



# Turn Learning Gaps into Learning Opportunities: 3 Strategies to Encourage Student Growth





Introduction. . . . .	2
<b>Strategy 1</b> Invest in SEL in the Classroom and at Home . . . . .	5
<b>Strategy 2</b> Focus On and Measure College & Career Readiness . . . . .	10
<b>Strategy 3</b> Get Ahead: Implement Summer Learning Opportunities . . . . .	13
Looking Ahead. . . . .	16



# Introduction

## Introduction

Despite the hardships that came with the pandemic, educators worked tirelessly to make schooling as "normal" as possible.

Teachers pivoted overnight to ensure student safety and continued education. They not only revamped their way of teaching, but had to rethink everything, even supplies. Some took money out of their own paychecks to do so, [while others turned to the internet to crowdfund](#) equipment such as paper, pencils, and hand sanitizer.



Despite teachers' hard work, one phrase lurked in the shadows throughout the pandemic: Learning loss.

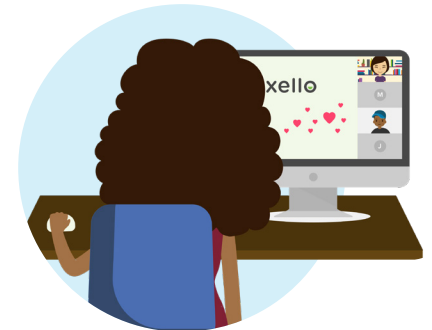
While learning loss has been a popular subject this past year, it isn't a new concept. It's the idea that students can lose skills and knowledge from the previous school year over the summer months. Students losing skills and knowledge from the previous school year has been an educational conundrum since it began. This, of course, makes sense, since kids aren't sitting in classrooms, engaging with academic materials seven hours a day for those 10 weeks.

The data, on the other hand, may be more surprising. During a normal summer, on average, students lose [up to 34%](#) of their knowledge gains. Mix in 2020's school shut downs, hybrid instruction, and virtual learning... well, it now becomes more apparent why this concept is at the forefront of society's mind. While numbers are still being crunched, it's estimated that [over 16%](#) of students didn't even step foot into a building last year.

There are limited data points surrounding how far students' skills have slid, mainly because some states chose to pause standardized testing and others tested under abnormal conditions. One very [small study](#), though, found that over the course of the pandemic year, third grade students only learned 67% of the math and 87% of the reading curricula.

## Introduction

To pile on the bad news, remote learning also exposed the stickier parts of American society. While many white families had the opportunity to work from home, a [study showed](#) that only 20% of Hispanic and Black workers had that option, meaning a lack of supervision to ensure their kids' learning.



Another issue was the [digital divide](#) amongst families. Luckily, many districts rose to the challenge and equipped students with the devices and hotspots necessary to learn remotely. Lastly, the [pandemic affected students' mental health](#) due to limited exposure to trusted adults, support of positive peers, and structured days has led to increased anxiety and unhealthy coping strategies.

We aren't sharing this news to dishearten educators, but to instead remind them that these results have nothing to do with their own efforts. Learning loss happens every single year. There have always been families without internet access. Kids routinely have less positive adult interactions over the summer.

So now what? While the growing academic gap wasn't caused by schools, teachers will have to address these issues in the upcoming academic year. And now that we're turning a corner and seeing life slowly returning to how it was, it's time to re-engage with our pre-pandemic attitudes and use what we've learned to make this year the best one yet.

Here are three helpful strategies to reignite your students' excitement for learning, starting now.



## STRATEGY ONE

# Invest in SEL in the Classroom and at Home

## Invest in SEL in the Classroom and at Home

While COVID-19 and social distancing affected families differently, one thing is certain: everyone felt new stressors. In fact, studies show that the [pandemic caused significant trauma](#), and as we know, the effects of trauma can appear weeks, months, or years later.

Responding to trauma is not only helpful for students' healing, but also teaches them that their classroom, school, and district are safe places. As educators help rebuild and satisfy kids' hierarchy of needs, students will be more invested in school and their learning.

Before jumping right into the course syllabus or instruction, it is important for educators to acknowledge the losses from last school year, allow students to connect with old classmates and teachers, and create a physically and psychologically safe space.

Educators know that emotional intelligence is important for students to learn, practice, and master, but it oftentimes gets lost in other district and curriculum directives. Below are seven tips for teachers to keep SEL instruction in the forefront of their teaching practices this upcoming school year.

### Don't Reinvent the Wheel:

Tackling a social emotional curriculum can be very daunting, especially when you may already feel overwhelmed and spread thin with other building initiatives. Take some time to research the basics of SEL by starting with [CASEL](#), an organization that has earned a top spot in the social emotional field. If your building is willing to invest in a research-based program, look into [Second Step](#), which provides lesson plans, scripts, and materials. A strength of these websites is that both provide parent resources to extend learning to home.



## Invest in SEL in the Classroom and at Home

### Plan with Intention:

While SEL instruction can be woven into most lessons, it is most effective when it is incorporated with purpose. Instead of being an afterthought, social emotional skills should be taught, and more importantly, practiced over and over. From carving out a particular time of day to practice, such as [Morning Meeting](#), or reviewing learned skills consistently before procedures, teachers can implement these competencies regularly.

### Meet with Colleagues to Determine Non-Negotiables:

A lot of mental health and counseling professionals [suggest consistency](#) in and out of the classroom for the sake of the teacher and the students. When students come to know and expect routines, they feel safe and empowered within that structure. This mentality also goes beyond their classroom's four walls. Having school-wide expectations allows students to feel more comfortable and knowledgeable, since academic and behavior standards are consistent in every common space and classroom. Similar grade or subject-level expectations not only promote this mindset, but also ensure that students are receiving similar instruction and will be prepared for the next year.



### Model a Growth Mindset for Your Students:

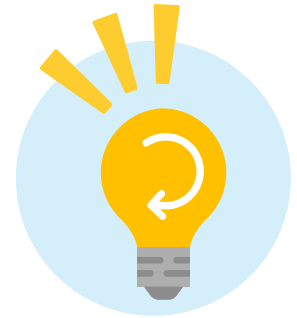
Intentionally think out loud when you're problem solving with students. They will hear you confront your challenges in a beneficial, growth-oriented way. Remember: Though everyone thought last year was going to be impossible, we all made it through stronger. Just recognizing out loud that we can do hard things encourages the same mindset in students.



## Invest in SEL in the Classroom and at Home

### Help Students Rephrase Their Thoughts:

Students' negative mindsets often include polarizing words ("always, never"), include defeatist future thoughts ("I know I won't win"), and attempt to read others' minds ("She probably doesn't like me"). Switch those thoughts to be more helpful and positive, and hold students accountable to flipping from that inner critic to their inner coach.



### Praise Effort Over Outcome:

[The Emotional Intelligence Network](#) recommends that instead of praising what kids may consider an unchangeable characteristic, teachers should praise a child's effort. "The first is known as people praise; the second is process praise. Process praise promotes an internal sense of self-efficacy because it reinforces that successes are due to effort (which the child can control) rather than some fixed level of talent or skill."

### Reflect and Reassess:

You may need to switch the way you teach and practice SEL skills throughout the year. If your class isn't making the progress you'd like, look into your delivery method or collect input from students. If SEL instruction has taken a backseat to content or standardized tests, remember that students who feel a sense of belonging and connectedness in your classroom are more likely to engage in learning and develop a growth mindset. SEL instruction isn't an added responsibility, but actually one of the most important things you can be teaching your students. [Relationships are incredibly important](#), and consistently building (or rebuilding) those can have powerful effects in your classroom culture.



## Invest in SEL in the Classroom and at Home

### Looking for curricula or supplemental SEL activities?

Listed below are a few resources vetted and recommended by teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, and administrators. Many of these resources also have an “at-home” component, which onboards families and provides additional practice opportunities.



[Common Sense Media](#): Lessons to help teach students to use online etiquette, navigate digital bullying, and vet online sources.

[Cosmic Kids Yoga](#): A series of videos that teach the basics of mindfulness, and relaxation.

[Go Noodle](#): Videos that promotes movement.

[Headspace for Kids](#): Teaches the fundamentals of meditation.

[Learning for Justice](#): Free resources to help create civil and inclusive school communities.

[MindUp](#): A program that teaches K-12 students the science behind our emotions.

[Random Acts of Kindness](#): Free curricula to help students build social and emotional skills.

[Social Thinking](#): Resources to help students that struggle with social emotional norms.

[Second Step](#): Tools to enable an active role in social emotional learning.

[SkillStreaming](#): A 4-part approach to teaching prosocial thinking.

[Stop, Breathe, & Think](#): Helps kids ages 5-10 practice being quiet and focused.

[Wide Open School](#): A free collection of online learning experiences for kids.

[Xello- An Educator’s Guide to Developing Social-Emotional Learning Skills in Your K-12 Students](#): An e-book further explaining SEL, the research behind it, and tips for implementation.

[ZONES of Regulation](#): A system used to teach [emotional self-regulation and emotional control](#).



## STRATEGY TWO

# Focus On and Measure College & Career Readiness

## Focus On and Measure College & Career Readiness

### Opportunities for CCR in K–5

The idea of instructing a room of 7-year-olds on College and Career Readiness (CCR) at first seems laughable. But when you really boil down future-ready skills-- time management, organization, numerous interests-- it makes sense to start fostering this kind of mindset at a young age.



The takeaway here is that CCR (at any grade level) needs to be age appropriate. At the elementary level it may look like introducing the concept of non-fiction by looking at different types of careers. It could be developing “About Me” boards, either virtually or physically, to showcase different areas of strengths.

By focusing on CCR at a young age, teachers are proactively helping students develop executive functioning skills and increase self-esteem, which will be vital for the rest of their lives.

### Opportunities for CCR in 6–8

Middle school is a place for kids to try different sports and clubs, as well as take various arts and enrichment courses. These opportunities allow for students to further develop interests and begin honing in on skills and course-work they’d like to continue in the future.

CCR in middle grades should build upon what students have already practiced: Positive character traits and soft skills, as well as identifying matched career clusters. This is a time for kids to begin personalizing their goals, including those for college and career. It’s equally important for students to learn that goal setting is flexible and should be a living, breathing document, not just one that’s filed away in the counselor’s office.

Dr. Jeremy Raff, a Pennsylvania school coordinator of College & Career Services, speaks to the benefit of real-time tracking: “[Xello] has been a great solution for centralizing all of our documentation. The data tracking aspect of Xello is a huge advantage to us, as is the

## Focus On and Measure College & Career Readiness

ability to know where students are in meeting state standards and continuing with their learning.”

### Opportunities for CCR in 9–12

Now that districts are investing additional time and money into future readiness programming, more and more students are feeling prepared to make decisions for their future. By focusing on CCR in the fall, teachers and counselors can help guide and support students through what can be a stressful time.



#### For Career & Technical Education Students:

Career & Technical Education (CTE) classes and community colleges are a smart choice for students choosing a non-college pathway, for those wanting a lower-cost option, or for seniors who aren't quite sure what they want to study. Just as students are conditioned to explore colleges, they should also be encouraged to research trade schools. The National Center for College & Career Transitions (NC3T) also recommends researching all avenues (CTE programs, four-year colleges, community colleges, and technical colleges) to expand pathway options and steps.

#### For College-Bound Students:

There are a lot of comprehensive college application guides out there for students, families, and counselors alike. U.S. News created an easy-to-follow [handbook](#) that helps readers understand the steps and timelines for applications and financial aid. The Best Schools, a website that provides in-depth rankings of programs and universities, not only [offers steps for applying to college](#), but also suggests questions and activities to help students prioritize deciding factors when selecting a school.

It's equally important for students to keep applications, transcripts, and scholarship offers organized. Choosing a [future readiness tool like Xello](#) can help students feel confident at every step of the planning process.



### STRATEGY THREE

# Get Ahead: Implement Summer Learning Opportunities

## Get Ahead: Implement Summer Learning Opportunities

While summer—especially this one—provides a much-needed break for educators and students alike, it also provides a time to set new intentions and refocus. This is a crucial time for teachers to reflect, since many tried or learned new methods of instruction. With new methods comes new risks, such as formally assessing students digitally or incorporating self-led coursework. What worked and what didn't?



Upon this reflection, teachers and district leads may likely have a long to-do list, from chosen professional developments to re-organizing units.

For students, though, the to-do list may not come as easily. Below is a list of suggestions for districts and educators to share with families to help make summer learning fun and enjoyable.



### **Supporting Summer Literacy with Emergent Learners:**

Kindergarten teachers Carolyn Helmers and Susan Vincent published a book this year focusing on literacy in young learners. Here, they've [compiled a list of resources](#) for families to help their child practice newly-found skills to avoid the summer slide.



### **Summer School:**

Summer school gets a bad rap, but it isn't just for students who have failed classes. While there are courses for credit recovery, many districts are offering classes to simply provide additional practice, help students knock courses out over the summer, and learn strategies for the ACT and SAT. By keeping up with course work, as well as school expectations, students are more likely to retain content learned last year and easily transition into the fall.



### **District Learning Resource Hub:**

District leads and teachers have also started creating digital resource hubs for students. In years' past, many educators printed off packets and lent books to students, but now technology mitigates the need for those to be sent home with all students.

## Get Ahead: Implement Summer Learning Opportunities



### Summer Camp:

Kindergarten teachers Carolyn Helmers and Susan Vincent published a book this Summer camp is also a concept that has been revamped in the past decade. There are still, of course, camps where you sleep in cabins, hike through the woods, and learn arts and crafts. Those provide a great escape from screens while providing kids opportunities to practice soft skills and potentially discover new interests. There are also day camps that are specific to those chosen interests; think coding camp, pottery camp, or Vacation Bible School camp.



### Library Summer Programs:

Many libraries have a robust program for kids that includes incentives for reading and learning through the summer months. Cincinnati's Public Library, for example, not only created [a summer hub of content](#), but is hosting live shows and providing lunch for kids. Paula Brehm-Heeger, Eva Jane Romaine Coombe Director of the Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library deeply believes in providing these summer enrichment programs: "We're thrilled to help kids sharpen their learning and reading skills this summer while helping families rediscover the great arts, cultural, and natural attractions."



### Employment:

Some of the best learning (about yourself, others, and a particular skill) happens on the job. When high school students are employed, they learn those executive functioning skills crucial to being a successful student.





# Looking Ahead

## Looking Ahead

Instead of viewing this upcoming school year as an uphill climb, we want educators to look at it as a celebration. You've survived one of the hardest years in teaching history. Schools became the answer to many of society's questions (internet access, food, child care), and teachers became many students' go-to for interaction.

So this fall, educators have the opportunity to treat that first day like it's the first day ever. You get to prioritize what's important in your classroom and what can be left behind. You can set new expectations and goals for students and yourself. And most importantly, you can prioritize that connection with students so they feel supported, inspired, and empowered to learn.

**Interested in learning how Xello can help your K–12 students become future-ready? Book a personalized demo with one of our Education Consultants.**

[Book My Demo](#)

