From Recovery to Takeoff

A Plan for Improvement Amidst COVID-related Disruptions to Schooling

The Vestal Central School District

July 1, 2021

Vestal Central School District
2020-2021

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Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has significantly altered many aspects of life. Schooling is no exception. Prior to the pandemic, our district was on a path to an academic takeoff. Over the past decade, the Vestal Central School District began implementing new State learning standards and a variety of complementary initiatives in almost every subject area. At Vestal, we have been working hard to ensure that our students have access to the best curricular and instructional programming. It takes time (often as much as 3-5 years) to fully implement a new instructional initiative. By the Spring of 2020, many of our instructional programs were nearing maturation. However the pandemic disrupted that process. As we look to the next three years, our goal is to recover to the point at which a major academic takeoff is once again possible.

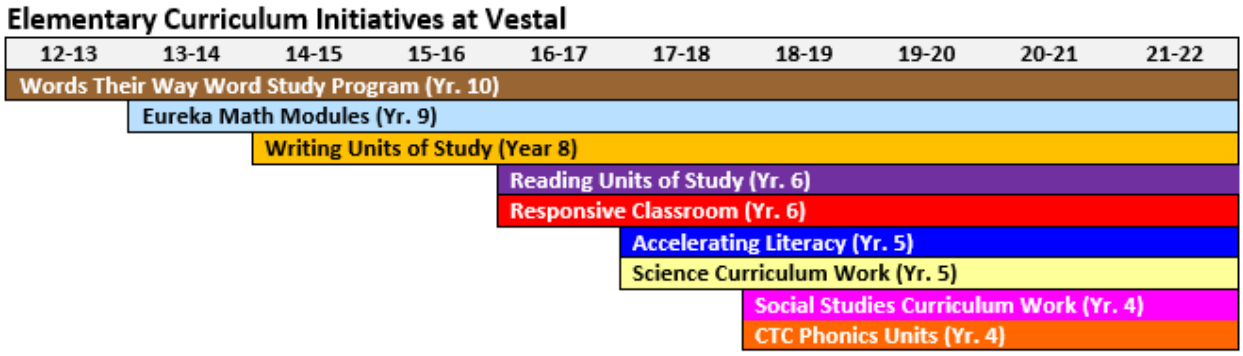
The federal government has provided financial resources to assist school districts in more fully reopening and recovering from disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic through Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) measures such as the CARES (Coronavirus Aid Relief, and Economic Security) Act and the CRRS (Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations), and the American Rescue Plan (ARP). Our district had developed a three-year recovery plan to make strategic use of these funds in order to address the District's post-pandemic needs.

In this plan, we begin by describing the state of the district's curricular and instructional initiatives prior to the pandemic. We then describe a needs assessment that we conducted in the Spring of 2021. From there, we outline a plan to move our district "from recovery to takeoff" over the next three years. Finally, we end by providing a rough estimate of how our district intends to use federal funds to help us realize this improvement plan.

Pre-Pandemic Curricular and Instructional Initiatives

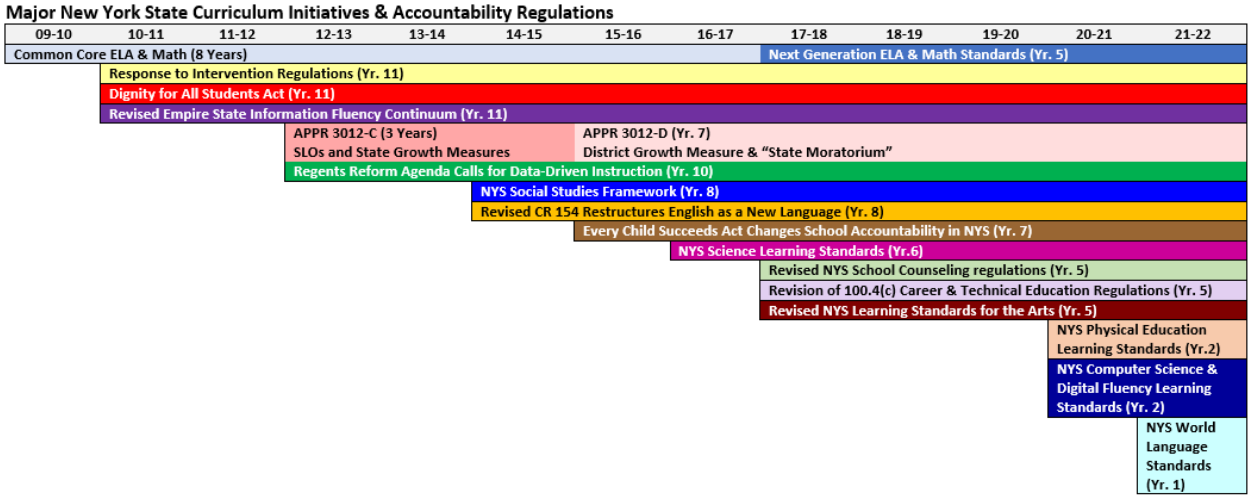
Figure 1 shows some of the major curricular and instructional initiatives we introduced at the elementary level. We began implementing the K-6 Eureka Math curriculum in 2013-14. The following year, we introduced the Columbia Teachers College (CTC) Writing Workshop curriculum, followed by the CTC Reading and Phonics curricula. In order to help students who were not reading at grade level, we joined the Broome-Tioga BOCES Accelerating Literacy program beginning in 2017-18. We also introduced the Responsive Classroom program to integrate rigorous academics with social and emotional learning and a developmentally informed perspective. Finally, our elementary teachers began developing inquiry-based curricula around new State standards in science and social studies.

Figure 1: Elementary Curriculum Initiatives at Vestal



Prior to the pandemic, our district was also working on many secondary and K-12 curricular and instructional initiatives. As Figure 2 illustrates, New York State has introduced many major changes to learning standards and other instructional guidelines, including two new teacher evaluation systems. The Vestal schools have worked diligently to implement these changes.

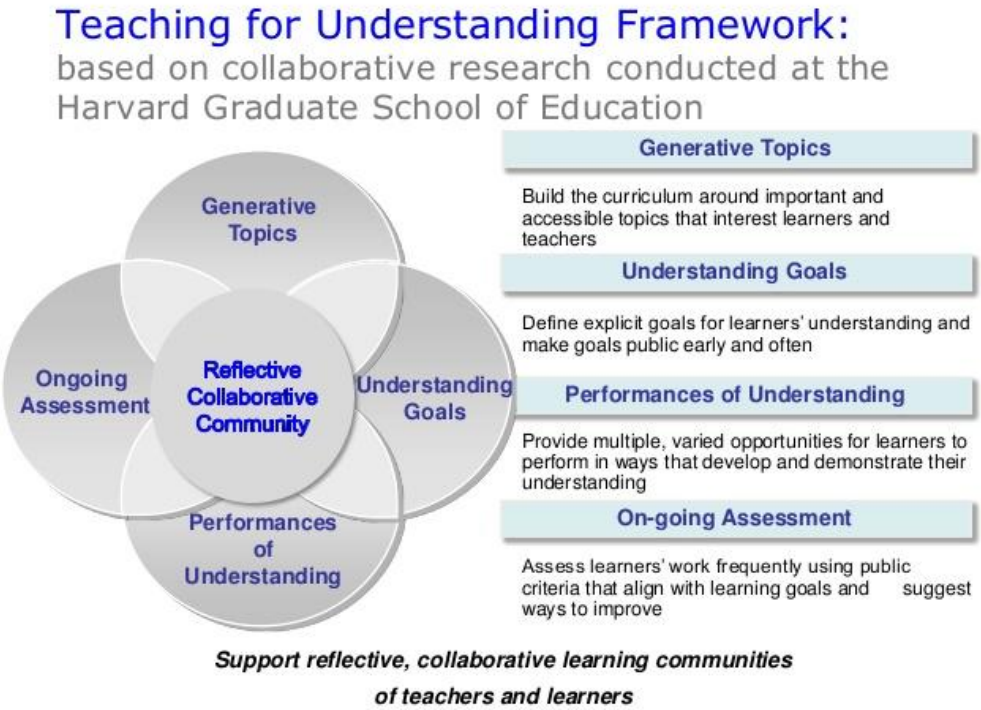
Figure 2: Major New York State Curriculum and Accountability Regulations



One thing that the revised State learning standards have in nearly every subject area, is that they expect students to go beyond simple memorization of content. They now expect students to be able to transfer and apply their skills and knowledge to novel situations and problems in and beyond the classroom. These standards encourage students to see themselves as junior mathematicians, writers, artists, historians, scientists, linguists, etc.

In order to implement these varied standards at the local level, our district has introduced the Teaching for Understanding (TfU) model to guide and structure our local curriculum development. Teaching for Understanding, a model developed through Harvard University's Project Zero, provides teachers across grade levels and subject areas with a common instructional language. Figure 3 shows the four major parts of this model.

Figure 3: The Teaching for Understanding Model



TfU seeks to help teachers marry academically challenging curricula with student interest by engaging students around "generative topics" (i.e., thematic units that address academically meaty subjects in ways that are relevant for students). Each generative topic is framed by 3-5 "understanding goals." These are rigorous and relevant compelling questions that drive guided inquiry throughout the unit. The model then structures learning around sequences of "performances of understanding." These are carefully scaffolded and cognitively challenging activities that promote transfer and application of new learning beyond the classroom. Finally, teachers and students practice "ongoing assessment," constantly reflecting on new learning and making adjustments as the unit progresses.

By the Spring of 2020, our district was poised for an academic takeoff. New elementary curricula in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and social and emotional learning were approaching maturity, and our work in science and social studies were beginning in earnest. Likewise about 100 teachers had participated in a five-day Teaching for Understanding training. The pandemic interrupted all of this. Of necessity, the district had to shift its full attention to keeping students and staff safe and healthy, while educating them in remote and hybrid contexts. Now that the pandemic appears to be subsiding, we look forward to a period of recovery that can bring us back to the point at which an academic takeoff is once again possible.

Needs Assessment

During the spring of 2021, Vestal district administrators conducted a systematic needs assessment to better understand how COVID-related school disruptions have impacted student

learning and mental health. This needs assessment included (1) meetings with the chairs of each academic department, (2) an analysis of K-8 universal screening assessment data for reading and math, and (3) administering two surveys of parents, students, and staff.

Department Chair Meetings

The directors of instruction asked the chairs and/or directors of each academic department or office to meet with their members to identify needs in the following areas:

- Professional Learning
- Curriculum Development
- Other Areas

In these meetings, we intentionally brought together department chairs from all applicable grade levels in order to ensure vertical alignment of curriculum and professional learning. These meetings included the following departments:

- Art (K-12)
- Business (9-12)
- English Language Arts (6-8 and 9-12)
- Family and Consumer Science (6-8)
- Health (6-8 and 9-12)
- Library/Media Studies (K-12)
- Math (K-5, 6-8 and 9-12)
- Music (K-12)
- Physical Education (K-12)
- Reading (K-12)
- Science (6-8, Chemistry, Earth Science, Living Environment, and Physics)
- Social Studies (6-8 and 9-12)
- Special Education (K-12)
- Technology and Engineering (6-8 and 9-12)
- Technology Integration (K-12)
- World Languages (6-8 and 9-12)

At these meetings we discussed a variety of issues including teachers' perceptions of student learning in terms of content, skills, and academic dispositions. We discussed potential curriculum gaps, professional learning needs, textbook and software requests, and other relevant issues. In some cases we made immediate adjustments by changing assessment timelines. Some examples of these include the following:

- Moving the ninth grade Algebra pre-test to grade 8 in order to have the data to inform decisions about which students should be placed in the Elements of Algebra A and Algebra I courses.
- Making the administration of the STAR Reading and Math assessments required, and moving up the administration timeline in order to have early access to the data for planning purposes.
- Hosting "tag off" meetings in which teachers from each grade level shared information with teachers in the next grade level. This information sometimes included student work

samples and the conversations identified potential curricular gaps that would need to be filled for the next school year.
- Brining in math and science specialists from Broome-Tioga BOCES in order to advise the chairs and instructional administrators about potential curricular issues.
- Offering credit recovery options for students who were failing courses.

Analysis of Screening Assessment Data
District administrators conducted an analysis of data from mid-year reading and mathematics screening assessments. We compared student score distribution to those from mid-year screenings in 2019-20. For students in grades K-1, this analysis focused on the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills). For students in grades 2-8, this analysis focused on the STAR Reading and Math assessments. These are standardized computer-adaptive assessments that provide percentile ranks and student growth percentiles compared to a large national norm group. We know from past linking studies, that scores on the STAR Reading and Math assessments are strongly and positively correlated to those of the New York State English Language Arts and Mathematics assessments for grades 3 through 8. The STAR assessments also provide diagnostic data that show student growth and achievement in a number of sub-areas.

Overall, our analysis of the screening data showed that the distribution of this year's mid-year assessment scores were comparable to those of last year. We divide STAR results into the following categories: "Above Grade Level," "At Grade Level," "Consider Intervention," and "Requires Intervention." Compared to the mid-year screening period in 2019-20, approximately the same proportion of student scores fell into the "Above Grade Level" and "Requires Intervention" categories. However we did note a trend in which more of this year's students fell into the "Consider Intervention" category. Many of these students' fell just below the cut point for the "At Grade Level" category.

These data suggest that COVID-related school disruptions were moderately and negatively associated with student achievement as measured by the DIBELS, STAR Reading, and STAR Math assessments. This appeared to be particularly true for students whose scores fell in the average range. At the same time, we did not see evidence of widespread or extreme impact, particularly for students whose scores typically fall at either extreme of the achievement spectrum.

Surveys
During the Spring of 2021, our district conducted two separate surveys of stakeholder groups. The first survey, called "BrightBytes," was a commercially developed survey that was primarily designed to assess stakeholders' experiences with technology. The second survey was a locally developed measure. It was designed to assess parent, student, and teacher opinions about the relative importance of various priorities for the district recovery plan.

BrightBytes Technology Surveys

The district administered a commercially developed "BrightBytes" survey to assess various stakeholders' experiences with technology integration over the past year. The district had previously administered an earlier version of the same survey in 2018. This allowed the district to assess both continuity and change over the past two years.

Overall the BrightBytes survey showed evidence that access and usage of digital devices increased for both teachers and students between 2018 and 2021. The following findings from the 2021 survey support this claim:

- In 2018, only about 52% of teachers reported using digital technology in ways that substantially impacted instruction.
- In 2021, 77% of teachers reported regularly facilitating online learning, and just under 70% of teachers reported using video conferencing daily or a few times per week
- In 2021, 56% of teachers felt confident managing student technology use. Thirty-six percent report "always" or "usually" curating and creating digital resources for students.
- In 2021, about 55% of students reported reading online and 40% reported writing online at least a few times a week.
- In 2021, 87% of students and 81% of teachers felt they always or usually had access to the devices they needed to complete their work.

Overall, the BrightBytes data suggest that the use of digital technology by teachers and students increased rapidly between 2018 and 2021. It appears that the need for remote learning and the district's decision to provide one-to-one devices and new software during the COVID-19 pandemic helped facilitate an increase in overall usage of digital technology.

While there is reason to believe that students and teachers have dramatically improved their facility with various digital devices and platforms, administrators' lesson observations also suggest that this technology has often been used as a substitute for, or augment to traditional teaching techniques and learning tasks. According to data from the 2018 BrightBytes survey, about 21% of teachers were using technology as a direct substitute for prior resources and practices, and another 19% were using it to augment their instruction. Only 12% reported using technology in ways that significantly modified or redefined pre-existing tasks.

Based on administrators' observations of lessons in the 2020-21 school year, there is relatively little evidence of a dramatic change to the 2018 data. It is still relatively rare to observe instructional technology use that significantly modifies or redefines learning tasks. In some ways, the dramatic increase in video-conferencing and the use of digital textbooks may actually represent a step back toward more teacher-centered instruction as social distancing requirements and the necessity of simultaneously teaching both in-person and remote students made it more challenging for teachers to implement cooperative and active learning structures.

Spring 2021 Recovery Priorities Survey

In June 2021, the district administered a brief, locally developed survey to help it assess the relative importance that parents, teachers, high school students, and community members placed on various recovery priorities. Overall, 613 people responded to the survey. Seventy-three percent of respondents identified themselves as parents, 26% as teachers, and .7% as students.

The survey provided an information sheet describing eight possible priorities for the district's recovery plan. The sheet then linked to an online form that asked respondents to rank the relative importance of each priority. Figures 4 and 5 show the results of the survey.

Figure 4: Recovery Survey Results Part I

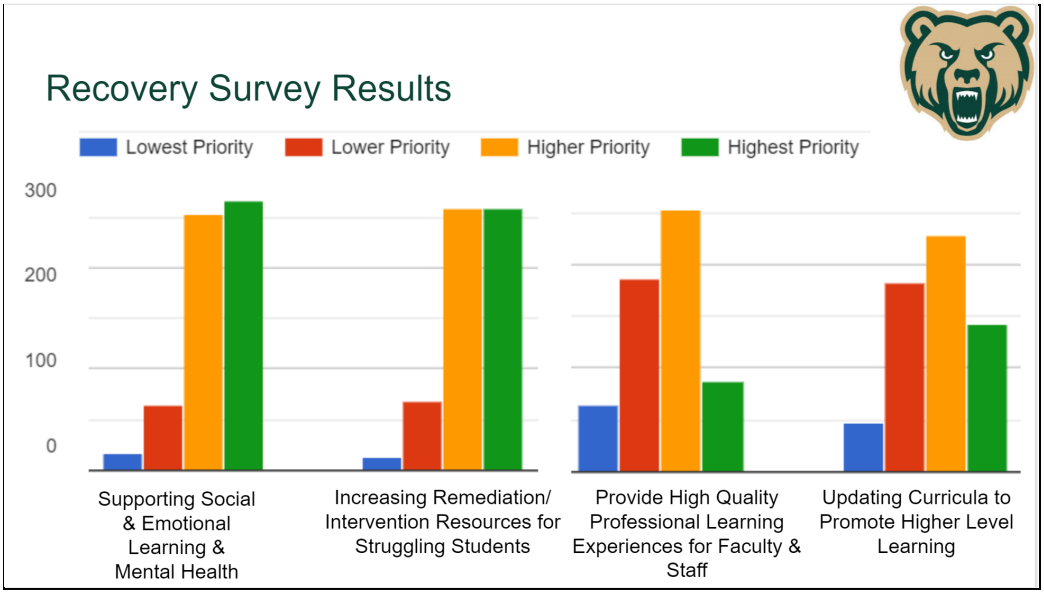
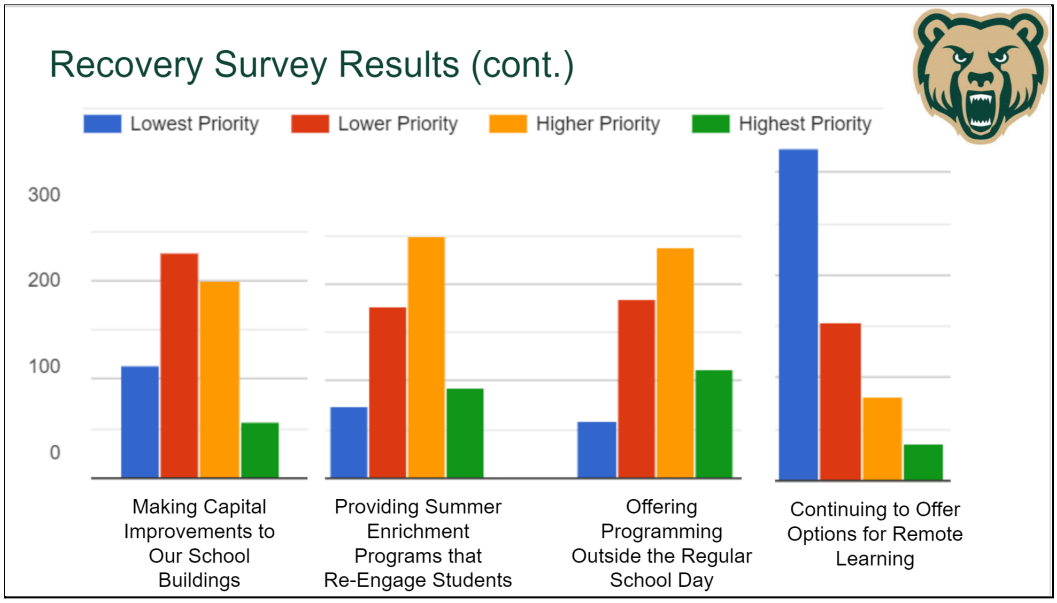


Figure 5: Recovery Survey Results Part II



As their highest priority, respondents identified the need for social and emotional learning and mental health. This was closely followed by respondents prioritization of resources for remediation and/or academic intervention. Respondents also prioritized professional learning and curriculum development. More than a third of respondents also thought enrichment programming and capital improvements to facilities should be high priorities. More than ⅔ of respondents felt that continuing options for remote learning should be the district's lowest priority.

Defining the Challenges

Despite our best efforts, since March 2020, schooling has been interrupted for virtually all students. Schools serve many needs that go far beyond academic learning. These include needs related to physical health and safety, emotional well-being, and socialization. As we move toward the 2021-22 school year, we will need to address both social/emotional and academic needs that will likely be more intense as a result of the pandemic. In order to accomplish this, we need to take an approach that integrates social and emotional learning, cultural responsiveness, and engaging academics.

1. ***Socialization, Emotional Trauma, and Mental Health Challenges:*** During the pandemic nearly all students had fewer opportunities for socialization. This has affected students differently depending on their developmental level. Our kindergarten and first grade students, for example, only know the version of school they have experienced over the past two years. At the other pole of the developmental continuum, our adolescent students have experienced more limited socialization at exactly the moment when they would typically become more independent and peer oriented. Relatedly, our students, families and staff have been under greater stress due to the pandemic, the associated economic downturn, and the racial, cultural and political divisions of the past few years. Greater stress often results in additional mental health needs. Finally, many have experienced trauma resulting from the uncertainty, fear, disruptions, and, in some cases, loss stemming from the pandemic. All of this happened at a time when the school and community were least able to support these increased needs.

2. ***Gaps in Academic Learning:*** We are already seeing at least three types of academic gaps:
    a. Content Gaps: There have been chunks of curriculum that were either not taught or taught but not learned well due to pandemic-related constraints.
    b. Skill Gaps: There are skills gaps that are "mottled in" because students have sometimes lacked enough opportunities to consistently practice. Examples of these might include lab skills in science, or soft skills that would come from working in cooperative groups,
    c. Disposition Gaps: Education is about more than just content acquisition. It is also about how academic disciplines create knowledge. It is also about learning how to learn. During the closure, time and resource constraints forced us to narrow the curriculum. This may have unintentionally sent the message that education is

mainly about content acquisition. We need to return to a place where students see themselves as junior readers, writers, mathematicians, scientists, and historians, etc.

3. ***Equity:*** The pandemic has not affected all students in the same ways. Students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and students from working class homes, and students of color tend to have often been disproportionately affected. At the same time, this pandemic has also affected other students in unexpected ways, sometimes making it difficult to accurately predict students' needs. For students of color, we also need to remember that racial and ethnic tensions have intensified at a moment schools were least able to help foster dialogue around these issues.

4. ***Indoor Air Quality:*** The COVID-19 pandemic has increased our awareness of indoor air quality. We have inspected and assessed the indoor air quality in all of our instructional buildings. We met with Delta Engineers and Architects to plan for added equipment in our Glenwood Elementary building. The new equipment will consist of a variable refrigerant flow heat pump system, energy recovery ventilator with ducted fresh air to each room, along with the addition of ionization units. We are also adding two additional chillers and piping to the African Road Elementary/Vestal Middle School instructional building. Tioga HIlls Elementary building nurse office will receive VRF and ERV ventilation equipment. The Vestal High School will receive a chiller upgrade. Finally the Transportation building will receive an upgraded ventilation system. With continuous improvement in mind, the focus of this work is to increase the indoor air quality of several buildings within our school district.

The Vision: Where Does the District Hope to Be by 2023-24?

Our District's recovery plan can be divided into two major components: Instructional Program Improvement and Capital Improvements. Although the two overlap, particularly in the area of technology integration, we will address each in a separate section.

Instructional Recovery Plan

As described in the second section of this plan, prior to the pandemic, the Vestal Central School District had been moving toward ambitious approaches to teaching and learning in all subject areas. In line with newly revised State learning standards and locally selected curricular and instructional initiatives, we have encouraged teaching and learning in which students:

1. Actively construct knowledge through "performances of understanding" by which their exposure to new phenomena, texts, and experiences prompt them to revise their prior knowledge as they transfer and apply it to new situations.

2. Engage in guided inquiry as they (a) pose and/or explore compelling questions, (b) analyze new information, (c) apply concepts from academic disciplines, and (d) communicate their findings.

3. Explore the relevance of learning by considering its value within and beyond school.

Before the pandemic, the Vestal schools were in various stages of implementing new learning standards and initiatives from Teaching for Understanding, to the Columbia Teachers College Units of Study, to the New York State Science Learning Standards, and much more. Many important pieces were beginning to fall into place. Our district was primed for a major academic takeoff. As we look to move beyond the pandemic, we need to arrive at a place from which such a takeoff is possible. In order to accomplish this, we propose a two-phased plan.

Phase I: Recovery (2021-22)

As we move toward the 2021-22 school year, we will need to address both social/emotional and academic needs that will likely be more intense as a result of the pandemic. Addressing these needs will require an approach that integrates social and emotional learning, cultural responsiveness, and engaging academics.

The theme for the next school year will be **"recovery."** Both students and staff will need support as they work toward this. As we look forward to a post-COVID era, we cannot simply return to schooling as it was. While the pandemic has been disruptive in many ways, some of that disruption has led to innovations that can make us stronger in the future. The goals and action plan described below were designed to build on those innovations while restoring our pre-COVID capacities in other areas.

Strategic Goals for 2021-22

In May of 2021, the District's Professional Learning Committee approved the 2021-22 strategic goals listed below. Each goal is accompanied by one or more essential questions intended to drive "action inquiry" plans in accord with our district's "Plan for School-Based Planning and Shared Decision Making."

Figure 6: 2021-22 Strategic Goals

1. Integrating SEL and with Deep and Engaging Academic Learning	2. Leveraging Technology to Promote Engaging and Socially Connected Learning	3. Promoting Resilience by Enhancing Holistic Systems for Student Support & Enrichment
• How can we integrate social-emotional learning with deep and engaging academics at the elementary and secondary levels? • How can teaching and learning become more culturally responsive?	• How can we leverage instructional technology to promote engaging and socially connected learning? • How can we determine which technology (if any) is most appropriate for a given purpose or task?	• How can we create flexible systems for student support that leverage both intervention and enrichment to promote student resilience?

The first of these goals is an explicit attempt to integrate social and emotional learning with academics. While they are sometimes treated separately, we believe these areas are closely related. Firstly, it is important to note that students' social and emotional needs must be met in order for them to learn at the highest levels. Secondly, we believe that engaged academic

learning actually promotes social and emotional well being. Simply put, when students find meaning in their academic work, their mental health improves.

The first goal is also meant to promote culturally responsive practice. As mentioned in the "Defining the Challenges" section, the pandemic has not impacted all groups equally. There is some evidence to suggest that Multilingual Learners and ethnic minorities have been particularly hurt by COVID-related disruptions to schooling. Prior to the pandemic, our district was working to more fully align our practices with the New York State Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework. Over the next school year, our district needs to continue that work.

The second goal seeks to make the gains our district has made in the area of educational technology integration more sustainable while harnessing its power to deepen teaching and learning. During the pandemic, out of necessity, our district launched a 1:1 device initiative. All Vestal students from kindergarten through grade twelve now have access to their own tablet, laptop, or Chromebook. In response to COVID-related disruptions to in-person schooling, our district also purchased new software to facilitate remote and hybrid learning. Finally, our district invested heavily in both professional learning and a part-time instructional coach in the area of technology integration. As we move into the next school year, we need to build on these gains by more fully harnessing the power of educational technology to deepen instruction. We will re-evaluate software purchases in order to differentiate between programs that were purchased as stop-gap measures to facilitate remote and hybrid learning during the pandemic, and those that can continue to promote high quality learning as schooling returns to something closer to its pre-pandemic state.

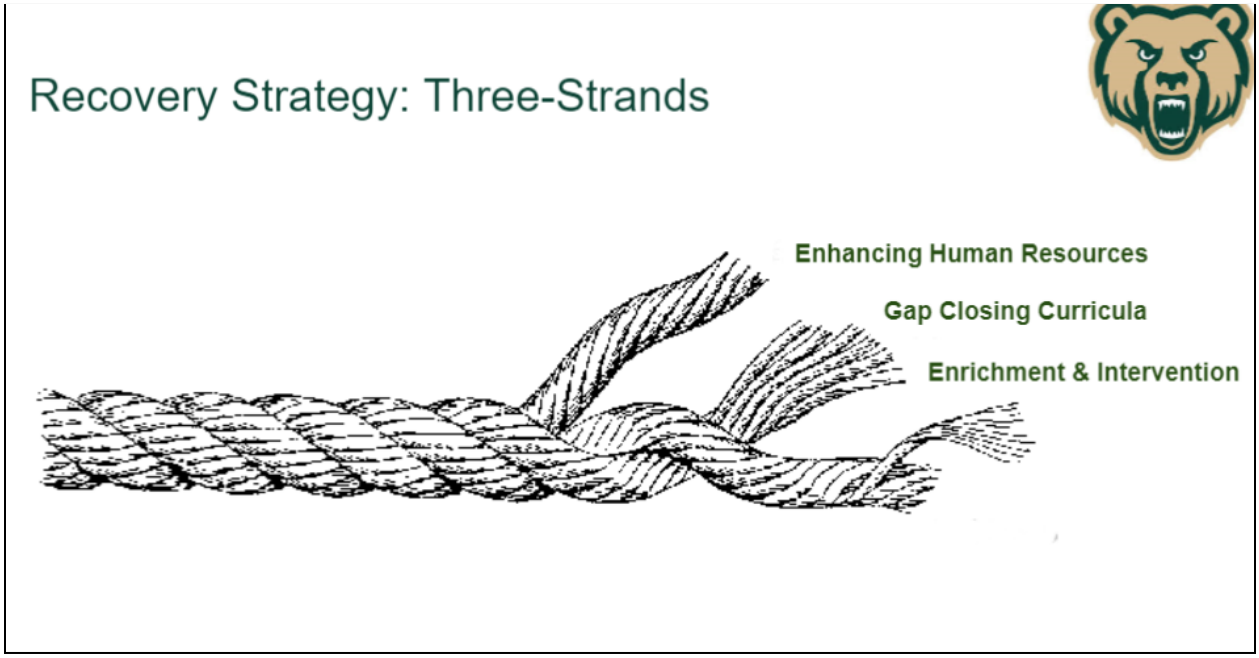
The third goal aims to enhance our district's ability to support those students who may need intervention and/or enrichment that goes beyond what we typically provide to all students. This summer our district will release a substantially revised "Comprehensive Student Support Plan" that outlines an in-depth strategy for helping students who need additional supports. Over the next year, we will begin to implement this plan by providing professional learning experiences, additional time for our district Student Support Committee to meet, and coaching by district and regional student support specialists.

Action Plan for 2021-22

As shown in Figure 7, our district's approach to recovery in the 2021-22 school year will revolve around the following three strands:

1. Enhancing Human Resources
2. Gap Closing Curricula
3. Enrichment and Intervention

Figure 7: Three-Stranded Recovery Strategy for 2021-22



We will elaborate on each of these components in the space below.

- <u>Enhancing Human Resources:</u> Over the next school year we will enhance our human resources by (1) adding a small but sustainable number of new positions in the areas of intervention and mental health, and (2) by providing high quality professional learning experiences for our faculty and staff.

  For the 2021-22 school year, our district will add a second school social worker and 2.4 elementary math interventionists. The addition of a social worker will enhance our in-house capabilities to provide counseling and other mental health services, while also positioning our district to take full advantage of community-based wraparound services for students and families. Likewise the addition of a secondary health teacher will allow our district to better address student's physical and mental health needs. Finally, the addition of elementary math interventionists will mean that each of our five elementary buildings will now have a full-time math interventionist. Not only will this allow us to offer more robust academic intervention services for students in grades three through five, but it will also allow us to focus on early intervention at the primary level.

Beginning in the summer of 2021, our district is collaborating with Broome-Tioga BOCES and other entities to offer professional learning in a variety of areas including social and emotional learning, technology integration, improvement of first instruction and intervention. As of this writing, our district is offering approximately 344 hours of professional learning to a total of about 383 staff (including staff taking multiple workshops).

- Gap Closing Curricula: We have found that some students have learning gaps in the areas of content, skills, and dispositions. In the Spring of 2021 teachers in our secondary departments formally shared information about adjustments that would need to be made to our local curricula in order to account for COVID-related disruptions to schooling. In the case of world languages and mathematics, where curricula tend to be sequential, we initiated a series of "tag off" meetings at which teachers from each grade level formally shared information with teachers from the next grade level. In some cases teachers shared artifacts of student work. In other cases they simply discussed what was and was not taught and learned at each level. In mathematics and science we brought in content-specialists from Broome-Tioga BOCES to help facilitate these conversations. For the summer of 2021, we have scheduled follow-up time for teachers to plan the necessary curricular adjustments. At the time of this writing, the district was offering 235 hours of summer curriculum work for a total of 173 faculty (including some faculty who may be involved in more than one session).

- Enrichment and Intervention: As outlined in the "Strategic Goals" section above, our district is currently finalizing a revised "Comprehensive Student Support Plan" for the next school year. That document offers a detailed plan for providing student support (both intervention and enrichment) moving forward. Our district takes the view that the line between enrichment and intervention is necessarily blurry. Studies of resiliency tell us that fostering resilience is not only about mitigating students' challenges, but also about building on their assets.[1] Consequently, over the next year, our district will increase the opportunities students have for both enrichment and intervention. As mentioned in the "Enhancing Human Resources" section above, we are currently hiring an additional social worker and 2.4 elementary math intervention positions. These staff will help us ensure that all students have access to the help they need in order to succeed.

  Our district is also offering three new enrichment programs this summer. We have created an elementary summer enrichment program for students who are going into grades 1 through 5 next September. Students will have the opportunity to enroll in inquiry-based social studies and/or science classes from 9:00 to 12:00, Monday through Thursday in the month of July. Intermediate students can sign up for a four-day mini-course in social studies. Primary students can sign up for up to two four-day mini-courses. At the time of this writing, approximately 170 elementary students have registered for the program. In light of the way that the pandemic limited opportunities for musical ensembles, our district is also offering summer music lessons this summer. Finally, our district will offer

[1] Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American psychologist*, *56*(3), 227.

a small catalogue of summer enrichment and intervention opportunities for students who will be entering grades six through twelve next year.

Phase II: Takeoff (2022-24)

We refer to Phase II of our district's recovery as a "takeoff period." As previously stated, we hope to use the 2021-22 school year to return our district to a place from which an academic "takeoff " is possible. By the 2022-23 school year (and possibly sooner in some grade levels and subject areas), we anticipate pushing forward with curricular and instructional changes designed to realize the district's vision of deep teaching and learning for all. While we understand that long-term plans must remain flexible, we offer both guiding principles and specific proposals that will help advance our district.

A Path to Solutions: Guiding Principles

During the coming year, we need to begin to address the challenges outlined above. There are no silver bullets, and no single person can meet these challenges on their own. If we are successful, it will be because we continue to pull together as a faculty and staff. We need to create both formal and informal opportunities for our faculty and staff to share what they are seeing and to generate solutions—big and small. In the space below, we offer a set of guiding principles that can facilitate both recovery and takeoff.

1. Focus on the Vision: What is a "good" education? We need a clear, overarching vision of what we should be striving for. This should reflect our collective values as a district and community. The district's current mission statement is a very good start, but it would be helpful to have additional conversations about what this document actually means to stakeholders. It is only through the process of collective meaning making that we can make such statements into living documents that deeply influence our practice. There is no one "right" answer to the question of good education, but as a starting point for the conversation, we propose a view of education centered on "qualification," "socialization," and "independence/autonomy" as articulated in our "Professional Learning Plan."

2. Distribute Leadership and Emphasize Sustainability: If we are going to recover and take off successfully, we need to have access to the best ideas. Those often come from the people who are closest to the situation on the ground—people with specialized subject-area and grade-level expertise. That is why we recommend a distributed approach to leadership. Rather than hierarchy, we need to create a network through which ideas flow more easily. We need to double down on teacher leadership and create additional feedback loops so that we function more like an ecosystem. Such a structure does not mean changes to positions or formal authority, rather it is a way of organizing our collaboration so as to allow a freer exchange of ideas.

3. Promote Authentic Engagement for Deep Learning: Vestal's approach to curriculum and instruction has been unique in our region. We have viewed student engagement as something much deeper than compliant behavior. Our view of engagement involves piquing student curiosity and interest in ways that promote deep and critical thinking.

This will be even more important as we attempt to recover from pandemic-related disruptions to schooling.

4. Double Down on Ongoing Assessment: If we are to help students who have had less consistent learning over the past year, we need to emphasize ongoing assessment. At the classroom level, this means that teachers will need to make student thinking observable, so that they can figure out where students need re-teaching and/or enrichment. They should also encourage students to reflect on their own learning and self-advocate when necessary. Most importantly, teachers will need to adapt their instruction to meet whatever student needs emerge. Finally, at the school and district levels, we need to have a better way to gauge our progress toward realizing our vision of good education. Once we have greater clarity around the district's vision and goals, we propose creating a task force to explore what indicators might help us gauge our progress toward realizing our goals. Program evaluation is not easy, but it is important.

5. Build Flexible Support Systems: At Vestal, our stance toward student support has always been holistic. Our most recent Student Support Plan introduces changes that will make it even more so. We need well organized student support systems, but we also need those systems to be flexible enough to meet less predictable student needs.

Specific Recommendations for 2022-24:

1. Enhancing Our Capacity to Promote Students' Social & Emotional Well Being: Our district seeks to use a two-tiered system of supports to promote social and emotional learning and mental health. The first tier includes social and emotional supports for *all* students. The second tier includes specialized supports for students with more specific needs.

   Our current "Counseling & Guidance Comprehensive Plan" outlines a variety of supports that our district currently offers at both tiers. Over the next three years we plan to further develop these options. For example, in grades K-5, we currently use the Responsive Classroom model to integrate rigorous academics with developmentally informed practices to promote social and emotional learning. We hope to adopt a similar approach at the secondary level. We are currently exploring the feasibility of expanding the Responsive Classroom model to encompass middle school students. At the high school, we are exploring the possibility of incorporating "restorative practice" as a model for tier 1 social and emotional supports.

   In order to address more specific "tier 2" needs, we are exploring "Life Space Crisis Intervention" (LSCI). This is a trauma-informed and relationship-driven model for helping students in crisis. It provides mental health specialists (i.e., administrators, teachers, counselors, social workers, and psychologists) with systematic tools for helping students "move from stress and conflict to insight and long-term behavioral change."

2. Early Identification and Support of Students Experiencing Learning Challenges: As stated previously, our forthcoming "Comprehensive Student Support Plan" will outline a detailed strategy for identifying and intervening with students who experience more severe learning challenges. Part of this strategy will include introducing a screening assessment to help us identify primary students who may suffer from dyslexia. Our goal is to help all students read at or above the benchmark for their grade level by the end of second grade. There has been strong research indicating that students with dyslexia and other reading difficulties benefit from more structured (i.e., explicit and systematic) reading instruction around phonics and phonemic awareness.[2] If we can identify these students early, then we can provide them with early interventions that will put them on the path to academic success.

3. Expanding Ambitious Approaches to Teaching: Ambitious teaching promotes learning that goes beyond State standards and assessments. It is generative, marrying the prescribed curriculum to student interests. Ambitious teaching helps students see the relevance of their work by creating opportunities for them to transfer and apply their learning to authentic contexts in the classroom and beyond. There are many things we can do to teach ambitiously, but the following is a short list of ambitious initiatives (many of which were already in progress prior to the pandemic):
    a. Expanding "Teaching for Understanding": There needs to be more opportunities for veteran teachers to participate, we need to develop advanced sessions for veteran teachers, and we need to ensure that new "in-house" curriculum development follows this framework.
    b. Promoting Inquiry-, Project-, and Problem-based Learning: The curriculum standards in science and social studies explicitly call for learning to be structured around inquiry at least some of the time. While it takes a lot of skill and flexibility for teachers to do inquiry well, there is strong research that it is more engaging and leads to deeper and more durable learning than most traditional instruction. Additionally, Problem-Based learning works well in a variety of subject areas, but especially in the STEM classroom. Not only does it show students the relevance by emphasizing transfer and application, but cognitive science tells us that students will actually develop deeper conceptual understandings by using them for some end. The Project Lead the Way curriculum might provide a good starting point for those looking to expand this approach into other subject areas. Finally, Project-Based Learning (PBL) can be another very powerful strategy when it is well designed and executed. Strong PBL design includes being clear but flexible about expectations, building in regular checkpoints at which students can get and give feedback, and working out ways to ensure students appropriately share the work. In the end, inquiry-, project-, and problem-based learning are not only more engaging for students, but they more closely parallel what students would be

[2] Spear-Swerling, L. (2019). Structured literacy and typical literacy practices: Understanding differences to create instructional opportunities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *51*(3), 201-211.

expected to do with their knowledge beyond K-12 schooling, and they help students develop essential soft skills.

Evaluating Our Progress

Evaluating a school district's quality and growth is no easy task. Any indicator we examine will provide, at best, just one piece of a broader picture. Furthermore, there can be negative side effects associated with over-emphasizing a given metric—especially if it is high-stakes testing.

School districts are human services organizations. Ultimately, they should be evaluated based on the quality of the service we provide to our clients (e.g., students, families, and community members). However, given the difficulties of measurement in complex adaptive systems like school districts, how do we evaluate the quality of a human service? Much like parenting or counseling, it helps to consider this question relative to our goals. What sort of service should we provide? What is a "good" education? How do we know our programs are good? This is a reasonable question for taxpayers, Board members, and a variety of other stakeholders to ask.

More work needs to be done in this area. In the next year, our District anticipates bringing together a task force to further clarify our organization's vision and medium-term goals, and to make recommendations as to how we might assess our progress toward meeting those goals.

As we consider how the Vestal schools might evaluate its programs, we should:

- ✔ Aim to provide the highest quality schooling for *all* our students.
- ✔ Remember that education is a human services profession, the impact of which is not always certain or measurable.
- ✔ Consider potential factors that might make our measures inaccurate and/or incomplete.
- ✔ Balance quantitative and qualitative sources of data.
- ✔ Be aware of context including student demographics and the comparability of various assessments when making data-based inferences.
- ✔ Work to ensure that any evaluation system we develop will enable, or at least not constrain, our ability to provide a high quality education for all.
- ✔ Be sure that any such system is created with extensive input from diverse stakeholders and, therefore, reflects what we value most about education in Vestal.

Capital Improvements

The second prong of our district's recovery plan involves capital improvements. These include both upgrades to our facilities, including but not limited to enhancements of our heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems. It also includes enhancements to our technology infrastructure.

Improvements to Facilities

In addition to the indoor air quality proposed upgrades to infrastructure listed in the "Defining the Challenges" section of this document, the Vestal Central School District is committed to ensuring adequate cleaning and disinfecting takes place in each of our classrooms/buildings. Additionally, adequate cleaning supplies have been purchased to ensure our staff has the necessary supplies to keep our buildings virus free. Over the next few years our district will explore the possibility of upgrading HVAC systems in some buildings as well.

Technology Integration

The Vestal Central School District has begun creating a new instructional technology plan. This plan includes developing a vision and goals to support student achievement and engagement through integration of technology into teaching and learning. The Vestal Central School District is developing this plan through the work of an Instructional Technology Strategic Planning Committee. The pandemic caused NYS wide school closure. In turn, this required Vestal CSD to shift to 1:1 devices for our students to enable remote learning. This was accomplished with use of old devices and equipment combined with newly purchased devices.

Some areas that have been identified as a need and will be considered with the use of ESSER funds are listed below:

- Additional Chromebook purchases for 1:1 devices: Kindergarten - Gr. 12
    - Kindergarten: iPads
    - 1st Grade: 2-in-1 Chromebooks
    - Grades 2 - 12: Touch Chromebooks
    - K-12 teachers: 2-in-1 Chromebooks
- Infrastructure Upgrades - WIFI added to Varsity Athletic Fields
- District-wide: Access Points (Wi-Fi) in every classroom
- Additional software to meet the requirements of remote learning and 1:1 devices
- Kajeet wireless internet devices in homes of families with need.
- Professional Learning focused on the Google Suite for Education and other applications.

Proposed Spending Plan Under ESSER-CRRSA-ARP

Federal funds available under ESSER will help our district carry out our plan for moving from recovery to takeoff. While plans remain somewhat tentative, figure 8 shows our district's proposed spending plan. Overall, our district's three-year federal allocation will be just over six million dollars. Our spending plan stretches ESSER funds across a number of categories including student intervention and enrichment, professional learning, staffing, equipment purchases, and capital improvements and the recovery of lost transportation aid.

Figure 8: Tentative Spending Plan for ESSER-CRRSA-ARP Allocations

ESSER-CRRSA-ARP Allocations				
Expense Item	**2021-2022**	**2022-2023**	**2020-2024**	**Total Expense**
Student Intervention & Enrichment				
Instructional Field Trips	$30,000	$30,000	$30,000	$90,000
Summer Enrichment	$100,000	$150,000	$150,000	$400,000
Credit Recovery	$60,000	$60,000	$60,000	$180,000
Professional Learning				
Professional Learning	$200,000	$200,000	$200,000	$600,000
Instructional Conferences	$100,000	$100,000	$100,000	$300,000
Instructional Trainers	$100,000	$100,000	$100,000	$300,000
Additional Staffing				
Health Teacher	$100,000	$100,000	$100,000	$300,000
Math Interventionist	$100,000	$100,000	$100,000	$300,000
Equipment Upgrades				
Science Lab Equipment	$50,000	$0	$0	$50,000
Robotics Lab Equipment	$400,000	$0	$0	$400,000
Instructional Technology	$200,000	$200,000	$200,000	$600,000
Bus Cameras	$75,000	$0	$0	$75,000
Capital Improvements				
Elevator Project	$250,000	$0	$0	$250,000
Building Security Cameras	$100,000	$49,700	$0	$149,700
HVAC in Buildings	$0	$2,000,000	$0	$2,000,000
Other for Purposes				
Lost Transportation Aid	$189,000	$0	$0	$189,000
TOTAL EXPENSES	**$2,054,000**	**$3,089,700**	**$1,040,000**	**$6,183,700**