

## POLICY BRIEF

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## Supporting Students' Academic Success During the COVID-19 Crisis

*by Elaine Allensworth, University of Chicago*

Disruptions in schooling accompanying the COVID-19 crisis have led to considerable concerns around declining academic performance and decreased equity in educational outcomes, and for good reason. Supporting students' academic growth is critically important for their later educational success and life outcomes. At the same time, focusing narrowly on recovering academic content missed this spring could do little to improve long-term outcomes. As students continue to experience the trauma and economic impact of COVID-19, educators need to ensure that students are in a safe, stable school environment that is responsive to the social-emotional needs of every child when they go back to the classroom. There are risks in pursuing strategies that cause more disruption in the learning environment for students and educators. The bigger impacts on students' long-term educational outcomes will be determined by what happens this coming year—both in the downturn in the economy and the ways that schools structure learning going forward.

### Putting Learning Loss in Perspective Helps in Evaluating Strategies

There are reasons to be concerned that students have fallen behind in academic skills with the move to remote learning, and that inequities by race and income will increase in the future as a result of the crisis. Online learning is [less effective](#) than in-person learning for most [students](#), especially for students with the lowest academic skill levels relative to [peers](#). Families with the least economic resources are less likely to have reliable access to technology to engage in online learning, and more crowded living conditions that make learning at home difficult. Black and Latino families have faced additional stress with greater risks of exposure to the virus and lower recovery rates.

At the same time, these effects do not have to be dire for students' long-term outcomes. Even if the largest predictions in [learning losses occur](#), most students will remain within the typical grade range and be able to engage with typical class content next year. Students who have a smaller gain in learning in one year tend to have a larger gain in the [following year](#), and they tend to catch up in skill development to [where they would have been](#) after a disruption, as long

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as they enter a [supportive environment](#) subsequently. Most students will still be at a normal skill level for their grade, even if their content knowledge is behind what it would have been without the spring disruptions.

Teaching extra content without changing the degree to which students are getting extra support can lead [students' grades to decline](#). Studies of accelerated math classes in both [North Carolina](#) and [California](#) have demonstrated negative effects, particularly for low achieving students. Nevertheless, policy makers and educators should not assume that students and families are undergoing so much stress that they cannot handle typical academic expectations. The majority of families are highly concerned about students' education even when undergoing significant challenges. With so much uncertainty, there is a risk of lowering expectations for students out of a concern for alleviating their stress, and further exacerbating inequitable educational outcomes.

## **The Economic Downturn and Continued Health Concerns Amplify Challenges in Teaching and Learning**

Differences in access to technology is a very tangible, visible sign of economic inequality. But even in normal times, there is unequal access to education due to financial costs that are often invisible to families with ample resources. Under the COVID-19 crisis, the country's economic status will exacerbate [economic inequality](#), further limiting the resources and support low-income families can offer their children. There are also still considerable concerns about health risks from the virus. Students could struggle in their courses for many reasons this coming year, thus strategies that support students' success in school broadly—so that they are engaged and getting good grades regardless of why they might struggle—will be more effective for students' long-term educational outcomes than strategies that narrowly focus on catching up academic skills. Students' engagement and success in their courses matters much more for long term success than their content knowledge in a particular [subject](#), or their [scores on standardized tests](#).

## **Effective Strategies to Support Students' Academic Development and Promote Equity in Outcomes**

Extended learning time opportunities (e.g., weeklong summer [academies](#) and [double-period math classes](#)) and one-on-one or small group support can boost academic achievement, although they do not necessarily improve course performance. High-intensity [tutoring](#) and [mentoring](#) programs that aim to support students' success in their classes, and are coordinated with their coursework and teachers, have been found to benefit test scores, attendance and grades. Ongoing [monitoring](#) will be critical to identifying struggles that are likely to emerge throughout the upcoming year. [Systems](#) that track attendance, assignment completion, and grades strengthen schools' ability to individualize services and match specific interventions to the needs of different students. Time for teachers and other school staff to monitor early warning indicator data, develop shared approaches and strategies, and provide assistance

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when students fall behind (rather than waiting for students to ask for help), provide support for all students.

Remedial courses, a common strategy for differentiating instruction for students with different incoming skill levels, has [both benefits and adverse consequences](#) for students with low skill levels. In order for remedial courses to be successful, training and support for teachers is required. [A particular form of double-dose classes](#) provide an alternative; all students take a regular class together while students with weaker skills have a second class with the same teacher that provides extra help and instruction to support their performance in the main class.

## **The Upcoming School Year Could Bring More Disruption, and a Stable Learning Environment Is What Students Need Most**

While the crisis is causing acute immediate stress, there will be long-term stress from the financial fallout of the crisis and the loss of loved ones. Supporting all students ultimately means making preparation so that students have a safe, stable school environment that is responsive to the social-emotional needs of every child to set the stage for students to be able to re-engage in learning. Research on the stress of [school closures](#) and on the academic impact of [Hurricane Katrina](#) finds that while students initially experience some learning loss, the persistence of these losses depends on the receiving environment. Losses fade after a year or two when students return to stable schools.

The more logistically complicated the plans are for the fall, the more chance that students and educators could have a chaotic school year where the jobs of teaching and learning become secondary to meeting new demands introduced by complicated new structures. When students go back to school, it will important that predictable routines and supportive relationships with their teacher and other adults and students in the school are present. There must be systems in place that provide support if students start to struggle – systems that can provide academic and social-emotional support, and resources needed to fully engage in school for both students and teachers.

**Elaine Allensworth** is the Lewis-Sebring Director of the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. Her research examines factors influencing students' educational attainment, school leadership, and school improvement.