



Rethinking Summer School and Beyond

Executive Summary

March 26, 2021

This summer presents us all with an important opportunity and a significant challenge: engaging our students in new ways that will allow them to reconnect with peers and adults and begin to heal from a traumatic year. The MTA and its 115,000 members, the people who educate and care for our students, believe that reimagining what summer learning should look like is a start to lifting up what matters most in our public schools.

We offer a **student-centered vision for what this summer should look like** to stimulate reflection and discussion among educators, administrators and parents prior to making program decisions.

PRINCIPLES WE CONSIDER PARAMOUNT

- 1. Prioritize Student Health and Well-Being:** Our students' greatest needs right now are physical, social and emotional well-being. **If students' mental health is poor, so too will be their learning.** We should not convey to students that they have a dire "learning loss" problem.
- 2. Instruction must be "trauma-informed."** The danger of disrupted learning must be considered in the context of the other losses they have faced. All student programs must be trauma-informed.
- 3. Deficit Perspective:** The deficit model of education is harmful to all of our students, but it is particularly oppressive to our students who identify as BIPOC or those who come from families earning low wages. As students return to in-person learning, we need to emphasize the valuable learning — some beyond academic content — that happened both in and out of school, rather than the learning that was "lost" or missed, as measured against pre-pandemic standards.
- 4. Asset-Based Curriculum:** The antidote to the deficit model is to understand students and learning through an asset perspective; that is, recognizing the strengths that students bring to the learning context and basing learning on those assets. Schools must develop and implement curriculum and practice frameworks that are rooted in cultural identity, which uplift and affirm our students. **Under the asset model, learning is meaningful. Meaningful learning is rarely lost.**
- 5. Equity Matters:** The curtailment of in-person learning affected some students more than others. Summer programs should prioritize students whose needs are the greatest. Districts should use time and resources this summer to support educators in developing strategies to re-engage those learners in the coming school year.
- 6. Re-engagement is key:** Re-engagement must take place at the interpersonal level. Educators must have time to establish strong personal connections with students and families. Students will need time to re-engage with classmates, relearn how to work in cooperative groups, and relearn some of the norms of school behavior.
- 7. Time is on our side:** Fortunately, younger students have many years left in their educational lives to receive instruction in skills that had not been taught as thoroughly during the pandemic as might be expected in a normal school year. The K-12 curriculum is designed to review and spiral from year to year. Some adjustments to curricula for the 2021-2022 school year may be necessary. This would require professional development time over the summer and increased planning time during the year for educators to articulate between grades (elementary) and across departments (secondary).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POST-COVID SUMMER PROGRAMING

- 1. Focus on reconnecting with learners.**
- 2. Emphasize extracurricular activities.**
- 3. Provide ample mental health resources.**
- 4. Fund summer camp-style programs for every student.**
- 5. Provide voluntary individual or small-group tutoring.**
- 6. Attend to educators' social-emotional and collaboration needs.**



Rethinking Summer School and Beyond

March 29, 2021

BACKGROUND

This summer presents us all with an important opportunity and a significant challenge: engaging our students in new ways that will allow them to reconnect with peers and adults and begin to heal from a traumatic year.

This past year has represented a terrible crisis for our students, their families and our educators. The MTA and its 115,000 members, the people who educate and care for our students, believe that reimagining what summer learning should look like is a start to lifting up what matters most in our public schools.

With many districts turning the corner on the coronavirus pandemic, and with an infusion of money from the federal government on the way, we must plan **now** for how best to help our students succeed in the months ahead.

As educators, we have an obligation to help young people — particularly students from lower-income families, students, those who identify as Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), and others who have faced the most significant challenges — to thrive as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis. This will require ensuring their social and emotional well-being while providing engaging academic experiences to support their learning.

We offer a **student-centered vision for what this summer should look like** to stimulate reflection and discussion among educators, administrators and parents prior to making program decisions.

Our vision consists of six general **recommendations**, which in turn rest on seven **principles**. We discuss these principles in the section that follows and conclude with six recommendations.

PRINCIPLES WE CONSIDER PARAMOUNT

1. **Prioritize Student Health and Well-Being:** Our students' greatest needs right now are physical, social and emotional well-being. To put it simply, **if students' mental health is poor, so too will be their learning.** Social interaction, play, physical activity and good mental health need to come first. Students, educators and parents are exhausted, fearful and stressed by the extraordinary survival measures required of everyone during this pandemic-ridden school year. Furthermore, students have spent much more time than is healthy in sedentary isolation, working mostly on their digital devices. We need not and should not convey to students that they *now* have an additional dire "learning loss" problem. This is wholly inaccurate, insensitive, and damaging to our students' self-esteem and psyches.
2. **Instruction must be "trauma-informed."** The danger of missed or interrupted learning is much less severe to many students than the other losses they have faced over

the last 15 months: loss of life, loss of home, loss of income, loss of companionship, loss of physical activity. These losses, for many, come on top of the ongoing — and often multigenerational — trauma of racism, poverty, abuse and neglect that many students regularly experience.

This reality demands that we think of “recovery” primarily in trauma-informed terms, such as making mental health services available to all who need it, and by helping students reconnect to trusted adults, to their peers, and with their own learning processes. This approach applies both to any summer program offered and to the full resumption of in-person learning, whenever it occurs. To provide trauma-informed instruction, professional development should be available to all educators. Districts should negotiate the hours, time, pay and other working conditions needed to make this professional development possible and successful.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

3. **Deficit Perspective:** The deficit model of education existed long before the pandemic and has become the centerpiece of “education reform.” It is harmful to all of our students, but it is particularly oppressive to our students who identify as BIPOC or those who come from families earning low wages. For them, it is the model that is more rigorously enforced in their schools.

This model approaches our students with a perspective that learning happens only in school and that students are passive learners — empty vessels — to be filled with required standards and content regardless of its relevance to their lives. Under the deficit model, the measure of students’ success — essentially proof that they are learning — is their performance on standardized, multiple-choice tests. Students who score high on tests have succeeded. Students who score low on tests are seen as broken, having a deficit called an achievement gap. In reality, standardized tests are primarily a measure of socioeconomic indicators and race.

The emerging COVID-19 pandemic narrative about so-called learning loss, sometimes quantified as colossal, is rooted in the deficit model of education. When “learning loss” is the diagnosis, the prescription is to add more lessons and required content so that students “catch up” and test scores return to normal. Critical and creative thinking, complex problem-solving skills, student inquiry and culturally relevant curriculum and instructional practices are all considered to be of secondary importance, rather than central to the learning process.

From both an educational perspective and a health perspective, the concern about “learning loss” is misplaced. **As students return to in-person learning, we need to emphasize the valuable learning — some beyond academic content — that happened both in and out of school, rather than the learning that was “lost” or missed, as measured against pre-pandemic standards.**

4. **Asset-Based Curriculum:** The antidote to the deficit model is to understand students and learning through an asset perspective; that is, recognizing the assets that students bring to the learning context and basing learning on those assets. Learning happens both

inside and outside of school; our students bring experience, knowledge and curiosity to the learning environment and their complex gender, multicultural and multilingual identities play a central role in how and what they learn.

Schools must develop and implement curriculum and practice frameworks that are rooted in cultural identity, which uplift and affirm our students. When children see themselves reflected in the curriculum, they are empowered, feel they matter, and learn better. Learning must have connection and relevance to students' lives. Content must be of interest and importance to students. Under these conditions, students are highly motivated and gain a sense of possibility for the future.

Learning is a process of constructing knowledge by asking questions, interacting with one another, exploring ideas and engaging with concrete materials. For our youngest students, meaningful learning and language development happens mainly through play. For older students, it happens through social interactions with peers and trusted adults.

Under the asset model, learning is meaningful. Meaningful learning is rarely lost.

5. **Equity Matters:** Evidence about the difficulties many students had accessing or persisting with remote instruction suggests that the “achievement gap” (as measured by performance on standardized tests)¹ will likely have widened during the pandemic between children of affluent and low-income families, which are disproportionately families of color. Families with economic means were generally able to maintain food, housing, income, and job security while being able to better control their overall interaction with COVID-19 on a daily basis. The opposite is true for families of color, those earning low wages and immigrant families. In too many instances, the oldest children had to prioritize working over going to school.

These inequities were exacerbated by the ability of more affluent families to engage private tutors or pay for “learning pod” support, as well as the difficulties many families had with digital devices, connectivity, bandwidth, etc.

The curtailment of in-person learning affected some students more than others, including special needs students and English learners. Summer programs should prioritize students whose needs are the greatest and who were the most affected by the pandemic. Districts should use time and resources this summer to support educators in developing the types of approaches and pedagogy needed to re-engage those learners in the coming school year. Academic resources, tutoring and small-group learning opportunities should be made available to students who need the support over the summer and throughout the school year.

6. **Re-engagement is key:** While some students thrived in remote and hybrid learning environments, many others disengaged and had difficulty sustaining effort — or even connecting — on digital platforms. If we are not mindful about effective re-engagement

¹ Of course, these gaps existed before and during the pandemic, and they will continue to exist after the pandemic, as well. The best way to close gaps is by providing resources, including measures that reduce income inequality, full implementation of the *Student Opportunity Act*, increased school funding through a progressive state income tax, fully funded preschool, and other measures designed to minimize existing opportunity gaps.

strategies, we run the risk of students becoming further — if not irretrievably — alienated from their own educational process.

All students learn best when we appeal to their strengths — not their deficits — and respect the learning derived from their lived experiences. Their learning experiences over the last year have actually been quite intense. They faced the pandemic, interrupted schooling, moments of racial reckoning and a crisis of democracy. They learned to rely on themselves and their families in ways that they could not have learned in a normal year, with many learning new skills in the process. To the extent possible, lessons this summer and fall should build on these lived experiences, incorporating pedagogies such as place- and project-based learning.

Re-engagement must also take place at the interpersonal level. As the 2021-22 school year begins, educators should have had time to attempt to establish strong personal connections with students and families, particularly those who were not engaged during the previous school year. And students will also need time also to re-engage with classmates, relearn how to work in cooperative groups, and relearn some of the norms of school etiquette.

7. **Time is on our side:** Pandemic-related “learning loss,” when it has been measured by comparing test scores during the pandemic year to those of previous years, has been found to be a minor factor in reading in the lower elementary grades, and a moderate factor in upper elementary and middle school math.² (Other studies about “learning loss” are based on measurement of summer “loss”, but the methodologies and results have been inconsistent and difficult to interpret. Furthermore, the efficacy of summer programs in curbing ‘summer loss’ has been uneven.)³

Fortunately, younger students have many years left in their educational lives to receive instruction in skills that had not been taught as thoroughly during the pandemic as might be expected in a normal school year. The K-12 curriculum is designed to review and spiral from year to year. For example, the beginning months of every year’s math instruction in elementary education involves reviewing several of last year’s topics. In science and social studies curricula at the secondary level, some topics may miss being taught; but many topics have been previously taught at a more basic level. (In any event, there have *always* been large discrepancies both within districts and between districts in material covered.)

In any event, some adjustments to curricula for the 2021-2022 school year may be necessary; and this would require professional development time over the summer and increased planning time during the year for educators to articulate between grades (elementary) and within departments (secondary).

² NWEA: [Learning during COVID-19: Initial findings on students’ reading and math achievement and growth](#), By: Megan Kuhfeld, Beth Tarasawa, Angela Johnson, Erik Ruzek, Karyn Lewis. November 2020

³ Brookings Institute: [Report: Summer learning loss: What is it, and what can we do about it?](#) By: David M. Quinn and Morgan Polikoff. Thursday, September 14, 2017

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POST-COVID SUMMER PROGRAMING

1. **Focus on reconnecting with learners.** Utilize school and community resources to “find” students (and their families) who did not participate fully in remote/hybrid learning. Working with families and community resources, lay the groundwork for a successful return to in-person learning, including ensuring internet connectivity (given the possibility that Covid-related shifts to remote learning may occur in the future).
2. **Emphasize extracurricular activities.** Our students missed out this year on the “3 to 6 p.m.” time, when they usually take part in some of the most valuable parts of their education — clubs, sports, music, theater and other activities. Open the schools for these essential activities.
3. **Provide ample mental health resources** to those in need, in recognition that many children will be returning with heavy burdens of stress, loss, and family insecurity.
4. **Fund summer camp programs for every student** — both school-based and community-based — so that opportunities for social interaction and play are available to all who wish to participate.
5. **Provide voluntary small-group tutoring** for children in high needs categories in outdoor classroom settings, in combination with recreation-based programming. Engage retired educators as a critical and untapped resource to support students’ engagement and learning, this summer and beyond.
6. **Attend to educators’ social-emotional and collaboration needs** during the summer. Provide them with mental health resources, give them a break from the stress of pandemic teaching, and give them paid time to collaborate with their peers to plan for curriculum articulation, rooted in culturally relevant and trauma-informed practices, in the coming year.