

Enhancing Learning Recovery and School Enrichment Programs



Introduction	2
Section 1: Overview of Losses Due to Covid-19	2
Covid-19 Timeline	2
Learning Loss	8
Section 1 Key Terms	24
Section 1 Discussion Questions	24
Section 1 Activities	25
Section 2: Learning Recovery and Mental Health Support	26
Measuring the Gaps	27
Holistic Approach to Learning Recovery	28
Vertical Teaming Across Grade Levels	28
Evidence Based, Grade-Level Instruction	30
Looping	31
Emotional Support	32
Additional Instruction	35
Become a Trauma-Informed School	37
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)	43
Section 2 Key Terms	47
Section 2 Discussion Questions	47
Section 2 Activities	48
Conclusion	49
Case Study	49
References	50

Introduction

In 2020, 1.5 billion students across 188 countries were forced out of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and even as of March 2022, 405 million students across 23 countries had not fully returned to school (OECD, 2021; Broom, 2022). Children and families worldwide rely on schools for education, social interaction, adult supervision, health services, and even nutritious meals. Thus, the school closures due to the pandemic had detrimental effects on children's learning and mental health. While there has been plenty of news coverage regarding the health impacts of Covid-19, the effects that the epidemic has had on childrens' learning and social-emotional wellness are just beginning to emerge.

Section 1: Overview of Losses Due to Covid-19

Almost three years after the coronavirus was declared a global pandemic, schools are still struggling to find a sense of normalcy for educators, students, and families. This section will begin by discussing a timeline of the major events that upended schools during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, and then it will dive into the types of losses experienced by students. Unsurprisingly, both learning loss and mental health losses were not experienced equally by every group, which will be further explored in this section as well. While the pandemic affected schools worldwide, the timeline below focuses on the major events in the United States education system.

Covid-19 Timeline

2019-2020 School Year

In late *January 2020*, an urgent care facility in Washington announced the first case of Covid-19 in the United States (Baker, 2022). Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warned schools about potential disruptions

in late *February 2020*, it was not until *March 11, 2020*, that the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a global pandemic, which was followed by schools across the country closing by the end of that month (Baker). School closures were supposed to be short-term, but policymakers realized that without proper access to schools, even on a short-term basis, detrimental effects would impact students, school officials, and parents. *On March 26, 2020*, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) waived the school nutrition rules, allowing parents to pick up “grab-and-go” school meals even if the student was not present, in an effort to ensure that families would not go hungry while schools were closed (Baker). Prior to this waiver, a child would need to be present for parents to receive a meal. *On March 27, 2020*, congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, allocating \$13.2 billion for states and local school districts (Baker). The CARES Act was meant to provide schools with financial relief and funding for remote learning equipment and personal protective equipment (PPE) (Baker).

By *April 2020*, educators everywhere were dealing with the stress of being on lockdown with their own families, while also juggling with remote teaching responsibilities; they were required to learn new technologies, create innovative lesson plans, and continue to communicate with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators. *On April 2, 2020*, the Department of Education (ED) excused all states from federally mandated standardized testing, which hasn't happened since the government first required state testing in 1994 (Baker, 2022). It wasn't until *May 20, 2020*, that the CDC issued its first guidance on reopening schools for the following school year. The CDC offered guidance on “issues like disinfecting surfaces, reducing students' contact with peers on buses and in the classroom, and daily health checks.” It also recommended that “common areas like lunchrooms be closed” (Baker). In addition, as of *May, 2020*, “Forty-eight states, four U.S. territories, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense

Education Activity have by this time ordered or recommended school building closures for the rest of the academic year, affecting at least 50.8 million public school students” (Baker). Throughout *June 2020*, schools found creative ways to celebrate the graduating class of 2020 since they were not allowed to have in-person graduations. Schools and communities celebrated with car parades, lawn decorations, remote ceremonies, and other out-of-the-box measures to ensure that the class of 2020 was celebrated.

2020-2021 School Year

On *July 8, 2020*, the Trump Administration threatened to withhold federal funding from schools that did not reopen for in-person learning (Baker). Trump commented that the CDC’s safety guidelines were “impractical and expensive,” and Secretary DeVos’ department supported “the idea that students in places where schools do not reopen should be able to take federal money and use it where they can get instruction in-person” (Baker). Later in July, the CDC released guidelines emphasizing the importance of in-person learning, discussing what students were missing out on amidst the school closures. Dr. Robert Redfield, CDC Director at the time, stated, “They get their nutritional support from their schools. We’re seeing an increase in drug use disorder as well as suicide in adolescent individuals. I do think that it’s really important to realize it’s not public health versus the economy about school reopening” (as cited in Baker). However, on *July 28, 2020*, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Union demanded that schools delay reopening to protect teachers. Randi Weingarten, President of the Union, threatened schools with lawsuits, strikes, protests, and other extreme measures, if the health and safety of teachers were jeopardized due to schools reopening prematurely (Baker). On that same day, Dr. Anthony Fauci, top U.S. infectious disease expert, reiterated that there were still numerous unanswered questions about the virus, and how it is spread by children. Fauci said that

teachers would be “part of the experiment,” which caused outrage among educators (Baker).

By *Fall 2020*, most districts decided to start the school year with remote learning; however, some districts utilized a hybrid model and some offered remote instruction. In September 2020, the U. The S. government released its vaccine distribution plan, prioritizing teachers, school employees, and other critical workers as preferred recipients of the vaccine; further, schools were identified as hubs for administering the vaccine (Baker, 2022). By *December 2020*, after healthcare workers were vaccinated, teachers began receiving their first dosages of the vaccine. On *December 27, 2020*, the second federal COVID aid package allocated more than \$190 billion to “help schools pay for tutors and cleaning supplies and millions of computing devices” (Baker).

In *January 2021*, newly elected President Joe Biden released a federal plan to reopen schools within his first 100 days in office, while continuing to follow state and local safety guidelines. Finally, in *February 2021*, the Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU) made a reopening deal with the district that included a delay “that gives the district more time to vaccinate teachers, which was a sticking point in weeks of negotiations” (Baker). Many other big districts across the country were making similar negotiations at this time.

At the beginning of *March 2021*, now a year into the pandemic, Biden announced a “federal push” to get all teachers their first dosage of the vaccine by the end of March (Baker, 2022). Chicago Public Schools and other large districts were utilizing their buildings for vaccine clinics, hoping to provide easy access for teachers and frontline workers. Also in *March*, the American Rescue Plan, the third federal COVID aid package, included \$800 million to schools for homeless children and youth, which was not included in the other two relief packages (Baker). On *March 19, 2021*, the CDC issued recommendations stating “3 feet of space between

students who are wearing masks is a sufficient safeguard in most classroom situations,” as the initial 6 feet of space made fully reopening schools very difficult due to space restrictions (Baker). By *April 2021*, the Covid-19 vaccine became available for teenagers aged 16-years-old and up, “a watershed moment for the pandemic” (Baker). Likewise, by the end of April, 80% of teachers reported to EdWeek Research Center that they were fully vaccinated (Baker). Schools continued waivers on meal distribution through June 2022, and allowed schools to continue “distributing meals to students who are learning remotely without red tape that can make it logistically difficult to do so” (Baker).

On *May 10, 2021*, the Pfizer vaccine became available for children aged 12-15 years old. Once again, schools were utilized as hubs to vaccinate school-age children. On *May 13, 2021*, the AFT President announced that schools would need to reopen for in-person learning for the next school year. Weingarten said, “We can and we must reopen schools in the fall for in-person teaching, learning, and support . . . And keep them open—fully and safely five days a week” (as cited in Baker, 2022). While strides were being made in Covid-19 recovery, the graduating class of 2021 continued to experience unfortunate hardships, as health concerns and financial impacts of the pandemic impacted college decisions. While 74% of 2020 graduates that planned to attend a four-year university went on to do so, only 62% of the 2021 graduates were able to do the same; for students that planned to attend a two-year program in 2021, only 44% did so, compared to 57% of 2020 graduates (Baker).

2021-2022 School Year

On *July 9, 2021*, the CDC issued guidelines for the upcoming school year. In addition to all staff, students, and visitors wearing masks in schools, they recommended “layered mitigation strategies,” such as “handwashing, regular testing, contact tracing to identify threats of exposure to the virus, and canceling

certain extracurricular activities in high-risk areas” (Baker, 2022). Still, the CDC also prioritized in-person learning. As the Delta variant continued to circulate, Biden also called on schools to have pop-up vaccination clinics, hoping to increase the number of vaccinated children over 12-years-old. In *August 2021*, California became the first state to require all teachers and school staff to get vaccinated, or undergo weekly Covid-19 testing (Baker). Throughout August, many states started requiring teachers to get fully vaccinated or face disciplinary action, including termination; most districts had a mandate similar in nature, requiring either vaccination or weekly testing. On *September 21, 2021*, the CDC director approved the booster shot for teachers.

On *October 1, 2021*, California announced a Covid-19 vaccination mandate for students. “California’s first-in-the-nation requirement for students to get vaccinated against COVID also makes it easier for families to opt out than existing state rules that require vaccines for routine illnesses, like measles, as a condition of school attendance” (Baker, 2022). On *November 2, 2021*, the CDC approved the Pfizer vaccine for emergency use for kids as young as 5-years-old. Also in November, some districts eliminated vaccine requirements due to staff shortages in schools. On *December 27, 2021*, the CDC changed quarantine requirements from ten full days to five days in quarantine, and then an additional five days in a mask resuming normal activity.

The spread of the Omicron variant in *January 2022* caused some schools to delay opening in-person for an additional one or two weeks after winter break, as many people traveled and attended gatherings for the holidays. By *February 25, 2022*, the CDC issued relaxed mask guidelines for schools, stating that “universal masking in public settings, including schools, is only recommended in areas with high risk of serious illness or strained health-care resources” (Baker, 2022). On *March 31, 2022*, a CDC survey of high school students revealed new mental health struggles caused by the pandemic. “High school students experienced mental

health challenges during the pandemic including hopelessness, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts or behaviors . . . But those who felt close to people at school or reported strong virtual connections with family and peers were less likely to report such concerns” (Baker).

Learning Loss

Three years after the initial school closures, educators are still trying to compensate for the learning time lost during the pandemic. Although schools attempted to continue the school year remotely, there were challenges that prevented students from having a “normal” learning experience, despite the efforts of educators everywhere. According to research from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) (2022), the majority of K-12 students “suffered significant learning losses of half a year or greater,” when schools closed for in-person learning during the 2019-2020 school year. While the school closings were temporary and meant to slow the spread of the coronavirus, the “learning deficits emerged and persisted over time” (Howard, 2023). For the most part, losses have been greater in mathematics than in reading. Learning losses were slightly less during the 2020-2021 school year, as most schools began to reopen, but “substantial numbers of students have continued falling further behind normal levels of learning for their age and grade” (CRPE).

The academic consequences of months of school closure, remote learning, and coronavirus challenges are “serious for some and grave for many” (CRPE, 2022). Long-term remote learning was harmful to all learners. For instance, in Ohio, researchers found that districts that stayed remote longer during the 2020-2021 school year “experienced declines up to three times greater than those of districts that mostly taught students in person” (Mervosh, 2022). One report estimates that over one million fourth graders nationwide are more than two years behind in early literacy skills (CRPE). Another report claims that the pandemic “left

students an average of five months behind in math and four months behind in reading by the end of the 2020–21 school year” (CRPE). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that between 2020 and 2022, math achievement of nine-year-olds dropped for the first time in the assessment’s history; even more worrisome perhaps, “the gaps between high-achieving students and those with low test scores were growing wider” (CRPE). “The drop in scores among students scoring in the bottom ten percent of scores was five times as large in reading, and four times as large in math, as the drop among students scoring in the top ten percent” (CRPE). While all students experienced learning loss and were impacted by school closures, not all learning loss was experienced equally. Socioeconomic status, race, ability level, and English-language proficiency played a role in just how serious learning loss impacts were.

Students in Poverty

Prior to the pandemic, “America had the largest academic performance gap between rich and poor students in the industrialized world, according to international PISA scores” (CRPE, 2022). While remote learning disrupted the learning of all students, it did not act alone. In an analysis of thousands of public school districts across 29 states, researchers at Harvard and Stanford Universities found that poverty played a substantial role, perhaps even larger than the role of remote learning, in academic declines during the pandemic (Mervosh, 2022). In fact, one of the lead researchers from the project said, “The poverty rate is very predictive of how much you lost” (Mervosh). For example, the analysis compared two California school districts, Cupertino Union and Merced City, both of which were spent about half the 2020-2021 school year remote; however, Cupertino Union has about 6% of students that qualify for free or reduced lunch, while Merced City has about 80% of students that qualify for free or reduced lunch (Mervosh). Despite the same amount of time being spent utilizing remote

learning, “students in the wealthier Cupertino district actually gained ground in math, while students in poorer Merced City fell behind” (Mervosh).

Obviously reading and math scores aren’t the only (or the most important) factors to consider, but they are a standardized indicator to see how students are progressing in school. Kids that were at-risk before the pandemic, particularly kids in high-poverty settings, are doing even worse post-pandemic. The Education Recovery Scorecard, part of the major study at Stanford and Harvard Universities, has “a map showing how many years of learning the average student in each district has lost since 2019” (Toness & Lurye, 2022). Their project compared results from the Nation’s Report Card with local standardized test scores. “In Memphis, Tennessee, where nearly 80% of students are poor, students lost the equivalent of 70% of a school year in reading and more than a year in math,” and similarly, in “Hopewell, Virginia, a school system of 4,000 students who are mostly low-income . . . showed an average loss of 2.29 years of school” (Toness & Lurye).

Students in high-poverty schools experienced a myriad of challenges relating to school closures. For one, “their schools were more likely to be remote and, when they were, students missed more learning” (Turner, 2022). For schools operating remotely during the 2020-2021 school year, the lost academic instruction time was 13-weeks in high income schools, and 22-weeks in high-poverty schools (CRPE, 2022). Essentially, students who were already vulnerable and behind in their academics experienced the greatest amount of learning loss, which will likely take years to reclaim. Why did students from high-poverty schools miss more learning while they were remote? Studies point to a few key reasons: Students in high-poverty schools “lacked a workspace and internet at home, and were less likely to have an adult there to help” (Turner). Likewise, many older students lost focus on school because the pandemic “forced them to become caretakers, or to get jobs” (Turner). For many of these students, school was the least of their

concerns because “high-poverty students were also more likely to experience food insecurity, homelessness and the loss of a loved one to COVID-19” (Turner).

The pandemic also caused challenges for low-income schools that were unrelated to remote learning. In Rochester, New Hampshire, a 4000-student district, with half living in poverty, had to close schools again in November 2020, after being reopened, because they did not have enough teachers reporting to work (Toness & Lurye, 2022). In this district, students were required to study online until March 2021, but many students continued with remote learning even when schools reopened. As a result of these challenges, this district lost almost two years in reading, which was the largest literacy decline of all of the districts in the analysis (Toness & Lurye).

Students of Color

Before the pandemic, students of color experienced disparities and inequities in their academic opportunities, including “less experienced teachers, tracking into less rigorous courses and programs, and lower expectations for their educational achievement” (Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2021). For example, while Black students accounted for 14.2% of all public high school seniors in 2020, they only accounted for 8.3% of students who sat for an AP exam, which is only a 1.3% increase since 2006 (OCR). Further, students of color are more likely to attend schools with fewer resources “in settings that are less safe and more likely to include temporary trailers and poorly maintained exteriors and HVAC systems” (OCR). For example, in 2018, students of color, namely those from Black, Hispanic, Latinx, and Native American families, typically attended schools in districts receiving almost 13% less in state and local funding per student, compared to districts serving fewer children of color (OCR). Many of these students experience similar hardships at home, “with parents or guardians earning lower pay for work that is disproportionately likely to require nonstandard schedules and

unpredictable hours, resulting in higher-than-average levels of household poverty” (OCR). Thus, even without the challenges of a global pandemic, these students do not have the same access to learning tools, such as the Internet and personal devices.

The disparities in academic achievement between students of color and their white peers have also been around long before the pandemic. “The average black or Hispanic student remains roughly two years behind the average white one,” and also consistently “trails” behind their white peers on standardized assessments (OCR, 2021). Knowing these statistics and the disparities that existed before the pandemic, it is not surprising that students of color experienced more severe academic losses during the pandemic.

The pandemic brought with it hardships for all students, but students of color experienced challenges in extreme proportions that went way beyond their school lives. For example, according to one study, Black children accounted for 20% of individuals who lost a parent to Covid-19 through early 2021, even though they only made up 14% of all children in the United States (OCR, 2021). Additionally, “Black and Latinx workers also were more likely than others to be employed in sectors where businesses have shut down, either temporarily or permanently, slashing income and other resources,” causing a rise in hunger and food insecurity as well (OCR). The issue of food insecurity was further exacerbated when schools shut down, as many families relied on schools to provide meals for their children.

Participation

In-person instruction is important for engagement, as well as for access to the academic and extracurricular services offered by schools. However, students of color were less likely to participate or be enrolled in full-time in-person instruction than their white peers. Even as recent as March 2021, “58% of white students attending schools that serve fourth graders—often but not always elementary

schools—were enrolled in fulltime in-person instruction, while only 36% of Black students, 35% of Latinx students, and 18% of Asian students in schools serving fourth graders were enrolled in fulltime in-person instruction” (OCR, 2021).

Distance Learning Issues

Technology barriers affected students of color disproportionately as well. OCR (2021) reports that, according to one study, “as of summer 2020, nearly a third of teachers in majority Black schools reported that their students lacked the technology necessary to take part in virtual instruction,” whereas only one in five teachers from schools with 10% or fewer Black students experienced the same challenges. Latinx students experienced similar difficulties as well. Such challenges persisted even into the fall of 2020. “While only 4.7% of white households reported inconsistent internet access, more than twice as many Black households and one-and-a-half times that many Latinx households said the same” (OCR). State and district efforts, as well as funding from the CARES Act aimed to close the technology gaps, and they did help some, but obstacles still continued for Black and Latinx students.

During the early days of the pandemic, even when students had access to the technology necessary, they often didn’t login to class. Participation rates were disproportionately lower for students of color (OCR, 2021). For example, in Chicago during the Spring of 2020, Black students had the lowest rate of “virtual participation, with nearly 30% not logging in at all at one point during distance learning— compared to 14% of white students not logging in during the same period” (OCR). Similarly, many families lost contact with their childrens’ schools, particularly during the early days of the pandemic. In one national survey, it was reported that in spring 2020, “nearly 30% of principals from schools serving ‘large populations of students of color and students from lower-income households’ said they had difficulty reaching some of their students and/or families—in contrast to

the 14% of principals who said the same in wealthier, predominantly white schools” (OCR). This trend continued throughout the 2020-2021 school year as well.

Academic Impact

Although experts continue to compile research on this topic, emerging evidence shows that the pandemic caused “a strikingly negative impact on academic growth for many students of color, widening the pre-existing disparities” discussed earlier (OCR, 2021). In fall 2020, reports on academic growth were mixed, finding growth for some students and substantial losses for others, with the greatest losses being among students of color (OCR). More recent reports show that the achievement gaps continued to widen for Black and Latinx students. A study conducted during the fall of 2020 by McKinsey & Company looked at data from Curriculum Associates’ i-Ready Diagnostic assessment; the analysis found that learning losses were “especially acute . . . in schools predominantly serving students of color,” with students of color potentially having lost three to five months of learning in math by the fall, while white students lost only one to three months (OCR). In another study, researchers at Ohio State University reported that average achievement on Ohio’s third-grade English Language Arts assessments had declined by roughly “a third of a year’s worth of learning” between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020, but Black students had test score declines that were 50% larger than white students, which equated to about half a year’s decline in learning (OCR). Even more concerning was that Black, Latinx, and American Indian/Alaska Native students’ growth in math and reading did not recover from fall to winter like their White and Asian peers, and by the middle of the 2020-2021 school year, they were even further “pre-pandemic growth expectations than they were in the beginning of the school year” (OCR).

Students with Disabilities

The American education system has not always been accessible to students with disabilities (SWD). Prior to federal laws being put into place, kids with disabilities were completely excluded from school, or forced to try to succeed within a system that offered no support. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as well as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), first passed in 1975, protect the rights of SWD and guarantee them a free appropriate public education (FAPE). Today, millions of SWD attend and participate in American schools. During the 2018-19 school year, more than 7.2 million students received services under IDEA, which is a number that has grown by 400% since 1975; 1.5 million additional students receive services under Section 504 (OCR, 2021).

Although IDEA and Section 504 guarantee FAPE for SWD, “requiring schools to meet students’ unique educational needs through specialized instruction and/or appropriately tailored services,” there has been a “gap” between “this promise and the reality” (OCR, 2021). This gap existed long before Covid-19 became an issue. During the 2019 fiscal year, the OCR resolved 4,300 complaints, with more than 7,000 “violations of students’ rights to equal access to their schools’ educational programming and other activities under Federal disability-discrimination laws,” with many claims that a school had denied a child FAPE by not implementing required services, placing students in restrictive educational environments, or implementing inappropriate disciplinary measures (OCR). The coronavirus pandemic only further complicated matters for SWD.

Distance Learning Issues

With the unexpected and rocky transition to remote learning, schools were not immediately equipped to meet the learning needs of SWD. The National Survey of Public Education’s Response to Covid-19 examined the challenges faced by districts to meet the needs of SWD during school shutdowns (Jackson & Bowdon,

2020). One such obstacle during remote learning, particularly at the beginning, was that schools struggled to meet the requirements of IDEA. Although “Providing instructional accommodations and related services . . . and engaging with families and community social service agencies are essential strategies for making education accessible and appropriate for students with disabilities and are also requirements under IDEA” (Jackson & Bowdon), this was nearly impossible during the pandemic. Since school buildings were closed and resources limited, it was very difficult for schools to ensure that such obligations were met. Schools reported that “a variety of logistical and instructional factors [that] made it more difficult to deliver special education services during distance learning” (OCR, 2021). Further, for students that required more “hands-on, face-to-face interaction,” such as Occupational Therapy (OT) or Physical Therapy (PT), school shutdowns caused a complete standstill of services (OCR). Related services were also limited because many schools shortened their live face-to-face time during remote learning.

The survey also revealed that districts not only struggled to provide services, but they also struggled to provide instructional accommodations, one of the cornerstones of a child’s individualized education program (IEP), during remote learning. For example, instructional accommodations on an IEP might include preferential seating near a teacher, checking for on-task behavior, a separate location with minimal distractions during a test, or extra visual and verbal cues; such accommodations are very difficult, if not impossible, to implement via Zoom. In a May 2020 survey of 1,954 parents of students with disabilities, only 20% of respondents said their children were receiving services required by their IEPs, and 39% reported receiving no services at all (OCR, 2021). Further, the survey revealed that parents of children with IEPs were more than twice as likely as parents of children without IEPs “to say that their child was doing little to no remote learning (35% to 17%) and that distance learning was not going well (40% to 19%)” (OCR).

The reason for this is that many SWD had difficulty accessing materials without the supports they were used to, and this caused them to be disengaged. For students with learning challenges, engagement is often difficult even in a typical classroom setting; therefore, such challenges are exacerbated by the confines of remote learning. As such, “students with disabilities experienced higher rates of absenteeism, incomplete assignments, and course failures compared to their typical peers, and the effect is more significant in mathematics than reading” (Morando-Rhim & Ekin, 2021).

In addition to classroom challenges, schools found it difficult to comply with the IEP development requirements, renewal meetings, and evaluations; such challenges were more pronounced in high-poverty districts (45%) than they were in low-poverty districts (32%) (Jackson & Bowdon, 2020). “Overall, 57% of districts said that it was more or substantially more difficult to engage with families for help with IEP requirements during remote instruction” (Jackson & Bowdon). Rural and urban areas had similar challenges. Rural areas, especially more remote ones, also had difficulties accessing WiFi, which created barriers for both remote learning, and scheduling IEP meetings (Jackson & Bowdon).

Academic Impact

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic seems to have negatively impacted the learning of SWD disproportionately compared to their non-disabled peers. For example, SWD “saw sharper declines in test scores than their peers during the pandemic” (Blad, 2022). Further, in Fall 2020, several districts reported increases in the numbers of SWD failing classes; for example, data from one Maryland district showed that the number of sixth graders with disabilities failing English class doubled from the previous year, and “a Virginia district saw a 111% increase in the number of students with disabilities receiving Fs in two or more subjects in the first quarter of the 2020-21 school year” (OCR, 2021).

While schools across the country attempted to implement recovery programs for SWD, this presents its own set of challenges. For instance, “even if a child lost skills, regression can be hard to prove. Since it was tougher to collect data on students’ skills during the pandemic, it can be tricky to demonstrate how they regressed in a particular area over time” (Vaughan, 2022). In Spring 2022, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) implemented a recovery services program. Under this plan, “a student would be eligible for services only if a school could provide data showing a student regressed during remote learning. It wasn’t not enough to have not improved; there needed to be actual loss of skill” (Vaughan). This type of plan is problematic because 1) progress monitoring was limited during remote learning, and 2) there is no standardized measure for learning loss. One Special Education teacher in CPS explains, “I have incoming third graders that still have yet to master their letters . . . But to the district-made guidelines, they don’t qualify for recovery services. The district’s interpretation of that is they would say those students don’t qualify because they had never retained their letters, and so they didn’t regress because of COVID” (as cited in Vaughan).

English Language Learners

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, English Language Learners (ELLs) experienced extreme challenges in accessing academic material in comparison with their English-proficient peers. ELLs “face the dual challenge of learning English and the same curricular content as their other classmates” (OCR, 2021). To do well in the general education classroom, many ELLs receive a wide range of supports and services, including “targeted English-language-development lessons within or outside of the general education classroom, instructional support from a qualified teacher who uses sheltering or bilingual strategies designed to help English Learners understand their core classes like reading, math, science, and social studies, or modified curricular materials that integrate instruction in language and content simultaneously” (OCR). Such ELL supports are effective for many students,

and there are more intensive supports for greater levels of need. ELLs who test out of services and are considered “Fluent English Proficient, especially during elementary school, often have educational outcomes indistinguishable from, or even superior to, their peers who started school as fluent English speakers” (OCR).

Distance Learning Issues

There is already significant amounts of research indicating that ELLs were among the most severely impacted academically by school closures and remote learning (OCR, 2021). For many of these students, “virtual learning effectively foreclosed opportunities for English learners to engage in English-language conversation with adults and with peers, receive intensive language instruction at frequent intervals, and encounter conversational and formal language in a range of social and academic contexts” (OCR). Distance learning also forced parents to play a much bigger role in their children’s education, many being forced into an educator’s role. For those who didn’t have to actually teach their children the material, they were still required to help facilitate the learning in lieu of in-person teachers, which was difficult for individuals whose first language is not English. “This burden fell especially hard on linguistically diverse families of English learners, many of whom depend on overwhelmed schools to make web-based learning accessible to them” (OCR).

During the pandemic, the families of ELLs and the students themselves were also burdened with “financial and caregiving responsibilities that prevented their full participation in distance learning” (OCR, 2021). One survey of 575 teachers and 589 families from Summer 2020 found that only 39% of Spanish-speaking families “felt prepared to support a child learning from home—compared to fully half of all English-speaking families surveyed” (OCR). Some districts claimed that their efforts to provide the necessary supports to ELLs during distance learning was made more difficult by insufficient numbers of equipped staff, which was an issue

even before the pandemic, and then further exacerbated by it (OCR). For example, many schools only have a few, or even just one, teacher certified in English as a Second Language (ESL). “Many rural districts, districts with fewer resources, and more generally those with fewer English learners have reportedly had an even harder time offering the specialized instruction English learners need to continue learning both English and core content in the general curriculum” (OCR).

Academic Impact

Although the data is preliminary, it suggests that the pandemic has further intensified the disparities in learning outcomes for ELLs. As of Fall 2020, many districts across the country reported increases in the number of failing grades given to ELLs; one California district reported that the rate of low or failing grades of ELL students had increased by 34% (OCR, 2021).

Mental Health Issues

When schools closed during the covid-19 pandemic, educators, administrators, and other officials placed a heavy emphasis on resuming academic instruction via remote learning to minimize learning loss and disruption. In the midst of this chaos and trying to keep learning afloat, there was less concern with the mental health of students, which was negatively impacted as well. Even now, three years after the initial closures, schools are struggling to help students with mental health issues caused by the “staggering loss, grief, isolation, and uncertainty” brought on by the pandemic (OCR, 2021).

Several analyses are starting to emerge regarding the pandemic and the poor mental health outcomes it has caused. Children and teenagers are particularly vulnerable to mental health impacts due to their “limited understanding” of the events, their “limited coping strategies,” as well as their limited abilities to “communicate their feelings” like adults do (Imran et al., 2020). Further, school

closures, separation from friends, extended family, teachers, and the overall disruption of their routines caused stress and anxiety for kids (Imran et al.). Similar to learning losses, mental health impacts do not affect everyone equally, as different groups experience varying levels of distress.

Children & Teenagers

In a 2020 national survey of 1,000 parents conducted by Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, 71% of parents said that the pandemic had taken a toll on their children's mental health, and 69% said that the pandemic was the worst thing to ever happen to their children (Abramson, 2022). More data tends to be published on the mental health effects of Covid on adolescents and teenagers than on young children, probably because researchers can survey older children personally, which might not be possible with little kids. However, some data expressing the struggles of younger children does exist. For example, from March 2020 to October 2020, mental health-related emergency room visits for children aged 5 to 11-years-old increased by 24% and by 31% for ages 12 to 17-years-old, compared to 2019 visits (Abramson).

Adolescents & Teenagers

In 2021, the CDC released results from a special national survey of high school students regarding their experiences during the global pandemic. Some of the key findings indicated that high school students experienced "challenges with mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic including hopelessness, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts or intentions" (Blad, 2022). More specifically, of the 7,700 respondents, 37% said they had experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, and 31% said they had experienced poor mental health within 30-days of the questionnaire, which was administered between January and June 2021 (Blad). In addition, 44% of respondents reported "persistent feelings of sadness or

hopelessness” within the last year, 20% had considered suicide, and 9% reported actually attempting suicide (Blad).

One of the major protective factors against these mental health consequences was having a connection to others. Approximately 47% of respondents reported feeling close to people at their school and among those students, 28% reported poor mental health during the pandemic, compared to 45% who did not feel close to others at school (Johnson, 2022). Likewise, “35% of youth who reported feeling connected to others at school reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness compared with 53% of their counterparts” (Johnson).

Unsurprisingly, students who were able to virtually connect with others during quarantine had better mental health outcomes than those who were less virtually connected.

LGBTQ+ Students

During the global shutdowns caused by Covid-19, LGBTQ+ “faced particularly heightened risks for anxiety and stress” and “lost regular access to affirming student organizations and supportive peers, teachers, and school staff” (OCR, 2021). There was a notably large disparity in mental health status reported by heterosexual students and LGBTQ+ students in the CDC’s survey. More than 75% of LGBTQ+ students reported feelings of persistent hopelessness and sadness, compared to 37% of heterosexual students; further, more than 25% of LGBTQ+ students reported attempting suicide in the past year, compared to 5% of heterosexual students (Johnson, 2022). Pre-pandemic, LGBTQ+ students were at a higher risk for adverse conditions, such as reduced sense of safety, poorer mental health and higher suicide rates, missed school, and homelessness (Johnson). While there is not a great deal of research available on the specific experiences of LGBTQ+ during the pandemic, “what there is underscores these students’ vulnerability” (OCR, 2021). Schools are one of the main sources of mental health

services for LGBTQ+ students. Early public health data indicates that “loss of access to needed services may have heightened pre-existing risks, particularly for students struggling with their identity or enduring rejection from family or friends” (OCR). A recent study of 35,000 LGBTQ+ youth aged 13-24 showed that 48% of youth who wanted mental healthcare in 2020 were unable to access care, leaving them with no professional help during school closures (OCR). The same survey found that “85% of transgender and nonbinary youth reported that COVID-19 negatively impacted their mental health, and 78% that their mental health was ‘poor’ either most of the time or always during Covid-19,” compared to 75% and 61% respectively for their cisgender peers (OCR).

The disparities in mental health struggles for LGBTQ+ students can be linked to various factors, including the inability to access affirming organizations and supportive individuals (i.e. teachers, coaches, counselors, peers), which are protective factors against mental health problems, as well as increased time at home, which can “heighten risks of isolation and abuse from unsupportive or actively hostile family members” (OCR, 2021). According to one study, 81% of LGBTQ+ youth reported that Covid-19 made their home lives more stressful than it had been pre-pandemic (OCR). Online meeting platforms, like Zoom and Google Hangouts, also added some unexpected hurdles for transgender and nonbinary students“, as they may have been “identifying the student by a pre-populated name that may be based on an earlier school record but is inconsistent with their gender identity and is not the name they use and are known by at school” (OCR).

Differences by Race

Like many other aspects of the coronavirus pandemic, mental health struggles did not plague all children equally. “Children of color who live in the cities most affected by the pandemic have been hit by a triple tsunami: Their communities have had higher rates of COVID infections and deaths, more job losses, and more

isolation from extended remote learning than many predominantly white suburbs” (Jolicoeur & Mullins, 2021). Further, as the pandemic was sweeping across the country, there was an uptick in police brutality cases, further emphasizing systemic racism in society, and causing “trauma related to racial injustices” (Jolicoeur & Mullins). Unsurprisingly, children of color are experiencing mental health challenges at a higher rate than their white peers. At Franciscan Children’s Hospital in

Brighton, Massachusetts, there was a 19% increase in children of color in its mental health programs compared to the year before (Jolicoeur & Mullins). Due to this increase in demand, wait times are over a year just for patients to start outpatient therapy. Even as the pandemic seems to be winding down, many children need help for trauma, depression, and anxiety (Jolicoeur & Mullins).

Section 1 Key Terms

American Rescue Plan (ARP) - For schools, the ARP consisted of \$1.9 trillion in emergency assistance measures; investment in PK-12 schools in response to covid-19 to open schools and keep them open safely, combat learning loss and mental health challenges, and provide additional assistance to specific high-risk populations (e.g. students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness)

Protective factors - Conditions or attributes in individuals, families, communities that help people deal more effectively with stressful events and mitigate negative impacts

Section 1 Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think different levels of learning loss, as well as mental health challenges, are experienced by students of different socioeconomic statuses and races?

2. In your own practice, did you notice specific groups of students struggling more than others during distance learning? What steps did you and your school take to mitigate these struggles?
3. If there was another global shutdown and remote learning was the norm again, do you think schools would be more equipped now to support students with diverse needs? Why or why not? (Give specific examples of how your school is or is not better prepared)
4. Do you think standardized assessments are an accurate measure for learning loss? If so, why? If not, what do you think would be a better tool?

Section 1 Activities

1. Look through your school's student database and compare test scores from pre-Covid years, to post-Covid years. Compare other available data as well, including (but not limited to) behavioral incidences, absences, and grades. Take note of specific patterns that you notice.
 - a. Filter your search by students in high-risk categories for Covid losses, such as students with disabilities, English Language Learners, low socioeconomic status, and students of color. Reflect on how these records reflect or do not reflect similar outcomes discussed in this section.
2. When school closures happened, many students and families were at a loss of who to contact for different needs (academic support, mental health support, food resources, etc). Create a flowchart with this information that you can distribute to families in the case of an unexpected closure, or just to have on-hand. Include specific contact information and an explanation of who each individual/organization is.

Section 2: Learning Recovery and Mental Health Support

Since the Covid-19 pandemic turned our schools upside down, “learning loss” has become a buzzword for researchers, policymakers, and educational leaders alike. Concerns about both the short-term and long-term effects that the “pandemic will have on students’ academic progress and social-emotional well-being have been a constant” (Stoltzfus, 2021). However, learning loss recovery is more complicated than schools simply implementing specific strategies and interventions for their students.

In an ASCD Twitter chat with educators and educational leaders, ASCD asked, “What approaches are you using to address potential learning disruptions and instructional gaps from last year?” (as cited in Stoltzfus). Educational leaders “pointed out red flags around overtesting and remediation and the education industry’s compulsion to sort and categorize students based on isolated standardized tests” (Stoltzfus). Boni Fernandez Wozolek, Professor at Penn State University, had issues with the term “learning loss,” claiming that “implies a deficit lens” with racist roots, referring back to “ideologies that disproportionately impact Black [and] Brown students” (As cited in Stoltzfus). Learning loss is also complicated from a pedagogical perspective. One educator-author responded to the Twitter chat, “It’s incredibly challenging to counter the learning loss narrative as an ed leader I just keep coming back to: what’s the rush? And why does it matter that they’re in a different place according to academic measures that we know are harmful?” (As cited in Stoltzfus). Of course, that response is referring to standardized tests claiming that children are behind. Still, educators and policymakers all agree that learning disruptions occurred, and learning loss is legitimate. Secretary of State Miguel Cardona said, “Learning disruptions are very real . . . So many students have experienced interrupted or unfinished instruction”

(Stoltzfus). The complex part comes in trying to figure out the most constructive way to address the learning disruptions that occurred.

Measuring the Gaps

Educators and researchers have been trying to quantify just *how much* learning was lost during the Covid-19 school shutdowns, and even thereafter. Different studies have shown varying findings. For example, a December 2020 report by McKinsey & Company, which looked specifically at K-5 learning, estimated that students were behind in academics by about seven months on average, with gaps being more severe for students of color (Stoltzfus, 2021). Brown University and Harvard University tracked learning through the online math program, Zearn, from pre-pandemic times through May 2021, and found “students’ mathematics progress went down 8.5 percent” (Stoltzfus). However, in a spring 2021 study by Renaissance Learning, which looked at 3.8 million students in grades 1-8, it showed that students made similar progress in math and reading that they did in other years (Stoltzfus). Ultimately, it makes sense that there was some learning loss experienced, and certain demographics experienced it more severely, but it is very difficult to define exactly how much.

Researchers have also looked at the “combined effects of remote learning’s toll on academic loss and on students’ social-emotional health,” which they have named “the thriving gap” (Stoltzfus, 2021). This study, released by the American Education Research Association (AERA) in July 2021, claims that high school students who learned remotely, struggled more academically, socially, and emotionally, compared to their peers who learned in-person (Stoltzfus). In AERA’s study, the results were consistent across gender, race, ethnicity, and wealth statuses. These studies are valuable and they add insight into what caused learning loss, as well as estimates as to how much learning loss, in order to guide schools on what actions to take to mitigate such losses. However, Professor of

Education at University of Kansas, Tong Zhao, explains that “becoming too focused on measuring the loss may lead to an overreliance on standardized testing (which can only capture a portion of students’ learning and cause undue pressure) and a hyper focus on reading and math at the expense of other subjects” (Stoltzfus). Zhao claims that time would be better spent working with students and supporting their learning, rather than taking time away for testing.

Holistic Approach to Learning Recovery

Educational Approaches

Avis Williams, Superintendent of Selma City Schools in Alabama and vice president of ASCD’s board of directors, has urged her district to focus on “learning opportunities” opposed to learning losses (Stoltzfus, 2021). Testing is a component of this approach, but there is greater focus on getting a well-rounded idea of student needs. To start with, when it comes to the district’s educational approach, Williams explained that it’s back to basics, meaning “effective small group instruction, early literacy skills in K-2 grades, and vertical teaming across grade levels” (Stoltzfus). Why are the basics necessary? Decades of research has shown the importance of school systems getting the basics right in order to provide a quality education to students; therefore, looking back to the basics is essential now. In addition to the basics, there are also intensive supports that are critical in helping to create necessary learning opportunities.

Vertical Teaming Across Grade Levels

Curriculum alignment like this requires teachers to collaborate with other teachers in the grade levels below and above their own. Vertical curricular review and collaboration “refers to ensuring what students learn in one lesson, course, or grade level prepares them for the next lesson, course, or grade level” (Hanover Research, 2020). This process requires teachers from different levels and teams to work together to understand student needs, and ensure that learning gaps are

identified. Simmons (2021) identifies some of the main areas that teams will need to prioritize in order to make up for lost ground due to the pandemic; specifically, Simmons says teams will need to:

- Identify and discuss *essential* standards . . . that connect between grade levels.
- Identify and discuss gaps in the essential standards between grade levels.
- Discuss what needs to be done to strengthen the coherence in the standards between the two grade levels. This will help prevent future learning gaps from surfacing because of holes in the cohesion of the curriculum.
- Discuss essential standards that were not taught in the previous grade due to pandemic-related disruptions. Teams can use qualitative data when planning for gaps.
- Discuss students' readiness—the challenges they had with grade-level standards, and misconceptions students had at the end of the school year. Did the students master the prerequisite content? Do they have the knowledge and skills needed to begin mastering new content?

Vertical planning will impact and improve learning for all students by “providing horizontal, grade-level teams with the information they need to fill gaps” (Simmons). When vertical planning does not take place, teachers must try to guess what students already know, as well as what they will need to know. It is more effective and a better use of time to use vertical planning to make informed decisions based on data. “Coupling the qualitative data from these vertical planning conversations with quantitative assessment data will give teachers a better understanding of what students know and can do, as well as what students will need to know and be able to do” (Simmons).

Evidence Based, Grade-Level Instruction

Rather than focusing on tradition, personal preference and experience, and other factors, evidence-based practices are based on best available scientific research. “Teachers who follow evidence-based best practices in curriculum and pedagogy are most likely to foster academic progression” (Bryant et al., 2020). Providing students with grade-level content, backed by research, is critical in helping students overcome deficiencies in learning. Why? “Recent research from the New Teacher Project suggests that well-intentioned approaches that pull students out of grade-level instruction to ‘re-teach’ earlier-grade content can reinforce low expectations and create vicious cycles of underachievement” (Bryant et al.). Further, remedial programs that pull students out, including some Tier II and Tier III interventions in an RTI framework, which take students away from grade-level content “can lead students into a cycle of perpetually falling behind their classmates” (Sawchuk, 2020). Obviously, causing students to fall further behind would be extremely counterproductive when working on learning recovery. Remedial pullout instruction can also be damaging because some of “the strongest English/language arts curricula, in particular, are built so that they systematically build students’ content knowledge, a critical component of reading comprehension,” so time away from these classes results in missing out on “carefully sequenced lessons” (Sawchuk). Instead, teachers should continue to expose students to grade-level content, “while scaffolding students with ‘just-in-time support’ so they can access such content,” as “this is a natural way of prioritizing the building-block content from previous grades that is required to progress” (Bryant et al.).

Obviously, some students will need help that goes beyond scaffolding. Sawchuk (2020) suggests that a “both-and” approach is the best, meaning “interventions should meet kids where they are, but not at the expense of access to challenging, grade-level curriculum. They should be timely and respond to specific learning

gaps, but not replace core learning.” To address the roadblocks caused by remedial instruction in postsecondary schools, colleges and universities are using a co-requisite model which offers “targeted assistance courses that students take alongside their regular credit-bearing courses” so that they don’t fall behind or miss out on core courses (Sawchuk). Schools must implement a similar model for interventions, which is actually best practice for RTI models anyway; students receiving tier II or Tier III supports are supposed to receive such supports IN ADDITION to their core instruction, not in lieu of.

Looping

Looping is a strategy defined as “the practice in which a teacher instructs the same group of students for at least two school years, following them from one grade level to the next,” and is said to help students with both academic achievement and attendance (Hanover Research, 2020). Looping has also been shown to help with recovering learning loss (Hanover Research). Research shows a number of benefits to looping, including keeping more students in the general education classroom, improved attendance, and perhaps most importantly, deeper student and teacher connections (Hanover). The consistency and continuity created by looping is especially important in post-pandemic times. “Students who have experienced trauma (e.g., COVID-19) benefit from consistency in the classroom environment, classroom procedures, and instruction, as they can be triggered by sudden changes in routine, a lack of structure, or unclear boundaries,” thus, the stability and consistency also aids in learning recovery (Hanover). Furthermore, looping can lend itself to additional learning time because teachers can provide students with summer work that builds on academics from the school year, as well as helps prepare them for the following year. Naturally, there are some potentially negative outcomes associated with looping, including personality conflicts between students which cause teachers to become exacerbated, teachers may leave before the looping cycle is over,

students get limited exposure to different teaching styles, and students that enter late into the cycle may change classroom dynamics (Hanover). However, the benefits of looping do seem to weigh out the cons.

Emotional Support

More specific mental health supports will be discussed below, but broad emotional support at the building level is crucial as well. Some examples of successful emotional support initiatives in Williams' district include "conducting frequent student surveys around relationships, engagement, and other concerns, and creating a text hotline called 'Handle with Care' that parents can use to let teachers know when their children are having a tough time emotionally" (Stoltzfus, 2021). When discussing a holistic approach to educating children and addressing learning loss, it's important to remember that social-emotional health is not a separate issue, but quite interrelated.

Prioritize Attendance and Engagement

Learning cannot be recovered or accelerated if students aren't present, or if they're completely disengaged from their coursework. "Nearly all successful interventions contain a social-emotional piece that hinges on establishing a trusting relationship between each student and an adult, conveying a sense that every child is special and cared for in some way" (Sawchuk, 2020). Some districts have implemented what they call a "primary person model," meaning "educators are now responsible for checking in on a handful of families multiple times a week, and that individual becomes a touchpoint between the family and the school district" (Sawchuk). Therefore, whether a school is face-to-face or remote, synchronous or asynchronous, if a student does not show up or make contact, the primary person is calling to check in. One district representative expresses, "It's become the safety net to make sure everyone's physically and mentally well" (Sawchuk).

Districts around the country are utilizing various but similar initiatives to prioritize attendance and engagement of their students and families. For example, the Phoenix Union high school district in Arizona has a system in place where “every central office staffer has a caseload of students they check in with daily so if some obstacle—say, a lack of Chromebooks—is preventing learning, the district can troubleshoot a solution” (Sawchuk, 2020). Using central office people is innovative because it also provides students and families with another point of human contact, in addition to their teachers. The Achievement First Charter Network added a 30-minute daily advisory period into its remote learning schedule, allowing for more informal teacher and student connections. Amy D’Angelo, superintendent of the charter network, explains, “We need space dedicated and prioritized for social connection, for community, for students to be seen and valued and feel known and heard and to connect with other students who know them well . . . And we have to be even more adaptive based on what that looks like based on student needs. . . . Being flexible first starts with holding the time sacred” (Sawchuk).

Early Warning Systems

Providing effective intervention - social-emotional or academic - begins with identifying students in need. Early warning systems don’t reengage students on their own, but rather help educators identify students who are struggling. Such systems consist of a number of district-selected identifiers, “preferably ones that move in real time—that are statistically linked to dropping out, failing to complete major milestones in schooling, and other adverse effects,” and then set thresholds for each indicator (Sawchuk, 2020). Indicators linked to dropping out are different at the elementary and secondary levels, but some common ones include attendance, grades, course completion, and sometimes behavioral data (Sawchuk). Districts can also add indicators that are unique to their own population of students. For example, some districts in Montana “ found that

mobility was predictive of future academic performance and incorporated that into their indicators,” and others included 3rd grade reading ability (Sawchuk).

What makes early warning systems successful is when schools successfully intervene when a student is identified. “Sometimes intervention means a ‘light-touch’ approach; students who trigger more flags in the system or don’t respond to initial efforts may need more-extensive help” (Sawchuk, 2020). Using the indicator data is a team effort and requires input across the school. Professional Learning Communities (PLC) should review academic identifiers on a weekly basis, while “Support staff, counselors, and mental-health experts . . . review data on attendance, behavior, and social-emotional learning programming” (Sawchuk). All team members should have access to all of the data and should also collaborate with colleagues who are working with the same students.

Interventions will vary depending on the school level and need. For instance, in the White River District, at the secondary level, teachers review the academic indicators and targets on Monday, and go to the student’s online planner to reserve a meeting time; “during these 30-minute periods, which are worked into the master schedule on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, students work with the appropriate teacher to master the specific missing skill or content” (Sawchuk, 2020). It’s important to note that these meetings take place during a free period or study hall period, so students never miss out on core instructional content.

Other interventions, listed in order from lighter to more intensive, include:

- Having a teacher send text messages to a student, if he or she is absent several days in a row or earns low grades on assignments.
- Ramping up parent engagement, for example, by notifying them of homework assignments and quizzes.
- Prioritizing certain students for counseling.

- Conducting home visits.
- Assigning a staff person as a “case manager” to check in on a student several times a week.
- Providing mental health services.
- Providing extended learning time.
- Providing individual or small-group tutoring (Sawchuk)

After the team has provided the determined intervention, they reconvene to determine if the extra support has helped, or if more intensive action is necessary.

Additional Instruction

High-Dosage Tutoring

“Study after study identifies intensive, one-on-one or one-to-two tutoring as the most effective way to help students who are falling behind in their learning to catch up” (Sawchuk, 2020). High-dosage tutoring is generally defined as “one-on-one tutoring or tutoring in very small groups at least three times a week, or for about 50 hours over a semester” (Sawchuk). Tutoring tends to work for a wide range of subjects and on average, has some of the largest effect sizes of any intervention in education (Sawchuk). “These high-dosage programs are much more effective than low-dosage volunteer tutoring provided weekly or on an ad hoc basis, which have not been shown to have any significant effect on academic progression” (Dorn et al., 2020). The challenge? Such an intervention is time-consuming, expensive, and logistically difficult for remote settings. Training and hiring tutors for one-on-one or small group instruction is pricey. One study of a high dosage math tutoring program in Chicago showed that it cost around \$3,800 per student for a school year (Sawchuk). However, high dosage tutoring is so effective that other countries “are underwriting tutoring as a core strategy to put

kids back on track,” and setting aside significant amounts of money to fund such services (Sawchuk). While researchers are urging the U.S. Congress to follow this same path, it has yet to be approved.

Using paraprofessionals and volunteers to provide the lessons is one way to lower the costs of tutoring. Studies show that paraprofessionals and trained volunteers are “generally as good as certified teachers” in providing tutoring. While “it can take years to learn how to effectively teach a class of 25 or more students, many people can be trained in a relatively short time to be a good one-on-one tutor” (Sawchuk, 2020). Districts can also take action to reduce costs, such as using grants, like Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) funding, Title I funding, or business partnerships (Hanover, 2020).

Acceleration Academies

Acceleration Academies are “intensive, targeted instructional programs taught over vacation breaks by a carefully selected set of teachers” (Hanover, 2020). Acceleration academies show promise for academic gains, and typically focus on math, literacy, or English as a second language (ESL) instruction. These intensive workshops consist of a small group, typically 9-10 students, that are selected from different schools to receive more in-person or remote learning through these academies. Teachers and administrators typically use academic data to select students to participate. “In all . . . students can get up to 120 hours of additional teaching in a subject over the course of an academic year, or the equivalent of about 20-25 regular school days” (Sawchuk, 2020).

Mental Health Supports

The effects of the covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people has shown to be substantial. In fact, many researchers believe that the pandemic has created, or at least exacerbated, a mental health crisis for children. During school closures, “unstable learning environments, prolonged isolation, housing insecurity,

systemic racism, and various other factors” all made children vulnerable to mental health challenges (Flores, 2021). With most schools back in-person, administrators, educators, and other stakeholders are trying to implement practices to support student mental health following such turbulent times. This type of effort must be schoolwide, as it won’t be sufficient on a classroom-by-classroom basis or if such services are only offered to select individuals. Some of the methods that have been identified to support the mental health of students include becoming a trauma-informed school, focusing on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) skills, and increasing mental health supports in the school and the community.

Become a Trauma-Informed School

One way to build a schoolwide approach to mental health support is by becoming a trauma-informed school. Trauma-informed schools are “schools that recognize and are prepared to support community members affected by trauma and traumatic stress” (Asby et al., 2020). Further, in a trauma-informed school, teachers, support staff, and other workers are trained to effectively address trauma, as well as teach with a trauma-informed approach. For this to be successful, trauma-informed schools “focus on fostering a supportive, caring culture and training their entire staff to recognize and support students suffering trauma” (Asby et al.). Schools do not have to reinvent the wheel to become trauma-informed, as there are already research-based programs to utilize, such as the Comprehensive Behavioral Health Model (CBHM) used in Boston Public Schools, Heart Centered Learning, and restorative practices (Asby et al., 2020). In addition to utilizing a whole-school model like the ones named above, schools must also implement a trauma-informed approach to schoolwide practices, as well as focus on training staff.

Trauma-Informed Approach

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) identified the four R's, which are key assumptions for a trauma informed approach and include realize, recognize, respond, and resist re-traumatization. In addition, SAMHSA outlined six guiding principles of a trauma-informed approach: 1) Safety, 2) Trustworthiness and transparency, 3) Peer support, 4) Collaboration and mutuality, 5) Empowerment and choice, and 6) Cultural, historical and gender issues (CDC, 2020). Organizations and schools alike use both the four R's and SAMHSA's guiding principles as they implement their own trauma-informed approaches and initiatives.

The Four R's. The four R's are key assumptions that define a trauma-informed approach. First, "In a trauma-informed approach, all people at all levels of the organization . . . have a basic **realization** about trauma and understand how trauma can affect families, groups, organizations, and communities as well as individuals" (SAMHSA, 2014). For schools, this means that all staff members receive training on the effects of trauma and toxic stress on the brain, development, and behavior. Second, "people in the organization or system are also able to **recognize** the signs of trauma" (SAMHSA). In a school setting, this means that staff is trained to recognize and identify inward and outward behavior that are trauma-responses. Oftentimes, a student's disruptive behavior is dismissed by teachers as being disrespectful or attention-seeking, when in reality it is a stress response. Third, "the program, organization, or system **responds** by applying the principles of a trauma-informed approach to all areas of functioning" (SAMHSA). Policies, procedures, disciplinary actions, and all school processes, at the classroom and building level, are revised to "take into consideration the experiences of trauma among children" (SAMHSA). Lastly, a trauma-informed approach aims to actively "**resist re-traumatization** of clients as well as staff" (SAMHSA). Teachers and staff should be trained to recognize how certain practices

or actions can retraumatize students. For example, disciplinary measures that use a seclusion room, or other isolating measure, can be a trigger for students that have experienced abuse or neglect.

Six Principles. A trauma-informed approach does not consist of specific practices and procedures, but instead is governed by the six following principles:

Safety. Safety is the first principle because progress will be greatly limited if children do not feel safe, both physically and psychologically. SAMHSA (2014) defines this component in the following way: “Throughout the organization, staff and the people they serve, whether children or adults . . . feel physically and psychologically safe; the physical setting is safe and interpersonal interactions promote a sense of safety.” Physical safety ensures that staff and students will not be exposed to violence or physically harmed, touched in a way that they do not want to be, or feel scared for their physical well-being. Psychological safety means that individuals feel safe to express feelings, emotions, ideas, concerns, and can be their true selves, without fearing punishment or humiliation by teachers or fellow students. Schools must take measures to guarantee that their discipline policies and classroom practices promote safety and equity for all students. A school culture of inclusion, respect, equity and acceptance also fosters psychological safety for students. For this reason, anti-bullying, anti-violence, and SEL programs have become a central component of schools.

Trustworthiness and Transparency. Operations and decisions within the school are “conducted with transparency with the goal of building and maintaining trust” with students, staff, family members, and the community (SAMHSA, 2014). Trustworthiness and transparency must exist at the building level, set forth by administration, as well as at the classroom-level, facilitated by teachers. Students must feel that their teachers are looking

out for their best interest in all of their actions and practices, as well as conducting themselves honestly. Further, consistency plays a role in trustworthiness and transparency, as students should know what to expect from their teachers as far as routines, procedures, and even disciplinary measures. “Routine and structure help children to feel safe in processing intense feelings and moving through grief,” all of which are increasingly necessary after the stress brought on by the covid-19 pandemic (Asby et al., 2020). Trust and transparency can also be built by using specific strategies to help students stay calm, such as providing trigger warnings before potentially upsetting content, planning for additional support when difficulties are anticipated, and arranging the physical space to minimize triggers (e.g. seating arrangements, calm down areas).

Peer Support. Peer support is essential for creating a sense of community and belonging and for helping young people thrive. “Peer support and mutual self-help are key vehicles for establishing safety and hope, building trust, enhancing collaboration, and for utilizing stories and lived experience to promote” a safe, supportive, and positive learning environment (SAMHSA, 2014). Creating a culture of positive and respectful peer interactions is crucial for any classroom and school. Helping students find commonalities with other students and build bonds they might not have on their own is also helpful, as strong friendships and peer support are both protective measures against the negative effects of trauma.

Collaboration and Mutuality. Collaboration and mutuality between students and teachers, and teachers and administration, creates a community of trust within the school setting. “Importance is placed on partnering and the leveling of power differences between staff” and students, as well as among staff at different levels within the organization (SAMHSA, 2014). Teachers must use their positions of authority to help

students, rather than to intimidate or coerce them. Schools can use these principles to “create chances for students [and teachers] to work together during school to better their nuclear community, and outside the school, to better the larger community,” through initiatives like reading to younger students, or service learning projects (Asby et al., 2020).

Empowerment and Choice. Including young people in decision-making processes and giving them choices helps build confidence, self-worth, and perseverance. With these practices, “Throughout the organization . . . individuals’ strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon,” and all staff members “understand the importance of power differentials and ways in which [certain groups] have been diminished in voice and choice and are often recipients of coercive treatment” (SAMHSA, 2014). In a school setting, this relates to culturally responsive practices and teaching, as well as understanding, and combatting, the systemic inequities that exist in schools. This principle also includes valuing everyone’s individual voice. Teachers can implement practices in the classroom to allow students a choice in their everyday routines. “Having a voice in creating an agenda, classroom norms or rules, and expectations is intrinsically satisfying and helps prepare students for the complexities of citizenship in a democracy” (Asby et al., 2020).

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues. Trauma-informed structures acknowledge the diverse needs of individuals based on cultural, historical, and gender expectations, distinctions and inequalities. This principle complements empowerment and choice in that “the organization actively moves past cultural stereotypes and biases (e.g. based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, geography, etc.); offers access to gender responsive services; . . . incorporates policies, protocols, and processes that

are responsive to the racial, ethnic and cultural needs of individuals served; and recognizes and addresses historical trauma” (SAMHSA, 2014).

Staff Training

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for children to experience trauma. In fact, it is estimated that by age 17, two out of three school-aged kids will experience a potentially traumatizing event, such as (but not limited to) sexual or physical abuse, sexual or physical assault, or witnessing domestic abuse (Donisch et al., 2022). Additionally, because of the stress, grief, and uncertainty that Covid-19 caused for students, teachers are dealing with significant numbers of students affected by trauma to varying degrees. “School and district personnel are uniquely situated to identify, respond to, and be impacted by students’ symptoms of traumatic stress due to their central role in children’s lives” (Donisch et al.). However, a 2020 survey by the New York Life Foundation and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) found that only 15% of educators felt comfortable addressing grief or trauma related to the pandemic (Abramson, 2022). Most teacher preparation programs do not have a class dedicated to trauma-informed practices, and as of now, it is not a professional development requirement to retain licensure.

Schools should provide professional development for ALL staff who interact with students - teachers, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, custodians, etc. - “about what trauma and chronic stress do to the brain, how that translates to behavior disruptions and mental health challenges, and how they can take concrete steps to foster resilience and ameliorate these effects” (Asby et al., 2022). It is even more beneficial when schools extend the training to individuals in the community who also work with children, such as police officers, medical professionals, and religious leaders, because not only does the knowledge

become more widespread but school personnel “can also gain valuable allies who can help address those negative effects, inside and out of school” (Asby et al.).

Organizations are coming forward to help in the effort to train school staff, with professional development opportunities including in-person training, online courses, and webinars. For example, a professor of school psychology at the University of Las Vegas, Samuel Song, is working on a grant to provide a four-part web-based curriculum for schools on trauma-informed practices. Such programs are meant to “help teachers identify signs of trauma in students and also cope with their own trauma,” as to avoid dismissing certain trauma-driven behaviors as disruptive or offensive, and instead “better identify kids who are struggling and route them to appropriate support services within the school system” (Abramson, 2022). *Mental Health Primers*, developed by the Coalition of Psychology in Schools and Education, is a free, online resource that strives to “provide information for teachers to identify behaviors in the classroom that are symptomatic of mental health and other psychological issues, with the goal of directing teachers to appropriate resources for their students” (Asby et al., 2022). These resources do not suggest that teachers treat students themselves, but rather be prepared to recognize behaviors associated with mental health struggles, and be able to provide students with the necessary resources. Other programs include Project AWARE, which is a “school-based mental health structure to train teachers in strategies to build supportive relationships with students and use ‘conscious discipline’ rather than simply reacting to students in the moment” (Sparks, 2022).

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Although little attention was paid to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) until recent times, research shows that it plays an integral role in improving “students’ mental health and wellbeing,” as well as “help to remediate for deficits in academic learning and outcomes” (Yorke et al., 2021). Both helping to overcome deficits in

academic learning, as well as improving the mental health and wellbeing of students are major areas of concern following the Covid-19 pandemic. “The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the essential role of SEL into focus and has drawn attention to the need to take a more holistic approach to students’ learning and development” (Yorke et al.). In other words, SEL is not a separate entity from academic learning, as such learning will not occur efficiently if students’ social-emotional health is suffering. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2019) defines SEL as: “How children and adults learn to understand and manage emotions, set goals, show empathy for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions,” with the core competencies being self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Although some may think that SEL takes valuable time away from academics, it is actually a crucial component of better academic outcomes. “Children with higher teacher-rated social competence in kindergarten are more likely to graduate, attend college, and have a job 20 years later. They are also less likely to receive public assistance, have criminal justice involvement, or report mental health challenges in young adulthood” (Yorke et al., 2021). Further, strong SEL skills “influence educational attainment, employment, and earnings as much, or more than, academic achievement measured by standardized tests” (Yorke et al.). SEL and academics are highly intertwined, as positive social-emotional learning competencies serve as a foundation for achieving academic goals.

SEL and Mental Health Connection

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (as cited in Yorke et al., 2021). An

individual's mental health and well-being are believed to be determined through biological, psychological, and social factors (Yorke et al.). As such, mental health and wellbeing "can be actively promoted through specific actions and interventions, including through the creation of an enabling and supportive environment both inside and outside of school," including instilling SEL skills in students (Yorke et al.).

Mental health challenges were on the rise among children and adolescents before the Covid-19 pandemic, but were exacerbated by school closures, unexpected hardships, and other unprecedented challenges that accompanied it. As recovery continues from all of these challenges, SEL is particularly important. "Building social and emotional learning skills can help children respond to difficult and unexpected situations in a calm and emotionally regulated manner, enabling them to set out and develop strategies for dealing with difficult circumstances, and to interact and work with others to address problems" (Yorke et al., 2021). By teaching children SEL skills, schools are instilling them with long-term and sustainable resilience to deal with life's challenges.

Schoolwide Approach to SEL

SEL can be a universal core instruction to build a common skill set and positive school culture, with a focus on proactive wellness promotion and self-regulating behavior and emotions. This universal approach creates a foundation of mutually reinforcing skills that improves prosocial interaction and resilience to stress for all students" (Rosenblaum, 2021). SEL should not be taught only on a classroom-by-classroom basis, but it should be part of a whole-school initiative. More recently, SEL has been integrated into the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) within a school, which "provides a model of instruction for all students within a school, spanning the content areas of both academics and social and emotional skills development" (Rosenblaum). Typically, a MTSS includes universal screening

measures, tiered support based on levels of need, and ongoing monitoring. Tier one is universal, such as a schoolwide SEL curriculum, while Tiers two and three increase with levels of need, and take place in small-groups or individual settings. “The MTSS framework recognizes SEL as an educational need analogous to the development of academic skills like literacy: both require universal instruction on a hierarchy of skills that build in complexity over time, along with practice and coaching from supportive teachers as new skills are tackled” (Rosenblaum).

Implementation. Not all implementation strategies of SEL are equally effective. “SEL programs that are optional or targeted only to certain students will do little to alter the overall school culture and behavioral norms,” but rather “universal SEL curricula achieve larger effects” and result in “significantly larger student benefits” (Rosenblaum, 2021). Tier one SEL instruction should be delivered by classroom teachers, whereas tiers two and three are better delivered by counselors and social workers. “When teachers lead SEL instruction and discussion, they become more engaged in the material and are more likely to weave ongoing skills coaching throughout the entire school day,” further, they can integrate SEL components into academic areas, such as “discussing social and emotional factors in literature or historical events” (Rosenblaum).

For students to fully benefit from SEL instruction, the delivery of the program will need to be well planned and exemplary. “They will need high-quality teacher preparation and training paired with ongoing monitoring, reflection, and coaching. They will need for SEL practices to become ingrained within the mindset of the educators and culture of the school” (Rosenblaum, 2021). As such, an effective SEL initiative will shape all aspects of a school, including teacher behavior, school climate, and student skills and behavior (Rosenblaum).

Section 2 Key Terms

Looping - The practice in which a teacher instructs the same group of students for at least two school years, following them from one grade level to the next

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) - A team of educators who collaborate with one another to improve and enhance their teaching practice, as well as learning experiences for students

Scaffolding - A teaching technique in which content is taught in segments, providing less and less support as students master the new skills (ex: I do - we do - you do)

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) - Refers to the acquisition of a wide range of skills and attributes, which are considered critical to students' development, including self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills

Vertical Collaboration - Refers to ensuring what students learn in one lesson, course, or grade level prepares them for the next lesson, course, or grade level

Section 2 Discussion Questions

1. Has your school implemented any of the interventions discussed to mitigate learning loss? If not, what has your school done to try to close any gaps caused by Covid-19 closures?
2. How might vertical teaming and curriculum alignment play a role in closing instructional gaps caused by the pandemic?
3. Why do you think there is a connection between SEL skills and academic achievement? Explain how the two relate to each other.

4. How does your school currently take a trauma-informed approach in its practices? How can your school do more, and what can you do in your individual practice?
5. How do you intentionally foster a culture of physical and psychological safety in your classroom?

Section 2 Activities

1. School Safety Audit
 - a. Map out hot zones and cool zones at your school. *Hot zones are the areas where students experience more conflict, disciplinary issues, and trauma-responses, whereas cool zones are areas where students are typically calm and conflict is minimal (Donisch et al., 2022).*
 - b. To do this, use observation and behavioral data that you have access to. Try to determine the root causes of conflicts in the hot zones, and the defining characteristics of the cool zones.
 - c. Using your data, determine strategies to enhance the physical and psychological safety of the hot areas.
2. Explore the Mental Health Primers website. Find a primer scenario that you have experienced or are experiencing with one of your students and take note of some strategies that you can use to help your student.
3. Conduct your own research on SEL programs that would fit your school's needs and demographics. Make a spreadsheet to compare a couple of programs and then present it to your administration for consideration.

Conclusion

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic forced an alarming amount of students out of schools, and years later schools and communities are trying to mitigate the negative effects that it had on school-aged children. Children and families worldwide rely on schools in their everyday lives, for education, social interaction, supervision, health services, mental health services and even nutritious meals. Therefore, when schools closed due to the pandemic it had detrimental effects on the learning and mental health of children. Although the effects that closures had on childrens' learning and social-emotional wellness are just beginning to emerge, they are critical, and will require schools to take serious action to repair.

Case Study

Mrs. Lily is the principal of Green Garden Middle School (GGMS), which is a racially and socioeconomically diverse school. While GGMS was able to get back into in-person instruction by mid 2020-2021 school year, they are still seeing declines in student performance and engagement. Mrs. Lily is looking for ways to improve both. Current practices have teachers working solely with their grade level teams to determine unit plans and standards covered for the year. They meet during summer institutes, as well as in weekly PLC meetings. When students are absent, each teacher is responsible for preparing makeup work for their respective class, but there is no specific point of contact for students. Mrs. Lily is proud of the SEL program that the school has adopted, and while teachers are supposed to implement it during advisory, teachers have not yet received training on the program. Mrs. Lily is trying to determine what school wide changes she needs to implement to see improvement in performance and engagement. She realizes that this will be an ongoing project, and knows that the investments made

will have a long lasting impact on the well-being and futures of students and the entire school community.

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