

# POWER OF THE QUESTION

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## Five Questions State Boards Should Ask about Accelerated Learning

By David Steiner and Joseph Hedger

In March 2021, President Joe Biden signed the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021, which requires districts to set aside 20 percent of the stimulus funding to address the lost instructional time that many students experienced during the pandemic. State education leaders have options other than remediation and retention to help students get back on track. They will need to help districts and schools identify evidence-based approaches to accelerate learning so students can meet grade-level expectations and graduate high school on time.

Based on 2020 estimates, the average amount of instructional time lost due to school building closures would reach about seven months for all students, with black students possibly falling behind by 10.3 months on average, Hispanic students by 9.2 months, and low-income students by more than a year.<sup>1</sup>

Closing achievement gaps has long been an elusive goal for leaders of state education systems. A 2019 empirical analysis of middle school math performance in six states and Washington, D.C., concluded that some gap reduction is possible but very rare. No school closed the math achievement gap during middle school years between 2014 and 2018, according to the analysis. Approximately 9 percent of sample schools were able to consistently reduce the achievement gap in middle school math performance, and fewer than 1 percent were able to close the achievement gap and increase their weakest students' understanding of middle school math.<sup>2</sup>

However, in individual schools where students received grade-appropriate assignments and experienced higher engagement and expectations, they were able to close learning gaps and improve achievement—especially those starting a year behind grade level.<sup>3</sup> We offer five questions state boards can ask to advance accelerated learning in their state.

## 1 WHAT DO THE DATA SAY ABOUT EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS?

Historically, schools have tried two strategies to return students to grade-level learning: grade retention—that is, repeating an academic year—and remediation, meaning reteaching content that students previously failed to learn. These methods have proved ineffective. In a study of reading achievement in grades K-8, the benefits of grade retention were virtually nonexistent, and classrooms where students started the year behind grade level had lower learning gains during secondary schooling than classrooms where teachers maintained high expectations for all students.<sup>4</sup>

When students get separated from their peers for remediation or retention, schools are essentially defining them as failures. When students are put into a separate group based on performance, it is psychologically hard to take, and even if some progress is made in addressing missed skills and knowledge, grade-level students will be too far ahead for remediated or retained students to catch up.

Acceleration is a pedagogical strategy that looks forward, not back. One of this paper's authors (David Steiner) defines acceleration as teaching students only what they need to access their next lesson or lessons, with teachers providing the skills and knowledge required for a student to understand and learn the targeted grade-level material.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than try to remediate, it is better to focus on the few crucial skills and body of knowledge at the grade level so that the students are given a fighting chance to learn at grade level during the year. This strategy will have academic, psychological, social, and emotional positive outcomes.

Acceleration cannot be achieved without one important trade-off. It would be counterproductive to try to accelerate students who are by definition far behind so they learn the full complement of material in their grade level. A successful strategy of accelerated learning will mean reducing the number of learning targets for struggling students while not lowering grade-level expectations. When done correctly, acceleration neither overburdens educators nor detracts from providing challenging instruction to all students; it helps teach students who have not sufficiently demonstrated mastery of content exactly what they need to advance.

## 2 HOW CAN ACCELERATED LEARNING WORK FOR EVERY STUDENT?

A Johns Hopkins survey on school culture finds that, prior to the pandemic, only about a quarter of U.S. students reported being stretched and challenged in school.<sup>6</sup> In classrooms with more access to grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers with high expectations—in other words, when rigorous

materials were well taught—even students who started the year behind their peers were able to make real progress.<sup>7</sup>

“To accelerate students’ progress, system leaders and educators need to identify exactly what unfinished learning needs to be addressed, when, and how,” according to TNTP, a nonprofit focused on effective teaching. TNTP published a guide that articulates goals for accelerating student learning amid the pandemic, suggesting that all students should

- have the resources they need to meaningfully engage in school, whether in-person or not;
- feel like they belong in their school experience;
- be treated as authentic partners;
- have access to grade-appropriate assignments focused on key priorities;
- have access to strong instruction that addresses any gaps in prior learning they have within the context of grade-appropriate assignments focused on priority content; and
- demonstrate mastery of grade-level content.<sup>8</sup>

Acceleration not only makes every effort to get students to grade level; it is an engaging approach for students themselves. It says, “You can do this. We refuse to regard you as less than your classmates.”

State leaders may face a challenge in getting school systems on board with prioritizing key skills and knowledge. There are resources to help schools foreground instruction on these priorities—that is, focusing on lessons and activities that are strictly necessary for mastering the learning standards as opposed to reducing the learning standards themselves. For example, Student Achievement Partners (SAP) named priorities in mathematics and English language arts/literacy for the 2020–21 school year.<sup>9</sup>

### **3 WHAT IS THE STATE’S ROLE IN IDENTIFYING GAPS AND ACCELERATING LEARNING?**

Neither state education agencies nor educators can remain mystified by what students know or do not know. Finding out where students are on the crucial skills needs to happen before accelerating to attain those skills. Thus the effective use of diagnostic assessments is essential. Where districts are using high-quality instructional materials, they may well find that their curriculum already includes diagnostic tools that point teachers to what needs to be reinforced before they teach the next content. The Zearn math curriculum, for example, embeds diagnostics and tips for teachers on how to teach students in an accelerated way. In other cases, teachers will have access to formative assessments such as MAP or iReady, which can help pinpoint areas of challenge.

SAP suggests that teacher’s formative assessments

- be used to determine how to bring students into grade-level instruction, not whether to bring them into it;
- center formative practices, including leveraging such sources of information as exit tickets, student work, and student discussions; and

- employ targeted checks for very specific subject and grade-level instructional purposes.<sup>10</sup>

At the state level, education agencies need to continue to assess learning gaps by subgroups (e.g., English language learners, students with disabilities) across their system in order to target resources most effectively.

### **4 WHAT SUPPORTS WILL DISTRICTS NEED IN ORDER TO IDENTIFY AND LEVERAGE HIGH-QUALITY CURRICULUM THAT CAN BE USED TO ACCELERATE LEARNING?**

Before they can accelerate learning, schools and systems need to determine whether their students and teachers have high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials that are also culturally and linguistically responsive. EdReports, a nonprofit that rates and helps educators access quality materials, can help school leaders make this determination. If materials “meet expectations,” schools can build a strategy that supports teachers’ effective use of those materials. If EdReports has not rated particular materials, schools will need to independently determine if they meet student-focused goals.

Near-term school and district plans should include goals to increase student access to grade-appropriate curriculum, communicate clear expectations to educators, train for teachers and school leaders to accelerate learning, and monitor the quality of assignments and make adjustments as needed, according to TNTP.

If districts have not yet introduced high-quality instructional materials, then long-term plans should include adopting high-quality instructional materials in a way that engages teachers, school leaders, students, and families in the decisions that are ultimately made and developing a multiyear implementation plan that will support teachers and school leaders in using high-quality instructional materials.<sup>11</sup>

State leaders have a role as well. The Council of Chief State School Officers and New America analyzed states that leverage openly licensed educational resources as an alternative to traditional materials. While few states require districts to adopt specific curricula, state leaders provide vital guidance on which curricula are well aligned to state academic standards. “Each [state] should ensure that all of its districts—no matter their size or capacity—have the accurate and up-to-date information they need in order to make knowledgeable curriculum decisions.”<sup>12</sup>

### **5 WHAT KIND OF EDUCATOR SUPPORT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MAKES ACCELERATION POSSIBLE?**

While all students need rigorous, grade-level academics, adopting new high-quality curricula will not suffice by itself. Harvard’s Center for Education Policy Research reported that most surveyed teachers reported using a new district-selected textbook in more than half their classes, but only a quarter used it “nearly all the time” for essential activities, and just 7 percent used the new curriculum exclusively. Many teachers also reported watering down curriculum when they believed it was too demanding for their students.<sup>13</sup>

The fault does not lie with the teacher or the new curricula. Adopting new curricula may hand teachers a new tool with great promise, but it also requires complex behavior changes. In many cases, teachers have been left to figure out on their own how to use the curriculum. Teachers lack professional development needed to transition effectively to more rigorous curricula, and state leaders must ensure they get it.<sup>14</sup>

States can help ensure that teachers are aware of the research and reasoning underpinning the push toward acceleration strategies so they will get on board with the process. Knowing that students come to their classrooms with a range of skill levels, teachers understandably want to communicate, “I’ll meet you where you are.” In effect, such a strategy often means that teachers abandon the effort to have students study the more rigorous material and instead try—often fruitlessly—to address all that the student has missed in prior years. Grade level means grade level. Focusing on below grade level instruction is a trajectory to nowhere.

Some states, such as Louisiana, have provided guides for implementing curricula at the district level.<sup>15</sup> Leading Innovation for Tennessee Education similarly created an implementation guidebook that helps member districts build teacher and leader capacity to expand their use of new, standards-aligned instructional materials.<sup>16</sup>

Tutoring may be the most effective strategy to accelerate learning. In its principles for effective tutoring, EdResearch for Recovery lays out where tutoring excels. For example, reading-focused tutoring for students in early grades and mathematics-focused tutoring for older students produces the strongest results. Also, tutoring is most likely to be effective when delivered in high doses, such as three or more sessions per week, for 30 to 60 minutes per day.<sup>17</sup>

Even before ARP stimulus funding was passed, state boards of education were already prioritizing acceleration to make up for lost instructional time. During its September 2020 meeting, the Maryland State Board of Education voted to work with local education agencies and stakeholders to accelerate learning over the next school year. In March, Connecticut tasked its AccelerateCT Education Task Force with building a framework for learning recovery by convening cross-section stakeholders and prioritizing areas for greater engagement, such as through family and community connections. Delaware also created a strong integrated strategic plan to target resources to support acceleration.<sup>18</sup>

In summer 2020, Missouri’s Task Force for Learning Acceleration released recommendations for guiding instructional planning for the return to school in fall. Part of the scope was to examine how to assess learning loss and focus on acceleration of learning to support students.<sup>19</sup>

Educators may be worried, and understandably so, about a shift from traditional practice to acceleration during challenging times. But if children come back in school and face business as usual, it will not be meaningful.

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## ENDNOTES

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