

The Secret to Kickstarting Learning Recovery

By Shalinee Sharma, CEO of Zearn

What's the secret to kickstarting learning recovery?

With students back in classrooms and the true measure of missed learning during the pandemic becoming apparent, we at Zearn are often asked for “the one thing that schools should be doing to get students back on track.”

While there are an abundance of folks who are more than happy to use this moment to promote the newest fad, the simple truth is that there's no one thing — no silver bullet — that will single-handedly kickstart learning recovery and erase the impact of the pandemic. The fact is, however, that there are steps state and district leaders can adopt to set teachers and students up for success. Here's a look, not just at the strategies, but the places putting in the hard work that will make learning recovery a reality:

Ensure equitable access to grade-level instruction.

Last school year, across our country, [students of color and those from low-income backgrounds were more likely than their white or wealthier peers to experience remediation—even when they had already mastered grade-level content](#). Detroit Public Schools, in which [78% of students come from low-income households](#), is proactively using Zearn to assess and adjust student assignments so all students have equitable access to grade-level instruction.

Tip: [Students with access to grade-level instruction are able to learn more material than those who experience traditional remediation, and this is particularly true for students of color and students from low-income households, who are much more likely to be remediated](#). Supporting teachers to make equitable instructional choices for all students — students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with learning and thinking differences, and multilingual learners — is key to closing the opportunity gap.

Support schools to choose strong instructional materials.

Districts and schools tasked with selecting high-quality instructional materials have a dizzying array of choices of varying quality. The Massachusetts Department of Education is providing [guidance and funding so that districts have free access not only to pre-vetted high-quality, coherent core curricula, but also engaging and interactive digital instructional materials and learning programs](#).

Tip: Students had very different pandemic experiences, which significantly increased gaps between what students know and understand, even within the same classroom. The best instructional materials allow educators to [meet each student where they are with just-in-time](#)

[support](#). Digital instructional materials, in particular, can be built for acceleration or remediation, so schools should be supported to choose materials that facilitate learning acceleration.

Provide the students who most need it with coherent, high-quality extra math instructional time and support.

In recognition of the [extraordinary toll the pandemic has taken](#) on student learning, the American Rescue Plan is sending billions of dollars to the states to support learning recovery. This summer, the Texas Education agency allocated some of these funds to an [initiative to provide high-impact tutoring for one million students](#), making it the first in the nation to provide subsidized, evidence-based tutoring for schools and districts at a statewide scale.

Tip: States and districts have great flexibility in how they choose to help students make up for missed learning. Ensuring extra supports and interventions, such as tutoring and summer sessions, are aligned with what students are learning in the classroom and utilize high-quality materials, allows students to consistently engage with one fundamental math concept at a time.

Offer comprehensive professional learning for teachers.

Meeting students' diverse needs before the pandemic was already incredibly challenging. In fact, a recent [survey](#) found that the average teacher spends 7 hours each week searching for instructional materials for their students, and another 5 hours creating their own. Nebraska is making educators' jobs easier by arming them with [new tools and professional learning](#) to address unfinished learning.

Tip: Training teachers on how they can best use instructional materials is crucial, even with high-quality curricula. When educators are aware of the tools available and comfortable using them, they can focus on instruction, instead of finding and developing resources, and implement with fidelity.

Engage families to support students' learning.

A year and a half of school closings, distance learning, and quarantines gave parents and caregivers a deeper understanding of what their children are learning, where they are excelling, and where they are struggling. The Delaware Department of Education is leveraging this moment to [communicate with families about educational tools and learning opportunities available to them at home and in their communities](#).

Tip: Transparently communicating to parents and caregivers what is happening in schools can make them true partners in their children's learning. And, providing regular opportunities for them to share feedback and shape decisions about the learning supports offered can help administrators and educators better tailor them to meet students' needs. This, in turn, leads more families to take advantage of them and improves family engagement overall.

The pandemic set millions of students back in their learning, but it also provided us with an opportunity to rethink how we educate students and how we can move them more quickly on the path to success. There's no quick fix, but districts and states can make smart investments and seize this moment to better meet kids' needs.