

Priority Learning Preparing for the 2020 – 2021 School Year

Overview and Purpose

This spring, school leaders and teachers acted swiftly and with urgency as we quickly transitioned from in-school to at-home learning in the face of what has been an unprecedented crisis. The efforts made by school leaders and teachers to ensure that students continued to receive instruction from their homes were valiant and demonstrated the dedication that exists among New York City educators in serving our 1.1 million students. Despite our best efforts, we know as we head into the 2020 – 2021 school year, our students will return to us with unfinished learning, exacerbating the inequities that have existed for far too long, in addition the social and emotional tolls this pandemic has taken on all of us. Since students need to feel safe to learn, restoring relationships with students by getting to know them well and creating safe, trusting learning environments is the first step in re-engaging students this fall. We cannot ask students to take risks in their thinking, engage in learning new concepts and take on challenges beyond what is academically comfortable without first supporting their social emotional well-beings and creating safe, supportive environments. In the 2020-2021 school year, there will be a heavy emphasis on the integration of academic and social emotional learning, which begins with knowing students well. Our efforts will center around:

- Caring for students’ social-emotional wellness and integrating academic and social emotional learning
- Ensuring that students have access to rich, culturally relevant, grade-level content and work that will prepare them for the future
- Addressing unfinished learning within the context of grade-level content and work by leveraging the assets students bring with them and drawing upon the richness of students’ cultures and backgrounds to help them make meaning of new concepts and apply learning
- Continuing to build capacity as we prepare to transition students and teachers to learning based on the New York State Next Generation Learning Standards (NGLS) for English Language Arts (ELA) and Math
- Providing high-quality, culturally relevant instructional experiences to all students no matter how they return to school this fall, whether blended or fully remote.

Building on the collaborative work began last winter, the DOE, UFT and CSA have closely examined the NGLS in ELA and mathematics to identify those standards that are most urgently needed to ensure that our students have the skills they need to access rich, culturally responsive grade-level work in 2020-21, while attending to unfinished learning within the context of grade-level standards. This document outlines more information related to both unfinished and priority learning. Future instructional guidance will show how the areas identified for priority learning can be used to effectively support classroom instruction.

What is unfinished learning?

While the term “unfinished learning” might sound new, the idea of unfinished learning is not. In education, we have often struggled with this, resorting to remediation, intervention and ultimately referrals for special education when our efforts fail. Many of the typical approaches taken to address unfinished learning in the past have repeatedly had the opposite effect we’re hoping to achieve. This has often resulted in further removing students from access to rich, grade-level content and causing the achievement or opportunity gaps that have plagued education for so long and particularly impacted students who have been historically underserved. As we look forward to the upcoming school year, we know addressing unfinished learning at scale will be essential, but

we must approach this differently and in more constructive ways than we have before. This will mean we address unfinished learning by engaging students with rich, culturally relevant grade-level content and strong instructional approaches that create access rather than focusing on remediation. Addressing unfinished learning in a manner that draws upon our students' past learning, prior experiences, and the richness of their identities, cultures and background will not only support us in tackling the learning loss we will no doubt face at scale this fall but also enables us to build toward our long-term goal of achieving equitable outcomes for all students through access to high-quality instruction. This begins with our shared belief that all students are capable of taking on new challenges within the context of rich grade-level work and growing within safe, supportive and trusting environments.

In the document [Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures](#), the Council of Great City Schools outlines six overarching principles for addressing unfinished learning. The Council of Great City Schools recommends that instruction in the coming school years should:

- **Stick to grade-level content and instructional rigor** This fall, there will be a strong temptation to administer tests that give us information about academic “deficits” so we can reteach or remediate. We should resist this urge as research has proven this to be ineffective practice that could have the opposite effect we desire to achieve by disengaging students and creating greater inequities. Instead of watering down content or reteaching topics, we need to stick to grade-level content and rigor by addressing unfinished learning within the context of grade-level content.
- **Focus on the depth of instruction, rather than the pace** Another temptation we should avoid is the instinct to cover the instruction of the previous year in an attempt to address ‘gaps.’ The pacing required to make up so much content would result in us rushing ahead of many students and feeding students a steady diet of instructional junk food: shallow engagement with the content, low standards for understanding, and low cognitive demand—all bad learning habits to acquire.¹ We need to instead focus on the instruction students should be receiving in their grade, resisting the urge to simply catch students up, just in case. “Just in case” teaching wastes time teaching content and skills from earlier grades just in case students need it for grade-level work.¹ Rather than “just in case” teaching, our focus should be on “just in time” teaching, taking the time to provide in-depth instruction. This allows us to formatively assess incomplete learning as students learn new grade-level content, allowing us to address unfinished learning in the context of the grade-level work.
- **Prioritize content and learning** The instructional approaches described above require time, which is often our most scarce and valuable resource. To make the most out of the time we have with our students, the Council of Great City Schools recommends we identify the most important content and learning. This helps teachers know where to invest their time and effort, what areas can be cut, and where they should teach only to awareness level to save time for identified priorities. What is most important deserves more time, and teachers need to be given the latitude to provide responsive feedback and allow time for constructive struggle. This additional time has to come from somewhere. Prioritizing content and learning does not mean that students will be deprived of critical knowledge, or that their educations will be any less diverse or rich.¹

¹ Council of Great City Schools, [Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures](#) (June 2020)

- ***Maintain the inclusion of each and every learner*** Of course, school closures impacted all students. Some students, such as ELLs, students with disabilities, students with learning or attention issues, economically disadvantaged students, foster children, and homeless youth, will be disproportionately affected by school closures and the unanticipated, rushed switch to distance learning. But now more than ever, it is essential to ensure that each and every student has equitable access to engaging grade-level content and instructional rigor.¹ This means including students in core instruction, rather than unintentionally removing students to remediate or catch them up. To include every student, we need to employ instructional strategies that create access for all students to engage in rich, grade-level work.
- ***Identify and address gaps in learning through instruction, avoiding the misuse of standardized testing to place kids into high or low ability groups or provide low levels of instructional rigor to lower performing students*** As noted earlier, a first instinct may be to assess students immediately to determine their academic level and needs. The Council for Great City Schools cautions us against this for multiple reasons. Our return to school should begin with creating learning environments that are safe and supportive for students and adults alike. Administering assessments too soon can undermine these efforts. Once we eventually begin to administer diagnostic measures that provide us with information related to academic levels, it is important to use assessment data for its intended purposes including which types of data can be used to drive instruction as opposed to when the data is meant to serve as an initial diagnostic to alert teachers to potential areas where students may have unfinished learning. Once teachers are alerted to potential areas of unfinished learning, ultimately, strong core instruction that is culturally responsive and paired with formative assessment will be the key to teachers pinpointing where gaps exist and responding to student needs in real-time, in the context of grade-level standards. This will require trusting and caring relationships as students engage in new challenges and push themselves out of their academic comfort zones.
- ***Focus on the commonalities that students share in this time of crisis, not just on their differences*** We all have had different experiences throughout this crisis. The Council of Great City Schools recommends these differences should not be our starting point for instruction but rather that we should capitalize on the shared experience of living through a pandemic, as well as the more recent social justice protest movement, as a learning opportunity.¹ This unprecedented time has created a set of common experiences that can serve as a springboard for instruction. There's no better way to make instruction meaningful for students than grounding it in real-world, collaborative experiences. This enables schools and teachers to reengage students by directly addressing student and adult hardship, stress, or trauma, and resuming instruction in a way that feels contextualized and responsive, helping students comprehend the world around them. This will also provide educators with a way to focus on grade-level texts and content that are less dependent on prior learning and are engaging and topical enough to reaffirm students' understanding of themselves as members of a learning community.¹

Prioritizing Content and Learning: What is Priority Learning?

All standards outlined in the Next Generation Learning Standards (NGLS) are equally important and work together to support students in achieving grade level expectations. Yet, to effectively address unfinished learning, guidance is needed to support teachers in determining what is most important to teach at each grade

¹ Council of Great City Schools, [Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures](#) (June 2020)

level, and where teachers should invest their time, resources, and effort. Moreover, because it is inadvisable (and impossible) to try to teach every missed concept all at once, it is necessary to prioritize the concepts and skills outlined in the standards that are of immediate importance in helping students access grade-level work.¹

In identifying our areas of priority learning for 2020-21 school year, we drew upon the work from the Council of Great City Schools, which recently offered the following questions to support the determination of priority learning:

- Does the content represent learning that:
 - Builds on work from earlier grades?
 - Extends into future content?
 - Helps students deepen conceptual understanding and subject area expertise, such as expertise with mathematical practices or reading comprehension?
 - Students need to know right now in order to continue learning grade-level subject matter?

With this in mind, the NYC DOE in collaboration with the UFT and CSA, closely examined the NGLS for ELA and mathematics to identify priority learning that can be used to inform strategic, culturally responsive instruction as well address unfinished learning in the context of rich, relevant and meaningful grade-level work. You will notice that the areas of priority learning for ELA and mathematics do not include every standard but instead represent key standards teachers should attend to when assessing unfinished learning and addressing it in the context of rich, culturally responsive grade-level work.

[CLICK HERE TO VIEW THE PRIORITY LEARNING STANDARDS FOR MATH](#)

[CLICK HERE TO VIEW THE PRIORITY LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ELA](#)

Identifying priority learning is an important first step that helps us prepare for the upcoming school year, but this is not enough to address unfinished learning. Knowledge of prioritized areas for learning must be paired with formative assessment of unfinished learning and instructional methodologies and approaches that create access to rich, grade-level content and work. In the upcoming weeks, we will provide additional supporting materials to assist teachers in formatively assessing unfinished learning in the context priority learning by outlining what this learning looks like across grades, the linguistic demands associated with each area of priority learning and specific considerations that create accessibility for all learners.

¹ Council of Great City Schools, [Addressing Unfinished Learning After COVID-19 School Closures](#) (June 2020)