



How Will Our Schools Be Different?

By Marilyn J. Dominick, NEW Chairperson

Things are looking up! Educators, politicians, and especially parents seem committed to in-person learning when schools reopen in 2021. This is welcome news, but it is probably safe to assume that schools will look and feel different in the future.

The following are a few driving questions behind our planning:

- How effective has remote learning been for our students, and where are they in terms of their learning?
- How much loss have we experienced?
- How can we mitigate the impact on students?
- How can we plan and schedule instruction to answer these questions?

In fact, back to school will not necessarily mean back to normal. We cannot just cram more into the new school year, and we certainly cannot retain large groups of students in the previous grade. It DOES make sense to identify the critical areas of unfinished learning and plan to fill the gaps.

Caring for **the mental state of our students** will be a priority in the new school year. Many students were completely disconnected from their teachers and peers for an entire year and may have started accepting the idea of getting used to normal schooling. And others who had supportive families and environments did well and continued their access to learning. So the difference between those two groups of students is bound to be exceptionally large! Individualized planning will be particularly important going forward. Part of this equation must be an investment in teachers so that they can build

student success. About 91% of parents and 99% of educators in a recent survey ranked teacher-student relationships as the most important factor in student success. Since some of our students never even met their teachers in the last school year, the relationship will be more important than ever.

Students will need more creative approaches to **build student engagement**, as they have not been in school in-person for a long time. Those who have been in school have been in smaller groups and have had the benefit of more individualized instruction. Overall, in terms of **routines and procedures** in their classrooms, teachers will have to assume that they will all be like kindergarten teachers this fall. It is important to start teaching the expected protocol to students upfront. And some students may need to get accustomed to in-person classes. Will this impact attendance patterns as families transition back to this requirement?

One new issue is said to be the **kindergarten bubble**. Students who would have started kindergarten in 2020 may not have done so. Parents may have opted out because they did not think their child's first experience in school should be a remote one. As a result, kindergarten enrollment may be larger, with some children older than normal years. Since they did not live in a vacuum but did continue to learn, this will be a challenge for which we must plan.

Grade level grouping by age might be obsolete. The grade a student is in may mean less than it ever has. Again, some have done well while others have struggled. The situation begs for a creative approach. We need to find out where each student is in the curriculum mastery and accordingly make an individual plan. That may mean multi-age, mastery-based groups for instruction, regardless of age or grade level. A scheduling nightmare? Yes! Necessary? Yes!

Teachers will have better technology skills than they did before the pandemic. Despite the chaos experienced by educators during the pandemic, most have adopted new approaches to instruction and assessment. Teachers have worked hard to focus on finding new, creative solutions to support best student learning. An overwhelming 89% of teachers did not have any experience with virtual teaching before the pandemic (NWEA survey)! Most say that they will apply what they have learned when school opens in the fall. They will be taking their pandemic experience and enhancing their classroom instruction using many of those tools.

Schools will need to access current research on the impact COVID-19 had on student learning. Rapid-response research projects are underway as evidenced in collaborations between university scholars, school districts, and foundations. It is essential to study the impact and act quickly to address the results. Evidence-based decision making is more important than ever.

How about grading systems? Good question! These must be more flexible than in the past. During the pandemic, many districts adjusted their grading systems because they promoted inequitable outcomes for students in varying situations. Now, we will need to combine high expectations for learning while being flexible about how we move a student forward.

Accountability and assessment will be reimaged and realigned to be more relevant to teaching and learning. The goal is to drive positive learning progress. The recent stimulus bill will provide \$126 billion for K-12 schools and will support much of this work. The equitable application of interventions to close

the gaps in learning that have occurred can only happen with strong assessment and high quality, creative instruction.

We certainly have big challenges in front of us. With God's help, I know that educators will rise to the occasion! God bless you as you prepare for your ministry to students, their families, and to each other.

- Some of the content in this article came from two published articles written by Laura Ascione. Laura is the editorial director at eSchool Media. She is a graduate of University of Maryland's prestigious Philip Merrill College of Journalism. Go to these links to read more of her comments:

<https://www.eschoolnews.com/2021/07/08/6-necessary-steps-to-move-k-12-education-forward-in-2021/2/>

<https://www.eschoolnews.com/2021/04/01/7-predictions-about-back-to-school-with-covid/>

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