BACK-TO-SCHOOL

BLUEPRINT

PLANNING FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE AFTER COVID-19

SUPPORTING REMOTE LEARNING

RennieCenter
EDUCATION RESEARCH & POLICY

SUPPORTING REMOTE LEARNING

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19 across the United States (and around the world), schools embarked on an unprecedented nationwide shift to online instruction last March. For educators, school leaders, families, and students, the transition came with many questions—and few prior experiences that could shine a guiding light.

Faced with unforeseen challenges, we saw a groundswell of support for giving students and families access to virtual or long-distance learning opportunities. From free internet services for low-income families to educational programming on public television to dedicated educators adapting and delivering lessons online, the novelty of the situation drove innovative ways of educating and connecting with school communities.

As we look ahead to the fall, a closer examination of relevant research, data, and guidance will help prepare schools across the Commonwealth to undertake another round of remote learning, either on its own or as part of a hybrid model that incorporates some in-person instruction. This action guide will explore past and present examples of remote learning, best practices in three key areas (relationships, instructional strategies, and technology), and ways to prepare for remote learning with educators, families, and students.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS REMOTE LEARNING?

This section **introduces** the topic of remote learning, **defines** the different methods of providing learning remotely, and **reviews** previous research on the effectiveness of remote learning.

BACKGROUND ON REMOTE LEARNING

Since the emergence of **correspondence education** (learning through the mail), distance learning has served as a way to bring knowledge to students who weren't able (or allowed) to attend school in person. Defined as a form of education where learning takes place when teachers and students are separated by distance, distance learning is synonymous with remote learning.

In more recent iterations, remote learning has been used by students requiring home or hospital care and students seeking an alternative school environment, among others. Though debates regarding oversight and accountability have prevented a mass presence of virtual schools in Massachusetts, the state currently has two accredited K-12 virtual schools, which together enroll around 3,000 students.

Because remote learning existed long before COVID-19 required its wholesale adoption, a number of sources have worked to define the characteristics—and assess the effectiveness—of this approach. This section presents background information on key concepts and findings related to remote learning.

KEY DEFINITIONS

- **In-Person Learning** is a form of learning where students and educators spend the majority of their time in the physical classroom.

- **Blended Learning**, or **Hybrid Learning**, combines learning that takes place in a school building with learning that takes place outside of school and/or online.

- **Distance Learning**, or **Remote Learning**, is a form of learning that takes place when teachers and students are separated by distance.
    - This is differentiated from Online Learning, which builds out the term to reflect that instruction and content is delivered primarily over the internet.

KNOWLEDGE CHECK: SYNCHRONOUS VS. ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

The terms **synchronous and asynchronous learning** have been circulating recently in discussions of remote learning pedagogy. In **synchronous learning**, learners participate in learning activities at the same time, and there are opportunities to interact with one another and/or with an instructor. This can happen in a classroom or virtually, such as through a videoconference. In **asynchronous learning**, learners are engaged in work on their own time, when there are no opportunities for interacting with other students or an instructor. Below are several examples of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities:

Synchronous Learning Activities

- Teaching and learning in a live Zoom session
- Students do group work through instant messaging
- A teacher holds drop-in group tutoring on Google Hangouts

Asynchronous Learning Activities

- Students post messages in an online forum
- Watching a videotaped lecture
- Sending the class a worksheet to complete and send back at another time

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON REMOTE LEARNING

"An unexpected finding was the small number of rigorous published studies contrasting online and face-to-face learning conditions for K–12 students."
— Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning, U.S. Department of Education

This finding, from a 2010 systematic search of research literature by the U.S. Department of Education, highlights the dearth of research regarding K-12 remote learning. This situation has not changed much in the 10 years since its publication—most evidence on the effectiveness of online learning still relates primarily to higher education or adult education contexts. The few studies that do exist, however, point to the conclusion that students who are academically behind in classes are the least likely to succeed in an online environment. (**Brookings**, 2017)

At the same time, the research that has been done on online or hybrid education (in K-12 and beyond) also points to several evidence-based practices that can inform schools as they prepare for remote learning this fall. The following summary comes from a May 2020 research compilation by the **Research Alliance for New York City Schools**.

- Teaching quality matters more than the method of delivering content (e.g., synchronous or asynchronous learning)

- It is critical to ensure that students have access to the technology they need to participate fully

- Interactions among peers offer a strong motivator and can lead to better learning outcomes

- Helping students work on their own (i.e., by advising them on structures or routines to support independent work) can also improve outcomes

- Certain instructional approaches (e.g., games, short quizzes) may be more effective in particular content areas or for particular purposes

Beyond these instructional needs and techniques, research also indicates that having a "**person on the ground**" to provide students with face-to-face support is an important component of successful remote learning, whether that person is a parent, family member, tutor, mentor, or someone else.

Though the evidence base is far from conclusive, these practices can guide a deeper exploration of educators' and students' experiences to date and offer insight into the key elements of a successful remote learning plan.

RESPONSES TO REMOTE LEARNING DURING COVID-19

This section details the experience of remote learning in the spring of 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including **educator, student, and family perspectives**.

RESPONDING IN THE MOMENT

At its core, remote learning in the spring of 2020 was simply about making the best out of a bad situation. Without the time to create a comprehensive action plan, many schools jumped into response mode and focused on creating a learning environment that could get them to the end of the year.

Though every district faced obstacles with this transition, the rapid shift to remote learning exposed many of the inequities that plague our education system. Most students in wealthier, majority-white districts benefited from easier access to technology, online resources, and comfortable learning environments. Meanwhile, many students in poorer districts and students of color faced major barriers to accessing learning opportunities, including a lack of devices and internet connectivity, limited instructional materials available in their home language, crowded home environments, and competing priorities (such as the need to work or care for younger siblings).

In order to fully examine remote learning, particularly its inequities, we need to better understand students', families', and educators' experiences from the past few months. This data will help identify strategies that K-12 schools should consider (or avoid) as they prepare for the fall.

WHAT ARE STUDENTS SAYING ABOUT REMOTE LEARNING?

While **some students have thrived** in the transition to remote learning, many others ran into roadblocks that limited their ability to access content and build understanding. Some found themselves getting distracted and procrastinating, lacking motivation to do schoolwork. Others felt overwhelmed by stress or anxiety due to the pandemic and struggled to access mental health supports that were normally provided by school staff. Many young people found themselves mourning the loss of a school year, particularly opportunities to interact with peers and participate in sporting events, proms, and graduation ceremonies.

Below are major findings from recent surveys that asked students to comment on their experiences with remote learning.

What are Students Saying About Remote Learning?

Student voice is an essential part of evaluating past learning and planning for future learning. Throughout the spring of 2020, youth feedback has been collected through a number of surveys. The following bullet points highlight key findings from several of these youth-focused surveys.

- **Distractions at home and feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious were the most frequently cited obstacles to virtual learning.** "Black and Latinx students faced more obstacles than White and Asian students. Seventy percent of students reported obstacles to their virtual learning. Of those students, 64 percent reported facing distractions at home and 50 percent reported feeling depressed, stressed or anxious. A greater proportion of female students and students who identify in a different way reported feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious than did male students." (**Read more at YouthTruth**)

- **Relationships with teachers were a bright spot.** "Spring 2020 has called for even greater resourcefulness in how teachers connect with and support their students. On average, students reported that their relationships with their teachers are slightly better than usual, a testament to teachers' care, commitment, and concern for their students during this challenging time." (**Read more at YouthTruth**)

- **Students of color were more likely to face remote learning challenges than their white peers.** "Living in crowded conditions can make it hard to focus on schoolwork, a challenge exacerbated when more family members are at home." Additionally, linguistic isolation, lack of access to a computer or the internet, impoverished living situations, and other risk factors have made remote learning difficult for many students (particularly students of color) during COVID-19. (**Read more at the Urban Institute**)

- **Finding space to do schoolwork is a challenge for many teens.** More than a quarter of teens (28%) say they lack a dedicated space where they can do schoolwork at home. (**Read more at Common Sense Media**)

- **Finally, more young people are experiencing declines in their emotional and cognitive health.** "Young people living in cities were 15% more likely to report poorer health indicators than those in rural areas. Asian and Latinx youth were significantly more likely to report poorer health than Black or White youth. Youth with parents born outside the United States were one-third more likely to experience poorer health than youth whose parents were born in the United States." (**Read more at America's Promise Alliance**)

WHAT ARE EDUCATORS SAYING ABOUT REMOTE LEARNING?

Educators have faced an immense uphill battle in transitioning to remote learning. Findings from a May 2020 survey conducted by Teach Plus Massachusetts, which focused on experiences with remote learning and student and family engagement during school closures, relays important feedback from educators. For example, 86% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that they understood what was expected of them related to work duties. However, just 46% of educators somewhat or strongly agreed that they were able to meaningfully engage with students. The following quotes offer additional snapshots of teacher experiences, and the poll results are **linked here**.

- "We are asked to teach with technology and platforms we have never used. We are struggling to learn them while still teaching, communicating with families, and dealing with our own family responsibilities. It's building the boat while sitting in it during a hurricane."

- "I need trauma-informed and SEL training. We are teaching young, anxious brains while we are anxious ourselves. We need help!"

- "I don't find remote learning to be effective. I work with students who come from low-income families and have emotional and behavioral disabilities. This is not at all good or effective for them."

- "Texting or calling and starting with 'How are you doing?' and 'What do you need?' [are effective family communication approaches]. I also include 'How can I help?' and instead of the 'You should be on Zoom daily,' I listen and do what the parent is asking, if possible."

A national survey conducted by PDK International also highlighted the gap between the types of support teachers are craving and the types they're receiving: 39% of teachers indicated that they are seeking assistance with their own social-emotional needs, but only 3% of school administrators report that they're providing such assistance. (Hear more about the results of the survey in this **CASEL webinar**)

WHAT ARE FAMILIES SAYING ABOUT REMOTE LEARNING?

Throughout the period of remote learning, parents took on the role of teacher as well as caretaker. The MassINC Polling Group's statewide poll of K-12 parents provides an essential perspective in the conversation on remote learning. Several key findings are highlighted below. **(Read more here)**

- According to the findings, "Massachusetts' K-12 parents experienced very different engagement levels from schools and teachers, with some reporting daily online classrooms and check-ins, while others said their child was mostly not connected to regular school activities."

- "More white parents reported relying on school materials, while Black, Latino, and Asian parents supplemented more with their own projects."

- "Parents of younger children spent far more time on both academic guidance and assistance with technical systems needed to complete school work."

- "Non-English speaking households report less frequent contact and feedback during remote learning."

HOW HAVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS RESPONDED TO REMOTE LEARNING?

Among the disparities that have risen to the surface as a result of school closures are differences in school district practices. Expectations of teachers, tracking of student engagement, instruction and progress monitoring structures, and many other factors varied tremendously based on district context. This has led to vastly different experiences for students, families, and educators across the country. Some notable results come from an **analysis by the Center for Reinventing Public Education**, which looked at how a representative sample of 477 school districts nationwide approached remote learning.

- Only **21.8% of districts** expected teachers to provide synchronous learning opportunities. This percentage was higher **(28.8%)** among the wealthiest districts, and lower among the districts with the highest poverty rates **(14.5%)**.

- Just **under half (48%)** of districts expected teachers to monitor student engagement, either by taking attendance, checking in one-on-one with students, or both.

- Less than **three in five districts (57.9%)** expected teachers to monitor student progress by reviewing and giving feedback on assignments. Even **fewer (42.1%)** required teachers to grade work and include the results in final course grades, even for a subgroup of students (e.g., those in middle and upper grades).

PREVIOUS GUIDANCE ON REMOTE LEARNING

This section summarizes the guidance on remote learning found in the Rennie Center's previous **Back-to-School Blueprint action guides** and provides a brief timeline of guidance from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

PREVIOUS GUIDANCE FROM THE RENNIE CENTER

To date, the Rennie Center has released five action guides as part of its Back-to-School Blueprint. Below, we highlight a few items from each guide that are most relevant to remote learning, though each guide also includes many other resources and action steps for schools and districts seeking to ease the return to school—whatever form that might take.

The five previously released action guides are linked below. Note that clicking the link will take you to a new course, each with multiple pages and numerous embedded resources. If you'd prefer to complete this course before visiting the other action guides, they are all available on the **Rennie Center's website**.

HELPING STUDENTS HEAL FROM TRAUMA

- **Provide structure and routine** by organizing remote learning that follows a consistent and familiar daily schedule.
- Find ways to **connect with students** each day, even remotely, to check in on students' emotional well-being.

REBUILDING COMMUNITY

- Find opportunities to **bring families together virtually**, such as coffee chats with the teacher or principal.
- **Promote two-way communication** through any available communications channels, including emails, phone calls, video conferences, and text messages.
- Initiate or maintain **mentorship programs**, giving students the chance to interact with peers and adults through technology offered by the school.

ACCESSING GRADE-LEVEL CONTENT

- Ask teachers to reflect on the **just-in-time scaffolds** they've used in virtual settings to facilitate access to rigorous content, and seek to spread effective practice across classrooms.
- **Incorporate informal assessments** during synchronous learning sessions. This may include gathering information through warm-up problems or student conversations.

ACCESSING ESSENTIAL SERVICES

- **Work with community partners** to offer enrichment programs, including those that extend the virtual school day.
- **Maintain connections with families** despite the remote environment. This includes conversations that identify families' needs and connect them with necessary resources (e.g., food banks, health care).

REENGAGING STUDENTS

- **Promote student attendance** by evaluating students' connectivity, examining their participation in remote learning activities, and staying in contact.
- **Foster academic confidence** by providing feedback on assignments and supporting collaboration through virtual channels.

TIMELINE: GUIDANCE ON REMOTE LEARNING FROM THE MA DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

March 26, 2020 — DESE Issues Initial Guidance on Remote Learning

DESE releases **guidance** on a recommended remote learning model and the scope and definition of remote learning. The model advises half-length school days and the reinforcement of previously taught skills. The scope includes the use of technology, as well as hands-on explorations.

April 24, 2020 — DESE Releases Update on Initial Guidance

Updated guidance focuses on strengthening remote learning programs by:

1. Prioritizing meaningful connections with educators and peers
2. Providing engaging core instruction focused on the content standards most critical for student success in the next grade
3. Offering opportunities for enrichment, exercise, and play
4. Ensuring programming is accessible and communication is streamlined for students and families

It also includes a resource list for remote teaching and learning during COVID-19 and links to additional guidance for working with **English Learners** and **students with disabilities**.

June 25, 2020 — DESE Releases Initial Fall School Reopening Guidance

The **guidance** puts forth as a goal the safe return of as many students as possible to in-person schooling this fall. It also provides a set of health and safety requirements and requires districts to prepare a reopening plan that addresses three options: in-person learning with new safety requirements, a hybrid of in-person and remote learning, and the continuation of remote learning.

July 9-10, 2020 — DESE Releases Additional Guidance on Fall Reopening Plans

On Thursday, July 9, DESE releases **Comprehensive Special Education Guidance for the 2020-21 School Year,** providing further information on supporting students with disabilities as districts develop the special education portion of their reopening plan. On Friday, July 10, DESE puts out **additional guidance** and an **FAQ** about fall reopening plans, asking schools and districts to "prioritize in-person instruction."

July 24, 2020 — DESE Releases Remote Learning Guidance for Fall 2020

This **guidance** describes policy requirements for remote learning in the fall, outlines various options for remote and/or hybrid learning, and suggests potential next steps for districts and schools as they prepare for the upcoming school year.

BEST PRACTICES OVERVIEW

This guide provides an overview of effective K-12 remote learning strategies in three areas—relationships, instructional methods, and technology—and spotlights the key aspects of equity embedded in each one. Together, these three areas form a strong foundation for schools and districts to build on as they prepare for remote learning this fall.

It is important to keep in mind that districts and schools may impose restrictions that affect some of these recommendations, now or in the future. For example, some districts or schools may have mandated online platforms, restrictions on videoconferencing with students, regulations designed to protect student and family privacy, or other rules related to technology use and access. Make sure to stay aware of any guidance or regulations regarding remote learning within your particular context.

WHAT MATTERS IN REMOTE LEARNING?

Relationships Matter explores strategies for building and maintaining relationships with students and families in fully remote or hybrid schedules.

Instructional Methods Matter describes strategies for implementing social-emotional curriculum, modes of direct instruction, and curriculum adaptations for fully remote or hybrid schedules.

Technology Matters explores strategies for building and maintaining relationships with students and families in fully remote or hybrid schedules.

REMOTE LEARNING BEST PRACTICES

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

With schools closed, educators are grappling with how to make up **lost learning time**, but the reality is that many students face an even bigger challenge: **losing access to relationships** that are essential for supporting their success.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Even more than in-person instruction, remote learning requires dedication to building strong relationships between educators and students and maintaining meaningful peer relationships. While students are learning remotely, it can be much harder for them to engage in relationship building, since they lack shared spaces where they can practice social-emotional and conflict resolution skills.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING DURING REMOTE INSTRUCTION

When students' normal face-to-face interactions disappear, students can end up feeling lost. Students are spending months away from friends, teachers, and mentors, leaving many experiencing feelings of isolation and higher stress levels. Educators can help set students on a positive course by infusing social-emotional practices into daily instruction, to ensure students feel safe, secure, and ready to learn.

Routines and Rituals

Students seek comfort and validation from relationships with teachers and peers. Providing encouragement, comfort, and compassion can be difficult in a virtual classroom. Transferring normal classroom routines and rituals can be a useful strategy to offer consistency and build trust and confidence within a remote learning environment. This article from the Learning Policy Institute talks about **_Leveraging Social and Emotional Learning to Support Students and Families in the Time of COVID-19_**. Examples of SEL routines or rituals include:

- **Morning Circles:** Take time at the beginning of every class session to allow students to share how they are feeling, describe something exciting that happened to them, or just say hello.
    - Some families may only have one device at home, which makes signing onto virtual learning difficult. Staggering daily meeting times throughout the week offers flexibility, giving students and families more opportunities to be present.
    - Build in opportunities to meet with smaller groups of students as part of Morning Circles. This will mitigate the challenge of hosting large online classes that limit individual student engagement, and help teachers "read the room."

- **Weekly Themes:** Embed weekly themes such as compassion, courage, and friendship into lesson plans and model how these can apply within a virtual space.

- **Periodic Check-ins:** Make sure to check in with every student regarding their mental and physical well-being. Have other staff members participate to ensure every student gets addressed. During class time, look for clues to students' well-being during lessons. Students who seem to be falling into the background will need even more support. For example, if a student doesn't come to a virtual lesson, be sure to follow up and see how they are doing.

Self-Regulation and Mindfulness

Modeling and encouraging self-regulation practices, such as breathing, identifying emotions, and other mindfulness techniques, are important skills to continue within virtual instruction. While students are dealing with increased stress and anxiety it is important for families and educators to put in place strategies for students to cope and process their emotions.

Consider leading breathing exercises every twenty to thirty minutes during class sessions; for example, **this sample weekly lesson plan** from Washoe County School District (available through **LearnLaunch**) describes four types of breathing techniques to use with students ("Drain," "S.T.A.R.," "Pretzel," or "Balloon"). You can also use your online platform to promote mindfulness apps students can access. More strategies for helping students process emotions can be found in the **Edutopia article linked here**.

SEL Outreach

Many schools and districts already have SEL teams that provide guidance and support on how to integrate SEL into classroom curricula and instruction. During a time when all students are at home and not accounted for on a daily basis, schools need to find other ways to be in contact and maintain touchpoints with students and families.

For example, Baltimore City Public Schools implemented "wholeness teams," which are responsible for calling a 20 families a day. They also use Google Classroom to hold open office hours to have daily contact with students. Teams based on this model could be made up of teachers, social workers, school administrators, or other staff.

Meanwhile, Phoenix Union High School District has made it a collective responsibility for staff to check in with students and families every day. The **linked guide** outlines how they structure this outreach and ensure that staff are seeking information on a range of student needs.

RELATIONSHIP MAPPING

In a virtual classroom, it is more important than ever to map which students have caring and supportive school relationships and which do not. One way to make sure that students are in contact with a caring adult is to engage all faculty in **Relationship Mapping**, a strategy developed by the Making Caring Common Project. This process involves sharing and discussing staff's existing connections with students to make sure that no students slip through the cracks, especially during periods of remote learning.

Why Map Relationships?

Positive and caring relationships, both in and out of schools, are a direct indicator of student success and well-being. Unfortunately, many students don't have these kinds of supportive relationships with adults, and given the COVID-19 pandemic some students will fall off the radar when they need these relationships the most. Having at least one positive relationship with an adult in school can greatly benefit students' emotional, physical, and mental health. Prioritizing relationship mapping will help ensure that every student has access to this critical source of support.

Benefits of Relationship Mapping

Mapping students' relationships is not only important for making sure all students have caring and supportive adult relationships. It can also provide valuable data on equity and inclusion within the school and help lead continuous improvement efforts.

As they collect and analyze relationship data, schools can engage in a comprehensive review of student support systems. By hosting follow-up meetings to track progress, create action plans,

and collect additional data, schools can begin to use relationship mapping as a tool for ongoing school improvement. This cycle can provide insight into the areas of the school that need to be looked at more carefully.

For instance, is there evidence that English Learners are building strong relationships with staff? If not, how can the school address this issue and better implement supports for these students, such as by identifying adults within the building who speak their native language or connecting students to outside mentors? This type of questioning and analysis can push schools to think more deeply about the systemic issues that inhibit students from building meaningful connections.

How to Engage in Relationship Mapping

To begin the process of mapping student relationships, dedicated staff members must reflect on which students they feel they have a positive relationship with and which students they feel concern about—especially during this period of remote learning. The goal is to connect with every student to make sure they are safe, healthy, and nurtured. The mapping process presented below is informed by Making Caring Common's Virtual Relationship Mapping Strategy.

1. **Virtual Mapping —** Encourage all faculty and staff to populate a relationship mapping spreadsheet to indicate which students they feel they have a positive relationship with and which students they think are at risk of not having supportive relationships.

2. **Reflective Meeting —** Once all staff have filled out the virtual mapping sheet, convene a reflective meeting to discuss every student. Note and discuss trends and concerns:
   a. Are there certain students who seem to have many supportive relationships within the school?
   b. Which students have no marked relationships?
   c. Are there students who have many strong relationships yet are also marked as high risk?
   d. Why do you think these trends exist?

3. **Action Planning —** Identify students who are either at high risk or have no marked positive relationships within the school. Have staff volunteer to reach out to each of these students to build a relationship. When matching adults to students, consider any similar interests or experiences that might support the process of relationship building.

4. **Follow Up** — Every couple of months, reconvene staff who are involved in reaching out to disconnected students. In these meetings it is important to check on the status of the relationship and on students' overall well-being.
    a. What supports are needed moving forward?
    b. What challenges still exist, and how can they be overcome?

5. **Analyze Data** — Relationship mapping allows for a specific type of data collection that can inform school improvement strategies. Through this process, educators and staff will be made aware of trends within their school that might not have been apparent before.
    a. Are students of color more likely to be marked at risk? Why?
    b. Are students with IEPs building strong relationships with staff?
    c. Which staff/teachers are making the best connections with students and how can they help others do the same?

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

When schools went remote in the spring, educators had the advantage of already knowing their students. This fall, if schools open with a remote or hybrid model, it could be difficult for teachers to forge relationships with a new group of students they haven't met in person. Noting that no amount of preparation, investment in technology, or revamped virtual curriculum can replace the in-person human connections that help students thrive, below are some strategies for building and maintaining relationships with students via remote learning.

Building Relationships from the First Click

When students log onto a digital platform for the first time and are met on the other end by a stranger, this could cause them to feel unsure and nervous. In person, teachers have the advantage of being able to show non-verbal signs of support, comfort, and kindness. Students, specifically in the younger grades, rely heavily on these non-verbal social cues to build relationships, and through online video calls it is much harder to show and pick up on these cues. The strategies below aim to help educators overcome these obstacles and support positive relationships from day one.

"Begin by asking students, 'What do you need to feel safe, comfortable, and excited to learn?'"
— Kristen Stuart Valdes

Build Trust and Consistency

Just like building relationships in person, virtual trust-building between you and your students requires consistency. Students need clear expectations regarding tone of voice, timing, and communication to feel secure with you and their learning. Set up routines within online learning, such as starting every class with a one word check-in or ending every classes with three deep breaths. Students will begin to feel confident and comfortable with you when they know what to expect and when routines are predictable, especially among students who have experienced trauma.

Consider the following strategies from **Panorama Education** for establishing a routine and setting clear expectations during remote learning:

- Always start class by greeting every student by name as they log on
- Begin class with a whip-around check-in, providing space for every student to say something
- Consider setting schedules together, based on student input

Note that these strategies are intended to be used during synchronous sessions, though they may be adapted for asynchronous environments as well (e.g., by soliciting class input through shared documents). The article below offers additional suggestions for establishing a sense of trust during virtual classes.

Building trust takes time, and even more time when you can't be in person with one another. Be patient and attentive to students' reactions, whether verbal or non-verbal. Make sure to check in regularly with students to show that you are thinking about them and care about their success.

Get Creative

Being flexible and creative is key in remote learning. Certain strategies that work within the classroom might not translate to an online platform. Furthermore, students come to the table with a variety of experiences and needs. Some students might have difficulty connecting to their teacher or peers remotely, while others might thrive due to the lessened social pressures that exist in virtual settings. To meet the needs of each and every learner, consider the following strategies:

- Make materials fun and exciting for students. Think about how you can relate lessons to the current time and make them relevant to students' lives.

- Meet students where they are, noting that students may need a variety of different instructional approaches and supports.

- Create an inviting space online with videos, podcasts, interactive apps, online games, etc.

- Incorporate activities that get students away from their screens, such as a household or neighborhood scavenger hunt.

- Use multiple methods of communication with students and families to share lessons, resources, and updates on student progress.

Be Trauma-Sensitive

Now more than ever, students will need extra support and guidance. When building your virtual classroom and curriculum, try not to single out students who need additional attention or care. Instead, aim to create a trauma-sensitive environment that meets the needs of all students. The **linked article from Education Post** lays out six key strategies educators can implement during remote learning to address trauma and support healing.

For more on trauma-sensitive practices, visit Rennie Center's action guide **Helping Students Heal from Trauma**.

Create Community Agreements

Community agreements are co-created with students to ensure every voice is heard and included. Community agreements are less about implementing classroom rules and more about how to create a safe and supportive learning environment. In creating these agreements, it is important to focus on the goals and aspirations of the class rather than the things the class should avoid. Creating these agreements is also a good way to help students build relationships with one another by learning about their peers' needs, wants, and goals.

In a remote learning setting, classroom agreements might look different than in a normal classroom setting. Agreements such as "respect other people's personal bubble" might turn into "respect others' speaking time" (i.e., leave space for every student to share and answer questions). Consider coming to the community agreement creation session with ideas in your back pocket, as a way to guide students through this new way of interaction.

PEER-TO-PEER CONNECTIONS

Students need to feel connected to their peers and build strong friendships to be happy and successful, both academically and otherwise. Many students will start school in the fall feeling disconnected and lonely after experiencing months apart from friends, mentors, and teachers. If

schools are fully remote, students might feel discouraged that they will have to spend more extended time away from peers. If schools engage in a hybrid model, in-person time will inevitably include strict social distancing guidelines that may leave students feeling frustrated and defeated. Therefore, educators must pay extra attention to fostering peer-to-peer relationships that help students feel connected, even while they're apart.

- **Collaborative Learning —** Create time and space within virtual instruction for students to work together via group projects, interactive discussions, virtual classroom tables, etc.

- **Relationship-Building Activities —** Include **activities and icebreakers** in daily lesson plans that foster peer relationships and help students feel connected.

- **Cultivate Relationships —** Identify student pairs or groups who can serve as sources of mutual support during remote learning, and facilitate connections between these students (in and out of class time).

TEACHER-FAMILY-STUDENT TRIANGLE

The global pandemic has shifted many things about normal life and the traditional school model. One change has been that families now play a more central role in students' daily learning. As teachers interact directly with students through online platforms and other methods of communication, they also have the opportunity (and responsibility) to form stronger connections with parents and caregivers. Collaboration and partnership between educators and parents is essential for student success, now more than ever. This **article from CRPE** discusses how teachers, families, and students can connect during this period of remote learning to support students' learning and well-being. (A summary of key points is listed below.)

- Give teachers clear guidance on which families they are responsible for reaching out to, and offer specific strategies for them to use when they connect.
- Look for ways to involve families in remote learning, such as by planning virtual town halls or inviting them to volunteer during lessons.

- Ensure that families have a say in remote learning planning and implementation, including by surveying them about their experiences.

- Foster connections among parents and caregivers and look for ways to share "best practice" stories that come out of these conversations.

Parent Webpage

Consider creating a specific webpage to share strategies and resources that parents can use to help support their children with learning at home. Some large school districts offer a comprehensive, online set of parent resources in multiple languages, such as **Miami Public Schools** and **San Diego Public Schools**. Schools may want to link to these resources from their parent webpage.

Share Experiences

Now more than ever, teachers and families have to share their experiences through two-way communication to understand the trials and errors on both sides during remote learning. Provide space and time for parents and teachers to share personal videos about their experiences with remote learning, exchange resources, and engage in periodic informal check-ins.

The Rennie Center's action guide on **Rebuilding Community** includes many more resources on connecting with families. It specifically focuses on how schools and districts can attend to culturally responsive communication and collaboration, address language and technology barriers, and challenge implicit biases.

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS MATTER

This section explores remote learning **instructional methods and adaptations** to best support the needs of each and **every learner**.

ADAPTING TO A NEW WORLD

Regardless of exactly how learning takes place at the start of school this fall, it is likely that remote learning will play a part in the upcoming school year. This new reality offers unprecedented challenges for students, families, and teachers alike. Strategies and instructional methods that are successful within an in-person classroom may not translate to a virtual one. Teachers have been asked to learn new skills and adapt overnight, parents have had to shift their entire relationship to their child's education, and students are dealing with fresh experiences and emotions daily.

What Practices Translate to Remote Learning?

Educators should reflect on their experiences thus far with remote learning to identify classroom strategies and instructional methods that translate well in a virtual environment. It is important to keep in mind that even when learning is administered primarily through a digital platform, **grade-aligned content is still the top priority**. Producing rigorous and well-designed curriculum will keep students motivated and engaged, whatever the method of delivery.

What Practices Don't Translate to Remote Learning?

Some existing lessons and approaches are difficult to replicate in an online environment. However, digital learning also opens up exciting new possibilities. Educators should feel empowered to take advantage of this new form of engagement and **experiment with different instructional methods** and modes of connection to best support students during this difficult time.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO SUPPORT EACH AND EVERY LEARNER?

English Learners, students with disabilities, and other marginalized student populations require specialized support in order to equitably access learning experiences. Differentiation, alongside specialization, is required to engage all students in remote learning curriculum and activities.

The following is a list of dos and don'ts for serving students with disabilities and English Learners throughout remote and hybrid learning, pulled together from the resources cited below. It is critical to take these tips into account when considering strategies for providing the best remote learning experience for all students.

For Students with Disabilities

DO:
- **Ensure that the delivery of instruction is accessible.** Online instruction should afford students equal opportunities to participate. This could look like captioning a live lecture or adopting different methods of evaluating content knowledge.[5]
- **Ensure that students are familiar and comfortable with navigating the online platform of choice.** Screen shots and short videos can demonstrate to students and families how to use new software or apps.[5]
- **Incorporate assistive technology programs and devices** when necessary and appropriate to support individual student success.[6]

DON'T:
- **Treat IEP objectives the same as you would during in-person learning.** Teachers should evaluate which goals are achievable and work with families to explore updated learning targets.[2]
- **Forgo meeting sensory and movement needs.** Teachers can provide different ideas for families, and integrate the ideas into remote lessons, in order to offer sensory modifications and supports.[2]
- **Remove pre-existing support structures** like peer mentors. Instead, focus on shifting these models to a remote setting.[6]

For English Learners

DO:

- **Familiarize yourself with a student's situation at home.** A needs assessment can help you ask the right questions to identify priorities for supporting students. Ongoing communication is key in this process.[1]
- **Use visual media to share key concepts**. Utilize graphics, videos, and demonstrations with ELs not only in academic learning, but also in health-related information.[4]
- **Increase student engagement** by asking students about texts and topics of interest, and providing culturally relevant options for learning.[4]

DON'T:

- **Try to teach too many things at once.** Focus on vocabulary students already know when introducing new activities, and vice versa. And don't forget to scaffold.[1]
- **Resort to only showing videos.** Model thinking aloud, ask comprehension questions, and for younger grades, utilize song and chants.[7]
- **Cut out opportunities to interact and build subject knowledge together.** Maximize authentic student-to-student interactions by using pair or small-group tasks.[4]

Sources: 1. Colorín Colorado, 2. Edutopia, 3. Disability Rights Texas, 4. English Learners Success Forum, 5. Landmark College 6. Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute, 7. SEAL, 8. TNTP

Educators may also benefit from this **list of pedagogical considerations** (broken down by specific special education eligibility categories, such as "autism" or "emotional impairments") from the Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute. And the **Educating All Learners Alliance** has brought together a wealth of resources on supporting students with disabilities during COVID-19.

ADAPTING INSTRUCTION TO REMOTE LEARNING

Though sitting in front of a computer can feel worlds away from standing in front of a classroom, remote and in-person learning are not complete opposites. Remote learning can, in many ways, mimic in-person instruction, though some adaptations must be made to ensure student success and well-being. Listed below are several strategies based on **Digital Promise's Transitioning to Digital Learning Microcredentials**.

1. **Be Aware of Technology Needs and Challenges**

    A technology needs assessment will ensure that students are able to participate fully in remote learning. The **resource from the William and Ida Friday Institute for Educational Innovation** is a great place for schools to start. The *Technology Matters* section of this guide details additional questions to ask when assessing technology needs.

2. **Offer Multiple Types of Instruction**

    Utilizing both synchronous and asynchronous instruction as well as independent work can be an effective practice to accommodate varying schedules and levels of technology access, while keeping students interested and engaged. Balancing these forms of instruction can also be a powerful tool for individualizing students' experiences and addressing the needs of each and every learner. For a definition of synchronous and asynchronous learning, visit the "What is Remote Learning?" section of this guide.

    ### Synchronous

    Through live interaction with students, educators can share key information, lead class discussions and activities, and enable student presentations or small-group work. Synchronous learning is also an important way to build class community and a sense of belonging among students. It can be a time for educators to check in with students on how they are faring socially and emotionally, as well as assess where students might need further academic support.

    ### Asynchronous

    With asynchronous materials, students work at their own pace and on varying schedules. This form of instruction allows students to engage with material on a deeper level, helps them identify any remaining questions or points of confusion, and offers flexibility in terms of timing and structure. It also lets students review content more than once, which can help English Learners and other students who need extra time to process material. This video from Edutopia on ***How to Make Effective Videos for Learning*** describes how educators can produce effective instructional videos, which are often part of asynchronous lessons.

    ### Independent Work

    Supplementing online instruction with independent work such as hands-on projects, activities, or research is essential to keeping students engaged while deepening their learning. Educators can take advantage of this period of at-home learning by encouraging students to explore the world around them. For example, students can complete a science project outside by collecting leaf samples and investigating each type. Students can then present their findings during the next synchronous lesson.

Encouraging independent work allows students to tailor activities to their interests and build skills associated with self-directed learning. It also accommodates varying family schedules and needs, and enables students to take a break from their screens.

3. Measure Students' Progress

Some methods of assessing students' progress have been halted due to the COVID crisis, particularly the MCAS exams that students were set to take last spring. Knowing that students will be returning with increased learning loss compared to a normal year, it is imperative that schools and educators continue to assess learning, both to help students achieve critical learning goals and to continuously improve instructional practices and approaches.

At the same time, **formal assessment processes should not be the first priority when students return**. Instead, it is critical for teachers to invest significant time at the beginning of the school year in building relationships and supporting the transition back to a learning environment.

Formative and Summative Assessment

While classes continue to be remote or offered through a hybrid model, it is important to consider how to measure student progress and get a full picture of their learning.

Formative Assessment

During remote learning it is important to check students' understanding frequently and provide them with concrete feedback. Engaging in formative assessment is not about grading students on performance but rather gauging where students are, finding out how they are progressing, and determining how to adjust instruction to meet students' needs. Formative assessment can take place in many ways, including through:

- Discussions with students about their understanding of material
- In-class assignments, independent work, and quizzes
- Direct observation of students

[This article from Edutopia](#) offers additional suggestions on incorporating formative assessments into remote instruction.

Summative Assessment

"It's important that we not rely solely on tried-and-true summative assessment practices and strategies during this time—we should reflect on those practices and strategies and approach assessment differently."
— [Edutopia](#)

During remote instruction, it can take a longer time for students to achieve certain standards. However, it is still important to use summative assessments to track progress throughout the year and identify which students have or have not demonstrated mastery of key content.

Going Deeper

To dive deeper into how schools and educators can measure student progress during remote learning, explore **this resource from FutureEd** that offers an assessment timeline for the coming year. It notes the importance of diagnosing unfinished learning at the start of the year and paying consistent attention to students' non-academic needs.

For more on assessing students' precursor skills and accelerating student learning in the coming year, see the Rennie Center's **Accessing Grade-Level Content action guide**.

Getting Creative

Through remote learning educators have an opportunity to find new, more equity-driven alternatives to traditional, pencil-and-paper forms of assessment. How can educators think creatively about how to assess student understanding in a remote world?

Digital Badges

Digital badging—awarding students a virtual credential when they demonstrate a particular skill/competency—offers a novel approach to recognizing student growth. It can also keep students engaged in their learning by asking students to set goals and providing them with strategies for achieving those goals. And it offers a powerful way to collaborate with out-of-school-time programs and acknowledge the skills students build in non-school settings.

In Massachusetts, Boston After School and Beyond has supported the implementation of digital badges in a number of their out-of-school-time programs. To learn more, see the Rennie Center's report **Elevating Real-World Learning: Two Cities' Efforts to Credential Real World Skills through Digital Badges**. You can also read **this article from the Hechinger Report**, about a school district that introduces students to badging from the early grades: younger students cut out physical badges and paste them in a badge book when they achieve particular milestones, laying the foundation for using digital badges in later years.

Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning allows students to dig into areas of interest and build academic skills along the way. Especially during longer-term projects, which may stretch over weeks, it is important to check in with students about their progress and incorporate assessment opportunities throughout. The final project itself is also an opportunity for

evaluation. Providing rubrics or exemplars to students as they work on their projects helps them understand the expectations and aim toward high standards.

This **link from PBL Works** offers recommendations for getting started with project-based learning and includes both technology tools and low-tech solutions for supporting deeper, real-world learning.

4. Evaluate Remote Learning

Engaging in continuous improvement is a key driver of success for students, families, and educators. By monitoring progress over time and tracking the impact of changes, teachers can see which actions lead to greater student success.

> *"To evaluate digital learning, an educator must first define "success." Is it increased equitable access to learning materials and supports? Is it increased engagement? Only through evaluation of digital learning can an educator determine what is working and what is not working, and continue to develop the quality of digital learning for all learners and families."*
> **— Digital Promise, Transitioning to Digital Learning**

Like in-person instruction, remote learning requires that teachers regularly evaluate the progress their class is making. They should focus on collecting frequent data to understand students' perception of their learning, as well as their performance in classes.

Assessing students' attitude toward remote learning requires digging into their interests and motivation, including using the following strategies:

- Examine how frequently and how attentively students participate in learning activities to understand their level of engagement

- Look at how students are interacting with each other and their teachers for insight into social and emotional needs

- Ask students to share their thoughts through methods like questionnaires, focus groups, and one-on-one conversations

These methods should aim to understand the nuances of students' experiences with remote learning and what holistic supports they may need during these difficult times.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

When schools went digital overnight this spring, it shed light on the deeply rooted inequities that plague our education system, but also opened up a new world of possibilities for engaging with

students and families in potentially more holistic and equitable ways. As schools and districts plan for the possibility of remote learning this fall, they should recognize its promise as well as its challenges, using any tools at their disposal to ensure that learners not only participate but also thrive.

To start, remote instruction might seem daunting, but **teaching online is still teaching**. Many strategies for helping students stay focused can transfer over to remote learning. This **video from Edutopia** on *Keeping Students Engaged in Digital Learning* offers a number of tips for engaging students during online instruction.

Promote Interactivity

Students learn best when they participate in their learning. Engage students in polls, brainstorms, or guided discussion with prompts. Also be sure to find ways to get students away from their screens through **brain breaks** and independent work such as hands-on projects.

Connect Learning to Current Events

Continuing to engage students in learning about themselves and the world around them is now more essential than ever. By providing students with relevant and engaging lessons, educators help students value who they are, while encouraging them to be positive and contributing members of their community and society as a whole. For example, **this article from the Learning Policy Institute** highlights an 11th grade class that conducted research on the inequitable impacts of COVID on communities, specifically communities of color.

Living in this unprecedented time lends itself to thinking bigger and beginning to shift how we approach instruction—in particular, by considering how to empower students to own their own learning.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Many students, specifically students of color and those from low-income communities, are not given access to rigorous or grade-level content, furthering persistent opportunity gaps that affect

student outcomes (**TNTP**, 2018). Personalizing education is key to ensuring that students are being met where they are and encouraged to achieve at higher levels. It can also help ensure that students stay engaged in their education over time.

The ability to access content targeted to their needs is a key component of personalized learning. Having coursework tailored to their interests and relevant to their own lives increases students' motivation and ownership over their own learning, while recognizing their diverse cultures and experiences. And unlike traditional forms of assessment rooted in white-dominant norms of achievement, personalized learning can promote many different ways of demonstrating success. This **article from KnowledgeWorks** on *Technology and Personalized Learning* describes technology as a tool for personalizing learning—as long as it's used intentionally and combined with effective teaching.

Strategies for Building Personalized Learning Structures

1. **Encourage Independent Learning**

   Independent work in the context of individualized learning means more than a student working on their own to solve a problem or produce a product. Independent work means self-driven, self-paced ownership over learning. Encouraging students to take action and move toward their own goals helps to build student agency within a remote setting. It also requires educators to re-envision their own roles and responsibilities within the (virtual or in-person) classroom. Read more about the ***Role of the Teacher in a Personalized, Competency-Based Classroom*** from KnowledgeWorks.

2. **Blended Learning**

   No amount of investment in technology or curriculum adaptations can replace the importance of in-person interactions on students' success and well-being. Engaging in a blended learning model can allow for students to complete coursework and learn content at home at their own pace while incorporating in-person support from educators. During this face-to-face time, students can get help with individual needs by asking questions, reviewing major themes, and discussing academic (or non-academic) challenges. **Read more about blended learning models** from the Christensen Institute.

3. **Provide Flexibility**

   Flexibility can manifest in many different ways. Varying learning environments, small-group instruction or collaborative projects, 1-on-1 mentoring, or student-led lessons are all options for offering students flexibility in their learning. Providing students with an online choice menu with different activities, coursework, and tasks is another great way to begin engaging students as partners in paving their own learning journey.

Letting students drive their own learning experience, set their own goals, and participate in their assessment encourages metacognition and independence, while inspiring their agency, creativity, and ownership over their education. **[Read more](#)** on ways to activate students' passion during a school closure from EdWeek.

4. **Provide Immediate Feedback**

Timely feedback is particularly important in remote learning. As students feel more disconnected from their school, peers, and teachers, continuous communication in the form of informal check-ins, as well as feedback on assignments, can keep students engaged in their learning remotely. Further, remote learning platforms allow for such immediate feedback to occur. Use technology's advantages to increase individualization and supports for students. Read more from ASCD on ***[Seven Keys to Effective Feedback](#)***.

The Rennie Center's **[Reengaging Students action guide](#)** offers additional strategies to engage students who may be disconnected.

STRATEGIES FOR INSTRUCTION IN A HYBRID MODEL

With so many variables in play, from the condition of public health to state and federal funding, schools and districts are faced with having to prepare for the unknown this fall. Though most of the strategies covered in this section hold true in both a remote and hybrid model, the list below highlights a few key considerations if schools open for part-time, in-person instruction.

1. **Existing resources can help you select an instructional model**. For example, in a **[Flipped Classroom](#)**, students learn content at home and then apply it in-person; in an **[Enriched Virtual model](#)**, students complete all coursework online and periodically attend important face-to-face interactions that help students thrive and get ahead. The Clayton Christensen Institute has **[laid out these models in detail](#)**, and Education Resource Strategies offers a number of guides (**[like this one](#)**) to help think through the options.

2. No matter which model you select, **in-person time is a valuable commodity**. Use this time for a combination of relationship-building (especially early in the year), individualized academic support, and enrichment activities.

3. **Integrate individualized rotation stations** that allow students to move at their own pace and are tailored to their interests, strengths, and weaknesses.

4. Whether in an in-person classroom or a remote one, **differentiation is key** to keeping students engaged and motivated.

TECHNOLOGY MATTERS

This section describes the **benefits of technology integration**, examines **inequities in access** to devices and the internet, and shares a variety of **digital platforms and tools**.

Remote learning relies on access to technology. Ensuring that each student has a device is the first step, but far from the only one: remote learning also requires sufficient internet access; technological literacy for students, staff, and families; access to an online classroom platform; videoconferencing capabilities; a method of communicating with staff and families; and much more.

Without the resources to provide students, staff, and families with all of the above, districts face an accessibility issue. While higher-income families often have multiple devices with internet capabilities, lower-income families may have no devices or means to connect to the internet. In rural areas, meanwhile, high-speed internet service is often unavailable at home for students and staff alike. Too often, a snapshot of remote learning looked like families sitting in library or school parking lots to utilize WiFi hotspots. Additionally, even in school districts that distributed devices, some families with limited English proficiency faced language barriers when requesting them, as described in this **Boston Globe article**.

With these disparities to access in mind, it is not only important to discuss how to properly utilize technology and online platforms for instruction, but also to examine and dismantle inequities in access to remote learning.

"When technology integration in the classroom is seamless and thoughtful, students not only become more engaged, they begin to take more control over their own learning, too. Effective tech integration changes classroom dynamics, encouraging student-centered project-based learning."
— Edutopia

WHY DO WE NEED TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION?

Beyond the obvious, that COVID-19 has rendered in-person learning unsafe, technology integration in the remote or in-person classroom has many benefits for students. Technology allows for greater student participation in determining how to access information and learn from it. In addition, technology integration can teach students the skills they will need to be successful digital citizens. The accordion below highlights three key benefits to integrating technology in the classroom from Edutopia's ***Why Do We Need Technology Integration?***:

- **Technology Revolutionizes the Learning Process —** *"More and more studies show that technology integration in the curriculum* **improves students' learning processes and outcomes***. Teachers who recognize computers as problem-solving tools change the way they teach...Technology and interactive multimedia are* **more conducive to project-based learning***. Students are engaged in their learning using these powerful tools, and can become creators and critics instead of just consumers."*

- **Technology Helps Students Develop 21st Century Skills —** Today's world is increasingly reliant on the use of technology. Preparing students to be active, engaged, and responsible 21st century citizens means preparing them to utilize technology to meet goals and execute problem-solving strategies. Technology, including computer programs and applications, video cameras, 3D printers, and much more, can provide an access point to students as they work to develop **21st Century skills**. These 21st Century skills include:
    - personal and social responsibility
    - planning, critical thinking, reasoning, and creativity
    - strong communication skills, both for interpersonal and presentation needs
    - cross-cultural understanding
    - visualizing and decision making
    - knowing how and when to use technology and choosing the most appropriate tool for the task

    This **video from Edutopia** explains the role of critical digital literacy skills for students' success.

- **Technology Changes Student/Teacher Roles and Relationships —** "Students take responsibility for their learning outcomes, while teachers become guides and facilitators. Technology lends itself as the multidimensional tool that assists that process."

    The strategies listed in this article on ***2 Simple Ways to Improve Online Instruction*** can maintain the interactive nature of student engagement that happens in a school setting throughout remote learning. It is important to note that schools may be the only point of device access for low-income students. Without access to a device during remote learning, their relationships with teachers and peers may be negatively impacted.

INEQUITY OF ACCESS

The shift to remote learning has made technology even more essential, while also magnifying the gaps in access to devices and internet. According to an **analysis** by Common Sense and Boston Consulting Group, of the 50 million K-12 students who took part in remote learning this spring, **15 million to 16 million (approximately 30%)** of these students lack adequate internet or devices to sustain effective distance learning at home. **9 million** of these students lack both adequate internet and devices.

Though there have been **efforts by districts, service providers, and the federal government** to get students and families connected, some students still lack the necessary technology tools and internet service to participate in online education. The **digital divide**, or the disparity between students and families who have easy access to devices and quality internet and those who do not, has been largely unaffected by efforts to increase access. For instance, "In 2016, researchers found that only 6 percent of families with incomes that qualify for discounted Internet services had ever signed up for such programs." (**KQED**) As shown below, the divide remains largest between Native American students and white students, though Latino and Black students are also substantially less likely than their white peers to have adequate connectivity.

Percent of Students without Adequate Connectivity by Race/Ethnicity
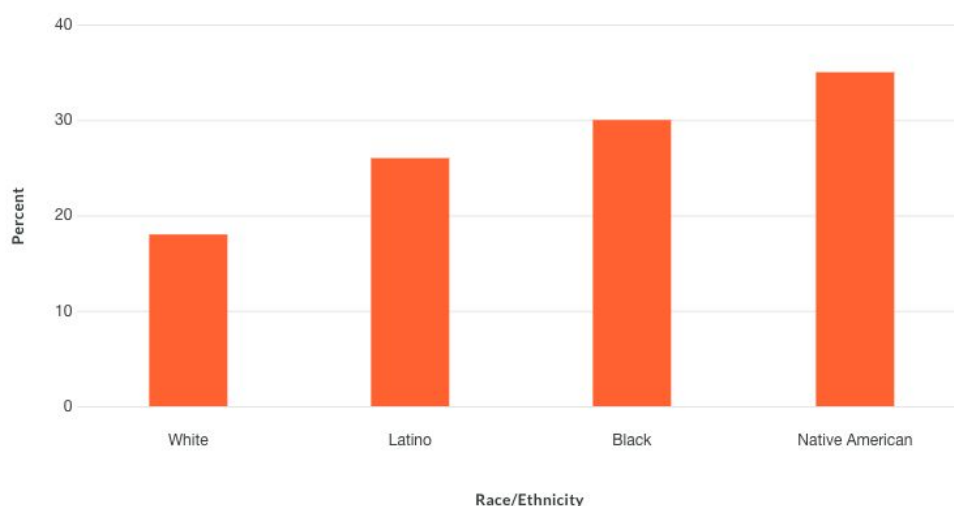
Understanding the fight that schools and districts are up against is half the battle. The data available on the digital divide can help educators hone in on student populations and geographic locations that may need more support and benefit from strategic problem-solving. If you are looking to read more on the gaps that exist in access to technology, the following resources may be helpful:

- **Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning**, by Common Sense Media and Boston Consulting Group

- **Equity of Access Resource Collection**, by the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA)

- **Opportunity for all? Technology and learning in lower-income families**, by the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The following are strategies that schools can begin to think about in order to address digital inequities for the coming school year. These strategies were shared in the **CoSN Digital Equity Action Toolkit**, which has real-life examples of districts that have achieved some of these crucial steps.

1. **Assemble a Coalition of Community Stakeholders**
    Community stakeholders are excellent collaborators when addressing the digital divide. Armed with knowledge beyond that of school-based technology access, community members can work together to plan out more flexible and adaptive systems of internet access and support. This **Policy Paper on Building Broadband Commons** from New America provides tools for planners and communities.

2. **Scope the Problem**
    Identifying the scope of the problem is the first step in addressing digital equity challenges. Teachers and school administrators may be able to identify specific students without home internet access; however, schools and districts should quantify this awareness with survey data. Read more on how to survey your community and scope the problem from the **C0SN Digital Equity Action Toolkit**.

    Refer to the *How To* section below to take a closer look at carrying out a needs assessment for your school or district.

3. **Connect Families with Low-Cost Internet Service and Computers**
    Using the Everyone On offer locator tool, individuals and families can find low-cost service programs in their area. **Everyone On** provides free templates for posting on social media to ensure all members of your school community are reached with your messaging.

4. **Deploy Mobile Hotspot Programs**
    Mobile hotspot lending programs can be an effective digital equity strategy, especially for students living in households that frequently move and for whom low-cost wired broadband plans may not be an effective solution.

5. **Identify Community Hotspots**
    Some districts are partnering with local community organizations and businesses to provide **"homework hotspots"** for students without home Internet access. According to the 2015 CoSN Infrastructure Survey, 15 percent of school systems report that there is community/business Wi-Fi available for students, a 50 percent increase from 2014. School costs tend to be minimal; partnerships can be branded to recognize businesses as partners in advancing digital equity and educational opportunity. In addition to local

businesses, other potential homework hotspot partners may include libraries, community centers, and churches or other faith-based organizations.

6. **Encourage Families to Get Involved with Technological Literacy Programs**
   Tech Goes Home (TGH) offers technological literacy courses taught by school personnel. Families with students in grades 1 - 12 enrolled at a partner school can sign up to attend an after-school TGH course. Ordinarily, these take place within the school building, although during COVID-19 they are being offered virtually. After completing the course, participants are able to buy a laptop at a reduced price.

   TGH currently operates in Boston and several cities in the Greater Boston area.

How to Conduct a Needs Assessment

Before beginning online instruction, schools and districts must first conduct a technology needs assessment to ensure that students are able to participate fully in remote learning. Taking the time to gather this information is a critical first step that will help educators understand the diverse needs of their students, allowing them to plan and strategize accordingly.

Gathering information on students' and families' access to technology can allow educators to make accommodations as needed. It also offers the opportunity to connect students and families with resources and supports that allow them to reach their fullest potential during remote learning. Below is a checklist of questions that can help schools create a holistic "remote learning plan" for each student.

- ❏ Does the student have access to a device and internet?

- ❏ Are they able to use the device throughout the whole day, or do they share it with siblings, parents, or others?

- ❏ Does the student and/or family need training to navigate and use technology tools?

- ❏ Are any other languages besides English spoken in the student's home?

- ❏ What extra supports might the student need (e.g., adaptive technology for a student with an IEP or instructions available in a student's native language for an English Learner)?

PLATFORM AND DIGITAL TOOL OPTIONS

After addressing internet and device accessibility, educators and school leaders should focus on appropriate tools and platforms to support remote learning. The tabs below offer a range of digital tools, platforms, and resources for remote learning.

It is important to note that no one school, or classroom, is the same. A multitude of options for digital learning means that educators and school leaders are able to design a learning environment that can fit individual needs. Though the vast number of choices may be daunting, the sources linked below offer filtered options and categorized labels to help narrow down what each classroom needs most.

Common Sense Education

Common Sense Education has grouped tools according to key needs teachers have when setting up virtual classrooms. These needs—communicating and messaging effectively, facilitating discussion, assessing learning, delivering lessons, and more—are also critical to creating remote learning experiences that keep students interested and active.

The EdTech Hub

The EdTech Hub provides a long list of online resources for communication and engagement, education management, learning content platforms, and personalized adaptive learning at all target levels.

DESE Educational Resources

To inform and supplement the resources provided by local districts and schools, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has pulled together **this list** on supporting students and families while schools are closed.

UNESCO

The **list of educational applications, platforms, and resources** aims to help all partners (families, educators, and school administrators) facilitate student learning and provide social care and interaction during periods of school closure. Most of the curated solutions are free, and many cater to multiple languages. While these solutions do not carry UNESCO's explicit endorsement, they tend to have a wide reach, a strong user base, and evidence of impact. They are categorized based on distance learning needs, but most of them offer functionalities across multiple categories.

GETTING READY FOR REMOTE LEARNING

PREPARING EDUCATORS FOR
REMOTE LEARNING

When schools closed this spring, teachers were thrown into a very different method of teaching than most were prepared for. How can we apply the lessons learned to support teachers for the unknowns ahead?

OBSTACLES TO REMOTE INSTRUCTION

Navigating new systems for delivering instruction amid a global pandemic led to significant challenges for many teachers, particularly those facing technological limitations or balancing work with caring for their own families.

- In a national survey, around 15 percent of teachers reported that accessing high-speed internet or a device was a "major need." Up to 400,000 teachers around the country live in homes without sufficient internet connectivity to conduct virtual instruction. (**RAND**; **Common Sense Media/Boston Consulting Group**)

- Seventy-two percent of teachers noted that "balancing child care/family care at home while teaching simultaneously" was a somewhat or very serious challenge. (**Educators for Excellence**)

- Shifting to online instruction was considered a very serious challenge by 44% of teachers. In particular, nearly one in four late-career teachers (with 30+ years of experience) have reported feeling uncomfortable using online teaching tools. (**Educators for Excellence**; **Upbeat Teaching from Home survey**)

In light of these and other challenges, many educators feel real trepidation about what the future holds. One poll found that as many as one in five teachers may not return to their roles this fall because of concerns for their health and safety. Beyond coronavirus-related concerns, many teachers worry that they will be unable to meet students' needs. As one Boston teacher **noted** about her experience with remote instruction this spring, "I don't know if they're actually learning

anything. Some days, I don't think I'm really teaching them. I feel like I'm just holding space." Whereas 96% of teachers reported feeling successful in their teaching prior to remote learning, only 73% said the same after schools closed. (**Upbeat Teaching from Home survey**)

School and district administrators, as well as families, recognized the challenges that educators faced during the rapid shift to remote learning. See **this letter to teachers** that highlights the uncertainty of this period and expresses the value of continued commitment to connecting with students.

> **As we look toward the fall, two primary needs emerge to prepare teachers for a remote environment: professional development and self-care.**

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Most teachers have received professional development since the outbreak of the coronavirus, but these offerings were not able to address the many questions involved in shifting to an entirely new educational approach. In particular, teachers express interest in building their knowledge and gaining practical advice on the following topics:

Using Technology Tools

A majority of teachers had received some training on using technology tools and platforms prior to the pandemic. However, teachers' increasing reliance on these tools has left some (particularly late-career) educators unsure of how to best leverage them with students. And all educators would benefit from additional guidance from schools and districts about which platforms and apps they should prioritize, in order to avoid confusion among students and families and minimize the burden of learning new systems.

Building Relationships

A majority of teachers had received some training on using technology tools and platforms prior to the pandemic. However, teachers' increasing reliance on these tools has left some (particularly late-career) educators unsure of how to best leverage them with students. And all educators would benefit from additional guidance from schools and districts about which platforms and apps they should prioritize, in order to avoid confusion among students and families and minimize the burden of learning new systems.

Curriculum Content and Materials

As the school year approaches, educators will confront many questions about what content to prioritize during remote learning. Particularly in schools and districts that have adopted high-quality instructional materials, professional development should align with existing curricula. This has been shown to be a powerful long-term strategy for professional learning.

In all situations, educators would benefit from a better sense of which topics and skills are essential. Local content experts (e.g., coaches, teacher leaders, department chairs) can play key roles in helping set shared learning targets. To offer additional food for thought, **this article** includes suggestions for distinguishing the "need-to-haves" from the "nice-to-haves" when it comes to curriculum this fall.

Effective Online Pedagogy

In addition to thinking about what to teach, educators would benefit from more support on how to communicate content in the new medium of online education. Higher education—where online courses have been widely available for years—can offer insights into effective pedagogical approaches in the K-12 space. This article on ***The Shift to Online Teaching*** from Usable Knowledge at Harvard discusses how K-12 educators can translate proven higher ed practices into their virtual classrooms.

Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning not only gets students off their devices and away from their screens, it also encourages deeper engagement with content and allows students to build knowledge in areas they care about. But even for teachers who have experience facilitating project-based learning, doing so in a remote context can present challenges. As schools and educators consider how to incorporate projects into their classes, they may take inspiration from schools like **Essex North Shore Agricultural & Technical High School** and **Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School**, whose vocational educators have found ways to encourage hands-on, project-based learning even without their normal tools of the trade.

Engaging and Motivating Students

While all of the areas listed above are important topics for professional development, one of the top needs identified by educators is how to keep students motivated to learn in a remote environment. While there are many potential strategies for educators to explore, professional development in this field could include discussions of the following:

- **Using interactive features** (surveys, simulations, games, etc.) during instruction

- **"Chunking" information**—including videos as well as text—into smaller, more digestible components (see **this article** for more)

- Providing and supporting opportunities for **student collaboration**

- Focusing assignments on **real-world problems or challenges**

- Offering **clear directions and expectations** for completing (and submitting) work—along with timely, individual feedback on assignments

Working with Special Populations

Another key PD priority identified by educators was supporting students with disabilities, English Learners, and other students with particular needs (such as homeless youth and those in foster care). The Rennie Center's **Accessing Essential Services action guide** offers some recommendations for how educators can connect students and families with external services. Meanwhile, the points below summarize a few areas for educator learning and growth as they work with these groups.

Students with Disabilities

- Ways to make learning tools accessible for all students, including those with visual impairments

- Methods to encourage understanding, such as by recording synchronous lessons and making them available for students to review

- Strategies for engaging families and students in the process of developing or updating learning goals

English Learners

- Methods for encouraging student interaction and conversation during synchronous instruction

- Ways of incorporating visual cues into lessons, such as with photos, illustrations, or real objects from around the home

- Approaches for engaging consistently with students and families, potentially with assistance from bilingual staff or trained interpreters

It is important that any professional development on remote learning be grounded in a shared commitment to racial equity and integrated with longer-term anti-racist/anti-bias work, both to ensure that it is culturally responsive and to avoid low expectations or "blaming the student."

This resource from NYU's Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools offers a number of suggestions for how to ensure that remote learning is carried out in a culturally responsive and sustaining way, with equity and racial justice at its core.

Modes of Delivery

Just as instructional practices need to shift, professional development must also be delivered in new ways during this period of remote work. A deep well of research shows that, to be most

effective, PD should be job-embedded and action-oriented. Within a remote environment, where many teachers face competing home demands and the stress of transferring instruction to a new medium, these features take on new urgency. See below for methods of providing professional development that are well-suited for the current moment—or any time when teachers need just-in-time access to additional supports.

Online Modules

At its most basic, remote professional development can look much like an in-person training session, with a presenter speaking in a live or recorded session.

To make these types of sessions more useful for educators, presenters should consider incorporating the same types of interactive, engaging components described above. They may also build in opportunities for self-assessment and reflection based on well-established models of remote learning, using tools such as Quality Matters' **Emergency Remote Instruction Checklist**.

Finally, given the range of PD needs at this moment, schools should consider offering differentiated and asynchronous opportunities for professional learning—and sessions should be designed to fit into teachers' busy schedules (ideally, no more than 45 minutes long).

Ongoing Support

Instructional coaches and other sources of ongoing support continue to play a key role in fostering teacher learning, even when schools are closed. According to Digital Promise's Dynamic Learning Partnership (described in **this article** from The Education Trust and Digital Promise), the best coaching programs:

- Build a "culture of partnership" among the teacher, coach, and school leader;
- Allow for voluntary teacher participation (not linked to evaluations);
- Give teachers the chance to "learn by doing" by focusing on tasks that are relevant to their needs; and
- Offer sustained support over time.

Differentiated models that offer different types and levels of coaching to more- and less-experienced educators can be an effective way to maximize coaches' time and effort. Novice teachers can also benefit from opportunities to observe veteran teachers in action by attending virtual classes and viewing lessons. This article from Learning Forward describes *6 ways coaches can support teachers during distance learning*.

Peer Collaboration

According to a national survey, 57% of teachers have participated in new professional learning communities (PLCs) since schools closed, many focused on the transition to

remote learning. (**RAND**) Whether through PLCs or otherwise, educators frequently turn to peers as key sources of guidance and empathy—another survey finds that 62% of educators say they have received "a great deal" of support from colleagues during the coronavirus outbreak. (**Educators for Excellence**)

Schools and districts may want to consider ways to leverage and build on these existing support structures, such as by creating structured teacher teams and scheduling time for them to meet during traditional school hours. This is particularly important for teachers in the middle and high school grades, who should seek to create consistent expectations and approaches for students juggling multiple remote classes. And don't forget to build in opportunities for collaboration among instructional coaches and administrators, too.

Remote professional development may—but doesn't have to—take the form of expert presentations on standalone topics. Just as students benefit from activities that incorporate choice and hands-on learning, so too can teachers gain tremendous insights from applying new ideas in practice and sharing their learning with others. The delivery methods listed above highlight just a few ideas for building teachers' understanding of and comfort with remote schooling.

SELF CARE

Alongside professional development, teachers also report the need for self-care and social-emotional supports to carry out their work effectively. According to a **survey of educators** in the Teach Plus Massachusetts network, 83% report feeling somewhat, quite, or extremely concerned about their social and emotional well-being. Fostering a caring school culture is covered more extensively in the Rennie Center's **Rebuilding Community action guide**, but the points below summarize some of the key considerations for educators in a fully remote environment.

1. **Give yourself a break.** Working in new ways, under unprecedented conditions, can be difficult and exhausting. Remind yourself that your goal is not to recreate the traditional school day. Avoid burn-out by building in opportunities to pause, reflect, and practice mindfulness.

2. **Maintain connections.** Schools that encouraged teacher collaboration before the pandemic have **benefited from these pre-existing connections,** demonstrating the power of working together. Other teachers serve as an invaluable support network and a source of encouragement in the face of obstacles or let-downs.

3. **Design your new work space with intentionality.** Working from home comes with many potential distractions, but your work space should not be one of them. Ensure that materials you need are easily available, and that the space allows for periodic movement breaks.

4. **Get inspired.** Look for opportunities to rethink your practice and engage your students in new ways**. [This reflection](#)** from former Teacher of the Year Sydney Chaffee can serve as a useful starting point.

5. **Incorporate adult SEL strategies into your routine.** Tactics to support healthy relationships, self-management, and emotional regulation are equally important for adults as they are for students. **[This guide](#)** offers strategies for embedding adult SEL within school structures amid COVID-19.

PREPARING FAMILIES FOR REMOTE LEARNING

Family members have been asked to take on a **range of new responsibilities** regarding their child's learning, from classroom aide to school counselor to coach. Schools can provide **critical assistance** to help navigate these new roles.

"Since school learning will almost universally decrease in the coming year, the only way to maintain student learning is for home learning to increase."
— [Imagining September: Principles and Design Elements for Ambitious Schools During COVID-19](#)
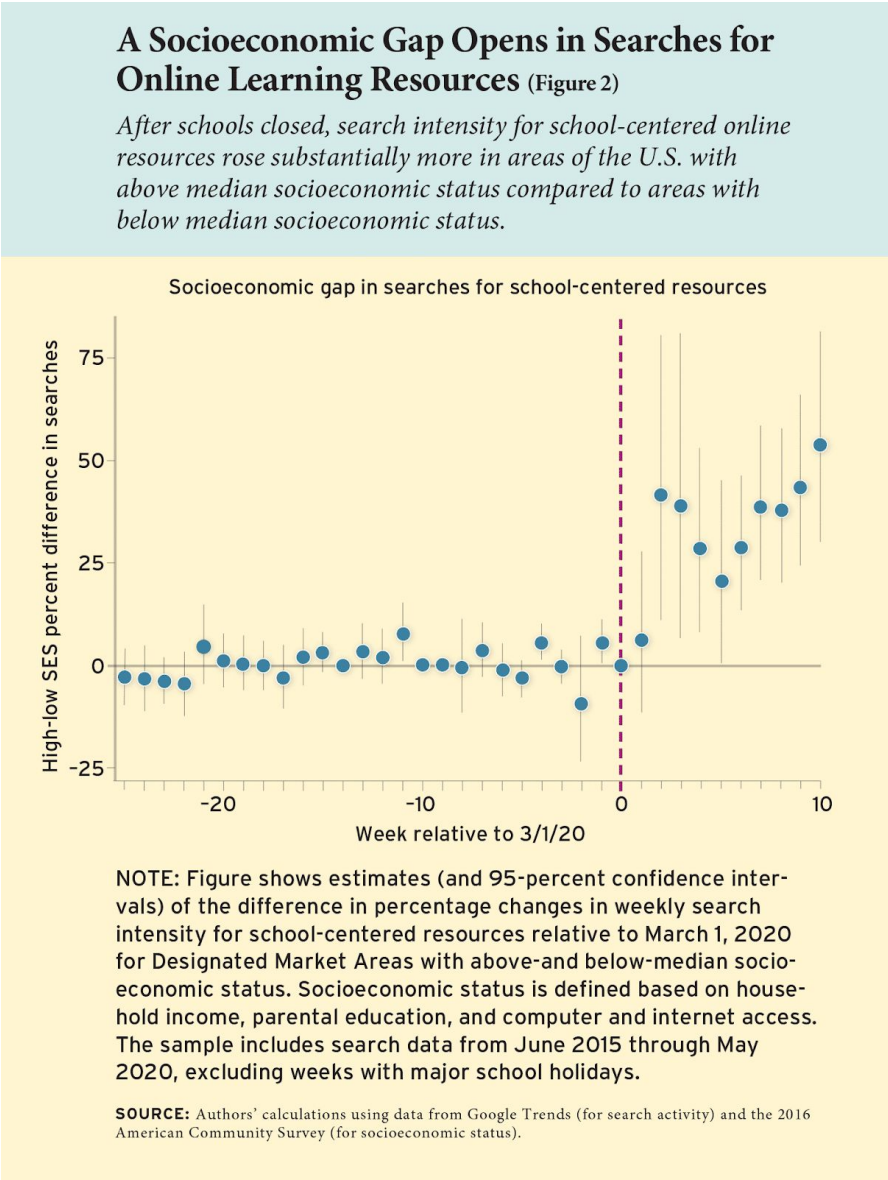
THE TRANSITION TO REMOTE LEARNING

All families suddenly facing the need to educate children at home—amid a global health crisis—were likely to encounter challenges with the transition. This is especially true considering that around three-quarters of Massachusetts students under age 12 live in households where "all available parents" work. (**[Annie E. Casey Foundation](#)**) For these families, school closures meant balancing students' learning needs with job demands, either remote or (particularly within communities of color) in-person.

The difficulty of maintaining student learning was even more acute among certain populations.

- **Low-income families —** A **[survey](#)** from ParentsTogether found that families with an annual income below $25,000 were ten times more likely than families with incomes above $100,000 to report that their children were doing little or no remote learning.

- **Families of students with disabilities —** A ParentsTogether **[survey](#)** revealed that families of students with IEPs were more than twice as likely to report that remote learning was "going poorly" (40%, vs. 19% for students without IEPs).

- **Families that speak a language other than English —** A MassINC **[poll](#)** found that 54% of parents with a home language other than English reported regular participation by students in virtual classrooms (compared to 72% of English-speaking households).

The reasons for these disparities are wide-ranging and grounded in systemic racism that permeates every institution, from employment to health care to education. The essential workers who had to continue reporting for duty amid the pandemic were disproportionately low-income and people of color; their children were often left alone to navigate at-home learning for themselves. Students with limited access to devices had difficulty staying connected with teachers and peers. Despite mandates to provide information in students' home languages, many non-English-speaking parents reported that their schools and districts failed to provide multilingual communication. These and other structural barriers led to the inequitable rates of participation in remote learning reported above.

An additional equity gap was evident in the rate at which wealthier families sought out supplemental learning materials online, as shown in the graphic below from **Education Next**. Taken together, these disparities demand that schools work with families in new ways to ensure that all students have access to rigorous, relevant, and accessible remote learning opportunities.

A Socioeconomic Gap Opens in Searches for Online Learning Resources (Figure 2)

After schools closed, search intensity for school-centered online resources rose substantially more in areas of the U.S. with above median socioeconomic status compared to areas with below median socioeconomic status.

Socioeconomic gap in searches for school-centered resources

NOTE: Figure shows estimates (and 95-percent confidence intervals) of the difference in percentage changes in weekly search intensity for school-centered resources relative to March 1, 2020 for Designated Market Areas with above-and below-median socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is defined based on household income, parental education, and computer and internet access. The sample includes search data from June 2015 through May 2020, excluding weeks with major school holidays.

SOURCE: Authors' calculations using data from Google Trends (for search activity) and the 2016 American Community Survey (for socioeconomic status).

SUPPORTING FAMILIES' NEW ROLES IN REMOTE LEARNING

When it comes to supporting their children's learning during the pandemic, families benefit from three types of assistance: **technology access/troubleshooting**, **instructional guidance**, and **social-emotional resources**. The sections below explore each of these three broad areas in more detail.

Technology Access and Troubleshooting

In a remote environment, having the appropriate technology tools to facilitate learning becomes a baseline requirement. Schools should start by assessing families' current technology needs and assets, as described in the "Technology Matters" section of this action guide. To ensure an accurate picture of students' access to learning tools, outreach (including phone calls, surveys, or online request forms) must be available in multiple languages. Note that some students with disabilities may require specialized tools or assistive technologies.

Once students have access to the proper hardware, school staff should focus on providing ongoing access to technical support and troubleshooting. Below are several suggestions for how to provide this assistance.

Help Desks

School or district staff can publicize a phone number for families to call or text when they need assistance with specific IT issues. Those who receive calls or texts should have a system for prioritizing and responding to questions—and access to interpreters who can support families speaking languages other than English.

With appropriate preparation and supervision, students can even be brought into the process of providing tech support. **This article** describes the student-run Help Desk at Burlington High School.

Virtual Tech Cafés

Where schools or districts wish to reach a larger number of families, but still provide individualized tech support, they may want to consider offering virtual "tech cafés," in which educators and staff field questions from parents or caregivers. They can address concerns in real time or make a plan for following up (for instance, by picking up or replacing non-functional devices). These virtual cafés can be personalized to focus on specific topics, including issues that arise frequently on Help Desk calls. They are also a great forum for families to connect and discuss common issues or concerns.

Video Tutorials

To respond to common questions or concerns, schools or districts may consider creating video tutorials that can be posted and shared on their website. Ideally, these videos

would be available in multiple languages and incorporate demonstrations on responding to technology challenges.

For instance, earlier this year students from Burlington High School's Help Desk helped present a **video tutorial on Google Classroom**, leveraging their IT savvy to support educators (and families) district-wide.

Along with the need to address direct technological challenges, schools and districts should consider using multiple forms of outreach (e.g., newsletter, videos, emails) to encourage safe engagement in remote learning. Families and students would benefit from clear guidance on privacy, confidentiality, and appropriate (or inappropriate) uses of technology tools, especially when those tools are provided by the school or district.

Instructional Guidance

Once students and families have access to the tools for learning—and are equipped to use them effectively—schools can help them prepare to engage in schoolwork. It is particularly enlightening to hear directly from families about the types of support that would be most helpful. One **poll** from Washington state, completed by The Education Trust, found that the following responses rose to the top:

- Regular contact with/access to their child's teacher **(96% rated as helpful)**

- Sharing examples of resources **(92%)**

- Tips on structuring their child's day **(89%)**

- Providing paper packets of instructional material **(89%)**

- Technical assistance **(89%)**

Structuring Remote Learning

One way for families to encourage students to treat at-home learning more like school is to cultivate a space for learning and a daily routine. This **article from the New York Times** offers additional advice on this topic.

Schools can help spread the word to families by sharing tips about how educators structure their time. In particular, teachers can let parents or caregivers know about any daily routines they use within their classes (e.g, morning meetings), so families can adopt similar practices on days when the class does not meet (or the student cannot attend). "A Day in the Life" videos, like these **examples from San Diego Unified School District**, can be useful resources to demonstrate how students and families are working through the remote learning process.

Schools can also provide helpful advice on the following key elements of the school day:

Schedule

Attention spans vary from child to child, but experts suggest that a good rule of thumb is that children can focus for **2-5 minutes per year of age**. Starting with small chunks of "focus time," interspersed with built-in breaks, can help keep younger students on track in their assignments. Don't forget to build in opportunities for physical activity during the day, too—and to break up screen time in other ways, such as through hands-on projects or pencil-and-paper assignments.

Time

Once students have a sense of what they should be doing and when, it's important to build in reminders about when it's time to move on to new tasks (or to redirect students who may have lost focus). A timer can help provide these cues. It will also help prevent "gray time," when students are unclear about what they should be doing.

Space

While not every student has access to a quiet area to focus, especially those sharing their living space with other siblings or family members, they can still benefit from a consistent place to work from day to day. Setting up school supplies at the start of the day can help signal to students that the day has begun, while also enabling easier access to materials.

Additional Instructional Resources

Beyond helping families structure the school day, schools can provide a wide range of content, tools, and strategies for augmenting student learning. These will be most effective if they are aligned with the skills students build through direct instruction.

Educators should also consider assigning projects and learning opportunities that incorporate elements of students' home cultures, allowing parents or caregivers to serve as at-home experts. And offering guidance on **how families can foster creativity** can help build a love of learning in students that will serve them well across subject areas and grade levels.

Social-Emotional Resources

The dislocation produced by the pandemic, along with the stress of remote learning, has resulted in significant and widespread social-emotional challenges for students. Families have seen these struggles firsthand. In a recent **MassINC poll**, a **majority (57%)** of parents reported that remote learning has had negative emotional effects for their children. Now that family members are at the front lines of student support, educators should help them identify strategies for supporting their children's non-academic needs.

While the resources below can provide a useful starting point, schools and districts should also be sure to offer access to experts—school counselors, social works, and psychologists—who can give insight and assistance for students with more significant social-emotional needs.

Incorporating Social-Emotional Learning at Home

This **article from EdSurge** offers ten methods of supporting SEL during periods of remote learning, including:

- Help your child name and express emotions
- Commit to active listening
- Engage in acts of creativity and service together
- Find reasons to celebrate

For a more structured approach that aims to build students' resilience in the face of obstacles, see **this blog post** offering a week's worth of activities, from "Making a Schedule" through "Gratitude." It also includes recommendations of additional resources and texts to read with students.

Mindfulness Breaks

When students and families take time to practice mindfulness, they become more aware of their emotions, bodies, and surroundings. This can lead to a host of benefits that are particularly important during remote learning, including improved attention, greater empathy, and better emotional regulation.

Miami-Dade Public Schools offers a number of publicly available videos through its Parent Academy, including a "Mindful Families" video that shares strategies for promoting mindfulness at home. This video and many others are available in three languages (English, Spanish, and Creole) on the **Parent Academy website**.

SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND ENGLISH LEARNERS

The topics listed above—technology, structuring learning time, and social-emotional development—offer a good starting point for conversations with any family. But for families of students with disabilities and students learning English, the sections below summarize key topics where educators can enhance caregivers' ability to support students' particular learning needs.

Students with Disabilities

- Offer training on how to supplement teletherapy from specialists (such as speech, occupational, and physical therapists), including the use of resources like sensory kits and physical therapy tools
- Share information on how to use accessibility features built in to learning platforms or other software (e.g., Zoom)

- Provide resources on participating in virtual IEP meetings (such as this **sample agenda from IDEAs That Work**), including how to advocate for any changes to students' goals as a result of fewer opportunities for social interaction.

English Learners

- Leverage community organizations as a useful resource for establishing and maintaining connections with non-English-speaking families. They can serve as trusted intermediaries for learning about families' needs and offering support
- Share online learning resources in families' native language, such as the items on this list from Immigrant Connections
- Emphasize to families that reading to and teaching children in their home language supports students' English language acquisition and long-term academic success

COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES

The strategies described above work best when they are part of a comprehensive plan for communicating with families. For instance, Be Clear offers a **template** that school and district staff can use to map out who is responsible for sharing different types of information. (They also offer more general recommendations on school communications, **available here**.) This is a stressful time for everyone, and offering too many resources can be overwhelming, even if well-intentioned. Including links and descriptions on an organized, easily accessible online space can be a good way to share information, especially when paired with regular outreach to understand families' and students' needs.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR
REMOTE LEARNING

Remote learning requires **students to build new skills** as they navigate technology tools, engage with peers and teachers virtually, and take more ownership over their learning. **How can schools help with this process?**

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT MOTIVATION

As the Rennie Center's **Reengaging Students action guide** makes clear, engagement in learning is the result of a constellation of factors. Students who lack a device or internet connectivity cannot participate in virtual coursework. The increased stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic may result in (or exacerbate) mental health challenges. Family demands, including taking care of younger siblings or contributing to household incomes, can limit time for participating in learning activities. Students experiencing homelessness may struggle to focus on schoolwork. Even students with a stable place to live may lack a quiet space to do work. All of these persistent issues cannot be overlooked when examining students' ability to participate in remote learning.

These and other factors also play a role in students' motivation. In some cases, highly motivated students could not participate in remote learning this spring because of competing demands, health concerns, technological limitations, or other challenges. But many students who could have participated in remote learning chose not to. To get a sense of the reasons why, see the quotes below from **Students Weigh In: Learning & Well-Being During COVID-19**, a national survey by the organization YouthTruth.

"Finding the motivation to do school work was the most difficult challenge I found during distance learning. In a classroom, most of the time, you are forced to work on assignments either as a class or in a small group of friends. At home, you have to push yourself to be productive. Lacking motivation caused me to dramatically fall behind."

"I get distracted a lot more at my house and procrastinate a lot. At school, I was better at time management because I had class time to work. Now I am distracted by tv, pets, games, etc."
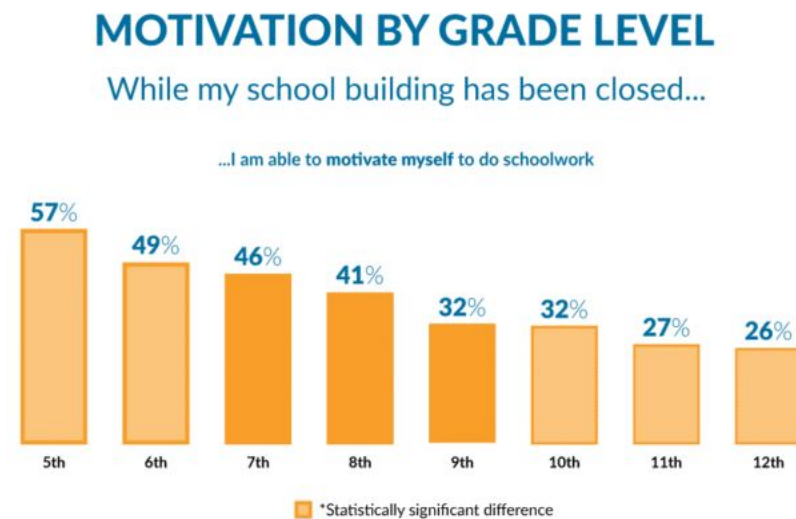
"I have no motivation and the assignments are just filler work with not much learning."

"My main motivation to go to school was being able to see my friends and now that I don't have that motivation it is very challenging to get schoolwork done."

"I have no motivation, no teacher to ask questions, no one to talk about my mental health [...] the online classes doesn't work the same way as being physically there."

— **Read more from YouthTruth**

Motivation was lower among older students:

MOTIVATION BY GRADE LEVEL

While my school building has been closed...

...I am able to **motivate myself** to do schoolwork

57% 5th | 49% 6th | 46% 7th | 41% 8th | 32% 9th | 32% 10th | 27% 11th | 26% 12th

*Statistically significant difference

The YouthTruth survey also found that students' motivation to participate in remote learning dropped as students got older. A majority of 5th grade students report that they were able to motivate themselves to do schoolwork, versus just over one-quarter of 12th grade students. These findings speak to an urgent need not only to help students get connected to remote learning in the fall, but also to help them stay connected over time.

These findings speak to an urgent need not only to help students get connected to remote learning in the fall, but also to help them stay connected over time.

GETTING CONNECTED

Successful participation in sustained remote learning requires a number of supportive mindsets and specific competencies, from technology skills to work habits to time management. The **rubric from Michigan Virtual**—intended as a way for families to assess whether their students should opt into online learning—can be helpful as schools seek to understand priority areas for supporting students during this period of transition.

Navigating Technology

Today's students are often seen as "digital natives," having grown up around computers, the internet, and smart phones. But not all students are equally comfortable using technology, especially those who have had limited access to devices. And even students who have facility using basic tech tools may struggle to apply their skills in a new context.

Technology Training

Students have a wide variety of digital proficiency. Some students might need help learning how to log on to a learning platform or videoconferencing app (like Zoom), while others need help using email or remembering passwords. Educators often expect that students will have an adult present to support them with technology or content questions, but some students are learning on their own and will need extra assistance.

Productivity Skills

Staring at a screen for hours in a day can have negative effects on focus and productivity. Encourage students to take "brain breaks" away from their screens and to avoid eye strain by optimizing their computer settings. Help students think through how to read and process information online—this **guide from Read Write Think** offers sample lessons on this topic. And because students are working independently more often, it is also important to explicitly teach strategies for time management and organization, to help them stay on track and manage multiple moving pieces at once.

Learning from Home

Remote learning generally happens in the home, a space that is usually hidden to students' peers, teachers, and mentors. Students might feel insecure having their room and personal belongings shown on camera, particularly those who grapple with anxiety or have dealt with bullying. If students or any family members have undocumented status, they may also have serious concerns about their security if they appear on camera. Strategies for addressing these issues include the following:

- **Encourage the use of virtual backgrounds.** Though virtual backgrounds can be distracting if used incorrectly, they can also help ease students' minds about what their peers may be seeing of their personal space.

- **Hide the "self-view."** In face-to-face interactions students do not have to constantly see their own selves reflected back at them. For many students (and adults), seeing their picture on the screen during videoconferences is distracting, but for some it raises more series issues of self-doubt or embarrassment. When possible, encourage students to hide the "self-view" option, allowing them to focus more on their peers and classroom instruction.

- **Remind students about privacy safeguards.** Because some students will be worried about their own or family members' safety, make a point to discuss and reinforce guidelines about online privacy—including any limitations on capturing images or videos during remote instruction.

- **Share tips for creating productive learning environments.** Provide guidance to students (and families) on setting up a specified area at home that helps them focus on schoolwork—while recognizing that not every student will have access to a quiet, private space for learning.

- **Establish "sharing circles."** For younger students, set aside time for them to share aspects of their home that they are proud of or personal items that they love. These could include a pet, a stuffed animal, a favorite place to do art, or an outdoor play area. Through sharing their space with peers, students build their confidence and develop feelings of trust in their classes and teachers.

Sensory Support

Thoughtfully designed classroom settings can promote comfort and learning, especially among students who have experienced trauma and students with special needs. While learning at home, students may not have access to spaces that offer the same sense of predictability and support. This **article from Eduotpia** lists strategies for helping students feel safe and comfortable while learning at home, such as creating sensory objects, using mindfulness techniques, and modeling calmness in interactions.

STAYING CONNECTED

As the student quotes above demonstrate, there are many potential reasons why students might feel unmotivated, including a lack of structure, distractions at home, and limited options for mental health support. Two other factors that are important to highlight are low-quality assignments and the lack of peer interaction. These elements are not intrinsic to remote learning—lessons can be designed to provide instruction that is both meaningful and rigorous, while peers can continue to serve as a source of support. The following sections offer resources on engaging learners by making learning relevant and maintaining links among students.

Making Learning Relevant

In a remote environment, even more than in the classroom, students benefit from learning that relates to their lives outside of school. The following bullet points offer a few suggestions for grounding lessons in relevant themes, while continuing to build critical academic skills.

- **Focus on Current Events —** World events provide a constant source of "teachable moments," especially in the middle of our current, unprecedented era in history. From the pandemic, to protests against racial oppression, to the upcoming presidential election, there is no shortage of topics for students to read

and write about, or to examine in math and science classes. The passage above comes from a "storyboard" created as part of a series of online design charrettes intended to envision a new approach to learning this school year. For more on that process, see **Imagining September: Principles and Design Elements for Ambitious Schools During COVID-19**.

- **Incorporate and Amplify Student Voice —** Ensuring that students have a say what they learn is always a powerful engagement strategy, but it takes on new significance during remote learning, as self-direction becomes increasingly important. The Rennie Center's 2019 Condition of Education in the Commonwealth report, **Student Voice: How Young People can Shape the Future of Education**, explores this topic in detail—including how it can be a lever for equity.

  Among other programs, the report highlights the work of **Generation Citizen**, which helps promote action civics in schools across Massachusetts (and beyond). Generation Citizen has put together a number of virtual lesson plans in response to COVID-19, aiming to help amplify student voice through op-eds, lobbying, and other activities.

- **Promote Responsible Digital Citizenship —** Digital citizens understand how to engage respectfully and effectively in virtual spaces. They can evaluate claims made by media sources, use technology to advocate for improvements in their world, and know how to protect themselves from harm by safeguarding their privacy while online. This fall will present a powerful opportunity to bring students into conversations about responsible digital citizenship, as they apply these skills in their day-to-day learning. Common Sense Education offers **lesson plans on digital citizenship** for grades K-12.

  While there are many ways to make education relevant to students' daily lives—such as through hands-on, project-based experiences—the topics and strategies included here are particularly suited to the present moment and offer powerful opportunities to apply new learning.

Maintaining Links with Peers

During times of remote learning, students are separated from friends and social groups physically—and, in many cases, emotionally. According to a **national survey by the America's Promise Alliance**, around one-quarter of young people report feeling disconnected from classmates and their school community. This isolation can exacerbate anxiety and stress. On the other hand, lessons and school structures that offer opportunities for social interaction can enhance student well-being while offering a potent source of motivation and encouragement.

The following strategies can help form or strengthen bonds among peers, even from a distance.

1. **Keep class enrollment consistent,** from one course to another or even one grade to another. Some observers have suggested "looping" teachers with students to help maintain the bonds between educators and their classes, but this tactic also keeps student groups intact from one year to the next.

2. **Utilize advisories**—where teachers meet regularly with a small group of students outside of normal class periods—to foster peer relationships as well as teacher-student relationships.

3. **Encourage student agency among peers**, especially peers who have inconsistent participation in remote learning. **This article** describes this as a method of building student agency, as well as a way to reconnect with absent students.

Helping students reflect on their peer relationships can also be a powerful exercise. **Making Caring Common's Virtual Circle of Concern** strategy engages students in a process of reflecting on how much empathy they feel and for whom they have empathy. It encourages students to reach beyond their normal circles, find a deeper sense of belonging, and widen their community.

DESIGNING THE FUTURE

Today's students are the only ones who have had the experience of receiving instruction at home amid a global pandemic. The value of their perspective on what worked, what didn't, and where to go from here cannot be overstated. Consider how to bring students into the process of redesigning education during remote learning. The **"Imagining September" design charrettes** used the linked template to spark student thinking about remote learning and prepare for an

online planning session. But there are many other avenues for engaging students during this time, particularly given that distance and transportation will not present a challenge.

Finally, remember that motivation is key to keeping students engaged and happy. It is important to teach and model persistence and perseverance. Remote learning can be frustrating and challenging for many students. Let them know that it is okay to feel this way, and encourage them to seek and ask for help when they need it.

CONCLUSION

ACTION STEPS

This section includes a **list of action steps** for school leaders and educators as they prepare for a potential return to remote learning.

FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

To Do Now:

The following actions can be implemented immediately, or early on in the school year, to support remote learning efforts.

- ❏ **Map relationships with students** and use that process to assign certain teachers to reach out to students/families as the new year gets underway. Have staff check in with their students every day. This **protocol** can help staff members understand your expectations for their calls.
- ❏ Review **this** or similar resources to ensure that you are **centering remote learning on equity** and focusing on culturally responsive and sustaining practices.

- ❏ **Conduct a needs assessment** to understand students' and families' access to technology. Publicize resources about low- or no-cost internet options, and distribute hotspots to students where internet connectivity remains a challenge.
- ❏ **Develop a communications plan** that outlines who is communicating with families, when, and what content they will be responsible for sharing.
- ❏ **Set up a parent webpage** with resources, including technology support and instructional/SEL guidance
- ❏ **Establish a virtual help desk** for parents to call or text with technology challenges. Make sure that whoever is answering the phone has the ability to connect with an interpreter as needed.
- ❏ **Invite teachers, families, and students into the process of designing remote or hybrid learning** this fall. Consider establishing a series of conversations where stakeholders can interact across groups and develop a vision for successful remote learning.
- ❏ Remember to **focus on adult SEL** among staff. Take time to model self-care and build in time to practice mindfulness alongside educators.
- ❏ Ask teachers about their **highest priorities for professional development.** Look for ways to present new information synchronously or asynchronously before the start of the year.
- ❏ Make sure **families have access to school-based social-emotional and mental health supports**, such as by establishing a "warm line" for families to call when they have questions or concerns that don't rise to the level of crisis.

To Do Later:

The following long-term and more resource-intensive actions will support school and district efforts to implement remote learning.

- ❏ **Use relationship mapping data to analyze trends** within the school and identify any student sub-groups that would benefit from stronger efforts at relationship building.
- ❏ If you haven't already done so, **establish professional learning communities (PLCs)** and build in time for them to meet consistently during the week.
- ❏ **Connect with community partners** to identify opportunities for extending the virtual school day through enrichment activities. Consider establishing shared rubrics for measuring students' skill development and using these as the basis for awarding digital badges.
- ❏ **Create family-friendly videos** to address common technology challenges and highlight effective practices for structuring school time.
- ❏ Consider building in time for **advisory periods**, where teachers can get to know their students outside of class time and students can connect with their peers.
- ❏ Look for opportunities to **connect families to each other**, such as through virtual coffee hours or affinity groups.
- ❏ **Bring students into the process of reaching out** to their peers and checking in on student needs and emotions.

- ❏ **Connect novice teachers with veteran educators**, allowing them to see effective forms of remote instruction.

FOR EDUCATORS

- ❏ **Set a clear and consistent schedule for students** to follow and make sure that students and families are aware of it. **Identify key daily or weekly routines** (e.g., morning meetings) and make families aware of them, so they can use similar structures on days when the class does not meet.
- ❏ Don't forget the value of **informal or casual contact with students**. Find ways to let them know you're thinking about them and that you know their interests. For example, you can send a message when their favorite sports team wins, or when you read a story you think they would like.
- ❏ **Offer timely and specific feedback** on student assignments, even those that aren't graded.
- ❏ **Incorporate mindfulness and breathing exercises** into in-person or synchronous learning sessions.
- ❏ **Create a community agreement** with students about how you will interact within virtual spaces.
- ❏ **Incorporate visual media** (real items, diagrams, pictures, etc.) in videos and online lessons as much as possible to support English Learners and others who benefit from visual examples.
- ❏ Plan lessons and content that ask students to **process real-world events**.
- ❏ After the first few weeks of school (when relationship-building should be the priority), think about ways to **incorporate formative assessments** during virtual class sessions (including through student observation and quick check-ins).
- ❏ Have students complete **engaging independent projects**. Incorporate student choice by allowing them to select their own topics of interest or areas of focus. Provide rubrics and exemplars to ensure that students understand your expectations for their work.
- ❏ **Measure students' engagement with remote learning** and build in opportunities to ask students about their experiences, in order to keep improving your own practices.
- ❏ **Set up virtual coffee hours** where families can get together with you and each other.

GOING DEEPER

This section includes resources to support further learning.

GOING DEEPER ON REMOTE LEARNING DATA

1. This **MassINC poll** details parents' perceptions of Massachusetts school reopening plans
2. Educators for Excellence, in partnership with Gotham Research Group, **conducted a survey** of 600 US district and charter public school teachers

GOING DEEPER ON BEST PRACTICES

3. **CAST Accessible Online Learning for Students with Disabilities** shows ways of making online learning more accessible so that everyone has a fair opportunity to learn
4. New America's guide to **Pandemic Planning for Distance Learning** is a comprehensive resource featuring scenarios and elements to consider when planning for remote learning
5. **A Brief Guide to Remote Teaching Best Practices** from TEALS offers guidance and suggestions for instructor-led remote learning programs
6. The Learning Policy Institute's **Resources and Examples: Learning in the Time of COVID-19** offers a growing body of useful resources to support student learning and well-being during school closures

GOING DEEPER ON STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS AND FAMILIES

7. TeachThought.com offers **22 Remote Learning Tips for Parents Helping at Home**
8. SETDA offers **Parent Resources** as they coordinate longer term eLearning days, consider content to create, and collaborate with each other
9. English Learners Success Forum offers a **range of resources** for supporting English Learners and their families, including by offering Do's and Don'ts for remote learning

GOING DEEPER ON EQUITY-CENTERED REMOTE LEARNING

10. The Education Trust and Digital Promise offer **10 Questions for Equity Advocates to Ask** about remote learning
11. LearnLaunch presents the **Building Blocks of Equitable Remote Learning**
12. The Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership released a brief on **Keeping Equity at the Forefront**

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