

Oak Park and River Forest High School District 200

201 North Scoville Avenue Oak Park, IL 60302-2296

TO: Board of Education

FROM: Dr. Patrick Hardy, Executive Director of Equity and Student Success, Kristen McKee, Coordinator of Learning Analytics, Dr. Laurie Fiorenza, Assistant Superintendent for Student Learning

DATE: August 26, 2021

RE: Discussion of Organizational Lessons Learned During COVID-19

SYNOPSIS

For decades, public schools have confronted the negative academic impacts of extended gaps and discontinuities in student learning. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and educational leaders strategized methods to respond to the wide variety of factors like extended medical absences, truancy, homelessness, and summer break and their influences on reversals in academic progress or the need to recover skills and content knowledge. Today, COVID-19 has substantially contributed to the broad phenomenon many commonly referred to as “learning loss,” a deficit term. This report intentionally analyzes our academic data and keeps the focus of the discussion on our systemic challenges and highlights four key lessons learned for our school and district based on our response to the pandemic to date.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

An analysis is provided to evaluate the learning impact of the pandemic through an examination of grade data and credit accrual utilizing the school year 2018-2019 as a baseline year. Overall, there is evidence of a learning impact with a slight increase in failing grades, falling disproportionately on our students of color. In addition, our current freshmen and sophomores are starting the school year slightly behind in credit accrual, whereas our juniors are starting slightly ahead.

RECOMMENDATION

Apply our existing multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) and interventions with additional research-based best practices accelerating student learning while focusing on students’ social and emotional needs.

Strategic Plan: Priority 1 **Board Goals:** **District Policy:** 6:10, 6:15

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FROM: Dr. Patrick Hardy, Executive Director of Equity and Student Success, Kristen McKee, Coordinator of Learning Analytics, and Dr. Laurie Fiorenza, Assistant Superintendent for Student Learning

DATE: August 26, 2021

RE: Organizational Lessons Learned During The COVID-19 Pandemic

BACKGROUND

For decades, public schools have confronted the deleterious effects of extended gaps and discontinuities in student learning. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and educational leaders strategized methods to respond to the wide variety of influences on reversals in academic progress or the need to recover skills and content knowledge. Over 40 years ago, Barbara Heyns's 1978 study titled *Summer Learning and the Effects of Schooling* was the first significant examination of achievement after a pause in learning that also considered differences across social lines and disaggregated data by race or ethnicity, and family income (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2007). Since that study, educators, scholars, and researchers have added wide-ranging discussions and research findings focused on identifying high-quality responses to the impacts on learning resulting from breaks in the educational process. Unfortunately, despite decades of study and an abundance of dialogue and debate, the challenges emerging from gaps in the learning process persist.

Today, COVID-19 has substantially contributed to the broad phenomenon many commonly referred to as "learning loss." However, educators understand that impacts on students and their education have historically occurred in several ways (Betebenner & Wenning, 2021). These include intermittent daily absences, homelessness, recent immigration, natural disasters, chronic truancy, extended school absences (e.g., family trips), protracted transitions to a new school, and prolonged health-related absences. In addition, there are institutional factors like teacher absences, lengthy teaching assignments by non-certified individuals, poor instruction, and course scheduling errors. Every year, K-12 educators work diligently to mitigate these and other issues that interrupt teaching and learning.

One of the most significantly studied factors that result in yearly discontinuities in learning is summer break. Prior to the pandemic, researchers amassed a plethora of research examining the detrimental effects of what most refer to as *summer learning loss* (Boulay & McChesney, 2021). Within educational communities in the United States, summer learning loss, or the loss of academic skills and knowledge, is recognized as a significant and pervasive problem (Zaromb, Adler, Bruce, Attali, & Rock, 2014). Every summer, the news media issues widespread warnings

about summer learning loss for all students, low-income learners, and its compounded effect on the achievement gap (von Hippel, 2019). Findings dating back to as early as 1906 suggest that detrimental effects of summer learning loss are cumulative and are more impactful on lower-income students when compared to higher-income homes (Patton & Reschly, 2013; Zaromb et al., 2014). Undoubtedly, summer break impacts learning, and educators are responsible for planning and implementing strategies that respond effectively to the academic challenges that may emerge. Of all the causes of discontinuities in learning, summer break presents the most pressing and ongoing challenge.

K-12 educators can confidently anticipate that the pandemic will end, though with bated breath. However, teachers and leaders cannot seriously expect summer break, a relic of our nation's agricultural past (Alexander et al., 2007), to vanish soon. Moreover, educators can foresee that the other ongoing academic impacts mentioned above will continue to plague the learning process without fail. Unlike COVID, these issues will continue to impact academics year after year for the foreseeable future. Certainly, COVID-19 is an added unique challenge, but it is a novel challenge to an old problem at its core. Policymakers and educators could not have anticipated the ways in which the pandemic challenged schools and districts (Excellence in Education Report, 2020). That's not to say educators should minimize or understate the impact of the pandemic on student learning and achievement. But, the truth is that the pandemic further exposed the structural inequities that previously existed within school systems and, in many cases, amplified them (Thompson, 2021). Thus, we must approach the topic with intentionality and caution, beginning with our language.

School communities now know COVID-19's effect on learning by several different names including, *COVID learning loss*, *the COVID-19 slide*, *COVID-19 learning gaps*, *student learning loss*, and *pandemic learning loss*, to name a few (Allensworth & Schwartz, 2020; Betebenner et al., 2021; Boulay & McChesney, 2021; Kuhfeld & Tarawasa, 2020). Phrases like these are borne of the pervasive deficit thinking that gave rise to terms like *limited English proficiency*, *achievement gap*, and *at-risk*, all of which ignore systems and focus on people as problems (Lehan, Orange-Jones, & Lacy-Schoenberger, 2021). Instead of focusing on people in our discussion and subsequent actions, OPRF's administration will adopt language that makes and keeps the system visible and continues to name racism as a complex interconnected structure (Diangelo, 2018). A shift in language in our communication is not a matter of semantics nor insignificant because language holds great power to harm or heal (Lehan et al., 2021). Therefore, we think it is critical to remain steadfast in our concentration on the organization, the lessons the adults learned to date, and the responses we must mount to address inequities inherent in the organization.

Less than 30 days into the initial pandemic-related school closures, local and national media began stoking fears about *learning loss*, which had not yet definitively materialized (Lehan, Orange-Jones, & Lacy-Schoenberger, 2021). Districts across the nation quickly and imperfectly implemented remote learning plans in a matter of weeks, not months, while balancing equity, needs related to connectivity (Gross & Opalka, 2020). The alarm bells were ringing! However, our administration understands that we must respond with calm. By doing so, we can avoid a classic mistake consistently committed in public education, that is, a quick leap into new

initiatives, interventions, and programs. Often, these actions have no lasting effects but result in long-term consequences because schools suddenly shift away from their purpose and vision.

Moreover, we have an opportunity to safeguard what our parents, students, and school community hears. We already know that all types of discontinuities in learning can disproportionately impact students of color, the impoverished, and already struggling students and that affluent learners may fair better due to additional resources (Allensworth & Schwartz, 2020; Betebenner & Wenning, 2021; Bomer, 2021; Sandberg-Patton & Reschly, 2013; Zaromb et al. 2014). We also know that school is synonymous with failure for too many disadvantaged and poor-performing students, school is not fun, and school is punishing (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). In a district committed to racial equity, we must not re-traumatize already marginalized students and families by labeling them as *less than whole persons* who have lost something. We have an opportunity to frame a message that names the systemic challenges and provides our community with encouragement and confidence that we can and are committed to addressing them.

In addition to valuing our students, families, and community, we must also appreciate the immeasurable learning that did occur and continues to happen during the pandemic. We must value the non-content skills many of our students mastered, like learning to reset rhythms and patterns of the day, perseverance, grit, and resilience. Events occurred during the pandemic that taught our students to deal with grief, loss, racism, systemic inequities, political resistance. Our students learned as they observed the government's responses to various crises. Equally important and often overlooked by policymakers and educators, many students learned invaluable lessons from living in closer proximity to family and community traditions. Non-content skills and knowledge like these are just as important content, and they are often acquired by working through adversity and harnessing students' lived experiences.

The reality is, if we as adults do not learn from the lessons of the pandemic, there could be an actual learning loss but on the part of the organization. We risk perpetuating persistent patterns of racial inequity in our system, which will leave groups of students to survive our school structures rather than thrive in them. Instead of explicitly reacting to the concerns about students' potential learning loss, the administration focused on challenges in our system and identified the following four key lessons learned for our school and district based on our response to the pandemic to date.

OPRF Organizational Lessons Learned

1. OPRF should foster a community that builds relationships, maintains engagement, and establishes more positive and inclusive experiences.
2. Instructional planning and academic supports should meet the needs of individuals and subgroups to accelerate learning recovery.

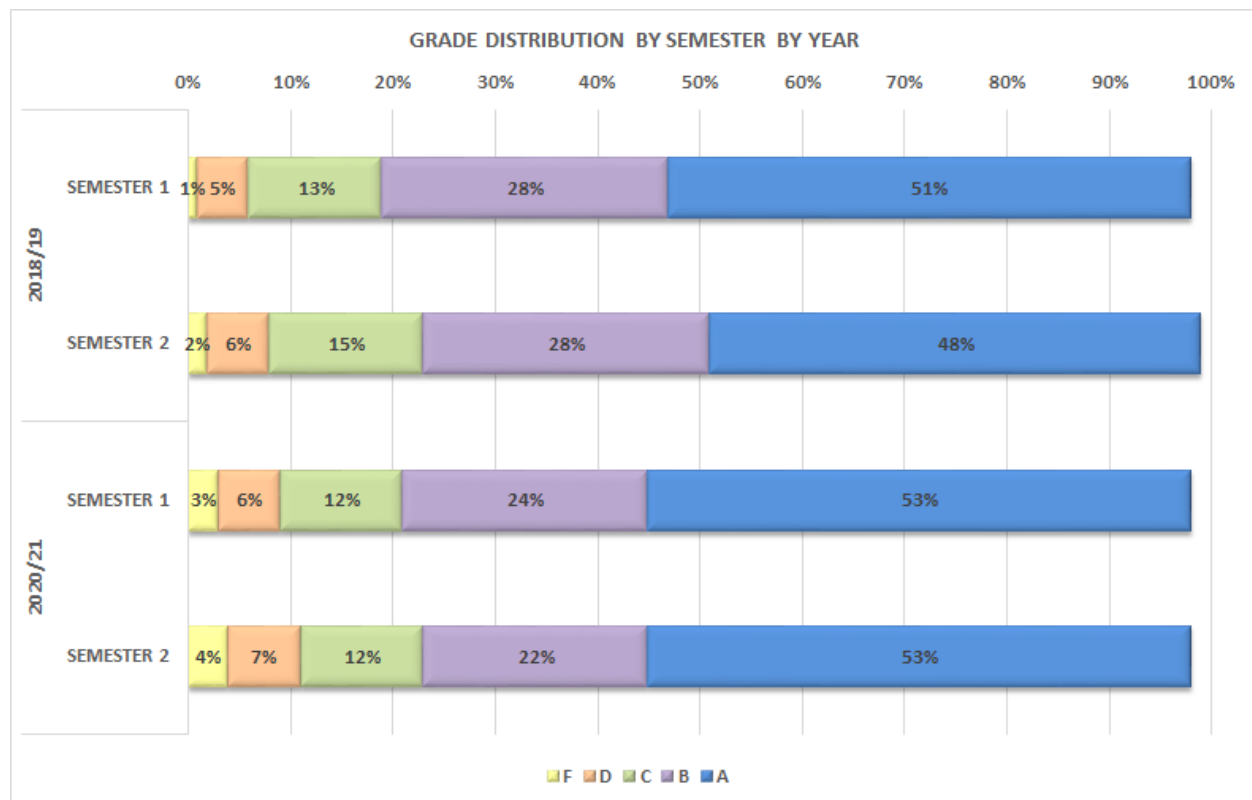
3. Instructional and leadership decision-making should be data-informed, especially when targeting resources based on students' needs.
4. Adult learning must address key topics like assessment, restorative practices, and the integration of instructional technology.

Throughout our analysis, we recognized that our district's racial equity priority is at the center of each of the four findings outlined above. The data below bears out these learnings, and we will describe our intended organizational actions that respond directly to those lessons.

This analysis was completed to evaluate the potential educational impact of Covid-19 due to change in learning conditions and environment. As previously discussed, this remains a very complicated situation, and there is no way to account for all the possible variables of each student's experience. However, it is a worthy endeavor to examine our students' academic progress made last year in their remote and hybrid environments. To do this, we examined our grade distribution patterns as well as credit accrual towards graduation benchmarks.

DATA ANALYSIS

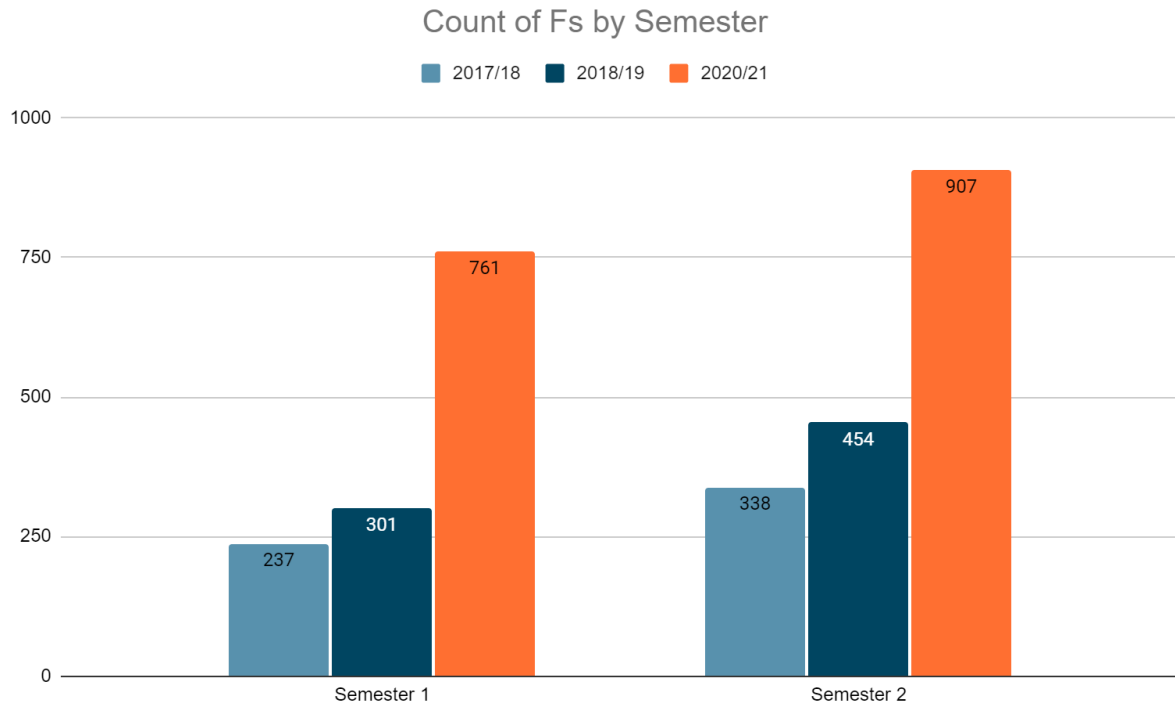
Grade Distribution Data Analysis



To understand the impact of how grades were distributed along an A to F continuum, we compared our previous school year, 2020-2021, to the school year 2018-2019, which was the

last uninterrupted school year. From an overall perspective, the grade distribution remained fairly consistent. When compared to 2018-19, last school year there was a two percentage points increase in failing grades each semester and also a small increase in A grades, two and five percentage points respectively.

Rate of Failure Analysis



This is a look at the count of F grades compared across three school years. We see here that the number of F grades historically increases in Semester 2 when compared to Semester 1. For perspective, approximately 21,000 grades are given per semester. The purpose of this graph is to contextualize further the percentage increase in F grades previously mentioned.

Failure Rate Data by Race/Ethnicity

Semester 2	% of total enrollment*		% of the total amount of Fs distributed by race^	
	2018-2019	2020-21	2018-19	2020-21
American Indian/Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.1%	N/A	N/A
Asian	4%	4%	2%	3%
Black or African American	20%	18%	52%	43%
Hispanic	12%	13%	15%	19%
Two or more races	9%	8%	7%	8%
White	56%	56%	23%	28%

*Data may contain rounding error

^Due to small n, subgroup data has been omitted

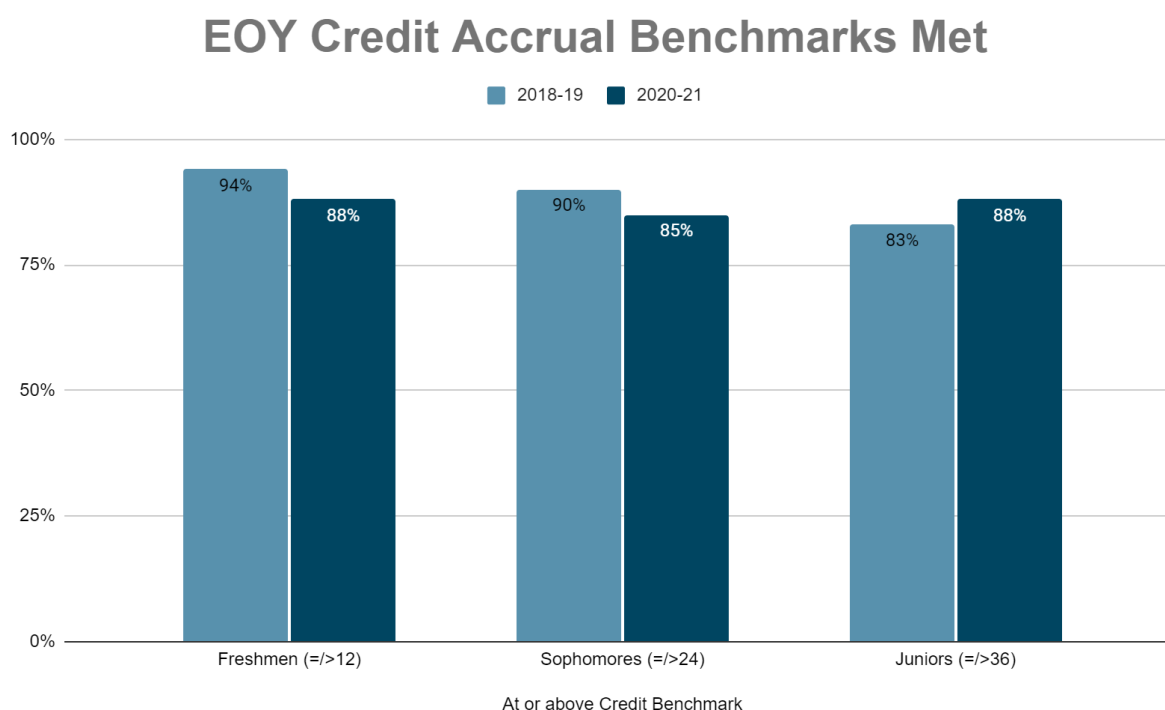
The above table again compares the 2018-2019 school year to the 2020-2021 school year in the school's total enrollment by race/ethnicity and how the grades of F were distributed across those subgroups for Semester 2. It is clear from this table that there is a disproportionate amount of F grades earned by our Black/AA students in both school years. However, this past school year shows a shift in that distribution while other subgroups increased in the number of F grades earned.

Semester 2	% of grades that were Fs within A to F grade distribution*		% of students in subgroup who received an F*	
	2018-19	2020-21	2018-19	2020-21
Total Enrollment	2%	4%	7%	13%
Asian	1%	3%	6%	9%
Black or African American	6%	10%	16%	28%
Hispanic	3%	6%	9%	17%
Two or more races	2%	4%	7%	10%
White	1%	2%	3%	7%

*Columns will not add up to 100%

This table further examines the failure rate patterns across race/ethnicity subgroups within our school. The left column reports the percentage of grades that were Fs in the A to F grade distribution for each subgroup. Overall, students at OPRFHS earn a small percentage of failing grades compared to passing grades. However, there is evidence in both years of some disproportionality of F grades earned within the subgroups. Each subgroup saw an increase in F grades in the overall distribution during the past school year with our Black/AA students seeing the biggest increase (+4 percentage points). The right-hand columns evaluate the percentage of *students* in each subgroup receiving one or more Fs. Our total enrollment experienced an increase in F grades (+6 percentage points), and each subgroup membership experienced an increase of F grades. Again, our Black/AA students experienced the biggest increase with a +12 percentage points jump. Further, when you group our black and brown student population together, the disproportionality becomes greater.

End of Year Credit Accrual Benchmarks



Another benchmark that we examined was student progress towards graduation. To do this, we look at the number of students that met a credit accrual benchmark that placed them on a solid path to graduation their senior year. Benchmarks used are as follows: End-of-year freshmen were expected to have accrued 12 or more credits, sophomores were expected to have accrued 24 or more and Juniors were expected to have accrued 36 or more credits. This data allows us to plan for students who may have lost footing on this path and may need schedule adjustments or alternative plans. We see a slight decrease in the percentage of students who met their corresponding credit accrual benchmarks for freshmen and sophomores. Juniors showed a slight increase in the percentage of students on track with the number of credits they need to graduate.

ACTION STEPS

Students make varying degrees of progress during an academic year, and during the summer months, learning is impacted, particularly for our black and brown students. As we attempt to consider the pandemic's impact, we can draw from our understanding of how summer breaks impact student learning. Therefore, as in-person learning resumes during the 2021-2022 school year, it is reasonable to expect that not only will students have mastered concepts and skills to different degrees, but the impact is likely more pronounced for our black and brown students. At the same time, as educators, we must balance our need to teach skills and content with the need to restore our student's social and emotional capacities. Consequently, we must recognize the unique challenges faced during the pandemic intensify the need for a systemic approach to confronting the racial and socioeconomic discrepancies often experienced by our underrepresented student population. Compounding the typical academic impact of a break-in learning, some of our students experienced additional trauma with family unemployment, health crises, and reduced access to particular resources. For some of our students, the isolation of the pandemic impacted their access to in-person resources such as tutoring, executive functioning support, and other academic supports, causing further trauma and ultimately their academic progress. This year more than any other, we must layer research-based best practices with our existing multi-tiered systems of supports and interventions to accelerate learning. Simultaneously we must address the emotional trauma that has been a significant part of our student's academic experience. Additionally, in response to the impact of the pandemic, faculty and staff will engage in adult learning opportunities that include both SEL and academic approaches:

Community Building:

- Teachers have the most significant impact on our students, which is why the OPRFHS administration began the annual Institute Day focused on their well-being balanced with professional development around effective ways to build a safe and inclusive community for all. Teachers spent time focused on establishing community agreements to build relationships and create clear and consistent expectations. Beginning the first week of the 2021 school year, teachers will engage students in developing community agreements in each class. This shared experience will help students acclimate to school and experience more stability throughout the day. Prioritizing collaboration and community is a critical component to supporting students around pandemic-related trauma.
- During the 2020 -2021 school year, the PEP squad was established to monitor attendance and engage students through 1:1 adult relationships. This year will be no exception. The practice of checking and connecting with students is an effective intervention that improves attendance and overall connectedness to school.

Instruction and Academic Supports:

- Prioritize standards - During the pandemic, teachers streamlined the prioritized standards for their courses, considering the following questions: Does the standard last beyond one grade level or reflect an essential life skill? Does the standard have cross-curricular applications? Is the standard a prerequisite for future learning? The standards eliminated or not addressed with the same level of intensity do not represent essential skills.
- Prioritize diagnosing unfinished learning - Teachers have and will continue to determine the critical skills and concepts that students are missing and provide scaffolds that will bridge gaps while teaching the missing skills.
- Scaffolding - Teachers have and will continue to scaffold instructional opportunities for students. Scaffolding is a process through which a teacher adds support for students to enhance learning and aid in the mastery of skills. Scaffolding involves breaking up the learning into chunks and providing a tool, or structure, with each chunk by modeling, providing graphics, graphic organizers, and chunking material.
- Differentiation - Teachers have and will continue to tailor instruction to meet individual needs in content, process, products, or the learning environment.
- Accelerated Learning - We will prioritize accelerating students' learning by increasing their exposure to content-aligned standards so that every student can master the appropriate skills.

Tutoring Support

- Executive Functioning Tutoring - Many of our students may find it hard to focus, especially as they may have become accustomed to studying and attending class alone at home. Reentering the classroom might come with an overload of distractions, necessitating that we assist students with relearning how to focus in a physical classroom environment.
- Peer Tutoring - We will recruit diverse student tutors representative of various content areas to receive ongoing training in best tutoring practices and strategies relevant to their content area to provide peer tutoring. Peer tutoring increases academic success and can also increase social integration.
- Virtual Tutoring - Provide virtual tutoring allowing students who can't access the tutoring center the opportunity to access a tutor. We will monitor the use of this service and, if needed, adjust the hours of service.
- Targeted Tutoring - We will increase the number of tutors available in the tutoring center throughout the day. This tutoring will involve targeted instruction on specific skills or

concepts. We will use the EWS data to assign students to this intervention during their daily study hall.

- SAT Prep - We will implement an SAT prep program for our students of color
- Credit Recovery - We will create earlier opportunities for credit recovery.

Data Planning and Usage

- Collect and use quantitative and qualitative data to help understand what students are experiencing, making adjustments as appropriate.
- Common formative and summative assessments
- Use existing assessments (e.g., STAR, SAT, AP, etc.) to make data-informed decisions around supports and intervention.

Adult Learning

- Adult learning around three key initiatives will be provided to staff regularly throughout the year in various ways. First, instructional coaches will offer adult learning opportunities through coaching cycles. Next, teacher collaboration teams will engage in small group learning.
 - Assessment - Establish a philosophy and practices that facilitate and reward growth over time.
 - Restorative Environment - Establish a restorative environment that facilitates a mindset of safety and inclusivity.
 - Instructional Technology - Establish practices that engage students as co-creators in their learning using technology resources.

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