



Interview with Jay Diskey

**For podcast release
Monday, June 7, 2021**

KENNEALLY: Parents and kids, are you ready for the latest version of the summer slide? No, you won't find this summer slide at an amusement park. The summer slide I'm talking about is a well-documented phenomenon for elementary and secondary school pupils in the US, who experience backsliding in learning achievement during their months-long summer holidays. A landmark study published in the *Review of Educational Research* in 1996 documented that this summer loss equals about one month on a grade-level-equivalent scale. Twenty-five years later, and in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, teachers and parents fear an even more dramatic drop that some are already calling the COVID slide.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content. The Center for Research on Education Outcomes at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University has calculated the magnitude of student-level learning losses during COVID-19 on behalf of 19 state education research partners. Average estimates of how much learning students lost in the spring of 2020 varied widely, ranging from one-third to as much as a single year of learning in reading, and in math, from three-quarters of a year to more than one and one quarter's worth.

Jay Diskey, a former special assistant to the US secretary of education, who was executive director of the Association of American Publishers education division from 2006 to 2017, joins me now to consider the pandemic's impact on children and what it may mean for curriculum development in the years ahead. Welcome to the program, Jay Diskey.

DISKEY: Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: It's a pleasure to have you here, Jay. Let's talk about this COVID slide for just a moment, and we'll get into some of the details and what's being done to address it. But is this something that we have established is a real phenomenon yet, or we're just worried about this?

DISKEY: It seems to be real. It's something that has been discussed over the past 14 months since the pandemic hit our shores. Now, at the same time, in fairness, there's only some early estimates. This is going to take probably several years to really sort out. But I think there's a sense among many researchers, and certainly many educators, that the COVID slide is real.



KENNEALLY: And I would imagine you can add to that list parents who are worried about this, too, Jay Diskey, because after all, the journey of the American student and their families over the past 14 months has been a trying one indeed.

DISKEY: Yeah, very confusing and trying. The school closings and the abrupt shift to remote learning – and it was very abrupt, as we all know – was very difficult for educators, students, and parents.

KENNEALLY: And there is, in practically every state in the Union, some effort already underway to establish what I think they're calling learning recovery programs.

DISKEY: That's absolutely right, Chris. I track legislation – state and federal – track legislation in all 50 states, and I would say nearly every state has either already established some sort of learning recovery program or is considering one. Many legislatures are still meeting. So we're seeing state after state – for example, Tennessee recently passed a \$100 million reading program for learning recovery just this summer. Colorado's debating a \$77 million program. And on it goes.

KENNEALLY: And the federal government, too, is stepping in. There's an allocation here – a considerable figure. Tell us what it is and what kind of investment is being made in K-12 at the federal level.

DISKEY: Yeah, indeed. It was \$200 billion, which is a huge amount of money. Keep in mind that the federal government typically spends about \$60 billion a year on K-12. So here comes a \$200 billion allocation made in three different relief packages over the course of roughly about 12 months. It is the largest single investment in K-12 funding in our nation's history. And states and school districts are using the funding to establish the learning recovery programs that I just mentioned. These programs take the form of summer institutes, after-school programs, and other learning opportunities. It simply varies, Chris, state by state, school district by school district.

KENNEALLY: And before we move ahead and try to recover, we have to understand the picture as it stands today and what has happened in the last 14 months. So to date, what have we learned about the lessons from the distance learning experiment, if you will, that we've all endured since COVID-19 arrived?

DISKEY: Fortunately, most districts had some sort of remote learning options, but they varied widely, and they weren't always successful. It took many districts a while to get up and running. For example, one of the large county school districts here in the Washington, DC,



area took more than a month to sort things out. In essence, school wasn't in session for any of the children in one of the largest districts in the country.

But there's been many lessons learned over the past year in regard to distance learning. For one thing, many districts learned that it's one thing to use educational technology for supplemental instruction or to use it just for a few hours a day. It's a whole other thing to go to ed tech full time throughout the day.

I think districts also learned that many of their teachers, or certainly some of their teachers, were not adequately trained and prepared to shift to full-time remote learning. I think another lesson is that districts learned that ed tech works best, at least at this moment in time, when it's in a hybrid mix of in-person and remote learning. And then the final thing that I think a lot of districts learned is that quality content really, really matters. Quality content that is fit for purpose is really important.

KENNEALLY: Let's talk about that quality content, because obviously that is, as you say, the key to success for students. That quality, though, is measured in a lot of different ways. There are various standards and various measures that students, parents want to look at to be sure that the curriculum is, as you say, fit for purpose. How do we do that? What are the concerns you have right now as far as quality curriculum?

DISKEY: Chris, first of all, it must have the right ingredients. The right ingredients are good academic standards and up-to-date standards. The curriculum should have a scope and sequence for the topics. It should also have authentic content drawn from trusted sources. And the curriculum should reflect local communities, and it should be diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Furthermore, it must be deliverable. This is where tech comes in and some of the issues that popped up during the pandemic as to how effective digital learning was.

And I don't want anybody to get me wrong. There's many success stories about remote learning or digital learning from this pandemic. But at the same time, there's some not-so-great success stories, and you hear tales of students using terribly out-of-date materials, terribly out-of-date books, or even out-of-date software.

I think one thing that's important to think about in terms of curriculum is how to build it. There is a lot of curriculum being developed locally in school districts. Unfortunately, school districts don't always have the ability to use the rich, authentic, up-to-date texts that I talked about – the passages from high-quality fiction, nonfiction, etc. Some of that has to do with copyright laws and regulations pertaining to that. So I think it's very important in building a curriculum and using a curriculum to, obviously, comply with copyright, but also to use a trusted partner – for example, Copyright Clearance Center – to clear permissions and to get the curriculum on its way and fully in compliance with copyright.



KENNEALLY: Jay Diskey, we appreciate you joining us today on Velocity of Content.

DISKEY: Thank you very much, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening. Join us again soon for another Velocity of Content podcast from CCC.

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