Planning for Acceleration in the 2020-2021 School Year: School Leader Action Guide

Summer 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced school leaders to confront unprecedented challenges. You have done heroic work over the past few months to offer stability, learning, and care to your students and families. But the academic challenges facing students in the fall will still be substantial, so it’s important to start planning now for how you’ll address that in your school.

TNTP released the Learning Acceleration Guide to help district leaders develop and execute a strategy to accelerate (rather than remediate) student learning. Those same ideas can help guide school leaders’ work in the coming months, too. This companion resource for school leaders will help you navigate the relevant advice in the Learning Acceleration Guide and offers additional principal-specific advice for accelerating your students’ learning.

We’ve grounded the advice that follows in a set of values we believe should guide any school leader’s decision making in the months ahead:

**Grade-level content is the academic priority.**

Run every idea through a simple test: Will this help every student get back to grade level? We don’t mean ignoring social/emotional or other non-academic needs; addressing those are core to setting students up for success. But more than anything else, you should prioritize accelerating students’ learning by accelerating their exposure to grade-appropriate content—so that every student can get back to grade level. It won’t happen in a single year, but if you don’t set the goal and build a strategy around it, it won’t happen at all.

**Address inequities head-on.**

Losing so much of this school year has likely exacerbated existing inequities and opportunity gaps in your school. Communicate about that openly and ensure that your plan for restarting school accounts for the academic and social/emotional supports students will need.

**Support and assume the best of all your stakeholders.**

In this pandemic, everyone has done the best they know how to do in an unprecedented situation. Assume the best of your students, families, and staff in your decision making as you plan for reopening, and ensure that you have a strong plan to provide training and support for your teachers.

**Communicate clearly.**

Your families and staff might still feel overwhelmed by at-home learning, so as you think about how to prepare for next year, make sure your decisions are as clear and simple as possible. You’ll also want to share why and how decisions have been made and who was consulted in making those decisions.

How can you create a plan to accelerate student learning?

In the *Learning Acceleration Guide*, we described how systems should approach creating a plan to accelerate student learning. While most of these recommendations involve strategy planning at the district level; there are some parallel steps that school leaders can take to prepare for the 2020-2021 school year.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **Ask your system-level staff** about their plan to accelerate student learning.
2. **Assemble a small, diverse acceleration planning team** for a series of planning sessions.
3. **Plan for several potential instructional delivery scenarios** in the 2020-2021 school year.
4. **Assemble an advisory committee** that will offer your acceleration team student and family perspectives about the choices and decisions you are making.
5. **Prioritize concretely planning to accelerate student learning** across the course of the next school year.
6. **Answer key questions** you’ll need to begin planning for reopening.
7. **Start with information you already have** to answer key questions.
8. **Then, collect any additional information** that you need but don’t already have.
9. **Identify challenges and opportunities** that your team will need to address.

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**Ask your system-level staff about their plan to accelerate student learning.**

Before you begin planning for the year ahead, ask your manager or system leader about their plan to support you in accelerating learning. Will your system be updating its pacing guidance or adopting new materials to support your team in improving students’ experiences? You’ll want to know about your district’s expectations and supports before planning for your students’ experiences next year, so that you don’t inadvertently spend significant time recreating the wheel.

**Assemble a small, diverse acceleration planning team for a series of planning sessions—and set goals for what that team will accomplish.**

Assemble a school-level planning team that can make decisions about your academic strategy and support your teachers to accelerate student learning. Given your system’s approach to planning, your team might need to take all the steps outlined in the *Learning Acceleration Guide*, or you might just need to think through how you’ll internalize your system’s new resources and plan to help teachers use them. Build your acceleration planning team’s objectives, goals, and workplan based on what you learned from your system-level staff about the supports and resources they will provide, ensuring that you aren’t repeating work that your system will be doing.

**Plan for several potential instructional delivery scenarios in the 2020-2021 school year.**

Parallel to planning for the highest-priority content your students will need, you should ensure that your school has a plan for the potential instructional delivery scenarios that will occur during the 2020-21 school year. It is possible school will start virtually, that you’ll need to run staggered schedules, or that school will start in-person and then you’ll have rolling closures that require your team to quickly shift back to at-home experiences. You’ll want to plan for
the delivery mechanisms in line with your system’s thinking about how next school year will look. This will include ensuring you are staffed to deliver on each of the potential delivery models (which can certainly be challenging right now, given the budgetary uncertainty that schools and systems are facing).

Your acceleration team should have an advisory committee that will offer student and family perspectives about the choices and decisions you are making.

Review the recommendations in the Learning Acceleration Guide to think through how you should structure and engage your advisory committee. Ensure that you have a strong representation of students and their family members on this committee.

Prioritize concrete planning to accelerate student learning across the course of the next school year.

In alignment with the goals your team has set and your system’s plan for accelerating learning, build a concrete plan that includes the action steps your acceleration planning team will need to take in order to be ready for the school year. Consider the guidance in the Learning Acceleration Guide as you think through some of those milestones.

Ask key questions you’ll need to begin planning for reopening your school academically.

Your acceleration planning team will need to deeply understand the current state of your students, families, and staff’s experiences with at-home learning as you plan for next year. Use the Learning Acceleration Guide to think through the information you’ll need to gather so that you can anticipate what your school community needs in the new school year.

Start with information you already have to answer key questions.

To answer key questions about your students’ experiences, consider what information you and your district have already collected about the experiences that your community has had with at-home learning. Maybe you’ve given a survey to families about their access to food or technology. Maybe your team has had conversations with families and teachers about how distance learning is going. Start with what you know to generate a detailed list of opportunities you see and challenges that you are facing as you return to school.

Then, collect any additional information that you need but don’t already have.

Maybe your school or district given a survey to families about their access to food or technology. Maybe your team has had conversations with families and teachers about how distance learning is going. Start with what you know to generate a detailed list of opportunities you see and challenges that you are facing as you return to school. You’ll find additional ideas for doing this in the Learning Acceleration Guide.

Settle on the list of three to five significant opportunities to capitalize on and three to five significant challenges your team will need to address as you create your reopening plan.

Your planning team will need a clear understanding of these most important strengths and challenges as you build your plan. Think about how to capitalize on the wins you experienced during at-home learning. For example, did students share that it felt good to have a greater opportunity to autonomously drive their learning? If they did, consider how you could build on that and provide even more opportunities for students to be autonomous during the school year. Did parents share that they felt even more engaged in their students’ learning than before? Did teachers have more one-on-one time with students, or did students with IEPs have a better experience at home than at school? Determine what went well and how to capitalize on it in addition to what you need to continue to improve.
How can you accelerate student learning?

The Learning Acceleration Guide describes how systems should approach accelerating student learning. Most of the recommendations in this section are steps that school leaders can take independently, within the context of district guidance regarding prioritized content, diagnosing students, and adapting pacing guidance.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCELERATING STUDENT LEARNING**

1. **Prioritize the most critical prerequisite skills and knowledge** for each subject area and grade level now.

2. **Plan your approach to diagnosing students’ unfinished learning** in that prerequisite content knowledge and those prerequisite skills.

3. **Adapt your scope and sequence/pacing guidance** for each subject area and grade level to reflect where teachers might need to provide acceleration support.

4. **Train your teachers and leadership team** to diagnose students’ unfinished learning and provide acceleration support.

5. **Monitor your students’ progress** on grade-appropriate assignments and adjust your supports for teachers and students based on those results.

Prioritize the most critical prerequisite skills and content knowledge for each subject area and grade level now.

After considering the plan your system has shared for supporting this prioritization, you may find that you need to prioritize the most critical prerequisite skills and content knowledge for your grades and subjects yourself. If that is the case, use the approach outlined in the Learning Acceleration Guide. If your system is supporting teachers by articulating the most critical prerequisite skills and content knowledge, find out when that will be shared so that you can use it for planning.

Plan your approach to diagnosing students’ unfinished learning for the prioritized prerequisite content knowledge and skills.

Again, you’ll want to consider what you learned from your system about the supports they’ll provide here. If they are working to provide guidance on how to diagnose students’ unfinished learning for the prioritized content knowledge and skills, use that guidance. If they are not planning to provide those supports, use the approach outlined in the Learning Acceleration Guide to plan for diagnosing your students.

Adapt your scope and sequence/pacing guidance for your teachers.

Consider the guidance your district is giving regarding how to adapt your pacing and scope and sequence for your teachers. If no guidance is being provided, you can use the recommendations in the Learning Acceleration Guide to plan your students’ content for the year, ensuring that you start from the curricular materials that you have and prioritize the most important grade-level content as you allocate time across the year. This might mean cutting some lower-priority content or skills from your year-long plan. For example, if you’re working on your first grade mathematics scope and sequence, you might cut lessons focused on telling time to the hour and half-hour (an “additional” cluster in the Common Core State Standards) from the 2020-21 school year so that you can spend more time focused on adding and subtracting within 20 (a major cluster without which students would be unable to be successful in second grade math and beyond).
Train your teachers and leadership team to diagnose students’ unfinished learning and provide acceleration support.

Consider the recommendations in the *Learning Acceleration Guide*, as well as the training your district will be offering your teachers and leadership team. Then plan your training around your approach to acceleration.

Monitor your students’ progress on grade-appropriate assignments and adjust your supports for teachers and students based on those results.

Throughout the school year, you should monitor whether your students are mastering grade-level content, and whether your teachers and leadership team are executing your strategy. We have detailed how you might want to monitor students' access to *The Opportunity Myth’s four resources* in our Student Experience Toolkit.¹

What other challenges should you anticipate as you plan to accelerate student learning?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students goes far beyond academics, so you should be thinking through how you’ll address the other challenges your students, teachers, and community might experience as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING OTHER CHALLENGES

1. **Ensure that you are fully staffed** for the start of the 2020-21 school year.

2. **Develop a social and emotional responsiveness strategy** that supports all your students in restarting school and considers the trauma many have experienced.

3. **Ensure that you have a strong plan to communicate with all of your stakeholders.**

4. **Develop a plan to shift to strong at-home learning rapidly**, using what you’ve learned in this round of at-home learning to improve your approach for the future.

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Ensure that you are fully staffed for the start of the 2020-21 school year.

Consider referencing our [Virtual Talent Guide](https://tntp.org/assets/documents/Virtual_Talent_Guide-TNTP.pdf) as your team considers the steps you need to take to ensure you have diverse, effective teachers and leaders.

Develop a social and emotional responsiveness strategy that supports all your students in restarting school and considers the trauma many have experienced.

Every single member of your school community has experienced some sort of trauma associated with the COVID-19 pandemic—and some students may have lost loved ones, experienced food insecurity, or lost their home. Ensure that you have a strong plan to be socially and emotionally responsive, considering the ideas in the Learning Acceleration Guide and paying special attention to The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)’s [helpful guide](https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CASEL_Leveraging-SEL-as-You-Prepare-to-Reopen-and-Renew.pdf) for planning for the social and emotional learning needs of students.

Ensure that you have a strong plan to communicate with all of your stakeholders.

Consider what your students and families will need to know to feel safe and welcomed in your school building. Then use the guidance in the Learning Acceleration Guide to plan your communication approach. Additionally, ensure that your plan includes how you’ll communicate with your teachers so that they feel safe coming back to school and are clear on the expectations for returning to school.

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Develop a plan to shift to at-home learning rapidly, using what you’ve learned in this round of at-home learning to improve your approach for the future.

As scary as it feels right now, epidemiologists predict a second wave of COVID-19 in the fall\(^6\) with continuing waves potentially occurring until we have a vaccine. Ensure that you understand your district’s approach to contingencies (like fully at-home learning or staggered schedules for students). Then use the recommendations in the *Learning Acceleration Guide* to ensure that you have a plan to deliver the content you worked so hard to prioritize to your students, whether they’re engaging with it in your school building or at home.

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