

Interrupted Instruction

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What Is the Issue, and Why Does It Matter?

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the lives of millions of schoolchildren and exacerbated existing educational inequities. Most schools rapidly transitioned to remote instruction in March 2020 and continued operating under fully remote or hybrid learning conditions for the 2020-21 school year. This rapid transition to, and subsequent extended use of, virtual teaching and learning presented many obstacles for students, teachers and schools.

Research projected that interrupted instruction would mean students would start the 2020-21 school year with [smaller reading and math gains](#) than they would in a typical school year, that unfinished learning would be greater during the [2020-21 winter](#) than in previous years, and that only small improvements in [learning opportunity gaps](#) were to be expected between spring 2021 and 2022. As many students enter a fourth semester of interrupted instruction, state education policymakers are working overtime to implement solutions.

Key Term

This Policy Snapshot uses the term “interrupted instruction” to refer to the gap in academic support and opportunities, and classroom time many students are experiencing during the pandemic. This phrase is used in place of learning loss or unfinished learning to emphasize that students are not at fault for any negative effects the pandemic has had on their learning and achievements.

Many state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have come via [governors' executive orders](#) and [state education agency guidance](#). This Policy Snapshot details state legislative examples that address interrupted instruction from the 2021 session. Based on a review of enacted and vetoed legislation, seven themes emerged:

- **Extended learning time and supports.** Many states have extended the amount of school time available to students to make up for lost learning time.
- **High dosage tutoring.** Closely related to extended learning time and supports, many states have established, or increased access to, statewide tutoring programs.
- **Literacy.** Using federal and state general funds, states are taking the opportunity to reinvest in their existing early literacy programs.
- **Special education.** States are taking steps to increase educational equity for students with Individualized Education Programs.
- **Student and family decisions.** Legislators have created decision-making processes that allow students and families to make final decisions on a student's academic progress.
- **Student mental health.** In addition to supporting students' academic needs, states are looking for ways to support their mental health needs.
- **Technology.** States are investing in new technology and broadband access for classrooms and students.

COVID-19 Funding: State and Federal Response

Congress passed three federal relief packages that provided state and local education agencies with \$190 billion in [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief](#) (ESSER) funding for K-12 education. The third relief bill, the [American Rescue Plan](#), stipulated that local education agencies must devote at least 20% of their total allotment toward addressing interrupted learning and students' academic and social and emotional needs. State education agencies were also mandated to allocate 5% of total ARP ESSER funds to learning recovery interventions. As of Aug. 31, 2021, 46 states and the District of Columbia have submitted ARP ESSER state plans to the U.S. Department of Education, and 33 have been approved.

Additionally, many states have passed legislation appropriating state general and federal funds to support efforts to facilitate interrupted instruction interventions related to COVID-19. [Guidance](#) from the U.S. Department of Education details how ARP ESSER funding can be used to address the impact of lost instruction time. The [return to school roadmap](#) also highlights approaches that state and local education agencies can use to address student mental health and to accelerate learning. An Education Commission of the States [State Information Request](#) found that states' top priorities for the 2021-22 school year include student mental health, accelerated learning, technology and extended learning time.

Extended Learning Time and Supports

Extended learning time refers to efforts to increase the amount of [instructional time](#) students receive during an academic year. It can involve lengthening the school day, adding academic days to the school calendar and to after-school programming, or by implementing summer learning opportunities for students. Increasing students' instructional time has recently gained salience because of the challenges of remote and hybrid instruction and the reductions in instructional time caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Efforts to prolong the school day or school year are typically used to support every student enrolled in the school or district. However, other extended learning time efforts, such as before- and after-school programs or summer enrichment programs, may be targeted toward specific students or grades. Universal eligibility for such programs may depend on local or state capacity to meet that demand. In addition to providing summer learning opportunities, education policymakers are adding time to or changing how time is spent during the existing school calendar. The following examples highlight strategies that states have taken to increase academic time for students to facilitate accelerated learning.



[H.B. 2862](#) permits districts and schools to adopt, after public input, alternative instructional time models to satisfy state requirements. Approved instructional models, including direct instruction, project-based learning, and independent- and mastery-based learning, may be delivered remotely through a blended program or in person. It also allows districts or schools to reallocate instructional time across coursework based on student needs, and requires schools and districts to bring attendance policies into alignment with instructional time changes.



[S.B. 234](#) requires public schools, for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, to provide expanded academic support to students in grades four through eight who failed to achieve mastery on any statewide assessment administered during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. This bill also requires local public school boards to develop an education plan and supporting budget to provide expanded academic support to students using federal funds provided for educational relief.



[H.B. 82](#) requires every school district in the state to offer a six-week school extension learning recovery and enrichment program to address interrupted learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Local education agencies are tasked with identifying at-risk students for participation in the program although students who are not deemed at-risk may also participate, if there is sufficient space. The term at-risk is left undefined in the bill but is defined elsewhere in state statute to mean students who are not successfully progressing toward grade promotion or who are demonstrating a likelihood for academic failure.

High-Dosage Tutoring

The American Rescue Plan [stipulated](#) that local education agencies must allocate at least 20% of ARP ESSER funding to evidence-based strategies for accelerating student learning. [Tutoring](#) was one specific example given by the U.S. Department of Education of an acceptable approach that state education agencies and local education agencies can use to facilitate learning recovery efforts. Tutoring is usually targeted toward students who demonstrate the greatest need for academic acceleration. [Research](#) has shown that high-quality tutoring programs can successfully accelerate student learning. The following state examples illustrate some state strategies to develop and support high-impact tutoring for students.



[S.B. 564](#) creates the Arkansas Tutoring Corps Act and allows the department of education to develop the program to: (1) identify qualified tutors; (2) identify a curriculum to support children preparing to enter kindergarten through grade six in the content areas of math and reading and ensure it aligns with Arkansas' academic standards; (3) ensure training modules related to the curriculum are provided to qualified tutors before tutoring begins; (4) ensure ongoing support is provided to tutors; and (5) coordinate with schools to ensure tutoring is offered at qualified tutoring sites or virtually by leveraging existing digital platforms. The program must be designed to deploy qualified tutors in a manner that offers statewide coverage and increases opportunities for students in rural areas.



[H.B. 21-1234](#) creates the Colorado high-impact tutoring program to provide grant funding to local education providers or groups of local education providers to create high-impact tutoring programs to address interrupted instruction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The bill also specifies that the application must demonstrate need, which may include serving students from low-income households or systemically excluded students.



[H.B. 7004](#) establishes the Tennessee accelerating literacy and learning corps as part of the Tennessee Learning Loss Remediation and Student Acceleration Act to develop and support a statewide network of high-quality tutors to assist local education agencies, public charter schools, community partners and parents in accelerating student learning.

Literacy

While literacy rates have always been among policymakers' top priorities, states are facing new urgency to provide additional reading and learning opportunities to students. [New data](#) show that more than 40% of kindergarten and first grade students are at risk of not learning to read due to COVID-19 interruptions, with disproportionate impacts on Black and Hispanic students.

[Declines](#) in prekindergarten and kindergarten enrollment during the 2020-21 school year have also heightened the need to focus on literacy in the early grades, as students may be entering first grade without a foundation of early learning. [Additional research](#) shows that while students gained reading skills during the 2020-21 school year, those gains were lower than expected for a typical academic year. States are taking the opportunity and the influx of federal funds to double literacy efforts. In addition to supporting or expanding statewide literacy programs, some states are investing in professional learning for teachers. The following state examples highlight approaches used to address literacy in schools.



[H.B. 358](#) appropriates funding to support literacy programs and the evaluation of programs for English learners. The department of education is required to report on the uses of funds and the effectiveness of programs and efforts.



[S.B. 387](#) establishes the Early Literacy Program to build foundational early literacy skills in students enrolled in the North Carolina Prekindergarten program. It also requires educator preparation programs to integrate training in the science of reading.



[S.B. 114](#) uses ESSER funds to provide professional learning modules on reading instruction focused on the five key areas of literacy instruction. These key areas are phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency and reading comprehension. The bill requires the agency of education to assist teacher supervisory unions in implementing evidence-based, systems-wide literacy approaches that address interrupted instruction because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, it creates the Advisory Council on Literacy to advise the agency, the state board of education and the General Assembly on how to improve literacy proficiency outcomes for students in prekindergarten through grade 12 and how to sustain those outcomes.

Special Populations

Educational equity for student subgroups that are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic was central to the [guidance and stipulations](#) placed on ARP ESSER funding by the U.S. Department of Education. Students with Individualized Education Programs faced significant impacts since many had [limited or no access](#) to services that were legally mandated under their IEPs. The following state examples highlight strategies that states have adopted to aid students with disabilities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



[H.B. 128](#) provides an additional school year to students who receive special education and related services who turned 21 during the 2020-21 school year.



[H.B. 714/S.B. 300](#) requires an IEP committee to develop continuity plans for students with IEPs in the case of an extended absence from in-person instruction.



[S.B. 3434](#) requires local boards, in the 2023-24 school year, to provide special education and related services contained in IEPs to students with disabilities, who turn 21 during the 2022-23 school year, provided that the parent of the student and the IEP team determine that the student requires additional or compensatory special education and related services, including transition services. It also specifies that the special education and related services, including transition services, provided will be paid for with federal coronavirus relief funds.

Student and Family Decisions

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, several states waived and/or suspended grade promotion or high school graduation requirements. In some cases, legislation allowed decisions to promote or graduate certain students to be made with input or authorization from school or district leadership. In contrast, other states empowered students and parents to make such decisions on their own by giving final authority to families. Below are examples of legislation that allow certain decisions to be left to students and their families.



[A.B. 104](#) allows a parent to submit a written request that their student be retained. Once the request is received, a consultation between the school district, administrator, teacher, parent and student must be scheduled to discuss all available learning recovery options and information on whether retention is in the student's best academic and social interest. If the decision is made to not retain the student, they must be given access to prior semester courses in which they received a D or F letter grade, or access to another form of credit recovery. Parents of a high school student may apply to the school district to change a letter grade for a given course to a Pass or No Pass on the student's transcript. Schools are required to make the requested change.



[H.B. 1159](#) allows parents of students in kindergarten through fifth grade to request that their child be retained for the 2021-22 school year in the grade they were enrolled in for the 2020-21 school year. After meeting with the principal, the parent or guardian has final control about retention decisions.



[S.B. 128](#) allows a student enrolled in a public school, grades kindergarten through 12, during the 2020-21 school year, to request to use the 2021-22 school year as a supplemental school year to retake or supplement prior courses or grades. Local school boards are authorized to establish temporary programs for graduated seniors for the 2021-22 school year. Local school boards may not approve or reject individual requests for supplemental years but must determine whether to accept or reject all requests.

Student Mental Health

In addition to understanding which academic supports are necessary, educators and policymakers are looking to meet students' mental health, social and emotional needs. The [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reported that mental health-related emergency room visits for children ages 5-11 increased 24% between April and October 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. Among children 12-17 years old, these visits increased 31%. [Research shows](#) that early detection and treatment of a student's mental health needs are associated with improved academic achievement. The following examples highlight state approaches for addressing students' mental health needs.

COLORADO

[H.B. 21-1259](#) directs the department of education to streamline the application process for awarding money to local education providers as they implement extended learning opportunities. The bill defines extended learning opportunities to include social and emotional and mental health supports that are tied to academic success.

PENNSYLVANIA

[H.B. 1348](#) distributes ARP ESSER funds to school districts, charters and cyber schools and requires that 30% of the grant money be used by schools to support the social and emotional and mental health needs of students impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, 10% of grant funds must be used for professional development for and technical assistance to educators and school personnel to support students' mental and social and emotional needs.

WASHINGTON

[H.B. 1208](#) requires school districts to immediately budget and expend Learning Assistance Program appropriations to identify and address the academic and nonacademic needs of students resulting from and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Districts can use up to 15% of their LAP allocation to deliver academic, nonacademic, and social and emotional supports and services to students through partnerships with community-based or other out-of-school organizations.

Technology

During the last year and a half, many students did not have broadband access or an internet connected device at home. Even in states with the smallest [digital divides](#), [one in four](#) students do not have adequate access to the internet. Access to technology is a matter of [equity](#) as students of color, students in rural school districts and students from low-income families are less likely than their peers to have broadband access or technological devices.

Additionally, [research](#) found that Black, Latino/a and Asian students were less likely to return to in-person instruction during the 2020-21 school year than their white peers. The following state examples demonstrate the ways policymakers are investing in broadband and technology to address disparate access.



[S.B. 74](#) authorizes government entities, including school districts, to contract for broadband services, data services and/or wireless telecommunications services.



[H.B. 386](#) appropriates \$26,500,000 for classroom technology, classroom technology infrastructure, wireless technology infrastructure, and learning management systems that assist teachers and students in effective and efficient instruction and learning.



[H.B. 1525](#) requires the education agency to help schools ensure that all students have access to internet services and provides one-time funding for reimbursements to school districts for technology acquisitions.

Related Resources

- [COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [States Address Special Education During COVID-19](#)
- [How States Are Helping School Districts Maximize Federal K-12 Relief](#)
- [Addressing Interrupted Instruction During COVID-19](#)
- [Using Summer Learning Opportunities to Address Unfinished Learning](#)
- [High-Impact Tutoring](#)



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