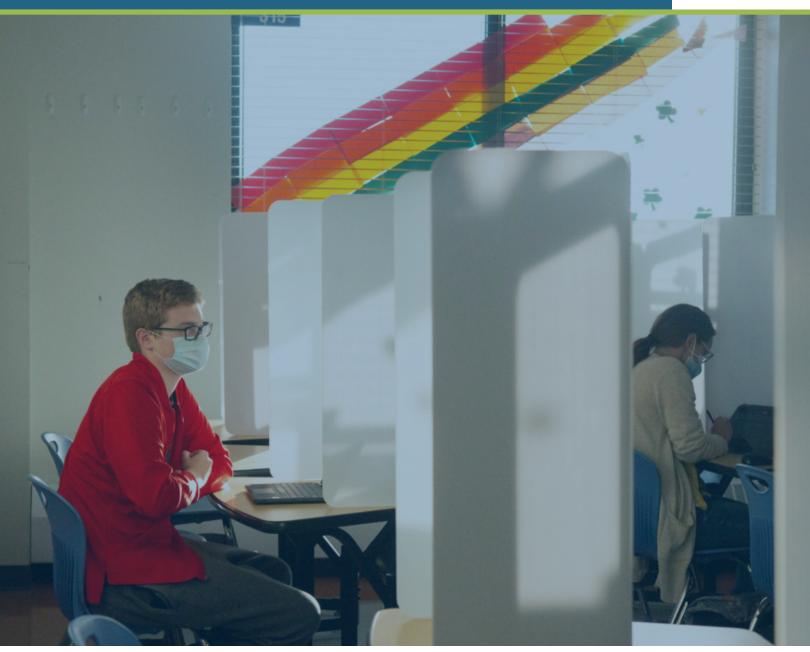# How Six School Systems are Responding to Disrupted Schooling:
Will It Be Enough?

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AMERICAN SCHOOL DISTRICT PANEL

CRPE
REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Cover Image Courtesy of Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action

Overview

More than a year has passed since American schools were abruptly closed to halt the spread of COVID-19. Many children have been out of regular school for most, or even all, of that time. Some have been learning online with help from teachers and parents. But many students have struggled to stay interested and engaged in school. "I think the biggest hardship with learning from home," a student wrote in response to a YouthTruth survey last fall, "is that I find myself with absolutely no desire to work … it's hard to pay attention, hard to focus, hard to care."[1]

As schools continue to reopen, students will likely return to in-person learning with a wide range of readiness to engage with grade-level content. That's nothing new, but the gaps may be worse than before the pandemic. Some students may have attended school sporadically and missed learning. Others may have suffered as a result of evolving, and sometimes disordered, instructional priorities during remote learning. The consequences for student learning are worrying teachers and parents. In a recent survey, 68 percent of parents said they were concerned about their children falling behind this year. All of this is happening on top of existing inequities, which have deepened and accelerated in many places during the pandemic.

This report examines how six school systems tried to address the academic consequences of disrupted learning in the 2020–2021 school year. This report is part of the American School District Panel (ASDP), a joint project between the Center on Reinventing Public Education, the RAND Corporation, Chiefs for Change, the Council of Great City Schools, and Kitamba, an education consulting firm. The ASDP's primary work is conducting a series of nationally-representative surveys of school districts. In this report, we complement our survey research with in-depth interviews of leaders on the ground in six school systems. Our goal was to learn how these system leaders approached and managed student learning during this difficult year and to gauge what it means for the future.

Our focus for this study builds on the ASDP's previous research. When we surveyed the nation's superintendents in fall 2020, they responded that "addressing disparities in students' opportunities to learn" was their top concern.[2] At the time, many systems were still figuring out how to deliver instruction remotely and game-planning for a range of return-to-school scenarios. As the school year and pandemic continued to unfold, what new instructional problems and solutions did school systems encounter as they tried to address the consequences of disrupted learning?

To begin to answer this question, we conducted the interviews with the ASDP school system leaders in the winter of 2020. Four of the systems were traditional public school districts and two were public charter management organizations (See inset, *What We Did*).

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1 YouthTruth, *Students Weigh In, Part II: Learning & Well-Being During COVID-19* (San Francisco, CA: YouthTruth, 2020): 27.
2 Superintendents identified "addressing disparities in student learning" as their top concern from a list of eight concerns that also included: dealing with state accountability requirements, providing supplemental supports for instruction (e.g., tutoring), ensuring students' and teachers' access to the internet, ensuring students' and teachers' access to devices, calculating accurate attendance for funding purposes, addressing seat-time requirements, and providing subsidized meals to students.

What We Did

This study is part of the American School District Panel (ASDP), a nationally representative panel of school district and charter management organization leaders. The ASDP is a partnership between the RAND Corporation, the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell, Chiefs for Change, the Council of Great City Schools, and Kitamba, an education consulting firm.

The ASDP's main activity is a series of nationally-representative surveys of school districts. In this study, we complement our survey research with 29 semi-structured interviews with central leaders in six ASDP systems between December 2020 and March 2021 (in two systems, we also interviewed a school principal). All six systems were fully remote in the winter of 2020 when we conducted the majority of our interviews. The six systems—two charter management organizations and four traditional public districts— spanned six states (two in the East, one in the West, one in the Midwest, and two in the South).

We interviewed between three and six leaders in each system. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and focused on instruction and learning. We asked leaders how pandemic-related disruptions were affecting student learning, what the system was doing to support student learning (including strategies, resources, and implementation), and how different stakeholders viewed the year's challenges and solutions. Our goal was to learn more about how the systems were approaching and managing this challenging year and to understand their expectations for the year to come. We recorded and transcribed all interviews and analyzed them with a combination of memos (in which we recorded hunches, hypotheses, and observations), thematic coding and categorizing, and team discussions.

Compared to the overall ASDP sample, these six systems were larger, more urban, and served more students from low-income households and more students of color. Still, the systems included a range in size (from 5,000 to almost 40,000 students), demographic characteristics, and social and economic circumstances. While their experiences can't be generalized, they nevertheless offer a rich and varied picture of how district leaders are grappling with the year's disruptions and challenges.

Key Findings

Across the board, the leaders we spoke with in the winter of 2020 reported that students were falling behind academically during the pandemic. In response, all the systems were focused on teaching essential grade-level standards to all students. Some were better positioned than others to do this. But it's unclear whether in even the most prepared districts improving instruction alone will be enough to meet the needs of the moment given the uncertain scope of the pandemic's impact and longer-standing challenges in public education. We found:

When it came to instruction, the school systems favored "acceleration" over remediation.

» Rather than diverting struggling students to remedial tracks, most systems chose to prioritize teaching grade-level content and skills coupled with student-specific diagnostic assessments and targeted instruction to close critical learning gaps —an approach some called "acceleration." In other words, instead of forcing students to play catch-up with the content they missed, the systems opted to forge ahead with a subset of essential, grade-appropriate goals and address gaps along the way.

School systems that had coherent instructional systems in place before the pandemic had an easier time delivering grade-level content.

» Leaders who described having coherent instructional systems in place before the pandemic (e.g., standards-aligned core curricula, assessments aligned to curricula, and shared instructional expectations) were confident in their system's ability to implement an accelerated strategy focused on grade-level content.

» A majority of the districts had less developed or more fragmented instructional systems, however. Leaders of larger systems of this kind were less confident of their system's capacity to execute an "accelerated" strategy. They faced the daunting task of developing a shared instructional vision and adopting new curricula while tackling the urgent demands of the pandemic.

In some cases, improving instruction alone may not be enough. Two of the systems that faced deeper inequity and performance challenges before the pandemic were considering more fundamental shifts.

» Faced with deep opportunity deficits that existed before the pandemic, leaders of two of the six systems worried that an accelerated approach would not be enough to engage all students. These leaders were considering more fundamental changes for the coming year, including new teacher roles and training, different uses of instructional time, length of school days and years, and involvement of community partners and independent providers. Some of these ideas (e.g., competency-based progressions that allow students to move at their own pace) were in tension with the emphasis on grade-level work associated with "acceleration."

The six systems we studied were working hard to slow the compounding effects of this difficult year. But many questions are unsettled. When we conducted our interviews, the six systems were still trying out new instructional approaches and problem-solving. The American Rescue Plan funding had yet to be announced. In the coming months, system priorities and strategies will undoubtedly continue to evolve in light of the amounts of learning that must be made up, the depth and variety of students' social and emotional needs, adult skills and cooperation, and new funding decisions. When it comes to student learning, the pandemic's bill has not fully come due and reality-testing looms. As one leader said, "We really don't yet know what's happened beneath the waterline" for students this year.

> **"We really don't yet know what's happened beneath the waterline" for students this year.**
>
> **– *School System Leader***

In Brief

» Education leaders across the nation are worried that students were falling behind academically during the pandemic. We interviewed top leaders in six school systems to learn more about how they were responding to the problem.

» We found that most of the systems focused on teaching essential grade-level standards to all students, rather than remediation. But some leaders, concerned that improving instruction alone might not meet the needs of the moment, were considering bolder changes in how they organize school and serve students.

» What happens next will depend not only on district actions but on the nature and depth of students' academic and social needs, which will only become clear over time.

Gauging the Pandemic's Impact on Students

All six systems used well-known assessments (e.g., NWEA, Fountas & Pinnell, i-Ready, etc.) to evaluate student learning during the pandemic.

All systems reported levels of learning in the fall and winter of 2020 that fell below expectations from prior years. But the size of the gaps and results in different academic subjects varied. In some places, student learning was "pretty spot-on for what NWEA predicted over the summer," noted one chief academic officer, referring to predictions that students would fall behind more in math than in reading.

But another system found students scored around 10 percentage points lower in both math and reading compared to the prior year. Elsewhere, a superintendent told us that a curriculum-aligned reading assessment (IRLA) suggested "the average reading level for our 8th graders is 4th grade. . . . We've got about 93 percent of students that are emergency or at risk when it comes to literacy." How much of that last result was attributable to the pandemic wasn't clear. Still, the general consensus across systems was that students were behind where they would normally be before the pandemic—a perspective that reflects our broader survey research. In a recent survey of ASDP district leaders nationwide, for example, 80 percent reported their students were behind in math in the fall of 2020 relative to the fall of 2019, and 77 percent reported students were behind in reading.

Reflecting on the consequences of this extraordinarily disruptive year, leaders were concerned about student groups across the K–12 continuum. Some leaders wondered if kindergarteners who had "spent an extra year in the wild" would be prepared for the start of school in fall 2021. Others were most concerned for high school students who appeared most at-risk for becoming disengaged. One district leader acknowledged that "there are some kids who, as far as we know, they're completely getting no education [because they are not attending school]." Students with disabilities were another population that kept leaders up at night. Children with dyslexia or other reading disabilities "need that tangible, hands-on program, which has really been challenging for us to replicate [online]," one leader said.

Like school systems across the country, the six systems we studied face complex problems without simple solutions. Explaining the decision to avoid remediation, one chief academic officer argued, "If you're in 3rd grade, you should learn 3rd grade." Otherwise, students will never have a chance to get back on grade level. However, systems leaders in communities with some of the steepest challenges believed that standards-based, grade-level instruction, however effectively it is delivered, might not be enough to address problems the pandemic exacerbated but didn't create.

A Deeper Look at What We Found

When It Came to Instruction, School Systems Favored "Acceleration" Over Remediation

Faced with the need to address learning disrupted by the pandemic, leaders in all the systems were tightening instructional expectations systemwide, rather than letting individual teachers and schools decide what to teach during the pandemic. This focus echoes prior calls for coherence in public education. But the demands of the pandemic gave it a special urgency and character.

> **All six systems set districtwide expectations that students would work on grade-level content instead of playing catch-up with the content they missed.**

All six systems set districtwide expectations that students would work on grade-level content instead of playing catch-up with the content they missed. Rather than expecting teachers to cover the full gamut of grade-level state standards, systems focused on a reduced set of essential knowledge and skills. Rather than push remediation or hold students back on missed material, they used formative assessments to measure student learning gaps relative to their grade-level work and concentrated on helping students fill in those gaps.

By applying this three-pronged approach of essential grade-level standards, diagnostic assessments, and targeted interventions, systems hoped to mitigate the year's disruptions. In reality, our interviews suggest that this approach played out in different ways and to different degrees across the six systems. More often than not, the system-level capacities and resources the approach required were still in development or in short supply.

Focusing Teachers on High-Priority Standards within Subjects

Although broader debates about standards-based reform were largely on hold during the pandemic, systems leaders understood that less time with students meant teachers needed a more tightly-focused set of learning standards. In all but one system, leaders reviewed state and local standards and identified a subset of essential goals for teaching and learning.

Systems needed to narrow learning progressions and standards to "get the noise out of the way," said one chief academic officer (CAO). Standards required for future learning took precedence. One elementary principal explained:

> *Rounding [numbers] isn't a power standard [in 3rd grade], but that's what they traditionally had a lot of in the first units. We can't spend all this time on rounding if we're going to get to [multiplication and division].*

These leaders' desire to "get the noise out'' recognized a stark reality: teachers and students, especially in remote settings, had less time to learn this year than last. Nationwide, 38 percent of partial or fully remote districts shortened the school day; and one in four systems reported

reducing instructional minutes. With less instructional time, districts had to decide what to keep and what to drop. The question wasn't if teachers would prioritize—it was how and using what criteria. A district administrator said:

> *Teachers are the ultimate prioritizers, simply by deciding, 'I'm not going to teach this.' So if we [the district] didn't do it systematically, they were going to do it anyway and then [instruction would] be sporadic and all over the place.*

Sometimes, districts turned to external organizations, like TNTP and Achieve the CORE, for guidance on what to prioritize. In other systems, internal teams of teachers and central office staff decided where to focus.

Although everyone recognized the need to focus instruction on top-priority learning goals, some leaders made clear that the less-is-more approach is a temporary fix. One district administrator admitted:

> *Pandemic aside, I am not a big fan of this idea of prioritization, or the idea that you can decide which standards not to teach. . . . But in the face of the pandemic, I have recognized the need to adjust the progressions to be able to emphasize some standards with additional time and deemphasize some standards.*

In one system, lingering concerns about state accountability made a less-is-more approach to standards seem risky. "Just in case [state testing happens], we have to hit [the standards]," a charter system leader said in the winter of 2020. Because she was worried about state accountability, her schools were "operating under the guise that we are teaching as much to the rubric and the standards on the test as possible." By contrast, leaders in the other five systems opted to focus on fewer targets and keep them at grade-level.

Supporting Ongoing Diagnostic Assessments

Assessing student learning during the pandemic has not been easy. In all the systems, testing was disrupted when students shifted to online learning last spring. This meant that many schools headed into the fall without up-to-date baseline assessments of student learning.

When school started again in the fall of 2020, urgent matters related to student attendance and COVID-related safety procedures delayed systemwide testing in several systems until later in the fall. In some places, leaders were tracking down students who never logged in or stopped attending their remote classes. By the beginning of 2021, most leaders conceded they were still working on assessing student learning.

These challenges aside, leaders emphasized the need for diagnostic information—the second prong of the systems' response—to help teachers identify where students were with their learning. They assumed students had missed some prerequisites for grade-level learning goals and needed to identify those gaps. As noted earlier (see inset, Gauging the Pandemic's Impact on Students), most relied on a range of well-known assessments, such as NWEA's MAP, i-Ready Assessments, Fountas and Pinnell reading assessments, and the Independent Reading Level Assessment.

One leader explained that it was critical to view the diagnostic results through the lens of the pared-down grade-level standards. Otherwise, the range of needs revealed by the assessments could be "overwhelming" for teachers, she said, adding that it's crucial to contextualize the results. "It's old school [i.e., basic practice]." She continued:

> [It's] … unpacking standards, knowing your prerequisites. Then you can see [from the i-Ready assessment], 'This student is having trouble back to [a specific skill].' . . . And now that I can see the learning progression for that standard, instead of me just saying they can't do it so we just need to do review, review, review, I can see: 'Oh, they're working on place value,' or 'They're working on fluency.'

Coaching teachers to have high expectations and embrace what students are able to do well was also a key part of making sense of diagnostic data and promoting grade-level instruction. Otherwise, said one principal, it's easy to "take those standards and find a way to reduce rigor in response to what you perceive as a student deficit."

Providing Targeted Supports for Students

In addition to adapting standards and using diagnostic assessments, the third prong of the systems' response was providing targeted instructional support to help individual student access to grade-level content. As 2020 came to a close, this was a work in progress. Most systems were still grappling with attendance, logistics, technology issues, and the pandemic's impact on communities and teachers.

Still, some systems were further along than others. In one of the more advanced schools, an elementary principal described how just-in-time teaching worked in her building (her example suggests what the approach looks like, but does not necessarily represent the types of teaching occuring in other schools in her district).

When children started school in the fall of 2020, this leader knew her students would be behind after disruptions last spring. Still, she insisted that teachers start with "some momentum around rigor and high-level content." She didn't want teachers "over-teaching content that students already know."

At the same time, she said students needed additional support in certain areas. For teachers, this meant having lessons "in their back pocket" to use with small groups needing just-in-time support. By differentiating instruction in small groups, the leader explained, teachers could avoid devoting "an entire week's worth of lessons to reviewing place value before we get to addition and subtraction."

Significantly, this school had assistance from extra staffing (student teachers and paraprofessionals) that allowed adults to work with multiple groups at once—a luxury not available everywhere. Educators could deliver different interventions to students who had been absent or were missing work, or tailor instruction for students working on different skills (e.g., equations and products or rows, columns, sets in mathematics). With fewer staff, such differentiated support could either fall on the classroom teacher or, perhaps, not be done at all.

In addition to extra staffing, this school used district planning protocols and resources to help teachers. One guide, for example, helped teachers follow a three-step planning process: (1) determine priority skills and concepts, (2) identify learning targets and success criteria, and (3) modify the curriculum by keeping, removing, or changing lessons and tasks.

Along with shifting instruction, some of the systems provided supports outside of the classroom. One system launched a series of in-person learning hubs to provide extra assistance for students with disabilities and those facing housing insecurity. Another used federal relief funds to pay teachers to tutor students in the evenings and before school. Another experimented with an app that provided 24/7 on-demand tutoring. Such experiments with tutoring reflect broader trends nationwide: according to our national survey collected in February 2021, over half (57 percent) of districts offered one-on-one or small-group tutoring in 2020–2021. In subsequent reports we'll track how these additional interventions are playing out and with what results.

School Systems That Had Coherent Instructional Systems in Place before the Pandemic Had an Easier Time Delivering Grade-Level Content

By combining grade-level standards, diagnostic assessments, and targeted interventions, school systems hoped to mitigate the year's disruptions "not by providing content faster, but by using instructional strategies that can help all students grapple with grade-appropriate content."[3]

But the relative difficulty of implementing these ideas depended on a host of enabling conditions. Those included everything from leadership and teacher capacity, to the degree of conflict between the district and its teachers union, to norms around school autonomy. Of the different moderating factors we observed, two stood out: the coherence of the system's instructional infrastructure and the culture of collaboration within its central office.

Systems with Shared Instructional Visions and Curricula Managed Better

"It sounds crazy to say it in 2021," a CAO reflected. "But the return to teaching standards was critical. Had we not done that prior to the pandemic, we would have been in way worse shape."

Systems had an easier time ensuring access to grade-level content when they embraced standards and had an instructional vision of standards-based instruction before the pandemic. Having a shared vision "made it really clear what teachers should teach, and kids should learn with accompanying learning targets," said a district administrator in one such system.

Districts that already had digital resources for teachers also fared better. Having ready-made, high-quality, standards-aligned lessons and other resources for teachers was a "non-negotiable" for success, said one leader. Otherwise, a district administrator said, teachers end up thinking, "I just have to go to Teachers Pay Teachers [an online market for teacher-created content] or find my own thing."

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3 TNTP, *Learning Acceleration Guide: Accelerating Learning in the 2020-2021 School Year* (New York, NY: TNTP, 2020): 2.

Not all the systems headed into the pandemic with an aligned instructional infrastructure. One leader in this system explained the challenges associated with decentralization that surfaced during the pandemic:

> *Prior to this past year we had a number of different reading programs occurring at the different elementary schools. . . . [As a result] schools [had] ... a reading program but may not have had enough money to purchase all the components or the appropriate professional development. So that just created a great number of inconsistencies.*[4]

In another district, the superintendent described launching a new K–8 curriculum in English Language Arts and math during the pandemic. He anticipated the curriculum would be a "strong game changer. . . . But," he continued, "we know, this is the first year and asking K–8 teachers to stand up and perfect two new curriculums is challenging."

Taking on major instructional projects—developing a shared instructional vision and adopting a new curriculum—while tackling the urgent demands of the pandemic was ambitious, but these superintendents saw no other choice. To ensure curricular resources and support could be shared efficiently across the system, school leaders who had been accustomed to considerable autonomy were asked to adopt standardized materials from the district. "We have come to realize," said a colleague in the same district, "that yes, we need somebody to be in charge."

The pandemic crisis underscored the perceived benefits of centralizing instructional guidance. Instructional improvement, one superintendent said, "can't just be left to the parents or to the discretion of a school or a classroom or a principal or a teacher." Those responsible for student progress must be "part of an infrastructure that's monitored for access and outcomes."

However, the six systems did not centralize across the board. For the most part they took a firmer hand steering instructional strategies systemwide (by setting state standard-based priorities and communicating the expectation that schools must keep every child working on grade-level material). But the way instruction was delivered and by whom varied from school to school. With different levels of capacity in both central offices and among schools, systems had to find their own balance between central guardrails and school-level discretion.

This push toward tighter instructional expectations placed huge demands on teachers and principals to stay on grade level while identifying and addressing gaps in student learning. Traditionally, schools and districts have grouped struggling students into remedial classes, in hopes of eventually returning them to regular classrooms. Asking educators to differentiate instruction for a wide range of students within a general classroom is a tall order under current circumstances. We know, for example, from RAND's American Educator Panel that a majority of teachers nationwide reported working longer hours during the pandemic. Eighty percent reported they were concerned about burnout. Teachers, especially those in remote-settings, reported on the survey that they needed more support from their districts about how to catch students up to grade-level learning.

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4 Instructional coherence is, unfortunately, an uncommon condition in public education: see Morgan Polikoff, Elaine Wang, and Julia Kaufman, "The Overlooked Support Teachers Are Missing: A Coherent Curriculum," *Education Week*, March 2, 2021.

Streamlined and Coordinated Central Offices Were a Key Support

In a crisis, leadership and coordinated action take on new importance. The districts in our study found it critical to overcome turf wars and uncoordinated action during the pandemic, recognizing that schools needed immediate and clear direction. Consistent with prior research, when central office staff could strategically coordinate their work across central departments, they were better positioned to support principals and teachers.

Coordination between curriculum and instruction departments and central office staff who supervised principals was evident in two of the most aligned systems. In one case, the district's academic and leadership directors said they planned all principal meetings together. "Making sure our leadership side of the house and [curriculum and instruction] side of the house are speaking the same language has really been one thing that's been able to move this work forward," said a principal supervisor.[5] The expectation for collaboration came from the top. "Had we not been working very closely as a team," he half joked, "[the superintendent] would be mad at us."

> **When central office staff could strategically coordinate their work across central departments, they were better positioned to support principals and teachers.**

In addition to encouraging coordination, two superintendents made it a priority to shield their CAOs from the day-to-day demands of dealing with the pandemic. Academic teams were free to focus on instruction, even as other teams in the central office were delegated to solve problems like nutrition, technology, and health protocols.

Other systems leaders talked about the need for increased central office coordination but had more work to do. In a system that was still working on developing a coherent instructional system, for example, the CAO emphasized they were still "making sure that we have coherence. . . . The three of us [chief officers] work together a lot to make sure that we each have an area of responsibility and that each one of our offices supports the other." As another district leader noted, the stress of the pandemic increased the need for coordination and collaboration. "The push me, pull me of 'What is my responsibility? What is your responsibility?' took on a heightened awareness in my opinion, because the stakes were so high on getting the communication right [during the pandemic]," she said.

In another district, the superintendent pointed to the benefits of having a long-standing leadership team that trusted each other, noting that her CAO had been in the position for seven years and the rest of the cabinet, with one exception, had been with the district for five years. "That kind of leadership stability and trust and communication was invaluable [for responding to the pandemic]," she said.

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5 In practice, the curriculum and instruction department would provide frameworks and guidance—the "guardrails or basics" said one CAO—and then hand them off to the leadership team to roll out to school leaders. But "it was [the CAO's] team and my team working together with the principals on how to implement it," said the leadership director. "So, it wasn't like the [CAO's] team just created it and handed it over. They were still very much involved in working with the principals and the assistant superintendents on how to make it look and be a support. We did help sessions with principals, so they could talk it through and all of those things," he said.

By necessity, the pandemic pushed central offices to break down silos and adopt more collaborative structures in ways that are often rare in public education. For some, new efforts at strategic coordination may herald a new way of work. For others, it may prove more temporary. But either way it seems critical, especially when it comes to developing and supporting a more aligned set of instructional expectations and resources in schools to ensure access to grade-level content.

Two of the Systems That Faced Deeper Inequity and Performance Challenges before the Pandemic Were Considering More Fundamental Shifts

Although all six systems committed to focusing teachers on grade-level work, two leaders questioned whether the "acceleration" strategy could provide adequate support for students who the system was struggling to serve even before the pandemic. They saw the need for more profound changes—including changes that might conflict with the emphasis on providing all students with access to grade-level work.

These leaders ran large districts that primarily served students of color from low-income communities. For decades, these systems have struggled to effectively educate their students. Even before the pandemic, teachers struggled to find the right starting place each year, often spending weeks reviewing ideas and skills the system should have successfully taught years earlier. Each year, students fell further behind. The pandemic shutdown only exacerbated these opportunity deficits. One leader said:

> I think we have to remember, we had kids who had stopped out [i.e., disengaged] in any number of ways, pre-pandemic. They just weren't as obvious to the public. But the kid that wasn't showing up to school, truant, showed up and put their head down because they were a reluctant learner, they checked out. So this is not a new problem.

In addition to these long-standing challenges, district leaders struggled with the politics of reopening schools, COVID fears among parents of color, and the urgent need to re-engage students who stopped coming to school. Improving instruction was just the beginning of what was needed, according to these superintendents. Could this be a chance to challenge assumptions about how schools must operate and fundamentally reimagine public education? One said:

> We have to rethink school, period. Forget about grade levels and think about where kids are academically. You can do that at the elementary level. . . . I'm looking at smaller classes next year for at least [grades] three through five. I'm also looking at extending the [school] day next year. . . . [I'm] looking into partnerships with community organizations to see—can we extend learning on the weekends or after school?

Changes in the Meaning of Public School

For these two leaders, the pandemic challenged many established conventions of how students learn best. While the shift to online platforms was hard for many students, there were some who genuinely thrived in virtual classrooms. Even as school buildings begin to reopen, these leaders hoped to offer such students the option to take courses online. One leader explained:

> *Some kids absolutely love [distance learning], and they flourish. We've seen data over the last couple days where students who've had poor attendance and poor grades in brick and mortar, have absolutely excelled in this virtual learning space. We're starting to convene small groups of students where we've seen those successes, and say, 'What is it about this experience that you're drawn to?'*

Indeed, our fall 2020 ASDP survey of superintendents suggests that most leaders expect remote learning of some kind to become a permanent part of public education going forward. Some leaders suggested that teachers who excel at virtual instruction or prefer to teach remotely for health reasons should be encouraged to do so. Ideally, one leader noted, teachers would specialize in one modality or the other and become masters of either in-person or online instruction.

One district expected to offer at least five kinds of learning environments in the near future: traditional classes, a hybrid school model, a fully remote option, learning pods where students are supervised but work more independently, and asynchronous options that allow students to log into course materials at any time.

These complex arrangements, should they occur, would require much greater differentiation in teacher roles and responsibilities than envisioned by current state regulations and collective bargaining agreements. (Contrary to the "acceleration" strategy, they might also introduce more varied pacing, with students moving through their work independent from their grade-level peers.) These two system leaders believed offering these different modalities would ultimately drive regulatory and contractual changes.

These leaders also imagined changes that would reverberate in district central offices, which traditionally offer schools standard services—teacher training, supplementary instructional programs, and advice— with more customized services depending on a school's student population (e.g., children with different disabilities or English language learners). If systems embrace a more varied and complex set of learning experiences, district services would need to be tailored much as special education and language assistance currently are. As one superintendent said, "No longer can we say, in any of our schools, 'We don't offer that course.'"

> **"No longer can we say, in any of our schools, 'We don't offer that course.'"**
>
> *- Superintendent*

Offering more learning options would require significant changes in adult roles, well beyond just capacity-building. It would demand levels of flexibility and cooperation not typical of school systems, especially large ones. But as district leaders said, these new visions of schooling spring from real and undeniable needs—and, for this reason, they may have the potential to address problems that existed prior to the pandemic.

More Options, Outside Resources

New schooling arrangements were not the only changes on the minds of leaders in the two big-city districts. They, like most other district leaders we interviewed, were skeptical that students could make up learning losses with only 180 six-hour days of schooling per year. These leaders intended to offer courses and tutoring during evenings, weekends, and even winter and spring breaks. They also hoped to keep schools in full operation throughout the summer of 2021, and possibly every summer thereafter. One city district also plans to offer students "do-over" years to catch up and complete unfinished course work. That district's leader says that course failure is no longer acceptable: students should get many chances to finish incomplete work.

Most of the districts anticipated supporting all students with tutoring and a more general emphasis on adjusting the length of time a student had to achieve mastery of the material. But even as they built support to help students stay on "pace," some district leaders hoped to create new relationships between time and learning. One leader asked:

> *What about pacing? Do we get out of this nine-week cycle and start thinking of shorter three-week cycles of learning where you really focus on doing something robust in a shorter period of time? How do we assess differently? So getting rid of the traditional averaging of grades, which has never made sense. So I take a quiz, I get an F. I take a quiz, I get a C. I take a quiz and get an A. A says I've mastered the content, but it took me three tries, so I only get a C for the class because we average it, not because I mastered it. So, how do we get to A, B, C, and complete mastery milestones?*

It wasn't clear how this leader was reconciling questions about mastery with a commitment to grade-level content expectations.

Leaders at the two big-city districts also talked about embracing new partnerships for instructional delivery. One was working to increase the numbers of new schools operated by high-quality charter networks. Another envisioned sharing academic ideas and information about student needs with private and parochial schools, where many families have found refuge after public schools closed.[6] Another leader hoped to foster more collaboration with postsecondary institutions and employers. Local colleges and universities could provide advanced courses for motivated young people, he said, and industry could offer hands-on internships to interested high school students. He welcomed an infusion of knowledge and talent from the private sector as well, saying:

> *[The district] can't rely solely on the workforce [it has] now. Are there innovative partners that we can bring in, either virtually or on the ground? Right now, because of the contract, I can only hire teachers to do instructional work. Well, we know that there are folks out there that do this work much better—I'm talking about this virtual learning, this innovation, that we need to be able to bring in.*

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6 A superintendent in another set of ASDP case studies had said, "When parents are doing anything they can for their kids, lines between public and private are blurred. We need to treat all the local schools as if they were one system."

Some district leaders, though optimistic, acknowledged their districts and partners needed to do more to meet students' needs now and in the future. They were realistic about the challenges ahead and the need for constant course corrections as the situation evolved. A few predicted resistance to change from central offices and teachers unions. While funding may not be an immediate constraint because of a massive influx of short-term federal assistance, hard tradeoffs lie ahead when districts eventually return to pre-pandemic funding levels.

As this all suggests, the systems that favor a bolder response face a heavy lift: developing a more coherent instructional system, and then going way beyond it in ways that upend established conventions. In the conclusion we call out the many issues and unresolved questions raised by both tasks.

What is **Social-Emotional Well-Being**?

Despite this report's focus on instruction and learning, all of the system leaders we spoke with were also concerned about children returning to school with mental health issues caused by isolation, grief, family conflict, and anxiety over racial and partisan strife. They planned to carve out time to check in with students and their families when in-person schooling resumed. That said, with the exception of the two charter management organizations in our sample (which had pre-existing commitments to social-emotional learning and well-being), most of the districts had yet to put in place district-led social and emotional support systems for students and teachers.

Some systems looked to community partners for help with these issues. District leaders were already working with pastors and neighborhood groups to provide activities and individualized emotional support for children. In one city, nonprofit organizations offered "pods" that gave children safe and healthy places to study and socialize. The district hoped these supports would continue even after in-person schooling resumed and planned to work with the nonprofits to upgrade the academic content of pod services.

District leaders also expected to work closely with health clinics to provide well-child assessments, medicine, dental care, and eyeglasses. Though district leaders did not use the "community schools" terminology common in New York City and Cincinnati, they did hope to strengthen ties between families and health care providers.

In one case, a leader said he intended to engage parents and caregivers in social-emotional health programs by providing courses, counseling, and connections to other parents designated as "family ambassadors."

What Happens Next?

This year's consequences for student learning are profound and still unfolding. A recent research summary concluded that many students have suffered "a dramatic loss of learning this year." Multiple data sources suggest learning among students from low-income communities and students of color have been disproportionately affected by the breakdown in schooling this year. The leaders we spoke with were worried about what comes next. A high school principal told us:

> My biggest concern … is that we are, for the next however many years, going to inherit kids for whom this year was a loss in 2nd grade, 3rd grade, 4th grade, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th. . . . What does that actually mean? At a certain point something's got to give.

To meet these challenges, districts anticipate needing to make profound changes in instruction and how schools operate. They intend to keep all students in grade-level courses, offer just-in-time help to those who have missed a prerequisite skill or idea, and to avoid putting anyone into a remedial track. They also anticipate setting priorities among the plethora of student learning standards to emphasize those on which later learning in core subjects depends.

These changes are likely to outlast the pandemic. Acknowledging that in the past many students who fell behind in school never caught up, district leaders plan lasting changes in district and school operation and are rethinking extensive and aspirational lists of state learning standards.

Some district leaders, moreover, think changes in instruction are not enough. In cities struggling with poverty and inequity, the pandemic has only exacerbated existing problems and made it clear how far short district routines fell before the pandemic. These leaders expect to offer new competency-based programs, small schools, summer and weekend options, new online and internship opportunities, to work more closely with community groups, and to seek teachers from different professional backgrounds and in roles not anticipated by existing labor agreements. These will likely stretch districts' capacities and generate opposition.

As we conclude our first wave of interviews, it is not clear whether any district can fully implement its plans or if these will prove a match for student needs. Some district leaders are more confident and able than others to change schools. But any and all could be in for surprises and disappointments. What happens next fall will likely depend on:

- The stamina and political will of district leaders and school boards to develop a central strategy, weather the inevitable setbacks, and see it through.

- The efficacy of central office coordination and collaboration with school leaders and teachers.

- School leaders' and teachers' acceptance of stronger steering from the system.

- Introducing changes in a way that feels collaborative and supportive of teachers who are just coming off the stress and pressure of teaching during the pandemic.

- The nature and depth of students' academic needs when they return to school—and how that informs the viability of a strategy of "acceleration" over remediation.

- The nature and depth of students' emotional needs when they return to school, and whether systems can support students while maintaining a strong focus on academics.

- District adeptness in building trust with families and communities to be open to new approaches to school, such as new learning modalities and longer school days and years.

- Short- and long-term district funding planning and decision-making as more federal pandemic aid becomes available and then eventually runs out.

- Labor-management relations, especially teachers union cooperation with bolder ideas about changing teacher roles or using community-based and external professional services.

- State support for setting priorities among learning goals, changes in how school time is structured, or allowing students to progress at their own individual pace.

- Whether districts seeking revolutionary changes (like new forms of schooling) will also be able to implement an "acceleration" strategy.

The challenges are significant and real. In any successful scenario, building and maintaining cooperation from key adult parties will be a major challenge. Stimulus funding will help, but systems must be intentional and strategic about how they use it. At the end of the day, the true measure of success will be student well-being and achievement.

Our next reports, covering the 2021–2022 school year, will chronicle and explore how these six systems progress in their post-pandemic plans in the months ahead.

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