



ACCELERATING STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH PRIORITIZING TEACHER SUPPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of the pandemic on student learning was significant and widened pre-existing achievement gaps for historically disadvantaged students. Researchers found students on average were four to five months behind in reading and math at the end of the 2020-21 school year, while students in majority Black schools were six months behind and those in low-income schools were seven months behind.¹ Yet some districts serving large numbers of high-need students were able to achieve notable learning gains, or substantially lower learning losses, than comparable districts.

As teachers continue to solve for the best way to meet their students' needs and address learning gaps, the common approach of remediation – teaching or re-teaching prior material – is quickly proving to be inadequate.

A more effective strategy of learning acceleration starts with teaching current grade-level content and only bringing in remedial content if a student demonstrates the need for it.²

This requires significant skill on the part of the classroom teacher, along with high-quality instructional materials that engage all students in grade-level learning. Interventions such as high-dosage tutoring, extending the school year, and summer sessions are important supplements for students with the greatest learning needs; however, we must increase our focus on ensuring that all classroom teachers are equipped to support learning acceleration strategies during core classroom instruction. This requires a systemic approach to improving classroom teaching and learning.

¹Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., Viruleg, E. "COVID-19 and Education: The Lingering Effects of Unfinished Learning." McKinsey & Company. July 27, 2021.

²Zearn & TNTP. "Accelerate, Don't Remediate: New Evidence from Elementary Math Classrooms." May 23, 2021.

Somerset Independent School District, Texas



Building systems and structures that strengthen core instruction to accelerate learning and close equity gaps has been the center of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching's work with our district partners for over two decades. We work with educators to build their instructional leadership capacity and equip teachers and leaders to accelerate learning consistently across all classrooms, reaching all students.

To provide insight on the most effective strategies that teachers and leaders can adopt right now, we interviewed educators in three of our partner districts that have invested in improving classroom instruction as their primary lever to accelerate student learning. Those investments made a significant impact in the achievement of their students during the pandemic.

- Somerset Independent School District outside San Antonio, Texas, was one of nine districts, of the 1,200 school districts in Texas, recognized for achieving academic growth during the pandemic.
- Cross County School District in northeast Arkansas is one of only a few districts in the state to increase student performance from 2019 to 2021 and, in 2021, Cross County High School students outperformed students statewide in all subjects.
- East Feliciana Public Schools, serving a rural community in south Louisiana, was in the top quartile of districts statewide for learning growth from 2019 to 2021.

Each of these districts is focused on strengthening classroom instruction by supporting teachers to diagnose and address individual students' learning needs, prioritizing and creating more structure around collaborative learning, and providing classroom-based coaching in the use of high-quality instructional materials. They aligned interventions outside the classroom such as tutoring and summer learning to the same learning goals that inform the everyday instruction students receive. Three core strategies are driving their success.

Strategy #1: Strengthen professional learning and instructional leadership teams by engaging teacher leaders.

Expanding the school leadership team to include teacher leaders builds instructional leadership capacity and creates opportunities to strengthen collaborative professional learning. Weekly professional learning and classroom coaching follow cycles of improvement that address specific student learning needs.

Strategy #2: Prioritize the use of high-quality instructional materials and a plan for training teachers to use those materials effectively.

A high-quality curriculum is a key foundation for teachers as they engage students in grade-level work, and it provides resources to help teachers address learning gaps. District and school leaders play an important role in creating opportunities for teachers to learn how to maximize their high-quality curriculum and instructional materials to meet individual student learning needs.

Strategy #3: Focus interventions on students most in need and minimize the amount of time students are out of the classroom.

Supporting teachers to utilize interventions within the classroom setting increases student access to grade level learning.

Using data to inform additional interventions targets those students most in need and makes connections to classroom learning.

To accelerate learning and achieve better outcomes for students, district leaders invested in building the capacity of teachers, teacher leaders, and school leaders to deliver stronger classroom instruction and to raise the level of teaching and learning consistently across classrooms.

[Instructionally focused teacher leadership roles](#)

at the school level help teachers to effectively use high-quality instructional materials, along with curriculum-aligned resources and tools to support students that need additional help. The lessons learned by each of these districts provide a roadmap for accelerating learning more quickly, for many more students.

Districts Interviewed

Somerset Independent School District, which is located southwest of San Antonio, has faced systemic challenges, and 90% of its 4,100 students are Hispanic and 82% are categorized as economically disadvantaged. Long before the pandemic, Somerset made a commitment to district-wide innovation and improvement that focused on the development of teacher leaders. As a result of this commitment, Somerset outperformed the state and their region on the 2021 math state assessment across grade levels. For example, 86% of third grade students in Somerset were performing at “Approaches Grade Level or Above” in math, compared to 61% statewide. Somerset also outperformed the state and their region in several other subjects and grade levels.

Cross County School District is located in Cherry Valley, Arkansas, in the northeastern corner of the state. Cross County serves a rural community of approximately 580 students, over 70% of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. For more than a decade, Cross County has partnered with NIET to strengthen instruction and create opportunities for teachers to grow as leaders. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, Cross County School District is one of only a few districts in Arkansas to increase student performance from 2019 to 2021, and in 2021, Cross County High School students outperformed students statewide in all subjects.

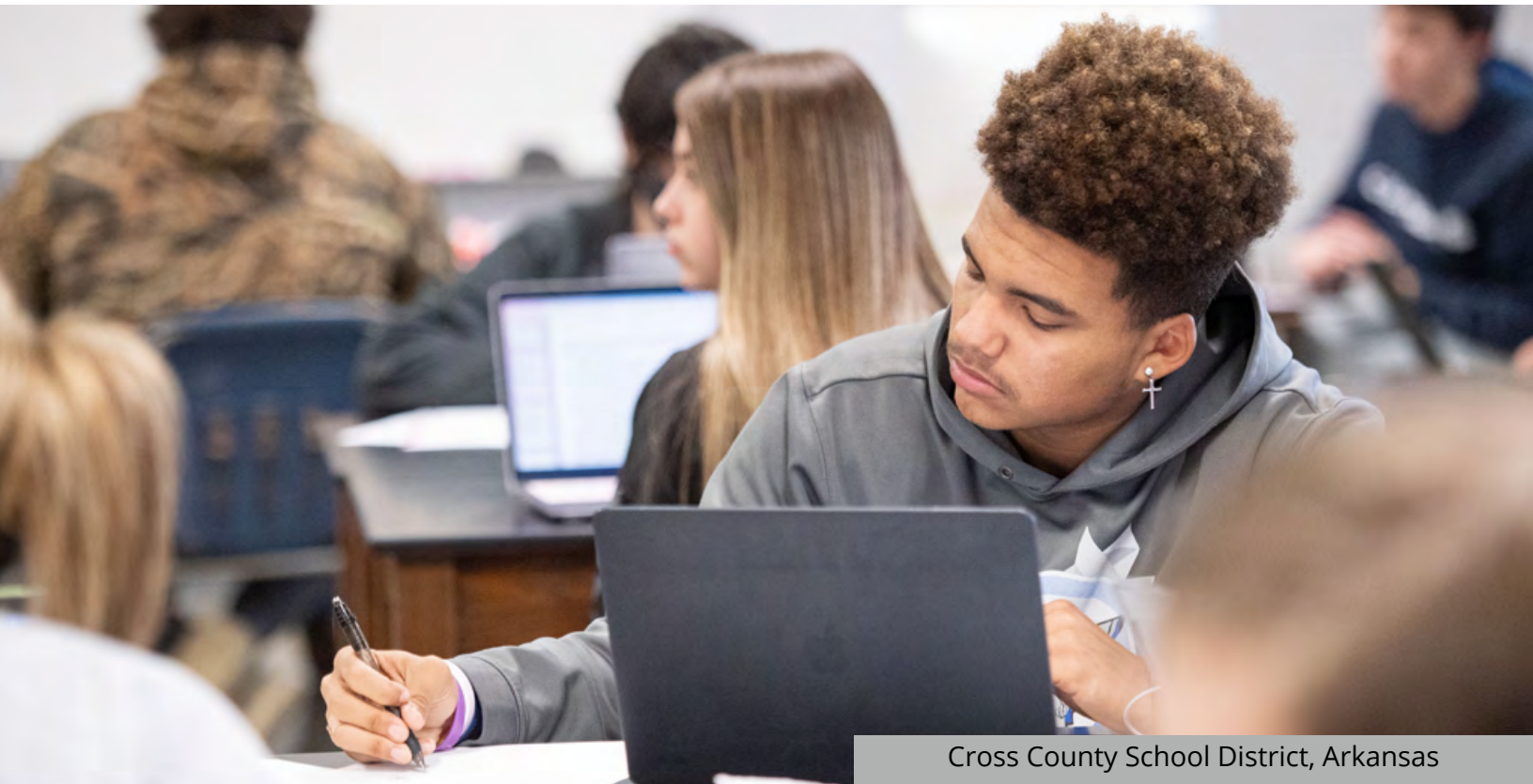
East Feliciana Public Schools is located in rural Louisiana, north of Baton Rouge. The district has six schools and enrolls about 1,300 students. Of those, 62% are students from racial minority backgrounds and nearly 90% are economically disadvantaged. For years, the district has been plagued by high teacher turnover, ineffective instruction, and the inability to attract candidates from outside the area. To combat these challenges, East Feliciana has implemented district-wide policies and practices focused on developing the instructional skills of school leaders and teachers alike. This dedication paid dividends through the pandemic, with the district placing in the top quarter of districts across Louisiana for growth from 2019 to 2021.

CORE STRATEGIES

Strategy #1: Strengthen professional learning and instructional leadership teams by engaging teacher leaders.

Professional learning follows a process for improvement in these districts, and teacher leaders work with principals on the school

instructional leadership team to design and facilitate weekly collaborative learning meetings. Professional learning communities (PLCs) meet each week and use a cycle of improvement led by teacher leaders to identify student needs, learn strategies to address these needs, plan how to support individual students to be successful, use supports and scaffolds to enable students to



Cross County School District, Arkansas

access grade level content in their classroom, and analyze student work to determine impact and guide next steps.

“Our teacher leadership structure was my salvation,” said Dana Deason, a master teacher in Cross County, Arkansas. “Before that, we were teaching to the middle or focusing on the bubble kids who were just below proficient, but we weren’t teaching each student. When we put this structure of teacher leadership in place, and trained teacher leaders and principals to use data to create cycles of improvement for each teacher, it changed how they supported students. Now, teachers have the tools and support to move each student.”

“What a difference it made during the pandemic,” Deason said. “We did not lose as much ground, and in fact, our students did very well when compared with peers across the state. The reason was that we had the people trained and positioned to help teachers. Teachers needed to use data to determine each student’s needs and create an action plan for learning acceleration. We already had built their trust in the system, and they knew who to go to for help.”

Using teacher leaders to tailor professional learning to specific student needs

Teacher leaders in East Feliciana Public Schools also play an important role in helping classroom teachers analyze student data and student work to address learning gaps. Weekly PLC meetings led by teacher leaders are designed to build teachers’ instructional skills to support individual student learning needs. “It starts with identifying individual student learning needs and gaps,” said Lauren May, master teacher at Jackson Elementary School. “Before we used generic categories: low-, medium-, high-performing students. What shifted for us during the pandemic is that we don’t use neat, simple categories anymore. We focus on the specific learning needs of each student, which might show they are exceptional and needy, at the same time, in different areas. We ground our conversations in actual student work. It lets us be more specific and requires teachers to be more intentional about gathering and using individual student work to drive instruction.”

In Somerset ISD, professional learning systems are similarly driven by data and student work. “The most important thing we found when the pandemic hit was to know our kids, to know where they are with learning, and what their struggles are in and out of the classroom,” said Superintendent Saul Hinojosa. “For us, data is essential to our process for supporting students and supporting teachers. We have weekly data conversations in what we call cluster groups of five to eight teachers. We really get into the weeds and take apart an assessment, identify where students fell short, discuss how we taught the concept, what answers students gave, and how we can address that learning gap going forward by scaffolding that learning into a future lesson, or where a student needs extra support through intervention.”

Engaging teachers as leaders in setting instructional goals and analyzing student work

In all three districts, building-level instructional leadership teams analyze student data and set goals that drive professional learning over the course of the year. For example, Cross

County School District convenes building-level instructional leadership teams during the summer to analyze student data and plan professional learning, creating a foundation for addressing learning gaps. “We started the school year in 2020 and 2021 with summer planning with our instructional leadership team,” said Teresa Fuller, a master teacher at the high school. “We were able to dig into the data and student work, really understand specific student needs, identify a strategy to address those needs, and plan a field test. We pulled in the standards and looked at what students were expected to know. We asked questions like: Is there a mini lesson some students need in order to keep up with grade-level material?”

Mentor teachers played a key role as the school year started by field testing the strategies in their classrooms and bringing results back to the instructional leadership team. “This increased buy-in for our mentor teachers,” said Fuller, “and their ability to share what was happening in classrooms.” Grounding professional learning in an analysis of student work and the grade-level standards made it highly relevant for teachers.

East Feliciana Public Schools, Louisiana



The instructional leadership team used recordings of classroom lessons as a resource to create more of a team approach. “We were able to pull clips from mentors’ classrooms to show other teachers,” Fuller said. “We focused on student work and student actions – what does it look like when students are owning their own learning? How can teachers facilitate the move from a more teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered classroom?” The leadership team played a critical role in creating a culture of open doors and sharing effective practices across the faculty.

Strategy #2: Prioritize the use of high-quality instructional materials and a plan for training teachers to use those materials effectively.

Having in place collaborative learning structures, with training for teacher and school leaders to guide these weekly sessions, provides the space for gaining a deeper understanding of how instructional materials can be used to support individual students. Numerous studies, including NIET’s 2020 report [High-Quality Curriculum Implementation: Connecting What to Teach with How to Teach It](#) illustrate the importance of high-quality instructional materials for student success. Using a high-quality curriculum frees teachers to spend their time differentiating and scaffolding learning rather than gathering and creating instructional materials on their own; however, teachers need support to make the shift to new instructional materials, and that support needs to continue beyond the first year of implementation.

Utilizing weekly professional learning to deepen understanding of curriculum design and support of grade-level standards

Cross County High School adopted a new literacy curriculum in the summer of 2021 to better support students in reaching the depth of knowledge required by grade-level standards. “We were afraid that the teachers wouldn’t fully use the new curriculum, given all the demands

on their time,” said District Executive Master Teacher Mindy Searcy. “But we worked with them to deeply understand the units, how the assessments were aligned to state standards, and the resources to use with lower-performing students. We are seeing them use the curriculum with individual students. They understand now how to support individual students or groups of students in order to keep them engaged in grade-level work.”

Searcy attends weekly professional learning meetings for teachers, in addition to her support for school leaders and their leadership team members. “We are taking more time with the curriculum,” she said, “noticing where scores might be slumping and figuring out together why and what we could do to address it.”





Cross County School District, Arkansas

For example, when data and student work in one second grade teacher's students showed a significantly bigger gap in reading comprehension than other second grade classes, elementary school Master Teacher Dana Deason co-planned and co-taught a unit over five days with that second grade teacher. She helped with assessing students, progress monitoring, and grouping students for learning acceleration, and the scores jumped. "While the data was always there," Dana said, "the difference was what we did with it."

"Working side by side with teachers," said Searcy, "helped me see the bigger picture and the connections between learning at different grade levels." Helping teachers to understand the progression of learning across grade levels has also strengthened their ability to support student engagement and ownership of their learning.

Increasing equitable access to grade-level learning

High-quality instructional materials are particularly important in providing equitable access for low-income and minority students who often are given less demanding assignments and miss opportunities to engage in grade-level learning.³ In East Feliciana, half of all teachers were new in the 2020-21 school year and needed a deeper level of support in how to use their curriculum to serve students who were significantly below grade level. "Our novice teachers are new to the curriculum, how to use it, what supports it offers," said Master Teacher Lauren May. "So we offer a lot of co-planning and co-teaching to our newer teachers." Differentiating support for new teachers in the use of the curriculum creates consistency in teaching across classrooms and a base for teacher collaboration and teamwork both within and across grade levels.

³TNTP. "The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down - and How to Fix It." 2018.

The ability to monitor student progress and use this information to strengthen upcoming lessons was something that experienced teachers embraced as well. “We have a lot of struggling readers,” May said. “In the past, the data was too general to be useful in pinpointing where a student was struggling. During the pandemic, with ESSER funds, we were able to purchase a new diagnostic assessment tool. Now we are able to progress monitor and see kids’ movement in key areas of learning. It really changed things. We know much better now, and in greater detail, what each student needs.”

Strategy #3: Focus intervention on students most in need, and minimize the amount of time students are out of the classroom.

All three districts created clearer connections between grade-level learning in classrooms and additional support through interventions such as tutoring and extended learning time. Teachers are trained to provide targeted intervention in the classroom, using small groups or scaffolding learning to keep all students working on grade-level learning. Where additional support is needed outside the classroom, interventions are aligned to student data, student work, and learning goals.

Using data to inform and connect multiple layers of intervention

Somerset uses data to drive these connections between classroom learning and interventions for students that need more support. “We carefully target intervention during the school day. Based on what we are seeing in student data and their work in class, we provide more intensive support as needed during electives, or small group instruction,” said Hinojosa. “In addition, we train our paraprofessionals to support accelerated instruction with students.” Somerset extends the school day for students that show they need extra support, creating meaningful engagement opportunities for students with clear connections back to classroom learning.

Making this work required increasing the effectiveness of classroom instruction so that more students are able to master the learning the first time it is taught. “We spend a lot of time planning, using the student work to guide our upcoming lessons,” said Elizabeth Sanchez, a mentor teacher at Somerset Elementary School. “Where students struggled with a concept or an assignment, what was their misunderstanding or misconception? How can we strengthen their understanding? For example, some teachers’ students were struggling with two-step word problems in math. We taught them to diagram each of the steps and to go see how a colleague was using this model for students who needed more support. We saw an immediate improvement, which also turned up in the assessment. In the past, we would have pulled those students and remediated, when what they needed was support that let them stay focused on grade-level learning.”

Minimizing the amount of time students are out of the classroom is creating more opportunities for these students to engage in grade-level learning with their peers.



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– Elizabeth Sanchez, mentor teacher at Somerset Elementary School

Planning effective systems of intervention that maximize classroom learning

East Feliciana’s district leadership team meets monthly, focusing on how district leaders can support school leaders and teachers in their schools. This team meeting, with deep learning and analysis of student work, was developed to support the district’s adoption and use of high-quality, Tier I curricula over the last several years.

“During the pandemic, we didn’t see as much learning loss,” said Executive Master Teacher Sarah Guidry. “Our teachers are trained in how to bring in support for students to work on grade-level material.” This provided opportunities for teachers to learn how to differentiate so that students with different proficiency levels could access the learning. “For example,” Guidry said, “in ELA, students were working to identify rumor from fact. They pulled from the text, using what characters said to justify their answers. Some students needed more support. We used sentence starters, key vocabulary, and other

scaffolds to support them in using the same text. We wanted them all to have the opportunity for a rich discussion.”

Teachers used small group and individual work time to provide targeted support for students needing extra help. They also identified students that needed extra support outside the classroom and carefully planned how those supports would be used. “We used the TFA Ignite tutoring program to support students with learning gaps that were not addressed in the classroom,” said Guidry, “and we were able to target that support using data and student work to address immediate student needs.”

East Feliciana extended the school year in 2021 through “EF Accelerate,” an intensive summer learning program for students designed to address learning gaps and prepare students to be successful using grade-level material in the fall. The summer program aligned to state academic goals and provided students with math, English language arts, and enrichment programs. Over 40% of students in grades K-11 participated, gaining a full month of additional instruction.

Cross County School District, Arkansas



In Cross County, data also drove connections between classroom learning and extended learning provided by reading intervention teachers. The leadership team minimized the amount of time that a student was out of the classroom by scheduling reading pull outs during small group time in the classroom so that those students were not missing the main lesson. More teachers were trained in phonics, so a number of special area teachers (e.g., art and music) were able to step in and help individual students. “We are now doing more to address student needs during the day in their classrooms,” said Searcy. “We still have intervention outside the classroom but it is highly targeted, for example, for struggling readers. We found pulling students out of class was hurting more than helping.” Strong district leadership was critical in aligning layers of intervention to minimize the amount of time that students were out of the classroom, while ensuring they had the kinds of targeted intervention necessary to enable them to engage in grade-level learning with their peer group.

CONCLUSION

Given the numbers of students who missed essential learning during the pandemic, investing in stronger classroom teaching and learning – where students spend the majority of their time – must be the primary focus of our efforts to accelerate learning if we want to close equity gaps. The pandemic, and the disruptions it caused to teaching and learning, highlighted the importance of systems and structures that support high-quality classroom teaching. Districts with systems in place to

support classroom teachers to deliver effective instruction when disruptions or challenges were thrown in their path were more successful in maintaining and accelerating student learning. By keeping their focus on effective classroom teaching and learning, training teachers to use high-quality instructional materials to support all students with grade-level learning, and aligning intervention for students with the greatest needs to classroom data and learning goals, these districts are accelerating student learning growth.

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