



The Education Trust

Closing the gaps in opportunity and achievement, pre-K through college

March 17, 2021

Secretary Miguel Cardona
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona:

Congratulations on your recent confirmation as the 12th United States Secretary of Education. As you know from experience as an educator and leader in Connecticut, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education for all students, but has exacerbated inequities for Black, Latino, and Native students; students from low-income backgrounds; students with disabilities; English learners; and students experiencing homelessness. Many students are experiencing significant disruptions in learning and will require sustained, student-centered, evidence-based strategies to ensure the country's most historically underserved students have the opportunities they need to meet and exceed grade-level standards.

In recognition of the urgent need to address these gaps, Congress provided federal resources at the state and local level to accelerate student learning. Their most recent relief effort – the [American Rescue Plan Act](#) – requires that states and school districts set aside a portion of these funds “to address learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions, such as summer learning or summer enrichment, extended day comprehensive afterschool programs, or extended school year programs, and ensure that such interventions respond to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on [students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, children with disabilities, English learners, migrant students, students experiencing homelessness, and students in foster care].”

On behalf of The Education Trust, I write to urge the U.S. Department of Education to support states and school districts in identifying and implementing evidence-based interventions that are effective and most likely to accelerate learning for our nation’s historically underserved students.

All students must continue to have rigorous learning experiences and opportunities to meet grade-level standards, whether that be through targeted intensive tutoring, extended learning time, advanced coursework opportunities, or other evidence-based interventions. While some students are facing increasing challenges due to pandemic induced changes, students who are surpassing grade-level expectations must have access to high-quality advanced coursework opportunities to accelerate, not remediate, their learning. Without targeted evidence-based interventions and opportunities to accelerate learning, both high-achieving students who do not have the opportunity to engage in more rigorous curriculum and the many students who are experiencing unfinished learning, are at risk of disengagement and may not have the opportunity to graduate college- and career-ready. This is especially true for students in high-poverty districts, who were more likely to be learning virtually and who were expected to spend far [less time learning new material](#) during virtual learning than their peers in low-poverty districts.



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The Department of Education plays a critical role in supporting states and school districts to understand – and invest in – practices that will not only help students make up for unfinished learning, but also accelerate their learning. Without additional guidance, states and districts may use these federal funds to implement strategies, activities, or interventions that are ineffective and unlikely to address the gaps exacerbated by COVID-19, particularly for historically underserved students.

Ed Trust’s [research](#) indicates, when implemented under the right conditions, students who participate in [targeted intensive tutoring](#) and [expanded learning time](#) programs experience significant academic gains, and evidence shows that [strong relationships](#) with teachers and school staff can dramatically enhance students’ motivation, academic engagement, and social skills. **To that end, we urge the Department to support states and districts in:**

- **Ensuring they have the infrastructure to build or maintain strong developmental relationships;**
- **Efficiently and effectively offering targeted intensive tutoring to students with the most need; and**
- **Efficiently and effectively using evidence-based practices to expand learning time.**

Strong Relationships

After months of stress, anxiety, and virtual instruction, schools must focus on building and/or maintaining trusting relationships with students and families. Despite the heroic efforts of many educators and staff across the country, the number of students who remain [disconnected from school buildings](#) is evidence of the lack of strong relationships. Moving forward, strong relationships and connections to schools and the caring educators who teach and work within buildings will be key to the successful implementation of any evidence-based academic intervention to address unfinished learning. This relationship building requires intentional and important decisions about staffing, scheduling, student engagement, and wraparound supports in conjunction with academic supports. Therefore, we urge the Department of Education to emphasize that efforts to build strong relationships are most effective when:

- These efforts are led by certified teachers and other school staff (e.g., counselors, nurses, coaches).
- Interventions effectively integrate and support the academic, social, and emotional well-being of all students, but especially historically underserved students.
- Schools create a schedule to provide specific time for adults to connect with students individually or in small groups (i.e., less than eight students).
- School staff treat students with respect and use time for activities designed to help students accomplish a goal or a task they want to achieve.
- Adults are provided with pre-service and ongoing training, as well as feedback, about building developmental relationships with students, including training and support to create culturally affirming environments, to build relationships with and understand their students, to support students’ academic success, as well as have mindsets geared toward anti-racism.



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- All students have access to the wraparound supports they need to thrive, including physical and mental health and social emotional supports. These whole child supports must be youth and family driven, individualized, utilize interconnected systems, and be culturally competent.

Targeted Intensive Tutoring

Targeted intensive tutoring refers to an individual tutor working with students frequently and regularly throughout the school year. Research shows trained certified teachers or paraprofessionals, working with one or two students at a time, are the most effective in helping students to make learning gains. While we recognize that states and school districts will need to navigate complicated decisions as they implement evidence-based, targeted intensive tutoring, we urge the Department of Education to emphasize that tutoring is most effective when:

- It is led by well-trained certified teachers or paraprofessionals.
- Students work in small groups (ideally one to two students per tutor but no more than four students per tutor).
- Tutors use a skill-building curriculum aligned with the math or reading curriculum used throughout the regular school day, are trained in how to adjust the lesson to match a student's level of understanding, and are prepared to use materials in culturally sustaining ways.
- Tutors are provided with pre-service and ongoing training that covers the goals of the curriculum, strategies for managing individual or small group tutoring sessions, and instructions around key program features and guidelines.
- Tutors are regularly observed and supported throughout the duration of the program.
- Scheduling allows for tutoring to take place during the school day complementing regular classes – students should not be pulled out of their core classes to be tutored, for example.
- Students receive at least an hour of support every day throughout the school year.

It is also worth noting that evidence shows targeted intensive tutoring is effective for all students, but may be most effective for younger students (i.e., students in grades K-three). Additionally, students in grades two through 12 benefit most from tutoring in math, although reading tutoring also has positive effects especially for students in pre-K through first grade.

Extended Learning Time

Extended learning time (ELT) encompasses programs or strategies implemented to increase the amount of instruction and learning students experience. ELT strategies include: afterschool, summer, and in-school programs. ELT programs can only be effective when the regular school day is used well. ELT programs must complement the regular school day or school year and include high-quality curriculum and instruction. We urge the Department of Education to emphasize that extended learning time is most effective when:

- The curriculum is aligned with content from the regular school day, and lesson plans include options for individualized instruction, allowing teachers to tailor instruction to both struggling and high-achieving students. This is especially critical when teaching reading to younger students.



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- Classes are small (i.e., 10-20 students). Smaller classes give teachers the opportunity to provide individualized instruction.
- Certified teachers receive pre-service and on-going training focused on how to implement the program's curriculum, including guidance on differentiating lessons for students experiencing different levels of unfinished learning. Non-certified instructors should receive additional training in pedagogy and classroom management.
- Extended learning time takes place during the regular school year and is mandatory for students.

Regardless of the specific evidence-based strategies states and school districts implement, we urge the Department of Education to emphasize that:

- States and school districts should publicly report on which students receive additional support, including data for each of the following groups of students: students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, English learners, students experiencing homelessness, and students in foster care.
- States and school districts should publicly report on the length, frequency, and duration of targeted intensive tutoring and/or extended learning sessions.
- States and school districts should use the results of high-quality assessments to identify which students need additional support and in which content areas.
- States should require districts to [equitably identify and enroll](#) students in advanced courses so that they are not penalized from pandemic related disruptions.
- States should monitor data on the participation rates of students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and students from low-income backgrounds in lower-level and advanced courses, including looking for early indicators that inequities in access are widening in response to COVID-19, noting those patterns for district leaders, and requiring them to develop an actionable plan to reverse the trend.
- States should review plans on how the district will use evidence-based strategies to accelerate student learning, including information on the diagnostic data it will use to identify which students need support, how the district will engage students and families, how tutors or additional staff will be recruited, and how the district will monitor or evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.
- States and districts should support social emotional needs of students by selecting interventions that attend to whole child needs, including academic, social, *and* emotional needs. Interventions that focus solely on the social-emotional needs of students without academic support are insufficient and may even further exacerbate inequities, and academic supports that don't foster belonging, affirm student identities, and support well-being will fall short as well.



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We appreciate the opportunity to provide the Department with this information and would be happy to discuss this in greater detail as you think through this critical issue facing our nation's students. We wish you the best in this new role and look forward to working with you on this issue – and many others – in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ary Amerikaner". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Ary Amerikaner
Vice President for P-12 Policy, Practice, and Research
The Education Trust