

New Pedagogies for Deep Learning: A Global Partnership

# Activate Deep Learning and Lift from Loss



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**Deep Learning**<sup>™</sup>

A GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP

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# Ten Priorities to Activate Deep Learning and Lift from Loss

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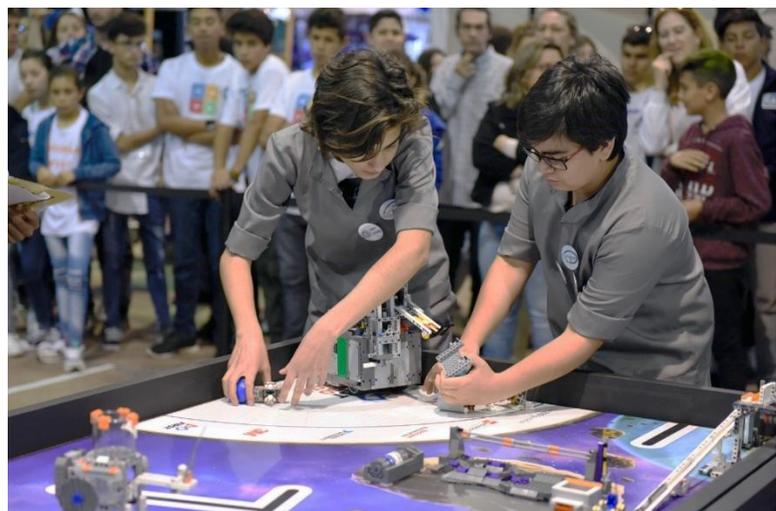
Enduring the pandemic has been like riding a roller coaster without seatbelts. For most, it's been an unnerving experience. This year has exposed the inequities of society and education. With an end in sight, it might be tantalizing to dream that we can return to the way we were. Nothing could be further from the truth. The pandemic's tentacles have touched everyone in some way. Our neuropathways have been rewired. Trauma, stress, boredom, and inactivity have affected our cognitive functioning and perpetuated chronic stress.<sup>1</sup> We are all different now. By necessity school has also changed. Schools have embraced new protocols, technology, the outdoors and a focus on well-being. Quite simply, there is no going back because students, teachers, families and society are not the same anymore. As Alice Walker says, "You can't step in the same river twice. The river is different and so are you."

## Come back anew.

Instead, let's view this period as the clean slate that it can be. Come back anew based on what we have learned during this time away. Imagine a school where students walk in and feel welcome and excited to connect with each other through learning that is relevant and purposeful. This school is a community of connection, of wonder, of joy. This is a place where each student matters-- where equity, well-being and rich, engaging learning liberates each student to flourish.

## Resist the quick fix.

As we welcome students back there will be many challenges to address. One such challenge is "learning loss" as cited by several authors.<sup>2</sup> Our first instinct may be to triage the 'loss' and respond with testing, streaming, and remediating students as the efficient and obvious solution. However, we strongly caution against this approach. First, it's an old model that has failed to serve



our most vulnerable students. Second, educators cannot assume they know the student now as they did pre-pandemic. Rushing in with remediation does not respect how the student has grown over the past year. Also, sifting and sorting students purely based on reading and math reinforces

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<sup>1</sup> Cushing, E. (2021, March) Late stage pandemic is messing with your brain. *The Atlantic*. 3(8).

<sup>2</sup>Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020, December 8). *Covid-19 and learning loss: Disparities grow and students need help*. New York, NY: McKinsey. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help>

damaging social stigma and can pull them away from quality learning experiences that could be deeply meaningful and highly reflective. Lastly, it is entirely possible that such tone-deaf mitigation attempts would further exacerbate an already desperate situation by further discouraging students from returning to school. We urge schools to resist the temptation to jump to the 'quick fix'.

### Activate Learning.

Transition is a massive challenge at this time. However, we must seize this unique moment to activate the students' innate desire to connect and be curious through authentic deep learning experiences. Not only will this re-engage them in school but it will also accelerate the learning as motivation and engagement combine to lift them from learning loss. Schools and students will thrive when they embrace a unified purpose that focuses on equity, well-being and deep learning.

We propose educators execute 10 priorities to activate deep learning and lift students from the loss they have encountered during this fragile period. These priorities will set schools on this energizing path.



# Ten Priorities to Activate Deep Learning and Lift from Loss

## 1. Use an Asset Lens

Treat people like they're broken, and they will respond as though they are. Use an asset lens by recognizing strengths and investing belief in them and they will surprise you. Begin by listening to student voice. Interview kids to hear their stories, how they have coped, and what they have come to understand about themselves at this time. Listen and watch for the learning gains rather than the gaps and build on those. Co-identify new learning possibilities that could inspire them to re-focus on their futures.

## 2. Nurture Well-being

We cannot all be mental health specialists, but we can all be human. Authentic relationships are key to supporting our collective well-being. Take dedicated time to nurture meaningful connections with students so they know you care. Remind students of the importance of friendship and how to support each other. Everyone in the community, staff, students, and parents should be aware of how to recognize trauma and how, as humans, they can offer support. For those students who are alienated, solidify the connection with an enduring caring adult who will check in with the student for at least six months.

## 3. Make school a happy place

For students, being at home has been at its best, lonely. Refresh the school community by restoring joy, color, music, laughter, movement, and celebration. Bring back the heart-warming rituals and shared norms that generate psychological safety and inclusion. Consider ways to help each student feel special, significant, and that they belong to a community. Make it a place where they want to be. This is not fluff or a detour from the learning. To reach students' minds, we must pass through their hearts first.

## 4. Ignite their interest through deep learning

Know that fanfare will only take you so far. If the spectre of boredom (such as textbooks, quizzes, and worksheets) haunts the classrooms, students will quickly disengage, and it will be a sure sign that nothing has authentically changed at school. We need to re-engage students with deep, meaningful, relevant learning. There is a lot to do here but the simplest way to begin is by incorporating student voice and choice. Position yourself as a learner by listening to what students are interested in. Model curiosity and theirs will quickly follow.

## 5. Remember: one size fits no one

When you have listened to students' interests and strengths, meet them where their minds are. This may mean differentiated instruction, purposeful grouping, customized timetabling, individualized support, partnering students with other experts. While this sounds like a lot of work up front, it will reduce disengagement and other concerns later on.

## 6. Don't track, don't test, don't retain

Tracking, testing and retaining practices hold students back. Students view these as punishment like a curse that keeps on giving. It may happen once but its effects chip away at student confidence and competence for a lifetime. Instead, agree as a staff that for one full month, you will delay dispensing judgment. Suspend practices that alienate students. Instead, substitute with interactive strategies like descriptive feedback, small group and individual conferencing and self/peer assessment. Then watch students bounce to life as they take interest and gain independence in their learning.

## 7. Don't migrate from tech - leverage it

Our growth in digital competencies has significantly increased our ability to connect and communicate. Consider how parents have become more engaged at this time. Middle and secondary students have had improved email access to teacher support. Social media has broadcasted upbeat and hopeful messaging. Through internet, students have been exposed to some of the finest museums, galleries and events in the world. Collaborative problem-solving meetings are easily conducted by digital. Tech is effective when it moves beyond mere transmission to foster connection and discovery. Why would we let all this go?

## 8. Forge new pathways for those who need it most

When addressing extreme needs, give the student an active voice in the process and solution finding. Collaboratively forge an intentional pathway of support that the student can see themselves on. Be open to the students' suggestions, no matter how unconventional they may be. Consider a robust range of fresh alternatives that gives them hope, optimism and generates commitment. Seize summer opportunities to catapult curiosity and generate community while facilitating new skills. Pursue other constructive strategies like: experiential programs, creative time-tabling, credit recovery, waiving prerequisites, granting credit for life skills and work experience can empower students. Invite their feedback. Negotiate how marks will be generated. These strategies will be interpreted as a handshake rather than a hand-out.

## 9. Create a Hub for All

Roll out the welcome mat for the community by partnering with agencies, public libraries, local businesses and food banks. Make WIFI available to all. Re-examine your facility policies. Strong families are rooted in strong communities. When we nurture relationships with the community and our families, we enable everyone to be their best. When children see their families invested as a part of the school space, it becomes a safe and essential space for them too.

## 10. Leave no one behind

Remember, that transitions are difficult for everyone, even for seasoned staff. In one year, our neuropathways have been rewired and returning to face-to-face schooling represents another significant change. The kids will not be well if adults are not well. Many of these priorities listed above aptly apply to the adults just as they would to our children.

**So, this is our chance to come back anew. The pandemic has robbed us of so many life moments. Let's not let it rob schools of this unique opportunity. Embrace these ten priorities and forge a pathway to schools of promise and possibility.**

**Kickstart for action....use this paper as a discussion starter with your team.**

**Invite staff to read this paper. Discuss the practices that resonate with your experience.**

**Using this paper as a reference, and given your context, what should your school or district:**

- Stop
- Start
- Continue

