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## To Address Learning Gaps, Go Deeper

18–23 minutes

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### **CHALLENGE: Academic achievement and opportunity gaps are persistent and perhaps widening.**

Educators are aware that many factors, some outside of their immediate control, can impact student achievement. Last school year was particularly challenging in this regard. Schools across the country grappled with widening learning gaps as a result of the pandemic, with students affected by systemic and structural inequities bearing the brunt of the problem. Such gaps inevitably led to a sense of urgency among educators and an instinct to take immediate action, as was the case in my own school. Educators may feel compelled to make decisions that can lead to abandoning their original academic goals and aggressively addressing learning gaps through intensive remediation (Narayan, 2022).

But we need to keep in mind that, while the urgency around learning gaps may be heightened right now, this problem is not entirely new. Therefore, we must ensure that our solutions aren't shortsighted. Overuse of academic-remediation interventions may offer temporary gains but impede long-term progress and ultimately lead to regression.

In my career as a teacher and school leader, I've consistently come back to the recognition that deeper instruction and a focus on high-quality student work must be the primary strategies for addressing and closing achievement gaps, while the conventional remediation-focused approach often needs revision. Targeted remediation interventions may be useful in certain situations, but there is profound power in learning experiences that are complex, authentic, and that foster knowledge development and craftsmanship. Educators must keep this in mind as they grapple with the current narrative on learning gaps. As a school leader, I know this is not always easy.

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Schools can provide a pathway to mitigating widening achievement gaps by emphasizing the production of *high-quality work*, defined by the curriculum-development group EL Education as work tasks that reflect real-world contexts, challenge students to think critically, and connect learning to practical applications (Berger et al., 2014). This approach promotes a deeper understanding of academic subject matter. It aims to develop critical-thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills that are important for students to become lifelong learners and critical to catching up and staying caught up. Examples of this kind of instruction are projects in which students:

- Undertake community-service initiatives that include researching, interviewing, and designing campaigns.
- Draft business plans for social enterprises that include grade-level math work.
- Research and analyze local or global issues and write persuasive letters to policymakers with recommendations for action.
- Collaborate on community-research projects focused on investigating neighborhood challenges and proposing solutions for improvement.

Maintaining a focus on high-level work may seem contrary to the notion that when a student is behind, we should stop and reteach content from lower grades or stick to exercises on basic skills and knowledge. But there is plenty of evidence to back up the accelerated approach. Educators who strive to foster high-quality work and use differentiation to provide in-time support when knowledge gaps arise are more likely to move and keep students at or above grade level (Szatrowski, 2022). By delving deeply into challenging content and grappling with complex problems, students develop the resilience, adaptability, and self-directed learning skills necessary to overcome academic setbacks and navigate future challenges. In addition, high-quality work encourages collaboration and teamwork, fostering the development of interpersonal skills that can enhance student support networks and facilitate peer learning (Vygotsky et al., 1978).

Staying committed to high-quality work can be challenging, especially when educators are working with students who are behind academically. The pressure to quickly address learning gaps often leads to a focus on remedial strategies that prioritize surface-level learning and rote memorization. It can be tempting to resort to narrow and repetitive instruction to ensure short-term performance gains. Again, targeted interventions as part of a more expansive instructional framework can be helpful, but it's important to recognize when these

remediation practices start to take over our classrooms and schools. Here are some common remediation pitfalls that, if we're not careful, can become part of routine instruction:

- 1. The skill-and-drill pitfall:** Relying on repetitive and rote approaches, such as worksheets, drills, and memorization, without fostering critical thinking, problem solving, and authentic application of knowledge. This approach limits students' ability to transfer their learning to real-world contexts and stifles their creativity and higher-order thinking skills (Hattie, 2009).
- 2. The narrow content pitfall:** Limiting instructional content to basic skills and a narrow range of topics, overlooking broader and complex concepts that encourage interdisciplinary connections and real-world applications. This narrow focus restricts students' exposure to diverse perspectives and diminishes their ability to make connections between different subject areas (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008).
- 3. The standardized-testing overemphasis pitfall:** Excessively focusing on teaching to the test and test prep. This narrows the curriculum, reduces opportunities for critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving, and leads to surface-level learning that impedes retention and engagement (Darling-Hammond, 2010).
- 4. The poor student engagement pitfall:** Relying predominantly on teacher-centered instruction, hindering active engagement and student-driven inquiry. This approach diminishes students' sense of ownership and agency in their learning process, limiting their motivation and involvement in deeper exploration (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).
- 5. The culturally irrelevant content pitfall:** Using instructional content that fails to connect with students' identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences. This pitfall undermines students' engagement, relevance, and connection to the content being taught, resulting in disengagement and limited opportunities for meaningful learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995).
- 6. The decontextualized content pitfall:** Presenting content in isolation from real-world applications and interdisciplinary connections. This approach limits students' understanding of how knowledge is used and applied beyond the classroom, leading to fragmented learning experiences that lack coherence and applicability (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).
- 7. The mistaking-skill-level-for-intelligence pitfall:** Focusing on students' skill level as an indicator of their intelligence rather than recognizing their diverse strengths and potential for growth. This pitfall perpetuates a fixed mindset and limited expectations, inhibiting students' ability to reach their full potential and engage in deeper learning experiences (Dweck, 2006).

By recognizing these instructional pitfalls and understanding their negative effects on student learning, we can take action to change course. Through intentional instructional design that circumvents these pitfalls, such as promoting inquiry-based learning, culturally relevant pedagogy, and authentic, real-world connections, we can guide students toward more engaged learning experiences that boost their cognitive capacity and long-term gains.

## Racial Biases and Deficit Perspectives

To navigate persistent achievement gaps and our tendency to want to remediate rather than deepen student learning, we must also consider two additional factors. The first of these is race. Racial inequality in our country contributes significantly to student learning gaps, and these gaps are perpetuated by systemic inequities and discriminatory practices within our education systems.

Indeed, the overuse of classroom remediation practices can be tied to unconscious bias. In education, unconscious bias can manifest in lower expectations, assumptions of incompetence, or deficit-oriented thinking toward specific groups of students. When teachers rely excessively on remediation as the primary instructional approach for these students, they may be unknowingly playing into and reinforcing these biases and

perpetuating a cycle of lower expectations and limited learning opportunities.

Despite efforts to promote equity and fairness, unconscious biases can still seep into decision-making processes, leading to disparities in deeper learning experiences and in opportunities for accelerated learning and growth. To counter these tendencies, educators must engage in ongoing self-reflection and professional development to recognize and address unconscious biases. This can help them ensure that all students have access to equitable and inclusive educational opportunities and avoid the remediation pitfalls that so often leave students of color behind.

The second factor to consider is our tendency to see falling behind or needing to catch up in a wholly negative light, rather than as a natural part of the learning process. In fact, falling behind can lead to opportunities for growth, resilience, and skill development. Learning gaps can be very wide, exacerbated by inequities or circumstances, but a student's reading or math score does not represent their intelligence or potential. If we can see students' learning struggles as natural and regular companions on the road to academic growth—rather than as grounds for punitive actions, oversimplified curriculum, or academic segmentation—we have a better chance of supporting their progress.

Indeed, research highlights the potential of combining high-quality work with well-integrated classroom interventions and supports to help bridge learning gaps. Such interventions include differentiated instruction, scaffolded curriculum, individualized learning plans, peer- and small-group learning, and formative assessment and feedback practices. These approaches go beyond mere remediation and equip students with essential learning strategies and self-directed learning skills, enabling them to overcome challenges, develop resilience, and cultivate a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). They can also lead students to improved academic performance and increased self-confidence (Hattie, 2009).

## Interrogating and Transforming School Systems

As a school leader, I have seen firsthand the power of restraining the remediation impulse and instead creating opportunities for consistently richer and deeper student learning experiences. With Sarah Fiarman and Allison Lee, I wrote about my experiences as a principal charged with boosting achievement at a high school in Baltimore (Fiarman et al., 2021).

This school had a rich history, dedicated teachers, and a committed community. At the time when I started as principal, however, it had faced years of declining academic performance. In response, the school leadership team decided to rebuild the school's legacy by focusing on enhancing the academic program to promote the sort of high-quality student work I have been describing. This included updating the course catalog by introducing more academically engaging and culturally relevant courses, expanding the number of art courses, and enlisting the support of community partners to create richer and more meaningful field studies.

In addition, we put in place a comprehensive feedback system encompassing both teacher-to-student feedback and student input on their learning needs and experiences. Finally, we provided professional development specifically designed to support teachers' skills in differentiated instruction and their understanding of grade-level standards and content, enabling them to effectively internalize and apply these expectations in their instruction.

While the process was not without challenges, the outcomes were highly encouraging. We saw a substantial increase in student achievement, the fostering of meaningful collaboration between the school and community, and the development of perseverance, critical thinking skills, and intrinsic motivation among the students.

I'm now the chief executive officer of an all-girls EL Education charter school in Baltimore, which primarily serves Black students. When the school first transitioned back to in-person instruction after the pandemic's peak, the leadership team sought to address the significant learning gaps observed among students, some of which likely predated the pandemic. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the school implemented various

strategies, including intensive remediation. These efforts were carefully planned and executed, with investments in online learning platforms, dedicated blocks of time for academic intervention, and dedicated personnel for remediation support. However, we fell short of closing the learning gaps, which appeared again at the beginning of last school year.

As a result, the school's leadership team shifted to an enrichment- and acceleration-based approach. We doubled down on initiatives that appeared to be working, such as offering more advanced math classes along with tutoring. We also integrated grade-level interdisciplinary projects into the curriculum to provide meaningful and engaging learning experiences. Through these projects, students investigated environmental issues in their local communities, studied the history and culture of these communities, and used adjacent math concepts that supported deeper exploration. Some grades also integrated art into their final projects. These projects facilitated cross-subject exploration, critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. By immersing themselves in authentic, real-world contexts, students were able to apply their learning and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

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The results of this shift have been encouraging. The school has seen fewer suspensions and transfers as well as enhanced collaboration and morale among our teachers. Formative data also indicates that we are moving in the right direction, with student achievement holding steady in previously declining areas and improving in other areas. However, challenges persist, particularly in schoolwide math achievement. To address this, we have introduced a new advanced middle school math course that combines individualized support with the prospect of high school credit, and we have created more peer-to-peer learning opportunities.

What I've learned from these experiences is that avoiding the pitfalls that take schools away from deeper instruction requires intentionality and sustained support on the part of school leaders. By emphasizing the components and importance of deep instruction, striking a balance between academic intervention and richer learning experiences, interrogating existing systems, and providing robust support to teachers, school leaders can ensure richer and more transformative learning experiences for all students. Just as we analyze student data, we must also interrogate the systems within our schools that either support or deter deeper instruction and high-quality work. This includes examining curriculum frameworks, instructional materials, professional development opportunities, and assessment practices. It is all-encompassing work.

## The Choice Is Ours

Quality-improvement expert W. Edwards Deming once said, "Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets." The overuse of remediation practices and the persistence of opportunity and achievement gaps are not isolated occurrences. In a sense, they form a self-perpetuating cycle that only reinforces the inequalities in our society.

In addressing post-pandemic learning gaps, I encourage educators to stay proactive in examining and challenging the existing structures, policies, and practices that perpetuate the overemphasis on remediation and limit opportunities for certain students. Leaders can work toward transforming classrooms by actively listening to the needs and concerns of teachers and students, building systems that support deep instruction, and fostering an inclusive and collaborative culture. This will require a collective effort to align instructional practices with equity, engagement, and authentic learning, ensuring every student has access to an education that challenges them and prepares them for success in an ever-changing world.

Are we willing to settle for short-term gains at the expense of long-term growth? Or will we embrace the challenge of transforming our educational practices to prioritize deeper learning experiences that empower our students to thrive? The choice is ours. As educators, administrators, policymakers, and advocates, let us seize this moment to recommit ourselves to providing rich and dynamic learning experiences to all students. Together, let us take bold steps toward implementing deeper instruction in our classrooms, schools, and districts, and build a generation of learners who recover from learning loss and emerge stronger, more resilient, and equipped with the skills and mindsets to shape a brighter future.

## Reflect & Discuss

- Are any of the remediation pitfalls described by Kyles-Smith familiar to you? Why is it so easy for schools to fall into them?
- In what ways has your school or district sought to address learning gaps from the pandemic? Do you feel they will be constructive in terms of supporting long-term gains?
- What are the biggest barriers to integrating high-quality student work as Kyles-Smith describes it into the curriculum? How can they be addressed?

## A Research-Based Blueprint for Tutoring

One strategy for closing learning gaps that can accompany accelerated learning opportunities is tutoring. Brown University researchers Matthew Kraft and

Grace Falken, drawing on research into what conditions make tutoring most effective—and observations of the success of particular programs—have created a “blueprint” for how tutoring could logistically be made part of the school day for most students.

Outlined in a 2021 working paper, their proposal envisions tutoring within groups of four or fewer kids, with funding provided through a new division within the U.S. Department of Education. Trained high school or college students would tutor younger students; AmeriCorps members would work with high schoolers.

A pilot program Kraft and three colleagues administered in some Chicago schools in 2022 featured aspects of their proposal, with trained college students tutoring middle schoolers over a school year. The pilot showed positive (though statistically insignificant) results (Kraft et al., 2022).

While Kraft and Falken envision tutoring as a core feature of all public schools over time, schools and districts now setting up smaller-scale tutoring programs could adopt aspects of their proposal. States like Tennessee and New Hampshire are already developing statewide tutoring corps to address learning loss. “Ultimately,” Kraft and Falken’s paper states, “we hope to inform efforts to reduce COVID-19 learning loss and catalyze a national dialogue . . . [making] tutoring a permanent factor of public schooling.”

—Naomi Thiers

Sources: Kraft, M., & Falken, G. (2021). A blueprint for scaling tutoring across public schools. *AERA Open*, 7(1), 1–21. Kraft, M., List, J., Livingston, J., & Sadoff, S. (2022). *Online tutoring by college volunteers: Experimental evidence from a pilot program* (Working Paper 22-568). Annenberg Institute, Brown University.