



Hop**SkipLeapfrog**

Launching Forward:

Leveraging pandemic
innovations to advance
school systems



The Learning
Accelerator 

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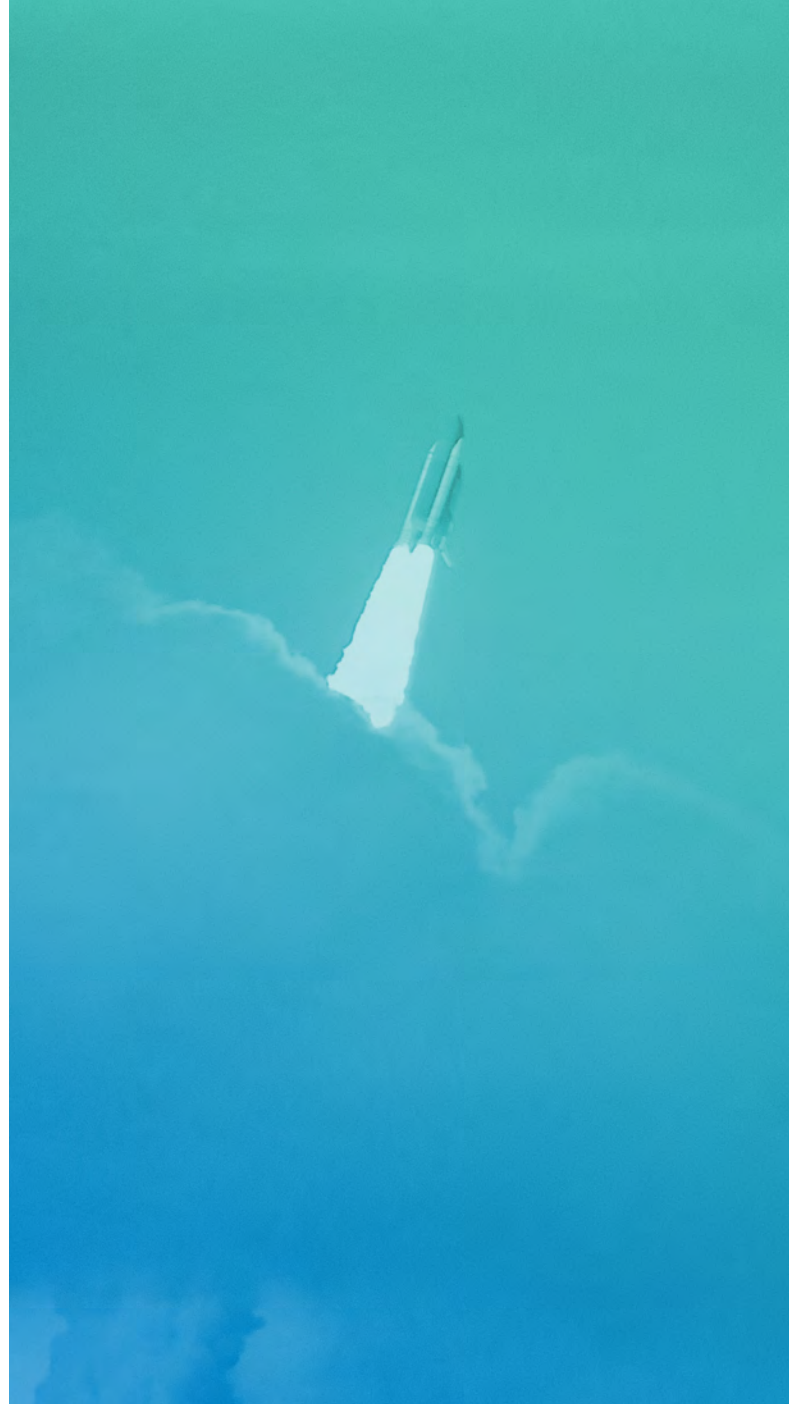
Introduction: What Have We Learned, and What Will Take Us Forward?

Every child deserves an effective, engaging, and equitable education that enables them to reach their full and unique potential. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated how very far we are from achieving this vision, deeply exposing the depth and breadth of persistent and predictable educational inequities in experience and outcomes for children across the country.

Our post-crisis mandate is clear: as the K-12 education sector progresses through re-stabilization and recovery, we must advance towards greater equity, resiliency, and excellence for every child, in every school. With new awareness of the fragility and injustice of our existing approaches, and unprecedented federal investment in education recovery, the intense spotlight on navigating the pandemic has been replaced by another of heightened expectation: Will leaders seize this moment of opportunity to deliver on the promise of public education?

At The Learning Accelerator (TLA), we believe that doing this requires not just plotting forward, but looking back, taking stock of where we are and understanding the resources — old and new — we can bring to bear. In early 2021, **TLA launched Hop, Skip, Leapfrog, a research project that aims to identify, codify, and make sense of new school system strategies and capabilities that emerged during the pandemic.** Through interviews with over 30 district teams and subject matter experts across the K-12 education field, the team explored the different concrete “hops, skips, and leaps” educators made towards more personalized, mastery-focused, and whole child practices during the 12 months of school closure, remote learning, and reopening.

It's important to recognize that while the story of the pandemic is one of hardship and loss, it is also a story of system learning at nearly every level. Forced to confront inequities, inefficiencies, and inflexibilities head on, communities across the nation found ways to solve problems, novel and preexisting. Administrators, teachers, students, and families grappled with constraints and competing demands, doing as one district leader in Minnesota reflected, “different, with less.” Through hardship, they developed new muscles for improvement and change.



These new capabilities can accelerate current efforts and offer starting points for sustained, equity-oriented progress over time – but only if we recognize and leverage them. To that end, in May 2021, TLA launched the [Hop, Skip, Leapfrog](#) toolkit, an online guide profiling over 100 of the strategies teams put into place (including artifacts, examples, and leader commentary). It also includes tools for teams to use to surface their own hops, skips, and leaps as they plan.

This first companion paper zooms out from these discrete innovation points, highlighting thematic stories and offering a look across systems and experts to share broader patterns in the new skills, capabilities, and mindsets which will help the K-12 sector make bigger leaps as communities move through recovery to advancement.



New Strengths To Propel Us Forward

The first section of the paper identifies five specific new and strengthened improvement and innovation “muscles” that systems built over the course of the pandemic that leaders can tap into to sustain and deepen change. These new competencies and ways of working can be leveraged to expand new practices and build momentum and buy-in for greater change.

- 1 Teacher mindsets, skills, and readiness** for innovation and change.
- 2 Infrastructure** that spurs more efficient and quality-improving practices.
- 3 Proactive district team habits** creating greater agility, proximity, and trust.
- 4 Personalized educator learning models** that target educator needs and build ongoing professional practice.
- 5 Students’ readiness and skills** for greater self-direction.



Launch Points For Bigger Leaps

The second section of the paper explores six high-potential practice areas where, through using new muscles, leaders can build on existing, concrete COVID innovations to go deeper, investing to implement more personalized, mastery-based, and whole child teaching and learning strategies more durably across more contexts over time.

- 1 Adopting identity-affirming, “tier 1” instructional approaches that flex to the unique needs of every learner** (including meeting unfinished learning needs).
- 2 Implementing effective capacity-building family engagement strategies** to build home-school partnerships for learning.
- 3 Pursuing whole child development** approaches that broaden assessments and support for students’ wellbeing and learning beyond academics.
- 4 Taking advantage of virtual learning to offer more flexible remote and hybrid school models** for students and families.
- 5 Pursuing innovative staffing models** that expand teacher time and expertise for students with the highest needs.
- 6 Encouraging educators and content creators to work together to inclusively design and adopt engaging, rigorous instructional materials that work in personalized, hybrid environments.**

With the right commitment to maintaining the new muscles built over the course of the pandemic, and the right focal points for continued work, leaders can sustain progress, build momentum, and deepen change, helping their communities hop, skip, and leap towards more resilient and equitable learning in systems, schools, and classrooms.

As you read on and explore these patterns, reflect on how they have shown up already in your own learners' experiences.

How will you take them forward in your work to hop, skip, and leap towards more resilient and equitable learning in your own system, school, or classroom?

Tapping Into **New Strengths** To Propel Us Forward

Stabilizing and improving learning experiences during COVID-19 continues to be a dynamic challenge for communities. At the start, few could anticipate the duration or intensity of the crisis; in many cases, short-term responses turned into longer-term pilots and shifts in practice. If viewed as durable capabilities, leaders can leverage these new strengths to sustain greater progress towards more personalized, mastery-based, and whole child practices.

Across our conversations with districts and experts, leaders consistently pointed to five areas where systems had significant growth and learning.

- 1 **Teacher mindsets, skills, and readiness for innovation and change.**
- 2 **Infrastructure that spurs more efficient and quality-improving practices.**
- 3 **Proactive district team habits creating greater agility, proximity, and trust.**
- 4 **Personalized educator learning models that target educator needs and build ongoing professional practice.**
- 5 **Students' readiness and skills for greater self-direction.**

We explore each new system-level strength in the pages that follow, offering stories and examples in action from the Hop, Skip, Leapfrog research. The examples provided within this document are not meant to be exhaustive (be sure to explore the full toolkit), nor will they look the same across communities. But as you read each of these, consider the following questions for your own school or systems:

What is my own story of this strength? What does it look like in my context, and what evidence of it can I show to others?

How might our team effectively tap into this new capability to advance our own progress? What learning might we need to do next to keep these new muscles strong in the long run?

Strength 1: New teacher mindsets, skills, and readiness for innovation and change.

Through Hop, Skip, Leapfrog interviews, TLA was able to highlight over 100 new strategies that teams had put into place to improve students' learning (the greater range of classroom initiatives was astounding!). At the most basic level, disruption of every-day practices and increased reliance on technology significantly shifted teachers' instruction and work habits. At a more transformative level, working with students in these new ways, over a sustained period of time, helped educators scrutinize past approaches and move towards more new models. Teachers now hold different pictures of what learning might look like, building skills and additional readiness through a variety of experiential factors, including:

- **Shifts in resources forced educators to abandon existing playbooks.** The move to online learning meant that teachers had to use new materials and tools. Beyond this, many schools adopted new scheduling, such as block periods, and the use of new spaces (physical and virtual) to support student cohorting and distancing needs. These **new structures got teachers thinking differently about how they used time, space, and resources** — thinking that's likely to stick into the future. As a Meriden, CT leader of blended learning [reflected](#), *"If we're going to be outside, what are the elements of the natural setting that we can use to enhance learning? I think that with some of those opportunities, we won't go back on that now."*
- **Rapid adoption of new tools during remote learning put teachers on the 'front lines' of system innovation.** Pandemic closures and moves to learning online forced every educator out of their existing comfort zone. Teachers **experimented with a variety of tools** to ensure learning continuity and address social and emotional wellbeing and equity gaps. The [Greater Los Angeles Education Foundation](#) leaders John Garcia and Kristina Romero provided a set of [teacher-led innovation grants](#) and [documented regional responses](#). Through this work, they found teachers' proximity to unmet student-level needs drove significant investment and creativity in classrooms across the region, with demand for support exceeding expectations. Now, *"the schools are learning from what the teachers are doing."*

The short-term experiences extended as educators navigated online improvement and the return to learning with COVID-19 precautions in place. In some cases, districts were able to **recruit teachers into longer-term design processes**.

“

I think that there is a shift in terms of teachers' learning that has been monumental. I think they see themselves as co-learning with students, and some of that guard that comes out as 'I deliver; you listen' has been broken down a little bit to where everybody learns from everybody. What's been really also amazing to see is the professional collaboration in staff and team meetings - just sharing knowledge and practices among each other. I think that the 'everybody learns from everybody' approach really decreases some of the anxiety.”

— Dave Quinn, Director Of Technology Integration, Mendon-Upton Regional School District

- **Decreased ability to rely on traditional, compliance-based structures meant teachers began to open their eyes to new ways of organizing for and managing active engagement.** Many educators quickly realized that more traditional measures for ensuring engagement were not going to be as effective, particularly for learners working online. Inquiry-based learning expert Diana Laufenberg observed, *"What many teachers picked up on very quickly is that a lot of American schools run on the both willingness of a kid to be nice and the discomfort that comes from not doing what is expected when you are in physical proximity*

to another human.” The **struggles educators faced in getting students to re-engage deeply during instruction inspired many to re-think structures and approaches.**

- Greater recognition of inequities — surfaced through the pandemic but made even more urgent in the light of the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests against racial injustice — **raised teacher awareness of the broader**

contexts in which students grow and develop (including their race, culture, and community), as well as a desire to understand and support that context. Leaders and experts highlighted educators’ desires to address social-emotional wellness and work in culturally responsive ways. The Highlander Institute’s Malika Ali summarized it like this: *“I think there was this recognition this year that we have to prioritize what our kids need.”*



Three stories of hops, skips, and leaps that built new teacher mindsets, skills, and readiness

Teachers in Liberty, MO embraced teaming and working across grade-levels to meet student needs.

District coaches worked with site-level teams to creatively tackle challenges of engagement and enrollment. In some cases, teachers [worked in teams](#) to lighten planning lifts and develop interdisciplinary experiences. In others, uneven enrollment patterns between virtual and hybrid schools led teachers to work in multi-grade classrooms, supporting students [across grade-levels](#). Coach Molly Henley noted that working differently together changed teacher perspectives: *“I think a lot of the teachers who at the beginning felt like they were thrust into this and it was really hard, are now like, hey, it was really hard, but we did it. We see the value and we want to continue using what we’ve learned.”*

Dallas educators brought together teachers to create powerful learning moments for learning communities.

As leaders moved beyond the initial [distance learning](#) launch, they brought teams of teachers in schools together around a [common innovation goal](#): “How might we design this year to have an extraordinary impact on our community?” Teams chose to explore a variety of new practices, from [student-led conferences](#) and “[Teach Back-Tuesdays](#),” which were incorporated into morning announcements and streamed live to families. Local pilots informed broader district supports, such as the development of [self-paced learning](#) templates and tools.

Leaders in D11 tackled inquiry learning as a means for increasing authentic engagement.

In the spring of 2020, schools in Colorado Springs District 11 quickly shifted to remote learning in response to the COVID 19 pandemic. As students, teachers, and leaders navigated the move online, educators began to wonder how they could better bridge a challenging, but familiar to many, engagement gap that emerged. That wondering led the team to tackle [three-to-six week inquiry-based learning pilots](#), which then served as the seed for deeper work on term-long, [cross-subject inquiry projects](#) throughout the next school year. This teacher-driven process really shifted mindsets; district leader Nicole Ottmer reflected, *“We’re no longer planning for teaching, we’re planning for learning.”*

Explore additional examples of teacher hop, skips, and leaps:

- [Shifts in Student-Level Practices](#)
- [Focusing Instruction Through Central Materials and Resources](#)

Strength 2: New infrastructure that spurs more efficient and quality-improving practices.

The move to remote learning in the spring of 2020 forced many teams to take stock of and invest in new centralized “infrastructure” (such as common standards, materials, and tools) to support the shift to remote learning. While not game-changing in and of themselves, these new infrastructure investments supported other activities that increased efficiency and instructional quality across the system:

- District teams consistently **identified common sets of priority instructional standards** to guide educator focus and improve communications about planning and progress. This prioritization helped **streamline district initiatives and set the stage for teachers to orient their instruction and reporting around mastery** of these common standards.
- Given many teachers couldn’t rely on their own previously developed lesson plans and analog materials, many districts were able to **digitally roll out centrally-vetted, standards-aligned materials, which increased demand for and willingness to use these common materials.**
- Adoption of **common learning management systems** enabled **greater teacher professional collaboration and planning**, including the development of interdisciplinary, inquiry projects.

- **Remote meeting and communication capabilities increased opportunities for learning interactions at nearly every level of the system:** coaches and interventionists could more easily work across sites to support professional and student learning, leaders and educators were able to collaborate with greater flexibility, on-demand support was provided from any location, and parents could more easily engage in conferencing and check-ins from home.

The adoption of infrastructure to increase efficiency and quality was also a noted benefit for support providers as well. Sarah Johnson of the Teaching Lab reflected on her organization’s own shift to working virtually: *“We’re delivering professional learning to thousands of educators across the nation through a learning management system and using zoom and video technology. [...] And we do think that is something that’s going really well. And we even find that some teachers like the virtual professional learning even more than the in-person professional learning because it’s more accessible and they can build community outside of their immediate school. We can also create shorter chunks of professional learning that can be integrated more authentically into a teacher workflow. And that’s really exciting.”*





Three stories of efficiency and quality-creating systems

Common priority standards in Cedar Rapids helped focus instruction and pilot mastery reporting.

District leaders identified a [common set of priority standards](#) that would serve the basis for common unit planning and the [piloting of standards-based reporting](#). The team also created a common “course shell” format on its two learning management systems to offer consistent unit guides for teachers aligned to these standards, which helped create consistency across classrooms and student experiences.

Central materials rolled out on Austin ISD’s LMS spurred adoption and professional collaboration.

To meet the demand for digital materials, the academic team brought together coaches from across initiatives and content areas to develop and [roll out centrally-vetted, standards-aligned course “blueprints”](#) through the district’s new learning management system. Over 85% of teachers reported using these materials and their adoption spurred significantly more [collaborative planning and professional learning oriented around standards-aligned curriculum](#).

Leveraging remote capability across schools increased Cudahy, WI’s ability to offer intervention to more students, more often.

Given safety considerations, interventionists and specialists who [worked across multiple in-person classrooms worked with students remotely](#). This allowed these expert staff to work with groups of children with similar needs at the same time across rooms and campuses, which created more opportunities for targeted support overall. Given the success of this strategy, the district will keep a remote approach into the future.

Explore additional hops, skips, and leaps that created efficiency and quality:

- [Focusing Instruction Through Central Materials and Resources](#)
- [Increasing Simplified Access to Necessary Technology](#)
- [Putting People Resources Proximate to Highest-Need Areas](#)

Strength 3: New proactive district team habits creating greater agility, proximity, and trust.

Given the need to address learning continuity and make decisions rapidly, central office teams had to evolve how they worked together and with stakeholders during the pandemic. This took several forms:

- Nearly every district we spoke to had **established and maintained weekly, cross-functional meetings**, and in several cases with union leads, to build understanding of problems emerging in different areas and working to solve them together.
- **Remote meeting structures have greatly increased teams' ability to collaborate** — and also to question why they hadn't used them before, saying things like “we used to take these inefficiencies for granted; now we don't.”
- Given the pace of change and novel nature of the work, district leaders prototyped ways to get **proximate to the frontline work with schools**, through team restructuring, reassignment to provide teacher and family assistance, and stepping in to substitute teach, to more deeply understand the challenges faced by students and teachers.
- **Doubling-down on communication to increase engagement**, setting up new structures and bi-directional ways to solicit ideas and questions, as well as transparently share information with parents and staff through new channels (ranging from online to Spanish radio).
- **Pushing on partnerships** with community organizations ranging from housing authorities, arts nonprofits, and even SpaceX, to meet the needs of learners.

“

You start looking at your entire organization in different ways when you're in a crisis. You're problem solving rapidly, but for a school district or charter leaders, you're doing it for each kid in every school. And so it's a crash course during the pandemic. [...] That's a skill set district teams are going to have going forward. [...] They've also built this new muscle memory to react more quickly to what their students need.”

— Scott Milam, Afton Partners



Three stories of new district team habits

Getting “all hands on deck” to meet student needs in Nashville, TN.

Leaders reimaged the central office as a support hub for students, families, and schools, redeploying district team time. Administrators at all levels [now devote at least one day a week to provide direct school support](#) and staff [technical assistance centers](#) for families. The district also created a new [“Navigator” program](#), which paired over 5,600 adults across the system to do weekly check-ins with every student and family, using data collected to push in personalized supports for students based on their needs.

Moving towards high-cadence, proactive communication helped Cudahy, WI develop trust for reopening.

At the height of school reopening planning, a [Cudahy, WI superintendent](#) set up a variety of structures for ongoing, transparent communications with stakeholders, like weekly community emails and board calls as well as open question and answer sessions with all staff throughout the district. These sessions are now held monthly and teachers have requested they continue.

Monterey Peninsula, CA, engaged students, staff, and community organizations as response and re-design partners.

District leaders tapped into stakeholders at every level of the system to tackle problems. Sites [redployed classified staff](#) to direct student supports like home visits and attendance check-ins and worked closely with [community groups like the YMCA](#) to set up tutoring centers, noting that the depth of work together has also deeply changed their relationship. Superintendent Diffenbaugh reflected: *“We were partners, now we are a team.”* Students were also recruited to solve problems, [engaging in board meetings and design processes](#) through an [equity task force](#).

Explore additional hop, skips, and leaps in district team habits:

- [Improving Communication](#)
- [Inclusively Building Understanding of Needs and Stakeholder Buy-In, and Ownership for Change](#)

Strength 4: Personalized educator learning models that target educator needs and build ongoing professional practice.

As they rolled out new resources and instructional plans, districts also quickly built new, agile approaches to professional learning. While educators were at widely different places in terms of their comfort with and understanding of new tools and plans that were often changing, nearly every adult was confronting novel professional challenges. As one leader said, somewhat in jest but also in seriousness, “*Basically [any educator] who’s not in the classroom right now is marginally obsolete in their skill set.*” Districts used this opportunity to leverage new tools and approaches to address adult learning needs:

- **Approaches became much more targeted and personalized** as leaders sought to provide ongoing support that met adult learners where they were.



- **Teachers were able to take greater control of more flexible learning experiences**, making choices about which sessions to attend based on their needs and interests.
- Districts invested in ways to move adult learning online, using video and learning management systems to **model for teachers the same new modalities** they were now expected to use in classrooms. Further, because teachers participated remotely, they could more easily collaborate with teachers in different schools.
- Professional learning experiences also shifted towards **more collaborative problem solving and planning** as teachers brought challenges they were experiencing in classrooms (physical and virtual) into learning sessions.

Taken together, systems moved to more relevant, sustained, technology-supported, and ongoing models of professional learning.

Three stories of personalized professional learning

Handing over greater ownership, with support, of district-wide PD to teachers helped D11 deepen engagement and tackle the most relevant problems of practice.

As teachers shifted to remote and hybrid instruction, there was a desire to both share their best practices and crowdsource ideas as well as model new practices experientially. The CO district hosted an [opt-in teaching and learning conference with 150 different teacher-led sessions](#), providing common quality guidelines and coaching for session leads, posting all sessions on a shared learning management system, and working with site leaders to undertake local reflection activities to ensure coherence.

Dallas ISD offered sustained, engaging, and cross-modality communities of practice in targeted growth areas through its personalized learning “camping trips.”

Teachers chose from five domain indicators (classroom culture, instructional rigor, assessment + data, equity, and student agency) and then used Schoology and district-developed content to engage in a self-directed learning cycle. Afterwards, they engaged in a synchronous personalized learning “Campfire Chat” with other teachers who were working towards similar goals.

Meeting teachers where they were (literally and figuratively) through remote classroom coaching.

Faced with existing teacher shortages and limited internal expertise in remote and blended learning, leaders in Ector County in TX tapped into [virtual coaches](#) to help teachers implement new approaches. Using Swivl robots and earbuds, coaches were able to work with teachers from afar to offer immediate advice and feedback to teachers working in classrooms.

Explore more hops, skips, and leaps in [personalized professional learning](#).

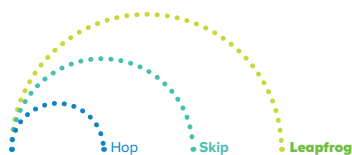
Strength 5: Investment in student readiness and skills for greater self-direction.

The move to remote and hybrid learning models required students to exert significantly more self-direction in their day-to-day learning. As learners and educators quickly discovered, keeping on track, staying engaged and motivated, and proactively addressing learning needs required a combination of building new skills and creating scaffolded supports as those skills were developed. Educators created more opportunities for students to:

- **Make choices about how, where, and when learning could happen** through technology-supported teaching and learning practices.
- **Build self-awareness of their own progress and learning strategies** through reflective exercises, taking leadership over conferencing, and setting goals.
- **Work together to co-design and solve problems**, from staging drama productions online and in public parks to stepping forward to lead equity tasks forces. As Cudahy, WI

Superintendent Tina Owen-Moore reflected, *“They just found ways to do the impossible things – both the students, the staff, the families, everybody just working together, and it was really cool.”*

Across the board, districts reported making considerable investments in social and emotional learning curriculum and “care structures” that will pay dividends over time. Notable too, beyond anything specific leaders did, is that students learned how to work through the stress and isolation of the pandemic itself, finding ways to persevere and developing meaningful coping strategies. Indigenous leader and NACA Inspired Schools Network Director Anpao Duta Flying Earth reflected on this resiliency: *“I wonder how students are coming out of the pandemic, more mature, much more self aware or more self actualizing. How did people come back to rely on the point of sustainability for them, whether that was exercise or mindfulness in the form of prayer or meditation or ceremonies? And how did that equip people and students with new coping mechanisms for stress?”*



Three stories of ways districts created opportunities for student self-direction

Building in structures for greater choice and self-monitoring.

Recognizing students learning from home needed both additional support and means for greater ownership and investment, Chicago Public Schools [launched virtual personalized learning plans](#). Developed weekly, plans gave students a clear outline of expected work but allowed them to complete their assigned activities in any order they choose. As a part of their development of self-management skills and learner agency, students were also prompted to complete daily and weekly reflections on how their work is going and how they are progressing against their goals.

Putting students in the driver’s seat during conferences.

Teachers at a Dallas school piloted [student-led conferencing](#). To prepare, teachers supported students in familiarizing themselves with the structure of the conference so that they were prepared to lead, and guided them through reflections that helped students to identify what they wanted to share. During these family-teacher conferences, students identified their strengths, areas of growth, prompted their parents or family members to add on, and answered questions from teachers and parents.

Organizing time in ways that support student help-seeking and getting what they need.

In Mendon-Upton schools in MA, leaders piloted a new [“What I Need” \(WIN\) Block](#) at the end of each day. Intended to support differentiation, tap into student interests, and empower choice in activity, high school students engaged in self-directed activities during the last block of the day for 30 minutes. A schedule was provided to students each week with options for activities that allowed them to plan their week. The one mandatory activity, advisory time, occurred during this block every Monday and schedules were delivered for students to plan out the rest of their week.

Explore more hops, skips, and leaps that built readiness for student self-direction:

- [Actively Engaging Educator Practices](#)
- [Growth Oriented Educator Practices](#)





Launch Points For Bigger Leaps

The challenges posed by COVID-19 surfaced significant, ongoing need for innovation and improvement across nearly every facet of American schooling. Viewed from a place of inertia, it can be difficult, if not daunting, to imagine where to begin.

Yet, our schools and systems have not been and are not inert. In the same way that responding to the challenges of COVID-19 forced educators to behave in different ways (building more durable habits, muscles, and mindsets), the new practices and strategies they pursued in response to specific needs offer “launch points” to build momentum, transforming student experiences more equitably and at greater scale. How will we exploit this momentum? What investment might support more significant leaps, advancing us towards models of learning that meet the needs of every learner?

In our conversations with district leaders and other experts, educators working across different contexts and models consistently highlighted key innovations that offer system “launch points” in six concrete areas critical for equity and resiliency. As practice changes, these innovations represent key launch points for taking bigger, systemic leaps to solve specific challenges.

- 1 Adopting identity-affirming, “tier 1” **instructional approaches that flex to the unique needs of every learner** (including meeting unfinished learning needs).
- 2 Implementing effective capacity-building **family engagement strategies** to build home-school partnerships for learning.

- 3 Pursuing **whole child development** approaches that broaden assessments and support for students’ wellbeing and learning beyond academics.
- 4 Taking advantage of virtual learning to offer **more flexible remote and hybrid school models** for students and families.
- 5 Pursuing **innovative staffing models** that expand teacher time and expertise for students with the highest needs.
- 6 Encouraging educators and content creators to work together to inclusively design and adopt **engaging, rigorous instructional materials that work in personalized, hybrid environments**.

The starting points created during the pandemic are manifold; they are, however, less established and therefore likely unsustainable without proper attention. The question leaders face as they explore them isn’t “how might we invent?” but rather “how will we identify the innovations that are leverage for future work, and encourage our system to deepen implementation, improving and getting better at systematic execution over time?” Tapping into new strengths, and with a focus on authentic, inclusive, and iterative design and improvement that builds upon the hard work of the last year, leaders can convert the “potential” to the possible.

We explore the six consistently identified launch points in the pages that follow, offering stories and examples in action from the Hop, Skip, Leapfrog research. We have also provided a series of start-point resources for teams looking to read more.

As you read each of these, consider the following questions for your own school or system:

- What does the story of this launch point look like in our school or system? What new practices and innovations has our team already undertaken that can help us launch forward?
- What process might we use to leverage new practices to explore deeper, sustained implementation and improvement?

Launch Point 1: Adopting identity-affirming core instructional approaches that flex to the unique needs of every learner (including meeting unfinished learning needs).

Students returning to classrooms in the 2021-2022 school year are projected to have a significant range of academic and non-academic readiness and needs. While the term “learning loss” has been widely used in national policy conversations to describe delays in student progress in aggregate from a system-level standpoint, individual learning experiences during COVID-19 varied considerably. This construct is essentially unhelpful for leaders considering how to move forward with real, individual students. In some cases, students made significant progress against grade-level expectations, perhaps even accelerating beyond. In other cases, students may have lacked access to instruction for key skills or time to develop mastery, essentially moving forward but with gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

Further, across all students, differences in experience have likely affected their connections to, perceptions of safety within, and motivation towards formal schooling. System-level assumptions and measurement focused on the “average” experience will fail to account for critical differences. As assessment expert Scott Marion recently [said](#), “*We have a saying in New England: You can have one foot on a wood stove, and another on a block of ice, and on average you’re pretty comfortable.*”

For these reasons, from an instructional perspective, we must move from an “intervention for some” to a “flexibility for all” mindset. **It is critical that leaders develop systems for understanding each student’s academic and non-academic progress, responding to individual needs and varying levels of finished or unfinished learning to offer personalized learning experiences focused on mastery and whole child development.**

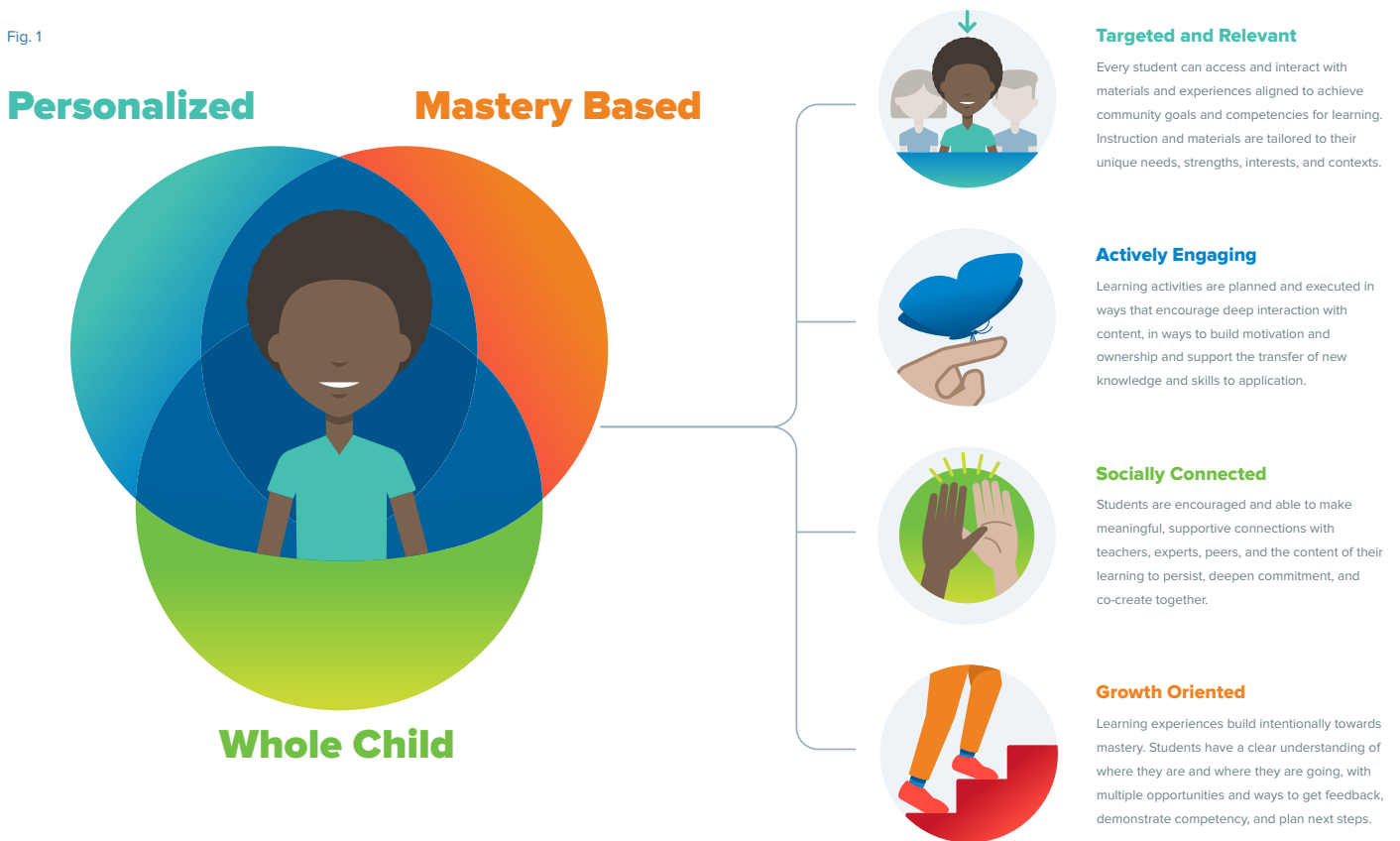
This was true prior to the pandemic; our traditional, group-level systems typically failed those students most in need of support [creating wide variance in academic achievement based on race and income and significant educational disengagement by high school](#). There is a rich practice base that already exists to draw from and, as we documented in the Hop, Skip, Leapfrog toolkit, educators have already [piloted a variety of innovative practices aimed at doing this](#), offering targeted, relevant instruction based on students’ needs, contexts, and identities, increasing active engagement, expanding social connection, and orienting towards growth. (Fig. 1 p.17)

“

I think the way that you get past the deficit-based impact of the ‘learning loss’ narrative and whatnot is by taking a radically asset-based approach. [...] We need to support educators in assuming that no matter what a student has experienced this last year, they are coming in with some assets that are going to help them get back on grade level and achieve high expectations. And it’s on us to figure out how to do that really well.”

— Sarah Johnson, Teaching Lab

Fig. 1



While shorter-term investments in additional tutors and intervention time are helpful measures at this acute stage of the pandemic, there is an urgent mandate for systems to leverage the [core, “tier 1” instructional practices](#) teachers piloted to inform broader change. It is critical that, as we move forward, **we recognize that these efforts to meet individual needs will require more than just adding on to traditional structures.** This will mean developing personalized plans for every child and [organizing staff and resources — from time to quality instructional materials](#) — to meet them in sustainable ways. It will also require [organizing assessment and instruction towards mastery](#), rather than time-based scope and sequence assumptions. It is essential that leaders undertake these changes in ways that meaningfully and authentically increase students’ connection to school and learning, engaging with the unique cultural and personal identities with students and [co-creating](#) solutions with students, families, and teachers.

Resources leaders can explore as they think about leaping further to address unfinished learning:

- TLA’s [Teaching and Learning Practices](#) resource bank offers concrete strategies for ways educators can personalize learning, supporting mastery and whole child development.
- Fordham Flypaper’s [How Any School Can Personalize Learning \(Part I\)](#) explores three common practices teachers can implement to organize for and address individual learning needs.
- TNTP’s [Learning Acceleration](#) guide, which explores specific strategies leaders can use to implement formative practices to improve students’ access to and mastery of grade-level standards.
- The Highlander Institute’s [Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogy Framework](#) is a tool designed to support educators to build awareness, create community, shift cognitive load to students, and build critical consciousness.
- The Teaching Lab’s [Just-In-Time Support Guide](#) offers a brief set of questions educators can use to leverage instructional materials to prioritize untaught or unmastered prerequisite content and intentionally infuse appropriate supports within a lesson.
- Instruction Partners’ [Rethinking Intervention](#) series explores six key takeaways for addressing unfinished learning based on conversations with educators and experts across the field.

Launch Point 2: Effective family engagement¹ strategies to build powerful home-school partnerships for learning.

It is well established that building robust partnerships with students' supports at home (parents, family members, guardians, and other community members) [is an essential and often underdeveloped mechanism for learning and growth](#). Even during a more typical school year, putting in place [systems, structures, and daily strategies](#) that engage learners' home network is a nuanced and ongoing process. As Karen Mapp and Eyal Bergman explore in the [Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#), educators and families must work together in “mutually supportive” ways that foster the learning and growth of students and the schools that support them.

With the transition to learning at home, closures and subsequent remote learning during COVID-19 demonstrated even more clearly how vital home-school connection is to our success as education organizations; in [online environments families must play an even more active role supporting learning activities](#). Further, as schools began to explore how to reopen with safety measures in place, guardians and educators quickly learned how important ongoing [communication and commitment to shared practices](#) across home and school boundaries became to keeping schools open for learning.

Given this, educators in our interviews consistently noted rapid and ongoing investments in family engagement as a critical area for innovation and improvement. These innovations included:

- **Channels and tools for family communication.** Schools reported teacher- and system-level adoption of tools for communicating home. Meriden, CT, invested in [ParentSquare](#) as well as [additional staff to meet multilingual support needs](#). In addition to using channels like YouTube, local television, and Facebook, communities like Ector County, TX, turned to partners like [local Spanish radio stations](#) for weekly updates and information sharing.
- **Practices that encourage bi-directional feedback and dialogue between educators and home.** Districts adopted new survey tools (including in short, text-based forms like [Possip](#) and longer-form tools to solicit deeper perceptions, like [Panorama's Family-School Relationship Survey](#)) to get feedback from parents. Leaders widely reported that working remotely increased parent participation in parent-teacher conferences, town halls, school board meetings, and [listening sessions](#). In Cedar Rapids, IA, leaders used the pandemic as an opportunity to set a [clear common expectation for cadence and content](#) of teacher calls home.

“

When students aren't in school, we're really thinking through how we are communicating. Who's going to speak Spanish on the tech support line? How do we provide support to and connect with parents who don't speak English? Why are we making it more difficult to connect with parents if what we really want is their participation? How do we make it as easy as possible for them to participate? I think parent teacher conferences opened our eyes to the fact that our parents do care, they want to be involved, but they may have to take an hour off of work to come to a parent teacher conference, or they may have to get a ride to the parent teacher conference.”

— Mark Benigni, Superintendent of Meriden Public Schools

¹ For the purposes of this document, we will refer to this work as “family engagement,” assuming the broadest potential use of the term.

- **Strategies that brought families into learning experiences.** Educators used new tools to open their classrooms (virtual or otherwise) to family members. Several districts piloted new [student conferencing](#) and [learning demonstration](#) approaches that brought parents, guardians, and even siblings actively into reflection processes. In Monterey, CA, elementary educators created “[Family STEAM Nights](#),” sending bags of materials home and encouraging families to participate in evening design challenges with their students and teachers.

All of this work translated to families having a greater sense of engagement with school. In a [recent Learning Heroes survey](#), 67% of families agreed they felt “more connected with my child’s day-to-day education now than ever before.” At the same time, this feeling of greater connection to learning didn’t necessarily translate to confidence. The same survey found

that parents are less confident they have a clear understanding of their child’s progress in school. Another survey published by Digital Promise found that [over a third of parents reported weaker relationships](#) with their children’s teachers (especially in older grades).

As our crisis urgency fades, there is still clear and urgent work to be done to capitalize on new capabilities and tap into the true potential of home-school partnerships for learning.

Mapp and Bergman, in a recent report [outlining the opportunity](#) for the PreK-12 sector, describe the challenge this way: “*walk through the door opened by COVID-19 and the antiracist movement and address the often-ignored and unspoken dynamics that prevent the cultivation of effective partnerships between families and educators. We call on the sector to seize this opportunity to move toward a family engagement practice that is liberatory, solidarity-driven, and equity-focused.*”

Resources leaders can explore as they think about leaping further:

- [DualCapacity.org](#) is a community website that explores the Dual Capacity Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships and offers ideas for how educators can put it into practice across the United States.
- [Learning Heroes](#) informs and equip parents to best support their children’s educational and developmental success. The organization offers a variety of resources leaders can use, including parent-teacher planning tools and student readiness checks that can be used at home.
- [PowerMyLearning](#) is a national nonprofit that focuses on activating the “exponential power” that occurs when the trio of teachers, students, and families collaborate on the same learning goals, offering a framework for family, student, and teacher engagement as well as tools like family playlists, which are designed to reinforce grade-level content by engaging families in the learning process at home.
- [TLA Problem of Practice: Building a Strong Foundation for Self-Direction in Remote Learning](#) is a guide for teachers that explores concrete strategies for building independent skills, engaging families and guardians as learning partners, and fostering whole child support when working at a distance.
- [TLA Teaching and Learning Strategies: Deepening Family Engagement and Involvement](#) is a resource bank of strategies used in schools to make students’ learning more socially connected.

Launch Point 3: Pursuing whole child development approaches that broaden assessments of and support for students' wellbeing and learning beyond academics.

While strong educators have always sought to support the unique needs of students, the stress and trauma experienced within and across education communities affected student wellbeing in a variety of developmental domains (academic and beyond), which [research has shown significantly affects readiness for and engagement in learning](#). Educators had to think comprehensively about understanding and addressing student needs, recognizing the ways in which “whole child” approaches could help ensure students had the holistic support needed to be ready to learn.

Leaders tested a variety of measures for child and adult learners in their systems:

- **Creating consistent, dedicated time and resources for non-academic learning and check-ins.** Nearly every district we interviewed implemented weekly, if not [daily, time](#) for explicit social emotional engagement. They also adopted [common materials](#) to guide action during this time.
- **Investing in ongoing “care structures.”** Leaders piloted new [advisory models](#) (oftentimes supported by the presence of limited-size class cohorts and online check-ins) as well as staffing structures that assigned staff to act as an individual [“point-person”](#) for a group of students.
- **Collecting and responding to data on non-academic perceptions and needs.** Districts used surveys as well as [structured, ongoing touchpoints](#) with homes to collect data on academic, social, health, and housing needs. They used these data to deploy targeted supports.
- **Tapping into deep, ongoing partnerships to offer wrap-around supports.** In addition to increasing their own offerings, such as [universal meal programs](#) and [staff social emotional programs](#), districts turned to partners to offer more robust support. For example, in Monterey, CA, leaders [worked across four partners](#) to launch daily learning and care centers for students with housing instability. In Austin, TX, leaders [partnered with the housing authority](#) to map and amplify wifi access as well as local arts nonprofits to offer students online enrichment.

“

Prior to the pandemic, we already had the partnerships, but it was more like we were two different organizations. [...] Now we're much more like we're a team. The communication is much better. The follow-up is much stronger.”

— Dr. P.K. Diffenbaugh, Superintendent, Monterey Peninsula Unified School District

All of these strategies offer launch points for developing comprehensive student supports beyond academics. However, significant work will need to be done to deepen structures, commitments, and partnerships to sustain this work in the longer term. Specifically, leaders spoke of two big challenges:

- Whole child supports need to be viewed, invested in, and integrated with instructional strategies. This will require adopting a more comprehensive view that the Learning Policy Institute and Turnaround for Children refer to as [“whole child design principles”](#) which systematically support “equity for all students and the development of the full set of skills, competencies, and mindsets that young people need to live and thrive in their diverse communities.”
- To make good on the commitment to whole child development, leaders will need to articulate and be held accountable to a broader range of outcomes than more narrow academic measures. The pressure to see quick gains academically (particularly given worries about “learning loss”) might threaten to overwhelm this broader focus and commitment.

Moving forward, systems will need to elevate and build from these launch points, holding tightly to their broader visions and investing integrally in whole child approaches alongside academics.

Resources leaders can explore as they think about leaping further:

- [Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action](#) is a report published by the Learning Policy Institute and Turnaround for Children, in partnership with the Forum for Youth Investment and in association with the SoLD Alliance, that explains the science behind how children learn and develop and offers Guiding Principles for Whole Child Design.
- TLA [Practices for Student Support Programming](#) is a resource bank of examples of strategies used in schools to deploy comprehensive student supports.
- The [Turnaround for Children Toolbox](#) is a website created by Turnaround USA offering science-grounded ideas and resources to “empower educators to embed an equitable whole child purpose into our education system.”
- Transcend Education offers a [series of different tools](#) for school and classroom designers, including a [Mental Health Toolkit](#).



Launch Point 4: Taking advantage of virtual learning to offer more flexible remote and hybrid school models for students and families.

Prior to the pandemic, [less than one percent of K-12](#) public students studied virtually; at its height, over 95% of American schools were working remotely, and over 50% of students were still working at least partially online through the end of the 2020-2021 school year. While much has been made of the challenges of virtual learning, families and educators remain optimistic about the potential of virtual models to support their needs, now and in the future.

An April 2021 [survey of parents by National Parent Union](#) found that 61% of parents surveyed would choose fully remote or hybrid models for their children at the time of data collection. Further, it found 58% would favor allowing parents to choose between remote and in-person models in the coming school year. This trend appears to be more pronounced [for non-white families](#) and is even higher in post-secondary schools. There is also a high likelihood that secondary experience in virtual instruction will be critical to post-secondary readiness. [An April 2021 survey](#) found significant optimism and interest in online learning models from both students and faculty in higher education settings, with 73% of student participants indicating a desire to take coursework online in the future.

This interest is not driven solely by COVID-19 fears. In the wake of a year of disruption and exploration, families indicated significant support for broader changes to schools. The same [survey of parents by National Parent Union](#) found 55% of parents agree with the following statement: “Schools should be focused on rethinking how we educate students, coming up with new ways to teach children moving forward as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.” A [similar study](#) from the same time period found that parents also believe the influx of federal support for pandemic recovery “opens the door to bold changes” in public education, a finding that cuts across demographic lines, especially with Black and Latinx families.

Given parent, student, and staff interests, nearly all participating districts hoped to offer a hybrid or remote option for the coming year (one district, Dallas ISD, has [launched a hybrid school for students in grades four through six](#)). Beyond safety considerations and meeting demand, interviews highlighted numerous ways leaders had seen many potential benefits for using virtual learning within their contexts:

- **Increasing credit-bearing learning beyond the boundaries of local resources.** Opening up virtual learning opportunities can allow students to tap into experiences and expertise beyond the “walls” of their school or district. For some students, this means being able to have [access to specific advanced coursework that isn’t offered at their school](#). For
- **Offering greater instructional flexibility to support learners with diverse needs.** Online modalities can support greater access, flexibility, and convenience for learners, especially those who might need extra time to process, additional representations and examples of materials, or access to assistive technologies. Indeed, throughout the pandemic, we were able to identify many ways in which educators were able to [target individual needs](#) to offer greater flexibility in pacing, access to materials, and choice-making.
- **Creating opportunities for internships, work, and other activities during traditional school hours.** Districts expressed a desire to explore how more flexible schedules might open up opportunities for career-based learning or enrichment, typically inaccessible to students learning during the school week. For example, some districts such as Hopkins Public Schools in MN were beginning to explore how to use [hybrid approaches](#) that maximize in-person learning time on hands-on activities and relationship building, providing students with greater flexibility to fit virtual learning around other activities.
- **Decreasing commuting time to and from school to support attendance and increased time for learning, especially for students in rural areas and for students who may have responsibilities at home.** It’s well-documented that school commutes often compete with time for students’ sleep and exercise, but opportunities to learn from home opened eyes to how time spent commuting could be used more effectively to support equity and engagement. One California superintendent noted that student attendance, [supported by additional check-ins from site-level team members](#), actually improved during the pandemic. Some families, especially parents with jobs that conflict with school schedules, found it easier to get their students online from home.
- **Protecting vulnerable students from risks such as peer pressure, bullying, and racism at school.** It has been [widely reported](#) that the move to learning online and hybrid learning has had [protective benefits for some students](#) who experienced school as stressful, if not hostile environments, based upon identity or social pressures. Giving these students opportunities to learn online, or in smaller

groups through hybrid experiences with a deep focus on relationship building, [could be helpful](#). These opportunities do not necessarily need to be full-time. For example, a charter school in New Mexico developed a homework “help line” during the afternoon, which allowed learners to sign into video chats with teachers staffing those hours on demand. They found this approach reduced students’ stress about asking for additional support in front of peers.

- **Offering flexibility to families with non-aligned schedules.** Districts consistently cited the ways that online learning allowed them to bring parents virtually into instruction through conferencing and online meetings. Looking forward, many wondered how offering more flexible learning schedules could allow parents working jobs outside of traditional nine-to-five work hours, or who need to travel for work, increased time with their children during the school week.

Given all of this, districts and experts we interviewed were highly reflective about the ways remote learning had worked well, or not, over the course of the school year. Many noted that some students had done better in virtual environments, and they were looking at data to understand why. Many had also begun to explore ways to improve their remote instruction, creating more stable virtual and hybrid enrollment opportunities (e.g., enrollment that would last the whole year rather than

shorter periods) as well as to articulate boundaries for eligibility (e.g., stipulating that students would need to demonstrate competency in learning online or achieve benchmarks to stay enrolled).

Districts’ options for doing so, however, remain in flux as they make sense of demand and resources available, as well as respond to changing district and state-level policies. In response to quality concerns, several states, [such as NJ](#), have moved to bar districts from offering fully or partially remote opportunities. Concerns are not unfounded; [pre-pandemic student performance in online-only charter schools \(often highly independent, under-networked, and under-connected in nature\) consistently lagged behind that of traditional schools](#). Absent greater understanding of high-quality practices, access to expertise, and networked learning to share lessons and models, the sector could likely recreate the deficits of the cyber charter models that have failed students previously.

Put together, the potential for meeting families’ needs and exploiting the opportunities virtual learning presents is enormous, and the last year of pandemic response has opened eyes and built skills for beginning that process. However, **there is significant work to be done to accelerate K-12 leaders’ understanding of the [significant knowledge base for high-quality online learning](#) (something few leaders had exposure to while quickly standing up remote models) as well as explore how to leverage the flexibility of virtual learning while mitigating known risks and pushing the boundaries of practice innovation.**

Resources leaders can explore as they think about leaping further:

- TLA’s [Driving Quality in Remote Learning: A framework for research-informed remote experiences for K-12 learners](#) is a review of the academic literature on distance and online learning that offers takeaways for improving instruction and support for learners.
- TLA Problems of Practice Series: [Implementing Quality Remote Learning](#) and [Strategies for Remote and Hybrid Learning Contexts](#).
- The Hunt Institute offers a series of simple policy recommendations for leaders interested in offering [Virtual Academies](#).
- Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute’s [Ultimate Guides to Online Learning](#) offers a series of guides for students, parents, teachers, administrators, and school boards on online learning.

Launch Point 5: Pursuing innovative staffing models that deploy and expand teacher time and expertise for students with the highest needs.

Access to an effective, expert teacher is positively tied to a variety of [academic](#) and [behavioral](#) student outcomes. Coupled with the fact that they account for [80 percent of a typical school budget](#), staff are arguably schools' most critical resource. Yet, how educator time is allocated is typically only bluntly associated with individual students needs based upon static classroom assignments or one-off intervention assignments. Responding to COVID-19 spurred a variety of staffing innovation launch points:

- **Assigning the most experienced teachers and intensive support to students with the highest needs.** Site leaders used flexibilities during COVID to have paraprofessional staff oversee non-blended learning station rotation models, allowing expert [teachers to work one-on-one with students](#). [Interventionists](#) and [tutors](#) were deployed remotely to allow them to spend more time tutoring and offering expert support.
- **Working in teams.** In order to meet a broader array of student learning needs, teachers worked together in [multi-grade](#) and [multi-classroom configurations](#). This allowed students to work in groups targeted to specific needs with greater efficiency as well as to decrease planning and instructional delivery modes. In some cases, teachers organized into [cross-content area teams](#) to enable interdisciplinary planning and greater collaboration.
- **Redeploying non-academic staff, from [district personnel to site-level classified staff](#), to meet needs.** In their efforts to ensure “every child is known,” Nashville, TN, leaders mobilized [thousands of adults in different roles across the system](#) to conduct ongoing, weekly check-ins on every student, using data about the student’s academic progress and wellbeing to inform differentiated supports deployed by the district and school referral teams.
- **Reorganizing district teams to create proximity to the classroom.** Central offices collapsed traditionally siloed planning and coaching teams, assigning [staff to work directly with teachers](#) to rapidly problem solve.



We needed to think holistically about the staff at the school and who can serve in this role. Our goal was to take all the students at the school as our numerator and grow the denominator as big as possible.”

— Dr. Keri Randolph, Executive Officer of Strategic State, Federal and Philanthropic Investments at Metro Nashville Public Schools

- **Tapping into developing teachers for additional support.** Districts with teacher residency partners, fellowships, and paraprofessionals used these staff to provide an additional layer of individualized support [through models like Brooklyn Lab’s success coaching](#).
- **Sharing talent across district lines.** In one very entrepreneurial example, leaders in Meriden, CT, [partnered across union and district lines](#) to engage in a “teacher swap,” which ensured schools had their staffing needs met and also allowed students to cross-enroll in district AP classes.

These different approaches for deploying time have opened educators’ eyes to how they might work, differently and together, to better support students. As students return in greater numbers to physical campuses, **leaders will need to avoid a return to “staffing as normal,” exploring how these new staffing models can increase students’ access to the experts they need to make progress.**

Resources leaders can explore as they think about leaping further:

- TLA Supporting Systems and Structures Examples: [Staffing Models](#) is a resource bank of examples of strategies used in schools to deploy teachers and other staff to support personalization and wraparound supports.
- [Opportunity Culture](#), an initiative of Public Impact, explores the ways schools can “extend the reach of excellent teachers & their teams to more students, for more pay, within budget.”
- FutureEd and the Education Counsel’s whitepaper, [Teaching Innovation: New Staffing Strategies Inspired by the Pandemic](#), explores how a variety of schools pursued new staffing structures during COVID-19.



Launch Point 6: Encouraging educators and content creators to work together to inclusively design and adopt engaging, rigorous instructional materials that work in personalized, hybrid environments.

It is well recognized that quality curriculum and instructional materials are critical levers in improving teaching and learning. Research shows that putting great resources in the “[hands of teachers can have significant positive impacts on student achievement](#).” Yet, even pre-pandemic adoption of these materials was often hampered by a [variety of barriers](#), from availability and cost to challenges collecting use data to assess effectiveness, which limited teachers adopting these materials with fidelity. In TLA’s [own research](#), educators seeking to personalize learning (i.e., provide instruction that effectively targeted individual needs, strengths, interests, and identities) reported that they struggled to use available materials due to issues such as a lack of digital formats and interoperability, inflexible scopes and sequences, and unengaging design that often lacked cultural relevance for learners. Researchers also noted that efforts to rate the quality of comprehensive materials did not effectively extend to digital versions and tools.

The rapid adoption of online materials in spring 2020 and the 2020-2021 school year significantly disrupted the way many teachers were using existing materials in their classrooms. In addition to adopting new resources, teachers and learners turned to online management systems to reorganize learning for remote and hybrid environments. This included:

- Adopting channels for content delivery, some novel, such as new adaptive learning products, and some decidedly not, such as [local television](#)
- Rolling out [common central materials](#) and [curation formats](#) on new learning platforms and management systems, sometimes for the first time
- Bringing together professional communities of teachers to [collaborate and plan](#) for digitally delivered standards-based instruction
- Exploring new, more engaging models for material use, such as [interdisciplinary](#) and [inquiry](#) learning
- Providing [materials directly to students](#) during self-paced and self-directed learning

[Analysis of materials usage during the pandemic](#) pointed to increased use of standards-aligned materials as well as decreased use of teacher-created ones. Leaders reflected in conversations that central efforts to deliver curricular units

[helped focus and integrate instructional priorities](#) (such as scaffolds for students learning english, social emotional learning, and culturally responsive and sustaining learning) as well as improve materials with feedback from teachers.

The adoption of new practices and infrastructure presents a significant launch point for more rapid adoption of effective standards-aligned materials. However, many of the materials we have now are not necessarily the materials we need in technology-supported systems orienting towards personalization, culturally relevant application, and mastery-based measurement. Many of the materials are designed for analog, predominantly group-level instruction in in-person environments. They are not intended to be modified or adjusted for individual learners or hybrid contexts. Materials leader Kristi Ransick also reflected increasing recognition that materials creators need to develop resources in ways that allow educators to leverage their professional expertise and judgement to adjust to in-the-moment needs: *“Over the last five or six years, there’s been a shift towards helping teachers think about how to adapt materials for the kids that are in front of them, which developers can never do because they’re having to sort of design for everybody and all implementations.”*

Additionally, within the context of remote learning, parents, students, and educators also have a wealth of new experiences to inform the next wave of materials. Definitions of “usability” have necessarily expanded to include student-directed and parent-supported needs. How will we learn from these experiences to ensure every educator, learner, and guardian have the engaging resources they can use in their contexts?

Put together, there is work to do to make existing and developing materials that are rigorously aligned to standards more usable, engaging, and responsive to the needs of learners as well as the people helping them use them, including teachers and families. There is also a significant opportunity to leverage the power of integrated assessments and data about usage to understand how materials are used and how effective they are for different students in different emerging contexts.

To move forward, materials creators should partner actively with teachers, families, students, and implementation support partners in [inclusive processes to research and develop](#) the resources that can be implemented with fidelity in ways that are deeply engaging and differentiating to the needs of every learner.

Resources leaders can explore as they think about leaping further:

- EdReports' [Resources to Support the Use of High-Quality Instructional Materials](#) offers a collection of resources to advocate for and guide decision making around the use of high-quality instructional materials within the context of COVID-19.
- EFMATH+ [Developing Education Products with Equity at the Center](#) is a report that explores how education product development teams can work together to create instructional materials that center the needs of Black and Latinx educators and students from the beginning and throughout the R&D process.
- TLA Problems of Practice Series: [Open Education Resources and How to Use Them](#); [Utilizing Open Educational Resources to personalize lessons and assessments](#); [Professional development support for creating and implementing OER](#).



Conclusion: Pathways Forward For Making Change

“

A danger in all of this is that we frame it in a way that causes everybody to say, ‘this is too overwhelming. You’re talking about blowing the whole system up.’ And I don’t think we have to blow the whole system up to put the focus back on learning at the classroom level.”

— Kristi Ransick, Consultant and Materials Expert

Core to TLA’s Hop, Skip, Leapfrog project is the belief that schools and systems exist in different contexts; “leaping forward,” or “leapfrogging” for that matter, will require individual leaders to identify their own leading edges and articulate concrete means for advancing towards models that emphasize personalization, mastery, and whole child development. The examples and innovation opportunities we’ve highlighted in this paper seek to represent the heterogeneity and diversity of approaches and means of making progress.

How will leaders use their new strengths and make progress leaping from launch points? While by no means exhaustive, here are few of the high-leverage actions we’ve learned about from talking to leaders:

Maintain dual-focus on the urgent and the important. As they seek to develop and execute their return plans for the 2021-2022 school year, leaders face many competing priorities. Some of these are highly urgent; teams are delivering summer support and expending time-limited funds through immediate investments such as hiring tutors, offering standalone social emotional programming, and addressing continued safety concerns. At the same time, leaders must also hold a longer-

term view that allows them to address the important, deep system inequities and inefficiencies that were present prior to COVID. These challenges clamor for more coherent, sustained, inclusively-designed, and dramatic improvement and innovation. It is necessary that teams, and the providers, funders, policy-makers, and other entities supporting them, recognize that these competing demands might require different actions. Responding to short-term needs cannot be a replacement for the long-term commitment to act on what we’ve learned during the pandemic. Moving forward requires holding and communicating a dual-focus.

Take the time to inclusively develop and adopt a community-wide vision for teaching and learning. Our interviews with leaders consistently pointed to one condition that helped leaders build common understanding and make decisions amongst competing priorities and the change-related fatigue of the pandemic: a focused vision that clearly defined outcomes for student learning. Whether in the form of a [graduate profile](#) or a [long-term strategic](#) vision, district leaders could return to foundational documents to make the case for staying the course when challenges got hard or for introducing new aligned innovations. The same tools have been crucial to decision-making as districts develop plans for federal relief spending.



Something that we had implemented right before we had to close schools and move to remote learning on March 13th last year was our D11 graduate profile. That goes into the wider competencies that we're promising our community we're developing in learners. It's situated both in the Colorado essential skills that our state provides us and our standards, but also in job outlook studies of the skills that our students need post K-12. When you think of time management and risk management, those were things that our students were struggling to demonstrate because we hadn't provided enough opportunities in our traditional settings for that. So we're telling the community to pay attention to this graduate profile because it has all of the pieces learners need to be developing."

— Nicole Ottmer, Personalized Learning Systems Coordinator, Colorado Springs District 11

Pick the process that helps your district make progress in your context. For some, this may mean investing in larger-scale innovation and strategic planning processes; for others, it might mean tackling small steps forward, iteratively, over time. Both are legitimate pathways for making change, but leaders must choose a pathway, adopt a process that fits, and make the approach explicit to their communities.

- TLA has designed a tool to help teams tackle big challenges in doable, sustainable ways. The [Real-Time Redesign Toolkit](#) is a free and open resource leaders can use to develop pilot programs through an inclusive and rapid process that focuses on targeted improvement in support of more equitable and resilient teaching and learning.
- For communities interested in exploring complete redesign, there are numerous partners positioned to help you do that work. One resource for teams that provides a good overview of redesign aims and processes is Transcend Education's [Fundamentals of Your School Design Blueprint](#).



Appendix: About the Hop, Skip, Leapfrog Project

Hop, Skip, Leapfrog is a research project of The Learning Accelerator conducted between February and May 2021. Through interviews with a diverse group of school system leaders and subject-matter experts, the TLA team sought to explore the ways districts pursued practice innovation and improvement during the COVID-19 pandemic to meet the needs of every student. We asked districts to share examples of practice improvement and innovation, as well as to reflect on the shifts to systems, supports, structures, and processes that made these practices possible.

All project resources, including our Toolkit, this paper, blogs, and other stories are openly licensed and free; they can be accessed at hopskipleapfrog.org.

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