

Academic Recovery to Support Literacy Skills in K-12 Education



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Introduction

Academic recovery has become one of the most urgent priorities in K–12 education, particularly as schools continue to address the lasting impacts of disrupted learning. At the center of this work is literacy, a foundational skill that influences students' ability to access content, think critically, and succeed across all subject areas. This course, *Academic Recovery to Support Literacy Skills in K–12 Education*, is designed to help educators understand the complex relationship between academic recovery and literacy development, while providing practical, evidence-based strategies to support student growth.

Throughout the course, educators will explore key concepts such as unfinished learning, the science of reading, and literacy equity, building a strong foundation for instructional decision-making. The course then moves into actionable strategies, including integrating literacy across content areas, implementing acceleration, leveraging high-impact instructional models, and designing inclusive, supportive learning environments. By bridging research and practice, this course supports educators in creating meaningful, equitable learning experiences that help all students move forward with confidence and success.

Section 1: Foundations of Academic Recovery and Literacy Development

Academic recovery and literacy development are deeply interconnected, particularly in the wake of widespread educational disruptions. As schools work to support students in regaining momentum, it is essential to understand both the broader context of academic recovery and the foundational components of literacy development. This section explores key concepts that shape how students learn and how educators can respond to gaps in learning, including the current

state of recovery, the distinction between learning loss and unfinished learning, and the research-based frameworks that guide literacy instruction. By examining these elements, educators can better understand how to support students in accessing grade-level content while continuing to build critical reading skills.

1.1 Understanding Academic Recovery in K-12 Education

In recent years, academic recovery has become a central focus in K-12 education as schools work to address the lasting impacts of disrupted learning.

Understanding what academic recovery means, and how it differs from traditional approaches, is essential for educators seeking to effectively support all students.

Definition and Purpose of Academic Recovery

Academic recovery refers to the intentional efforts educators and school systems take to address unfinished learning and support students in progressing toward grade-level expectations. Unlike traditional approaches that focus solely on reteaching missed content, academic recovery emphasizes identifying specific skill gaps and providing targeted instruction that enables students to re-engage with current grade-level learning (Banerji, 2025). A key shift in recent educational research is the move away from the term “learning loss” toward “unfinished learning.” This distinction reflects the understanding that students continued to learn during disruptions, but may not have fully mastered critical skills or concepts (Banerji). The differences between learning loss and unfinished learning will be discussed in more detail in section 1.3. Academic recovery is not about “going backward,” but about strategically supporting students in building the knowledge and skills needed to succeed moving forward. The primary purpose of academic recovery is to (Carbonari et al.):

- Close gaps in essential skills, notably in literacy and math

- Ensure equitable access to grade-level content
- Prevent long-term academic challenges and disengagement
- Support all students in achieving academic success

The State of Academic Recovery Post-COVID-19

The current state of academic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic remains a significant concern for educators and policymakers. Despite substantial investments in recovery efforts and the passage of several years since initial school disruptions, data suggest that progress has been slow, uneven, and insufficient to fully address learning loss (Murray, 2025). Findings from the third iteration of the Education Recovery Scorecard, developed by Harvard's Center for Education Policy Research, paint a stark picture of recovery at the district level. Drawing on data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and state assessments administered to approximately 35 million students across 43 states, the report examines student performance in 2019 (pre-pandemic), 2022, and 2024. These data were further analyzed alongside information on federal pandemic relief funding and trends in chronic absenteeism to better understand factors influencing recovery outcomes. The results indicate that widespread recovery has not yet occurred. As highlighted in the report, 94 percent of elementary and middle school students are enrolled in districts where achievement levels in reading and mathematics have not returned to pre-pandemic benchmarks (Murray). In fact, rather than demonstrating consistent improvement, students have, on average, fallen further behind compared to 2022 data. The typical student remains approximately six months behind in both reading and math when compared to peers in the same grade level in 2019.

Equally concerning is the growing inequity in academic outcomes. The data reveal that pandemic-related learning loss has disproportionately impacted students in

lower-income districts and those serving higher proportions of racial and ethnic minority populations (Murray, 2025). For example, disparities in math achievement between students in affluent and low-income districts have widened by 11 percent since the onset of the pandemic, while gaps between majority-white and predominantly minority districts have increased by 15 percent (Murray, 2025). Even within individual districts, racial and ethnic achievement gaps have expanded by 7 to 12 percent in mathematics. Although similar trends are observed in reading, the increases in disparity are slightly less pronounced. These findings underscore a critical reality: academic recovery is not only incomplete but also increasingly inequitable. While some districts, particularly those with greater resources, have shown modest gains, the overall trajectory suggests that many students, especially those in historically underserved communities, continue to face substantial barriers to regaining lost learning (Murray).

Building on its analysis of stalled and uneven recovery, the Education Recovery Scorecard identifies four key priorities that are essential for accelerating academic recovery efforts across districts and schools. These recommendations emphasize not only instructional improvement but also systemic and community-wide action (Murray, 2025). First, the report underscores the importance of sustaining investment in high-quality academic recovery strategies. During the pandemic, federal relief funding enabled many districts to implement interventions such as high-dosage tutoring, extended learning time, and targeted small-group instruction. However, as these funds have largely been exhausted, the Scorecard stresses the need for continued funding, through state, local, or alternative sources, to maintain and scale these evidence-based practices (Murray). Without sustained financial support, many of the most effective recovery initiatives risk being discontinued before meaningful progress can be achieved.

Second, the report calls for a comprehensive and coordinated effort to address chronic absenteeism, which has emerged as a major barrier to recovery (Murray,

2025). Reducing absenteeism is not solely the responsibility of schools; rather, it requires collaboration among educators, families, community leaders, and even local employers. By engaging multiple stakeholders, districts can better address the underlying causes of absenteeism, such as transportation challenges, health concerns, and disengagement from school, all of which directly impact students' ability to benefit from instructional recovery efforts (Murray).

Third, the Scorecard highlights the need for clear, consistent communication with families about student progress. Parents and caregivers must be accurately informed about whether their children are meeting grade-level expectations and, if not, what supports are available (Murray, 2025). This includes providing transparent data on student performance and ensuring families have easy access to remediation opportunities, such as tutoring programs or summer learning initiatives. Strengthening this communication helps build partnerships between schools and families, which is critical for reinforcing learning outside the classroom.

Finally, the report emphasizes the importance of expanding and scaling effective instructional reforms, particularly those grounded in research. For example, approaches aligned with the Science of Reading and the adoption of high-quality, standards-aligned curricula have shown promising results in improving student outcomes (Murray, 2025). The Scorecard suggests that states and districts that have not yet implemented these reforms should prioritize doing so, ensuring that all students have access to rigorous, evidence-based instruction.

Distinguishing Academic Recovery from Traditional Remediation Models

In the context of post-pandemic academic recovery, educators are increasingly examining the effectiveness of two primary instructional approaches: acceleration and remediation. While both aim to address unfinished learning, they differ significantly in philosophy, implementation, and impact on student outcomes.

Acceleration is an instructional approach that prioritizes grade-level learning while strategically addressing gaps in foundational knowledge (Edmentum, 2023). Rather than pulling students back to below-grade-level content for extended periods, teachers integrate brief, targeted supports, often called “just-in-time” scaffolds, within grade-level instruction. These supports are designed to address specific prerequisite skills that may hinder understanding, allowing students to quickly re-engage with current learning expectations (Edmentum). This approach is grounded in the idea that students benefit from continued exposure to rigorous, grade-level content, even if they have gaps in prior knowledge. Research cited by Edmentum, including work from the The New Teacher Project, supports acceleration as a more effective strategy for addressing pandemic-related learning loss. The U.S. Department of Education similarly defines acceleration as identifying and addressing critical gaps while maintaining forward momentum in learning, ensuring students remain engaged and continue building academic vocabulary and conceptual understanding (Edmentum).

In contrast, remediation, often referred to as reteaching, focuses on revisiting previously taught, below-grade-level content that students did not initially master (Edmentum, 2023). This approach typically involves pausing grade-level instruction to reteach foundational skills, often identified through formative assessment. While remediation can be valuable when used strategically and early in the learning process, it often results in students spending extended time on past material, which may limit their exposure to current grade-level standards. Although remediation is commonly used and can be effective in addressing specific misconceptions, it has notable limitations. When overused, it can create a cycle in which struggling students are repeatedly exposed to lower-level content without sufficient opportunities to engage in grade-level work. This can ultimately widen achievement gaps rather than close them (Edmentum).

Recent research further highlights the differences in outcomes between these two approaches. According to (Camera, 2022), students who experience accelerated instruction not only complete more grade-level content but also demonstrate lower levels of academic struggle. Specifically, students engaged in acceleration were found to struggle 17% less in subsequent grade-level lessons compared to those who received remediation. In contrast, students who were remediated had a 44% likelihood of struggling with future grade-level content, compared to 36% for those who experienced acceleration (Camera). Additionally, the research reveals important equity implications. Students in schools serving predominantly Black, Latino, and low-income populations are more likely to be assigned remedial work, even when they demonstrate the same capacity to succeed with grade-level material as their peers in more affluent or majority-white schools (Camera). This suggests that instructional decisions about remediation versus acceleration may unintentionally reinforce existing disparities in educational opportunity.

1.2 The Science of Reading

Understanding how students learn to read is essential for designing effective instruction, particularly in the context of academic recovery. The science of reading or literacy development provides a research-based framework for how reading skills develop over time, emphasizing that literacy is not a single skill but a complex, evolving process. This section explores two key components of that framework: the stages of literacy development across the lifespan and the foundational pillars that support reading proficiency. Together, these concepts help educators better understand how to meet learners where they are and provide targeted, evidence-based instruction to support continued growth.

Stages of Literacy Development

Literacy development evolves through distinct stages, each characterized by specific skills, behaviors, and instructional needs. Using Chall's framework, literacy development can be understood as progressing from early language exposure in childhood to advanced, critical literacy in adulthood (The Literacy Bug, n.d.). These stages highlight how reading and writing abilities deepen over time and how instruction must adapt to meet learners' changing needs.

Stage 0: Pre-Reading (Birth to Age 6)

In the earliest stage, also referred to as emergent reading, children develop foundational language and literacy awareness. They engage in behaviors such as pretending to read, recognizing letters, and interacting with books; although they may understand thousands of spoken words, they typically cannot yet read independently (The Literacy Bug, n.d.). This stage emphasizes oral language development, vocabulary growth, and early print awareness. Adults play a critical role by modeling language, engaging in shared reading, and encouraging interaction with texts through strategies such as dialogic reading (The Literacy Bug).

Stage 1: Initial Reading and Decoding (Ages 6–7)

During this stage, children begin to understand the relationship between letters and sounds, enabling them to decode simple words and texts (The Literacy Bug, n.d.). They start reading high-frequency and phonetically regular words and experiment with early writing forms. Instruction focuses heavily on phonological awareness, phonics, and the development of basic decoding skills. Students also begin to apply these skills through both reading and writing activities, marking the transition into formal literacy learning (The Literacy Bug).

Stage 2: Confirmation and Fluency (Ages 7–8)

At this stage, students build fluency and confidence in reading. They can read familiar texts with increasing accuracy and speed while beginning to focus more on comprehension (The Literacy Bug, n.d.). Instruction emphasizes repeated reading, exposure to a variety of texts, and vocabulary development. By the end of this stage, students are transitioning from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” a critical shift in literacy development (The Literacy Bug).

Stage 3: Reading to Learn (Ages 9–13)

In this stage, reading becomes a primary tool for acquiring new knowledge. Students engage with more complex texts and are expected to extract meaning, analyze information, and apply comprehension strategies (The Literacy Bug, n.d.). Instruction focuses on higher-order thinking skills, including summarizing, questioning, identifying main ideas, and using context to determine meaning. Students also begin to read across disciplines, using literacy skills to support learning in all subject areas (The Literacy Bug).

Stage 4: Multiple Perspectives (Ages 14–17)

Adolescent readers in this stage are expected to engage with diverse and complex texts, often requiring them to analyze multiple viewpoints and synthesize information (The Literacy Bug, n.d.). Literacy becomes more discipline-specific, with students applying reading and writing skills in specialized contexts such as science, history, and literature. Instruction supports critical thinking, analysis, and the ability to evaluate and integrate information from multiple sources (The Literacy Bug).

Stage 5: Construction and Reconstruction (Adulthood)

In the final stage, literacy is used for personal, professional, and societal purposes. Individuals read and write strategically to solve problems, generate new knowledge, and communicate effectively across contexts (The Literacy Bug, n.d.).

Literacy becomes highly specialized and shaped by one's experiences, career, and interests. This stage emphasizes critical literacy, where individuals evaluate, synthesize, and apply information in meaningful ways (The Literacy Bug) .

Pillars of Literacy

The five pillars of literacy, originally identified by the National Reading Panel and backed by the Science of Reading framework, represent the essential components required for students to become proficient readers (Lexia, 2025). These pillars - phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension - work together to support the development of strong reading skills. The five pillars include the following.

- **Phonemic Awareness:** Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate individual sounds, or phonemes, in spoken words. This foundational skill allows students to understand that words are made up of discrete sounds, which can be blended, segmented, and rearranged (Lexia, 2025). Instruction in phonemic awareness is most effective when it is explicit, focused, and often delivered in small-group settings. Developing this skill is critical because it underpins students' ability to decode words and build early reading proficiency .
- **Phonics:** Phonics builds on phonemic awareness by connecting sounds to written letters and letter patterns (Lexia, 2025). It involves understanding the relationship between graphemes (letters) and phonemes (sounds) and using this knowledge to decode (read) and encode (write) words. Systematic phonics instruction has been shown to significantly improve reading outcomes, particularly for beginning readers and those who struggle with reading (Lexia). While phonics is a crucial component of literacy, it is only one part of a broader system of skills required for reading success .

- **Fluency:** Fluency refers to the ability to read text accurately, quickly, and with appropriate expression (Lexia, 2025). Fluent readers can recognize words automatically, allowing them to focus their cognitive energy on understanding the meaning of the text. Fluency serves as a bridge between decoding and comprehension; without it, students may struggle to make sense of what they read. Research shows that students with strong fluency skills are more likely to succeed in overall literacy development, as fluency supports both word recognition and comprehension (Lexia).
- **Vocabulary:** Vocabulary encompasses the words students need to understand and use effectively in both spoken and written language. A strong vocabulary allows students to make meaning from text and communicate their ideas clearly (Lexia, 2025). Vocabulary development occurs through both direct instruction and exposure to rich language experiences, including reading, conversation, and content-area learning. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, students may be able to decode words but still struggle to comprehend what they read (Lexia).
- **Comprehension:** Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading and involves constructing meaning from text. It requires the integration of multiple skills, including decoding, vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, and critical thinking (Lexia, 2025). Students must be able to interpret, analyze, and reflect on what they read. Models such as the *Simple View of Reading* and *Scarborough's Reading Rope* further illustrate that comprehension depends on both word recognition and language comprehension working together (Lexia). A weakness in any of these underlying components can hinder overall reading success .

Together, the five pillars of literacy provide a comprehensive framework for effective reading instruction. Rather than teaching these components in isolation,

educators must integrate them in meaningful ways to support students' development as skilled, confident readers (Lexia, 2025).

1.3 Impact of Disrupted Instruction and Unfinished Learning

After the COVID-19 pandemic, two terms have become central to discussions of academic recovery: learning loss and unfinished learning. While often used interchangeably, these concepts represent distinct ways of understanding disruptions in student learning, each with important implications for instruction, student outcomes, and educational equity (Nisbet, 2021).

Understanding Learning Loss and Its Impacts

In contrast, unfinished learning refers to content and skills that students were in the process of learning but did not fully master or were never given the opportunity to learn (Nisbet, 2021). Rather than emphasizing a loss of knowledge, this term highlights the idea that learning is incomplete but ongoing. It reflects a more forward-looking perspective, suggesting that students can continue building on prior knowledge with appropriate support and instruction. Unfinished learning has become a preferred term among many educators because of its more constructive and asset-based framing. It acknowledges that students still retain prior learning and are capable of progressing, which can positively influence both instructional approaches and student mindset (Nisbet). This distinction is particularly important in the context of pandemic-related disruptions, where many students experienced pauses in learning rather than complete regression. Research indicates that unfinished learning has been especially significant in key subject areas such as mathematics and early literacy, with younger students and those in lower-income communities experiencing greater gaps (Nisbet).

Key Differences Between Learning Loss and Unfinished Learning

The primary difference between learning loss and unfinished learning lies in both definition and perspective. Learning loss emphasizes what students have lost, often focusing on deficits and decline. In contrast, unfinished learning emphasizes what remains to be learned, framing gaps as opportunities for continued growth rather than failures (Nisbet, 2021). This distinction has meaningful implications for practice. A focus on learning loss may lead educators to prioritize remediation and reteaching of past content, sometimes at the expense of grade-level learning. Conversely, a focus on unfinished learning aligns more closely with instructional approaches such as acceleration, which integrate foundational skill support within grade-level instruction (Nisbet). Additionally, the language used to describe learning gaps can influence student motivation and well-being. Framing gaps as unfinished learning rather than loss may help reduce stigma, promote a growth mindset, and encourage persistence, particularly in students who have been disproportionately impacted by educational disruptions (Nisbet).

1.4 Literacy Gaps and Equity Considerations

Literacy equity is a critical component of educational equity and refers to ensuring that all students - regardless of background - have access to the resources, instruction, and support needed to become proficient readers (Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity, 2024). Achieving literacy equity requires more than equal access; it involves proactively addressing systemic inequities and removing barriers that disproportionately impact historically marginalized and minoritized student groups. At its core, literacy equity emphasizes the need for integrated and inclusive instructional practices that meet the diverse needs of all learners. This includes providing high-quality, evidence-based literacy instruction, ensuring access to appropriate materials, and creating learning environments where every student can succeed (Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity).

Without intentional efforts to address inequities, disparities in literacy outcomes are likely to persist and, in many cases, widen over time.

Current Disparities in Literacy Achievement

Despite decades of research and reform efforts, significant disparities in literacy achievement remain. Students experiencing poverty, students of color, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities often encounter systemic barriers that hinder their literacy development (Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity, 2024). These barriers may include limited access to high-quality instruction, inequitable resource allocation, and instructional practices that do not adequately reflect or support diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) continue to highlight persistent gaps in reading proficiency across racial and socioeconomic groups. Students who identify as Black or Hispanic, as well as those from lower-income households, consistently score below their peers from more affluent and predominantly White backgrounds. These disparities are often reinforced by structural practices within schools, such as tracking, ability grouping, and removal from core instruction, which can limit access to grade-level content and high-quality literacy experiences (Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity).

Importantly, these literacy gaps are not isolated issues but reflect broader systemic inequities within education. Traditional educational systems have often been designed around narrow norms that do not represent the diverse identities and experiences of today's student population. As a result, many students are underserved by instructional models that fail to account for cultural, linguistic, and individual differences (Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity, 2024).

Broader Implications of Literacy Inequity

The consequences of literacy inequity extend far beyond academic performance. Literacy is closely linked to long-term social and economic outcomes, including employment opportunities, civic engagement, and overall well-being (Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity, 2024). One of the most concerning connections is the relationship between literacy and the *school-to-prison pipeline*, a phenomenon in which students who struggle academically, particularly in reading, are at increased risk of disengagement, dropout, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity). Research cited by the U.S. Department of Justice indicates that a significant proportion of incarcerated individuals read below a fourth-grade level, underscoring the profound long-term impact of early literacy challenges. Students who do not develop strong reading skills are more likely to experience frustration, disengagement, and limited academic success, all of which can contribute to broader life challenges (Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity).

Section 1 Conclusion

Together, the concepts explored in this section highlight the complexity of academic recovery and the importance of grounding instruction in research-based literacy practices. From understanding the realities of post-pandemic learning gaps to examining how literacy develops over time, it is clear that effective recovery requires both intentional planning and responsive instruction. Moving forward, the focus shifts from understanding the problem to taking action. The next section will focus on how to apply academic recovery strategies in practice.

Section 1 Key Terms

Acceleration - Instructional approach that prioritizes grade-level learning while embedding targeted supports to address specific gaps in foundational knowledge.

Academic Recovery - Intentional efforts by educators and school systems to address unfinished learning and support students in progressing toward grade-level expectations.

Achievement Gap - Differences in academic performance between groups of students, often influenced by socioeconomic, racial, or systemic factors.

Chronic Absenteeism - Frequent student absence from school that significantly impacts learning opportunities and academic progress.

Cognitive Load - The amount of mental effort required to process new information, which can impact a student's ability to learn and retain content.

Critical Literacy - The ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information from texts, particularly in relation to multiple perspectives and real-world contexts.

Decoding - The process of translating written words into spoken language by applying knowledge of letter-sound relationships.

Dialogic Reading - An interactive reading approach in which adults prompt children with questions and encourage active participation to build language and comprehension skills.

Disciplinary Literacy - The ability to read, write, and think within the specific conventions and practices of different academic disciplines.

Equitable Access - The principle of ensuring all students have the resources, opportunities, and supports needed to succeed, regardless of background.

Fluency Bridge - The concept that fluency connects decoding skills to comprehension by enabling automatic word recognition and expressive reading.

Grade-Level Content - Instructional material and learning expectations aligned to the standards for a student's current grade.

High-Dosage Tutoring - An intensive, structured form of tutoring provided frequently in small groups or one-on-one to accelerate learning.

Instructional Scaffolding - Temporary supports provided to help students access complex content and gradually build independence.

Learning Loss - A decline or reversal in academic knowledge and skills, often resulting from interruptions in formal education such as school closures, extended absences, or disruptions in instruction.

Literacy Equity - Ensuring all students have access to high-quality literacy instruction and resources while addressing systemic barriers to achievement.

Literacy Development - The ongoing process through which individuals acquire and refine reading, writing, and language skills across the lifespan.

Reading Fluency - The ability to read text accurately, quickly, and with appropriate expression, supporting comprehension.

Remediation - Instructional approach focused on reteaching previously taught, below-grade-level content that students did not master.

School-to-Prison Pipeline - A pattern in which students, particularly those from marginalized groups, are pushed out of educational systems and into the criminal justice system, often linked to academic struggles.

Systemic Inequities - Structural factors within education systems that create unequal access to opportunities and outcomes for different groups of students.

Targeted Instruction - Teaching that is specifically designed to address identified student needs or skill gaps.

Unfinished Learning - Concepts and skills that students have not yet fully mastered or had the opportunity to learn, emphasizing continued progress rather than loss.

Section 1 Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on your current understanding of academic recovery. How does your school's approach align with the idea of supporting forward progress rather than revisiting past content?
2. In what ways has your school or classroom experienced the effects of disrupted learning since COVID-19? What patterns have you noticed among your students?
3. How do you ensure that students are consistently exposed to grade-level content, even when they have gaps in foundational skills?
4. What barriers to academic recovery exist in your school or district (e.g., absenteeism, resource limitations, student engagement)? Which feel most urgent to address?
5. Which of the five pillars of literacy do you feel most confident teaching? Which pillar do you find most challenging to address effectively?

Section 1 Activities

1. **Attendance Impact Review:** Analyze your classroom attendance data and reflect on how absenteeism may be impacting student learning and progress.

2. **Family Communication Audit:** Review how you currently communicate student progress to families and identify opportunities to improve clarity, frequency, or accessibility.
3. **Equity in Instruction Reflection:** Examine your classroom practices to determine whether all students have equitable access to grade-level content and identify any unintended barriers.
4. **Literacy Stage Identification:** Identify the literacy development stages of your students and group them based on similar needs to inform differentiated instruction.
5. **Resource Curation Activity:** Research and compile evidence-based literacy resources or tools that align with the science of reading and could enhance your instruction.

Section 2: Applying Academic Recovery Strategies in Practice

Translating academic recovery strategies into classroom practice requires intentional, responsive instruction that meets students where they are while maintaining a focus on grade-level learning. As educators work to address unfinished learning, they must balance rigor with support, ensuring that all students have access to meaningful, engaging instruction across content areas. This section explores how evidence-based strategies can be applied in real classroom settings, with a focus on literacy integration, acceleration, high-impact instructional models, and system-level supports that promote sustained academic growth.

2.1 Integrating Literacy into Core and Content-Area Instruction

Today, literacy cannot be confined to language arts classrooms alone. Instead, it must be embedded across all areas of instruction to fully prepare students for the demands of academic learning and real-world problem solving. As Neuhaus Education Center (2024) suggests, effective classrooms are those in which literacy is woven throughout every subject - where students read, write, analyze, and communicate ideas across disciplines. This integrated approach is not simply an instructional enhancement; it is essential for developing well-rounded, capable learners.

The Importance of Literacy Across Subjects

While literacy is traditionally associated with reading and writing instruction, its impact extends far beyond English language arts. When students engage in literacy practices across the curriculum, they strengthen critical thinking skills, improve information retention, and develop the ability to communicate complex ideas in a variety of contexts (Neuhaus Education Center, 2024). These skills are foundational not only for academic success but also for lifelong learning. Integrating literacy into all subjects supports deeper engagement with content. Rather than passively receiving information, students actively construct meaning by reading, writing, discussing, and reflecting on what they learn. This process helps them internalize concepts more effectively and apply their knowledge in meaningful ways (Neuhaus Education Center).

Content-Area Literacy Vs. Disciplinary Literacy

As educators work to integrate literacy across the curriculum, it is important to distinguish between two related but fundamentally different approaches: content-area literacy and disciplinary literacy. While both aim to support students' reading and comprehension across subjects, they differ in purpose, instructional focus,

and underlying assumptions about how literacy develops within academic disciplines.

Content-area literacy is the older of the two approaches, emerging in the mid-20th century as a way to support students' reading skills beyond elementary school; the central idea was that if students developed strong general reading abilities - such as vocabulary knowledge, summarization, and the use of tools like dictionaries - they could apply these skills across all subject areas (Sawchuk, 2024). In this model, teachers in disciplines such as social studies or science were encouraged to reinforce general reading strategies by having students read textbooks and demonstrate comprehension. The focus was less on the unique demands of each discipline and more on helping students improve overall reading proficiency in order to access content (Sawchuk). While content-area literacy helped highlight the importance of reading across subjects, it also faced limitations. Many educators, particularly in fields like mathematics and science, questioned whether teaching general reading strategies was sufficient, or even appropriate, for helping students deeply understand discipline-specific content (Sawchuk). This led to the development of a more nuanced approach: disciplinary literacy.

Disciplinary literacy reflects the understanding that each academic field has its own ways of thinking, reading, writing, and communicating knowledge; rather than applying one set of general reading strategies across all subjects, disciplinary literacy emphasizes that students must learn to engage with texts in ways that are specific to each discipline (Sawchuk, 2024). For example, reading in history involves analyzing sources, evaluating perspective and bias, and interpreting evidence, while reading in science requires understanding technical language, interpreting data, and following logical explanations of processes. In mathematics, literacy may involve interpreting symbols, explaining reasoning, and communicating problem-solving processes. As Sawchuk explains, disciplinary

literacy requires students to adopt the perspective of experts within each field - reading like historians, scientists, mathematicians, or literary critics. This means understanding not only the content itself but also how knowledge is created, communicated, and evaluated within that discipline. Students must develop specialized strategies that allow them to navigate the unique texts and practices associated with each subject area.

Disciplinary Literacy in Content Areas

Literacy integration can take many forms depending on the subject area, but the goal remains consistent: to deepen understanding of the content through purposeful reading and writing. Neuhaus Education Center (2024) provides examples of how disciplinary literacy can be used across different subjects:

- **Science:** Students can engage in literacy through lab reports, analysis of scientific texts, and written reflections on experiments. These practices help students articulate their understanding and connect theory to application.
- **Mathematics:** Although often overlooked, math provides valuable opportunities for literacy development. Students can explain their problem-solving processes, justify their reasoning in writing, and describe mathematical concepts, reinforcing both conceptual understanding and communication skills.
- **Social Studies:** Reading primary and secondary sources, analyzing historical texts, and engaging in written discussions or debates allow students to explore multiple perspectives and better understand context and complexity.
- **The Arts:** In subjects such as art, music, and drama, literacy can be integrated through critiques, reflections, and analysis of techniques. Writing

about creative processes helps students deepen their interpretations and express their ideas more clearly (Neuhaus Education Center, 2024).

Benefits of Cross-Curricular Literacy

Embedding literacy across disciplines provides several important benefits. It promotes deeper learning and retention by encouraging students to actively engage with content (Neuhaus Education Center, 2024). It also helps students make connections between different subject areas, fostering a more holistic understanding of knowledge. Additionally, integrating literacy tasks into varied disciplines can increase student motivation, as activities become more relevant and meaningful when tied to diverse interests and real-world applications (Neuhaus Education Center).

A Structured Approach to Cross-Curricular Literacy: The START Framework

Successfully integrating literacy across the curriculum requires more than isolated strategies, it calls for a clear, structured approach that teachers can consistently apply across content areas. One such approach is the START framework, which provides a practical and accessible method for embedding literacy into everyday instruction without sacrificing content learning (Silver et al., 2023). The START framework is built on five key components that guide lesson planning and instructional design (Silver et al.):

- **Standards:** Instruction begins with a clear focus on content standards and learning targets. Teachers identify the key concepts and skills students need to develop, ensuring that literacy integration remains aligned with academic expectations.
- **Texts:** Teachers select meaningful texts that support learning goals and engage students in critical thinking. These texts can include traditional

readings as well as primary sources, multimedia, or high-interest materials that deepen content understanding.

- **Assessment:** Effective assessments require students to demonstrate both content knowledge and literacy skills. These can range from formal evaluations to informal observations, discussions, or written responses that reveal student thinking.
- **Reading and Literacy Skills:** Teachers intentionally target specific literacy skills, such as summarizing, analyzing, questioning, or supporting ideas with evidence. These skills help students both understand content and communicate their learning effectively.
- **Tools:** Instructional tools and strategies are used to support literacy development and deepen comprehension. Examples include structured discussion prompts, graphic organizers, and summarization techniques that help students engage more actively with texts and ideas.

A key strength of the START framework is its simplicity and adaptability. Rather than requiring a complete overhaul of instruction, it provides a clear entry point for teachers to begin integrating literacy into their existing lessons (Silver et al., 2023). This makes it especially effective for cross-curricular implementation, as it can be applied across grade levels and subject areas. Additionally, the use of shared literacy tools and strategies can foster collaboration among educators. When teachers across disciplines use common approaches, it creates consistency for students and supports a more cohesive learning experience. This shared language around literacy also strengthens professional collaboration and instructional alignment within schools (Silver et al.).

2.2 Accelerating Literacy Through Grade-Level Instruction

Understanding Acceleration

Acceleration is an instructional approach designed to help students close achievement gaps by ensuring they can successfully engage with grade-level content. Rather than attempting to reteach all previously missed material, acceleration focuses on providing students with the specific knowledge and skills they need to access upcoming learning; its primary goal is to reduce disparities between lower- and higher-performing students without limiting opportunities for either group (Steiner and The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, 2024). At its core, acceleration is a forward-looking strategy. It emphasizes identifying the most critical prerequisite skills students need in order to participate in grade-level instruction and teaching those skills in a timely, targeted way. This is often referred to as a “just-in-time” approach, where instruction is aligned to what students need right before they encounter new content (Steiner and The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy). By doing so, students remain engaged in current learning rather than being held back by gaps from prior instruction.

This approach differs significantly from traditional remediation. While remediation focuses on revisiting a potentially large body of missed content from the past, acceleration recognizes that it is often impractical, and ineffective, to reteach everything a student has not mastered. Instead, acceleration prioritizes efficiency by narrowing the focus to essential skills that unlock access to grade-level learning (Steiner and The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, 2024). This allows students to make progress without becoming stuck in a cycle of below-grade-level instruction. Acceleration also plays a key role in promoting educational equity. By ensuring that all students have access to grade-level content, even when they have gaps in their learning, it addresses disparities in opportunity to learn. Research has shown that students who experience acceleration not only engage

more with grade-level material but also demonstrate improved learning outcomes compared to those who are primarily remediated (Steiner and The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy). Ultimately, acceleration shifts the focus from what students have missed to what they need next. It supports a more responsive and strategic approach to instruction - one that keeps students moving forward while still addressing critical gaps in their learning.

How to Implement Acceleration in the Classroom

Effectively implementing acceleration in the classroom requires intentional instructional shifts that prioritize efficiency, engagement, and responsiveness to student needs. Importantly, acceleration does not mean skipping content or rushing students through learning. Instead, it involves using research-based strategies to ensure students can access grade-level material while addressing gaps in a targeted and strategic way (Ferlazzo, 2021).

1. Identify What Students Already Know and What They Still Need to Learn

One of the most important elements of accelerated learning is the use of ongoing, high-quality assessment data (Knight, 2021). Teachers must rely on screeners, diagnostic tools, and formative assessments to continuously monitor student progress and identify specific areas of need. This data allows educators to make informed instructional decisions, such as grouping students with similar needs, adjusting pacing, and targeting instruction more precisely (Knight). Rather than relying on assumptions, acceleration depends on real-time evidence of student learning to guide next steps. This can include quick diagnostic checks such as entrance tickets, short quizzes, discussions, or concept inventories (Ferlazzo, 2021). The goal is not to label students as “behind,” but to identify specific gaps that will prevent access to upcoming learning. Once this information is gathered, teachers should intentionally eliminate or reduce time spent on content students have already mastered (Ferlazzo). This shift is essential - rather than reteaching

everything, educators focus only on the most necessary skills. For example, if students already understand key vocabulary or foundational concepts, instructional time can be redirected toward applying those concepts at a deeper level. This approach ensures that time is used efficiently and that students remain engaged in meaningful, grade-level work.

2. Build Background Knowledge in Advance of Instruction

Acceleration depends on students having enough background knowledge to make sense of new content (Ferlazzo, 2021). Without it, even well-designed lessons can feel inaccessible. To address this, teachers can frontload essential knowledge before formal instruction begins. This does not need to take up valuable class time. Instead, educators can leverage tools such as short instructional videos, readings, or interactive digital platforms to introduce key ideas ahead of a lesson. This “preloading” allows classroom time to focus on higher-order thinking, discussion, and application rather than basic exposure (Ferlazzo). For example, before starting a science unit on ecosystems, students might watch a brief video introducing key terms like “producers,” “consumers,” and “food webs.” When they enter the classroom, they are better prepared to engage in analysis, experiments, and discussion, and most importantly, access the new learning (Ferlazzo). This approach maximizes instructional time and supports deeper learning.

3. Increase the Relevance of Lessons

Student engagement is a key driver of acceleration. When students find learning meaningful, they are more likely to invest effort, persist through challenges, and take ownership of their learning (Ferlazzo, 2021). To support this, teachers should intentionally connect content to students’ lives, interests, and future goals. This can be done in a variety of ways (Ferlazzo):

- Linking lessons to real-world applications (e.g., using math to analyze real-life data)
- Incorporating student voice and choice in topics or projects
- Demonstrating enthusiasm and passion for the subject matter
- Helping students see how skills apply beyond the classroom

Relevance does not mean tailoring every lesson to individual interests, but it does mean helping students understand why the learning matters (Ferlazzo). When students perceive value in what they are learning, they are more likely to engage deeply and accelerate their progress.

4. Design Active, Fast-Paced Lessons

Acceleration requires a shift from slow, repetitive instruction to purposeful, well-paced learning experiences. This does not mean rushing students, but rather creating a sense of momentum and urgency that communicates high expectations (Ferlazzo, 2021). In accelerated classrooms, students are active participants in their learning. This includes (Ferlazzo):

- Engaging in discussions and collaborative problem-solving
- Explaining their thinking to peers
- Analyzing and applying concepts in real time
- Practicing skills through meaningful tasks

Lessons should be carefully structured and chunked into manageable segments to avoid cognitive overload. Teachers should also build in opportunities for reflection and revisit key ideas to reinforce learning (Ferlazzo). Importantly, pacing should balance urgency with adequate wait time, ensuring students have time to process and think deeply.

5. Build Student Confidence and Resilience

Acceleration is most effective when students believe they are capable of success (Ferlazzo, 2021). Many students impacted by disrupted learning may feel uncertain or lack confidence in their abilities. As a result, educators must help students to build their confidence. Teachers can support this by:

- Normalizing struggle as part of the learning process
- Highlighting growth and progress, not just outcomes
- Providing specific, actionable feedback focused on effort and strategy
- Encouraging goal setting and self-assessment
- Celebrating small wins and milestones

Additionally, creating a classroom environment where students feel safe to take risks and make mistakes is critical. When students recognize that they are making progress and that their efforts matter, they are more likely to persist through challenging, grade-level work (Ferlazzo).

Acceleration for Diverse Learners

Acceleration for students with disabilities is most effective when it prioritizes access to grade-level content while providing targeted supports. (Knight, 2026) outlines several key components that guide effective acceleration practices for students with disabilities:

- **Focus on Grade-Level Standards Through Streamlined Curriculum:**
Effective acceleration reduces unnecessary redundancies in the curriculum and emphasizes rigorous, grade-level content. This approach allows students to stay engaged with core learning while addressing prerequisite skills at critical points.

- **Provide Additional Time for Skill Development:** Students may need extended time to build foundational skills while still participating in grade-level instruction. This requires intentional scheduling and collaboration among educators, specialists, and families to ensure students receive the support they need.
- **Customize Instruction Based on Strengths and Needs:** Acceleration should move away from deficit-based models and instead focus on students' strengths. Instruction is tailored to individual needs, incorporating targeted supports and accommodations while addressing areas for growth.
- **Leverage Student Interests to Increase Engagement:** Aligning instruction with student interests and incorporating culturally responsive practices can significantly enhance engagement and improve learning outcomes.
- **Use Inclusive and Flexible Instructional Practices:** Strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), multiple instructional modalities, and small group instruction provide flexible pathways for students to access content and demonstrate understanding. These approaches support diverse learners and strengthen acceleration efforts.
- **Foster Collaboration and Inclusive Environments:** Successful acceleration depends on collaboration among general educators, special educators, and families. Inclusive environments that provide appropriate supports, accommodations, and high expectations ensure that students with disabilities can meaningfully engage with grade-level content.

Together, these components reinforce that acceleration is not about moving faster through content, but about creating intentional, supportive pathways that allow students with disabilities to access and succeed in grade-level learning. By maintaining high expectations and providing the right scaffolds, educators can

ensure that all students are positioned for meaningful progress and long-term academic success.

Inclusion is also a critical component of accelerating learning for students with disabilities. Most students with disabilities spend the majority of their school day in general education classrooms alongside their nondisabled peers, reflecting the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandate that students be educated in the least restrictive environment to the greatest extent possible (Knight, 2026). Creating an inclusive learning environment requires intentional design and support systems that meet the diverse needs of all learners. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) plays a key role by providing multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement, ensuring that all students can access and participate in learning. Additionally, implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) allows schools to use a data-driven, collaborative approach to provide layered supports that improve outcomes for every student (Knight). Supporting the development of executive function skills is also essential, as many students, particularly those with attention-related disabilities, may struggle with skills such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-regulation. To ensure success in accelerated learning environments, educators must embed scaffolds, provide structured guidance, and gradually build students' independence (Knight). When these inclusive practices are in place, students with disabilities are better positioned to engage meaningfully with grade-level content and make sustained academic progress.

2.3 High-Impact Instructional Models for Recovery

High-Impact Tutoring

High-impact tutoring is widely recognized as one of the most effective strategies for accelerating student learning and addressing unfinished learning. Research

cited by Morton and Hashim (2023) indicates that tutoring, when delivered intensively and with personalized support, can significantly improve outcomes in both mathematics and reading, especially for students from low-income backgrounds. Unlike more generalized interventions, high-impact tutoring is defined by specific characteristics that contribute to its effectiveness, including strong tutor–student relationships, frequent and consistent sessions at least 2-3 times per week for at least 30-minutes, and small group sizes of no more than three students per tutor (Morton and Hashim).

The quality and structure of tutoring programs are critical to their success. Effective programs use high-quality, curriculum-aligned materials and rely on data-informed practices to monitor progress and adjust instruction (Morton and Hashim, 2023). Additionally, tutoring is most impactful when it is embedded within the school day rather than treated as an optional add-on, ensuring equitable access for all students. Proper tutor training and ongoing professional support further strengthen implementation (Morton and Hashim). As schools continue to address unfinished learning, high-impact tutoring offers a scalable and evidence-based approach to accelerating student progress and promoting long-term academic recovery.

What the Research Says About High-Impact Tutoring

Extensive research, including a review of nearly 200 rigorous studies, demonstrates that high-impact tutoring consistently produces strong positive effects in both mathematics and reading (Morton and Hashim, 2023). The impact of high-impact tutoring is both statistically significant and practically meaningful. Morton and Hashim report effect sizes ranging from 0.12 to 0.40 standard deviations, depending on the model and intensity of implementation. To put this into perspective, the average student gains approximately 0.40 standard deviations over an entire school year. This means that well-designed tutoring

programs, particularly those delivered daily in small groups, can help students make up a substantial portion of lost learning in a relatively short amount of time (Morton and Hashim).

Research also highlights several design principles that contribute to the effectiveness of high-impact tutoring. Successful programs are embedded within the school day, occur frequently (three or more times per week), and are delivered by trained tutors in small groups. Instruction is aligned with classroom curriculum and often incorporates both grade-level content and foundational skills (Morton and Hashim, 2023). Programs are more successful when schools address implementation challenges such as scheduling, staffing, and student engagement.

Importantly, access and participation play a critical role in program success. Optional, on-demand tutoring models tend to have low participation rates, particularly among the students who would benefit most. Recent findings from a California charter district showed that when an on-demand, virtual math tutoring program was offered without encouragement or structured expectations, only 19% of middle and high school students used it (Morton and Hashim, 2023). Students who were already struggling were even less likely to participate, suggesting that optional, opt-in supports may unintentionally widen achievement gaps instead of helping to close them. In contrast, structured, in-school tutoring models demonstrate stronger outcomes, with measurable gains in student achievement when tutoring is integrated into the school schedule (Morton and Hashim). While high-impact tutoring can require a significant investment, the research suggests it is highly cost-effective due to its strong and consistent outcomes.

Advancing High-Impact Tutoring with Technology

Scaling high-impact tutoring programs presents significant challenges related to cost and staffing. Research from University of Chicago (2024) highlights an

innovative approach developed in partnership with Saga Education that integrates educational technology into traditional tutoring models. This approach, referred to as the “Saga Technology” model, explores how strategically incorporating digital learning tools can maintain strong academic outcomes while improving efficiency.

The model alternates direct tutor instruction with the use of high-quality educational technology platforms (University of Chicago). This blended approach reduces the amount of time students spend with tutors without diminishing the effectiveness of the program. In fact, findings showed that schools could lower tutoring costs by approximately one-third and reduce the number of tutors needed by half, addressing two of the most significant barriers to scaling high-impact tutoring (University of Chicago). Most importantly, the integration of educational technology did not compromise student learning. Students participating in the Saga Technology model achieved outcomes comparable to those in traditional high-dosage tutoring programs, experiencing the equivalent of one to two additional years of math learning (University of Chicago). These findings suggest that thoughtfully designed technology-enhanced tutoring models can expand access to effective interventions while maintaining quality and impact, offering a promising pathway for districts seeking scalable solutions for educational recovery.

Extended Learning Time

Expanded learning time (ELT) is a critical strategy for supporting educational recovery and improving student outcomes, particularly for those most impacted by disruptions to learning. ELT extends beyond the traditional school day to include opportunities before and after school, as well as during summer and other scheduled breaks (Darling-Hammond, 2020). Importantly, ELT is not simply an add-on or enrichment activity; rather, it is intentionally designed to complement

and reinforce core instruction, aligning with academic standards and deepening student learning (Darling-Hammond et al.). A substantial body of research supports the effectiveness of expanded learning time. Studies conducted over several decades consistently demonstrate positive impacts on both student achievement and engagement. For example, a meta-analysis of 15 rigorous studies found that the vast majority showed improved academic outcomes when learning time was extended; these benefits are particularly pronounced for students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and those who are academically behind, making ELT a key equity-focused intervention (Darling-Hammond).

Expanded learning time is also especially important for students with specialized learning needs, including English learners. Many of these students require additional opportunities for language development, targeted instruction, and social-emotional support. High-quality ELT programs incorporate focused academic and social-emotional learning, provide a supportive and engaging environment, and ensure consistent participation with trained educators (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). In addition to extended day and year programs, early childhood education can also be considered a form of expanded learning time. Investments in high-quality preschool programs have been shown to yield significant long-term benefits, including improved academic attainment and future earnings. However, access remains limited, particularly for full-day programs, which are more effective than part-day options (Darling-Hammond et al.).

Expanded Learning Time Models

Expanded Learning Time (ELT) can be implemented through a variety of models that extend when and how students engage in learning, allowing schools to better meet diverse academic needs. These models include extending the school year,

lengthening the school day, and providing structured out-of-school learning opportunities such as afterschool and summer programs. Each approach offers flexibility in how additional time is designed and delivered, whether through mandatory or voluntary participation and across different points in the academic calendar (DiMarco, 2023).

Extended School Year

One common model is the extended school year, which increases the number of instructional days beyond the traditional 180-day calendar (DiMarco, 2023). Some districts have implemented longer school years or added targeted “intersessions” during breaks to provide additional academic support. These intersessions often focus on students who need extra support and offer targeted instruction in a more focused setting (DiMarco).

School districts across the country have implemented a range of extended school year models to address learning loss and support academic recovery. In the Aldine Independent School District, two schools expanded their academic calendar to 210 days during the 2021–22 school year to help students recover from pandemic-related disruptions. The initiative showed positive impacts on student achievement, leading the district to expand the model to additional schools the following year (DiMarco, 2023). Similarly, Richmond Public Schools piloted a 200-day school year for two elementary schools in the 2023–24 academic year. Students in these schools began the school year about a month earlier than their peers, providing additional instructional time to address unfinished learning and support academic progress (DiMarco).

In contrast to extending the entire school year, some districts have adopted intersession models, which add targeted instructional time throughout the year rather than increasing the total number of school days for all students. For example, Dallas Independent School District implemented a large-scale initiative

that included five voluntary week-long intersessions across 41 schools. These sessions were designed to provide targeted support for students who needed it most, with participation encouraged for those identified as benefiting from additional instruction (DiMarco, 2023). A similar, though more flexible, approach was used by the Los Angeles Unified School District, which introduced “acceleration days” during the 2022–23 school year. These optional days, scheduled during winter and spring breaks, provided focused academic support such as small group instruction in literacy and math, as well as tutoring and college and career guidance for older students. Participation was significant, particularly among high-need students, and the district has continued offering these opportunities (DiMarco).

Together, these examples illustrate how districts are adapting extended learning time models in different ways—either by lengthening the school year or strategically embedding additional learning opportunities throughout the calendar—to provide targeted support and accelerate student learning.

Extended School Day

Another approach is the extended school day, where schools add additional instructional time, typically 30 minutes to an hour, to provide opportunities for interventions such as small-group instruction or tutoring (DiMarco, 2023). This model allows schools to embed support directly into the daily schedule without requiring major calendar changes.

Atlanta Public Schools added 30 minutes to the elementary school day during the 2021–22 school year, using this time to create a dedicated intervention block focused on small-group tutoring to address learning loss. This approach allowed targeted academic support to be embedded directly into the daily schedule rather than offered as an optional add-on (DiMarco, 2023). Another large-scale example comes from Chicago Public Schools, which expanded the length of the school day

across all schools in 2012, long before any Covid-19 related unfinished learning. The district increased instructional time from a shorter-than-average 5.75-hour day to 7 hours for elementary students and 7.5 hours for high school students. While this shift significantly increased learning time, it also highlighted important implementation considerations, including the need to address staffing and compensation. Resistance to extending the school day without additional teacher pay contributed to a teacher strike, underscoring the importance of aligning policy changes with educator support and resources (DiMarco).

These examples illustrate how extended school day models can create meaningful opportunities for additional instruction and targeted support, while also emphasizing the importance of thoughtful implementation to ensure sustainability and stakeholder buy-in.

Out-of-School Time Programs

Out-of-school time programs provide additional learning opportunities outside of regular school hours. These programs often include afterschool enrichment, summer learning, tutoring, and mentoring. Because they do not require systemic calendar changes and are often more flexible, they are widely used by districts to expand access to academic and enrichment opportunities (DiMarco, 2023).

A national analysis found that more than 3,000 school districts, representing 74 percent of students nationwide, planned to use federal pandemic-response funding to support afterschool, extended-day, or summer learning programs (DiMarco, 2023). This widespread adoption highlights the flexibility and scalability of out-of-school models as a strategy for academic recovery. At the district level, Mobile County School District provides a strong example of how these programs can be implemented. The district invested heavily in expanding both afterschool and summer learning opportunities across its schools. Afterschool programs offer a combination of academic support, such as homework help, along with

enrichment activities including art, music, and STEM. In addition, the district's four-week summer program provides focused instruction in core subjects like math, science, English language arts, and reading, with targeted supports for English learners (DiMarco).

What the Research Says About ELT

A 2020 study found that students at low-performing Massachusetts middle schools who attended “vacation academies” (also known as acceleration academies) were 10 percentage points more likely to achieve math proficiency on state exams. The study also showed improvements in English achievement and overall course performance, demonstrating the value of targeted, short-term instructional boosts embedded within the school year (DiMarco, 2023). More recent research further emphasizes that simply adding time is not enough - how that time is structured matters. A 2022 review found that extending instructional time can lead to meaningful gains in student achievement when it is used effectively; however, poorly designed or implemented expanded time can have little impact or even negative effects if it replaces more engaging or enriching learning experiences (DiMarco). The same research also found that shifting to four-day school weeks generally produced negative outcomes, while extending the school year showed stronger and more consistent evidence of effectiveness compared to extending the school day (DiMarco).

Additional evidence supports the role of out-of-school learning opportunities in improving student outcomes. Afterschool and enrichment programs have been linked to higher test scores, reduced course failure rates, and improved attendance and graduation rates (DiMarco, 2023). These programs are most effective when they provide a sufficient amount of structured instructional time, with research suggesting optimal ranges of 44 to 210 hours annually for reading and 46 to 100 hours for math. Similarly, summer learning programs can produce

positive academic outcomes when they offer high-quality, sustained instruction. Programs that provide adequate hours of targeted math and reading instruction have been shown to improve students' performance on subsequent state assessments (DiMarco). Taken together, this research underscores that expanded learning time can be a powerful tool for academic recovery, but its success depends on intentional design, sufficient duration, and a focus on high-quality instruction.

2.4 Systemic Changes to Support Academic Recovery

Meaningful academic recovery requires more than isolated interventions - it depends on coordinated, system-level strategies that address both learning and the broader conditions that support student success. While national data continues to highlight ongoing challenges, there are also clear examples of progress that demonstrate what is possible when states and districts implement comprehensive, aligned approaches. California's 2025 outcomes provide a strong example of this progress and help illustrate how intentional, statewide strategies can drive improvement. The state saw academic gains across all subjects and grade levels, along with improvements in key indicators such as reduced chronic absenteeism and suspension rates and record-high graduation rates (Darling-Hammond, 2025). These gains were not incidental, they were the result of deliberate investments in multiple, aligned strategies designed to support student learning and well-being. These included expanding access to early learning through universal transitional kindergarten, strengthening literacy instruction by funding literacy coaches and reading specialists, increasing access to expanded learning time opportunities, and investing in acceleration strategies such as high-impact tutoring (Darling-Hammond). Together, these efforts created more consistent access to academic support, particularly for students in high-need communities, contributing to stronger outcomes across student groups.

One of the most impactful elements of California's approach has been the expansion of community schools. Schools that received grants through the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) showed stronger gains than similar schools that did not participate (Darling-Hammond, 2025). These schools integrate academic supports, expanded learning opportunities, family engagement, and community resources into a cohesive model that centers around students and their families. By coordinating multiple supports within a unified framework, community schools amplify the effectiveness of individual initiatives and create more sustainable pathways for academic recovery (Darling-Hammond).

The Impact of Community Schools

Community schools have emerged as a powerful, system-level strategy for supporting academic recovery by addressing both academic and non-academic barriers to learning. This approach is built on a comprehensive framework that integrates multiple supports to create a more holistic and equitable learning environment (Darling-Hammond, 2025). In California, a large-scale investment in community schools has supported thousands of schools through a four-part strategy that includes integrated student supports, expanded learning opportunities, strong family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership structures (Darling-Hammond).

At the core of the community school model is the understanding that students' academic success is closely tied to their overall well-being. Integrated supports, such as access to health care, mental health services, nutrition programs, and social services, help remove barriers that may otherwise interfere with learning (Darling-Hammond, 2025). At the same time, expanded learning opportunities, including before- and after-school programs and summer enrichment, provide additional time and space for students to build knowledge and skills. These efforts

are strengthened by authentic partnerships with families and community organizations, ensuring that schools are responsive to the needs and strengths of the communities they serve. Research shows that this coordinated approach leads to meaningful improvements in student outcomes (Darling-Hammond). When the community school model has been implemented, greater reductions in chronic absenteeism and suspensions, along with notable gains in academic achievement and engagement, have been observed. In some cases, students experienced learning gains equivalent to more than a full month of additional instruction in subjects like math and literacy. These outcomes are particularly significant for historically underserved student groups, including English learners and Black students (Darling-Hammond).

2.5 Practices That Can Harm Academic Recovery

While many strategies aim to accelerate learning and support academic recovery in literacy and beyond, not all approaches lead to positive outcomes. In some cases, well-intentioned practices can unintentionally hinder student progress, particularly when they are not implemented with sufficient support or alignment to evidence-based practices. Understanding which approaches to avoid is essential for ensuring that recovery efforts are both effective and equitable.

Grade Retention Without Adequate Support

Grade retention is often viewed as a straightforward solution for addressing unfinished learning, but research suggests it should be approached with caution. While some policymakers argue that giving students an additional year of instruction could improve academic outcomes, the evidence is mixed and highlights several potential drawbacks. Short-term academic gains have been observed in some elementary settings; however, these benefits often diminish over time and may not persist into middle or high school (Allensworth et al.,

2023). In contrast, research on retention in later grades points to more concerning outcomes. Students who are retained in middle school are more likely to experience negative long-term effects, including lower rates of course completion and decreased likelihood of graduating from high school. Beyond academic outcomes, retention can also negatively impact students' self-esteem, motivation, and sense of belonging, raising important equity concerns (Allensworth et al.).

There are also significant cost implications associated with grade retention. Although retaining a student may cost less than enrolling a new student, it still represents a substantial financial investment, with estimates ranging from several thousand dollars per student (Allensworth et al., 2023). Despite this investment, retention alone does not guarantee improved academic performance. Research emphasizes that retention is only effective when paired with intensive, targeted instructional support. Without these additional supports, simply repeating a grade is unlikely to address underlying learning gaps and may instead contribute to further disengagement (Allensworth et al.). For this reason, grade retention should not be used as a primary strategy for academic recovery, particularly when more effective, evidence-based interventions are available.

Replacing Core Instruction with Interventions

Interventions that replace, rather than supplement, core instruction time can have unintended negative effects on student achievement. Research shows that when struggling students are removed from core instruction for extended periods, they miss access to grade-level content and peer learning opportunities that are critical for their progress (Allensworth et al., 2023). A review of 40 studies reinforces this concern, finding that separating students from their peers for all core instruction is associated with small to moderate negative impacts on achievement compared to students who remain in inclusive, grade-level learning environments. These findings highlight the importance of ensuring that interventions are designed to

support - not replace - students' participation in core instruction (Allensworth et al.).

Additional evidence comes from a study examining reading interventions delivered through a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework across 146 elementary schools. The study found no significant improvement, and in some cases, negative effects on student achievement (Allensworth et al., 2023).

Researchers suggest that one contributing factor was the removal of students from core instruction to receive intervention services, which occurred for a substantial portion of students and was not aligned with the intended design of the program (Allensworth et al.).

Accelerating Content Without Adequate Support

Providing students with more advanced content without the necessary supports is unlikely to lead to improved outcomes and may, in some cases, be counterproductive. While acceleration is often intended to increase rigor and opportunity, research shows that simply moving students into higher-level coursework without addressing readiness and support needs can negatively impact achievement (Allensworth et al., 2023). For example, “algebra-for-all” initiatives - which require all students to take algebra by 8th grade regardless of readiness - have been associated with declines in student performance. Studies in states such as North Carolina and California found that these policies led to lower grades, particularly for the lower-performing students they were intended to support (Allensworth et al.). Similarly, a policy in Chicago Public Schools that placed low-performing 9th grade students into college-preparatory algebra and English courses resulted in higher failure rates and lower grades, without improving test scores or graduation outcomes (Allensworth et al.).

Research also indicates that acceleration strategies such as grade-skipping or enrollment in advanced coursework tend to benefit only those students who are

carefully selected based on academic readiness, motivation, and social-emotional development (Allensworth et al., 2023). Without these considerations, students may struggle to keep pace with increased demands. At the same time, decisions about who is considered “ready” for advanced coursework can introduce or reinforce inequities. Variations in how schools identify and place students into advanced courses can lead to disparities in access, particularly along racial and socioeconomic lines. Without intentional, equity-focused practices, acceleration policies risk widening opportunity gaps rather than closing them. (Allensworth et al.).

Practices that limit access to grade-level content, reduce instructional time, or fail to provide adequate support can undermine recovery efforts. By avoiding these approaches and focusing on evidence-based strategies, educators can better support meaningful and sustained academic growth for all students.

Section 2 Conclusion

Applying academic recovery strategies effectively requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that integrates high-quality instruction, targeted supports, and thoughtful system design. From implementing literacy across disciplines, high-impact tutoring, expanded learning time, and community-based supports, each strategy plays a critical role in helping students regain and extend their learning. At the same time, avoiding ineffective or harmful practices is essential to ensuring that these efforts lead to meaningful progress. When these approaches are implemented together with intentionality and equity at the forefront, they create powerful conditions for sustained academic recovery and long-term student success.

Section 2 Key Terms

Acceleration Academies - Short-term, targeted instructional programs - often during breaks or intersessions - designed to boost student learning in specific subject areas.

Content-Area Literacy - An approach to literacy instruction that focuses on applying general reading and comprehension strategies across all subject areas.

Data-Informed Instruction - The use of assessment data to guide teaching decisions, identify student needs, and adjust instruction to improve learning outcomes.

Disciplinary Literacy - An approach to literacy that emphasizes the specialized ways of reading, writing, thinking, and communicating within specific academic disciplines.

Extended Learning Time (ELT) - Additional instructional time provided beyond the traditional school day or year, including afterschool, summer, or intersession programs.

Extended School Day - A model of expanded learning time that increases the number of instructional hours within a regular school day.

Extended School Year - A model of expanded learning time that increases the number of instructional days beyond the traditional academic calendar.

Formative Assessment - Ongoing, informal assessments used during instruction to monitor student understanding and inform teaching practices.

Frontloading - An instructional strategy that introduces key concepts or background knowledge before a lesson to improve student understanding and engagement.

High-Impact Tutoring - A structured, research-based tutoring approach characterized by frequent sessions, small group sizes, and alignment with classroom instruction.

Intercession - Scheduled breaks within the academic year that are used to provide targeted instruction, enrichment, or academic support.

Just-in-Time Support - Targeted instructional support provided at the moment students need it to access and understand grade-level content.

Out-of-School Time Programs - Educational programs that take place outside regular school hours, including afterschool, summer learning, and enrichment opportunities.

Progress Monitoring - The ongoing process of tracking student performance over time to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction and interventions.

Response to Intervention (RTI) - A multi-tiered framework that provides increasingly intensive levels of support based on students' academic needs.

START Framework - A structured approach to integrating literacy into instruction, focusing on Standards, Texts, Assessment, Reading skills, and Tools.

Structured Literacy - An evidence-based approach to reading instruction that is explicit, systematic, and focused on foundational literacy skills.

Section 2 Reflection Questions

1. Consider the difference between content-area literacy and disciplinary literacy. Which approach is more evident in your classroom, and how might shifting toward disciplinary literacy impact student learning?

2. Reflect on your use of assessment data. How confident do you feel in using data to make real-time instructional decisions, and what might improve your process?
3. What role does collaboration play in your school when implementing strategies like acceleration or literacy integration? How could collaboration be strengthened?
4. Reflect on the use of high-impact tutoring or small-group instruction in your setting. How are these supports structured, and how effective are they in complementing core instruction?
5. Consider the practices discussed that can negatively impact academic recovery. Are any of these present in your school or classroom? If so, how might they be addressed or redesigned?

Section 2 Activities

1. **Discipline-Specific Writing Prompt:** Design a writing task that reflects authentic work in your field (e.g., lab explanation, historical argument, mathematical justification) and use it with students.
2. **Acceleration Strategy Planning:** Identify one upcoming lesson and plan how you will incorporate just-in-time support instead of reteaching prior content.
3. **Frontloading Content Activity:** Create a short pre-learning resource (video, reading, or vocabulary preview) to build background knowledge before a new unit.

4. **Extended Learning Time Review:** Investigate how your school uses extended learning time (e.g., intervention blocks, afterschool programs) and evaluate its effectiveness.
5. **Out-of-School Resource Exploration:** Research local or digital programs (e.g., tutoring, summer learning) that could support your students and compile a resource list.
6. **Observation of Literacy in Practice:** Observe a colleague's classroom (or watch a recorded lesson) and identify effective literacy integration strategies. Reflect on how you could apply them.

Course Conclusion

Supporting academic recovery in literacy requires more than addressing gaps - it requires a shift in how educators approach instruction, equity, and student potential. Throughout this course, it is clear that effective recovery is rooted in maintaining access to grade-level content, using targeted supports, and implementing research-based strategies that prioritize both rigor and inclusion. As educators apply these approaches in their own classrooms and schools, they play a critical role in shaping not only students' academic outcomes, but also their confidence, engagement, and long-term success. By focusing on acceleration over remediation, integrating literacy across disciplines, and leveraging high-impact practices, educators can create learning environments where all students have the opportunity to thrive. Ultimately, academic recovery is not just about catching up, it is about moving forward with purpose, ensuring that every student is equipped with the literacy skills needed for lifelong learning.

Classroom Example

Mr. Oak teaches fourth-grade English Language Arts in a Title I elementary school in an urban district. His classroom includes a diverse group of learners, including multilingual students, students with disabilities, and students who are reading below grade level due to disrupted instruction in the early grades. Mr. Oak is committed to ensuring that all of his students develop strong literacy skills, but he has noticed significant gaps in foundational reading abilities, particularly in decoding, fluency, and comprehension. While some students are able to engage with grade-level texts and participate in discussions, others struggle to access the content, often becoming disengaged or frustrated. Mr. Oak understands that simply reteaching earlier skills will not be enough to support academic recovery.

Challenges

- **Balancing Grade-Level Instruction with Foundational Skill Gaps:** Mr. Oak wants to ensure that all students have access to grade-level texts and standards, but many of his students lack the foundational skills needed to fully engage. He struggles with how to provide targeted support without removing students from core instruction.
- **Addressing Diverse Literacy Needs:** His students have a wide range of reading abilities and learning needs. Some require explicit phonics instruction, while others need support with vocabulary and comprehension. Mr. Oak finds it challenging to differentiate instruction in a way that meets all students' needs without lowering expectations.
- **Maintaining Student Engagement and Confidence:** Several students have developed negative attitudes toward reading due to past struggles. They are hesitant to participate, avoid challenging texts, or quickly give up when

tasks become difficult. Mr. Oak wants to build a classroom culture where all students feel confident and capable as readers.

- **Integrating Structured Literacy into Daily Instruction:** Mr. Oak understands the importance of structured literacy, including explicit and systematic instruction in foundational skills, but he is unsure how to integrate these practices into his existing curriculum while still covering grade-level content.
- **Supporting Multilingual Learners and Students with Disabilities:** Many of Mr. Oak's students require additional supports, such as language scaffolds, accommodations, or modified instruction. He wants to ensure that these students are fully included in literacy instruction and have equitable access to learning opportunities.
- **Using Data to Inform Instruction Without Becoming Overwhelmed:** Mr. Oak has access to assessment data, but he finds it difficult to consistently use it to guide instruction in a meaningful way. He wants to better understand how to identify key skill gaps and adjust his teaching accordingly without becoming overwhelmed by data analysis.

Considerations for Support and Improvement

- How can Mr. Oak implement acceleration strategies that allow students to engage with grade-level texts while addressing foundational skill gaps in real time?
- What structured literacy practices can he incorporate into daily instruction to strengthen decoding, fluency, and comprehension without sacrificing content coverage?
- How might he use flexible grouping and small-group instruction to differentiate learning while maintaining high expectations for all students?

- How can he effectively support multilingual learners and students with disabilities through inclusive practices such as scaffolding, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and targeted interventions?
- What systems can he put in place to use assessment data efficiently to inform instruction and monitor student progress over time?



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