

BALANCING WELL-BEING AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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Longer hours, summer schools, rearranged school terms, extra tutoring - these are just some of the ideas that are being aired with the goal of helping students “catch up” on learning they have missed during the long months of the pandemic. It’s a complicated issue to tackle, given the sheer range of disparities in students’ experiences and circumstances during their time away from the rhythm and routine of the school environment

Not only have many students lost their learning momentum and rate of progress, but educators have also had an extremely challenging time, with workloads mushrooming to encompass getting to grips with new technology for remote learning and having to adapt lesson plans from the usual in-person formats. Educators have to produce extra resources for asynchronous and synchronous learning, flipped remote classrooms and more, meaning they are also running on empty. It’s certainly not an ideal starting point from which to suddenly press the accelerator on “catching up.”

Recognising the need for well-being

Over the last year, most organizations have recognized that when it comes to managing change — proactive or reactive — the main driver for the effectiveness of impact is fundamentally its people. So, in other words, well-being is the key to the delivery of any change. If people are not on board or happy with what they are doing, it’s fairly guaranteed that they will be less invested in any kind of change.

For schools, the question is as follows: In these unique circumstances, when is it appropriate to start getting back on the path to implementing academic and school improvement? It’s about finding the balance between the two strands of well-being and progress: on one hand, understanding the need to concentrate on supporting and nurturing, and on the other, beginning to apply focus to move toward improvement objectives.

Working together for change

With so much time already lost, getting

things right the first time is key. In my experience, I believe it makes sense to start at the top, by supporting the well-being of school leaders and educators. They are the facilitators of subsequent plans and putting excellent support in place for them makes good sense for the longer term, especially as they will be the ones supporting others. It’s not only about acknowledging their contributions but also thinking creatively to implement measures to make their working lives easier — whether it’s providing extra time for data gathering, lesson planning, training or having the right technology in place to allow them to work seamlessly between home and school (because those will all impact on their well-being).

In parallel, the conversation about supporting students’ mental health and well-being will also continue, particularly taking into account the most vulnerable. Making plans to track and evidence all students’ engagement and monitor their well-being and “catch up” in the months ahead will be crucial to their long-term support.

Reflect and being positively

Once a school has established its plans and is making provisions for the recovery of both educators and students — after the outcomes of surveys and discussions and when it’s agreed that everyone is receptive to moving forward — they can start to work on their improvement objectives.

Reflecting on the positive outcomes that have come from the pandemic can provide the impetus for any future plans. Let’s look at the glass that is half-full. In terms of achievements, some students have independently gained skills in non-curriculum activities that have inspired them to be creative in ways that a classroom environment would not have allowed. Yes, some learning will have inevitably slipped away, but considering the real-world skills that have been gained in their place (e.g., creating art with technology, learning life skills such as operating a washing machine, learning from YouTube about things that interest them, etc.) and acknowledging these as valid learning points that students can be proud of will be incredibly valuable.

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A big mountain to climb

As part of any structured school or district improvement plan in the new post-pandemic environment, strategic priorities will need to be identified and aligned. Although standardized test scores, graduation rates and state/federal performance measures have been the main issues schools have been concentrating on for some time, there is hopefully an opportunity to also factor in objectives tailored specifically to their own students.

The parameters schools are facing in terms of improvement have widened massively. At the other end of the spectrum, as far away as learning self-directed non-curriculum skills as you can get, is attendance. The task of getting those students back is immense. Then there’s another improvement goal to consider: behavior. Huge numbers of students are completely out of the habit of learning for a myriad of reasons: They’ve lost the will to learn, they lack technology access or maybe they just found it difficult to apply themselves to learning remotely.

One thing that is for sure is that, once all students are back in class, educators are finding that some students’ concentration levels are at an all-time low. So, in terms of school improvement, it’s going to take a lot of extra effort to rebuild these skills, which is why the well-being side for staff is so important — to shore up their resilience for the task ahead.

How to move forward

Moving forward with school improvement will happen most effectively when everyone is on board and pulling in the same direction. Pressing ahead with improvement plans will be best done with a light touch, as there is no clear time distinction between the recovery period and “business as usual.” The pandemic has changed everyone in some way. Keeping that in mind, we need not hold schools back from pursuing their improvement objectives; rather, it may enrich the way they go about it and make it a more inclusive, responsive process for all. We can start creating a “new normal” with a greater focus on the people that lie behind the data. It could be just the change that education strategy needs.