

Assess and address gaps in student learning

As the new school year starts, one of educators’ many challenges is assessing where students’ skills stand and filling the gaps. Students may be behind where they would typically be at the beginning of their grade level as a result of missing out on instruction last spring.

With the unplanned transition to distance learning, many teachers focused on reviewing content and maintaining students’ current skill levels rather than attempting to teach new content. That choice was driven by concerns about leaving behind students without internet access, teachers’ lack of training in how to engage students online, and the urgency of tending to students’ nutritional, safety, and social and emotional needs.

Even when teachers did teach new content, students may have experienced stress and trauma that hindered their



learning, struggled to adjust to online teaching, and experienced varying levels of family support for learning.

On top of those challenges, it was difficult to assess how much students were learning in the spring. Many typical methods of checking for understanding were impossible without in-person interactions, and formal assessment would have been stressful for, and perhaps unfair to, students.

When you add in all the uncertainty about what school will look like this year, it’s clear that it will take creativity and collaboration to ensure students don’t manifest skill gaps that carry forward for months or years. Educators at all levels and in all roles should be part of the solution, and cross-grade collaboration will be essential.

Use this tool to consider and plan strategies to create continuity of content and assess and address students’ skill gaps.

CHECKLIST OF STRATEGIES TO IDENTIFY STUDENT SKILL GAPS

INSTRUCTIONS: Review the professional learning strategies for identifying and addressing student skill gaps that are relevant to your role and setting. For each item, check the appropriate response based on whether you plan to use the strategy. After reviewing all the strategies, reflect on which you are prioritizing and not prioritizing.

STRATEGIES: TEACHING AND LEARNING	Currently doing	Planning to do	To consider	Not interested or not applicable
Employ looping so that teachers continue with students they know from last year.				
Use co-teaching among teachers of different subject areas to leverage project-based or multidisciplinary learning to emphasize critical concepts.				
Create opportunities for teacher leadership and peer-to-peer learning so that teachers can build one another’s knowledge of content and pedagogy across grades.				
Hold regular cross-grade teacher meetings and collaboration, such as PLCs.				
Encourage informal collaboration among teachers of different grade levels (e.g. hold a weekly virtual lunch hangout).				
Leverage the skills and assets of paraprofessionals to facilitate information sharing among teachers about classes and students, work one-on-one or in small groups with struggling students, and communicate regularly with families.				
Conduct check-ins or focus groups with students to hear their perspective on skills and needs.				

CHECKLIST OF STRATEGIES TO IDENTIFY STUDENT SKILL GAPS CONTINUED

STRATEGIES: COACHING	Currently doing	Planning to do	To consider	Not interested or not applicable
Engage teachers in conversation and reflection to help them assess students' needs and gaps as well as their own professional learning needs.				
Build teachers' knowledge of content normally covered in previous grade levels through modeling, training, and other strategies.				
Facilitate cross-grade teacher collaboration through PLCs.				
Serve as a liaison among teachers to facilitate information sharing about the skills and needs of classes and specific students.				

STRATEGIES: SCHOOL LEADERSHIP				
Create and protect time for teacher collaboration, including cross-grade collaboration.				
Participate in those teacher team conversations as a learner, colleague, and facilitator.				
Work with coaching staff to set schedules and responsibilities that maximize their effectiveness and efficiency.				
Establish a schoolwide expectation that all staff are responsible for all students' learning.				
Identify or create collaborative learning opportunities with other school leaders within or beyond your district to learn about promising practices and share ideas and challenges.				
Create and advocate for ongoing professional learning on remote assessment and instructional strategies.				
Establish guidelines for student assessment, and communicate them clearly and consistently.				

STRATEGIES: DISTRICT AND STATE LEADERSHIP				
Ensure time for school leaders to collaborate within and across schools to discuss common areas of student need and strategies for addressing them.				
Establish time for teachers to collaborate outside their own schools and share knowledge across the district about grade-level needs and strategies.				
Prioritize coaching capacity, especially in schools with high numbers of students at risk for learning gaps.				
Provide professional learning and ongoing support in the use of formative assessment.				
Fund and implement professional learning on remote assessment and instruction.				
Establish a district- or statewide vision for student assessment aligned with instructional goals for the year with clear expectations and consistent support for all educators.				
Communicate openly with families and the community about shifts in assessment and instructional goals for the year.				

Marzano's Nine Essential Instructional Strategies

1. ***Identifying Similarities and Differences:*** helps students understand more complex problems by analyzing them in a simpler way
 - a. Use Venn diagrams or charts to compare and classify items.
 - b. Engage students in comparing, classifying, and creating metaphors and analogies.
2. ***Summarizing and Note-taking:*** promotes comprehension because students have to analyze what is important and what is not important and put it in their own words
 - a. Provide a set of rules for asking students to summarize a literary selection, a movie clip, a section of a textbook, etc.
 - b. Provide a basic outline for note-taking, having students fill in pertinent information
3. ***Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition:*** showing the connection between effort and achievement helps students see the importance of effort and allows them to change their beliefs to emphasize it more. Note that recognition is more effective if it is contingent on achieving some specified standard.
 - a. Share stories about people who succeeded by not giving up.
 - b. Find ways to personalize recognition. Give awards for individual accomplishments.
 - c. "Pause, Prompt, Praise." If a student is struggling, pause to discuss the problem, then prompt with specific suggestions to help her improve. If the student's performance improves as a result, offer praise.
4. ***Homework and Practice:*** provides opportunities to extend learning outside the classroom, but should be assigned based on relevant grade level. All homework should have a purpose and that purpose should be readily evident to the students. Additionally, feedback should be given for all homework assignments.
 - a. Establish a homework policy with a specific schedule and time parameters.
 - b. Vary feedback methods to maximize its effectiveness.
 - c. Focus practice and homework on difficult concepts.
5. ***Nonlinguistic Representations:*** has recently been proven to stimulate and increase brain activity.
 - a. Incorporate words and images using symbols to represent relationships.
 - b. Use physical models and physical movement to represent information.
6. ***Cooperative Learning:*** has been proven to have a positive impact on overall learning. Note: groups should be small enough to be effective and the strategy should be used in a systematic and consistent manner.
 - a. Group students according to factors such as common interests or experiences.
 - b. Vary group sizes and mixes.
 - c. Focus on positive interdependence, social skills, face-to-face interaction, and individual and group accountability.

7. ***Setting Objectives and Providing Feedback:*** provide students with a direction. Objectives should not be too specific and should be adaptable to students' individual objectives. There is no such thing as too much positive feedback, however, the method in which you give that feedback should be varied.
 - a. Set a core goal for a unit, and then encourage students to personalize that goal by identifying areas of interest to them. Questions like "I want to know" and "I want to know more about . . ." get students thinking about their interests and actively involved in the goal-setting process.
 - b. Use contracts to outline the specific goals that students must attain and the grade they will receive if they meet those goals.
 - c. Make sure feedback is corrective in nature; tell students how they did in relation to specific levels of knowledge. Rubrics are a great way to do this.
8. ***Generating and Testing Hypotheses:*** it's not just for science class! Research shows that a deductive approach works best, but both inductive and deductive reasoning can help students understand and relate to the material.
 - a. Ask students to predict what would happen if an aspect of a familiar system, such as the government or transportation, were changed.
 - b. Ask students to build something using limited resources. This task generates questions and hypotheses about what may or may not work.
9. ***Cues, Questions, and Advanced Organizers:*** helps students use what they already know to enhance what they are about to learn. These are usually most effective when used before a specific lesson.
 - a. Pause briefly after asking a question to give students time to answer with more depth.
 - b. Vary the style of advance organizer used: Tell a story, skim a text, or create a graphic image. There are many ways to expose students to information before they "learn" it.

Information taken from <http://www.middleweb.com/MWLresources/marzchat1.html>

Other interesting resources for information concerning Marzano's Nine Instructional Strategies:

- <http://staff.fcps.net/DCombs/Marzano%20Brain%20Research.htm>
- <http://ncs.district.googlepages.com/integratingtechnologywithmarzano'sninein>
- <http://classroom.leanderisd.org/webs/marzano/home.htm>
- <http://www.mapthemind.com/research/pdf/marzano9.pdf>

Close Read Strategies

Close Reading Strategy #1

1. Choose a text or an image.
2. Look closely at the small bit of text/image that is revealed.
 - a. What do you see?
 - b. What do you think it means?
3. Reveal more of the text/image.
 - a. What new things do you see?
 - b. Does this change your hypothesis or interpretation? If so, how?
 - c. Has the new information changed your previous ideas?
 - d. What are you wondering about that is not observable in the text/image?
 - e. How does this section build on the previous one(s) revealed?
4. Continue the process of revealing and questioning until the entire text/image has been revealed.
5. Does the author/artist leave questions unanswered? What is a theme/main idea of the text/image? How did the author/artist reveal a theme/main idea of the text/image? What details support the specific theme/main idea you claim?

Close Reading Strategy #2

1. Select a short informational text wherein a topic of some debate is being explored/discussed. You could also select an excerpt from a piece of literature being read that deals with part of the conflict.
2. Ask students to read/reread the piece silently, annotating the text for a specific purpose: future interview questions for the person or character.
3. Once they have finished, ask students to pair up, share their annotations with each other, and create 5-7 interview questions for the person/character.
4. Then, have pairs of students switch their questions with another pair of students and try to answer the questions based on evidence from the text.
5. If a question cannot be answered with evidence from the text, have the pair trying to answer, answer the following question: Why do you think the author chose not to ___?

Close Reading Strategy #3

1. Read with a pencil in hand and annotate the text, especially for specific concepts from the standards.
2. Look for patterns in the things you've noticed about the text—repetitions, contradictions, similarities.
3. Ask questions about the patterns you've noticed, especially *how* and *why*.
 - a. Why is this (word, phrase, image, etc...) repeated?
 - b. Why does the author choose these particular contradictions? What do they help me understand?
 - c. What concepts are similar? How are they similar?

Close Reading Strategy #4

1. Have students read, view, or listen to a text.
2. Ask them to write down, for later discussion, three focused questions related to
 - a. Something they found confusing.
 - b. Something on which they want to hear someone else's view.
 - c. Something that connects to another discipline or current event.
3. Have students pose their questions in a roundtable discussion in small groups.
4. If groups cannot clarify the questions of confusion, have them pose the questions during the whole group discussion.
5. Have groups pose one concept with differing viewpoints.
6. Have groups pose one connection to another discipline or current event.

Close Reading Strategy #5

1. Have students read silently for a specific amount of time—max time: 10-15 minutes.
2. If the text is a narrative piece, begin the discussion with this question: Why do you think (character) decides to (action)? What evidence is there to support your response?
3. If the text is informational, begin the discussion with this question: To what degree does (topic/issue) impact the average (citizen/teen)? Would the author agree with you? What evidence is there to support your opinion?

Close Reading Strategy #6

1. Have students notice how the author develops events, individuals, and/or ideas.
2. Then, have students contemplate why the author chooses to do develop them that way.
3. Have students complete this sentence three times after reading a text: "Notice how the author _____. I think the author did it this way because _____."

Close Reading Strategy #7

1. After students have read a text (literary or informational), ask them to consider the core idea(s).
2. They then will write a headline for the topic or issue that captures an important aspect or core idea.
3. Students share the headline with a partner or small group, including the story and reasoning behind their choice(s).
4. You can create a class collection of the headlines that document the group's/class's thinking.
5. You could also have students name songs that would best capture a central theme from the text they are reading, explaining and justifying their choices.
6. Class listens to the mix of song selections and reflects on how they portray the central theme.

Close Reading Strategy #8

1. Students highlight or underline the following:

- a. A sentence that they feel captures a central idea of the text and/or is meaningful to understanding the text.
 - b. A phrase that demonstrates powerful language—author’s craft.
 - c. A single word the author chose that they found particularly effective.
2. In small groups, students share, discuss, and record their choices.
3. Students explain why they chose their sentences, phrases, and words.
4. In a whole group discussion, reflect by identifying commonalities, differences, and what was not captured in their choices.

Close Reading Strategy #9

1. Read with a pencil in hand and annotate the text using sentence starters or specific questions to prompt thinking.
2. In groups of 3, students pass their annotated text to the person on the right. Each student responds to original reader’s annotations. The next time the papers pass, each individual adds his/her notes to both of the previous readers’ responses.
3. Members of each group collaborate to create one complete sentence (for the sentence starter) or an answer to a specific question (whatever question was asked for the purpose of annotation). Groups share responses.

Close Reading Strategy #10

1. Select a short piece of informational text for students to read (or listen to) silently.
2. Ask students to note the ways in which the author conveys his/her point of view and annotate using the following steps:
 - a. Circle statements that reveal the author’s viewpoint/opinion.
 - b. Draw arrows to statements that convey or support each circled viewpoint.
 - c. Next to each arrow, explain whether or not the opinion/stance is appropriately presented or supported. Analyze diction, figurative language, organization, etc....
3. After students have had time to read and annotate, have them break into small groups to discuss their annotations.

Close Reading Strategy #11

1. After students read opposing arguments on a certain issue, have them complete one of the following argument frames to prepare to discuss or write an analysis of their side of the argument:
 - a. In discussions about ____, one issue has been _____. People who believe ____ claim that _____. On the other hand, those who believe ____ contend that _____. My own view is _____. Evidence that supports my view is _____.
 - b. When it comes to the topic of ____, most of us would agree that _____. Where this agreement ends, however, is on the question of _____. Whereas some are convinced that ____, others maintain that _____. My own view is that _____.

Vocabulary Strategies

Taken from Shanahan on Literacy, August 2015

Word Knowledge is Multi-Dimensional

Students learn words best when they have opportunities to think of words deeply—rather than just through definitions. Focus on the encyclopedia description more than the dictionary definition. Consequently, one of my favorite vocabulary activities is to have students writing multiple “definitions” for words, rather than single definitions.

Say you wanted to teach the word *rope*. The dictionary definition is “a length of strong cord made by twisting together strands of natural fibers such as hemp or artificial fibers such as polypropylene.” But that’s not good enough. I would also want the students to come up with some synonyms for rope (e.g., cord, twine, string), and a real-example (like “my mom uses rope for a clothesline in our basement” or “we have a rope that the girls play jump rope with during recess”). What category does rope belong to? Tools or things we can tie, perhaps. And, it’s a noun (a thing, specifically). How about a comparison? Rope is like stringer, but thicker and stronger because it is made of several strands. Let’s also have kids act this one out. Perhaps they’d pretend to climb a rope or they’d have an imaginary “tug of war.” Drawing a picture of a rope would be another kind of definition or description, and providing a sentence that uses a word in a way that shows that you know what it means is a good idea, too (“I tied the boxes together with a piece of rope”). [This exercise can be elaborated on lots of ways: using the words in analogies such as “rope is to cord as a street is to a lane”; listing different forms of the word by using various prefixes and suffixes, trying to use forms of the word in different ways grammatically as nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives etc.—“The cowboy is roping a calf.” “Since I started riding a bicycle, my muscles have gotten ropey.”]

Word Learning is Social

Words are learned best when students have a lot of opportunity to interact and connect around words. For example, the multiple definition exercise described above is most effective when kids don’t do that by themselves. Have them work on that kind of assignment in teams. That requires that they talk to each other and help each other to figure out the word meanings and that they provide explanations of the words. Another possibility: instead of having everyone looking up 8-10 words in the dictionary, assign 2-4 words to each group (I usually overlap these, so that more than one group gets a particular word). Then have the groups take turn teaching each other the words.

Words Need to be Connected to Other Words

Words relate each other in lots of ways and understanding how they fit together can help. Many vocabulary programs group words together: words about using our legs (e.g., run, amble, leap, meander) words about talking (e.g., swore, vowed, yelled, recitation), health and medical words (e.g., exercise, diet, calories, cholesterol). That can be tough to replicate in a classroom setting, but this can be done effectively in retrospect, too. As students learn new words keep track of them (e.g., a word wall, a vocabulary bulletin board). Then have them trying to group words: which ones go together—building categories out of the relationships among the words that have been taught. Synonyms aren’t the only kinds of relationships either. Have students consider various relationships (for the rope example above, consider uses or functions (e.g., clothesline, rope climbing, rodeo—roping calves); parts (e.g., fibers, strands); who uses these (e.g., cowboys, gym teachers, campers, someone doing laundry).

Words Need to be Used in Many Ways

Organize your lessons so students have many opportunities to read the words of interest, to hear them orally, to use the words orally themselves, and to write the words in context (I’m not talking about just copying a word). Put vocabulary into the context of communication, learning, and language use—that means lots of speaking, listening, reading, and writing with the focus words.

Words Need to be Connected to Students' Lives
Beck and McKeown's "Word Wizards" is great for this. Have kids watch for their words in use, and give them credit if they bring in evidence of having used or come across the words that they are learning.
Words Don't Stick Easily
Include lots of opportunity for review. Words need to accumulate across the entire school year, and that means going back to them again and again. The re-categorizing that I described above is a great review activity. If you test kids vocabulary with a weekly quiz, make it cumulative—continually recycle some of the older words. Set aside weeks where you don't focus on new words, but on a larger number of the previously studied ones. And, of course, give kids lots of opportunity to re-confront the words in text.