

August 2021

## Executive Summary

# Learning found, not lost: Examining learner growth and support in LUSD during the COVID-19 crisis



# Introduction

As a result of their system-wide investment in professional development and technology to support high-quality, personalized learning both face-to-face and online, Lindsay Unified School District was poised to successfully implement and maintain remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the past decade, Lindsay Unified School District (LUSD) has made significant, system-wide investments in professional development, technology, and resources to support high-quality, personalized learning both face-to-face and online. Given this focus, they were poised to successfully implement and maintain remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the district recognized that many of their learners faced immense challenges accessing and participating in distance learning during this time.

While much of the national research around learning has centered on ‘learning loss’ or gaps in knowledge and performance, LUSD wanted to identify what had been gained and chose to examine patterns of growth in reading and math. To address this line of inquiry, the district partnered with The Learning Accelerator (TLA) to understand where differences in progress occurred, or the degree to which learning remained ‘unfinished.’

## The Realities of Learning During COVID-19

The long-term impacts of the pandemic may still be unknown. Researchers predict an increase in economic and social stratification resulting from academic losses, particularly for Black and Hispanic/Latino learners in rural areas and communities in which family incomes are below the federal poverty threshold. This likely means that **“those who went into the pandemic with the fewest opportunities are at risk of leaving with even less** (p. 51).”<sup>3</sup>

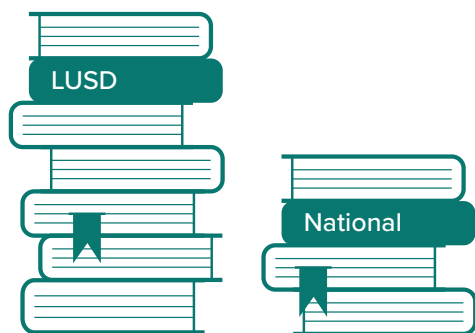
In LUSD, learners did their best to participate during distance learning whether logging in from home, a car, or a worksite. Particularly with younger learners, babysitters and caretakers were frequently overwhelmed trying to support every child’s learning schedule. Older learners often had to care for younger siblings or work while still trying to participate in their own learning. Despite the challenges, LUSD learners wanted to attend class and learn – either in person or online.



A small, rural district, LUSD serves a predominantly Hispanic/Latino community of approximately 4,000 learners, roughly 90% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

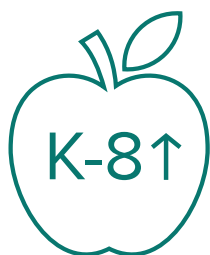
# Key Findings

The research team used reading and math assessment data to model and explore academic growth during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years.



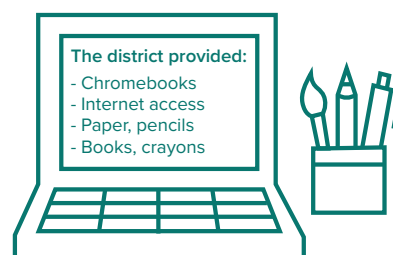
## 1 LUSD learners grew more in reading than their national peers.

Where districts with similar demographics experienced negative growth, LUSD learners in content areas 4-8 demonstrated substantial progress — a testament to the efforts of the district to ensure that learners continued to grow during distance learning.



## 2 Contrary to national trends, younger learners made more gains.

Elementary and middle learners showed steady progress while secondary learners experienced a decline. Notably, despite making steady progress while still in a K-8 learning environment, learners in content level 9 experienced a drop as they entered high school.



## 3 District supports benefitted multiple subgroups.

Contrary to national data that learners classified as English Learner, Migrant, or Homeless would have experienced consistent decline, at LUSD, that was mostly not the case. Despite numerous challenges, these learners generally made progress.

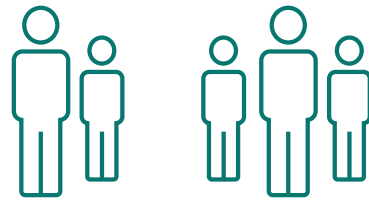
## Key Findings, Continued



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### Instructional setting had varying effects on learner growth.

When compared to national data for similar districts, LUSD had a substantially higher rate of return to in-person instruction. At the elementary and middle levels, those in the early-return cohort model demonstrated more growth compared to their peers. In contrast, in-person instruction did not have a discernible effect on secondary learners' growth.



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### Learner growth varied across learning communities.

Across the TK-8 learning communities, all learners made varying amounts of progress. At the secondary level, they experienced a decline. Of particular concern, learners receiving special education services, those classified as English Learners, and learners in Alternative Education consistently had lower growth rates and scores.

**“LUSD consistently went above and beyond to connect with their learners and make sure that they received high-quality supports to set them up for success.”** *LUSD Counselor*



# Recommendations

LUSD learners continued to make progress – particularly at the primary level. This was likely related to the existing systems and structures that supported learners.



**1** Increase access to classified support programs and services.

The district should continue to offer benefits associated with free and reduced-price meals, and also look to extend other classified programs and services such as one-on-one check-ins, small-group tutoring, and individual counseling.

**2** Cultivate and extend relationships with learners and their families.

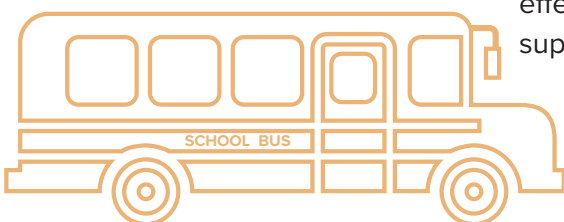
During distance learning, learning facilitators built strong relationships with their learners' families, helping to build trust and a better understanding of each learner as an individual. Going forward, LUSD should leverage this momentum to make progress toward working with families as at-home learning partners.

**3** Continue to leverage the entire LUSD community to support learners and their families.

Throughout the pandemic, learners were supported academically and socially by counselors, learning facilitators, and other LUSD staff. From counseling and mental health, to food banks and meal delivery, to transportation access, to planned events to facilitate community-building, the district worked to ensure that learners and their families received access to formal and informal programs and services. This community support should be continued.

**4** Leverage data to improve communication about how and if learners receive the support that they need.

The counselors collaborated as a team to ensure alignment across learning communities, meeting weekly during the pandemic to brainstorm ideas and facilitate equitable access to services – particularly for those learners who may be eligible for multiple programs. However, the data revealed that not all referrals resulted in action. Currently, a formal system to track how learners with multiple classifications receive multiple support services does not exist. Formalizing this data collection may improve communication, effectiveness, and equity in ensuring that all learners receive the supports that best fit their needs.





## Recommendations, Continued

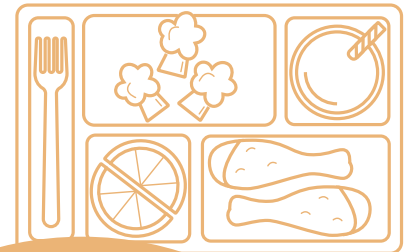
- 5** Expand the cohort model for K-8 learners should there be a return to distance learning.

Younger learners who participated in the early-return cohort model typically exhibited greater growth. As such, if there is a need to return to distance learning, the district should advocate for more funding and staffing to expand the cohort model for more learners.

- 6** Specifically address the disparities in learner growth and lack of participation at the secondary level.

Older learners faced additional stressors and challenges during the pandemic. As a result, secondary learners made the least progress in reading and math. Future research should explore the underlying causes and factors of secondary learners' experiences during the pandemic to best identify strategies that may better support their growth.

“If I had a learner who was, for example, an English Learner, Migrant, and Homeless, I was working directly with those providers to ensure we had streamlined communication and common messaging, so it wasn’t three different messages, three different calls.” *LUSD Counselor*



## Final Takeaway

Compared to their national counterparts, learners in LUSD showed positive growth in reading and math during the pandemic and did not exhibit the same levels of ‘learning loss’ as detected in the national assessment data.

**While LUSD is a unique context because of its demographics, access to supports, mission, and values, it can serve as a model for other districts looking to support learners in addressing unfinished learning.** The national conversation has just begun to shift from a focus on what was lost during the pandemic to what groups of learners may have gained. LUSD serves as a model for how to measure growth as well as how to design essential services and supports to meet the needs of each individual learner.

