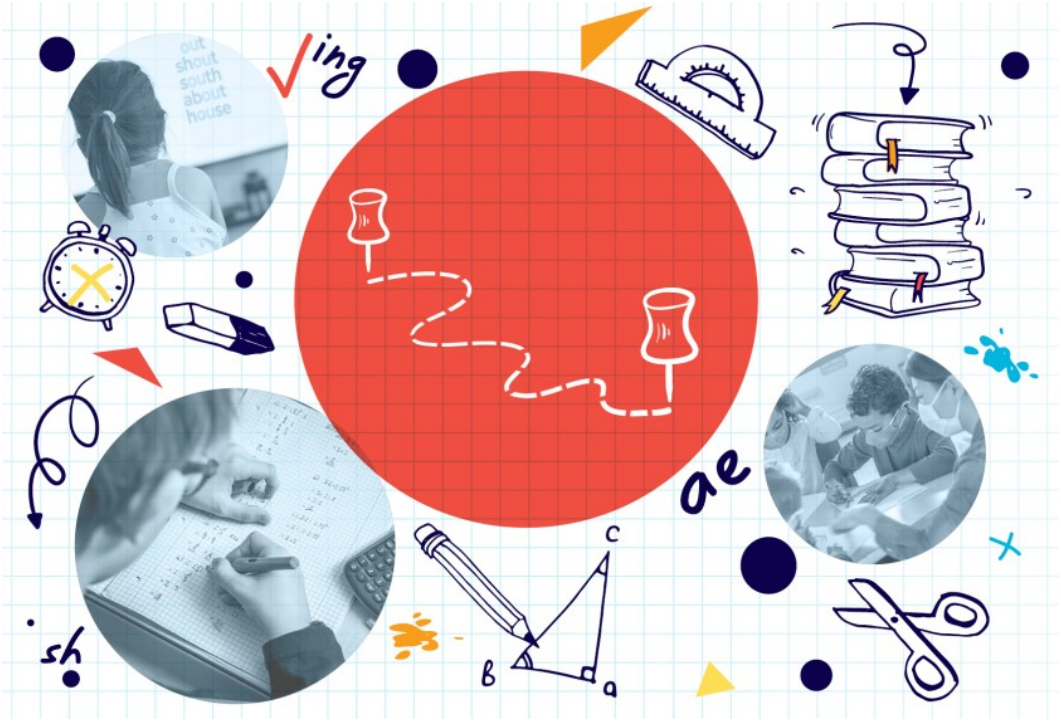
Understanding Learning ‘Acceleration’: Going Slow to Go Fast



Most students will return to in-person schooling this fall, and teachers around the country are feeling the pressure to get their classes back on track.

In many places, a model known as acceleration is being billed as the way to ameliorate less-than-ideal learning conditions from this past school year. Generally speaking, the idea is to provide “just in time” supports, or scaffolds, to help students access their usual grade-level content, rather than going back and teaching what got skipped last year.

It’s a compelling idea, and one that’s been broadly embraced by a number of national education groups.

But what about an entering 1st grader who’s only learned phonics lessons on a computer screen, or in-person through masks? Or a student navigating the rocks and shoals of freshman year Algebra 1 who still has difficulties plotting points on a graph? Or a teacher whose English-learners are coming in running the gamut of proficiency levels?

In this special report, Education Week decided to pick three specific problems of practice centered on students who are entering key transition points: in foundational literacy and numeracy; in 9th grade algebra, which research connects to later success in high school; and in English-language acquisition—including for students who may be brand new to American schools.

Our reasons for the focus on these touchpoints are twofold. For one, teachers must fine-tune their plans based on the specifics of the content and of their learners. There's no recipe for acceleration that will work in every single instance.

"Supporting unfinished learning is complex but doable work, and decisions that matter live in the details of instructional decisions," said Emily Freitag, the CEO of Instruction Partners, a nonprofit that works with schools and districts on teaching and learning. "I see the zeitgeist trying to simplify the equation, but it's an unsimplifiable equation. You have to get granular."

Secondly, unlike social-emotional learning or character education, learning in these three areas typically doesn't happen outside of school classrooms. Most parents are not equipped to teach foundational reading systematically; algebra is almost always formally taught.

'Meet Kids' or 'Build a Bridge'?

Education Week wanted to know what acceleration might look like in those subjects, and what we learned helps to clarify some of the confusion around the term. For one thing, the general definition of acceleration doesn't apply here: It doesn't mean going faster. Sometimes it means going slower.

"If unit two on multiplication and division in 4th grade typically takes 25 days, you might need 30 days on that unit so that you can embed additional supports within the unit," said Freitag. "It's working through the plan for the year and making more time for the most important content."

The old adage of "meeting kids where they are"? Acceleration, experts say, requires tossing that aside. Instead, teachers can start with the current grade's work, then backtrack for students on certain concepts as needed. "What we've seen is that when we try to meet kids where they are, we never build a bridge to where they should be," said Bailey Cato Czupryk, a partner for practices and impact at TNTP, a national teacher-training and policy nonprofit. "We just stay where they are forever."

And sometimes acceleration won't work. Take early literacy foundations, which include making sure students have phonemic awareness and systematically learn all their letter sounds: There is no way to skip through those skills.

"If a kid is not fluently reading, you are going to need to explicitly go in and spend the time to fill in the grade level gaps in an intensive way," said Cato Czupryk.

But acceleration is also more feasible than most people think. Mathematics learning is not always linear; concepts repeat and become more complex with time. "Some walls are load-bearing and some are not," Freitag said. "You don't have to do the rhombus before you do fractions, but you do have to count backwards before you subtract."

And there are moments in a students' career where, beyond acceleration, schools should be prepared to bolster supports to prevent course failure—and the negative mindsets it can engender.

"Ninth grade is where students are figuring out, 'How do I do high school? Do I belong in high school? Can I succeed?' said Elaine Allensworth, the director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, who has studied math coursetaking, the importance of the 9th grade year, and algebra credit recovery. "It is so much more effective to help prevent students from failing than going back and remediating it later."

Still, our sources told us, teachers shouldn't approach these challenges with an eye only to missed learning or deficits. English-learners, for example, may have picked up more expertise in their home language, which could potentially help them make richer connections to the academic language they'll be learning in class.

And paradoxically, experts said, acceleration will also require teachers to fill in some of the other gaps that make for supportive, efficient learning environments. First graders may need more help on setting classroom norms and working independently, key parts of the kindergarten curriculum. Entering 9th graders may need to be encouraged to interact with one another and not to be afraid to ask questions, especially in a course like Algebra 1, where talking through misconceptions and "making sense of math" enrich students' abilities to apply the right algorithms.

For each story, we’ve created at least one composite student “case study” built on some of the actual needs and challenges sources have described to us, and then detailed the strategies you can use to adapt learning. We hope you’ll find this unusual approach helpful.

And once you’ve started developing your own acceleration plans this fall and begun teaching, why not reach back to us and let us know how they worked out?