

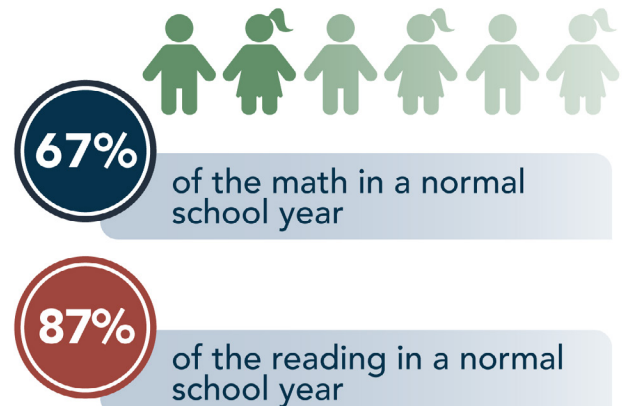
Learning Loss, the Homework Gap, and Digital Equity

The digital divide between technology haves and have-nots has been a persistent problem for education, with minority and low-income students—as well as urban residents—typically suffering.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted educational systems across the U.S. and around the globe. With students unable to attend brick and mortar schools, instructional time and quality were hampered. Lasting far longer than many predicted and leaving practically no student unaffected, the impacts of the disruption to students' education and lives are only starting to become apparent.

Early evidence suggests that these lost learning opportunities have led to severe student learning loss. According to [The Glossary of Education Reform](#), the term learning loss refers to “any specific or general loss of knowledge and skills or to reversals in academic progress, most commonly due to extended gaps or discontinuities in a student’s education.”

Education has often grappled with versions of learning loss; everything from summer break and interrupted formal education, to chronic absenteeism and even “senioritis”. Yet the learning loss suffered from the pandemic is vastly different. It’s not due to temporary circumstances, nor does it simply affect isolated populations. Instead, it has affected most every student for an extended period of time.



Learning Loss By the Numbers

In late 2020, [McKinsey & Company](#) accessed data from Curriculum Associates that revealed, on average, students learned 67% of the math and 87% of the reading that they learn in a typical school year. Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students were also found to be more impacted by the pandemic, achieving only 59% of the expected math and 77% of the reading.

An assessment company, Illuminate Education, corroborated many of the findings of McKinsey's analysis. Compared to learning in previous years, [Illuminate Education](#) indicated, students in all but Kindergarten were showing learning losses of more than a month for both math and reading.

In the Trenches Insights

Neema Avashia, 2013 Educator of the Year for Boston Public Schools, shared her take on learning loss with [Education Week](#): “When our youths are frightened, disconnected, grieving, or anxious, they aren’t learning. If we are going to address the academic loss that may have occurred during the pandemic, then we also need to fully understand the other kinds of loss our young people have experienced and have plans in place to support them through those losses.”

When Avashia asked her students what they thought about learning loss, they replied in a number of ways, including:

“Staying in the house is not for me. I learned more about my people and I learned more about what people did to Black people then and now. This pandemic is already very stressful for students and giving us more work won’t help. Some kids may be struggling, but some are having less of a problem with remote learning than others because every person has different experiences with things.”

It is clear from these responses that learning loss is just one disruption among many other severe disruptions students have suffered during the pandemic. Every student has their own unique experience and some have thrived in online learning environments.

The American Rescue Plan to the Rescue

To help students recover from missed learning opportunities will take creative solutions and cost money. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARP), signed into law in March of 2021, includes money to implement and scale evidence-based programs to specifically address learning loss.

Approximately 30 billion dollars in the ARP is directly earmarked for programs that address learning loss “through the implementation of evidence-based interventions, such as summer learning, extended day, comprehensive after school programs, or extended school year programs, and ensure that such interventions respond to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on” disadvantaged students subgroups, homeless students, and students in foster care.



Addressing Equity

President Biden’s education budget includes new “equity grants” that would increase funding for Title I, a grant program for educating disadvantaged students, to \$36.5 billion from about \$16 billion, the largest increase in the history of the program. To access that funding, states would have to submit plans about how they would track and address gaps in their funding systems, ensure teachers are compensated at levels comparable to other professionals with similar education and experience, ensure students have access to advanced coursework, and increase access to early-childhood programs.

These grants would boost funding for full-service community schools, which help coordinate services, like health care and counseling, to meet students’ non-academic needs. The budget also calls for a new \$1 billion program to double the number of counselors, school psychologists, nurses, and social workers in schools.

Section 2004 of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP Act) new maintenance of equity provisions are “central to ensuring that essential resources are meeting the needs of students who have been subject to longstanding opportunity gaps in our education system” and “will help ensure that schools and LEAs serving large proportions of historically underserved groups of students—including students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness—receive an equitable share of State and local funds”.

Specifically, Maintenance of Equity ensures that:

- An SEA (State Education Agency) does not disproportionately reduce per-pupil State funding to high-need LEAs (Local Education Agencies);
- An SEA does not reduce per-pupil State funding to the highest-poverty LEAs below their FY (Fiscal Year) 2019 level;
- An LEA does not disproportionately reduce State and local per-pupil funding in high-poverty Schools; and,
- An LEA does not disproportionately reduce the number of full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff per pupil in high-poverty schools.

By protecting these LEAs from disproportionate funding cuts, maintenance of equity helps to ensure that vital resources are available to mitigate the impact that the pandemic has had on underserved students, including addressing students’ social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs.

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Get with the Programs

[McKinsey & Company](#) suggests two examples for evidence-based programs to help students recover from learning loss due to COVID-19: Acceleration Academies (week-long 25-hour vacation academies with 8-12 students and targeted-instruction in reading and math) and High-intensity Tutoring (50 minutes of daily tutoring provided by paraprofessionals in reading and math with 1-2 students in a session).

Already, school systems around the country are experimenting with additional programming to not only accelerate learning but to also ensure the social-emotional well-being of students. This programming includes both extended day and extended year programming to increase instructional time for students with school staff. In other cases, schools are testing out high-intensity tutoring programs with low student-to-teacher ratios. In addition, many districts are connecting with organizations in the community to offer STEM and other enrichment opportunities.

Left to Their Own Devices

Schools have a great deal of flexibility in how they use this money, including toward the purchase of technology. LEAs are required to spend no less than 20% of their ESSER allocations to “[address learning loss through evidence-based interventions.](#)” Purchasing educational technology, which could include hardware, software, and connectivity, for students served by the LEA that aids in regular, substantive educational interaction between students and educators.

Bridging the Gap

According to the [Pew Research Center](#), the homework gap refers to school-age children lacking the connectivity they need to complete schoolwork at home, and “is more pronounced for black, Hispanic, and lower-income households.”

The [Federal Communications Commission](#) was awarded \$7 billion to address “the homework gap”: helping schools recoup the costs of paying for student and teacher access to broadband at home. These funds can be used specifically to purchase devices, hotspots, modems, routers as well as Internet access services for K-12 students and teachers who are unconnected in their homes.

However, shifting the financial responsibility from schools to students to provide their own devices for learning is not true digital equity. Digital equity ensures that every student has equitable access to advanced technologies, communication and information resources, and the learning experiences they provide. There needs to be a creative model that blends federal, state, and local support for leveraging mobile technologies in schools.



Equal to the Task

Digital equity supports social-emotional learning because there is no true Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) without equity. Equity shows that districts are unconditionally supporting all of their students and providing, to the extent they are able, all the opportunities students need to succeed. If districts are not able to provide this in-house, they are seeking the knowledge and opportunities to bring this to their faculty and staff. Districts providing resources should ensure that the tools and media represent their students and what they want to portray to their students.

Giving computers to children is not going to solve all their problems. In many cases, internet access and bandwidth are issues preventing students from using technology and learning in meaningful ways. If students cannot utilize the technology they have, there is no equity. Digital equity is achieved when educational technology is used effectively to benefit the students and enhance the lessons. Only then can SEL be taught in a meaningful and beneficial way.

View Additional Resources

Check out the rest of the Digital Equity tools and resources on the [K-12 Blueprint](#).

The Way Forward

The point is, nothing is ever going to be the same. During the pandemic, kids deep dived into social media and absorbed every nuance of a historic, news-heavy year. Their minds have been opened to social justice and global politics. The traditional classroom will seem more confining and out-of-step with the world. So educators will have to not only open their minds to come up with innovative solutions to heal learning loss and digital inequity, but to keep this generation engaged, connected, and aligned with their own purpose and agency.

As educators continue to improve the effectiveness of hybrid instructional routines, it is vital that school districts and states lay the groundwork for reimagined systems that can accelerate the recovery from months of lost learning opportunities.

