



Helping our Lowest Performing Students – Post COVID

There are many issues to be resolved before schools reopen in the fall. To mention just a few:

Will we continue online instruction?

Will schools require social distancing, and what will that do to pupil teacher ratios?

Will I be wearing a mask to teach?

Will students be required to wear masks?

How will large group classes like physical education and band be handled?

Will school budget cuts impact salaries and other important budget issues?

With these important questions up in the air, we need to frequently remember Philippians 4:6-7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” If you are a teacher and your school year is over, I encourage you to take a well-deserved break, but remember to continue in prayer—especially for those who will be making these decisions.

As if the above list were not enough, there is at least one more issue that is important for teachers and administrators. How will our lowest performing students make up for their learning loss that occurred during the virus shutdown? The Northwest Evaluation Association, a non-profit that creates student assessments to measure growth and proficiency, [has released a research study](#) in conjunction with researchers from Texas A&M, Johns Hopkins, and Duke universities, and the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater predicting that the spread between top performers and the lowest performers has grown by more than two grade levels as a result of COVID 19. Currently the average spread in a typical classroom is about seven grade levels.

How can teachers handle such diversity in ability? The typical solution has been to expect teachers to differentiate instruction, providing different activities for different students based on their strengths and abilities. Differentiated instruction can be much more challenging in a digital learning context. And as the gap between the top of the class and the bottom grows, it becomes more difficult to succeed using such methods. It is the bottom of the class that suffers the most when differentiated instruction is not working well. So how are we to deal with this?

Various ideas are being floated. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis believes that reading skills are key. He [has announced](#) a \$64 million summer reading program targeted at the lowest performing elementary school students in the state. The program would deliver one month of additional instruction for K–5 students who have identified reading problems. This is likely to be helpful but will not completely solve the problem.

[Education Week surveyed school districts regarding their summer plans](#). They found that 24% of districts are planning some sort of summer learning activities. The Ed Week study also found that because of the ongoing virus, 79% of the districts planning summer instruction intend to do it online. About half of the districts offering such programs would make them required only for low performing students, and half would also allow them as an option for all students.

[Beth Shuler, a professor at the University of Virginia](#), has looked at the research on programs designed to help students who start school behind their peers and believes that highly intensive individual tutoring and small group instruction show the most promise. She emphasizes that the quality of such programs is essential to their success. One promising formulation is “‘vacation academy’ small-group programming, for which districts select teachers they consider to be highly effective and offer them the opportunity to instruct groups of roughly ten struggling students in a single subject over weeklong vacation breaks.” Breaking the content up into week-long chunks allows teachers the flexibility to opt in to teaching as much or little as they wish and can also be tailored so that students only take the specific blocks of instruction most relevant to their needs. Shuler points to one such program in Springfield, Massachusetts, where students showed increases on academic assessments and reductions in school suspensions upon completing the program.

Of course, such programs can be expensive, and that is a major reason why they are not present in all districts. While some would [hope otherwise](#), the harsh reality of COVID’s impact on the nation’s economy does not make it likely that schools will see an infusion of more federal funding. Districts may need to reallocate some of the Title I funds that are going to districts and pursue other revenue sources to provide additional instruction to the lowest performing students at times when higher performing students are on vacation.

While this type of “summer school” may seem like punishment for low performing students, the alternative of not receiving enough support to overcome learning gaps is a much tougher punishment. A life of lower economic opportunities is the all too frequent result. While some students—particularly those with strong family supports—will persevere and overcome deficits, other students will need more. Perhaps church-based programs could pick students up after their instructional day is over and provide them culturally enriching programs and activities that will encourage and inspire them to persist in their academic efforts. Teachers alone cannot do everything that needs to be done to help these students. That is why our prayers for them are so important.

Please share your thoughts on this column that you would like other readers to see by entering them in the form below. Personal comments can be sent to JMitchell@ceai.org. John Mitchell is on staff at CEAI and teaches part-time in the suburbs of Washington, DC.

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