

## Planning for Summer School in 2021

April 2021

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### Introduction

Schools across the country have just endured the most challenging year in recent memory. In the face of unprecedented disruptions to regular school routines, school communities—from educators, to support staff, to families and caregivers—rallied to provide the social, emotional, and academic support students needed. They did this heroic work knowing all the while that even their best efforts would not be enough to make up for the trauma many students were experiencing.

Now, with the pandemic finally waning and more students returning to in-person instruction, school systems can begin to shift their focus from surviving the crisis to helping students recover. It will be a years-long process: schools will need to help students readjust to simply being in the classroom; reestablish their social identities after months of isolation; cope with ongoing physical, emotional, and economic challenges; and make up for interrupted learning. On the instructional front, in particular, this will require giving many students much more challenging, engaging school experiences than they received before the pandemic.

Many leaders at all levels—including the Biden administration—are looking to summer school as the place to start. It's the right instinct: summer programming has the potential to help students reacclimate to school and rebuild their academic and social identities so that they're positioned for a strong start in what will hopefully be a much more familiar 2021-22 school year.

The challenge for system leaders is how exactly to create those experiences for students this summer. Ramping up the same old summer school designed for a very different reality probably isn't the answer in most districts. But systems also need to be realistic about what they can design and implement well in just a few months—while maintaining focus on the even more urgent priority of [planning for accelerating learning](#) over the next several years. We've created this guide to help system leaders strike the balance that's right for their students and school communities. It starts from a basic principle: summer school is just the first step on a long journey, and should be the springboard to a comprehensive plan to accelerate students back to grade level in the years ahead.

The “right” approach to summer learning depends on the level of hardship students have experienced and the amount of progress a district has made on its long-term plans—and it might not mean spending newly-available federal funding to develop new programs this summer. Districts that have solid plans for next year or where students experienced less interrupted learning than expected may opt for a larger-scale program that serves a large proportion of their students. Those that need to allocate most of their resources toward planning for next year, or where students experienced widespread interrupted learning, might consider building or expanding partnerships with community-based organizations to offer summer programming and curating online learning resources for families instead of running a large summer program themselves.

Below, we suggest approaches to summer learning to fit these and many other circumstances, along with guiding questions to help system leaders determine the kind of summer program they're ready to take on—and that would best position their students for success in the years ahead. TNTP will also release guidance to help school systems develop a strong three-to-five-year learning acceleration strategy in May 2021.

This document is grounded in four key questions.

## CONTENTS

1. What principles should guide our 2021 summer learning experience planning? .....	3
2. What are our goals for our 2021 summer learning experience?.....	4
3. Given those goals, how should we plan for summer 2021 learning experiences?.....	5
4. What models might we use for summer 2021 learning experiences? .....	8

## 1. What principles should guide our 2021 summer learning experience planning?

We've grounded our planning questions and the advice that follows in a set of values we believe should guide any school system's decision-making about summer learning experiences:

<p><b>Use this summer as a jumping-off point for the 2021-2022 school year.</b></p>	<p>If your system has a solid transformation strategy to address interrupted learning for students, this might look like running summer programs for a large swath of your students. If your system needs to prioritize putting a strategy in place to transform the quality of students' educational experiences, spend most of your capacity doing that rather than executing summer programming for the summer of 2021.</p>
<p><b>Authentically engage students, and families, and partner with the broader community.</b></p>	<p>Students, families, and the broader community should have the opportunity to share their perspective about the approach and structures that will be most helpful in the summer. For some students and families, that might be in-person learning focused on building student belonging and mastery of priority content. For other students, it might be attending a safe community-based summer camp focused on a topic of interest. Authentically engage your stakeholders—then partner with your community and organizations within it to offer experiences that will meet their needs.</p>
<p><b>Student belonging is the social and emotional priority.</b></p>	<p>Students' sense of belonging is a critical and often underappreciated condition for academic success. During these challenging times for students—when many students are learning from home or attending socially distanced classrooms while asked to wear a mask where they can't see their friends' or teachers' faces—it's more important than ever that students believe that they belong in their learning environment and that we ensure that students have access to a classroom community that cultivates their sense of belonging.<sup>1</sup></p>
<p><b>Grade-level content is the academic priority.</b></p>	<p>Run every idea through a simple test: Will this help every student, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or other aspects of their identity, get back to grade level? You should prioritize accelerating students' learning by accelerating all students' exposure to grade-appropriate content while also addressing students' social and emotional needs—so that every student can get back to grade level.</p>
<p><b>Address inequities head-on.</b></p>	<p>Losing so much time in school, along with the lack of access to virtual learning many students have experienced, has exacerbated existing inequities and opportunity gaps in your school and system. Social unrest and repeated incidences of racism and violence against people of color have added to the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. Center your approaches on creating equitable experiences and outcomes for all your students, regardless of their race, identity, native language, learning and thinking differences, or other background characteristics. Examine every decision and piece of data you collect through the lens of how you are planning to ensure that <i>all</i> your students are successful this summer and in the coming school year.</p>
<p><b>Communicate early and clearly.</b></p>	<p>Your students, family, and staff likely feel overwhelmed, so as you think about your work this summer, ensure that you have a plan to communicate with your students and families as early and as clearly as possible. Make sure your decisions are clear and simple. You'll also want to share how decisions have been made and who was consulted in making those decisions, ensuring that you authentically partner with students and their families.</p>

<sup>1</sup> <https://studentexperiencenetwork.org/belonging-now-what-it-takes-to-create-the-conditions-for-belonging/>

## 2. What are our goals for our 2021 summer learning experience?

**To accelerate all students' progress, regardless of their identity or prior achievement, system leaders and educators need to identify exactly what their goals are for social, emotional, and academic learning.** In the initial version of the [Learning Acceleration Guide](#), we recommended identifying whether your students felt a sense of belonging. We also recommended identifying content knowledge and skills your students might struggle with in their current grade level, and filling those potential gaps "just in time," when the material occurs in the school year.

We acknowledge that this might feel like a radically different approach for some of your teachers and leaders. And in many ways, it is. Building a sense of belonging requires structuring learning environments to disrupt inequities and sending individual students – especially students of color, students with learning and thinking differences, and multi-lingual learners - proactive and explicit cues that they belong in the school environment. Accelerated learning requires that students consistently receive grade-level materials, tasks, and assignments, along with appropriate scaffolds that make the work accessible.

As we described above, planning for this transformation might actually require that your system do less with summer programming than you have historically so that your team can plan to transform your schools such that students accelerate their learning:

### GOALS FOR 2021 SUMMER PROGRAMMING

1. All students and families who want to participate have access to the summer programming they desire as a result of your system and community's partnership efforts.
2. All participating students have opportunities to safely interact with their peers, rebuild a sense of community, and reaffirm their academic identity as a competent, successful learner.
3. All participating students have the opportunity to engage in content that will prepare them for the next school year (be that credit recovery to keep high schoolers on track for graduation or reading foundations for your youngest learners).
4. All participating students are demonstrating an increased sense of belonging and mastery of grade-level content.

We described how systems could set themselves up to measure goals such as this in [the Learning Acceleration Guide](#), so you can reference that resource for more detail if you want to think about setting yourself up to monitor progress towards these goals.

### 3. Given those goals, how should we plan for summer 2021 learning experiences?

If your system has the capacity to plan for and implement a summer learning experience, you should view it as both an opportunity to extend your year-long instructional program and a way to launch new academic strategies. To do this, you'll need to:

**Engage students—and use whatever data you have about student learning during the 2020-21 school year—to understand how they've experienced school over the last year.**

Before you plan for summer learning experiences, you'll want to ensure that you understand the experiences students had during the pandemic so far. You'll want to answer the questions:

- *How do students describe their experiences in the 2020-21 school year?*
- *Do students feel as if they belong in school?*
- *Do students identify as competent, successful learners?*
- *Have students mastered the most important grade-level content such that they're prepared to enter the next grade-level?*
- *What inequities in students' experiences with schooling or mastery of grade-level content do you need to address?*

Nationally, we know many students have struggled to stay motivated and mentally healthy—and in many cases are struggling to identify as competent, successful learners.<sup>2</sup> We also know students have experienced more unfinished learning this year than in past school years.<sup>3</sup>

But the experiences of individual students have varied widely, so you should consider any data you have that represents your students' experiences. You may have surveyed your students about their experiences or conducted focus groups that will support you in understanding how students have experienced this past school year. You may have benchmark or end-of-year assessment data that will help you understand whether students have mastered grade-level content.

If you don't know the answers to these questions, consider administering [a survey to your students](#) and conducting focus groups with a diverse set of students to more deeply understand the strengths you're building on and challenges you're trying to solve for in your summer learning experiences.

**Based on what you learned from your students and their 2020-21 achievement, build an early vision for summer school that addresses your most significant needs.**

[Consider what you learned from your students](#) and an analysis of what you know about their experiences and learning from the past year. What are the biggest challenges you want to address in your students' summer learning experiences?

It's possible you'll realize that most of your students don't feel a sense of belonging in school or feel disconnected from their teachers and peers. In those cases, you'll want to build a vision for summer school (and ultimately summer school programming) that centers student belonging and connectedness.

It's also possible you'll find that you have a significant number of high schoolers who need to recover credits to stay on track to graduate—along some who are considering leaving formal schooling all together, given their experiences

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.crpe.org/publications/kids-are-really-not-alright-synthesis-covid-19-student-surveys>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.curriculumassociates.com/research-and-efficacy/unfinished-learning-research>

with it over the past few years. Or perhaps early elementary students who have not received significant small-group foundational skills practice will stand out as the most urgent priority, given the virtual experiences they had this year.

Determine what your system's biggest challenges are—and then develop an asset-based vision that articulates what you aspire to accomplish in your summer learning experiences.

**Once you have an early vision for the summer, check it against your operational, logistical, and human capacity.** To do this, you'll:

1. Determine the general structure of your summer program—including your delivery model and the resources you have available, both from an instructional and a community-based perspective. To make these determinations, ask yourself:
  - *Will students be in-person, virtual, or hybrid? Are all delivery models possible, given the space you have available and the renovations you are making?* Many school systems plan to use federal stimulus dollars to strengthen their infrastructure (i.e., HVAC, water, sanitation, broadband, social-distancing measures) prior to restarting the year. This may have significant impact on what instructional *structure* you can employ over the summer.
  - *What instructional resources do you have at your disposal—and what instructional resources might you want to invest in now?* Auditing your instructional resources (and your teams' familiarity with those resources) can help you determine what high-quality instructional options are most appropriate for the summer. For example, if your system has limited literacy intervention materials, you probably shouldn't build your summer vision around literacy interventions.
  - *What community programs exist?* Your students likely have opportunities to engage in summer programming through community-based organizations, like your local community centers, churches, mosques, and temples. Determine how you could partner with community organizations to ensure that your students and families know the range of summer programming options available to them.
2. Determine what resources you can allocate to summer programming. To make these determinations, consider:
  - *How much funding do you have available for summer programming right now—and what are the tradeoffs for using the funding in the summer of 2021?* Many systems—especially those who were mostly virtual last year— have additional funds available for summer programming or other uses, and also have federal stimulus dollars to spend on accelerating learning. Within the context of your broader stimulus spending and budgetary plans, how much funding do you have available to support summer programming?
  - *Which teachers and other adults will oversee summer programming?* As you think about your collective bargaining agreement (if you have one) and the availability of your workforce, how many of your teachers will be able to teach during the summer? How effective are those teachers? What type of learning experience do they have the capacity to implement and maintain?

**Engage your students and families/caregivers now to help finalize your vision and structure—and partner with community organizations who already offer summer programming that could meet your community's needs.**

Once you know the realistic possibilities for implanting your vision and general structure, authentically engage students, families/caregivers, and community partners to hear what they would prioritize. You can use our [Five Essentials for Engaging Families and Community Partners in Reopening Efforts](#) as you consider your next steps to engage your families/caregivers and community partners. As a part of this engagement work, you'll want to answer questions like:

- *Within the resource parameters that you have identified, what priorities would families and caregivers set for your summer learning efforts?*
- *Which families and caregivers are willing to have their students engage in in-person learning?*
- *If virtual learning is required, is there a caregiver at home that could support student learning?*
  - *If so, during which hours of the day or for how many hours?*
  - *Will students have reliable access to technology and broadband services throughout the summer?*
- *Would families require any other school-based services throughout the summer (transportation, breakfast/lunch services, etc.)?*
- *What programs already exist in our community, and how can we make those available to our students and families/caregivers?*

**Given your available resources, the desires of your community, and your students' experiences so far this year, determine which students to prioritize for summer programming.**

While the magnitude of the interruption to learning over the last year might understandably lead you to explore a summer learning program for *all* students, resource and personnel limitation might make it impossible. If you find that you need to prioritize a subset of students this summer, focus on providing additional instructional and social/emotional support to the students who need and benefit from it most. Consider these guiding questions:

1. *What inequities existed in engagement in your 2020-21 instructional program?* Use your summer program as an opportunity to re-engage students and families who were disengaged this school year. Consider prioritizing students with low or no attendance; students who frequently shared that they did not feel connected to their school or teachers during the calendar year; or students with limited or no access to technology.
2. *Which grade bands or students struggled most with virtual or hybrid experiences last year?* If you have the capacity for in-person summer school instruction, prioritize students who struggled the most with virtual or hybrid experiences. This may mean K-2 students who've had the hardest time transitioning into virtual instruction, or even older students who have struggled to attend or remain engaged in the virtual space.
3. *Which students are furthest behind academically?* While all students may have experienced some interrupted learning, some subsets of your student population likely experienced more than others. As you review your student data, identify and prioritize those students that appear to be the furthest behind academically.
4. *Which students typically need (and benefit from) more individualized supports?* In a typical year, some students require more individualized, targeted supports (e.g., students with learning and thinking differences or multilingual learners). You can use summer programming as an opportunity to work specifically with students who may have missed out on the individualized educational support hours that they would have received during a typical school year.
5. *Which students are in key transition years?* Students transitioning from elementary to middle or middle to high school will not experience the comfort of returning to familiar buildings or seeing familiar adult faces in Fall 2021. Perhaps now more than ever, using summer to support students in transitioning into new buildings and school communities will set students up to be successful.

**Prioritize the most important content and experiences for your students.**

As we describe in more detail in the section below, there are a few evidence-based models from which you can choose to support summer 2021 learning experiences. Each will be most effective if anchored in high-quality instructional materials and focused on [the priority instructional content in literacy and mathematics](#).

In **elementary English Language Arts**—especially for kindergarten through third grade students—this means spending time on [early reading accelerators](#) like reading foundational skills and building students’ knowledge and vocabulary. For an example of what this might look like, you can reference [these resources](#) that we created to support clients in Tennessee planning for in-person summer school using the Core Knowledge Language Arts set of high-quality instructional materials.

In **secondary English Language Arts**, this means spending time on building knowledge and vocabulary through reading complex texts and ensuring that students can fluently read. It likely means picking one or two topics in which students will become “experts” using your high-quality instructional materials or other high-quality text sets, like those included [here](#). It also includes practicing fluent reading using resources like those included [here](#).

In **elementary and secondary mathematics**, this means a significant focus on the prioritized content that students would need to master to start the 2021-22 school year strong. Zearn has done field-leading work in thinking through resources that could support students (as well as families and caregivers), so reference their [Summer Learning Plans](#) for a series of daily lessons for 12 weeks of targeted math intervention. They also include [guidance](#) for how to use their resources in different types of summer programs. The Student Achievement Partners’ [resources on fractions](#) might also be helpful as you think through how to address the priority instructional content for third through fifth grade students.

#### 4. What models might we use for summer 2021 learning experiences?

If your system has decided to pursue leading summer learning experiences (rather than relying on community-based organizations’ summer programming alone), you can choose from several models. While each model has a unique set of objectives or goals, they all require that educators receive training and support that focuses on:

1. *What students know and what they’ve yet to master.* Educators and instructors must understand where students are and why they’re focusing on the content you’ve selected. Your training plan should help educators understand the data that matters most, as well as the instructional scope and sequence of your selected summer school model.
2. *Where students might get stuck and the most common instructional pitfalls.* Summer school offers instructors with an opportunity to engage students in content they may or may not have experienced before. Effective summer professional learning experiences often prepare instructors by outlining strategies that students may have already experienced, so that educators have a foundational understanding of what students may already know and where the prior instruction may have broken down.
3. *How to scaffold and provide effective, just-in-time instruction or deliberate practice.* Effective instructors, especially effective summer instructors, know how and when to deploy scaffolds. Systems can encourage effective scaffolding practices by providing professional learning that focuses on:
  - a. Reviewing student data and tasks to understand what students know and can do.
  - b. Diagnosing student learning needs and aligned instructional supports.
  - c. Planning for and implementing an effective first-teach.
  - d. Identifying and deploying effective scaffolding strategies.
4. *How summer school supports and promotes the academic and social identities of students.* Attending or supporting summer school can be a hard sell even to the most dedicated student, parent, educator, or community partner. A critical aspect of professional learning should focus on helping stakeholders understand how summer is an extension of, and a critical building block, for your system’s instructional culture and vision.

Answering the questions above will most likely lead you to prioritize either strategic practice/intensive tutoring or preparing for your first units of study. While the goal of each model is the same—improved student learning—the



structure and focus of each model varies slightly. Before detailing each of these models, it's important to highlight one course of action that is unique to high school students: **credit recovery**.

If you support ninth through twelfth grade students, you will most likely offer some form of credit recovery over the summer. Keep the following questions in mind when planning for it:

1. *Who's eligible for credit recovery?* In most cases, systems will already have guidance that details student eligibility. In the case of summer school planning, answering this question is about identifying who in your system may need credit recovery.
2. *What content will be covered?* Systems often attempt to condense a year's or semester's worth of content into a truncated credit recovery term. Don't try this. Instead, review student data and the course content to develop a prioritized list of units or content that will satisfy your credit recovery requirements.
3. *What logistical or technical support is needed?* If your system plans to offer online credit recovery services, build in time for training students, staff members, and student caregivers on the system and its navigation processes.
4. *How will educators, families, and students track progress?* Given the high-stakes nature of credit recovery for many students, it's important that systems and schools have clear progress monitoring structures in place. These structures should:
  - a. Encourage educators (teachers, school leaders, and credit recovery support staff) to meet frequently to discuss student progress, successes, and needs.
  - b. Enable families, caregivers, and students to get accurate, up-to-date information on student progress in credit recovery and that program's impact on student transcripts or G.P.A.

Aside from credit recovery, systems might engage in either strategic practice/tutoring or preparing students for their first units of study, which we describe in more detail below.

### **Strategic Practice/Tutoring**

During a normal school year, students often benefit from additional opportunities for supported instructional practice, or "instructional at-bats." Specifically, students often need more time to practice strategic skills with the support of a teacher, aide, or specialist. But during this time of instructional upheaval, students have lost valuable practice time. Developing a summer school program around the concept of providing students with additional practice in specific instructional skills could be incredibly beneficial.

1. *When might this be the best model for your system?* If in your data, you see evidence that students would benefit from deliberate practice on critical instructional skills and concepts like those detailed above, the strategic practice/tutoring model might serve you best.
2. *What does this model look like in practice?* In this model, educators identify skills and concepts where students are not yet fluent in a particular skill or concept that would impede a student's ability to successfully engage in grade level materials and provide opportunities for deliberate practice. Often when educators hear about the concept of deliberate practice, they think about the traditional "skill-drill" models that use lots of worksheets or timers. While this is a critical aspect of deliberate practice, students need practice on both the skill *and* the concept. In his book, *Making Learning Whole: How Seven Principles of Teaching Can Transform Education*, Harvard professor David Perkins argues that the tendency is to eliminate the skill from the concept: we drill students on the skill without ever giving them a chance to apply that skill to the concepts where they are expected to use it. Perkin explains that we would never expect that a child who has only experienced batting practice would be ready to play in an actual baseball game. Similarly, if we simply have students practicing multiplication facts all day without ever explaining or showing them where they'll eventually have to apply that skill, they will most likely fail at using that skill effectively when it's

applied to the concept.

3. *What content will you cover?* The concept of strategic practice or “at-bats” comes from baseball. The idea that becoming a better hitter requires players to have as many opportunities as possible to swing and hit a ball—at bats. Therefore, if you’re planning on designing a summer program around this concept, you’ll need to think about and prioritize having students practice the skills, tasks, standards, or strategies that if mastered to the point of fluency, give students the best chance of success on grade-level work. Students often need strategic practice in the following areas:
  - a. K-2 Literacy: Foundational Skills and fluency practice
  - b. 3-12 Literacy: Fluency and academic vocabulary
  - c. Mathematics: Procedural Fluency and Conceptual Knowledge
    - i. In the case of conceptual knowledge, focus on concepts that students will need to fluently recognize or recall in the upcoming grade
  - d. Social Studies: Time periods or eras, geographic locations, timelines, historic figures, causalities, content-specific reading fluency
  - e. Science: Formulas, mathematics procedural fluency, causalities, and content-specific reading fluency.
4. *What instructional capacity will you need?* Research shows that effective practice or tutoring models don’t have to be run only by highly qualified teachers. Systems can implement this model with help from community partners, college students, recent college graduates and others. Although we know that tutoring programs run by non-educators can be effective, we’ve also found that systems have to be mindful of the student to instructor ratio. Structures like this are less successful in large groups of students. Systems and schools should have adults work with no more than six students at a time to maximize the impact. In general, though, this model could allow systems to provide meaningful support to students while also retaining enough academic capacity focus on long-term planning.
5. *What resources will you use?* Educators may have to pull from several sources to get content that offers students the kind of practice opportunities they need. In most cases, though, they should use the high-quality instructional materials your system uses during the year as a guide to locating and curating additional practice tools. For example, many publishers offer additional practice materials and even supports for summer school. Review those materials before striking out on your own. Because the key focus of this model is *lots of practice*, you don’t want cumbersome materials that are confusing for students or require a lot of training for your staff. This is why relying on your high-quality, Tier 1 materials that students and educators are generally familiar with can be so beneficial.

### **Accelerated Learning Model**

A summer program focused on learning acceleration—to prepare students for their first units of study in the 2021-22 school year—centers on readying students for the content, topics, and concepts that students encounter in first months of school. This model is not about pre-teaching (i.e., having students do the exact lessons that they’ll encounter in the unit), but rather accelerating student learning by building their schema and academic vocabulary so that they are set up to fully participate in the grade-level unit and content once they encounter it.

1. *When might this be the best model for your system?* If your data shows that you have several students not yet on grade level or students with naïve understanding of concepts (e.g., data shows students have yet to master multiplication and the first unit is on multiplying fractions with like denominators), this accelerated model might be the best approach. Additionally, this model offers students with unfinished learning an opportunity to be set up as instructional leaders in the fall when their peers return to engage in the content.
2. *What does this model look like in practice?* In this model, systems should adhere to the principles of accelerated learning. Instructors look to the goals, topics, and tasks associated with an upcoming grade-level unit of study. For example, if systems have a group of rising 5<sup>th</sup> graders (students leaving 4<sup>th</sup> grade and

going to 5<sup>th</sup>), students should most likely work with their receiving 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers on accelerated content. A more detailed outline of the accelerated learning model can be found in TNTP's [Learning Acceleration Guide](#).

3. *What instructional capacity will you need?* This depends on your materials. If you have high-quality instructional materials with supplemental materials that teachers can readily use for acceleration (see the example in number five below), this model could be supported by any number of staff members. If, however, your instructional materials include minimal support materials (i.e., only the anchor text, but not supplemental texts about similar topics), running a program like this would require educators who are highly skilled in building knowledge, recognizing vertical content coherence and scaffolding—likely your most skilled principals, instructional coaches, interventionists, and classroom teachers.
4. *What content will you cover?* Accelerated learning is about getting students into grade-level content more quickly. While goal of this work is ensuring that students are ready to access and engage in the grade-level tasks and requirements of an upcoming unit of study, educators shouldn't think of accelerated learning as pre-teaching (i.e., simply teaching students the unit's exact lessons prior to them seeing it in the fall). Accelerated learning is about building students' schema or prior knowledge on lost or unrealized concepts and content in preparation for the upcoming unit. [See the Learning Acceleration Guide](#) for more details on selecting content for accelerated learning.
5. *What resources should your system use?* As with strategic practice, high-quality accelerated learning programs rely heavily on high-quality Tier 1 instructional materials. Instructors should not reference or see these materials as resources for reteaching; rather, they should use Tier 1 materials as source material for uncovering the topics, academic vocabulary, or concepts that students will cover within a particular unit. Many publishers include supplemental materials in curricular materials that educators can use when accelerating learning. For example, in [EL Education's 8th grade literacy module](#), the publisher includes over twenty supplemental texts in its first module. However, completing the [module requires](#) that students only technically review three to four texts outside of the anchor text. This means teachers supporting accelerated learning in the summer might elect to use these supplemental texts to introduce students to some of the topics, concepts, and vocabulary that students will encounter in the anchor text.