White Paper

How COVID-19 has Shifted Education from Learning Loss to Learning Realignment and Recovery

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Executive Summary

Schools across the country are working to find solutions for learning realignment and recovery after significant slides in academics, particularly math and reading. More students and teachers are also suffering from mental health issues associated with the pandemic. In addition, enrollment and attendance have worsened, and there is a nationwide shortage of educators that negatively impacts student learning and achievement. These challenges further widen the achievement gap that already exists for minority students, low-income students, and students with disabilities. The pandemic has created a crisis called the "COVID Slide" that is likely to worsen before it gets better if not addressed quickly and effectively. Targeting social, emotional, and mental health may help students and educators get back on track and ready to learn. Offering solutions to fill in gaps for learning through online, self-paced courses may also help students to recover. Rethink Ed solutions and strategies can help address the slide in multiple ways by offering curriculum and training for learning realignment and recovery.

KEYWORDS

learning loss, learning recovery, learning alignment, achievement gap, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), mental health, enrollment, absenteeism, COVID-19, pandemic, achievement gap, COVID Slide

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Why Learning Loss Matters

Learning loss occurs when a student learns, only to lose those skills later. In our adult life, we forget much of what we learned in high school. In fact, we retain only about 37% of what we learned in high school (EmpowerEd, 2022). Some learning loss is expected when students have extended periods of time away from school (e.g., summer break), with the average of 78% of elementary students losing skills in math and 62-73% losing skills in reading (Kuhfeld, 2019). This drop is most significant during the summer between 5th and 6th grade when transitioning into middle school, with 84% of students showing a loss in math. While summer learning programs can be effective, they are not available to all students and can be cost-prohibitive for many students in lower-income areas.

One way to understand the impact of time out of school on learning is to look at the effect of absenteeism. Absenteeism is noted as excusable or inexcusable absences from elementary or secondary school (Kearney, 2008). Absenteeism can be associated with risk factors that can be detrimental to a student's well-being. Chronic Absenteeism is when a student misses 18 days of school or more per year (Gottfried, 2019). Time out of school hinders academic progress and can also stifle social and emotional development, which can result in significantly increased learning gaps over time.

> **Low-income students tend to fall further behind,** and students with disabilities often **fall further behind than general education students** when there are extended periods of time out of school.

While some degree of learning loss may be insignificant, widening gaps can lead to serious long-term consequences for some students, such as poor academic performance

in the future, delays in social-emotional growth and development, behavioral challenges, suspensions, unemployment, substance abuse, and other issues. Unfortunately, this gap tends to expand for certain students. Historically, the achievement gap has been occurring since its inception nearly 60 years ago, when the term was first coined by James S. Coleman (Coleman et al., 1996). It has disproportionately affected marginalized communities, and it has ranged from impacted areas, but ultimately left education as the pillar of the crisis. This paper seeks to address the impact of learning loss for various students and what can be done to mitigate loss in the future.

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The Learning Loss Achievement Gap

The achievement gap is an academic disparity between different groups of students. Research has indicated that this gap occurs even before students enter kindergarten and continues as the students age (Chapin, 2006). Minority groups of students, particularly Black and Hispanic students, historically perform at lower rates than their White counterparts. In addition, low-income students tend to fall further behind, and students with disabilities often fall further behind than general education students when there are extended periods of time out of school. African American students are three times more likely than White students to be placed in special education programs and are half as likely to be in gifted programs in elementary and secondary schools (Meckler & Natanson, 2020). The educational achievement gap has impacted minority students at a much more significant rate. Thus, showing students of color overrepresented in special

education classrooms and underrepresented in gifted programs. This speaks to the vulnerabilities that marginalized groups are facing.

The achievement gap in schools presents itself through grades, standardized test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college completion rates, to name a few (Ansell, 2020). Scholars have not determined a specific cause or factor that contributes to this widening gap. Home-based variables, such as low-income, attribute to achievement gap causes, but are out of school administrators' control to improve achievement gap outcomes. However, school-based variables, such as teacher quality and instruction, can be enhanced to better support students. The achievement gap also is present within students with disabilities, and students with disabilities perform more than three years below their non-disabled peers (Gilmour et al., 2018). The achievement gap highlights present inequities within our education system. Without implications for change, students that identify within these following groups will incur significant learning loss.

The Covid Slide: Pandemic Hits Learning Loss Hard

The COVID-19 Pandemic has resulted in what is called the "COVID Slide", where students are demonstrating significant learning losses, decreased enrollment and attendance, and a crisis in teacher shortages (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Students forced to learn remotely have impacted certain groups, leaving some students to experience more significant learning loss than others during school closures. Learning disruptions occurred worldwide, affecting nearly 1.5 billion students due to school closures (Harmey & Moss, 2021). The impact of COVID-19 on students has shown months of learning loss with students being behind in math by five months on average and behind in reading by

four months on average (Dorn et al., 2021). The pandemic has contributed to widening achievement gaps that are present today. The trauma and decline of resources added to the already existing achievement gaps for Black students who are on average six months behind in math and six months behind in reading; Hispanic students who are on average six months behind in math and five months behind in reading; and for low-income students who are on average seven months behind in both math and reading. This learning loss is likely to worsen as enrollment, lack of access to learning, attendance, and teacher retention continue to decline.

Despite slow increases over the past ten years, public school enrollment numbers declined by 3% during the COVID-19 Pandemic with a 13% drop in pre-K and kindergarten enrollment, leaving many families to find alternative ways to provide education for their students (Kamenetz, et al., 2021). Statewide trends have indicated that 'untraditional districts' (e.g., vocational, charter, virtual, homeschooling) have noticed an increase in enrollment numbers. However, even with the switch to other forms of schooling, the learning loss within traditional districts was too insurmountable to compensate for (Dee & Murphy, 2021).

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Lack of access to learning is a significant contributor to the widening achievement gap. With school districts moving to remote platforms for learning, computer and internet access became the hallmark of students' needs, specifically students of color. As the COVID-19 Pandemic persists, McKinsey & Company (Dorn et al., 2021) estimates that Black

and Hispanic students will experience a tremendous amount of learning loss. Remote schooling limitations contribute to this generalization. The Census Bureau reported that 15% of Black students and 16% of Hispanic students did not have live access to teachers. This is compared to the 8% of White students that may also have limitations in remote connectivity. (Meckler & Natanson, 2020).

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As a result of school-induced closures, attendance declined severely. Remote instruction became the new normal, and students were forced to attend school virtually. Chronic absenteeism has been a reoccurring issue that schools were trying to reduce. However, according to a parent survey, chronic absenteeism has increased 12% for 8-12th graders. Of these students, 42% are not attending school at all. (Dorn et al., 2021). Retaining students became extremely more complicated, and many were left to play catchup due to low attendance rates. One study estimates that an additional 617,000-1.2 million 8-12th graders may drop out of school due to the pandemic if efforts are not made to re-engage these students and work toward learning recovery. (Dorn et al., 2021). Low attendance rates and chronic absenteeism continue to impact the larger issue of learning loss. Inability to retain students through remote platforms was highly detrimental to their learning and completion of school.

In addition to high school students losing important adolescent milestones such as athletic or artistic events, prom, and even graduation, the pandemic also appears to have had an impact on their academic achievement. ACT college-entry test scores dropped for the average high school junior to the 46th percentile from the 50th percentile in English,

reading, math, and science (Sparks, 2022). This loss is equivalent to 3 months of learning loss and high school students on average showed a loss of 3.4 months in reading, 3.3 months in math, 3.1 months in science, and 2.3 months in English. This loss of both academic and social development may leave many students less prepared for post-secondary education and careers. Experts hypothesize that this learning loss could cut future incomes by 3 percent (Sparks, 2022).

Staff shortages are another area that the COVID-19 Pandemic has negatively impacted. Schools are reaching a breaking point to fill classrooms with supervised adults in place of a full-time teacher being out due to COVID-19. School districts around the country are reaching desperate breaking points reaching out to alumni and parents to fill in as the surge spans. A school outside of St. Louis stated that their "teacher absences are trending at about twice their normal rate, and they are only filling 30-40% of those absences with subs" (Murphy & Yan, 2022). With the pandemic limiting teacher capacity, learning is interrupted, and student absenteeism increases and contributes to the more significant issue of learning loss within schools.

Students with disabilities are also one of the most impacted and vulnerable groups during the pandemic. Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) were postponed due to school closures, and this severely impacts students who have IEPs due to not receiving individualized care. Students with disabilities, a group with the most need, were not given support during this time. Students with IEPs may require reevaluation every three years to see if the child needs qualifying services. Students that needed IEP evaluations were left without an opportunity to receive care in a way that supports their learning. Schools now must play catch-up to provide support to neglected students due to school closures and remote learning. With staff shortages persisting

throughout the pandemic, there has been a decrease in IEP compliance and ability to meet IEP goals. Special education students are among those who are most impacted and face the most severe learning loss. (Colvin et al., 2022).

How Rethink Ed Can Help with Learning Realignment and Recovery

One of the barriers to learning is coping with mental health or social and emotional issues, resulting in a lack of motivation to learn or inability to learn due to stress,

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anxiety, and other factors. Rethink Ed provides a solution to help students and educators learn more about their personal, social, emotional, and mental health and improve their well-being through engaged videos, lesson plans, and activities. A large body of literature supports that Social Emotional Learning (SEL) improves academic performance in math, reading, and science (Corcoran et al., 2018). For instance, building knowledge and strategies for improving self-knowledge, emotions, values, wants and needs, learning skills, and growth mindset can help students and educators better understand their strengths and limitations, as well as help them to improve their ability to recognize the strengths and needs of other people. These skills can improve a student's ability and motivation to learn. In addition, these skills can improve teaching effectiveness by building awareness of how one is teaching and how students are responding. Other skills such as self-control, stress management, focus, problem-solving, goal setting, and resilience can help students and educators with self-management. Rethink Ed's award-winning SEL curriculum is explicitly

designed to build social intelligence and help students and school staff better understand themselves and others in order to focus and learn.

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With mounting challenges related to the pandemic and social issues in our current environment, mental health has become a national crisis for students, teachers, principals, counselors, and other school staff. Mental health issues can interfere with learning and academic performance, and negatively impact attendance and participation. People are often afraid to tackle mental health, and there is often a stigma that can be ameliorated with education and training. The Rethink Ed Mental Health series addresses crucial mental health topics such as depression, anxiety, suicide, substance abuse, bullying, and violence. Videos, resources, and activities help students and educators to better understand the topics and offer strategies for coping, getting help, and helping others. Having a better grasp on mental health can help students and educators work together for a more productive and positive learning environment.

Once a student falls behind academically, it can be challenging to catch up. Through our Vizzle® program, Rethink Ed offers a potential solution to help students get back on track. This award-winning digital learning library provides multi-tiered courses in English language arts, math, science, and social studies, and the content aligns to academic standards in all 50 states. The courses can be used for students who are behind to recover in these subjects. Vizzle's differentiated instruction for Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 makes catching up possible for students through self-guided interactive online instruction. Using

Vizzle courses can not only help all students get back on track who have fallen behind from the pandemic, but it can also help bridge the achievement gap for students who tend to fall further behind during school closures or due to absenteeism, such as minorities, low-income, and students with disabilities. While the "COVID Slide" does not appear to be going away anytime soon, there are solutions available through Rethink Ed that may help students get back on and stay on track academically and help students and educators re-engage and remain engaged in promoting their social, emotional, and mental wellness.

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Conclusion

Why does learning loss matter? Learning loss is impacted in a magnitude of ways. The achievement gap has historically highlighted the disparities of the widening gap between minority and majority groups of students, students who come from less affluent backgrounds, and students with disabilities. The COVID-19 Pandemic heightened existing disparities that were already present within schools. Student enrollment dropped, and chronic absenteeism continues to climb in our education system. The impact of COVID-19 is causing state-wide staff shortages, contributing to the continuous cycle of learning loss. Students need support to alleviate the existing decline in learning loss. The "COVID-19 Slide" caused a significant shift in education on every level. One way to tackle this shift is

to provide support to students and school personnel. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has proven to help improve overall well-being for students and staff. Rethink Ed's SEL and Mental Health curriculum can be the call to tackle learning loss across the country by providing practical strategies to manage their overall well-being. Similarly, Vizzle may offer an opportunity for schools to help students with math, reading, science, and other academic needs, to get them on the path to learning recovery.

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About Us

Rethink Ed was founded on a simple, yet powerful idea: To re-think education. To make it better and easier. To unburden school districts and empower educators. To improve outcomes and elevate accountability. To promote collaboration and inspire learning. And most importantly, to make a difference in the school day for everyone – administrators, educators, and students.

The Rethink Ed solution is part of Rethink First, a global company that is transforming behavioral healthcare. Similar to Rethink First's other solutions that are innovating and improving outcomes for clinicians and employers globally, Rethink Ed is pioneering EdTech with our relentless pursuit of innovative methods that put evidenced-based, data-informed, digitally delivered instruction and assessments into the hands of educators, clinicians, and parents who share our singularly minded focus: To power the potential of all children and to work together to help them succeed.

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