

GUIDE

Kick-start fall planning: 4 principles for school leaders

Carrie Heath Phillips, with Steve Underwood and Ted Coe



Back to school won't be back to normal following COVID-19. Nor should it be.

The chaos created by the pandemic offers an opportunity for educators to do what they were called to do when they joined the education profession: rethink education to meet the needs of all students. “Normal” schooling has never worked for many children, particularly for students living in poverty, students of color, students with disabilities, and English language learners. The challenges many children experienced prior to extended school closures have been exacerbated by remote teaching and learning. While the issues at hand are complicated, now, more than ever, it is important to establish strong practices that support the whole child—social, emotional, mental, physical, and academic health—while also deeply exploring how to address unfinished teaching. Our educators, in partnership with families and community members, are exactly the right people to address these challenges now.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Students had a wide range of experiences during COVID-19 school closures. [Research from NWEA](#) confirms what many educators knew was happening all along: an increase in educational inequity and opportunity gaps. Using data from 5.5 million students, we found that gains in reading and math were lower in SY20–21 than years before the pandemic and that American Indian, Alaska Native, Black, and Latino students, as well as students in high-poverty schools, were disproportionately impacted.

This guide provides principles for how school leaders can bridge unfinished teaching for

students while teaching grade-level standards in a way that best meets students where they are. As you plan for the school year ahead, we offer these strategies to inform the instructional decisions to be made based on your community’s needs and circumstances.

THE PRINCIPLES

The four principles we’re recommending you follow are:

1. Build a system-wide approach to social-emotional learning (SEL)
2. Establish system-wide curriculum models accompanied by professional learning for teachers on scaffolding instruction and use of data
3. Ensure time and structures are designed to optimize student learning
4. Guarantee each building has a strong school leadership team

Principle 1: Build a system-wide approach to social-emotional learning (SEL), since academic learning is dependent on supporting students’ social and emotional development

For kids to learn, their social and emotional needs must be addressed alongside their academic needs. The world has been a traumatic place for many students during the pandemic. [Integrating SEL with academic learning will serve the needs of the whole child.](#) Here’s how to do that.

Foster a supportive school environment

Before starting to provide specific supports and implement new tactics for individual students and teachers, look at the overall school environment to identify if it's a safe, welcoming, and supportive space for all adults and students. Note where disparities may exist for different groups of students and teachers. A school's climate and culture set the tone for how willing adults and children are to engage in new social and emotional learning programs. Consider measuring your starting place around school environment through surveys that include climate and culture measures for students and teachers.

Cultivate adult social and emotional well-being and skills

School personnel have been impacted by school closures and many will have personally experienced the impacts of COVID-19 sickness or loss, the unemployment of family members, or other forms of trauma. Leading with empathy and attending to adult well-being will fuel staff's ability to care for students. [As the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\) states](#), "[I]t is important to nurture a work environment in which staff feel supported and have opportunities to build relational trust, collaborate effectively, and sharpen their own skills." Attending to the social and emotional dynamics of the adults in your system is a multi-year effort, and now is an opportune time to start.

Identify a school's starting place for SEL

Consider conducting a survey such as the [Priority Setting Questionnaire](#) from CASEL. Choose one or two areas to focus on this school year so the change is manageable and productive for adults and kids. Based on your starting place, develop a plan to phase in integration of social and emotional skills with academics, if this isn't in place already. Curricula and products on SEL will only be effective if there's a cohesive and sustained effort to provide all school personnel quality professional learning. Strong commitment

and prioritization from school leaders to SEL's integration with academics is vital to success.

Focus on SEL skills that help mitigate trauma and stress and build relationships and resilience

Although students will have reacted to this crisis differently and will have differing coping mechanisms, research on the effects of trauma and chronic stress (i.e., stress lasting for an extended period of time) gives us an idea of [what social and emotional needs students will have](#). Although we should not expect that all students will have experienced the pandemic as traumatic, educators should be aware that those who experience chronic stress will have psychological and behavior impacts resulting in increased challenges with attention, regulation, and interpersonal skills. Based on this, schools should consider these specific dimensions of SEL as the focus of their support to students through professional development for educators on what to expect, how to recognize symptoms, and how to support students. In addition, ensure teachers are familiar with the systems of referral for signaling a student is in crisis. Consider these resources on trauma-informed practice:

- [Trauma-informed SEL toolkit](#)
- [Helping traumatized children learn](#)
- [Trauma-sensitive schools training package](#)
- [Social-emotional learning: Trauma-informed support](#)

Consider high-impact approaches you can start immediately, such as developing a strategy to ensure each child has a supportive, continuous relationship with at least one adult in each school building

Students and teachers missed seeing each other during COVID-19 school closures, underscoring the centrality of relationships to the teaching and learning process. Strong relationships are the foundation of social and emotional development. The supportive relationship may be with a child's classroom teacher or homeroom teacher, school counselor, specialty-area teacher, or custodian;

all adults can play a role here. For example, some schools intentionally assign teachers, kitchen or playground staff, or bus drivers to build relationships with and keep an eye out for specific sets of kids because a caring adult who knows a child will best be able to identify when a child is struggling. Another strategy, particularly for older students, is to create advisories or small learning communities where students have the opportunity to develop positive relationships with a specific teacher or groups of peers. While not as widely used, looping is a good strategy to try in elementary schools. This is when students remain with one teacher for more than one grade. It's a low-cost, pragmatic approach to sustaining relationships and continuity for students.

Connect with families and other community partners

SEL is most productive when implemented across school, familial, and community environments. Identify community partners—from after-school

providers to youth development and social services organizations—who can provide services and supports to young people. Organize a meeting to discuss ideas on how to collaborate to address the needs of students and families in your shared spheres of influence.

Similarly, schools can connect with families to help build an understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 in their community that may not have been as visible to teachers and school leaders. Families who did not have the resources (such as internet connectivity, devices, or adults who could be present in the home during the day) at the onset of the pandemic to support distance learning may be feeling more marginalized and less supportive of the system than ever. School leaders should create the conditions that allow families to be seen and valued as we all work together to educate each and every child. Consider [Dr. Karen Mapp's family-school partnership framework](#) to support your efforts.

Principle 2: Establish system-wide curriculum models accompanied by professional learning for teachers on scaffolding instruction and use of data

School leaders should establish clear and attainable curricular goals for the upcoming academic year, communicated and established in a way that promotes positive social and emotional development for students. Just as teachers will need to focus on instructional preparation and relationships with students, system leaders will need to help establish and support discipline-specific prioritizations as well as redesigns and adaptations of curriculum and instructional materials. Ensuring that all teachers have high-quality instructional materials, rather than requiring each teacher to be a curriculum developer, is a high-impact approach to support teachers in providing great instruction. Here are some tips.

Examine standards, determine a model, and adapt curriculum to that model

Teachers will need to have a clear understanding of the standards students may not have reliably had the opportunity to learn due to school closures. Beyond the date when schools closed due to COVID-19, student learning may vary widely. For example, this point may have been somewhere near the end of the third quarter of SY19–20, shown in blue here.



Many students may not have had the chance to learn the standards-based content that happened in the later part of the year. Another school year, however, will usher in a new set of grade-level standards. For example, there might be four quarters of new content, shown in yellow here.



You'll need to decide how to work with this reality and set realistic goals. School leaders can work with teachers to surface different approaches and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each. Each subject area may need its own model, as some models work better for one discipline than another. Here are some examples for approaching your mathematics curriculum.

Example 1: Append the potential unfinished teaching at the beginning of the school year to maintain the pace of the existing curriculum, like this:



An advantage to this approach is that the pacing set by the curriculum designers will be maintained and the “story line” will remain as designed. A key disadvantage, though, is it may not be the best for a significant number of students who learned grade-level standards through distance learning. Additionally, in this model students will not experience the full set of grade-level standards and may enter end-of-year summative assessments at a disadvantage and risk perpetually being behind their peers.

Example 2: With a likely shared desire to catch up, a model might be considered that accelerates through all the missed math curricula. Schools may try to fit the missed content in at the beginning of the year, following the designed trajectory, like this:



Advantages to this approach include the ability to teach all the content and keeping a compressed version of the existing curriculum. The disadvantage is clear, however: [such an acceleration will come at a great cost](#) to many students who need more time or individualized instruction to master content.

Example 3: Another model could be to fold the missing math content into grade-level work and modify original learning trajectories based on content and instructional priorities, as illustrated below:



An advantage to this model is that it can leverage the progressions in the math content to allow grade-level work while providing prior year content support for students in ways that make mathematical sense. The disadvantage is that such an adaptation may require a significant amount of work, as it involves setting shared priorities (see the next section), studying mathematics progressions, and possibly securing instructional materials to help support modified learning trajectories. Working together with shared goals, though, can make it easier to accomplish this promising approach.

Treat ELA and mathematics differently

ELA and mathematics are distinct subject areas and, therefore, students learn these areas differently. Grade-level, Tier 1 classroom instruction, scaffolded based on where kids are, should remain the main way that all kids grow and learn in the upcoming school year.

In math, prioritize the major work of each grade. In order to determine the curriculum approach adopted by the system, determine if the missed math content [serves as a necessary foundation for later conceptual development and how it connects with the major work of the grade](#). Some content can be taught [alongside content for the next grade more seamlessly](#). Other content might be postponed or deprioritized in order to address unfinished teaching from the prior year and to maintain focus on the major work of the grade.

To enhance understanding of the interdependences of math standards, use [this coherence map](#) to locate grade-level standards and then identify standards from the previous grade that are foundational to achieving the standards.

For ELA, distinguish between the unique needs of K-3 and 4-12 literacy. Systems will need different plans for each. Gaps in foundational skills can have a cumulative, long-term impact, and systems must address those gaps immediately. School and district leaders should adopt a systematic approach to ensuring a carefully sequenced early literacy curriculum is provided to each child. For students in grades 4-12, systems should start with all students reading texts on or near grade level, with scaffolding provided so each child can access the complex texts.

Empower teachers with data and strategies to know the amount and type of scaffolding needed in their classroom

There are several approaches to accomplish this:

- **Determine kids' starting place.** Identify overall academic strengths and areas of growth for students using interim or diagnostic assessments. Interim or diagnostic assessments should help teachers know where scaffolding will be needed within grade-level curricular units and how to target interventions or enrichment for groups of kids. Systems must have early literacy assessment tools that pinpoint where K-3 students are in word recognition and language comprehension and a systematic approach to addressing the related foundational reading skills.
- **Ensure appropriate use of interim/diagnostic and formative assessment data.** School leaders and teachers need to know how to understand and use interim or diagnostic data, and they need time to create instructional plans that respond appropriately. To identify each child's specific needs, formative assessment should be coupled with other data to provide teachers more detailed diagnostic information. For English language learners, systems should build teachers' capacity to use formative assessment practices that give students the opportunity to use oral and written expression of academic knowledge and skills. Teachers should also be supported to understand the English language proficiency level of each student and how that should be taken into consideration with scaffolding approaches.
- **Provide teachers professional learning on scaffolding strategies for grade-level content.** In reading, provide strategies to access grade-level texts, opportunities to read complex texts in science and social studies instruction, and direction on the purpose of small group instruction.

While there are a variety of ways to access complex texts, K-3 students should be primarily getting complex texts through rich read-aloud. In grades 4-12, students should be primarily reading complex texts independently. Ensure 4-12 teachers have strategies to provide their students access to complex texts for their grade level as suggested by [Student Achievement Partners](#) and [LearnZillion](#).

Reading across the curriculum, especially in science and social studies, bolsters vocabulary, content knowledge, and reading skills. Students meet texts with highly variable levels of background knowledge about content area topics and vocabulary, and teachers should capitalize on the interplay of varied student background knowledge, text reading, and student-led discussion to advance learning.

Small group reading instruction should be supplemental to core instruction and used to provide access to the grade-level anchor text, such as by building students' knowledge about the topic of the text or providing explicit fluency instruction.

In mathematics, teachers may need support understanding the long-term scope and sequence of mathematics learning progressions in their instructional materials and developing scaffolding strategies based on student needs. If it fits with your system’s instructional vision, personalized and competency-based learning models using grade-level and off-grade-level content provide a strong curricular and instructional model, as outlined by [the Iceberg Problem](#).

Principle 3: Ensure time and structures are designed to optimize student learning

It’s important for teachers and students alike to have enough time for learning in the fall. Try the following.

Extend learning time

As much as possible, extend learning time by starting the year earlier, extending the school day, or implementing Saturday academies. Ensure that any extended learning time meaningfully engages students with time-on-task, standards-based learning rather than non-academic time fillers. Include additional professional learning for teachers on how to manage the extra time and target that time toward students most in need. Partner with after-school programs that can provide important remediation and extension of learning for students as well.

Develop and communicate a system for student intervention and enrichment to ensure each student is getting needed support, coupled with rigorous grade-level instruction

Examine your Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and identify where adjustments need to be made.

Students with disabilities may have been disproportionately impacted by school closures since they may not have had access to all the specialized instruction, related services, or accommodations provided in their individualized education program (IEP). In addition, the services a student received virtually may not have been as comprehensive as those they had been receiving when schools were open. Ensure that these students maintain access to grade-level instruction coupled with accommodations in and outside the classroom to propel their success.

Evaluate each student’s current level of need upon returning to school, determine which services are needed, and implement a plan for those services to be provided as soon as feasible.

Ensure that teachers of English language learners know how to support language development alongside content development. Consider a resource such as [Stanford’s free professional learning course](#).

Conduct an audit of existing supplemental programs, instructional resources, and assessments in your district

Determine which resources can already meet the needs of students through expanded use and where there may be gaps. If new programs are purchased, determine how those complement other available student interventions and supports, which resources might be duplicative, and how teachers will have the professional learning to ensure these resources are implemented with fidelity.

Principle 4: Guarantee each building has a strong school leadership team that is equipped to deepen impact across each school

Strong leadership can support your efforts for a strong school restart in the fall. Here are some suggestions.

Leverage ANet’s leadership kit

Building structures and routines at the school level will establish the infrastructure to provide strong instruction that supports student social, emotional, and academic development during this unprecedented time; this can sustain student learning thereafter. [Teaching the Whole Child](#), from the Center on Great Teachers & Leaders, provides further connections between teaching practices that promote SEL and academic learning simultaneously.

Adjust schedules to prioritize regular time for collaborative teacher planning, data analysis, targeted professional learning, and peer coaching and observations

It can be difficult to build in collaboration and professional learning time. However, time for collaboration and professional learning—virtually and in-person—will be needed more than ever because teachers will be facing such unique challenges. These collaboration opportunities also support teacher social and emotional well-being and skill development. Try to avoid the temptation to lessen collaboration time because it will likely short-circuit your long-term goals. Teachers will need time to engage in these conversations, early, often, and throughout the year, to make informed decisions with data and design instructional pacing that sets the trajectory for success.

For example, second grade teachers who aren't typically required to teach phonological awareness skills will need support from K-1 teachers to fill potential gaps in the fall of second

grade. Without secure phonological awareness skills, those second graders will be at risk of reading below grade level year after year. States with third grade reading requirements and retention policies may need to reconsider and create aggressive measures reflective of this new sense of urgency.

In addition, some students may need more support in the classroom than in previous years, and teachers may need to adapt their instruction to meet learners wherever they may be. General educators should lean on special educators to share their expertise and inform practices and strategies in the classroom to support all learners.

Build bridges between the school leadership team and the social and emotional leadership team

Integrate a member of the district and school's SEL team, if one has been established, into the school leadership team to promote integration of social, emotional, and academic learning so they are not separate.

IN CLOSING

There is no one formula for addressing the situation ahead of us. Aiming to integrate the social and emotional needs of students with academic needs, high academic expectations, frameworks and tools that lighten the tremendous load placed on teachers, and a lens of continuous improvement will serve students well in the school year ahead.

NWEA thanks the following individuals for their feedback on this resource:

Jennifer DePaoli, Learning Policy Institute

Kathleen Airhart, Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)

Michael Watson, New Classrooms

Nick Yoder, CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

Richard Fournier, Transforming Education

Katie Keown and Shelbi Cole, Student Achievement Partners

Kenji Hakuta, Stanford University

Kristen Johnson, NAEYC

Miah Daughtery

Kesson Anderson, Achievement Network

Meghan Whittaker and Lindsay Kubatzky, National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)



nwea

NWEA® is a not-for-profit organization that supports students and educators worldwide by providing assessment solutions, insightful reports, professional learning offerings, and research services. Visit [NWEA.org](https://www.nwea.org) to find out how NWEA can partner with you to help all kids learn.

© 2021 NWEA. NWEA is a registered trademark of NWEA in the US and in other countries.

JUL21 | KAP5336