

6 Essentials to Minimize Unfinished Learning

BY MARCUS NEWSOME, Ed.D.

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In 2010, during the Great Recession, I served as superintendent of Chesterfield County Public Schools in Virginia. At that time, I faced an unforeseen circumstance that required substantial budget cuts, threatening the stability of the school district. This situation demanded immediate action and strategic foresight. Anticipating the needs of students and families, our team researched and piloted several technology initiatives, resulting in the largest purchase of Chromebooks in the nation and the implementation of a one-to-one model to ensure anytime, anywhere learning. We were fortunate to have skilled educators who developed robust professional development and a digital curriculum, ensuring that technology was a transformative educational experience and that learning was not disrupted.

Fast-forward ten years to another unforeseen circumstance—the global pandemic. While many districts struggled with the abrupt transition to remote learning, Chesterfield Schools did not face the same challenges. Our preparedness, rooted in earlier foresight and fiscal efficiency, allowed the district to meet the needs of students and families, effectively ensuring once again that learning was not severely disrupted.

These experiences underscored a crucial lesson: *anticipating current needs makes us better prepared for tomorrow's uncertainties.*



Mitigating Unfinished Learning

While Chesterfield County Schools' preparedness supported a smoother transition during the pandemic, the broader educational landscape faced significant challenges and experienced varying degrees of unfinished learning ([Fahle et al., 2023](#)).

Unfinished learning refers to gaps in a student's education due to extended breaks or disruptions, and it is a substantial pain point for teachers and school leaders.

This was especially true for schools serving low-income and students of color ([Strunk et al., 2023](#)), thus worsening existing educational inequities and further perpetuating the Matthew Effect (Stanovich, 1986). In other words, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

"National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores showed unprecedented declines in mathematics and significant dips in reading achievement between 2019 and 2022 for students in grades 4 and 8. These declines were broad-based—affecting students in every state and every region of the country" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2023).

A range of intervention efforts were implemented to counteract the effects of this unforeseen circumstance. Specifically, the federal government allocated \$123 billion to K–12 schools to fund measures to assist and stabilize the effects of unfinished learning ([U.S. Department of Education, 2021](#)). Districts and schools across America used these funds to implement academic interventions, hire staff, upgrade facilities, and purchase technology ([Reid, 2022](#)). A full understanding of the effects of these interventions is not known, but evidence suggests some gains are being made ([Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2022](#)).

Beyond the pandemic, unfinished learning can result from other circumstances. For example, newcomers may have limited formal education due to poverty, geographic isolation, and societal expectations that hinder consistent school attendance. Chronic absenteeism, often caused by barriers such as illness, trauma, academic struggles, or a lack of meaningful relationships with adults in schools, can also lead to unfinished learning. Furthermore, long summer breaks can contribute to unfinished learning, particularly for students who need access to enriching activities during this period ([Atteberry & McEachin, 2021](#)).

Fortunately, there are measures that policymakers and educators can proactively (and retroactively) implement to mitigate the effects of unfinished learning. When implemented with fidelity and consistency, these measures also prepare us to better manage present and future uncertainties.



1. Establish Strong Leadership

Effective leadership at federal, state, district, and school levels is crucial for creating an environment where failure is not an option. Identify, train, and support knowledgeable, dedicated, adaptive, and visionary school leaders. They ensure that policies are responsive to current needs and anticipate future challenges. This requires a commitment to continuous improvement and a laser focus on student outcomes. By having agreed-upon policies and a shared understanding among all stakeholders that every student deserves the opportunity to succeed, leaders can create a robust foundation for educational resilience.

2. Ensure Equitable Allocation of Resources

Equitable resource allocation is imperative. This occurs when “schools and communities work together to find the right combination of resources that enables every child to thrive” ([Education Strategies, 2020](#)). This, however, does not always occur. For example, ample evidence suggests that educating disadvantaged students may cost twice as much as educating their more affluent peers, thus necessitating more funding ([Willis, Krausen, Caparas & Taylor, 2019](#)). Unfortunately, these students are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, perpetuating educational inequities ([Munyan-Penney, 2023](#)).

To ensure equitable allocation of resources, nonprofit organizations like [Education Resource Strategies](#) and [The Education Trust](#) have partnered together to create a framework for shared understanding, and a plan for collaborative action. As an outcome, ten dimensions of education resource equity were outlined. These dimensions can support educational stakeholders as they work toward ensuring all students have access to the support they need to succeed.

Ten Dimensions of Education Resource Equity

- Distribute school funding based on student need.
- Ensure teacher quality and diversity.
- Prioritize quality and diverse school leadership.
- Use empowering, rigorous content.
- Provide additional instructional time and attention for students who need it.
- Establish a positive and inviting school climate.
- Make available additional student supports and interventions (e.g., social-emotional).
- Mandate high-quality early learning.
- Maintain learning-ready facilities.
- Embrace diverse classrooms and schools.



3. Adopt High-Quality Instructional Materials

Adopting high-quality instructional materials aligned to rigorous state standards and future-ready workforce skills is another important measure to mitigate unfinished learning. Yet only 40% of teachers report using materials that are considered high-quality ([NIET, 2020](#)). Fortunately, the hallmarks of high-quality instructional materials are well known. High-quality instructional materials should ([Benchmark Education, 2024](#)):

- include evidence-based practices that support all learners,
- be grounded in research,
- reflect diversity and inclusiveness,
- enable progress monitoring through valid and reliable assessments,
- offer implementation support and opportunities for teacher learning, and
- be usable and practical.

Additionally, high-quality instructional materials should value personalized learning approaches, which help cater to individual student needs at all levels. For example, teachers should have access to materials that address students' interests and levels of proficiency.

4. Implement Evidence-Based Interventions

Implementing Tier II and Tier III interventions (e.g., [Benchmark Phonics Intervention](#)) that are strongly supported by evidence is vital for supporting students who have experienced the effects of unfinished learning. Many interventions can be implemented in the classroom during the regular school day. Others, like tutoring or extended learning opportunities, can be integrated into after-school or [summer school programs](#). Regardless of when or where these interventions take place, they must be supported with high-quality instructional materials and implemented faithfully ([Slavin, 2020](#)). Additionally, evidence of efficacy must align with the unique needs of the students. Ask, "Is there evidence to suggest that this intervention will work for this student?" If the answer is no, a different intervention should be used.



5. Prioritize Professional Learning

Prioritizing professional learning is a prerequisite, as skilled teachers, paired with high-quality instructional materials, influence student achievement more than any other school variable.

However, not all professional learning is created equal. [Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner \(2017\)](#) outline the elements of effective professional learning.

Elements of Effective Professional Learning

- Focuses on content
- Utilizes adult learning theory
- Supports collaboration
- Leverages models of effective practice
- Values coaching and expert support
- Offers feedback and opportunities for reflection
- Is sustained

Sustained professional learning that includes these elements of effectiveness ensures that teachers remain current with the latest educational research and instructional strategies, enabling them to meet their students' diverse needs effectively. Districts and schools can partner with universities, nonprofit organizations, or curriculum companies to support their professional learning needs.



6. Engage Parents and the Community

Engaging parents and the community is important when mitigating the effects of unfinished learning. It is also important when proactively preparing for unforeseen circumstances that may lead to unfinished learning. When family and community members participate in student learning, students improve academically and develop a more robust support system. Additionally, family engagement is associated with higher student success, improved behavior, and increased attendance (Hanover, 2023). Schools can foster this engagement by offering workshops, creating communication channels in a family's native language, and providing resources that empower parents to support their children's education. For example, schools can encourage parents to monitor and assist with homework by providing accessible digital resources and tools that enhance student learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Addressing unfinished learning requires a comprehensive and proactive approach. By establishing strong leadership, ensuring equitable resource allocation, adopting high-quality instructional materials, implementing evidence-based interventions, prioritizing professional learning, and engaging parents and the community, we can mitigate the effects of unfinished learning and prepare for future unforeseen circumstances. The experiences from Chesterfield County illustrate that with foresight, collaboration, vision, innovation, and a relentless focus on student needs, we can navigate even the most daunting challenges and emerge more robust and better prepared to provide every student with a quality education.

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