. For more information, please see Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University.

Evaluate different options for spending by comparing per-pupil numbers

- Total dollar amounts can be overwhelming and hide the impact on students. Breaking down any expenditure into its per-pupil impact can highlight the scale of the investment for the students in question.
- For example, all these investments are estimated (using national numbers) to cost $1,000 per pupil. Which might make the most impactful difference in your district? (Source: Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University)

- Pay for four months of COVID-19 testing (if testing all students and staff twice per week).
- Reduce class size by two students for all students for two years.
- Add a month of school for all students.
- Fund two years of high dosage tutoring for half of the student body.
- Note that these suggestions are offered solely as a thought exercise on relative costs and impact. They are not assumed to be necessarily appropriate for your district's specific circumstances.

Questions when considering long-term impact of financial decisions (budgetary shortfalls)

- Consider what staffing positions or programs may be in jeopardy if a budget shortfall occurs after FY 2024.
- ESSER funds can be used to fill budget shortfalls related to additional costs from the pandemic or to maintain current staffing levels that may have been reduced because of lack of additional EBF tier funding.

Regulation awareness: Plan now for audits later

- All ESSER funds must be spent on preventing, preparing for, or responding to COVID-19.
- ESSER does not contain the requirement of supplement, not supplant.
- The ESSER grants can be spent on the same activities, projects, etc.
- ESSER contains a Maintenance of Effort requirement, in that there must be an assurance to maintain a certain level of spending on education. In addition to state Maintenance of Effort provisions we are all familiar with, the ARP includes Maintenance of Equity provisions that apply both at the state and Local Education Agency levels. Superintendents need to be familiar with these and spend resources in a manner that complies with Maintenance of Equity provisions. The U.S. Department of Education will provide further information on Maintenance of Equity.

The following are ideas and options that Illinois superintendents are considering.

High-quality instructional materials and interventions

- What systems are currently in place to measure student growth over time?
- Is your curriculum (the Core or Tier 1) aligned across grade levels and within grade levels and departments?
- What interventions and/or wrap-around services are in place or needed for your students?
- What other instructional materials will enhance the current interventions in place? This can include increasing aligned instructional time (Saturdays, summer, before/after

school). Salaries, benefits, purchase services, etc. can be budgeted for your financial planning.

Construction, renovation, or acquisition of real property

- Evaluate current facility needs. Consider using funds for new construction, renovations, or the acquisition of property that will aid in cleaning, sanitation, air quality, and social distancing to prepare, prevent, and respond to COVID-19. Examples include the following: Remove carpet and replace with tile or epoxy, classroom additions, new building, HVAC renovations, outdoor seating, bathroom renovations, cafeteria renovations, etc.
- Factor in the cost of maintenance when determining facility or property investments. The upfront cost may be paid for with one-time funds, but how will ongoing maintenance be funded? For example, one alternative to taking on new property would be signing a short-term lease with a community organization.

Close the digital divide and gaps in connectivity

- Even if we return to in-person instruction, supporting home access to devices and connectivity to support learning can remain a priority so that achievement gaps do not continue to widen.
- Assess connectivity and device limitations of families throughout your district. FCC Emergency Broadband Benefit Program can assist families with up to $50/month for broadband internet access costs.
- Determine cost-effective long-term solutions (one-time fee) based on your geographic location that will provide internet connectivity to students at home or school to complete homework, conduct research, communicate with teachers, etc.
- Consider E-rate allowable expenses in planning for future reimbursement purposes. Examples include Dark fiber; Government entity partners; Internet provider contract

Professional learning and development

- District leadership should consider all district staff care/social-emotional needs.
- Provide staff with the necessary professional development needed to support the key identified instructional strategies noted in this guidance document. Other considerations may include extended learning pay for instructional activities to support

student learning.
- Professional development is an allowable expense with the ESSER funds.

Transportation
- Provide transportation services to students for extended learning and intervention programs. Examples include summer school, English Learner (EL) programs, early start to the school year, etc.
- Purchase or implement contracts for new buses to provide additional routes to transport students and increase social distance.
- Note that ESSER funds utilized for expenditures that are allowable for state transportation reimbursement will have to be reported as offsetting revenue. Consider using ESSER funds for transportation costs for services that are not allowable for state reimbursement (e.g., summer school for students without Individualized Education Programs [IEPs]).

Health and welfare of families
- Provide support to schools that do not have adequate nursing staff.
- Make appropriate onsite diagnostic testing available for all staff and students in your district.
- Form community partnerships with health care providers.
- Provide the opportunity for telehealth for students who do not have access to health care.
- Buy software that can be used to alert school officials about students in crisis. Examples of such a software can be found at Safe2Help Illinois.
- Support schools in need of social services.

Family and community engagement programs
- What professional development do you need to support your families?
- Think about recruitment strategies that can increase the number of your volunteers.
- Do your parents need training in any non-instructional areas, such as personal strategies to reduce virus transmission or mental health for their children and self?

Instructional Considerations: Strategies for Learning Recovery and Instruction

The purpose of education is to provide students with the best possible opportunities to develop their cognitive skills. To do that, we must allow our staff to use their creativity and innovation to develop new and engaging opportunities. Many students have developed new skills while learning during the pandemic. Some of the learning involves life skills, such as developing resiliency, becoming caregivers to younger siblings, and growing up much quicker than expected. This is the adaptive challenge we face. What follows is a

set of questions and resources that can guide instructional leaders as they are planning initiatives to maximize student learning.

A Learning Focus: Where do we start?

- Looking at student data provides us the opportunity to give a laser-like focus to areas of instructional need.

What data/information about our students will be needed to assess learning needs?

- Determine what gaps exist based upon a combination of diagnostic or formative assessments and data sources.
- What interventions and support will be needed to support students?

What are the skills and competencies to be taught?

- Consolidate/prioritize/narrow standards for each grade level to define focused learning for students.
- Examples from the Peoria Public Schools: The professional Performance Standards version was influenced by the ISBE Priority Learning Standards and teacher input.
- Mid November Teacher Pacing Guide K-12
- 5th Grade Science Earth Systems Compact Teaching Plan
- 5th Grade Condensed Social Studies
- 2nd Semester Math Grades Condensed Standards
- 2nd Semester Literacy Condensed CCSS
- Branching Growth Professional Learning
- Institute Day Catalog

How can learning accelerate?

- Acceleration frameworks define a learning path for students, based on experiences during COVID-19, to recover learning gaps. Once a child's path is determined, an individualized learning plan along with support is developed.
- Example from Peoria Public Schools: Learning Recovery Plan

How can summer school provide more instruction?

- Summer school will provide students with instruction in reading and math intervention for an hour each. The interventions are based on research and will be delivered in small group settings.
- Districts need to decide what summer school will look like. Credit recovery is most important for high school students.
- Consider tailoring programming to align with parents' and students' work schedules.
- Provide high-impact tutoring for students who may need individualized attention.
- Enrichment provides students with the opportunity to develop cognitive skills by

playing chess, learning to play an instrument, or learning a foreign language.
- Example from Peoria Public Schools: Summer School Planning

How can we refine assessment practices?
- Use this opportunity to consider improvements to local assessment practices like those featured in Getting Assessment Right.

What skills were learned or enhanced during the pandemic?
- What positive takeaways are there for our students?
- Can we identify skills that were learned or enhanced (e.g., problem solving, flexibility, time management, organization, other "soft skills")?
- Were technology skills enhanced or learned?

What additional factors could be considered?
- Designate time for teachers to plan and prepare for instructional delivery.
- Support teachers through this work. What do they need?
- Enhance/support teacher efficacy, gaining greater understanding of the importance of teacher efficacy in this space and time.

Innovation

Learning is not defined as four walls and set times in a classroom, nor has it ever been. For Illinois to truly advance into the 21st century and evolve into a national leader, we must take this moment to think progressively and act boldly in applying learning science to the design frameworks of our schools. Learning occurs when students master knowledge and skills that allow them to perform increasingly complex tasks and solve increasingly complex problems — alone and in groups — with diminishing levels of support. Much of this learning occurs outside the classroom; in fact, to think that we can design learning based on the concept of "seat time" becomes a limiting factor itself.

In a connected world, our schools need to help students develop into powerful learners through evolved assessment practices within authentic learning environments that leverage student passions and interest to take advantage of what humans are naturally wired to do — solve problems. Today's employers are looking for young adults who can take instructions but work independently and develop and ask clarifying questions to increase their understanding; — and do these things with autonomy and within team structures. These learning skills can be practiced and natural curiosity can be nurtured in evolved schools that invest in pedagogy grounded in learning science. These designs emphasize flexibility and student progression based on individual proficiency in skills, exactly the type of natural learning that occurs when students learn to ride their bikes, read, or play the clarinet. Modern learning is supposed to develop student inquiry and agency through

designs that honor and promote student questions, voice, and input on how to construct and assess learning.

The following are suggestions on how you can allow innovation to occur in your districts. Although not exhaustive, these suggestions may help you envision how innovation may continue in your districts and schools.

Flexible use of time, space, and instruction

- **Allow schools to operate with flexibility around seat time.** Focus on evidence of student learning. We encourage the expansion of competency — or evidence-based education. Today's schools are designed for students to progress individually and as groups based on acquisition of knowledge and skills and the proficient demonstration of both. The world is our classroom now. Pick a topic — any topic. The odds are that multiple YouTube videos exist to help explain or demonstrate how to understand or do it. In today's world, our job in education must shift to that of helping students understand and evaluate information, as well as develop the skills to perform tasks, solve problems, and develop learning efficacy to become empowered and confident learners equipped to go into the world and succeed.
- **Reframe our concept of student success.** In a knowledge- and skill-based economy, we must measure what matters the most to our students, parents, and communities — that is how students are doing in the world once they leave our schools.
- **Reimagine school health offices/services.** Look for ways to reposition our school health offices to better reflect full-service or community-based schools where broader health programs assist students, staff, and the community in healthy lifestyles through a more proactive, response-based approach. Schools are part of the "bedrock" of our society and play a pivotal role in sustaining our economy. As a result of the pandemic, schools found themselves in need to be better equipped to ensure health is extended beyond the walls and into the respective community in which they serve. On-site testing can be part of the solution and a service to the community. It's certainly not the only answer and although it may not be a fit everywhere, this process is actionable, replicable, and scalable to fit any district. Schools can share some of the tremendous load that has been and continues to be placed on our health care system.
- **Identify, distill, replicate, and enhance what worked.** Schools across the state have gathered solid evidence yielded by promising practices from simultaneous remote and in-person learning models to flexible hybrid schedules for individual students to better meet their needs. An important part of innovation is being deliberate about finding what works and careful to avoid "throwing the baby out with the bath water." Challenging past practices will only enhance what is best for students and help meet their learning needs.
- **It is important to keep in mind that students can learn without grades, yet they**

cannot learn without formative assessment and feedback. Meaningful, differentiated grading and assessment practices encourage dialogue among practitioners and students in individual and collaborative settings. Grading and assessment are ongoing and related to student learning and growth. Flexibility and responsiveness to students' needs should be a priority.

Equity and inclusion

It is our responsibility to ensure equity for all students in providing high-quality access to all aspects of learning. The achievement gap will be closed when the equity gap is closed. Closing the gap is important work requiring system leadership to set a clear direction; ensure the engagement of all stakeholders; and establish clear and measurable goals, implementation plans, and expectations.

The following are examples that can demonstrate evidence of impact:

Attendance — All students should be identified and engaged with high-quality instruction. As such, the following are examples to assist in this endeavor:

- Truancy outreach counselors or student engagement officers can be hired to assist in identifying and locating students who are truant or absent.
- Community engagement liaisons can serve as part of a community school's network.
- Multi-tiered systems (e.g., Positive Intervention and Behavioral Supports, Response to Intervention) can be used to support student engagement.
  - Attendance
  - Academics
  - Behavior

Provide social-emotional learning — The following are examples to consider:

- Students
  - Developmentally appropriate SEL curriculum
  - Social workers and school psychologists
- Adults
  - Check-ins at the beginning of every meeting
  - Virtual relaxation sessions
  - Self-care – Educators need to care for themselves in order to care for others
- Mental Health and Addressing the Effects of Trauma
  - Partnerships with community agencies for free or low-cost support
  - Social workers in every school building
  - School psychologists
- Home Visits
  - Community connections and partnerships

- Safe spaces for learning

Parent education and engagement — It is imperative that we engage and train parents in ways that support their child to solidify the home-school connection. The following are examples to consider:

- Take advantage of students having devices and connectivity in their home to connect with parents. Parent engagement can increase with this new trend and schools should take advantage of the opportunity to see parents' faces virtually.
- Consider continuing to offer virtual opportunities for parents to connect with the school (parent teacher conferences, etc.). This can increase parent engagement and involvement in their child's education.
- Be intentional about offering consistent training opportunities for families to learn the basics of virtual platforms. Remember that not all families are tech savvy.
- Share the benefits and successes with teachers of maintaining consistent parent communication throughout the school year, not only when a student is failing but to also highlight student successes.
- Continue to seek feedback from parents on what is working well and what is not as schools' transition back to full in-person learning. Parent communication is the key to school community success.

RESOURCES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Engagement is imperative for all stakeholders to feel at ease and embark on the educational process. It is critical that school leaders seek out engagement opportunities and capitalize on them to establish and build upon relationships with students, staff members, and families. Strong, positive relationships will lead to students feeling comfortable in their school environment, allowing them to take the academic and social risks necessary for everyone involved in the process to excel.

Student Engagement Opportunities

Connecting with students will establish a solid foundation from which staff members at all levels can help students achieve their full potential.

Check and Connect Strategies

Assign a specific staff member to check and connect with the student as they return to in-person learning. Teachers, paraprofessionals, office staff, etc. can be used to make personal connections with students. Seeing a smiling face that will greet a student by name each day will begin the students' day on a positive note.

- Refine check-in, check-out procedures to help students transition to in-person learning. Many schools already have procedures in place for this, but they can be revised to meet the needs of students transitioning back to in-person learning or for those that are having a tough time with the transition process.
- Locate simple and quick check and connect resources to use with students. Here is a link to a YouTube video that offers advice on why it is important to check in and how to do it efficiently and successfully. It also includes examples of check-in strategies, such as One Word Strategy, Personal Stories, the Feelings Wheel, etc.

Advisory Period for Middle and High School

Provide an advisory period at a given time each day to give students a structured routine from which they can receive resources and support. Consider developing a calendar that will target specific areas of need for your grade levels and student population. For example, high school sessions could focus on SEL, college and career readiness, and/or SAT prep. Elementary sessions could be more tailored toward specific interventions, SEL, behavioral needs, etc. Regardless of grade level, schools may find it advantageous to tie these focused supports to their school improvement goals.

Morning Meetings for Elementary School

- Create a sense of community and belonging with morning meetings by providing them consistently to students. A daily morning meeting helps establish routine into

the student day, provides a positive experience first thing in the morning, and builds empathy and school culture.
- Consider staggering morning meetings when possible so school support personnel, such as social workers and counselors, are available.
- Assign staff creatively to make morning meeting groups smaller and more personal.
- Resource: Morning Meetings.

IEP/504/EL Plans IEP/504/EL Plans/504/EL Plans

- Review IEPs, 504 plans, EL plans, etc. to determine if the team needs to convene to develop extra accommodations or supports to be implemented during transitional periods.
- Incorporate remote learning considerations into plans that are newly created in the event of a future quarantine due to illness or close contact.

Summer Transition Programs

- View summer school from a different perspective. A transitional summer program takes a creative approach to what many envision summer school to look like. The purpose of a summer transition program is to provide students with a higher level of comfort as they return to school. Some students have been out of our buildings for over a year and will not be able to just pick up where they left off. Therefore, it is important to provide a transition back into the school environment.
- Build a sense of community with the summer transition program by carefully selecting topics of focus. This can be accomplished by reviewing or revisiting expectations (for the hallways, cafeteria, etc.), daily schedules, SEL activities, or STEM/enrichment activities that prepare students for learning to work collaboratively again.

'Traditional/Right of Passage' Activities

Reflect on past experiences and think creatively about what can be done to preserve some of the history of your school or district. The students in your school buildings have grown up watching older students and siblings participate in many very tried and true activities throughout the years. When the pandemic hit, those traditions and rite of passage activities were taken away in the blink of an eye. Take some time to reflect on your pre-pandemic building and make a list of activities that your students could not wait to participate in. What can you safely make happen? What can you slightly revise to give your students a sense of belonging to the history of a school that they love and want to represent? This may take some time, consideration, and teamwork but the payoff will be well worth it. Here are a few things to help kickstart your list:

- Homecoming activities
- Prom
- Elementary holiday parties

- Winter concerts
- Other traditions and annual activities your community has counted on in the past

Celebrate!
Help students connect with one another by finding things to celebrate about each other at the school level and in the classroom. A positive outlook goes a long way in helping students feel engaged and connected to their peers and school staff members. A few examples include:

- A Random Acts of Kindness Day — Challenge students and staff to do a random act of kindness for anyone in the school. (Resource: 100 Simple RAK for Kids)
- Collect Compliments — Ask teachers to keep tally marks displayed in the classroom when they observe students complimenting each other.

Staff Engagement Opportunities

Even before the pandemic, building leaders were aware that their teachers and staff members grow tired as the year progresses. The stress and extra duties that were put on those that work in the school setting were unprecedented and have taken their toll. Administrators must look for opportunities to lift up, encourage, and support our staff members. They are a direct link to our students. Engaged and recharged staff members will lead to higher levels of student engagement and achievement.

Core practices

- Revisit and reflect on the core practices that allow building leaders to be excellent administrators.
- Visibility: Teachers need to see you in their hallways and classrooms interacting with students, allowing you to have a positive impact on the culture of the building.
- Availability: Make time in your day for teachers to pop in or schedule an appointment to express concerns or ask questions. Teachers need to be seen and heard to feel valued.
- Engage in Conversations: Check in informally with staff members to build strong relationships.

Listen
Gather input from all staff members through conversations or use listening circles with a focus topic or questions about a concept/issue. However, make note that the follow-up is a critical piece of this process. It is not enough to just lend an ear. Do something visible with the information/data by making a change or acknowledging the issues/concerns brought to your attention.

Provide a coach
Consider hiring someone outside of your organization to listen to staff members and help

you take stock of what is working and what is not. Sometimes an outside ear can be more powerful than we anticipate.

Provide opportunities for FUN
Establish a climate committee that will build some fun and appreciation into the school year. The climate and culture of a building can make it thrive or flounder. Be proactive. (Resource: Ideas To Build Positive Climate)

Consistent communication
Keep staff members up to date with as much information as possible. Providing clear concise information on a regular basis will ease the anxiety of the unknown. The district should develop a plan to disperse building information to staff at a specific date/time and districtwide communication to the community at a certain date/time each week. Informing staff members of critical information prior to the community will help establish an understanding of respect and value for employees of the district.

'Grow your own' professional development
Develop training sessions in which teachers/staff teach each other in identified teams. This will promote interaction and engagement as they collaborate to plan, create, and teach their colleagues. Consider doing this non-virtually, when possible.

Staff book studies
Select a book that all staff members can relate to. There are several books that speak directly about raising engagement levels.

- *Teach Like a Pirate: Increase Student Engagement, Boost Your Creativity, and Transform Your Life as an Educator* — Dave Burgess encourages teachers to stretch themselves beyond their comfort levels and challenges them to create classrooms that are "an amazing… unique place filled with outrageously engaging content and activities." Written for teachers of all subjects and at all grade levels, this book explains how you can generate a new passion for teaching and discover new depths of creativity, to produce lesson plans that captivate and "hook" your students.
- *What Great Teachers Do Differently: 17 Things That Matter the Most* — You will find pearls of wisdom, heartfelt advice, and inspiration from one of the nation's leading

authorities on staff motivation, teacher leadership, and principal effectiveness. With wit and understanding, Todd Whitaker describes the beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and interactions of great teachers and explains what they do differently.
- *Recharge with Gratitude* — Success is a tribute that life pays to excellence. Success based on this value of grace leads to harmony and true happiness.

Family Engagement Opportunities

Families share their most precious assets with us, their children. We cannot leave them out as a piece of the engagement puzzle. School leaders must find ways to target, reach, and connect with families as we transition into the next phase of the pandemic and the new school year.

Increasing Parent Participation

- Helping students succeed is a team effort. By allowing or continuing to allow families to attend meetings/events virtually, we are removing barriers that previously existed if a parent/guardian was unable to travel to the school.
- Provide online options for attending conferences, parent-teacher association or advisory council meetings, college fairs, student performances, etc. for those who cannot attend in person.

Family Night Events for Celebrations

- Prioritize these events and work to highlight and promote them throughout your community to increase attendance and participation.
- Include activities such as a book fair, awards night, family reading night, STEAM project exhibit, science fair, etc.

Connect Families Within the District

- Find ways for families to support and interact with other families. Providing this network can serve as a resource for those that have not engaged with the school community in the past or are new to the district.
- Accomplish this through avenues such as a parent Facebook page, community partnerships with libraries/park districts, PTO, booster clubs, and resource fairs (for family support and networking). One idea is to have parents who are engaged mentor/partner with parents who are not. Pair them up at the beginning of 2021-22 school year. Start with as many pairs as possible. The "parent buddies" can meet prior to or after a PTO meeting.

Hire a Family Engagement Advocate(s)/Cultural Liaison(s)

- A staff member who serves as a liaison between the school district and families could provide support that has been nonexistent in the past. The goal of this position would

be to bridge the gap between school and home while strengthening partnerships with families and bringing voice to the needs of the various cultures within one's community.
- A family engagement advocate who makes home visits could provide at-home tech support and help connect families to resources they might not be aware of that are available through the school district.

Connect with Technology.
- Tell the story of your school on your own terms while harnessing the very power of the stories of your students and their successes in your school. Creatively tell stories by highlighting faculty, staff, and students in a monthly video montage on your YouTube channel or in newsletters, Tweets, and Facebook posts.
- Include posts for weekly/daily announcements and livestream in-person events or meetings when possible, such as concerts or sporting events, and post recordings of town hall or Board of Education meetings for later viewing.
- Determine a family's preference for communication and transmit that information in the desired format, rather than overwhelming parents with multiple communications of the same message.

Focus on Reciprocal Communication
- Create thought exchanges that allow individuals to work collaboratively and share ideas on important topics and issues. (Possible Resource: Thought Exchange Process)
- Utilize short surveys and share the aggregate feedback.
- Use a general principal email address specifically for questions/concerns. Create an email address (e.g., principal@myschool.com). One person in the district is responsible for maintaining the address. He/she can forward the email to the proper person to answer within a certain time period established by the district. This will eliminate any one person from being overwhelmed and provide quicker response time to families.

The return to in-person learning will undoubtedly provide ample opportunities to renew engagement with all community members, but some schools and leaders may also face challenges. Here are a few ways to be proactive in planning for engagement challenges.

Students

What can be done to help students recall and retain the knowledge they had of rules and expectations prior to the pandemic?
- Promote healthy habits and correct unhealthy habits that may have formed during remote learning.
- Create multiple opportunities to collaborate with peers. Many students did not have the opportunity to collaborate or participate in discussion frequently during remote learning.

- Continue to support technology with what is needed for students in case of a quarantine absence.

Staff

- How do we unify staff members after they have been working independently during remote learning?
- Take advantage of opportunities to bring staff together when it is safe. Staff have been isolated during the pandemic; provide as many opportunities as possible to collaborate and socialize with peers in person.
- Get staff on the same page for where students are and where they need to be with learning and with SEL, executive functioning, and behavior expectations.

Families

How do schools promote the benefits of in-person learning?

- Student engagement
- Too much screen time can be harmful
- Socialization
- Hands-on activities
- Individualized attention
- Controlled learning environment
- Teachers and students can take breaks
- Access to resources other than online
- Provides necessary routines
- Sense of belonging/community
- Continue partnerships with parents to encourage communication with the school and teachers. Maintain a level of communication practice utilized during the pandemic and make it applicable to in-person learning.

RESOURCES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Instructional Planning

Key Planning Reminders

- Always begin with the end in mind. Backward Design can help shape the scope of a unit to keep students moving toward a targeted skill.
- Maximize instructional time by breaking large concepts into mini lessons.
- Focus on the opportunities of cross-curricular skills to reinforce learning in multiple subject areas. Assignments and projects that connect to the real world (critical, creative, innovative thinking) help students deepen their connections to learning.
- Remember you are not alone. Engage with colleagues and continue to leverage global connections created during virtual learning to inform and enhance your plans and practice.

Relationship Building and Integrating Social-Emotional Learning

Having a good rapport with students is critical to their success in the classroom. Teachers can build rapport with students by learning more about student interests and needs, which can then serve as the basis for lessons. When planning instructions, teachers should consider the following questions:

How can I build trust with my students?

- Teachers are models for students. When teachers are open and show vulnerability, students will feel more comfortable opening and sharing as well. Ensuring consistency in classroom structure and following-through on the tasks can help students develop trust in the classroom.

How do I get to know my students?

- Academically — To become more aware of students' academic levels, teachers can utilize formative checks for understanding, consult students' previous teachers, and examine assessment scores on universal screeners or the Illinois Assessment of Readiness.
- Personally — To develop an understanding of students on a personal level, teachers can utilize surveys, inventories, questionnaires, and engage in individual discussions with students. Reaching out to students' previous teachers and support personnel (such as counselors, social workers, administrators) can also help teachers better understand a student's experiences.
- Socially — Surveys, inventories, and general observations are also useful in helping teachers develop an understanding of students' social interactions. Sample Survey

Creating a positive classroom environment develops a safe space for students to learn. Considering the following questions can help teachers develop a positive classroom environment:

How do I help students feel safe?

- Establish and follow routines.
- Set clear expectations and provide regular reminders and positive reinforcement. Provide opportunities for students to share experiences and concerns in a variety of ways and settings.

How do I help students feel supported?

- Identify resources for support within the building and the community.
- Listen to student concerns and connect students with school/community support when possible.

Students and teachers have experienced a wide range of emotions in the past year. Understanding students' prior experiences is critical in planning instruction. Teachers need to be aware of students' prior knowledge, their prior learning experiences, and traumas that may be impacting them. Instructional planning that considers this need can be facilitated by asking these questions:

How do I help students identify and navigate emotions?

- Use an SEL resource or curriculum to explicitly teach students how to identify and navigate emotions.
- Guide students toward school resources, such as social workers.
- Model emotional awareness.

What emotions are students feeling?

- Familiarize yourself with the range of emotions that students might be experiencing.
- Develop a check-in system with students so they can share their emotions.
- Incorporate regular opportunities for students to reflect during learning.

How do I help students reacclimate to school?

- Regularly reminds students of behavior expectations.
- Model positive interactions with others.
- Provide time and space for students to become comfortable in the environment.
- Anticipate student anxieties and respond with patience.
- Seek out additional support, as necessary.

SEL Curriculum Resources:

- CASEL Competencies-Helping students to become more aware of their emotions
- Ruler
- Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Solutions at AIR
- D181 Social-Emotional and Special Needs

Meeting the Needs of All Learners

In planning for instruction, teachers must consider the strengths and unique needs of all learners, including multilingual learners and students with IEPs or 504 plans.
As teachers prepare lessons, it can be helpful to ask the following questions to assist in determining student needs:

How do I assess students' academic needs?

- Utilize quick checks for understanding.
- Incorporate assessment as a learning activity rather than a stand-alone use of time.
- Design performance-based assessments, journal prompts, etc.
- Communicate with previous teachers to develop an understanding of the material that was covered in the previous year.

What are the critical concepts students need in order to move forward?

- Begin by reviewing the ISBE Priority Standards.
- Look for subject matter and content areas that overlap. For instance, is there a science standard that incorporates or reinforces a language arts or math standard?

How can I support students with IEPs?

- Review modifications and accommodation with an eye on how they will function best in your classroom to meet the needs of the student.
- Adjust the classroom layout based on this review.
- Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of your implementation of the accommodation.
- Collaborate with special education teachers and support staff.

What are the needs of my multilingual learners?

- Adapt the curriculum to meet the language needs of the learner.
- Ensure that structured academic support is available to the learner.
- Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of lessons.
- Collaborate with the English as a second language coordinator.

Engaging with Parents and the Community

It is also essential in providing the collaborative environment necessary to understand and develop students' assets. Some questions to consider are:

What information and support can I provide to families about the goals and climate of our classroom?

- Clear and early communication is essential.
- Ensure that communication is accessible in families' home languages. WIDA (World Class Instructional Design and Assessment) — ABCs of Family Engagement
- Adapt communication styles and methods to address multiple schedules and formats accessible to families.
- Provide families with links to community resources.
- Here is an example: D181 Parent & Teacher Resources.

How can I partner with families to develop engaging lessons?

- Reach out to families to understand their concerns and goals for their child's education.
- Ask families for feedback regarding learning experiences.
- Develop lessons that reflect students' backgrounds and interests.

Planning for Absences

It is a possibility that students may experience absences during the next school year that last for several days. To help plan instruction for these students, it may be helpful to ask:

What does the student absolutely need to know to show to demonstrate proficiency in the content?

- Review the priority standards and determine the most critical aspect of the standards for the student to know.
- Provide flexibility in how the student demonstrates concept proficiency.

What curricular materials (books, digital devices, laboratory equipment, etc.) are available to the students outside of the school environment?

- Ensure that students have access to all the required materials necessary for success. Modify expectations if the materials are not available to the student.
- Consider providing information in multiple ways — digitally and hard copy.

What learning techniques were most effective for students during previous remote instruction?

- Ask the student and family which strategies were effective in previous remote learning.
- If possible, speak with the student's previous teachers to identify effective means of remote instruction.

Instructional Delivery

Responsive Instruction that Develops Endurance

The return to in-person instruction may prove to be challenging for students who have become accustomed to remote learning. Some ways to deliver instructions that develop endurance for in-person learning are:

- Use shorter assignments.
  - Assign exit tickets for students to demonstrate learning at the end of a lesson.
  - Add project checkpoints to help students conceptualize a large assignment.
  - Design "mini conference" days to meet in small groups related to a needed skill.
  - Embed formative assessments into the flow of a student's week.

- Refine the way you deliver feedback so that it is more frequent, individualized, and motivating. Consider setting short appointments with students to touch base on their learning progress and address supports or changes they may need as the unit continues. Read How Improving Student Feedback and Teaching Data Science Restored Our Classroom Culture for more ideas.

One of the benefits of the in-person classroom is the communal energy students receive as they are surrounded by peers in learning and teachers who foster a consistent focus on exploration, curiosity, and work ethic. This past year, many students were unable to enjoy the structures that have encouraged their agency in the past. In turn, placing a renewed focus in 2021-22 on direct instruction in the areas of (a) growth mindset, (b) time management, and (c) organizational skills will benefit students as they reacclimate to the in-person school environment.

Differentiation

Students were learning in new and different ways throughout the pandemic, so they may return to classrooms with even more divergent and unique needs than they had previously. Below are some suggestions for how teachers can build differentiation into their everyday instructional delivery.

- Empathize with students who have achievement gaps that may require more differentiation than typical. Assess where students are and adjust methods for students to achieve age-appropriate goals.
- Highlight growth instead of grades.
  - Have students reflect on their growth during a unit using something like this sample student checklist.
  - Have students create portfolios or use artifacts to demonstrate summative growth.
- Use a flexible pacing approach by creating common goals that all students can access

while offering learning activities that fluctuate along a learning continuum. See Flexible Pacing: Running The Same Race to learn more.

- Offer inquiry-based learning that encourages students to think critically, collaborate, communicate effectively, and learn creatively. Here are some templates and resources:
  - Sample inquiry-based playlist
  - Sample Depth of Knowledge-based playlist
  - "Hacking Project-Based Learning"
  - Inquiry Based Learning
- Here is a menu of additional differentiation options to consider: Basic Differentiation Strategies.

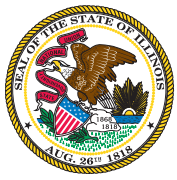
Encourage Student Collaboration

In-person learning provides renewed opportunities to use student collaboration to drive increased learning. Below are some ways teachers can support student collaboration during instruction.

- Encourage project-based learning in which students are assigned roles instead of tasks. When students work together to establish outcomes, motivation increases to find results and develop a greater understanding of the concept. (Group Contracts in Project Based Learning)
- Offer multiple avenues for students to discuss key concepts in pairs and small groups. Live conversation is incredibly important for the expansion of ideas and piquing curiosity.
  - Create ways for students to communicate that do not have to be verbal. For example, students answer a "question of the day" as they walk into the classroom, raise a colored index card, or make hand gestures to show how they feel/think. This allows all students to participate in a way that is comfortable.
  - Design ways for students to share their ideas and advance their learning beyond the classroom to peers outside their classroom, to their community, and on a global level.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- How the pandemic is reshaping education
- Education solutions: A positive legacy of pandemic remote learning
- Getting Clearer: Schooling Loss, Not Learning Loss
- Education in focus | Hub
- Schools and the Path to Zero
- D181 Learning and Competencies
- D181 Remote Learning Standards
- D181 In-Person Learning Standards
- Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards for all Illinois Educators



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