

Learning interrupted

Schools across the country recently tackled another challenging back-to-school ritual, but they continue to grapple with COVID-19-related challenges. As they move forward, for example, what impact might new virus variants have? Looking back, what strategies did they employ that worked well? While they once again find themselves in unusual quandaries, two longtime educators are sharing smart solutions to help teachers ensure student growth.

Dr. Rachel Book and Charles Thayer have spent the bulk of the last two years equipping schools with dynamic technology to keep students learning and observing and facilitating the dramatic shift in education that took place because of the pandemic. In their roles at Lincoln Learning Solutions, they and their teams were slammed last summer as schools scrambled to prepare for online and blended learning. As they developed solutions and supported educators, they witnessed the evolution firsthand.

Inequitable evolution

“Looking back, the evolution was not always created equal,” Thayer said. “From school to school, grade to grade and teacher to teacher, attitudes and organizational approaches varied and, in most cases, the teachers’ responses were ultimately where the rubber met the road.” He adds, though, that access to physical technology and internet bandwidth, paired with delivery platforms that make virtual learning function more smoothly, were integral to determining the rate at which schools successfully evolved. Read: zip codes still reign.

Obviously, schools with access to the right tools seemed to fair better and get on track more quickly than those who scrambled to equip their students with devices and connectivity. Aside from that obvious advantage, Thayer said schools who were more organizationally savvy, with plan Bs and plan Cs in place, were able to pivot more efficiently and lose less ground.

As the evolution unfolded, Thayer said he and his colleagues consistently communicated internally, making sure they themselves were making proper adaptations to effectively assist schools, but they also wanted to be sure they learned something from this extraordinary event. Their unique vantage point revealed how schools with differing levels of preparedness either thrived or strived. It also motivated them to reach out to schools with interventions and strategies to help students whose education was impacted throughout the pandemic.

Seeing the silver lining

Based on experience, best practices and research, Book said schools need to focus on reconnecting with families, giving students an academic boost and setting expectations for them, reimagining reassessments and routines, and empowering teachers. Thayer underscored the fact that schools need to approach everything armed with the knowledge they gained throughout the pandemic. "It's easy to put things back in the closet, so to speak, but let's look at everything we learned that worked well and put it to good use," he said.

Reestablishing partnerships between and among schools, families and communities is paramount to supporting students' development and progress. After two years of on-again, off-again lockdowns, it's especially important to jumpstart and maintain these relationships. "Have a parade," Book said, "it's a fun, effective way to engender excitement and allow everyone to reconnect. There are myriad ways based on grade levels to rejuvenate and reengage kids but getting our communities and especially parents back in the game is as crucial. "We are all aware of how they elevated their kiddos' learning experiences during the pandemic," Book said, "and research shows that the more they're involved, the better their kids achieve academically, so we need to reinspire this collaborative effort."

Knowing that students perform better when expectations are directly expressed, Book said educators need to identify then foster them through personalization and differentiated instruction. "Let students know you believe in them when you're setting these expectations, and don't make excuses based on what they may have missed because of the extraordinary circumstances they endured."

The same holds true for reestablishing routines that give kids a roadmap for getting through the school day. Routines give students structure and keep them accountable. As educators necessarily threw a lot of routines out the window over the past school year, they may be wondering why they employed some of them in the first place. "The point is," Book said, "don't go back. Talk to the students. Evaluate what didn't work, rethink what worked, and make it work."

State assessments and even standardized tests that measure academic achievement and have been mandatory for acceptance by most universities were turned on their heads, Thayer said. Studies have concluded for decades that students with good grades and modest testing do better in college than students with high scores and lower

grades. Yet, it took a pandemic for most colleges to waive the traditional requirement. Thayer said K-12 teachers reassessed course assessments too.

“Assessment delivery was a little easier for educators who had some online teaching training or experience,” Thayer said. “Those who built in redundancy to their delivery methods were able to function whether they were online or in-person. He said a lot more educators were utilizing approaches that allow students to show their critical thinking skills to solve problems. “That’s an approach we should continue to foster,” he said.

Many educators devoted their summer to professional development that incorporated online learning and are feeling empowered. “Challenging ourselves to come out of our comfort zones to tackle new technologies is good for the soul,” Thayer said. Exposing teachers to new strategies and tools that can be used both in the classroom and online is a win-win strategy.

*We now resume our regularly scheduled program
(Cue rewind sound effect)*

Adaptations will continue be the norm. Zoom, Google Meet, Teams, etc. are now household words. Going remote should now be a mere snag, not a stumbling block. Utilizing tools that build on technology and keep kids interested should remain a part of all classrooms. Students learn in different ways. Hybrid approaches are bi-directional, i.e., students can take online field, trips, for example, in brick-and-mortar classrooms, and in-person field trips in online classrooms. Look ahead and make the most of what we’ve learned.

As this new school year continues to unfold, rather than fixating on learning loss, the Lincoln Learning Solutions team suggests building a bridge that will put students closer to where they would have been had the pandemic not occurred. Focusing on what’s lost isn’t going to bring it back. A positive, productive, creative approach that interweaves these various concepts as foundational to the new skills being taught in each grade level will go a long way in helping teachers and students build that bridge together. Teaching is an art, and artistic license may be necessary for this to be successful.

Dr. Rachel Book serves as chief sales and marketing officer for Lincoln Learning Solutions. In addition to leading her team through an unprecedented demand for online learning throughout the pandemic, she devotes her personal time to leading and participating in efforts to improve

opportunities for children. She leverages her doctoral program at the University of Southern California to help educators discover ways to enhance students' cognitive, psychomotor, and social-emotional development. Dr. Book also has a BS in Early Childhood Education and a M. Ed in School Counseling.

Charles Thayer is vice president of academic affairs at LLS. Formatively trained as a social studies teacher at the secondary level, he has been working in education – with a specific focus in online education – for more than a decade. Having held many positions in the field, including teacher, curriculum developer and administrator, his experience in both the academic and technical realms has expanded his field of vision and understanding of the nuanced nature of online learning. He strives to connect relevant tools and assets in an efficient manner that enables teachers to meet students where they are.

[Lincoln Learning Solutions](#) is a 501c3 nonprofit organization dedicated to collaborating with educators and maximizing their talents to facilitate student success. Based in Rochester, PA, it is the developer of **Lincoln Empowered™**, a digitally based curriculum that delivers engaging, standards-based, instruction in online and blended learning environments. **Lincoln Empowered™** offers a dynamic array of courses in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, physical education, and the creative and performing arts. Lincoln Learning Solutions currently serves nearly 600 schools in 14 states, and upward of 265,000 students.