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## Back to School 2021 – Addressing Learning Loss and Student Well-Being

The beginning of this K-12 academic year will certainly be significant for school leaders, educators, students and families. After more than a year of remote learning, in-person schooling will fully resume for students across the state. Two primary considerations for school leaders will be addressing learning loss due to remote learning and assessing student well-being in the wake of the collective trauma brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because these two [concepts](#) are not unrelated, it is important that both academics and socio-emotional health are prioritized as classes resume this fall.



### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ **Two priorities for K-12 school leaders this fall will be addressing learning loss and gauging student mental health.**
- ▶ **High-dosage tutoring is one way school districts can work to mitigate learning loss from remote learning.**
- ▶ **Survey assessments can be helpful tools to pinpoint specific interventions to support students' well-being.**

### TUTORING TO ADDRESS LEARNING LOSS

Student learning loss due to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is a reality for the K-12 community. McKinsey & Company, a renowned management consulting firm, [analyzed](#) student learning loss at the culmination of the 2020-21 school year. The analysis “shows that the impact of the pandemic on K–12 student learning was significant, leaving students on average five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the school year. The pandemic widened preexisting opportunity

and achievement gaps, hitting historically disadvantaged students hardest. In math, students in majority Black schools ended the year with six months of unfinished learning, students in low-income schools with seven.”

Tutoring may be one panacea for learning loss. A “[meta-analysis](#) finds that tutoring programs have consistently large, positive impacts on students across a wide range of program characteristics.” Programs with the most impact tended to be facilitated by educators or paraprofessionals, as opposed to volunteers or parents, and tended to be programs imbedded within the school day, according to the research.

Intensive tutoring, commonly referred to as high-dosage tutoring, has shown great promise. According to [recent research](#), “... high-dosage tutoring was 20 times more effective than low-dosage tutoring in math. In reading, high-dosage tutoring was 15 times more effective than low-dosage tutoring.”

In an April 2021 school reopening guidance document, the [U.S. Department of Education](#) highlighted the importance of tutoring on math achievement for high school students. American Rescue Plan monies can be used for tutoring, states the guidance. According to the report,



“... a study from the University of Chicago Education Lab shows that personalized, intensive tutoring can double or triple the amount of math high school students learn each year, increasing their grades and reducing course failures in both math and other subjects.”

Currently, there is a national push to promote tutoring in K-12 education. Envisioned by a coalition of U.S. education leaders, the [National Student Support Accelerator](#) aims to scale high-impact K-12 tutoring programs throughout the country. The project, which is in its infancy stage, is currently housed at Brown University and provides research, tools and technical assistance to K-12 school districts.

Using a model that is more personalized and utilizes paraprofessionals, Saga Education has demonstrated the benefits of [high-dosage](#) tutoring. Several ingredients are needed to effectively implement it. Rather than include tutoring as a tack-on to the school day, it should be “part of the

academic ecosystem,” says AJ Gutierrez, co-founder of Saga Education.

The frequency of tutoring should be three to five times per week, which is about 60-70 hours of instruction per school year. This frequency is “where you begin to see significant academic gains for students,” Gutierrez notes. According to Gutierrez, it is best to pair students and tutors according to student skill level via assessment scores (e.g., Regents scores) and also by personality. Overall, tutoring shows much [effectiveness](#) with reading levels in the early primary grade years and, even more so, for higher-level math achievement.

School district leaders who are concerned about financing tutoring can allay their worries, says Gutierrez. High-dosage tutoring is much more cost-effective than tutoring in the private sector, a choice that may present access issues for low-income families, he notes. In terms of scalability and cost-effectiveness, every student at each grade level does not need a tutor within

this model. “You get the most bang for your buck” by concentrating tutoring efforts at two transitions along the K-12 spectrum – ninth-grade algebra and third-grade literacy, Gutierrez told NYSSBA. Of note, tutoring [costs](#) have ranged from \$3,500 – \$4,300 per year per student. Research is currently being conducted concerning [lower-cost](#) Saga tutoring models.

It is important to remember that high-dosage tutoring is not just about academics, it is also about relationships. So, having consistent, reliable tutor/student ratios of 1:2 or 1:3 throughout the academic year is important, Gutierrez told NYSSBA. Positive relational connections tend to foster emotional well-being, namely [happiness](#), in students.

### GAUGING STUDENT WELL-BEING

Healthy socio-emotional well-being supports student academic development as well. As school resumes, it is important to strengthen ties with students and gauge student well-being.

The importance of focusing on student well-being is highlighted in the U.S. Department of Education’s April 2021 school reopening [guidance](#). According to the guidance, “While there is concern regarding the impact of lost instructional time as it relates to student academic performance, meeting the social and emotional needs of students must be foundational to efforts to improve academic outcomes for students.”

No doubt, there is, and will continue to be, a spectrum of impact from the pandemic on students. School leaders will need to ascertain where students are at emotionally and what their needs are as schools reopen in the fall. There are many contextual factors that may affect a child’s mental health. Risk factors that may play a role in adverse outcomes can include living in poverty and experiencing trauma (e.g., loss, violence, abuse). Protective factors including

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supportive relationships with caring adults may buffer a child from adverse outcomes.

An April 2021 [joint memo](#) from the New York State Education Department and the New York State Office of Mental Health explains how risk and resilience factors may play out for youth during the pandemic. “Less vulnerable students may be able to leverage protective factors and make the transition to post-traumatic growth, though the existence of protective factors does not preclude a student’s risk. More vulnerable students, however, including those with pre-existing social-emotional or behavioral challenges such as depression and anxiety, can be at greater risk,” states the memo.

There is at least one step school leaders should take before administering well-being assessments. School administrators and educators should prioritize relationships at the beginning of the school year, says Myung. “The issue of testing right at the beginning of the year is also an issue of opportunity cost. When educator attention is directed toward administering tests, less attention is being focused on relationship development, which should be the primary focus at the start of the school year. In my opinion, schools should wait at least one or two weeks before administering formal exams (academic or SEL), with that time being focused on developing connections, relationships and belonging,” she notes.

houses the survey, has entered into a partnership with UChicago Consortium that houses a tool called [Cultivate](#), she notes. According to Maichin, “Cultivate can serve as the larger before and after measurement and Elevate can be used as a progress monitoring tool between Cultivate administration.”

Assessing student socio-emotional well-being can be accomplished in more than one way. In addition to surveys, school leaders can conduct [focus groups](#), according to joint guidance from the New York State Department of Education and the New York State Office of Mental Health.

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School boards can direct district administrators to assess student socio-emotional well-being as a part of the process to support student social and emotional needs. Surveys are a useful tool for assessing the socio-emotional state of students. The national guidance addresses the use of such assessments to gauge student socio-emotional health. Survey assessments need to be designed well so that youth are not [retraumatized](#) or stigmatized. This is important since “research indicates that testing can trigger feelings of stigmatization and marginalization for vulnerable students, particularly when they feel under threat or when they lack a sense of belonging in class,” says Dr. Jeannie Myung, director of policy research at Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) at Stanford University.

After strengthening relationships with students, school leaders may decide to survey district youth. An example of a survey that assesses student well-being is the [Copilot-Elevate Survey](#). This survey ascertains learning conditions that support positive student development and engagement. Jennifer Maichin, district learning and development specialist at Mineola Union Free School District and Copilot contributor and super-user, according to the survey company’s website, explains the benefits her district’s educators experience from using the assessment tool. “We have been using Copilot-Elevate for 3 years now with different sets of teachers and have had amazing take-aways and have also seen an increase in both teacher ownership (to create the learning conditions that support engagement) and student engagement.” PERTS, the company that

Optimally, whichever methods are used, assessment tools should provide feedback that informs school intervention strategies including “[tiered referrals](#),” so assessment [objectives](#) (e.g., “assessment of overall well-being”) should align with K-12 strategic plans. For example, the Copilot-Elevate Survey links outcomes to “evidence-based recommendations.”

The start of this upcoming school year will be a pivotal time to focus on any needs gap that may be present in the K-12 community. Addressing learning loss and student well-being, and doing so in a way that recognizes their interconnectedness, will be of paramount importance as the new K-12 academic normal commences.