



# Accelerate or remediate?

## KEY FACTORS FOR EDUCATORS TO CONSIDER

BY TANJI REED MARSHALL

**L**ast month, the U.S. government lifted the emergency designation put in place three years ago to address the COVID-19 pandemic. But the impacts of the pandemic live on, especially in schools, where there is a dire need

to address the interrupted learning students experienced and continue to wrestle with now that they are back in classrooms.

The critical question is: How do we do this? What are the promising practices leaders and classroom-level educators should consider as they

work to support *all* students? And how should the billions of dollars in education stabilization funding be allocated to best meet students' needs, especially students who are struggling and those who have been historically marginalized and frequently left behind?

After the murder of George Floyd, the country seemed prepared to address the racial inequities grounded in our unaddressed historical systemic issues. Now, there seems to be an abatement of efforts to provide redress for centuries-long policies and practices that have yielded ongoing racially and economically predictive outcome imbalances.

Efforts to create educational equity through cultural relevance and responsiveness, curriculum inclusivity, attention to teacher diversity, and funding have recently been challenged. Across the nation, states have rolled back efforts to ensure that every student has an authentic place and knows their identity is valued.

Instead of working toward more inclusion and equity, efforts from many states are moving backwards. They are banning books from classrooms and libraries, narrowing curricula, and putting leaders and classroom educators in jeopardy.

In this context, what does it mean to approach acceleration with an equity lens?

## MOVING BEYOND THE INEQUITY IN REMEDIATION

Historically, traditional means of addressing learning gaps have a poor track record when it comes to equity. Remediation has long been a popular choice, and continues to be, in response to the pandemic, based on the assumption that, because students were not in school buildings for months or even years, they were going to be behind on whole grade levels' worth of material. Unfortunately, research shows remediation is not always the best route (Asio & Jimenez, 2020), and the impact is felt most acutely by

historically marginalized students, most especially Black boys.

A report from TNTP (2021) examined patterns and impacts of remediation, which TNTP defined as:

- Spending significant time in content below grade level before moving into new learning;
- Covering many objectives or standards from prior grades or units (usually extending to a month or more of instruction);
- Isolated from grade-appropriate learning; and
- Usually with greater than 50% of time on procedural fluency (ability to select and use strategies and procedures) rather than a balance of fluency, conceptual understanding, and application.

TNTP found that remediation in the wake of school closures left many students further behind, in part because students were assigned to remedial work even when there was sufficient data to suggest they were already on grade level.

This occurred more often for students of color and those designated as in economic need than for their white and wealthier counterparts. In fact, one in six students in higher-poverty schools were in remediation, regardless of what the data showed about their ability to achieve mastery on grade-level content.

According to TNTP, acceleration is a better way forward. TNTP defines acceleration as:

- Connecting unfinished learning into the context of new learning;
- Integrating a few lessons from prior grades or units;
- Just-in-time to grade-appropriate learning (whether in core or extended time); and

- Always with an appropriate balance of fluency, conceptual understanding, and application of work.

Another study compared the two kinds of instruction when students struggled in math (Zearn, 2022). The study showed that 44% of students with remediated instruction faced academic struggles when attempting to do subsequent grade-level work, compared to 36% of students in an acceleration model. Furthermore, students consistently engaged in acceleration completed an average of twice as many grade-level lessons as those with consistent remediation.

These patterns were even more pronounced for historically marginalized students. Those in majority Black and Latino schools had a 50% probability of struggle after remediation compared to a 41% struggle after acceleration, and the numbers for students in schools designated as low-income were 51% and 41%.

## BUILDING EQUITY INTO ACCELERATION

Conceptually, acceleration appears to provide the best way forward to close interrupted learning gaps. But doing so with equity takes intentionality. In particular, it requires educators — building leaders included — to examine their mindsets about students, address structural barriers and external pressures, and ensure all teachers have high-quality professional learning and materials. The following questions and points for consideration can help educators approach their thinking and design of classes and systems to address each of these factors.



**Examine mindsets about students**

One of the most significant areas that we must address is teacher and leader mindset — how teachers see the students in front of them. While the TNTP report is now two years old, there are students — especially students of color and those from low-income families — still being remediated even when the data is clear that they have mastered the content.

Given the unabating test score outcome differences between students of color and less wealthy students as compared to their white and wealthier counterparts, many educators make assumptions about their students based on demographics. While this sometimes comes from a place of care and sensitivity, such care should not slip into misplaced compassion. We must also be willing to admit that, many times, this comes from a place of deficit thinking that links intellect to economic status and other demographics.

There is another false assumption many in education must be willing to face: While many children faced traumatic experiences during the pandemic resulting in family loss and increased economic distress and instability, not every child had those experiences, and not every child of color or economically disadvantaged child had those experiences. There were students from many communities — even from those we tend to believe would not have thrived — who did, in fact, thrive when their school building moved to remote learning. Yet there remains a pervasive belief that students of color need remediation more simply because their schools moved to remote learning, even when there is evidence to the contrary.

Beliefs are essential because what we believe to be true becomes true. Our actions will always align to our core beliefs and assumptions. Beliefs

impact instructional decision-making: If an educator believes the students of color in their class experienced heightened levels of pandemic trauma, their instructional decisions will be shaped by their belief and their students of color will fall into the category of being remediated despite the possibility that data suggests otherwise.

While data suggests that acceleration is the way to go for all students, nuance is necessary to ensure every student receives the support they need. Remediation — targeted and sustained reteaching of a concept or skill — is part of the story. There are times when a student might require remediation due to severe unteaching, disrupted learning, and many other factors. Educators need data analysis, a check on their personal belief systems, and effective professional learning to recognize when and to what extent students need remediation and when it has achieved the desired outcomes.

Far too often, students, especially Black and Brown students, those experiencing elements of poverty, and those learning English, get dropped into remedial learning programs with no hope for a way out. In these cases, remediation relegates students to never-ending cycles of under- and miseducation. It has also resulted in students’ misrepresentation (over and missed identification) in special education classes, exclusion from advanced courses, and risk for more restrictive learning environments and higher discipline targeting (Morgan, 2020; The Education Trust, 2020; American Psychological Association, 2021).

Questions to consider:

*How is your system addressing teacher beliefs?*

- Teachers must face the realization that how they see their students is how they will teach them.
- Leading with the heart has its place until doing so leads to low expectations fostered through misplaced compassion.

- Building leaders must be willing to name and address educator low expectations to ensure every student has the best opportunity for academic success.
- Teachers and leaders must recognize the importance of knowing how who they are and how they experienced school are driving factors in the instructional decision-making process.

*Are teachers aware of the power they have to direct student access to learning?*

- Teachers make thousands of instructional decisions every day, each endowed with the power to advance or constrain student access to an excellent education.
- Teachers must understand that their decisions hold power and weight in ways that often reinforce negative stereotypes about certain groups of students while maintaining overly positive stereotypes about other groups of students.
- Learning about the ways instructional decision-making can create empowered or disenfranchising learning environments could help educators become more mindful of the decisions that often leave students behind.



**Address structural barriers and external pressures**

External pressures, especially accountability processes, can be barriers to teachers’ willingness to try acceleration. Classroom teachers, who are governed by curricular mandates not of their own making, will feel the stress of potentially leaving something out if they do not cover every unit in a curriculum. Such a sentiment may lead them to go further backwards to address what they believe has been missed rather than moving forward and including in-time learning support.

Concerns about high-stakes assessment may also be a driver in decision-making about acceleration. If teachers believe students will be ill-prepared for upcoming tests, they may be more likely to lean into remediation as opposed to acceleration. This will be especially true for students who are consistently performing below grade level and teachers in schools under intense state scrutiny.

Addressing these mindsets and teacher fears requires a willingness to move past the conventional and dare to create more empowering learning environments. Leaders should start by recognizing the impact of their own and teachers' instructional power and decision making (Reed Marshall, 2023). They should also develop deep-level knowledge of the root causes of persistently low student outcomes, including the historical context behind and underneath the disparities.

Data analysis, using culturally sensitive and relevant data and applying a justice-focused lens, is necessary, and leaders must be willing to use that data to develop short- and long-range plans to address the disparities. Short-range plans must address leadership development, educator learning to support instructional development, and curricular enhancements. Long-range plans must focus on understanding the historical context behind and underneath the disparities, using culturally sensitive and relevant data and applying a justice-focused lens to address the issues, disrupt the systemic inequities, and foster lasting change. Such plans should include a range of stakeholders to gain historical and contextual insight into the underlying issues related.

Bringing students, especially older students, into the data analysis process is one way to help students better understand their data and foster a transparent learning environment. Students need deep knowledge about how to analyze their data so they can take authentic ownership of their learning and progress.

Analyzing curriculum through a more comprehensive lens where students gain much-needed critical analysis skills will also position them for higher motivation, engagement, and success.

Questions to consider:

*What data has been collected and how is it used in the decision-making process?*

- Formative and summative data both have value in this process.
- Students should be made aware of their data and considered critical stakeholders in the decision-making process.

*Is disaggregated data available to determine which students have fully mastered concepts, standards, and skills?*

- Educators must have accurate disaggregated data to avoid leaning into their deficit beliefs and assumptions about which students really need remediation and which must be accelerated.
- Instructional decision-making is complex. Building and classroom leaders must take a nuanced approach to deciding when and how to accelerate learning.

*Does the data give clear, unequivocal support that students assigned to remediation need it?*

- Leaders must resist the urge to lean into clarion calls to simply accelerate and give clear-eyed attention to the most recent empirical data with an understanding of their context to apply data effectively.
- Data should evidence which students are closest to achieving skill, concept, and standards mastery; these are students who most likely can benefit from acceleration.
- Data should also indicate a pathway for students who might need additional targeted support so they can get to grade level and beyond as quickly as possible.



### **Ensure all teachers have high-quality professional learning**

Acceleration may be a new concept for many educators, and it may feel counterintuitive to some. Teachers will need strong guidance from their leaders at the building and district level. They will also need professional learning with specific modeling that demonstrates how to incorporate a needed skill from a prior unit while teaching new skills in a current unit.

Many educators need permission to go beyond the structures of purchased or mandated curriculum. Leaders must develop their own understanding of acceleration to be better able to afford their educators the space they need to make the right kinds of instructional decisions that may involve going beyond what a purchased or mandated curriculum requires.

Such knowledge necessitates professional learning. District leaders must be willing to invest in the type of learning that helps building and classroom leaders build the knowledge needed to make critical decisions about how to use data effectively as a tool to better understand when best to accelerate content. They also need skill development on how to judiciously and effectively condense curricula to accelerate learning without exacerbating learning and skill gaps incurred due to interrupted and disrupted schooling.

Questions to consider:

*Do educators have the necessary skills to make the determination of when to accelerate and when to remediate?*

- Building leaders must have a full understanding of their teachers' instructional capabilities to determine where best to invest in professional learning on data use and analysis and effective instructional practices for remediation and acceleration.
- Building leaders must ensure teachers have permission to make



on-the-ground instructional decisions in the best interests of students that may mean going outside purchased and mandated curriculum.

*Do teachers possess the necessary pedagogical knowledge and skills to accelerate effectively?*

- Building leaders need to know what pedagogical skills teachers possess and how best to develop them so they can provide the instruction needed for effective acceleration.
- Leaders may need to increase access to professional learning on standards, the curriculum, concepts, and more.

*Do teachers have the resources necessary to accelerate student learning?*

- Acceleration is more than going fast. It involves teaching differently and with materials that may not be part of the curriculum.
- Building leaders should have a working knowledge of the curriculum to provide teachers with the additional resources they may need to accelerate effectively.

**TO ACCELERATE OR NOT?**

Deciding when and how best to address the gaps created by interrupted and disrupted learning requires care and intentionality so that students who should be accelerated are and those who may need more targeted support get what they need.

Judicious understanding about data is crucial in making sure student needs are met and done in a way that is devoid of assumptions and underlying deficit

beliefs that deny students' potential. Leaders and teachers should also consider how they are implementing plans for remediation and acceleration and monitoring progress.

Additional questions to consider:  
*Are there clear structures for how acceleration fits into current schedules?*

- Building leaders should provide support through tutoring, core schedule adjustments, or teacher rotations to ensure there is a clear structure for how best to implement acceleration strategies.
- Discussions with building-level stakeholders (e.g., teachers, coaches, etc.) should be involved in the decision-making process for effective acceleration implementation strategies.

*Is there a system for strategic progress monitoring of acceleration?*

- There must be a process through which educators will be able to monitor the effectiveness of acceleration to ensure student success.
- There must also be a process through which students are able to analyze their own data and partner with educators on the acceleration process.

These are just some of the questions leaders should have in their minds as they and their teachers determine how best to address the interrupted and disrupted learning from the pandemic. The pandemic's effects are still creating learning challenges for students, and it will take critical reflection and thoughtful approaches to make sure that all students get what they need.

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