

February 10, 2021

Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, and staff, thank you for the opportunity to speak with this committee on the topic of learning loss.

My name is Nate Schwartz and I am an associate professor of practice at Brown University's Annenberg Institute. I am here as part of a project called [EdResearch for Recovery](#) that I began with Sara Kerr of Results for America last March when it was clear that education leaders were venturing into increasingly uncharted waters due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Starting from a set of questions identified by school and district leaders, our initiative has built a library of briefs written by leading researchers from across the country that summarize key strategies to confront the interlocking challenges faced by our students, their families, and our schools. This fall, we led a series of bi-weekly workshops with leadership teams from a dozen Washington D.C. LEAs, including DCPS, to talk through these challenges and go deeper on the application of some of our research briefs.

With these perspectives in mind – namely, researchers working to synthesize our available evidence base and LEA leaders working through urgent local issues – I want to draw the committee's attention to three interconnected challenges that I believe represent the key areas of need and of opportunity moving forward. These include: (a) student reengagement and well-being; (b) academic learning loss; and (c) teacher demoralization. Each one will require adequate funding and guidance to ensure that available resources are directed toward strategies grounded in research and aligned with local needs.

I'll begin with student reengagement and well-being.

Traditionally, as I'm sure you know, state accountability systems have focused on students who are "chronically absent," defined as missing more than 10 percent of a given stretch of the school year. What we are seeing in student absence data this year is different. Some students (and I'm including both students connecting virtually and students whose schools meet in person) are missing tremendous amounts of school, showing up for less than half of the days in a month. This category of chronic absence used to be almost non-existent and now represents a somewhere around 5 to 10 percent of the school-going population, depending on grade level.

We're also seeing increases in other indicators of disengagement: rising numbers of dropouts in high school and students at all grades who are present but checked out – turning off their videos if virtual or simply not completing assignments if present in person. Many of these data points are only symptoms of greater issues around student and family social, emotional, and economic well-being.

Reengaging these students and rebuilding trusting relationships between our schools, students, and families will require resources – to create or strengthen monitoring systems that can capture areas of greatest need and to support targeted strategies in areas like school-based mental health and family engagement. We know that the pandemic has had uneven impacts, widening gaps for students of color and students from lower-income families, and there is a real opportunity – and responsibility – to identify the students with the greatest needs and reconnect them with learning opportunities in schools.

As you build guidance in this area, several resources from EdResearch for Recovery offer strategies for schools and districts, specifically a recently released [research brief](#) authored by members of PACE (Policy Analysis for California Education) describing the types of evidence-based monitoring systems that are needed to track student well-being over time and another [research brief](#) written by Nancy Hill at Harvard and Latoya Gayle from the Boston School Finder on family engagement strategies.

The second area of challenge to bring to your attention is academic learning loss.

Other testimony before this committee provides a summary of the data specific to Washington D.C. in this area, so I won't go deeper into the local landscape right now. Instead, I want to note two crucial points that I think sometimes get lost from the discussion. These are both highlighted in our [brief on strategies for intensive academic intervention](#).

One point is that taking on learning loss is by no means separate from the reengagement work described above. Studies looking at learning trajectories after Hurricane Katrina and school closures in Chicago have shown that the best predictor for whether or not students recover from an academic disruption is not the academic interventions they receive but rather the strength of their relationships with adults in their schools. In other words, the work of taking on learning loss goes hand in hand with the work of re-engaging students.

Another key point is that the strategies that we have seen work for catching students up when they fall far behind tend to involve strengthened core instruction along with additional time for students to engage in small groups with a sustained mentor over time. These strategies include things like small-group [high-dosage tutoring](#), vacation academies, and double dose math. Most importantly, they are supplemental and allow students to continue on with high-quality grade-level work (based on a high-quality curriculum, delivered by well-trained teachers, etc.) while receiving just-in-time remediation. In contrast, attempts to move students into separate classes where they just repeat material that failed to make a mark the first time around tend to be unsuccessful.

As you consider where and how to invest resources, there is an opportunity to direct funding toward investments that accelerate versus remediate by providing clear guidance around research-based strategies, and by incentivizing partnership with local or national organizations that have a track record of success in creating additional learning opportunities that strengthen connections to school rather than simply adding more academic drills into the schedule.

Third, and last, I want to add a few words on the educators who make this all possible from a forthcoming brief that we're working on now with Olga Price from George Washington University and Doris Santoro from Bowdoin College. One of the data points that I continue to think across all of this work shows the [shift in the percentage of teachers who feel successful](#) in their work across the course of last spring. Understandably, the number plummeted across the course of the pandemic and there is no evidence that it has risen again. We are asking educators to conduct their work in entirely new ways while often juggling impossible demands in their personal lives – and that is playing out across the educational system.

Any Covid response strategy that doesn't take this reality into account is bound to fail. We cannot just



continue to demand more of our educators with no provision for their success – more time spent staffing summer schools, more small-group tutoring, more lesson planning that is simultaneously responsive both to virtual and in-person students. Making all of this work means building stronger lifelines for teachers; ensuring that they have materials that make their jobs more doable, bringing in other support professionals to support school and student well-being, and leveraging community organizations to ensure that the vast project of Covid-19 recovery does not fall on schools alone.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Nate Schwartz, Ph.D.