3 Principles for Assessments During Instructional Recovery and Beyond

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School as we’ve known it has changed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically shifted the way leaders, teachers, students, and families experience teaching and learning.

As leaders and teachers are preparing to address amplified learning loss, they are also recognizing and preparing for the compounding impact on students who are experiencing increased economic challenges, are from racially marginalized communities, have inequitable access to quality distance learning, are multi-language learners, and/or have learning and attention differences.

Districts should not aim for a quick fix that returns students to a status quo that already had too many students inadequately engaged in learning. Rather, we have an opportunity to try to create more equitable systems that address the underlying issues of marginalization. It will take a strategic approach of leveraging standards-aligned materials and assessments to mitigate the loss and begin to eliminate the preexisting gap.

Strategic use of assessments can be key in identifying and responding to learning loss. But what should assessments look like right now?

In our previous white paper, Teaching Comes First, we shared the key considerations for using assessments to drive instruction: volume, purpose, and quality. These considerations are still essential in today’s context. Building on this work, and in recognition of today’s new challenges and exacerbated inequities, it is more important than ever to focus on the purpose of assessments—to serve children and families with the best information to accelerate learning.

With this in mind, we recommend three guiding principles for establishing a strong, purposeful assessment system for the coming school year and beyond. These guiding principles are applicable across instructional delivery scenarios: from long distance learning to schools opening as they historically have, for leaders just getting started in planning, and for those beginning to implement instructional recovery plans.
Principle 1: Establish a tiered approach to collecting data

Start by identifying what prioritized data you need for all, some, and a few of your students. Think expansively about the data you’ll need to support students—for example, academic achievement, social-emotional needs, attendance, and frequency of family communication. Centering on the experience and perspective of your students, especially the most marginalized, can help ensure that their needs drive your planning.

A tiered approach will limit the likelihood of being overwhelmed by assessments and data. It will also help teachers and leaders provide additional support to students who need it most.

Principle 2: Prioritize data close to instruction

Ensure every assessment given connects to a clear action a teacher can take to support student learning. Short-cycle assessments provide “time of need” data to make targeted decisions when shifting between virtual and in-person instructional delivery models.

High-quality interims that reflect the demands of the standards can serve as an anchor for teachers and leaders to revisit quarterly. They can be especially useful for leaders seeking to make programmatic decisions about scheduling, staffing, and resource allocation with a focus on instructional planning and getting students to grade level. With a high-quality curriculum, you’ll likely have a more efficient path in prioritizing data close to instruction.

Ask yourself, “Can a teacher use this next week?” By prioritizing data close to instruction, you’ll be able to identify students’ needs expeditiously and provide them with the targeted support they need, when they need it—reducing amplified learning loss.

Principle 3: Use data to increase student and family engagement

Focus on feedback rather than formal assessment. Instead of using assessments to assign a grade to students or to determine rigid groupings that may prevent students from accessing grade-level content, use assessment data to keep students and families engaged.

Assessments that are used instructionally to determine students’ strengths and areas of need—and put them on the path to accessing grade-level content—will be essential for capturing the data most meaningful to students and the educators who support them.