

3 Principles for Assessments During Instructional Recovery and Beyond

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School as we've known it has changed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically shifted the way leaders, teachers, students, and families experience teaching and learning. As leaders plan to support teachers and students now and during instructional recovery, learning loss—and how to address it—is top of mind.

The COVID-19 pandemic will amplify normal learning loss.

Between natural learning loss as well as unfinished teaching and unfinished learning due to a disrupted school year, leaders and teachers across the country are preparing to address amplified learning loss. They are also recognizing and preparing for the *compounding impact* on students who are experiencing increased economic challenges, are from racially marginalized communities, have inequitable access to quality distance learning, are multi-language learners, have learning and attention differences, and/or are immunocompromised.

We at ANet have long recognized that our most vulnerable communities have the least access to equitable instruction, and the pandemic has brought this to the forefront. As districts plan for instructional recovery, they should not be aiming for a quick fix that returns students to a status quo that already had too many students inadequately engaged in learning. Instead, we have an opportunity to try to create more equitable systems that address the underlying issues of racism and marginalization. It will take a strategic approach of leveraging standards-aligned materials and the appropriate assessments to mitigate the loss and begin to eliminate the preexisting gap.

Strategic use of assessments can be key in identifying and responding to learning loss. But what should assessments look like right now?

In our previous white paper, *Teaching Comes First*, we shared the key considerations for using assessments to drive instruction: **volume**, **purpose**, and **quality**. These considerations are still essential in today's context.

Building on this work, and in recognition of today's new challenges and exacerbated inequities, it is more important than ever to focus on the *purpose* of assessments—to serve children and families with the best information to accelerate learning.

“This crisis will need to change the way we think about the use of data and grades, and center it around what teachers and students need to make progress and have ownership over learning.”

Danielle Eisenberg
Senior Director, Research & Evaluation
KIPP Foundation

Today we must be even more intentional about the role of data and assessments in service of student learning. Without a commitment to and an understanding of equitable instruction—including an acknowledgment of the ways racism and bias can show up in the classroom—the information from assessments can be used in ways that can actually magnify existing problems. Now, it’s more important than ever that leaders have informed opinions about data and clear plans for assessments.

We know that right now, some of the most important data for leaders is *not* student summative scores or class grades. Qualitative data is becoming even more critically important. Leaders, for instance, are paying close attention to class attendance. They want to know which students are signing on to virtual classes and how students are engaging in virtual sessions.

“Now more than ever it’s essential that leaders have a strong foundation in assessment literacy so that they are able to make strong decisions about the data they leverage, grounded in purpose of each assessment and how it can inform instruction.”

Assessment Project Manager
Large Urban School District

As we regroup in today’s essential focus on *purpose*, we must consider how to implement effective assessments that will capture the data most meaningful to students and their families, and the educators who support them.

We recommend three guiding principles for establishing a strong assessment system.

These principles will ensure you have critical data at your fingertips this spring as well as when planning to address amplified learning loss next school year.

Our guiding principles are applicable across instructional delivery scenarios: from long-distance learning to schools opening as they historically have, for leaders just getting started in planning, and for those beginning to implement instructional recovery plans. Aligning your systems to these principles will ensure you have the right data to adjust and respond to changing realities throughout the school year.

1

Establish a **tiered approach** to collecting data

2

Prioritize data close to **instruction**

3

Use data to increase **student and family engagement**

For each principle, we've provided a description and rationale as well as an opportunity to engage further through a set of reflection questions and recommended action steps. Additionally, we have provided two sample resources—a sample map for data review and a reflection & action plan—to support you in applying these principles to your assessment strategy for the coming school year.

Principle 1: Establish a tiered approach to collecting data

Start by identifying what prioritized data you need for *all*, *some*, and *a few* of your students.

This work starts with diagnosis and self-reflection. Begin by assessing what you already know about the student experience and your team's blind spots. Consider, for example, academic achievement, social-emotional needs, attendance, and frequency of family communication. Centering on the experience and perspective of your students, especially the most marginalized, can help ensure that their needs drive your planning.

"A tiered approach across academic and social-emotional domains allows equity gaps to be addressed systematically and enables schools to focus on cultivating the full potential of every child."

Caroline Racine Gilles, Ph.D.
Executive Director, Integrated Supports and
Assessment for Learning
Madison Metropolitan School District

A tiered approach will limit the likelihood of being overwhelmed by data and will allow you to have the data you need at various levels to set and reflect on priorities.

Tiered data collection will help teachers and leaders provide additional supports and resources to students who need it most.¹ It enables schools to live out their commitments to equity by providing an efficient and effective process for identifying student needs early, and it presents the opportunity to dedicate the most resources to the students at the greatest risk—an approach with universal benefits. With a tiered system, consider the grain size of data that is most helpful in supporting instructional decisions at various cycle lengths (e.g. quarterly, monthly, weekly).

Finally, it's important to note that in practice, this should *not* mean our most marginalized students are given the most tests. And at *no point* should data be used to serve as a gatekeeper to grade-level content. In principles 2 and 3, we'll discuss the importance of shorter cycle assessments and collecting data for feedback as opposed to evaluation. When applying this principle, collecting data for *some* or *a few* students is not about administering a greater number of

¹Miller, Patwa, and Chafouleas. "Using Direct Behavior Rating--Single Item Scales to Assess Student Behavior within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support." *Journal of Special Education Leadership* 27.2 (2014): 76-85.

assessments but looking at information about their strengths and areas of need with greater frequency. This may include analyzing both qualitative and quantitative information to make a plan for how to better engage and support these students.

Engage Further: Apply Principle 1

Below is an example of how to apply this principle with baseline data as you plan for the upcoming school year. The chart is designed to show how leaders can prioritize data from *all*, *some*, and *a few* students as they make critical decisions about instructional program design and resource allocation. Just as important as the sources of data and assessment are the reflection questions and sample leader actions provided.

Looking at data for *all* students:

DATA and ASSESSMENT	REFLECT	TAKE ACTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom attendance and participation data from any virtual coursework they completed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do our students have the necessary prerequisite knowledge to access upcoming grade level content? What specific strengths and areas of need do we notice? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Think expansively about how to adjust in-person or remote class schedules to address students' needs from the data. <p>Consider giving students more time on core academic content, as needed. And ensure it is done '<i>just in time</i>' as opposed to a blanket review.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A short diagnostic or screener that focuses on major learnings from prior grades or observes for reading ability and provides specific information about student strengths and areas of need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there ways we can adjust school schedules, staffing, or resource allocation to better meet student and family needs? 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A survey or inventory for all students on conditions for learning, sources of resilience, and/or overall well-being.² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What social-emotional priorities are emerging for students, and how are we equipping educators to respond? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine the key social-emotional priorities for your classroom, school, or district. Identify school support staff in charge of addressing social-emotional priorities (as well as the process of outside referrals) and create a plan to revisit quarterly. Outline professional learning, and support your staff needs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An engagement survey that is accessible to all families, including those who don't have internet access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are our students who need more support? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify focus students based on results. Set goals for each group of students to revisit quarterly.

Looking at data for *some* students:

DATA and ASSESSMENT	REFLECT	TAKE ACTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For some students whose diagnostic results indicated they were furthest from grade level standards, administer a foundational literacy or math skills diagnostic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there other foundational needs to be aware of? • What targeted instructional resources can we provide? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocate instructional resources (teachers, technology, tutoring, books, etc.) to accelerate their progress. • Leverage interventionists to support building foundational skills.

Looking at data for *a few* students:

² Having universal mental health screening in schools is increasingly called for--and is increasingly critical in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bear in mind that implementing a mental health screener goes beyond simply assessing students' mental health. It requires putting in place the right organizational structures and protocols for how data is analyzed and how students are referred to mental health providers both inside and outside the building. The example in the above table is intended to prompt thinking and discussion around the application of Principle 1 and some of the nuances of collecting data for *all*, *some*, and *a few* students, and it may not fully capture the range of complexities districts will need to consider when implementing universal mental health screening.

For further reading on universal health screening: Sicheloff, E. R., Bradley, W. J., & Flory, K. (2017). Universal Behavioral/Emotional Health Screening in Schools: Overview and Feasibility. Report on emotional & behavioral disorders in youth, 17(2), 32–38; Humphrey, N. & Wigelsworth, M. (2016). Making the case for universal school-based mental health screening. Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, EarlyView. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2015.1120051>; Dowdy, Furlong, Raines, Boverly, Kauffman, Kamphaus, Dever, Price & Murdock (2015) Enhancing School-Based Mental Health Services With a Preventive and Promotive Approach to Universal Screening for Complete Mental Health, Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 25:2-3, 178-197, DOI: 10.1080/10474412.2014.929951.

DATA and ASSESSMENT	REFLECT	TAKE ACTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For a few students who may be most at-risk because social-emotional, attendance, and academic data indicate they were greatly impacted by COVID-19, administer a more holistic needs assessment, such as an interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there other supports, social-emotional resources, or engagement or connection opportunities that students need? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure students have access to any mental health supports that may be necessary. (This requires a tight partnership with family and counselors.) Allocate additional staff to connect with students who are not engaging in virtual or in-person learning. Consider dividing up teachers' responsibilities so some focus on planning and delivering core instruction while others focus on student engagement and connection.

As a reminder when implementing this principle: Data should never serve as a gatekeeper to grade-level content, and using a tiered approach to data collection should not mean our most marginalized students are given the most tests. Our sample action plan--provided at the end--outlines how you might apply this principle in order to more frequently reflect on and adjust for the needs of your most at-risk students.

Principle 2: Prioritize data close to instruction

Ensure every assessment given and data report analyzed connects to a clear action a teacher or leader can take to support student learning.

Ask yourself, “Can a teacher use this next week?” If not, consider if the assessment is worth giving. Shorter cycle formative assessments enable teachers to be more responsive to students’ needs and provide “time of need” data to make targeted decisions when shifting between virtual and in-person instructional delivery models.

If your school or district has already adopted a high-quality curriculum: good news! With a high-quality curriculum, you’ll likely have a more efficient path in prioritizing data close to instruction as these materials often provide short-cycle, embedded assessments. Beyond the added lift it provides to teachers who would otherwise need to identify their own checkpoints or spend time adjusting materials, curriculum-embedded assessments can make it easier for teachers to respond to students’ needs by providing guidance on how to adjust lessons based on the assessment results.

The primary goal of assessments and data should be to identify students’ needs expediently and provide them with the targeted support they need.

Every minute will count as leaders and teachers try to respond to amplified learning loss. While lengthy and overly complex diagnostic tools that take weeks to sort through may be a distraction, high-quality instructional interims that are reflective of the demands of the standards may continue to be an important part of your assessment system. These can serve as an anchor to revisit quarterly as schools shift between the realities of in-person instruction and distance learning. This data can be especially useful for leaders seeking to make programmatic decisions about scheduling, staffing, and resource allocation with a focus on instructional planning and getting students to grade level versus going backwards.

“The biggest impact happens with ‘short-cycle’ formative assessment, which takes place not every six to ten weeks but every six to ten minutes, or even every six to ten seconds.”

Dylan Wiliam
Teacher, Education Researcher and Writer
Embedded Formative Assessment

Engage Further: Apply Principle 2

Reflect

- How are students performing relative to grade-level expectations right now?
- How can you strengthen your approach to reach more students regardless of the instructional delivery model?
- What type of instructional support is needed in order for students to be successful with grade level content? Where might these supports be found within the materials teachers are using?

Take Action

- Train teachers to use diagnostic data in fluency or phonics to provide explicit instruction, and progress monitor students' foundational skills in literacy. Or use short math quizzes every other week to identify students' mastery of prerequisite standards required for accessing standards learning in upcoming lessons. Leverage that data to determine what topics will need to be remediated for the whole group, in small groups, or through one-on-one feedback conferences between teachers and students.
 - For an example of what this might look like beyond curriculum-embedded options, consider the Louisiana Department of Education's Eureka remediation toolbox, which was designed in alignment with the Eureka math curriculum.
- Support your staff in using regular checks for understanding throughout the week to understand how students are progressing with grade level content. This does not have to be a formal quiz or test; open-ended tasks and classwork assignments can be a great way to gauge student understanding. In a remote setting, consider having students record their thinking using a voice recorder on a phone or app such as Wixie and share with their teacher.³
 - For example, the CKLA ELA curriculum provides an easy bridge between assessment and materials. Throughout the Skills Strand units, there are periodic opportunities to assess critical foundational literacy skills and Pause Points that lay out a clear path for teachers to address misunderstandings that emerge within their existing instructional materials.

³ Larry Ferlazzo outlines this suggestion in an April 2020 article in EdWeek. With the recognition that COVID-19 "amplifies the inequities in social determinants of health outcomes that render the African American community more susceptible to the negative outcomes of any crisis," he offers four ways to keep students connected to the "space, community, and concept of school" through four instructional strategies. (Ferlazzo, L. (2020). Four Ways to Support African American Students Through the COVID-19 Emergency. *Education Week Teacher*. http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2020/04/four_ways_to_support_african-american_students_through_the_covid-19_emergency.html)

Principle 3: Use data to increase student and family engagement

During the period of school closures, some students will have faced economic hardships or emotional trauma. It is essential that a strong assessment system take into account students' emotional health and wellbeing. Assessments that evaluate students and are used to determine which students get access to grade level content could have a negative impact on students' self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and engagement in school. In contrast, assessments that are used instructionally to determine students' strengths and areas of need—and put them on the path to accessing grade-level content—will be an essential instructional tool for teachers as well as parents.

Focus on feedback rather than formal assessment.

Rather than using assessments to assign a grade to students or to determine rigid groupings that may prevent students from accessing grade level content, use assessment data to keep students and families engaged and connected.

Prioritize using assessments to provide feedback to students so they stay connected to their teachers. Use assessments to engage parents by providing clear and succinct information about their child's progress and ideas for how to support at home.

“What we need now is data that does two things:

1- Gives families a line of sight into how their students are doing relative to grade level content.

2 - Gives teachers a line of sight into how they can supports students instructionally so they can be successful with grade level content.”

Jill Cowart
Assistant Superintendent of Academic Content
Louisiana Department of Education

If you need a refresher, use the chart below to reground in the elements of strong feedback:⁴

⁴ Drawn from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's *Assessment Framework*.

Elements of Strong Feedback

- Timely** Delivered close enough to the completion of the assignment to feel relevant.
- Specific** Feedback is non-judgmental and targeted to an area of recent learning. It is clear and actionable.
- Consistent** It builds on past feedback by acknowledging where students have or have not progressed.
- Engaging** It builds a shared understanding of high-quality work (e.g. sharing exemplar responses or rubrics), and in doing so it supports an investment in why high-quality work matters.

Engage Further: Apply Principle 3

Reflect

- How connected do your most marginalized students feel to their school community? Are there ways to strengthen that connection?
- Are students aware of their strengths relative to grade level expectation?

Take Action

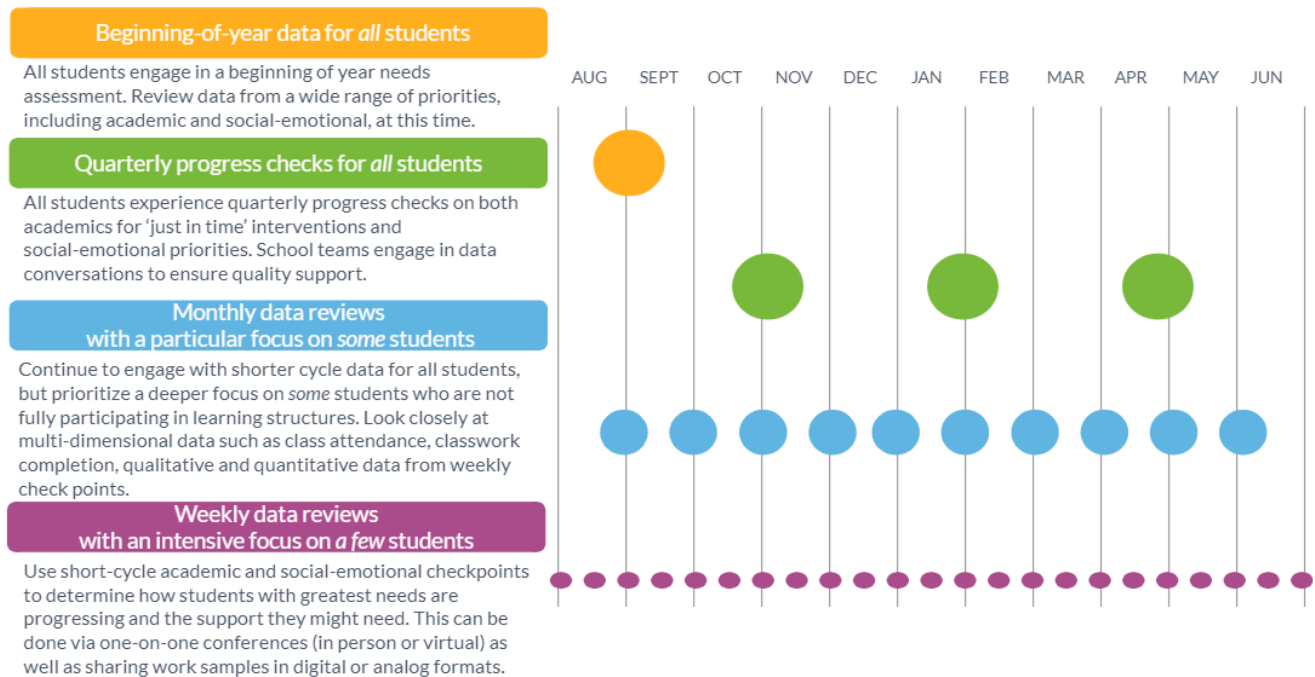
- Encourage teachers to use assessments and data to increase student and family engagement by making efforts to connect with each student as often as possible. If your school is leading virtual learning sessions or sending learning packets home, individual student conferences can ensure students feel connected and engaged. They can also be a great way to provide students with discrete and actionable feedback.
- Encourage student voice by 1) asking them to share feedback on how they are experiencing school, and 2) engaging them in teacher feedback by encouraging self-reflection about their own strengths and areas of need.⁵
- Engage families whenever possible, focusing on qualitative insights about students' strengths and areas of growth as opposed to sharing a numerical score or growth target. Vary modes of engagement from social media to text messages to virtual convenings.
- Think flexibly about staffing to create the opportunity for greater connection. Divide up responsibility and leverage support staff. Have some teachers plan and deliver synchronous and asynchronous lessons while others reach out directly to families and students and hold office hours.

⁵Carless and Boud outline the necessity of strong feedback cycles between teachers and students and its correlation to student achievement, specifically naming the importance of student self-evaluation. On page 1322 they conclude that, "Through repeated experiences of making self-evaluations, students learn to generate internal feedback and gradually acquire expertise in making more sophisticated academic judgments." Carless & Boud (2018). The development of student feedback literacy: enabling uptake of feedback, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43:8, 1315-1325. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02602938.2018.1463354>

Seize the Moment: Planning for instructional recovery

Below we've included two additional resources: a sample map for data review and a sample reflection & action plan, each meant to be starter examples to help visualize or jumpstart your own planning.

SAMPLE YEAR-LONG DATA REVIEW MAP:



SAMPLE REFLECTION & ACTION PLAN

[Sample] 20-21 Assessment Priority: Look at data quarterly, monthly and weekly to surface bright spots and areas of need in our data to influence staffing, scheduling and resource decisions and to highlight with kids and families.

Quarterly Leadership Team Data Meetings: Dig into data for *all* students

REFLECTION QUESTIONS	ACTION STEP DESCRIPTIONS	OWNER	TIMELINE
What were our goals for all students this quarter?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share bright spots and promising practice across grade levels and between teachers and schools. 	Instructional Coach	Sept All-Staff Meeting
What did we learn from our data?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide more support for teachers on how to support students' social-emotional needs. 	School Counselor/AP	Starting next week in PLCs
What strengths do we see in our school's academics?			
What does our data tell us about students' social-emotional needs? ⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revisit class schedule and resource allocation to determine if adjustments should be made to better support students across the school or within particular grade levels. 	Principal and grade level teams	Top of the month grade level meeting

Monthly Department Level PLCs: Dig into data for *some* students

REFLECTION QUESTIONS	ACTION STEP DESCRIPTIONS	OWNER	TIMELINE
What did we learn from our data?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide additional resources to your focus students who may need them to be 	One representative per grade level	At top of next month

⁶ As previously noted, implementing a mental health screening requires putting the right organizational structures and protocols in place. We can't assume teachers or leaders are able to meaningfully interpret this data and need to consider the appropriate staff and coaching required for understanding this data.

What strengths and areas of need do we see in our focus students (consider data and insights from short diagnostics in addition to classroom formatives)?	successful with grade-level coursework, such as books, online coursework, or intervention programs aligned to your curriculum.		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide virtual or in-person high dosage tutoring or mentoring to students. 	Counselor and assistant principal	At top of next month
Where are we seeing the greatest success with our focus students? What are the resources and strategies that are being leveraged (academic and social/emotional)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide focus students with access to your strongest teachers while allocating other staff to check in and conference with students who may not be engaging in virtual or in-person learning. 	Department chair and instructional coach	At top of next month

Teacher Weekly Grade Level PLCs: Dig in to data for a few students

REFLECTION QUESTIONS	ACTION STEP DESCRIPTIONS	OWNER	TIMELINE
What were students' academic and social-emotional needs this week?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create space and time for teachers with the strongest existing relationships to engage students with the greatest needs 	Grade level chair	Within the week
How well did we meet their needs and what evidence do we have?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share strategies for engaging our target students in classwork and commit to using them in weekly lesson planning. 	Instructional coach	Within the week
Where is the engagement of at-risk students the highest?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commit to connecting with target student to share progress update and hear feedback on their learning experience 	Every teacher	Within the week
What additional insights have we gained from connecting with the student as well as their family?			