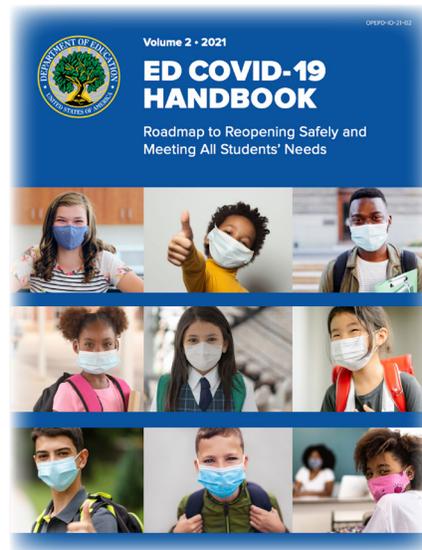




OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN INDICATORS: WHY THEY MATTER MORE THAN EVER RIGHT NOW



In the last 10 years, education scholars have made a **concerted effort** to shift our nation away from its single-minded focus on so-called “achievement gaps” that are typically based on test score and graduation differences. Instead, we can learn from a balanced approach that also seeks to measure and understand the “opportunity gaps” that drive these achievement gaps.

These **gaps in opportunity** include both in-school factors, such as tracking systems that ration challenging learning experiences to a select few, and out-of-school factors such as inequitable access to housing and nutrition. Unlike the achievement gap framing—which often simply highlights disparities in test scores without explaining why they exist and thereby implies that students themselves are to blame—opportunity gap language seeks to get at the root of the problem by exposing the systemic social and political structures that provide some students with more and better learning opportunities than others.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown a spotlight on these opportunity gaps. BIPOC students have had **less access** to in-person learning since the pandemic started—an injustice that poses both learning and mental wellness challenges. People in Black, Latinx, and Native communities have **died and been hospitalized** from the disease at two or more times the rate of the white population. Although children and young people have been relatively less likely to suffer serious COVID effects, family and community illnesses and death still have a major impact on their lives.

The U.S. Department of Education, in a 2021 publication titled, *Ed COVID-19 Handbook: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs*, stresses the need to consider how the pandemic has impacted opportunities to learn (OTL). Under the federal American Rescue Plan of 2021, schools have access to billions of new dollars. But these resources will not be targeted in such a way to provide all students with opportunities to learn unless OTL indicators are tracked and used to target the funds.

As the *Handbook* points out, “States and districts should consider prioritizing OTLs that are related to student outcomes in understanding where increased investments could be made.” This means collecting data that goes beyond assessing the impact of the pandemic on student achievement. Data must also include OTL indicators that help explain why these results occurred. These data, according to the Department of Education, might include:

- Chronic absenteeism rates;
- Discipline rates, including in-school and out-of-school suspension (including multiple suspensions and length of suspensions), and expulsion rates;
- Data from student, staff, and family surveys;
- The ratio of students to nurses, counselors, social workers, and psychologists, and access to integrated support services;
- Educator certification (e.g., full certification in the area assigned, additional certifications such as National Board Certification);
- Educator experience;
- Educator effectiveness;
- Educator chronic absenteeism and turnover rates;
- Educator supports such as mentors, induction programs, evidence-based professional development, and leadership opportunities;
- Internet access (in school and at home) and student device ratios (e.g., 1:1);
- The quality of remote learning (e.g., engagement with high-quality curricula and instructional materials);
- Educator access to personalized, job-embedded professional learning opportunities on the effective use of technology;
- Advanced course participation and completion, including in Advanced Placement (AP), IB, dual enrollment, and early college programs, gatekeeper courses, and high-quality STEM and career and technical education pathways;
- Culturally and linguistically responsive curriculum designs;
- The adoption of high-quality diagnostic assessments to inform instruction; and
- Access to project-based, experiential learning opportunities that meet the individualized needs of students.

The Department's *Handbook* also suggests that educators disaggregate these data to examine whether the indicators differ for student subgroups. This will help schools target needed resources toward communities that have received fewer opportunities to learn. Similarly, the Department points out that getting aid to those most in need will require considering out-of-school inequities in, for example, COVID community death rates.

The *Handbook* addresses a wide variety of related concerns and offers recommendations— noting, for example, the importance of engaging authentically with parents, in their home languages and in ways that are accessible to people with disabilities and those without high-speed internet connections. And schools should ensure that interrupted learning time during the pandemic does not foreclose students' opportunities to take advantage of advanced coursework down the road.

The U.S. Department Education's *Ed COVID-19 Handbook* is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/reopening-2.pdf>.

NEPC Resources on Equity and Social Justice

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