

Providing Effective and Equitable Digital Learning for all Students:

Key Considerations for Districts



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Challenges with COVID-19 and School Closures

As schools remain closed, district leaders are continuously developing, revising, and implementing plans for maximum educational continuity. However, challenges with digital learning and equity [persist](#). Such national trends indicate that our most vulnerable student populations – including those from families without reliable connection to the internet or access to devices, those whose families cannot regularly support at-home instruction, or those with special needs – are most at risk of falling behind their peers.

The effects of COVID-19 on students and families require district leaders to collaborate with local stakeholders – including administrators, classroom teachers, school support staff, parents, and students – to plan strategic actions that allow digital learning to effectively and equitably continue into the summer and beyond.

Furthermore, evidence from the [science of learning and development](#) demonstrates that academic learning cannot happen without the integration of affective, cognitive, motivational, and relational processes. As such, COVID-19 responses that focus exclusively on academics fall short of fully supporting students. Districts must engage in [whole-child approaches](#) that leverage technology to integrate positive environments, developmental relationships, [skill and mindset development](#), integrated supports, and rigorous instruction, which optimize students' learning, especially in the context of stress.

Below, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), Turnaround for Children, the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), the Future of Privacy Forum (FPF), and the New Hampshire Society for Technology in Education (NHSTE) – who are members of the broader COVID-19 Education Coalition – provide three key considerations that districts must keep in mind as they build immediate and long-term plans: **equitable infrastructure, active digital learning content, and educator capacity building.**

Recommendation 1:

Focus on Equitable Infrastructure

Districts must continue to ensure that students and families have equitable access to devices and connectivity conducive to online learning. This foundational infrastructure is not only necessary for the near future as COVID-19 forces students to learn from home, but also in the long-term to narrow the existing [digital divide](#). Education stabilization funds levied under the [CARES Act](#) can be prioritized to meet this need.

When making purchasing decisions, districts must also ensure that both hardware and software are accessible to learners with diverse abilities and needs. Specifically, technology must abide by accessibility standards, including [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) and [Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act](#). Furthermore, educators must be offered appropriate training and support so they can develop expertise in using the technology and any built-in accessibility features effectively.

Key questions to discuss:

- Which families in our district are most negatively impacted by COVID-19? How can we quickly find out and drive resources to them?
- Which existing school and community assets – such as edtech coaches, special educators, and technical support lines – can we deploy to help set up environments conducive to online learning?
- How can we ensure that the technology is designed to comply with the latest accessibility standards and are equipped with accessibility features our educators are prepared to use?
- How can access be sustained throughout the summer months and into the fall?

Suggested resources:

- [Free Remote Learning Survey](#) (ISTE & Brightbytes)
- [Coalition for eLearning Website](#) (SETDA)
- [Internet Access: Four Strategies for District Leaders](#), (U.S. Department of Education)
- [Resource Library](#) (Educating All Learners)
- [Inclusive Technology in a 21st Century Learning System](#) (NCLD)
- [National Center on Accessible Educational Materials](#) (CAST)

Recommendation 2:

Leverage Active Digital Learning Content

Passive learning does not effectively build skills and mindsets – such as executive function, self-efficacy, resilience, agency, and academic tenacity – that are critical for students' success in school and beyond. Unfortunately, due to the rapid transition to online learning, some districts are resorting to printed packets of material in place of engaging, effective instruction. This poses a significant issue for the continuity of learning and development. A recent Education Week poll found that [nearly 60%](#) of teachers report declines in student engagement levels.

Districts must collaborate with educators to curate content that promotes [active](#) learning strategies, which provide opportunities to meaningfully engage with the material rather than passively consuming information. A robust instructional framework is necessary to help educators vet active content. For example, the [ISTE Standards for Students](#) is composed of seven distinct personas – empowered learner, digital citizen, knowledge constructor, innovative designer, computational thinker, creative communicator, and global collaborator – each of which is broken down into competencies that students can demonstrate to solve real-world problems. [Eighteen states](#) have already adopted the newest iteration of the ISTE Standards.

In addition, districts must focus on assisting teachers in designing lessons and instructional strategies aligned to the [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) framework. UDL is grounded in the principles of multiple means of engagement, representation and expression, which are critically important to removing learning barriers and optimizing levels of challenge.

Key questions to discuss:

- Who are in-house experts in technology-empowered pedagogy, such as edtech and UDL coaches and specialists, who can lead the development of online curricula and support for instructional strategies that incorporate active learning?
- Who are in-house experts in UDL, including special educators, who can support general educators in the development of lesson plans and instructional strategies to ensure accessibility of content and materials for all learners?
- How can we engage in-house experts in social and emotional learning (SEL) to help develop online learning experiences that buffer stress and intentionally build students' skills and mindsets, including resilience and agency?
- How can we work efficiently by leveraging existing hubs of active learning content, such as online hubs of open educational resources (OER)?
- How can we ensure that tools and platforms are equipped with adequate accessibility features and privacy and security protections?

Suggested resources:

- [Free Tech for Learning database](#) (ISTE and EdSurge)
- [State OER Hub](#) (#GoOpen Michigan)
- [District Virtual Learning Time Template](#) (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction)
- [Science of Learning Guide to Education Technology](#) (Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning)
- [Digital Citizenship](#) (Common Sense Education)
- [Online Learning Best Practices Checklist](#) (FPF)
- [Privacy Considerations Checklist](#) (CoSN)
- [UDL Guidelines](#) (CAST)
- [UDL Scan Tool](#) (Center for Online Learning and Students with Disabilities)

Recommendation 3:

Provide Ongoing Professional Learning for Educators

[AASA](#) and [NAESP](#) member surveys find that next to connectivity, “instructional capacity” is one of the largest barriers inhibiting the transition to online learning models. Starting immediately and continuing over the long-term, districts can provide educators with ongoing professional learning that focuses on:

- Promoting whole-child development – including the intentional development of the skills, mindsets, and habits of all successful learners – through personalizing learning experiences designed to meet their assets and needs.
- Incorporating best practices for using technology for active learning, including those informed by the [ISTE Standards](#).
- Providing instruction that aligns with the principles of UDL, ensures accessibility of content, and effectively uses progress monitoring techniques in a virtual setting.
- Providing specialized instruction and related services in 1:1 or small group virtual settings, including accommodations, modifications, and technical supports as appropriate for diverse learners.
- Ensuring adequate privacy and security of online learning platforms and tools.

Such comprehensive professional learning ensures an efficient investment of resources, as practices learned can not only be sustained in fully online settings, but also in blended and face-to-face environments after the crisis subsides. School districts from around the country also corroborate that their investments in educator training in the past have been paying off at this time (see appendix). Education stabilization funds levied under the [CARES Act](#) can be prioritized to meet this need.

Key questions to discuss:

- How can we support educators in designing learner-centered environments in an online space, grounded in a whole-child approach?
- Who are in-house experts in technology-empowered pedagogy, such as edtech and UDL coaches and specialists, who can lead educator capacity building efforts over the long term?
- How can we promote and provide time for collaboration between special educators, general educators, and other specialized instructional support personnel within and outside of district lines?
- Who are local and national organizations that can provide training and technical assistance to meet this need to build educator capacity?
- What existing systems and policies for credentialing and professional advancement can we leverage to recognize and reward educators who receive training and apply the practices learned? How can we work with state leaders to meet this need?

Suggested resources:

- [ISTE Certification for Educators](#) (ISTE)
- [ISTE U Courses](#) (ISTE)
- [Educator Capacity Building Case Studies](#) (ISTE & Education Commission of the States)
- [Educator Resources on Student Privacy](#) (FPF)
- [Four Actions to Support Students With Disabilities and Their Families](#) (NCLD)
- [Providing a Free Appropriate Public Education](#) (NCLD)
- [Family-School Collaboration](#) (NCLD)
- [Coronavirus Pandemic Resources to Support Whole-Child Education](#) (Turnaround for Children)
- [COVID-19 Resource and Community Support Hub](#) (New Teacher Center)
- [COVID-19 Resources for School Leaders](#) (New Leaders)

Conclusion:

Districts Must Start **Now** to Develop an Actionable Strategy

With extended school closures, many districts can expect an exacerbated [summer slide](#) effect, resulting in the loss of learning particularly among students with inequitable access to resources and opportunities. To mitigate this impact, districts must immediately begin working with school and community stakeholders to develop a shared vision and plan that focuses on technical infrastructure, active digital learning content, and educator capacity.

For example, [less than a third of districts](#) currently indicate readiness to implement summer learning. Therefore, education stabilization funds levied under the [CARES Act](#) can be invested in the planning and implementation of summer learning, whether online or blended. These funds can also be used to ensure that organizations focused on youth development and childcare continue to operate during the summer.

Key questions to discuss:

- How can we leverage the summer months to support students' social and emotional needs? Can summer learning reinforce connections with and between students, build relationships that buffer stress, and support routines that create consistency in a disrupted world? How can we ensure that these opportunities are integrated with academic learning?
- How can we survey families, educators, and school administrators for supports that they need to execute summer online learning aligned to our district's vision?
- Who are in-house experts in technology-empowered pedagogy, such as edtech and UDL coaches and specialists, who can lead the implementation of active summer learning strategies that combine skill building with stress management and academic content?
- Who are in-house experts in specialized instruction and related services, such as special educators or specialized instructional support personnel, who can lead the implementation of individualized programming to meet the needs of diverse learners?

Appendix:

Exemplary District Stories

Los Angeles Unified Continues Delivering Online Professional Learning on the ISTE Standards

Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the second largest public school system in the United States. As schools officially closed on March 13, the district's [Instructional Technology Initiative](#) (ITI) immediately began developing resources to support educators as they delivered instruction online. For example, ITI had already been in charge of implementing the ISTE Standards in the district for several years, producing an extensive [catalogue of professional learning offerings](#) supported through federal funds. ITI first identified the professional learning offerings that could be delivered in an online setting using a bite-sized format, focused around specific practices that educators could put into motion immediately. LAUSD's expectation is that educators would continue these practices even after the school closures end. LAUSD's leaders are supplementing this effort for the long-term with [additional investments](#) into devices, internet access, and training for online learning models.

Lakota Local Schools Benefits From Continued Investments Into Effective Technology Use

Lakota Local Schools in Ohio took a systematic approach to rolling out online learning. On March 13, as schools closed down, educators first tested the technical means of reaching out to students via virtual platforms and collaborated to develop what online learning would look like. Fortunately, the district had made strategic investments previously so that all students in third grade and above would have access to a device, and teachers were [certified to teach with technology](#). District leaders at the Office of Equity and Inclusion worked to identify students who do not have a reliable connection to the internet and coordinated with the technology division to ensure access to a hotspot. Furthermore, superintendent Matt Miller helped set up [regular virtual calls](#) across the state to ensure that promising practices for educators would not be siloed. Lakota Local Schools is currently prioritizing social and emotional learning by using technology as a vehicle to ensure a continuity of healthy student-educator and student-student relationships.

Westlake Charter School Focuses on Equity and Access Through Asynchronous SEL Supports

Westlake Charter School (WCS) serves K-8 students in Sacramento, California. Since March 16, teachers have iteratively adjusted practices, using equity and access to guide decisions. Through a dedicated [web portal](#), families have access to daily SEL and academic activities developed by classroom teachers, adaptive ELA and math curricula, extensive links to grade-appropriate external learning resources, and social-emotional supports via the [Counseling and Resources](#) page. WCS has committed to delivering academics asynchronously while reserving video conferencing, as well as phone and text communications through Google Voice, for collaborating and relationship building in real-time with students and families. Each iterative best practice is co-constructed between WCS staff and captured in the [WCS Distance Learning Manual](#).

Natomas Unified Implements Online Learning With a Focus on SEL That Leverages Technology

Natomas Unified School District in Sacramento, California, rolled out online learning with equitable access to technology as a major focus. On March 13, the district immediately began identifying [online learning resources for families](#). When it became clear that online learning would be required for the long-term, staff

surveyed families to determine each student's access to technology and the internet, eventually distributing 7,000 devices and 350 hotspots. Fortunately, the district had made investments over the last several years so that all teachers had enough Chromebooks to provide access to every student who would need one. The district has also made it a priority to support students' and families' social-emotional needs by using technology to meaningfully connect students to their schools, as well as provide access to online social-emotional referral forms and mental health services. Furthermore, district leaders developed orientations for teachers and families, as well as social-emotional supports, through the district's dedicated [web portal](#).

Glendale Unified Develops Comprehensive Plan to Ensure Educational Continuity

On March 13, leaders and staff at Glendale Unified School District in California quickly developed a systemic approach to address access to technology and online resources, training on remote instruction, and communication regarding the transition process. The district set up a kiosk at the central office lobby, where device distribution took place. To date, nearly 8,000 devices and 200 hotspots have been distributed. Glendale Unified also established a robust remote learning plan, which included webinars and screencasts on how to set up and lead remote instruction, lesson plan templates for students with and without technology, and resources organized by grade level. To facilitate communication with students and families, the district developed a dedicated [web portal](#) featuring student and family expectations, online resources, mental health support, and instructions on how to access meals and technology. Finally, Glendale Unified provided translation services for all communication and established special help lines for technical and special education support.

Rowan-Salisbury Schools Makes an Efficient Pivot to Online Learning Models

Andrew Smith, chief strategy officer at Rowan-Salisbury Schools in North Carolina, collaborated with district leaders to make an efficient pivot to online learning. Fortunately, the district had previously invested in enough devices to ensure a 1:1 student-to-device ratio and developed plans to conduct learning remotely during temporary closures. Realizing that this would not be enough for long-term online learning, Smith and his team surveyed all students to identify internet needs and distribute 300 MiFi hotspots. After the first few weeks of implementing online learning plans, Rowan-Salisbury began iteratively revising its strategy to better meet needs of students and families. For example, the district is now exploring a mix of synchronous and asynchronous classes to provide relief to families. Educators are still providing ample opportunities to engage with problem-based learning models, frequently checking in to monitor student progress and provide feedback.

Oak Park District 97 Leverages In-House Edtech Experts to Coordinate Online Learning and Build Student Agency

Oak Park District 97 in Illinois had begun implementing a personalized learning approach since 2015, ensuring device and at-home internet access for all students in grades 3-8 and training educators on effective edtech use. When the district closed in March, district leaders immediately prepared and distributed professional learning materials on how to conduct online learning. This effort was supplemented by a team of instructional coaches, who provided remote assistance for educators on how to use various tools and platforms to build a sense of community, support social and emotional needs, and reinforce student agency and creativity. For example, members of the Lincoln Tech Club, organized and led by fifth grade students in Oak Park, teach staff members and other students how to use technology for projects and assignments.

Acknowledgments: Contributing Organizations



The International Society for Technology in Education is a nonprofit organization that works with the education community to accelerate the use of technology to solve tough problems and inspire innovation. Our worldwide network believes in the potential technology holds to transform teaching and learning. For additional information, please visit iste.org.



The Future of Privacy Forum (FPF) is a nonprofit organization that serves as a catalyst for privacy leadership and scholarship, advancing principled data practices in support of emerging technologies. FPF brings together industry, academics, consumer advocates, and other thought leaders to explore the challenges posed by technological innovation and develop privacy protections, ethical norms, and workable business practices. For additional information, please visit fpf.org and ferpasherpa.org.



Turnaround for Children translates neuroscientific research into tools and strategies for schools with high concentrations of students impacted by adversity, in order to accelerate healthy development and academic achievement. For additional information, please visit turnaroundusa.org.



The New Hampshire Society for Technology in Education (NHSTE) is a non-profit organization formed by volunteers to improve education through the use of information technologies. NHSTE provides a structure for linking educators across the state to share the effective application of emerging technologies in New Hampshire schools. For additional information, please visit nhste.org.



The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) is a Washington, DC-based national policy, advocacy, and research organization that works to improve the lives of the 1 in 5 children and adults nationwide with learning and attention issues – by empowering parents and young adults, transforming schools, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. For additional information, please visit nclid.org.



The COVID-19 Education Coalition is a community of nonprofit organizations convened by ISTE and EdSurge to support the education field as learning moves online. For additional information, please visit learningkeepsgoing.org.