



We Hear You: What School Districts Need and Want for a Return to Learning

As school districts make final decisions for how to return to learning this fall, it's clear they will need innovative, flexible resources that can meet the moment: Students must be able to learn anywhere.

As educators ourselves, the team at Great Minds® is committed to supporting schools, teachers, and students with new resources for in-person, distance, and hybrid learning. Conditions will inevitably change throughout the year, and we aim to make all learning transitions seamless.

The Great Minds team has spent the summer listening to and learning from educators, parents, and students about what worked and what did not as schools made the abrupt transition to distance learning this past spring. We have also combed through survey findings, talked to our school district partners, and reviewed the various return-to-learning guidance published in recent months.

Based on what we've learned, Great Minds will focus on the following five key objectives this school year.

- 1 Provide flexible, high-quality knowledge-building curricula**
- 2 Attend to equity**
- 3 Assess student needs and provide curricular supports**
- 4 Support the social-emotional needs of students**
- 5 Offer teachers timely, focused professional development**

1. Provide flexible, high-quality knowledge-building curricula

Given the unpredictability of the upcoming year, schools need a strong academic foundation with high-quality knowledge-building curricula that support both in-person and distance learning. In a recent [Phi Delta Kappa International survey](#), 58 percent of educators reported that one of their top concerns is providing students with a quality curriculum during the COVID-19 crisis.

The return to instruction recommendations offered in May by Chiefs for Change and the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy echo this concern. In [“The Return: How Should Education Leaders Prepare for Reentry and Beyond?”](#), they advocate for all learning to be based on high-quality instructional materials and curriculum-based assessments: “As leaders prepare their school communities for the challenge of restarting face-to-face as well as hybrid models, a coherent pathway for learning recovery and acceleration needs to include greater reliance on high-quality materials and instruction, and completing the circle with curriculum-based assessments.”

Great Minds will continue to provide high-quality knowledge-building curricula that teachers and students can use wherever learning takes place next year. This summer, we launched *Great Minds in Sync*™, a suite of print and digital resources created by our teacher-writers for our curricula, *Eureka Math*®, *Wit & Wisdom*® (English language arts), and *PhD Science*®. *Great Minds in Sync* allows teachers to toggle seamlessly from classroom instruction to distance learning without sacrificing coherence.

Building on the success of the *Knowledge on the Go*™ video lessons, which we developed this spring in response to the pandemic, and incorporating valuable feedback from educators and parents, *Great Minds in Sync* includes video lessons to

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Knowledge-Building Curriculum Key to Engaging Students During Spring School Closures

“If this distance learning shift occurred before our curriculum upgrade, I would be fretting about building out lessons. Probably whipping up packets Instead, I’ve been finding tactics to translate rich instruction. I focused where the curriculum focused—knowledge building—because I’ve learned that if you get that right, other skills present themselves more naturally, from comprehension to writing If kids could join me for lessons, great! When parents informed me that tech might be an issue, I coached parents to make a list of interesting topics and to research, talk, read, write, argue on that topic. All of a sudden, distance learning didn’t seem so daunting.”

—Kyair Butts,

Grade 6 teacher using *Wit & Wisdom*,
Baltimore City Public Schools,

[“Curriculum Matters Even More in a Crisis”](#)

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provide or supplement core direct instruction in math, ELA, and science. In addition, it offers digital classwork to support student-teacher interactions and checks for understanding as well as teacher resources with guidance on how to deliver hybrid instruction.

Geodes in a Digital Learning Environment

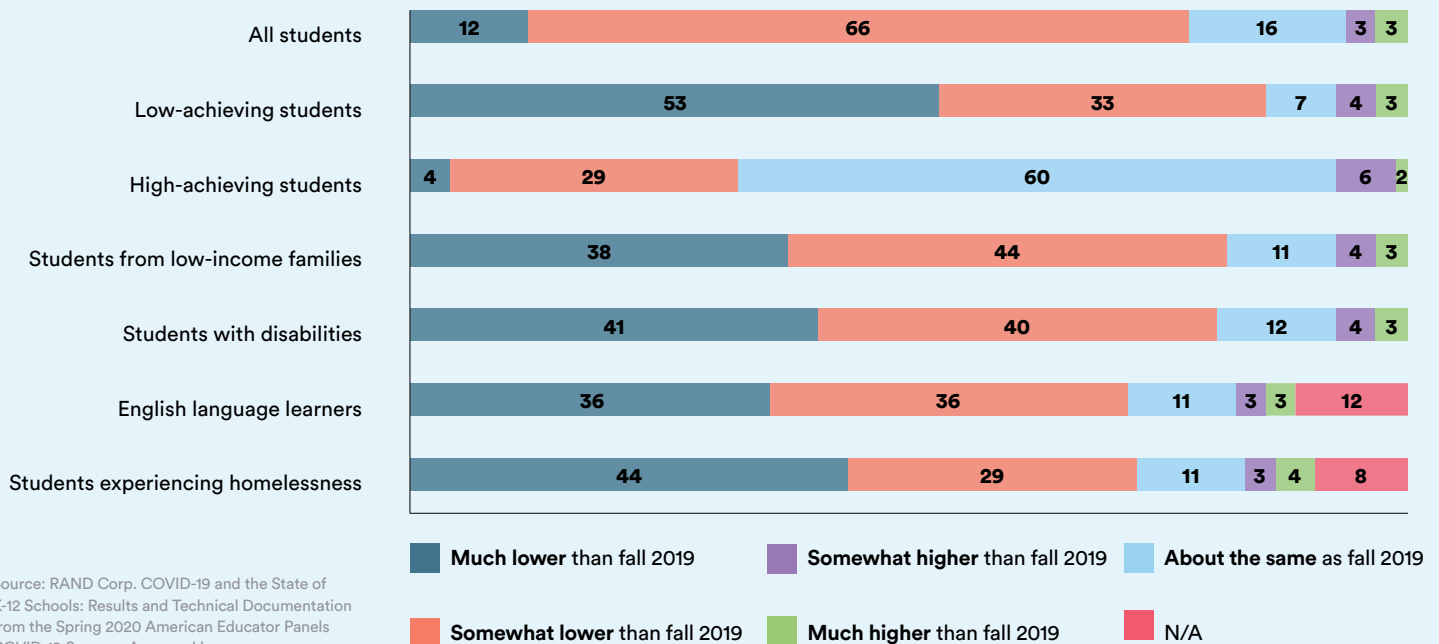
Wit & Wisdom in Sync™ provides schools also using *Geodes®* with access to 30 digital flipbooks and read-aloud videos per grade for Grades K–2. Developed in collaboration with [Wilson Language Training®](#), publisher of *Foundations®*, the evidence-based foundational reading and spelling program for students in Grades K–3, *Geodes* combine carefully selected language with highly engaging content and illustrations from top artists. These books build students’ confidence in their ability to read and use knowledge-building topics to inspire curiosity.

2. Attend to equity

School closures have exacerbated existing education inequities, and administrators, teachers, and parents alike are concerned about a widening achievement gap. A recent [Education Next survey](#) found that 71 percent of parents think their children learned less from home this spring than they would have in school. Principals share parents’ concerns about unfinished instruction from the spring and where students will start the fall academically. In a [recent RAND survey](#),

principals were consistently concerned that student achievement might be “much lower” or “somewhat lower” than fall 2019 for almost all student groups (see chart below). Therefore, it is not surprising that a [recent white paper from NWEA](#) predicts that students in Grades 3–8 will return to school in fall 2020 with roughly 70 percent of the learning gains in reading and only 50 percent of the learning gains in math relative to a typical school year.

Principals’ estimate of how student achievement might differ in fall 2020 compared with fall 2019



Source: RAND Corp. COVID-19 and the State of K-12 Schools: Results and Technical Documentation from the Spring 2020 American Educator Panels COVID-19 Surveys. Accessed [here](#).

While some have proposed keeping students in their previous grade level until completing unfinished instruction from last school year, the research is clear that this approach harms students. TNTP's 2018 report [The Opportunity Myth](#) found that all students, including students who are academically behind, need grade-level instruction and too few are receiving the rigorous instruction they deserve. Furthermore, TNTP's study found that when students are taught with grade-level appropriate materials and held to high expectations, achievement gaps narrow. Therefore, in an [April report](#) on preparing for the 2020–2021 school year, TNTP recommends an acceleration strategy to support unfinished instruction: “Schools need to be ready on the first day back with a fundamentally different strategy for diagnosing lost learning and putting every student on a fast track back to grade level—a strategy designed to accelerate their exposure to grade-appropriate work, not delay it.”

Attending to equity requires grade-level instruction, not reteaching the previous year's content. Fortunately, a well-equipped and supported teacher can bridge a knowledge gap with minimal disruption to the delivery of grade-level content. *Great Minds in Sync* provides Learn Anywhere Plans and diagnostic assessments for teachers to support students in their unfinished instruction from the previous school year without compromising grade-level content. In addition, Learn Anywhere Plans offer teachers pacing guidance and tips on adjusting instruction to meet the needs of students and their learning environment.

Wit & Wisdom in Sync also includes vocabulary videos to support all learners. Designed with English learners in mind, these videos include Spanish-language content for multilingual students and families. For each word defined, its definition is offered in both English and Spanish. Students are also asked to discuss a content-based question from the video at home so they can practice speaking and listening and give their families a connection point to the content.

Furthermore, to ensure that students have access to knowledge-building resources now, Great Minds will keep *Knowledge on the Go* free and available to everyone through the end of summer. Schools can use the *Knowledge on the Go* videos in math, ELA, and science as part of their direct summer instruction or share it with families to use independently. We have also partnered with public television stations to make these lessons even more widely available. Louisiana Public Broadcasting, together with the Louisiana Department of Education, [broadcasted](#) lessons throughout July. By continuing to engage with rich knowledge-building content, students will be better prepared to start school this fall.

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Retaining Students Is Not the Answer

“One ‘desperate measure’ that’s gotten widespread attention is to retain vast numbers of low-income children at their current grade level. Baltimore educators won’t be spending one minute of time or one ounce of their brain power exploring this option, for a simple reason: it will not help children. A meta-analysis of the best research suggests that holding back students in elementary grades makes at best a tiny difference—but even that difference melts over time. No good research finds any gains for retaining older students.”

—Sonja Santelises,
Chief Executive Officer,
Baltimore City Public Schools
(Source: [The Baltimore Sun](#))

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Address the Digital Divide

One clear challenge to distance learning in spring 2020 was the digital divide. Schools and districts worked hard to increase access to digital devices and reliable internet for as many students as possible. But the divide remains: Not all students have the resources to succeed in a distance learning environment.

According to the [Federal Communications Commission](#), 97 percent of people in urban areas have high-speed internet access compared to 65 percent in rural areas and 60 percent on Tribal lands. Additionally, we know that the digital divide does not affect students and families equally. A recent [YouthTruth survey](#) found that 26 percent of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch said “limited or no internet access” was an obstacle to distance

learning. In the same survey, 19 percent of these students reported “limited or no access to a computer or device” as an obstacle to distance learning compared to 10 percent for students not eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

In the coming year, schools and districts should forge partnerships where possible to bring students distance learning resources while also thinking creatively about how to support students still affected by the digital divide. In addition, to fully support students in hybrid or distance learning environments, schools must work to ensure that students have both the technological resources they need *and* access to high-quality knowledge-building curricula. One without the other will leave too many students vulnerable to continued learning loss.

3. Assess student needs and provide curricular supports

Accurately assessing student learning is a priority for educators in the year ahead. In a [recent EdWeek Market Brief survey](#) (subscription required), 41 percent of district administrators said that their most urgent need is assessing students’ learning losses in the fall; they expect curriculum providers to help. A [recent RAND survey](#) found that 46 percent of school principals anticipate having to modify their regular curriculum to help students catch up.

The [Education Trust’s recent surveys](#) of parents across multiple states found that nearly 90 percent of parents are worried about their children falling behind academically because of coronavirus-related school closures, ranking this concern higher than any other financial or social-emotional concern.

A coherent high-quality curriculum is iterative, returning to content and concepts repeatedly over the years. So curriculum developers are well positioned to help schools and districts figure out how to use that aspect of curriculum design to help fill any instructional gaps for students while simultaneously delivering grade-level content.

To help teachers identify and bridge student learning gaps, we are launching *Eureka Math Equip*™, an innovative new adaptive diagnostic assessment tool. Unlike a state assessment or an interim assessment, *Eureka Math Equip* is designed to be used before the start of each module to help teachers address learning gaps during ongoing instruction—not after—so students can remain engaged in grade-level content.

Partnerships Key for Assessing Gaps and Providing Supports

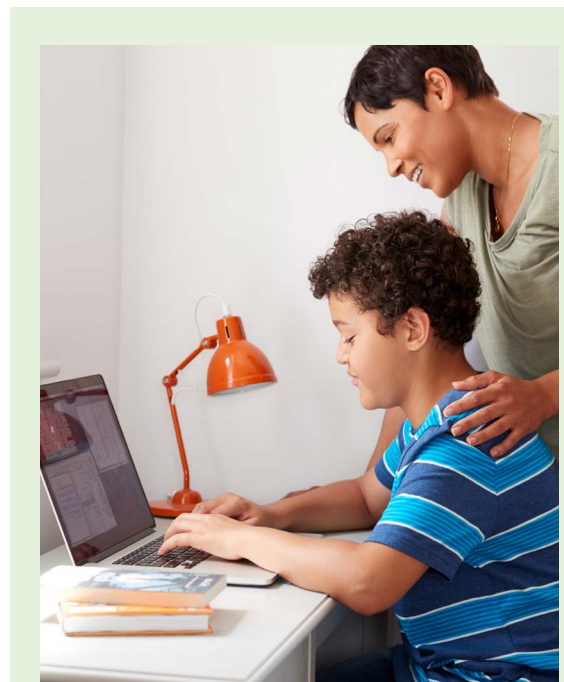
In [A Blueprint for Back to School](#), the American Enterprise Institute, in consultation with state school chiefs, explicitly recommends that educators partner with curriculum providers “to identify the best way to use the publisher’s material to identify student learning gaps, how their materials can be used in different ways (e.g., in-classroom instruction, remote learning, and hybrid learning), and how the provider can help give professional development for teachers.”

4. Support the social-emotional needs of students

Surveys show that educators are very concerned about the health and safety and social-emotional needs of students going into the fall. In a recent [PDK International poll](#), 66 percent of classroom teachers said their main concern for the next school year is student mental health, followed closely by other student health and safety concerns (excluding mental health)—a legitimate concern given that in a recent [Educators for Excellence survey](#), 69 percent and 62 percent of teachers reported, respectively, that students expressed social concerns (e.g., missing in-person experiences with friends and family) and emotional concerns (e.g., feeling anxious or depressed) because of COVID-19.

Curriculum can support students’ social-emotional development. *Eureka Math* and *Wit & Wisdom* foster development of the five core competencies from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. *Eureka Math* lessons include sample dialogues to help encourage robust conversations and peer-to-peer interaction. *Wit & Wisdom* includes carefully selected texts paired with strong instructional practices to help students build empathy, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making. Detailed analyses of how these curricula integrate social-emotional learning with instruction are available [here](#).

At a time requiring hybrid and distance learning, Great Minds remains committed to the central tenet that peer-to-peer discourse is key to student learning. Therefore, coupled with our belief that all students need access to high-quality direct instruction on new content, we believe that teachers should primarily use synchronous small- or whole-group meetings to facilitate peer-to-peer math discourse. *Great Minds in Sync* includes video lessons for direct core instruction so that teachers can use precious virtual meeting time to engage students in group discussions or host one-on-one meetings with students.

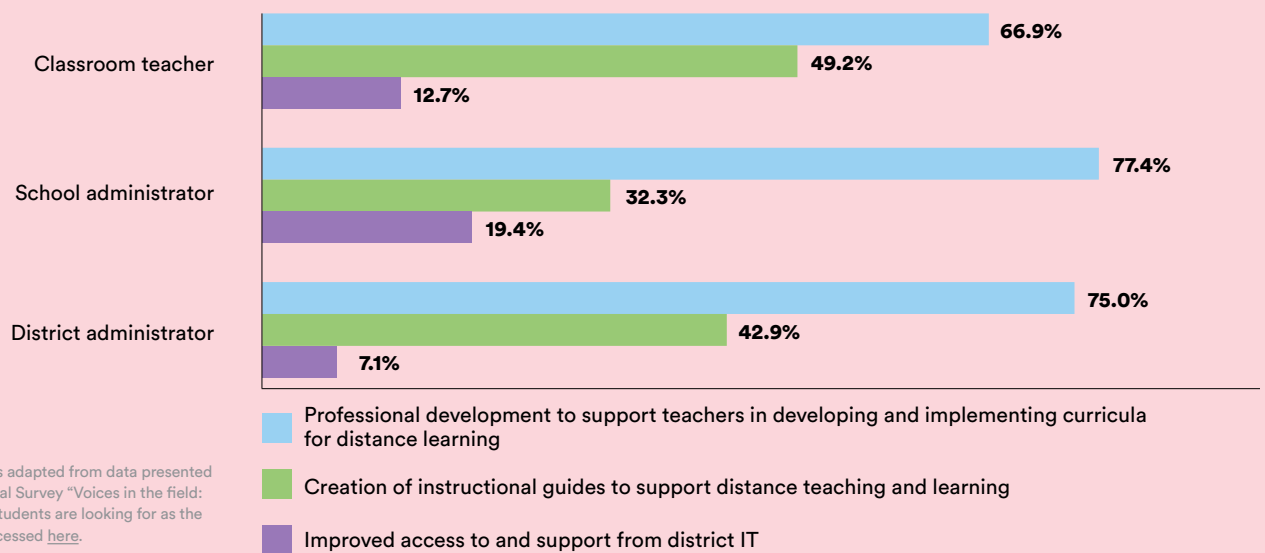


5. Offer teachers timely, focused professional development

In a recent [Educators for Excellence survey](#), 36 percent of teachers reported not receiving professional development since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. And of those who have received professional development, only 39 percent say it has been very relevant to the current educational landscape.

A recent [PDK International survey](#) found that teachers and administrators were looking for professional development opportunities this summer to support the development and implementation of curricula that can be taught in an online environment (see chart below).

Teachers' summer professional development needs to prepare for return to learning



Source: This chart was adapted from data presented in the PDK International Survey "Voices in the field: What educators and students are looking for as the school year ends." Accessed [here](#).

Great Minds in Sync answers the call, offering both continuous learning resources and—because schools and teachers are in different stages of curriculum implementation—virtual professional development and coaching in a distance or hybrid learning environment. The virtual professional development consists of live, facilitator-led sessions that are inspired by the same learning design and goals as our in-person sessions.

As schools finalize their plans for the year ahead, *Great Minds* will continue reaching out to educators and parents to learn how we can help them this upcoming school year and beyond while drawing on our own experiences as teachers and parents to continue developing high-quality knowledge-building curricula adaptable to any learning environment.



EVERY CHILD IS CAPABLE OF GREATNESS



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