



Considerations for back to school

Establishing a baseline

Students are returning to school for the 2019–20 school year with differing experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, in all aspects of their lives. Now, more than ever, school personnel and families must employ thoughtful techniques and strategies to support students' well-being and academic needs.

No one yet knows the impact of the pandemic's disruptions on individual students. At the beginning of every year, teachers use a variety of methods to formally and informally assess where students are and in which area(s) they may require additional or differentiated instruction—in other words, to establish a baseline of students' readiness for their current grade level. This year, establishing this baseline is even more essential.

Teachers need baseline information to plan instructional priorities for their students. Beyond the classroom, schools and districts use the information to prioritize and allocate resources for the year, informed by a variety of data including (but not limited to) assessment data. Establishing a baseline of students' preparedness requires a deep dive into student learning needs and effective strategies to address them.

With such varied starting points and needs, no blanket strategy of remediation or acceleration can be applied to all students. Instead, educators and families must work in tandem to understand what students know by identifying gaps in learning, and respond with targeted and additional support in areas of struggle.

Thoughtful use of assessment

Unfortunately, there is no prescribed method to establish a baseline for student learning. Further, while many resources claim to be “diagnostic” in nature, no single tool can serve all purposes. Placing the process of identifying, diagnosing, and responding to student needs in the context of an overall **balanced assessment system** ensures that these efforts integrate with other measures of student learning. For these purposes, two components of an assessment system provide actionable information.

Formative assessment is a planned, ongoing process used by students and teachers during learning and teaching to elicit evidence of student learning. In a learning partnership, students and teacher use the evidence to improve students' understanding of intended curricular learning outcomes and support them to become self-directed learners. These practices are inseparable from instruction and provide in-the-moment feedback to students, and insight into student thinking for teachers, so they can adjust instruction to meet students' learning needs.

Interim assessments provide information on student progress toward achieving the learning goals for a grade level, typically at three points during the school year (i.e., beginning, middle, and end). These assessments provide data that help teachers identify students requiring additional support. When used across multiple classrooms, they can broadly inform areas of strength, improvement, and trends in student performance, supporting changes in programs, systems, and resource allocation.

Formative and interim assessment provide essential information to teachers, students, and families about how to best support student learning. But schools should employ a broad toolkit of resources and supports to establish a baseline for the 2020–2021 school year. Multiple measures of student understanding will elicit student thinking, identify areas of need and misconceptions, and reveal progress in relation to learning goals. And teachers can't do all this alone. They need explicit and consistent support as they adapt their instructional practices to various delivery methods, including remote and hybrid learning, to be responsive to community needs this fall.

Placing the process of identifying, diagnosing, and responding to student needs in the context of an overall balanced assessment system ensures that these efforts integrate with other measures of student learning.

Resources for support

Planning for students' return to the classroom, whether remote, hybrid, or in-person, requires ongoing engagement and communication with stakeholders, as suggested below. In addition, educators need support and agility to develop and allocate resources, and professional learning and training to strengthen various modes of instruction. Cognia™ has assembled a library of tools and resources publicly available to all schools, available at cognia.org/covid19-resources.

Suggested key actions before reentry

- Engage with stakeholders (teachers, parents, students) regularly to gather data on available resources, priority needs, and feedback on considerations for reentry.
- Enhance understanding of a balanced assessment system, its components, and appropriate interpretations and uses of assessment types.
- Become familiar with available assessment resources and platforms.
- Participate in professional learning around strong instructional practices, including considerations for virtual learning environments.

Suggested key actions upon reentry

- Gather data on academic readiness (e.g., learning gaps) through multiple means to determine targets for accelerated learning, focusing on creating critical scaffolds to get or keep students on track.
- Employ effective assessment practices to inform instructional and programmatic planning.
- Continue to engage with stakeholders and SEAs to identify additional supports and resources available..

Related webinars from Cognia

- Educator and Parent Panels
- Engaging Stakeholders Through Surveys
- Leveraging Cognia Formative Assessment Tools
- Effective Best Practices in Digital Learning
- Transform Your Progress Monitoring Practices for the Virtual Classroom
- Addressing Gaps in Learning series: Curriculum Alignment, Formative Assessment, Differentiated Instruction

Find these webinars and more at cognia.org/covid19-resources/#events.

Cognia Assessments

Not all assessments are created equal. Cognia offers you outstanding formative and interim assessment solutions built on a legacy of expertise in large-scale and local assessments. Get meaningful information about what students know and can do, to inform instruction and decision making. [Contact us to learn more.](#)

