STRATEGIES TO RECOVER AND ACCELERATE STUDENT LEARNING IN RESPONSE TO DISTANCE LEARNING DURING THE COVID–19 PANDEMIC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Remote education during the COVID–19 pandemic has affected nearly all students to some degree, and early signs point to learning loss due to distance learning for students with the greatest needs for educational support, such as low-income students and English learners. With more than 50 percent of California's students falling into one or more of the historically disadvantaged categories—low-income students, English learners, foster youth, migrant students, homeless students, and students with disabilities, it is imperative that the state and local education partners work to mitigate and address student learning loss and ensure all students have access to a high quality education, whether attending in person, remotely through distance learning, or a hybrid model of the two. Without additional support for these targeted student groups, these students risk falling further behind.

This report aims to uncover and understand effective strategies that schools and school districts have used to mitigate and address learning loss during distance learning. This analysis is based on a review of a sample of district plans for distance learning, as well as interviews and surveys with some district representatives. While it seems likely that most students will receive in-person instruction during the next school year, certain forms of remote education may continue to be an option in school districts. Further, as students return to their school sites, it may be beneficial for schools to continue some of the innovative methods they developed for engaging students during distance learning. Irrespective of districts' choices going forward, it will be crucial that they continue to provide supports to accelerate student learning.

KEY FINDINGS

The researcher's analysis of a sample of districts' plans combined with interviews and surveys of district administrators and other staff indicates that the most effective practices to mitigate learning loss and provide additional supports for target student groups include the following:

♦ Extended learning such as after-school and summer programs

♦ Smaller classes

♦ Small, in-person cohorts for tutoring and instruction

♦ Utilizing student data from screening tools to improve teaching and learning

- Collaboration between inclusion specialists, social workers, and counselors on removing barriers to learning such as providing resources for food, clothes, housing, transportation, technology, and referral to mental health services

- Prioritizing the mental health of students and staff

- Schools, teachers, and parents working together on improving student learning

- Training teachers to teach in the distance-learning setting

- Hiring and training high school and college students as tutors to mitigate learning loss

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The key recommendations that the Legislature should consider for helping districts to address learning loss during the COVID–19 pandemic and close achievement gaps are as follows:

- Fund programs such as tutoring, class reduction size, and extended learning beyond the next two years

- Prioritize the mental health of students and staff

- Remove barriers to learning by funding social workers, counselors, and inclusion specialists

- Invest in screening tools to have real-time student data that teachers can use to improve their teaching and student learning

- Support research that rigorously studies distance learning and the strategies that mitigate learning loss in distance learning, in-person, and hybrid instruction settings for students with disabilities, English learners, and low-income students

- Designate or create a regional or state entity to analyze, communicate, and implement the effective strategies identified by research

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DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Many students have experienced learning loss in California due to distance learning and the disruption caused by the COVID–19 pandemic. There is limited research on what districts are doing to mitigate educational losses. Although researchers have tried to gauge the initial extent of the loss, it is too early to know the full extent. A report on California districts found poor academic outcomes for students in fourth through seventh grades in mathematics and fourth through ninth grades in English language arts, with low-income students and English learners experiencing the most significant loss over the past year (Bookman et al., 2021). This report, along with other nationwide reports, highlights the need to mitigate learning loss experienced by students, especially those in historically disadvantaged categories.

To better understand what districts are doing to mitigate learning loss due to distance learning, this project looks at a sample of school districts representing California's kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) population. Various data sources were collected and analyzed to understand learning loss and solutions at the local level, including interviewing officials from the selected school districts, reviewing their learning continuity and attendance plans (LCPs), and conducting a survey of statewide school administrators. The problem is urgent as many California students remain in remote education as the 2020–21 school year ends. Even as districts prepare to return to in-person learning, many may continue to offer an option of remote learning to respond to families' preferences. Districts also may want to continue some of the other strategies they put in place during distance learning. For various reasons, it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of approaches used during distance learning as lessons for the future.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This project studies the efforts of a sample of school districts across the state that represent the state's diversity, over fifteen months during the COVID–19 pandemic. One objective is to gain insights for how school districts are meeting the minimum requirements for distance learning. Another is to document the strategies and models used to mitigate learning loss, including how target student groups, identified in law (low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities), are served beyond the broader student population. Lastly, this report will identify the strategies and models that district leaders identify as most effective in meeting student needs and mitigating learning loss. Based on this analysis, the researcher recommends several best practices for distance learning and considerations for implementation statewide.

LANGUAGE NOTE

While the term "learning loss" has been used most broadly when attempting to define the educational declines that many students experience during distance learning, it implies students are falling behind because of a school's poor remote strategies or perhaps that students are failing to log on or engage in their studies. Through interviews with superintendents, the researcher learned that blanket use of the term learning loss is an imprecise term to describe the issue, as students cannot be expected to learn concepts they were not taught when districts were forced to cut curriculum and minutes during the transition to online learning. Many superintendents who were interviewed for this report consider "instructional loss" a more accurate way to describe this circumstance—but pointed out that even referring to it as such is a deficit-based term because education is still occurring, albeit in a more cumbersome manner. There is disagreement and discomfort with these terms; however, both terms demonstrate that some degree of loss is occurring for students. An asset-based approach to combat the loss due to distance learning and the COVID–19 pandemic is recovery, resilience, and acceleration, which inspired this report title. For consistency, the report will continue to use the term "learning loss" when referring to student repercussions from remote education. The researcher makes this brief note as a reminder that some of the learning loss students have experienced is due to instructional loss.

LIMITATIONS

This report has a few limitations with regard to approach, sample size, and analysis. The project captures an overview of the strategies and, due to the lack of statewide testing data for 2020 and 2021, factors in the opinions of district administrators when determining which strategies are the most effective. A resulting limitation is that effectiveness is from the perspective of the district leader, who is an educational expert, but the opinion can be biased. The second limitation is the small sample size of districts. There are more than 1,000 school districts in California, and this report studies the efforts of 37 districts. A more rigorous analysis with a larger sample size can determine the actual effectiveness of each strategy by studying student outcomes over an academic year or more. Such a study would need to disaggregate students by race/ethnicity and targeted student subgroups.
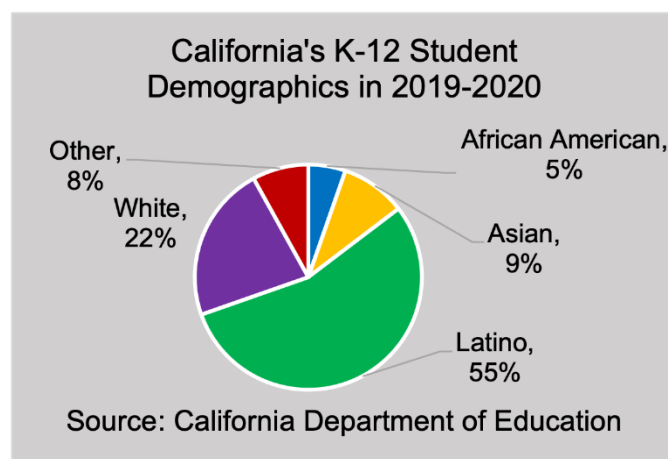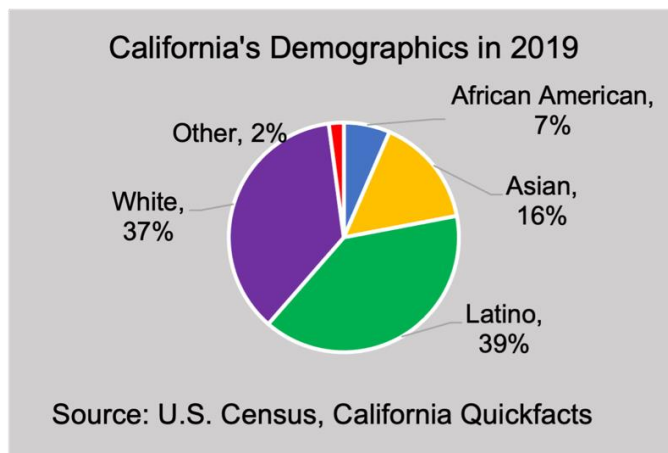
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, school districts in California abruptly closed their doors to slow the spread of COVID–19 across the state. These sudden closures forced schools to pivot as best they could to remote education with few state requirements, so the type and quality of the instruction varied widely. The California Legislature gave kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) school districts significant flexibility to implement distance learning with some requirements, such as the number of instructional minutes and to outline their plans for addressing learning loss in the 2020–21 Learning Continuity and Attendance Plan.

It has been unclear which district strategies are the most effective at tackling learning loss due to distance learning. This report explores how districts have implemented remote education and what district administrators deem to be effective at mitigating learning loss. Although more school districts are transitioning to in-person instruction as of the second semester of the 2020–21 school year, many still offer hybrid learning as a mode of instruction. Reviewing the strategies to mitigate learning loss during distance learning will help the Legislature understand how districts have been spending their funding allocations and determine whether districts could benefit from additional supports or policy changes. Further, it will help the state and local education leaders prepare for a future scenario where districts might need distance learning for various reasons.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND TARGET GROUPS DATA

The California K–12 public school population is incredibly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, economic backgrounds, and other categories. During the 2019–20 school year, 18.6 percent of students were English learners, 0.5 percent foster youth, 3.2 percent homeless youth, 11.7 percent students with disabilities, and 60.7 percent socioeconomically disadvantaged (California Department of Education, "2019–20 Enrollment by Subgroup"*).* Further, the racial/ethnic breakdown of California's K–12 students in the 2019–20 school year was 5 percent African American, 9 percent Asian, 55 percent Latino, 22 percent white, and 8 percent other (California Department of Education, "2019–20 Enrollment by Ethnicity and Grade"*).* Lastly, in 2019, the state was 39 percent Latino, 37 percent white, 16 percent Asian, 7 percent African American, and 2 percent other (U.S. Census, 2019). Overall, California has a significant percentage of students categorized under law as disadvantaged subgroups, and the student population is more diverse racially/ethnically than the statewide population.

California's Demographics in 2019

Other, 2%
African American, 7%
White, 37%
Asian, 16%
Latino, 39%

Source: U.S. Census, California Quickfacts

California's K-12 Student Demographics in 2019-2020

Other, 8%
White, 22%
African American, 5%
Asian, 9%
Latino, 55%

Source: California Department of Education

ACADEMIC EFFECTS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Many reports have found that learning loss is one of the most concerning outcomes of transitioning to distance learning. In this context, learning loss is the loss of content and skills learned between a typical year and the past 14 months of distance learning during the COVID–19 pandemic (Bookman et al., 2021). Learning loss is most acutely identified through academic outcomes, primarily in lower test scores and falling grades.

Decreased Test Scores: At the end of a typical school year, students are evaluated through a series of statewide assessments designed to show how well students are mastering standards in each subject. These test scores are used for a variety of student feedback at the local level and provide an opportunity to measure the skills of all California students against the same academic standards, which is valuable feedback for teaching and instruction. While statewide assessments were not required in 2020 or 2021, some schools continued to administer similar assessments as a tool to measure student learning. A report on California school districts by the Policy Analysis for

California Education reviewed such assessments for 2020 and found a significant loss in math and English language arts with earlier grades, and historically disadvantaged groups such as low-income students and English learners falling the most behind (Bookman et al., 2021). For example, during a typical year in the measure of academic progress assessments, there is 10-point growth in elementary-level scores; however, in fall 2020, there was a 1.5-point loss for fifth grade (Bookman et al., 2021). A limitation of this study was that fewer students took the fall 2020 tests, with a high number of missing results for students with disabilities (Bookman et al., 2021). With time, more students will return to school in person, making it easier to assess their academic performance. Future studies will address the gaps of recent studies and provide more precise results on California students' academic performance; however, the full impact of remote learning will be unknown for some time.

Fall in Grades: Another academic effect is the increase in the number of failing letter grades (D's and F's). For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District saw an 8.7 percent increase in Ds and Fs for high school students in fall 2020 (Johnson, 2021). Another example is the Sequoia Union High School District in Redwood City, which reported a 9 percent increase (Johnson, 2021). Numerous California districts experienced an increase in D's and F's, which complicates the decisions that districts need to make in the next school year. The fall in academic outcomes likely will have a lasting impact on students who fail to graduate on time or earn a satisfactory grade point average for college entrance.

MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Social isolation due to COVID–19, including the inability to attend school in person, has affected students' emotional, psychological, and social well-being. While there is a need for more information about the pandemic's effects on children's mental health and well-being, current data show the isolation due to COVID–19 has increased youths' stress and anxiety levels and increased teen suicide (Calhoun et al., February 2021).

LEGISLATIVE UPDATES ON FUNDING[1]

State legislation in early 2021 provided funds to incentivize districts to return to in-person instruction, and federal stimulus acts gave schools money to address learning loss and mitigate the spread of COVID–19. In March 2021, Governor Newsom signed AB 86 (Committee on Budget), which incentivized school districts to reopen in-person learning by April 1 by offering funds with an emphasis on bringing back younger grades (transitional kindergarten through grade 2), students with special needs, and other

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[1]   Legislative updates are as of spring 2021, which is when research and fieldwork was completed.

prioritized groups (AB 86, 2021; EdSource staff, 2021). Parents had the option to decide whether they preferred to keep their kids in remote education. In circumstances where in-person instruction was not possible, hybrid models would be allowed. Following that legislation, it appeared that many middle and high school students remained remote, although more of these grade levels are returning as the COVID–19 rates have fallen statewide. Furthermore, schools also received emergency funding from a series of federal stimulus acts, the most recent being H.R.1319, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which allocated funds to get students back safely into the classroom and address learning loss. Recipients must expend the funds by the end of the 2023–24 school year (H.R.1319, 2021; Nierenberg and Taylor, 2021). At the time this report was being prepared, it remained to be seen what the enacted state budget for fiscal year 2021–22 would include regarding state requirements and funding for schools' reopening and student support for the 2021–22 school year.

SCHOOL REOPENING

The COVID–19 pandemic has forced some California schools to operate under remote instruction full time or in a hybrid model with limited in-person instruction, while a smaller number of schools operated in-person classes. The mode largely related to the number of documented COVID–19 cases in the regions in one of three modes of instruction: remote, in-person, and hybrid. The rate of COVID–19 cases in the region largely determined which type of instruction employed, but districts could consider other factors as well. This section is not to compare the types of instruction but to provide information as background. As of early May 2021, 20 percent of elementary school students had returned to in-person schooling, and 34 percent were in a hybrid capacity (*Los Angeles Times* staff, 2021). For secondary school students, 10 percent had returned to in-person school, and 30 percent were in a hybrid capacity (*Los Angeles Times* staff, 2021). Northern, rural counties had the most students back in classrooms, while urban counties were more likely to have their students in distance learning due to the numbers of confirmed COVID–19 cases in densely populated areas. As counties advanced in the state-ordered COVID–19 reopening tiers, more students returned to school. Further, now that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has given emergency use authorization to three COVID–19 vaccines, which together cover a large swath of school-aged children (12 and older), many parents are expected to feel more comfortable sending their children back to school.

COVID–19 has magnified many educational equity issues. Schools in affluent communities are more likely to offer full-time, in-person instruction than high-poverty school districts (Gao et al., 2021). Low-income students are the least likely to return to in-person instruction, which is concerning because they have experienced the most learning loss and tend to rely on more in-person supports and services that schools

provide (Bookman et al., 2021). Lastly, remote education occurs at more significant percentages in districts with high shares of Black or Latino students, which is likely to exacerbate achievement gaps between student subgroups (Gao et al., 2021).

BACKGROUND

DISTANCE LEARNING

This report will analyze and evaluate district strategies to mitigate learning loss during distance learning. California Education Code Section 43500(a) defines distance learning as instruction that "relies on computer or communications technology" due to the instructor and pupil being in different locations. In distance learning, school districts are required to do the following:

- Ensure connectivity and access to a device
- Ensure content is aligned to grade-level standards
- Offer daily live instruction by certificated employees to monitor student progress and help students feel connected to the school
- Support the following students:

  o Those with achievement not at grade level
  o Those in need of mental health resources
  o Foster youth and homeless
  o Students with disabilities, including providing services outlined in the student's individualized education program (IEP) and adjust IEP to ensure it is implemented in distance learning
  o English learners, including ensuring instruction of English language development in preparation for the English language proficiency test to eventually reclassify as fully English proficient (California Education Code Section 43503)

It is vital to understand best practices for distance learning, even with students returning to their school sites, as remote or independent learning options may continue as an education choice for families. It also helps schools to be prepared if future issues force students to learn from home. Further, the student groups identified in law likely will need additional supports, and it is critical to understand what districts have done to help these students during remote education.

FACTORS THAT MAKE IT HARDER TO PARTICIPATE IN DISTANCE LEARNING

Besides the difficulties students face in learning and staying focused in a remote education setting, other nonacademic factors complicate participation and further exacerbate the inequalities of distance learning.

Lack of Broadband Access: One factor that makes it harder for some students to participate and learn during distance learning is limited broadband access. In the spring of 2020, districts and schools found many of their students lacked access to broadband or computers and therefore had to dedicate time and resources to provide students with wireless Internet hotspots and laptop computers. From the spring to the fall of 2020, device access increased from 67 percent to 82 percent for California's K–12 students, and reliable Internet access has increased slightly (Gao et al., 2021).

Further, in October 2020, the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) reported that higher-income households are more likely to have broadband in their homes. LAO found Latino and limited-English-speaking households have lower adoption rates. Broadband access continues to be an issue in California as some areas lack connectivity, although schools and state officials are working to address the issue (Tadayon and Johnson, 2021). This report will not dive deeply into this issue because state and federal governments have identified broadband access expansion as a critical priority.

Other Factors: For the following groups of students, it has been harder to learn online:

- **Black and Latinx communities** have been the hardest hit by COVID–19 infections and the associated financial crisis, leading to food and housing insecurity (Brown, 2020).

- Some students have struggled with **limited adult supervision and support** due to parents working while they participate in distance learning or parents who are unable to help them (Whitehurst, 2020).

- Furthermore, for **younger students, English learners, and students with disabilities,** it is often difficult to learn via a computer, as they rely on significant teacher supports that are hard to replicate online.

Students facing significant barriers in learning are more likely to experience severe learning loss and therefore must be given additional resources to accelerate learning.

LEARNING CONTINUITY AND ATTENDANCE PLAN

In 2020, the state required districts to prepare an accountability document called the 2020-2021 Learning Continuity and Attendance Plan (LCP).[2] The focus of the LCP is to communicate how districts plan to address the challenges created by COVID-19 school closures and spend federal and state funds dedicated for this purpose. In the LCP, districts describe their plans to address or provide the following:

- Address gaps in learning
- Conduct stakeholder engagement
- Provide access to devices and connectivity during distance learning
- Provide resources to address student and staff mental health and social-emotional well-being
- Provide meals to students
- Address the needs of students identified in law as high need such as homeless students, students with unique needs, and English learners
- Outline how federal and state funds will be allocated to support academic achievement and mitigate learning loss (CDE, 2020, 2020 Budget Act and Special Education*)*

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main objective of this project is to understand the work of districts in mitigating learning loss due to distance learning; therefore, the primary research question is: "What are districts doing to mitigate learning loss due to distance learning and the pandemic?" The other research questions are to offer a deeper understanding of the work of districts during distance learning with a focus on efforts for students with disabilities, English learners, and low-income students. For the complete list of research questions, see: Appendix A: Research Questions.

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[2]   In prior years, the state required districts to complete a Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). This "three-year plan describes the goals, actions, services, and expenditures to support positive student outcomes that address state and local priorities" (CDE, 2021, LCAP).

METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

To gain insight into the strategies, programs, and models implemented by districts to mitigate learning loss, the researcher did the following:

- Conducted **19 semi-structured interviews with school district administrators** such as superintendents or assistant superintendents. Interviews were conducted via video and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes each. In some interviews, only the superintendent or assistant superintendent attended, while in others, multiple leaders, such as the director of curriculum, participated. The researcher recorded the answers by note taking. The survey helped answer the research questions, get details on how the strategies work on the ground, and obtain the district officials' views on the effectiveness of those strategies in reducing learning loss. For the list of interview questions, see: Appendix C: Interview Questions.

- Reviewed **13 Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans** for the 2020–21 year. The researcher downloaded these LCPs from the districts' websites and found that LCPs included much information on the work of these districts.

- Collected **15 online surveys** completed by district leaders. The survey provided space for district leaders to share the top two best practices with evidence of mitigating learning loss for English learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students. The Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) distributed the survey to its members in all districts. The survey was purposely anonymous to get candid answers. For the list of survey questions, see: Appendix D: District Administrator Survey.

For the district count and context, see: Appendix B: Table 1: Count and Context of Data Sources.

A review of the LCPs and interviews and surveys of district officials is intended to get a complete picture of districts' strategies and gather input on which are most effective. The districts included in this research represent California's student demographic population and geographic diversity. Districts were carefully selected by identifying districts with similar rates of ethnic/racial diversity, English learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities as the statewide rates, using the California Department of Education's enrollment data. The 19 districts interviewed had a total of 423,862 students in the 2019–20 school year. Even though some rural districts had already started hybrid models or returned to in-person learning when the survey was conducted, rural districts were invited to respond, for purposes of geographical diversity, to give a broader understanding of what districts did during distance learning and to look ahead at hybrid and in-person learning. The researcher chose to leave the interviews

anonymous in this report to give district officials more freedom to speak openly. Since the survey was sent out to all ACSA members and was anonymous, the researcher cannot provide district contexts such as geographic location or student population.

ANALYTIC APPROACH

The research approach was divided into three parts. The first was the document review of the LCPs. The LCP is the primary document for districts to outline their plans, programs, and spending for stakeholders to review, and the state uses it as an accountability tool. Although it is an excellent primary source of information to understand what districts are doing to get a more in-depth understanding of what they are doing and what is effective, some fieldwork research is needed. This research provides real-time insight from the local perspective and context as to what strategies district leaders considered most effective. The LCP review helped inform the next steps of the research.

The second and third parts, the interviews and surveys of district representatives, were conducted during the same time frame. Once the document review, interviews, and survey were complete, the strategies to mitigate learning loss were added to a spreadsheet, reviewed closely, coded to determine themes, and quantified the types of strategies. If a district did not mention a particular strategy in the interview or survey, it does not suggest they do not employ the practice; rather, the district administrator did not describe it as the most effective. The strategies uncovered from the analysis help inform the findings and recommendations.

FINDINGS ANALYSIS

Schools in California are not mandated to administer statewide assessments in 2020 and 2021; therefore, there is no reliable statewide student outcomes data with which to assess how district practices helped to mitigate learning loss during distance learning. Instead, this study's approach is to ask district leaders to share what is working based on the local assessments and data and anecdotal reports by principals, teachers, and other stakeholders. The districts reviewed in this report address the distance learning requirements outlined in state law (noted on p. 13) and prioritize supports for targeted student groups, including English learners, students with disabilities, and low-income students. This section outlines what districts are doing to mitigate learning loss during distance learning.

MOST EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

The researcher identified smaller classes, small in-person cohorts for tutoring and instruction, the use of data from screening tools to improve teaching and learning, and extended learning times as the most effective practices to mitigate learning loss. These strategies are particularly effective because they allow for focused, tailored instruction to students who need additional assistance beyond large group teaching settings. The quotes by district leaders below encompass several strategies that appear to be the best practices.

- **Extended learning opportunities such as after-school and summer programs to address literacy development** were among the most common practices. One district even mentioned Saturday school as an additional extended learning opportunity for students who are struggling. Literacy intervention for elementary-aged English learners and non-English learners was identified as a critical strategy. The strategy in the quote below is for ELs, but it can be just as effective for non-English learners developing their English literacy skills.

  > One strategy that I have employed is a two-pronged approach: Hire high school interns and train them on how to teach reading. Then have high school students do an internship as Instructional Aides who work with small groups of two to four students providing a Summer Reading Academy that includes enrichment components to keep students engaged and fully learning. We did an eight-week Summer Literacy Academy. It was amazing . . . The evidence was a .75-to-2.4-year gain. Vocabulary had the highest outcome. This was due to students being bilingual-biliterate and were able to help English learner students make connections to their home language.

- Districts emphasized the importance of **smaller class sizes and bringing students on-site in small cohorts** to help them learn during remote education. Distance learning is difficult for some students; therefore, they were provided with on-site one-on-one and small group tutoring to supplement the distance learning. Priority was for English learners, students with disabilities, and to support other students who are struggling.

  > Small cohorts on each of the campuses that are comprised of Special Ed students, English learner students, and students with the greatest need. The classroom has an instructional (assistant) that provides support for each of their courses . . . All of this has resulted in improved grades and earning the necessary credits needed for graduation.

- Another effective strategy identified by districts in the LCPs, interviews, and surveys was using **data from assessments or screening tools to identify gaps and offer targeted support**. The two quotes on the following page describe how district and school leaders use the data to support students and improve academic outcomes.

> The i-Ready ELA and math diagnostic assessments every eight to 10 weeks helped teachers identify skills gaps at the beginning of the 2020–21 year, and then teachers support 'filling' these skills gaps with intentional, strategic instruction. The midyear data is used to plan for and implement intentional, strategic instruction and provide teachers and site administrators information to allocate instructional resources better. In between the three diagnostic assessment windows, teachers have used formative and summative assessments to monitor student learning and provide 'just in time,' appropriate instruction. The combined use of a standardized, diagnostic assessment (i-Ready) district-wide and formative/summative assessment data has been used to identify gaps/needs and prevent students from 'falling through the cracks.'

> Using a diagnostic tool to gauge learning gaps is very helpful to fill them. It is just attending to student needs. Doing the local assessments that show us where the difficulties lie and then targeting support (reteaching, tutoring, intervention support) to help students access the curriculum, make up any deficits, etc.

Districts identified the above approaches as some of the most effective at mitigating learning loss and helping students learn. They are effective because they are targeted, evidence-based approaches to identify gaps, provide support to address the gaps, and the cycle is repeated until the student reaches the goal.

OTHER KEY PRACTICES

Below are other critical practices the researcher identified for mitigating learning loss. Some of these practices are not directly tied to academics, but rather remove barriers to learning based on student circumstances. Nonacademic strategies are crucial, too, because they can improve learning and prevent and address learning loss. Further, students who have their basic needs met are more able to dedicate their time to learning. In the interviews, district leaders were proud to share that their staff are addressing the needs of students and families outside of academics. Below are some of the more frequently cited strategies viewed as beneficial by district leaders:

- **Attendance Outreach:** If a student was not logged in to class, districts had other staff working in the background reaching out to students and parents to get them logged in. Staff supported students and parents with figuring out how to log in, finding the link, and referring to other staff if additional support was needed.

- **Technology Support:** Districts launched technology support hotlines for parents and students to call, which streamlined issues and helped the transition to distance learning go more smoothly. Hotlines received a high number of calls.

- **Inclusion Specialists, Social Workers, and Counselors Remove Barriers to Learning:** Inclusion specialists (for students with disabilities), social workers, and counselors removed barriers to learning for a child and family by providing them with much-needed resources. Some of the resources provided included a device, alarm clock, clothes, and help connecting families to food, housing, transportation, and health services.

- **Counselors and Mental Health Resources:** In the interviews, district administrators highlighted that counselors were busy responding to referrals from students, teachers, and staff identifying students in need. They provided counseling, referred students to outside agencies for additional support, provided mental health resources to students and families, and led training for staff and parents on mental health topics.

- **Parent Engagement:** Since parents had to become teachers during distance learning, schools changed how they worked with parents. Teachers and parents had to work more closely than ever, and parents became equal partners in their child's learning. For example, teachers taught parents techniques to support their child's learning during distance learning.

- **Teacher Support:** Districts provided teachers with professional development on teaching in a distance-learning mode and monitoring and addressing student well-being. Instructional coaches taught teachers how to better serve English learners and students with disabilities. There was an increase in professional learning community collaboration across different areas, such as reviewing student data and developing solutions for issues as they arise.

- **Meal Distribution and Device and Broadband Access:** Schools oversaw food distribution and device and broadband access—offering on-site pickup and delivering meals for families who could not pick them up.

- **Social-Emotional Learning Activities:** These activities were embedded into homeroom and advisory periods or before a lesson. They serve as informal student

well-being check-ins and help students feel connected to one another, their teacher, and their school, which is crucial for their well-being.

- **Credit Recovery Options:** Credit recovery describes a variety of educational strategies and programs that give students who have failed a class the opportunity to redo coursework or retake a course through alternate means and earn academic credit. Frequently observed credit recovery options include summer school for middle and high school students, online programs specifically tailored for credit recovery, and "micro-courses" that target a specific learning standard. Last summer, many districts allowed English learners and other prioritized groups to participate in credit recovery in person.

- **Community Engagement**: Schools and districts increased collaboration with their communities, such as Native American tribes, the YMCA, community centers, and public transportation agencies, and formed partnerships with private-sector companies to provide the resources students needed, such as tutoring, devices, Wi-Fi, and spaces to learn.

INNOVATIVE STRATEGY

An innovative strategy used by school districts is designating **high school and college students as tutors and mentors.** Since teachers already have a lot on their plates, districts hired and trained their tutors to provide individualized and group support for students in need, such as English learners. The approach could have benefits beyond the short term because it exposes young people to opportunities of helping other students, which is empowering and could help a diverse group of student tutors discover a passion for teaching as a career. This strategy is associated with improved academic outcomes and school connectedness for students receiving the tutoring— which is especially critical for many target student groups.

For the summary of findings for each format, see:

- Appendix E: Diagram: Summary of Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs) Review Findings
- Appendix F: Table 2: Summary of Survey Findings
- Appendix G: Table 3: Summary of Interview Findings

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since California waived the requirement for statewide achievement tests in 2020 and 2021, there is no single assessment to measure academic outcomes across the districts reviewed in this report. Therefore, the researcher relied on the perspective of district

leaders, who, with their data and experience, identified which strategies they believe are working best. The researcher supplemented this perspective with practices outlined in the Learning Continuity and Attendance Plan (LCP). The recommendations include some of the key strategies for mitigating learning loss as described in the interviews, surveys of district leaders, and LCPs. This section also incorporates some of the common concerns of district leaders on mitigating learning loss and recommendations to address these concerns. Recommendations are as follows:

- **Fund programs such as tutoring, class size reduction, and extended learning beyond the next fiscal year to address learning loss caused by distance learning during the COVID–19 pandemic.** The researcher recommends the Legislature provide funding for tutoring, smaller class sizes, and extended learning initiatives to address learning loss for the next several years. District leaders highlight these strategies as particularly effective at mitigating learning loss and want to continue them as students return to campuses. In addition, students with disabilities, English learners, and low-income, homeless, foster youth, and struggling students should continue to be prioritized for these programs. Research demonstrates these student groups have had considerable learning challenges during the pandemic, and they will continue to need these types of dedicated support in the future.

  o An example of funding that can be extended is the Expanded Learning Opportunities Grants included in AB 86 to increase in-person instruction and provide academic interventions to address barriers to learning and accelerate progress to close learning gaps by prioritizing students who fall in the following subgroups:

    - Pupils with disabilities
    - Youth in foster care
    - Homeless youth
    - English learners
    - Pupils from low-income families
    - Pupils without access to a computing device, software, and high-speed Internet
    - Disengaged pupils, credit-deficient high school pupils, pupils at risk of dropping out, pupils with failing grades
    - Pupils identified as needing social and mental health supports (California Legislature, 2021, AB 86)

    This grant ends in 2022–23, and it can be extended to fund programs identified in this report several years into the future as districts continue to tackle learning loss.

- o A concern identified by district leaders during interviews is the teacher shortage.[3] Districts need to attract additional teachers to provide one-on-one and small group tutoring, reduce class size, and offer extended learning opportunities such as after-school and summer programs. A creative way to address the need and give students additional mentorship is hiring high school and college students as tutors. This is a low-cost, innovative way to address learning loss and build a pipeline of teachers from diverse backgrounds to help mitigate the teacher shortage.

- **Prioritize the mental health of students and staff and remove barriers to learning by funding social workers, counselors, and inclusion specialists.** These resources are crucial because they address the mental health needs of students and connect students and families to resources to remove barriers. Mental health challenges and barriers to learning do not disappear when students return in-person; therefore, it is critical to provide funding to hire staff who can address socio-emotional learning and mental health. Further, if districts can hire mental health professionals, teachers can focus more on instruction, which increases instructional preparation time and may help prevent teacher burnout.

- **Invest in screening tools to have real-time student data that teachers can use to improve their teaching and student learning**. Teachers need to know if their students grasped the key concepts immediately to know whether they need to fill the gaps to the entire class right away or if only a few students fell behind and need some one-on-one or small group instruction. Instructors found these tools helpful because the tools immediately improve their teaching and help them promptly evaluate student learning.

- **Encourage future research that runs rigorous tests to evaluate distance learning and hybrid instruction. This testing should assess strategies that target high-need students, such as students with disabilities, English learners, and low-income students**. Without rigorous research, it will be unclear what is working as districts attempt to address learning loss impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Last, **designate a regional or state entity to analyze and communicate the effective strategies uncovered by the rigorous research. The entity would develop materials to support districts with implementing effective strategies**

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[3] During the 2021 legislative session, the Legislature is currently considering two bills that address the teacher shortage and tutoring to mitigate learning loss: SB 723 and AB 520. SB 723 establishes the California Leadership, Excellence, Academic, Diversity, and Service-Learning (LEADS) Tutoring Program to train and hire college students to help address learning loss and strengthen the teacher pipeline. AB 520 establishes California's Diversifying the Teacher Workforce Grant Program to make the teaching force more diverse.

and convene districts to evaluate and improve strategies. One option is the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, the statewide agency charged with assisting schools in need of support by coordinating resources for improvement and joint problem-solving.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Questions

Research Questions:

1. What are districts doing to mitigate learning loss due to distance learning during the pandemic?

2. How do districts monitor the academic progress of their students? Low-income students? English learners? Students with disabilities?

3. How are districts supporting students and families?

   a. How are they supporting chronically absent students?

4. What are the most effective practices to mitigate learning loss?

   a. How do these practices/policies/programs/models work?
   b. What are the results?
   c. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the practices?

5. How do districts catch up their students after they have fallen behind when they return in person?

Appendix B: Table 1: Count and Context of Data Sources

Source Type	Total Count	Context
Survey	15	◆ Survey anonymous: no district context
Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans (LCPs)	13	◆ Districts are in the following counties: Del Norte, Fresno (three), Imperial, Kern, Marin, Riverside, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Joaquin, and Tulare. ◆ Grades served by these districts: elementary, middle, and high school (11), and elementary and middle school (two)
Interview	19	◆ Districts are in the following counties: Alameda, Butte, Contra Costa, Del Norte, Fresno (two), Imperial, Kern, Kings, Los Angeles, Merced, Orange, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego (two), San Joaquin, Santa Clara, and Tulare. ◆ One district is a charter school. ◆ Grades served by these districts: elementary and middle school (six), elementary, middle, and high school (10), high school (one), and middle and high school (two)

Overview:

1. How is your district measuring and identifying learning loss due to distance learning?
2. What is your district doing to mitigate learning loss for the **general student population**?
3. What is your district doing to mitigate learning loss for **English learners**?
4. What is your district doing to mitigate learning loss for **students with disabilities**?
5. What infrastructure is in place to support **low-income students and families**?

Outcomes & Data:

6. Which intervention would you identify as the most promising? Is there data to support it for being effective?

   a. Does this intervention have any gaps? How would you improve it?

Closing:

7. Are there plans in place for measuring and addressing learning gaps when students return to in-person instruction?

Additional questions (if time permits):

8. How does your district reconnect with chronically absent students?
9. Distance learning has changed how schools support students with disabilities. Can you answer the following to help me understand?

   a. How is your district conducting assessments to determine whether a student should be in special education?
   b. How are teachers conducting Individualized Education Plan meetings?
   c. How do teachers provide students with one-on-one time?

10. Districts in hybrid: Are you noticing learning loss for students who are back in the classroom?

Strategies for Mitigating Learning Loss

Dear District Administrator,

My name is Maria Valle, and I am supporting the California Senate Office of Research (SOR) efforts to understand the best practices to mitigate learning loss due to distance learning in the COVID era. My research will focus on promising district practices, especially among districts' serving high rates of low-income students, English learners, or students with disabilities. I am reaching out to gather the exemplary practices that mitigate learning loss during distance learning and highlight them in a report for the legislature. Findings may inform future budgeting appropriations. Please take fifteen to twenty minutes to fill out this survey to share your district's efforts.

The survey is anonymous. Please complete the survey by Friday, March 19, 2021.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Respectfully,

Maria Valle

Best Practice #1: Share a practice/model/strategy/intervention with evidence of reducing learning loss due to distance learning for English Learners, students with disabilities, or low-income students. What is the evidence that supports that it reduces learning loss?

Long answer text

Best Practice #2: Share another practice/model/strategy/intervention with evidence of reducing learning loss due to distance learning for English Learners, students with disabilities, or low-income students. What is the evidence that supports that it reduces learning loss?
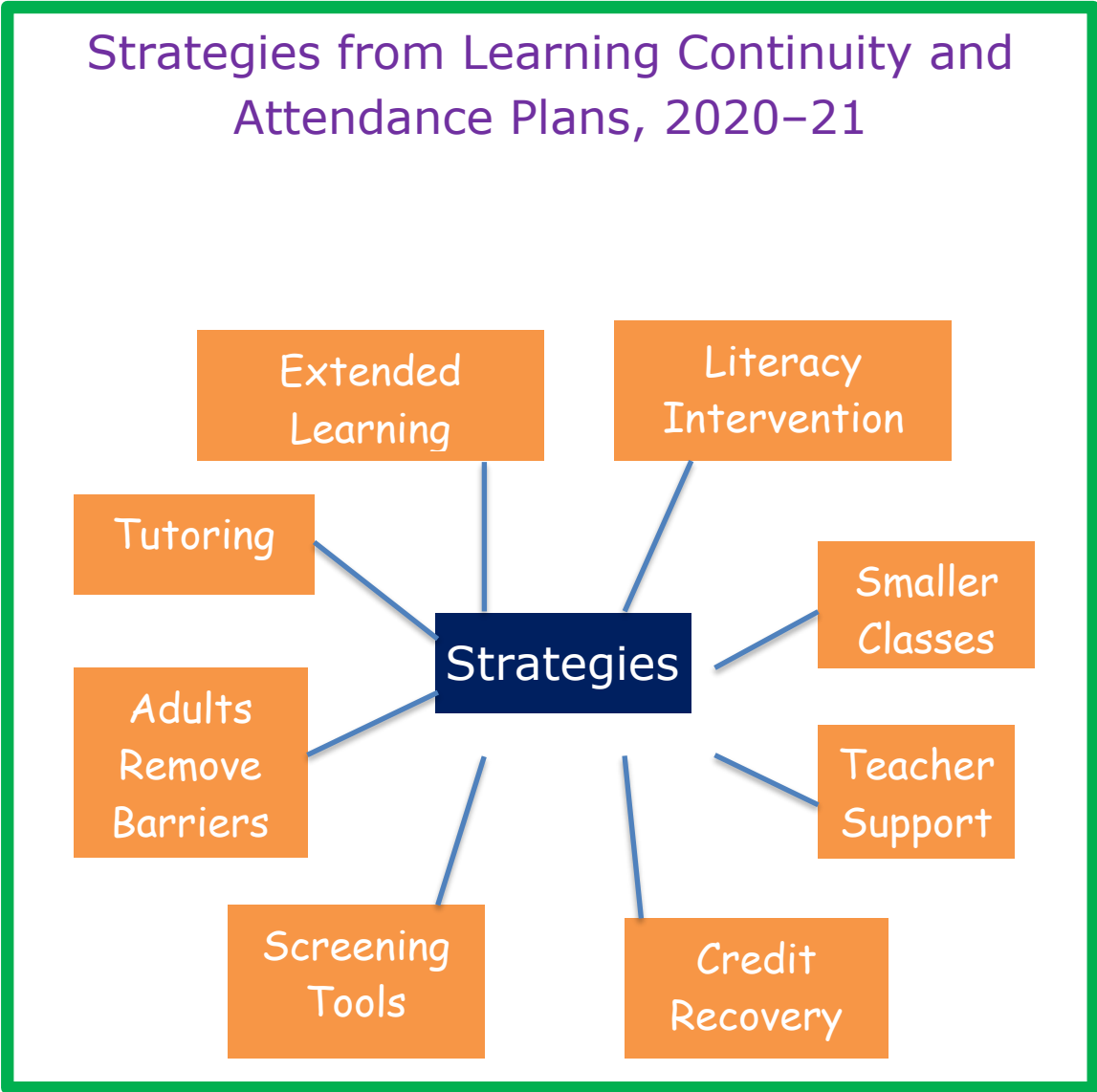
Long answer text

Please share your name and email if you are available for a brief call to share more about your district's efforts.

Short answer text

Strategies from Learning Continuity and Attendance Plans, 2020–21

Strategies

Extended Learning

Literacy Intervention

Tutoring

Smaller Classes

Adults Remove Barriers

Teacher Support

Screening Tools

Credit Recovery

Appendix F: Table 2: Summary of Survey Findings

Strategy	Total Number of Districts
Smaller class sizes	5
Data is actively used to impact instruction and student learning	3
Intervention classes take place over the school day	3
Increased family and community engagement.	2
Credit recovery efforts (for middle and high school students)	2
Mental health strategies to help address social-emotional needs of students during the pandemic	2
Tutoring and mentoring by high school students.	2
Small group and one-on-one tutoring	1
Increased Visual and Performing Arts for all students	1
Increased teacher capacity through professional development such as connecting with students and teaching during distance learning.	1
Creative scheduling	1
Special education students returned to in-person earlier than the rest of the students	1
Technology devices and hotspots for every student, and phone line to call to troubleshoot technology issues	1
The alternative education teacher met individually with every student on a weekly basis for an academic and social/emotional check-in	1
Supports that connect the student to the school beyond academics	1
Summer school to prepare students for the fall	1
School for Emotionally Disturbed students has been open since the beginning of this school year for in-person learning	1
Return of English learners to campus for additional support	1
During distance learning, special needs students received their services and had the opportunity to get individual tutoring as needed (both remotely)	1
Provided the option to graduating seniors to graduate with reduced credit requirements, yet still above the state minimum if the student need that flexibility	1

Strategy	Total Number of Districts
English learners are provided differentiated instruction in small group breakout rooms four times per week during afternoon sessions	1
Extended learning to protect the regular classroom instruction time for students not meeting standards	1
Targeted instruction provided to very small groups by certificated staff	1
Bringing in small groups of students to campus on-off cohort/hybrid days to meet student needs	1

Appendix G: Table 3: Summary of Interview Findings

Strategy	Total Number of Districts
Academic:	
Small group instruction	14
Data from assessments.	11
Extended learning: after-school and summer school	10
Small group and individual tutoring prioritized for English learner, students with disabilities, low-income, foster, and homeless	8
Offering credit recovery	7
Parent collaboration.	6
Tracking multiple measures of engagement: attendance, log-ins to Google classroom, grades, and completion of assignments	5
Real-time feedback from digital tools help teacher identify student skill level and break out into groups to support them	4
Professional development on how to teach in distance learning	3
Nonacademic:	
Providing meals	9
Homeroom or an advisory period for connection and social-emotional check-in before instruction starts	7
One-on-one device and Internet	7
Social workers.	4
Calling students who have not logged in and providing support	4

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