

# CAREI

Center for Applied Research  
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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

## How to Redirect the Tempting Conversation of “Learning Loss”

Absence of data, disruptions to learning have created a “perfect storm” for schools

*By Kim Gibbons, Ph.D., and Katie Pekel, Ed.D.*



*Kim Gibbons, Ph.D., is the Director of CAREI.*



*Katie Pekel, Ed.D.*

We are now one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, and we are all well aware of the challenges this has created for educators, students, and families. Along with significant disruptions to students’ education, other challenges such as food and housing insecurity, child care, access to technology, and the mental well-being of educators, students and families have all been impacted.

In the past year, schools have been required to transition between in-person, hybrid, and full distance learning, many times. Many schools routinely screen students for important milestones in reading, math, and writing and participate in end of year accountability tests (MCAs) to quantify the degree to which schools are providing instruction that is sufficient to help most children attain proficiency. Due to timing of school closures, Spring 2020 data does not exist for the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA), and it is unclear how many districts are collecting screening data during the 2020-21 school year.

The absence of data and disruptions to learning have created a “perfect storm” for our schools, and it has been hypothesized that the economic impacts and trauma of recent events will likely exacerbate long-standing opportunity gaps. These hypotheses are now taking root in the form of a multitude of market-based solutions to address “learning loss.” One principal reported receiving over 30 emails from vendors already. The term “learning loss” is “sticky,” meaning it seems to make immediate sense; however, we are growing increasingly concerned with its use. First, the hypothesis of “learning loss” described in the media is not based on actual assessment results (much more on that below). Second, the language itself situates the last year entirely in a deficit frame, not acknowledging or taking into account the many real skills students and educators have learned that may be leveraged to accelerate instruction, like the use of technology and asynchronous lessons.



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### Where did this idea of “learning loss” come from?

Research has identified some trends around summer learning loss (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2007; Kuhfeld, 2019). It has been documented that achievement typically slows or declines over the summer months, declines in learning tend to be steeper for math than for reading, and the extent of loss increases in the upper grades. To compensate for the lack of data available during the pandemic, NWEA used research on seasonal learning and summer learning loss to offer insights around the potential impact of learning during the pandemic (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). Their projections from COVID closures (Spring 2020) estimated that students would return in the Fall 2020 with 70% of the learning gains in reading and less than 50% of learning gains in math relative to a typical school year. In some grades, projections indicate students could be nearly a full year behind of what we would observe in normal conditions.

### More than just “test” data

Before panic ensues, it is important to remember that data from the NWEA and other studies are projections and not based on actual data. Data from the 2021 MCA’s and local assessments will either confirm or disconfirm these projections. Given the wide array of experiences students have had during the pandemic, we need

assessments that are designed to quickly identify learning needs and guide instruction. The current inequities and complexities faced by students require that we consider not only student performance but also the experiences that could impede their learning and development, and also those that have frankly potentially enhanced learning and development beyond just academic standards. We know that a students’ physical, social, and emotional well-being, including relationships with peers and adults, are foundational to learning. As a result, we need to know both what students know and how they feel to inform instruction, now more than ever. It is important for educators to identify the reasons students may have learning struggles, not just the struggles themselves.

### Helpful principles of assessment

With the increased focus on assessment data, we encourage you to remember some basic principles of assessment to consider during the pandemic (Lake and Olson, 2020):

- **Do no harm.** Refrain from retaining students based on assessment data. If it is not clear how data will be used, do not administer assessments that put added time burden on students and teachers. Ensure that educators administering assessments know how to interpret results, what to do in response to the results, and have options for action.



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- **Prioritize measures closest to classroom instruction.**

In order to help teachers to know what to do next, provide professional development to help teachers translate assessment data into specific classroom instruction or find ways to integrate the review of unfinished learning into grade level content. Make use of existing data. If a high-quality curriculum that includes assessment is not available, don't put the burden of developing pre-assessments on individual teachers.

- **Use more formal interim assessments for school and district decision-making.**

Continue using interim assessments that are in place that predict performance on state learning standards (MAP, Fastbridge, I-Ready). However, be cautious about using interim assessments this year to compare with previous years. Testing will not help without a clear districtwide commitment and plan to address any needs revealed.

- **Engage parents as partners.**

Create a district-level protocol to share assessment results with parents and to solicit their observations and feedback. Provide professional development to teachers on the protocol. Increase transparency and make sure parents have access to interim and other assessments with resources and support. Provide support to teachers, including data literacy, so they can have honest and simple conversations with families about student progress.

- **Remember that universal screening is going to look different for the next few years.** One purpose of universal screening is to rule out students who do not need academic intervention. There will likely be a higher prevalence of academic risk in nearly all schools that will make it difficult to sort out which students need more intensive intervention. Single point-in-time screenings are not going to be sufficient. Schools must use "Gated Screening" where teachers implement classwide interventions daily and then use data to determine which students need more intensive intervention.

### Resources for districts

The Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) is a partner in the Wisconsin Minnesota Comprehensive Center (WMCC) – one of 19 federally funded comprehensive centers across the United States that provides high quality and intensive capacity-building services to help state education agencies and school districts identify, implement, and sustain evidence-based practices to support educational outcomes. As part of our work, we are partnering with the Minnesota Department of Education on a variety of projects. One area of focus is around implementation of the Safe Learning Plan. A survey has been developed for families, educators, and students to gather information on their experiences with safe learning plan implementation. The survey will be deployed at three intervals – February, May, and October 2021. Information from the survey

will be provided to school districts to assist with identifying needs within a continuous improvement framework. In addition, WMCC will be developing guidance for districts on how to assess student learning across in-person, hybrid, and distance-learning models with action planning strategies to close achievement gaps. Rapid briefs summarizing assessment guidance will be issued every few weeks between March 2021 and June 2021. The first brief includes general assessment guidance for districts to consider.

In closing, we both applaud all of the work you have done this year to best meet the needs of students, families, and your staff. We know the work has not been easy. We will do our part to continue developing resources and tools to make your jobs easier.

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*Kim Gibbons, Ph.D., is the Director of the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota. Katie Pekel, Ed.D., is the Director of the Minnesota Principals Academy; Coordinator for the Education Policy and Leadership Programs; and Co-Director of the Urban Leadership Academy of the University of Minnesota. You may contact Kim and Katie about this column at [kgibbons@umn.edu](mailto:kgibbons@umn.edu) and [kpekel@umn.edu](mailto:kpekel@umn.edu).*

### **Additional reading on the topic:**

Barnum, M. (2020, October 6). How much learning have students lost due to COVID? Projections are coming in, but it's still hard to say. Retrieved from Chalkbeat: <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/10/6/21504195/covid-schools-learning-loss-projections-nwea-credo>

Pekel, K. (2021, February 19). Path out of the pandemic: The right way to help students returning to school. Retrieved from Minnpost: <https://www.minnpost.com/author/kent-pekel/>

Silverman, M. (2021, March 9). Want to tackle learning loss: First listen to your students. Retrieved from Education Week: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-want-to-tackle-learning-loss-first-listen-to-your-students/2021/03>

Strauss, V. (2021, March 10). What 'learning loss' really means It's not a loss of learning. Retrieved from The Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/03/10/what-learning-loss-really-means>