



One Hundred Leaders' View on the Back to School Challenge



Over the last few months, the *i-Ready* team has had a chance to talk to more than 100 district leaders about the challenges they face as they plan for the 2020–2021 school year. We explored their challenges, their reasons to be hopeful, and the tools they believe will be most important for success in the year ahead.

Challenges

While every leader we spoke with had unique stories and circumstances, there were remarkable commonalities in the challenges they described. As the leaders we spoke with look ahead to the coming academic year, they're grappling with a number of questions:

- Will students be back to school at the beginning of the year?
- Will teachers find it safe to return?
- How can we make our schools safe for students and staff?
- How do we support students' social and emotional needs?
- How much learning loss did our students experience?
- How do we make up for so much unfinished learning?
- How do we support the students at greatest risk of falling further behind?
- What do we do if schools are forced to close unexpectedly again?
- What will we do if state and local budgets shrink?

Opportunities

These challenges have been widely documented, with coverage just about everywhere education is discussed. And although the obstacles were top-of-mind for most, nearly every leader we spoke with also shared a sense of optimism. The distance-learning experience from this past spring, while trying, was instructive in many ways. On the heels of this experience, educators see a few common sources for optimism:

- Greater levels of parent and family engagement
- Growing teacher comfort with technology
- More independence in students' learning
- Greater interest in how data can support students
- More investment in summer access to learning
- New interest in the role practice and personalized instruction can play in learning

While no one we spoke with would describe the crash course in distance learning as a welcome surprise, most remained positive, believing that this unplanned experiment might bring new energy and enthusiasm to their work. All were intent on harnessing what they'd learned to help them succeed in the coming year, and all were excited to get back to work in a year when educators, parents, and teachers are all so eager to get back to school.

The Tools We'll Need

With both the challenges and opportunities in mind, we asked educators to consider the tools they'll need to successfully support learning in the coming year. Their reflections on what they would need to support teachers and students in the school year ahead anchored around four themes:

- Multi-grade understanding of student needs
- Goals that are both attainable and ambitious
- Plans for balancing prerequisite and grade-level learning
- Instruction that hits high marks for both quality and ease of use

The good news is that while the scale and the circumstances have changed, these needs aren't entirely new. Educators serving large populations of at-risk students and meeting the needs of migrant students experience similar challenges every fall. Based on the work of many, we have a running start on the tools educators will need to help all of their students see success.

Need 1: Multi-Grade Understanding of Student Needs

There is widespread consensus among educators (echoed by [TNTP](#), the [Council of the Great City Schools](#) (CGCS), and [AEL](#)) that teachers will need student diagnostic data to inform their instruction strategies in the year ahead. Our teachers will likely need to support more students who are further behind than in years past and address a dizzying variety of student needs, given family-by-family variability in distance-learning experiences. Nearly every child, even those previously working at grade level, will be missing some skills. Given these factors, the most actionable and impactful diagnosis will provide:

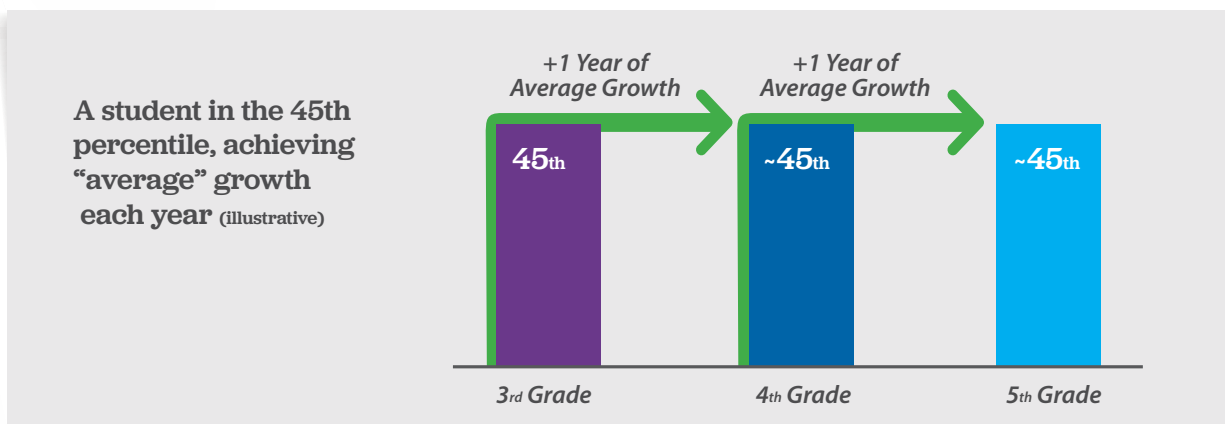
- Multi-grade-level insights of a student's individual instructional needs, regardless of whether a fifth grader is reading at the third, fourth, fifth, or sixth grade levels
- Specificity at the domain (e.g., Algebra and Algebraic Thinking, Geometry, etc.) and skill level (e.g., representing proportional relationships in fractions, identifying right triangles, etc.)

To be actionable, this multi-grade map of needs will have to be more detailed than much of the assessment data we've used in the past. For example, if a fifth grader is reading at the third grade level, knowing he hasn't mastered fifth grade standards is important to know, but it provides limited instructional insight. Further, simply knowing where students are — "They're in the 48th percentile" or "They've moved from the 64th percentile to the 67th" — won't be enough for us to address gaps. In the year ahead, the data we provide to teachers will need to dive deeper into domain- and skill-level diagnosis, painting a clear picture of what our students can do and what next steps are needed for their success.

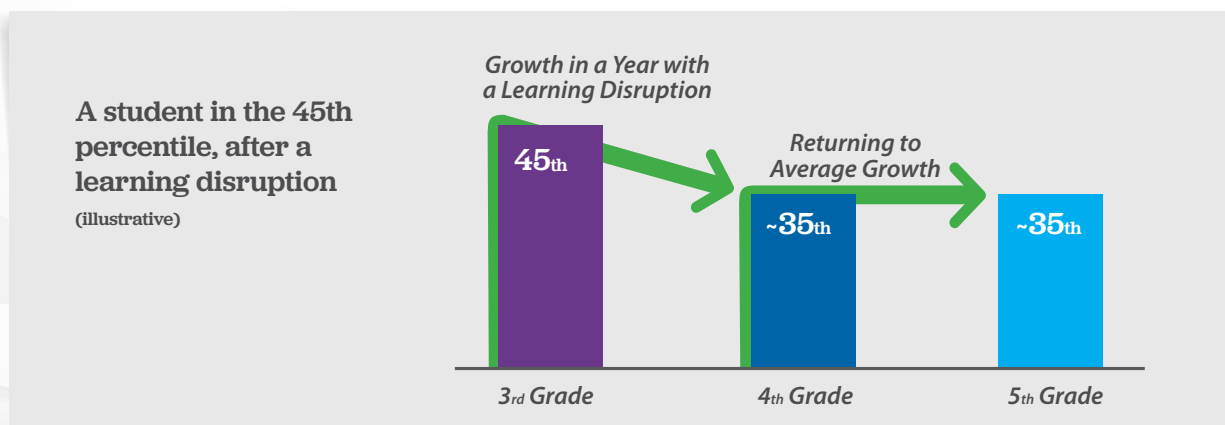
Need 2: Goals That Are Both Attainable and Ambitious

As students return to school, with many returning further behind than in past years, educators will need a different approach to goal setting for their learners. While old conventions like “a year’s worth of growth” or “the 50th percentile of growth” helped us understand if students were tracking with peers, they generally didn’t help us understand how students were closing in on the ultimate goal: grade-level work. More sophisticated goals set with grade level in mind will be more necessary than ever in a year when fewer students begin the year at grade level.

If we track students to normative goals based on historic averages (like average or 50th percentile growth), they will tend to hover around the average indefinitely:



And if those same students experience a significant disruption in their learning—like the one brought on by recent school closures—and continue to grow at average rates, they will inevitably “stick” at a level of performance even further below grade level:



We certainly aren’t the first to note this phenomenon, though. In a [study of programs in place in Kansas City](#), the CGCS found that setting expectations for growth based on their current, normative growth goals “would leave the district well short of proficiency on the state assessment, and students would fall [further] behind as they proceeded from one grade level to the next.” The finding was similar in an [audit of Columbus City Schools](#), where CGCS found that “although they are meeting their annual growth goals, students are still not making the additional gains necessary to close the achievement gap nor improve state assessment scores to a large degree.”

If our past goal-setting approaches won’t work, what will? Ideally, students will have growth goals that put every learner on a path to grade level, even if that destination isn’t reachable within one academic year. Every student’s goal will need to be attainable, but goals will also have to be ambitious if we are going to help returning students ultimately reach grade level.

Need 3: Plans for Balancing Prerequisite and Grade-Level Learning

If the experiences of Louisiana educators after [Hurricane Katrina](#) foreshadow the experiences our teachers will face when they return this fall, they'll face a painful dilemma:

- Most students are missing critical prerequisite skills they'll need to be successful this year.
- All of our students need grade-level skills to be successful in the long run.

Completely disposing of both needs will be impossible—there simply won't be enough time to make up for lost learning in the spring and to cover every grade-level skill. A two-step approach, in which we first tackle the prerequisites and then move onto grade level, won't be possible given logical limitations on the amount of classroom time available to teachers.

Our teachers will ultimately need one strategy for melding prerequisite skills and grade-level learning—one that helps teachers hone in on the select prerequisite skills necessary to access grade-level learning. TNTP arrived at a conclusion similar to the educators we interviewed: [covering everything will be untenable](#), and [focusing on the most critical prerequisite skills](#) will be key if our goal is still to engage every learner with grade-level work. (For more on the criticality of grade-level work, we find TNTP's [Opportunity Myth](#) particularly instructive.)

Need 4: Instruction Programs That Hit High Marks for Both Quality and Ease of Use

Despite the heroic efforts from educators, families, local communities, and education technology partners, it is clear students lost some instructional opportunities in spring 2020. While it is not clear what school calendars will look like in the 2020–2021 academic year, it's increasingly likely that schools will have less than the traditional 180 days of instruction at their disposal. Almost every district we spoke with is planning for some combination of remote learning, non-traditional classrooms, or alternative schedules—an expectation that is starting to solidify in guidance documents from state governments (like this [example from the California Department of Education](#)).

With greater deficits and less time to intervene, making the most of every instructional minute will be critical to our students' success. To address this challenge, quality of instruction clearly matters. Beyond a high bar for quality (such as the benchmarks set by [EdReports](#)), instructional resources will also have to be:

- Adaptable to delivery for both in-class and remote learning (likely in print and digital forms)
- Flexible enough to adjust course if school schedules change throughout the year
- Tied to data, reflecting the needs of individual students

Given the constraints on teachers' time, leaders won't have the option of compromising on quality of instruction or ease of use. Both qualities will be necessary for the daunting tasks their teachers are facing.

i-Ready's Toolkit for 2020

Based on this guidance from educators and years' worth of research into the needs of diverse classrooms, the *i-Ready* team has developed a toolkit for helping educators navigate this unprecedented year. To learn more about the tools we've developed, visit i-Ready.com/Toolsfor2020.

