

# Student Learning: Unfinished, Not Lost

An Asset-Based Frame that Humanizes Learning & Supports Action



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Over the past year, the phrase “learning loss” has been used to describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning. Despite a disrupted school year, there are countless stories and artifacts of student learning, progress, and strength. While academic learning may be unfinished, it is not lost. With commitment and care, educators, school leaders, school support staff, families and communities continue to provide students with opportunities to learn while also tending to students’ physical, social, and emotional needs. Remarkably, students continue to demonstrate new and deepening competencies such as problem solving in the moment, navigating uncertainty, learning new technologies, and relying on the resilience and strength of family and community.

## SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE



*Student Learning: Unfinished, Not Lost* shifts the narrative. A responsive system, grounded in equity, meets students where they are and accelerates their learning by building on strengths and needs. Collectively, this means redesigning teaching and learning and reexamining deeply rooted deficit-based thinking. This resource invites pause, inquiry, and reflection around ways we respond to the dominant narrative of learning loss.

### From Learning Loss to Unfinished Learning

Learning happens everywhere for students every day; humans are born to make meaning, to synthesize, and to develop understanding through lived experiences. As meaning makers, students are primed for learning--remote or otherwise. They are actively building schema and new understanding of the world and are ready to apply what they know and understand to what they are ready to learn next. When students’ lived experiences are viewed through an asset lens and there is value assigned to their funds of knowledge (cultural, linguistic, social-emotional and academic), students are seen as fully human and in turn, bring their full selves to

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the school experience. As Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson (2001) conclude, “learning works best when children feel they are partners in the enterprise.”

A review of published information regarding “learning loss” demonstrates that the term is most often used to maintain a fixed perception of learning as a static or finite destination to be measured, quantified, or compared. Predictive modeling is used to project how much a student is likely to learn in a typical school year, so those data can be compared to what was observed at some point during the COVID-19

pandemic. This year has been anything but typical, which makes any comparison indefensible. In addition, the disruption of typical learning patterns and environments doesn’t mean that learning isn’t happening in different spaces or that students are losing something that can’t be retaught, regained, or reframed.

When the focus is on looking for signs of “learning loss,” there is a risk of missing student strengths and negating the essential link between learning and culture. This deficit thinking occurs when educators and other adults look for and over emphasize what students may lack or do differently, instead of building on the skills, resources, lived experiences, and innate gifts that students possess and have been built upon through the unique experiences of the past year. Deficit framing disproportionately harms students historically underserved by the system.

***“Learning loss research is driven by a deficit theory, just as word gap research is driven by a deficit theory. And the thing about deficit theories is that they are usually expressions of racial bias more than they are objective statements of truth.”***

***- David E. Kirkland (Twitter: @davidekirkland)***

Groups of students who are subjected to deficit thinking often tend to have fewer opportunities to learn and less access to ambitious, challenging material. In a recent interview with *Education Week*, Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, an expert in literacy, said, “deficit perspectives and thinking lead to poor and basic instructional practices.”

*Our deepest-held vision for our students is that they are equipped and empowered to participate in a society that recognizes and values their unique abilities and contributions. While success in mathematics and literacy are undoubtedly an integral part of this vision, these are not the only forms of learning that should be considered. Promoting greater opportunities for students, families, and communities to determine for themselves how time should be distributed across formal and informal learning experiences is important. In fact, by centering the learning experiences students have daily in their family and community contexts, educators will be more likely to accelerate unfinished learning in content areas as students return to a more formal educational setting.*

*- Chen, et al. (2013)*

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*“First, we must recognize that learning doesn’t only happen in schools; learning happens all the time and everywhere. When schools shut down last March, various media outlets and think tanks warned of “learning loss” arguing that students (especially those without access to private “pods” and reliable technology) could fall irreparably behind. “Learning loss” suggests that physical presence in schools is the only path to education and well-being, yet many countries are providing families direct economic support. Although “learning loss” is expressed as a concern for youth of color, youth grappling with poverty and/or houselessness, disabled youth and/or those with learning differences, it often functions as a dog-whistle for white entitlement. “Learning loss” ignores how our social policies created racial, economic, and educational inequities and sustain the conditions in which they persist.” - Drs. McKinney de Royston & Vossoughi (truthout.org)*

## From Remediation to Acceleration

### Responding to Unfinished Learning

As students return to in-person instruction, schools have the opportunity to learn more about students’ strengths and needs. This information is unlikely to be elicited from a single data point. Relying on one data source, or depending on one assessment, is likely to create a narrow and limiting story around student learning. Start with what students can do. Listen to their stories. Assess with the lens of what they are ready to learn next. By collecting multiple artifacts of their work, reflections of their own learning, and consistently engaging in formative assessment, a broad and more complete student learning profile emerges. A student-centered approach to assessing learning yields high value as it informs teaching and builds relationships between student and teacher. Potential sources of assessment data may include:

- Family and student [empathy interviews](#)
- [Interim Assessments](#)
- Performance Tasks
- [Formative Assessment](#)
- Presentations and Project Designs
- Student-led conferences
- Student self reflections
- Universal screeners
- Curriculum-based assessments
- Student portfolios, including artwork

Formative assessment practices are the best instructional strategies to consider individualized entry points for students across instructional contexts. The ten dimensions of formative assessment are well defined and accessible in the Formative Assessment Rubrics, Reflection, and Observation Tools to Support Professional Reflection on Practice ([FARROP](#)), which is an observational tool that teachers can use for peer-to-peer observations and feedback.

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## **Asset-Based Approach and Culturally Responsive Teaching**

In the simplest terms, an asset-based approach focuses on strengths. It views diversity in thought, culture, and traits as positive assets. Teachers and students alike are valued for what they bring to the classroom rather than being characterized by what they may need to work on or what they are perceived to lack.

Asset-based approaches that are culturally responsive foster growth and support community building. Culturally responsive education not only supports students' academic success, but also fosters the development of traits that transcend academic contexts, like resilience and confidence ([Culture-based Education is a Path to Healing for Native Youth](#)). It is the work of the adults in the system to see students' strengths and teach from them. "By cultivating culturally vibrant and affirming learning environments in lieu of "one-size-fits-all" approaches, educators honor assets found in Indigenous knowledge, values, and stories as models of vitality and empowerment for all," (Kana'iaupuni SM, Ledward B, Malone N. Mohala i ka wai).

## **Focusing Content, Instruction, and Assessment to Accelerate Learning**

As recommended in [Ready Schools, Safe Learners](#), it is critical to focus attention on accelerating learning by investing in relationships, honoring student voice, and designing integrated learning. In contrast to remediation efforts, which perpetuate low expectations and lead to disparate outcomes, students who access accelerated learning and advanced coursework demonstrate consistently higher learning outcomes, increased engagement, and agency.

**Teaching and learning in response to a pandemic requires a focus on key ideas, relevant learning, and formative assessment practices.** Priority standards and assessment practices by subject-area can be found on Oregon Department of Education's [Designing Learning](#) webpage. The following recommendations are highlighted from *Ready Schools, Safe Learners*:

- Collect varied evidence of learning related to student strengths and interests; provide multiple ways for students to show what they know.
- Prioritize descriptive feedback that provides students with actionable next steps. Feedback and monitoring should focus on the continuation of learning.
- Leverage curriculum-embedded classroom or program-based assessments for learning, and develop a learning plan for students that includes benchmarks, milestones, or progress markers in reference to learning and/or developmental progressions.
- Design experiences using research-based design principles, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), that improve access to learning for all participants.
- Honor the student learning environment, building on assets including home language, family (siblings and extended family), and culture.
- Provide consistent and timely student feedback and documented assessment of learning toward academic content standards. Leverage formative assessment practices to grow student's ability for independent learning.
- Incorporate time for check-ins and peer interactions; develop classroom culture.



- Design curricular experiences that utilize authentic and deeper learning experiences to engage students. Provide opportunities for students to meet the academic content standards in nontraditional ways such as through student-driven projects that honor student identity and context. Project-Based learning opportunities leverage cross-disciplinary learning objectives, supporting well-rounded development of student academic and professional skills.
- Allow for student choice and voice and integrate culturally sustaining practices.
- Invest in career-connected learning experiences. These experiences focus on skills that aid students in their future success such as navigating interpersonal relationships; critical collaborative and team-based problem solving; self-direction and project/goal management; discernment of reliability of sources of knowledge; and innovation.

## **Retention is Not A Solution**

A decision to retain a child is a potentially life-changing event and must be carefully considered in partnership between the family, educators, school leaders, and where appropriate, the student. Local school districts are responsible for developing policies that address grade retention and promotion. Retention and promotion are not the only instructional options; there are better [alternatives](#). Appropriate planning, evidence-based interventions, focused tutoring, peer mentoring and strong family-school connection can shift learning patterns and create the conditions for learning to accelerate.

### Preventative Measures as Alternatives to Retention:

- Consider looping models or blended grade classrooms to build on student relationships as educators who know their student can accelerate student learning.
- Build summer bridge programs that use project-based learning to boost foundational academic skills of students.
- Provide opportunities for students to receive intensive one-on-one or small group support accessing grade-level content.
- Ensure educators have training in implementing evidence-based practices for accelerating student learning.

Comprehensive literature reviews regarding retention practices, such as [Marsh, Gershwin, et al. \(2009\)](#), show that retention does not benefit students' long term academic trajectory. Though a few studies have found short-term academic improvement in the years directly following the retention, the research generally finds negative relationships between retention and future academic achievement. Findings from the few studies that adjusted for selection bias have been inconclusive, with some showing short-term improvement and others reporting gains that faded over time. Uniform retention decisions based on a single point-in-time assessment on a single topic or skill (e.g., literacy) ignores individual and contextual characteristics and can be detrimental to students and families.

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While not yet a formal requirement for school year 2021-22, ODE's clearest recommendation is to seek alternatives to retention. If retention is being considered for a particular student, the following factors should inform the decision-making process:

Equity-Based Decision Making Guidelines (for limited circumstances where retention may be considered):

- Ensure multiple data sources are used, including family and student interviews.
- Engage family members, previous teachers, and appropriate staff in decision making.
- Weigh the potential short- and long-term unintended consequences of retention on the student's social-emotional wellbeing, academic success, and status.
- Consider the cultural implications and stigma associated with retention for the student and family.
- Apply an equity lens to decision making ([Equity based decision making tool](#)).
- Equity Review: Document retention decisions at the school and district level. Disaggregate district data by race, socioeconomic status, migrant students, students who experience houselessness, emergent bilingual students, and students who experience disability. Include a careful data review prior to any singular retention decision.

## From Recovery to Renewal

The disruption of typical schooling over the last year provides an opportunity for all educators to reimagine schools in ways that can transform learning for students and teachers. What would it look like to truly develop equitable education from the place of abundance rather than scarcity? How can leaders take what they've learned from this last year, such as the importance of partnering closely with families and communities, to build a more empowering and equitable educational future? How do we intentionally redistribute and resource our schools to reflect the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on students and communities? As districts plan for summer learning and beyond, we have a unique opportunity to fundamentally redesign educational systems. This opportunity must be met with detailed designs and strategies that concretely pair the best of what we know about teaching and learning with operational realities school by school and community by community across Oregon. [Designing Learning](#) is a more extensive resource to utilize at next stages of planning and decision making.

### Looking Ahead: From Recovery to Renewal

The Learning Policy Institute's report on [Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond](#) is a critical resource to guide thinking and planning. The report highlights the importance of the moment:

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*Reinventing school means focusing on authentic learning and equity and harnessing the knowledge of human development, learning, and effective teaching accumulated over the last century and needed for the next.*

## Framework for Restarting and Reinventing School

The ten components of the [Framework for Restarting and Reinventing School](#) established by the Learning Policy Institute and supported by research is synthesized below with resources for districts to attend to each component. This guidance summarizes the ten components to provide a high-level introduction to the framework.

1. Close the digital divide
  - Continue to provide technology and move forward with partnerships to expand internet access.
  - Leverage [E-Rate programs](#) to provide and expand services.
2. Strengthen Comprehensive Distance Learning and Hybrid learning
  - Support high-quality Comprehensive Distance Learning and Hybrid learning models with resources and training
  - Give special consideration to [early childhood learning](#).
3. Assess what students need
  - Emphasize [formative assessment practices](#) and leverage Oregon's [interim assessment system](#), with appropriate professional learning and continuous supports.
  - Consider the need to build employability skills and opportunities for career exploration and work-based learning.
4. Ensure supports for social and emotional learning
  - Federal funds, including Title IV-A and ESSER I, II and others can be used to pay for counselors, nurses and psychologists. Telehealth options also exist for districts to provide support to their students and teachers.
  - Review resources available through [ODE Safe and Inclusive Schools](#) and [Mental Health and School Counselors](#).
5. Redesign schools for stronger relationships
  - Build connection to local community, business and industry partners, and teacher preparation programs. Some districts are using federal and state funds to pay for incentives for families to participate in engagement nights or for family coordinators.
  - Foster and support [family engagement](#).



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6. Emphasize authentic, culturally-responsive learning
  - Convene parents and families to review curriculum and instructional practices to ensure that the materials used are culturally-responsive and respectful. Federal funds can be used to support this effort.
  - Leverage [Tribal History/Shared History](#) lessons, [Ethnic Studies Standards](#), and open educational resources through [Oregon Open Learning](#).
7. Provide extended learning time
  - Extended learning time can include before, after, or longer school days. This additional time can be beneficial for students who are emergent bilingual to have more exposure and practice learning English or other languages.
  - High-quality Pre-K can also qualify as expanding learning time. Districts can work to expand Pre-K from a half, or partial day, to a full day.
  - [Oregon's Early Learning Division](#) has provided guidance to support early childhood programs' response to COVID.
8. Establish community schools and wraparound supports
  - Federal funds can be used to support [community schools](#) and wrap around services. This includes paying for meals, transportation, mental health and other supports for students, teachers, and families.
9. Prepare Educators for Reinventing School
  - Create collaboration time for planning innovative lessons and projects.
  - Support high-retention strategies and pathways, including service scholarships and loan forgiveness programs, teacher and leader residencies, and Grow-Your-Own programs.
  - Transform educator learning opportunities to match current needs.
  - Support mentoring and new teacher roles.
10. Leverage more adequate and equitable school funding
  - State and federal funds can be used in a variety of ways to support school and district academic and social/emotional goals. Ensuring funds are being used to support all students strengths and needs and student groups should be considered.
  - Review [Oregon Federal Funds Guide](#) and [Ensuring Equity and Access Aligning State and Federal Requirements](#).



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