2023 RESTART Network National Forum: Advancing Pandemic Recovery by Bringing Research and Practice Together

Forum: May 31–June 1, 2023

Session 4 held on June 1, 2023

Session 4: Small-Group Topical Discussion

The purpose of this session was to bring together participants in small-group topic-based discussions focused on capturing the strengths, successes, current areas of need/challenge, and identifying areas where additional supports are needed for pandemic recovery.

Discussion Questions and Key Take Aways

Participants self-selected into topic-based groups to discuss the questions developed by the RESTART Network (which are listed below). There were five topics: addressing unfinished learning, attending to school climate, student engagement, operational management and ESSER investment, and involving community members. The ideas that emerged during the discussions are summarized by topic below.

When thinking about the strategies you pursued, what informed your decisions? What resources or research informed your choices?

Addressing Unfinished Learning
- At COVID onset, decisions were informed out of necessity (such as needing to purchase laptops for students)
- Sense of belonging survey

Attending to School Climate
- School climate survey data
  - Example: [5Essentials Survey](#) in Illinois
- Data related to use of exclusionary disciplinary practices
  - Example: [School Discipline Improvement Program](#) in Delaware
- Climate standards
- Caregiver surveys
- Vision and mission of the school
- School walk-throughs

- Equity audit questions

Student Engagement
- Student attendance data
- Student achievement data
- Disciplinary data
- Focus groups with students
- Revisiting what student engagement looks like, particularly for different groups of students

Operational Management and ESSER Investment
- Researching what other states decided to pursue
- Leveraging funds for efforts that were already in place

Involving Community Members
- Needs assessment research

What strategies have been successful, and what factors have contributed to their success?

Addressing Unfinished Learning
- Providing students with access to grade-level content
- Summer learning programs

Attending to School Climate
- Community liaison teams
- Family wellness night to help caregivers understand mental health
- Restorative practices
- Communicating with students that the adults in the building care about them
- Providing time in the schedule each day for social and emotional learning (SEL)
- Morning meetings
- District and building leadership setting the tone for climate within their context
- Consistent messaging in schools that caregiver engagement is the job of every staff member
- Creating a family and community engagement office
- Low student-to-counselor ratio

Student Engagement
- Providing incentives based on students' specific needs
- Culture-specific days

- Affinity groups
- Re-engaging students who are chronically absent through home visits
  - Example: [Learner Engagement and Attendance Program](#) in Connecticut
- Connecting students with mentors
- Student advisory groups representative of the student population
- Connections with community partners

Operational Management and ESSER Investment
- Seeing the funds as supplemental to existing funding
- States able to create an office of recovery with dedicated staff have more resources to incorporate evaluative efforts when using funds

Involving Community Members
- Development of a framework for comprehensive behavioral health services for students
  - Example: [Maryland Consortium on Coordinated Community Supports](#), which began in 2022
- Grow your own programs for teacher certification
- Apprenticeships and career and technical education (CTE) programs
- Implementation partner meetings lead to deepened connections between organizations
- Partnerships with institutes of higher education
- Partnerships with public libraries

What challenges have been encountered?

Addressing Unfinished Learning
- Getting students to show up for programs
- Gaps between what districts say they will do and what is actually implemented
- Lag time in receiving data
- Minimizing lag time between research and sharing results with districts

Attending to School Climate
- Transitioning from knowing what works to implementing what works
- Anti-SEL legislation
- Lack of diversity in conversations about school climate
- Leadership turnover negatively impacting climate progress
- Fear of implementing changes in case changes do not positively change school climate

Student Engagement
- School administration feeling pressure to deal with learning loss before addressing student engagement
- Tools used to measure student engagement being banned due to political climate surrounding SEL
- How to measure student engagement effectively and accurately
- Using achievement as a measure of engagement when engagement must come before achievement

Operational Management and ESSER Investment
- Broader stakeholder engagement at the planning table to increase buy-in
- Resource allocation challenges: how to use emergency funds with sustainability in mind
- A need for training around pooling and braiding of funds for those developing school budgets

Involving Community Members
- Inequity in access to programs like apprenticeships and CTE
- Lack of communication between different community resources, which results in families not getting needed services
- Under resourced districts lack the capacity to fully support the mental health needs of students
- Hiring difficulties
- Many students unable to access services for special needs

What suggestions do you have for increasing collaboration among researchers and leaders/policymakers to ensure findings are relevant and actionable?

Addressing Unfinished Learning
- Focus not just on what worked, but *how* it worked
- Researchers should develop relationships with educators in schools, not just with district stakeholders

Attending to School Climate
- Implement strategies in connection with the community

Student Engagement
- Two-way communication between researchers and research participants
- Streamline information
- Create visuals of results
- Hold role-alike sessions to share research and discuss implications of results

Operational Management and ESSER Investment
- Effective translation of results with educators and district leaders
- Transparency with stakeholders around how feedback and suggestions are incorporated into the research process
- Research to understand the use of pandemic funds

Involving Community Members
- Allow enough time to see results of a program before determining whether it is successful
- Maintain a sense of urgency in what will be a lengthy process of addressing pandemic-induced learning disruptions and long-term inequities in education