

—AP Photo/Brynn Anderson

Aimee Rodriguez Webb reads emails at her dining room table, which she set up as a virtual classroom in Marietta, Ga. After a rocky transition to distance learning last spring, Webb bought a dry-erase board and a special camera for displaying worksheets.

# Distance Learning

## EDITORS NOTE

As schools adjust to hybrid and remote schedules throughout the pandemic, educators must adopt new distance learning strategies. In this Spotlight, learn how educators are serving students with special needs in distance learning, how schools can reduce the risk of cyberattacks, and how to optimize in-person and remote instruction.

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Published on August 5, 2020, in Education Week

# How to Make Lessons Cohesive When Teaching Both Remote and In-Person Classes

By Sarah Schwartz

**E**ven in schools offering face-to-face instruction this fall, one “class” of students likely won’t be the coherent unit that it was in past years. Within one 5th grade class, for example, students may be split in a hybrid schedule—half in-person two or three days, online the rest. Some may have opted for fully remote instruction while their classmates are in school buildings. The same teacher might be responsible for all of these students at once, or all 5th grade teachers might team up, each instructing in a different modality.

With so many moving parts, how can teachers make sure all students have a coherent learning experience?

Don’t try to plan two completely different courses, experts say. Instead, think about goals for the class: What is it that you want students to know and be able to do by the end? Those goals should guide instruction across environments, even if you’re using different techniques to achieve them online and in-person.

Education Week spoke with educators, online learning experts, and curriculum providers for concrete advice on how to keep instruction and materials coherent when students are in and out of the school building. Here’s what they recommend:

## When possible, use the same materials in both settings, and stick with the same curricular progression.

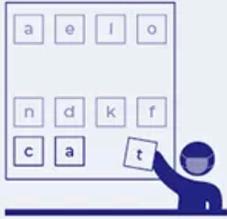
Some publishers have always offered, or have recently developed, a digital match: For every unit, there are online versions of in-classroom lessons. Districts may also have access to resources from the state. Texas, for example, is releasing a set of free, pre-K-12 resources that districts in the state can use in-person or online.

But even if a curriculum doesn’t have a digital component, district instructional leaders can do work upfront to find complementary online resources and provide guidance on how to align them with existing paper-and-pencil lessons. Teachers should know before the school year starts what they have available to use in either setting for each part of their course.

All materials should have supports for Eng-

## Teaching the Same Lesson in Different Settings

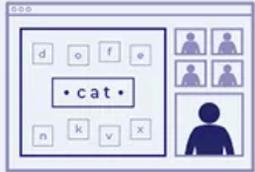
Instead of planning two separate courses, think about what you want students to know at the end of the class. Those goals should guide instruction, even if you’re using different techniques to achieve them online and in-person.



**IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION: WHOLE CLASS**

Students use a chart with letters to practice placing individual letters in the right order to form words.

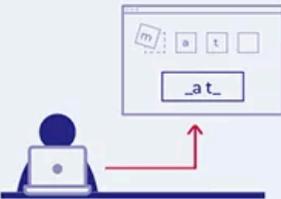
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**REMOTE SYNCHRONOUS: SMALL GROUP**

On a video call, students practice making words by moving letters around using an interactive chart.

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**REMOTE ASYNCHRONOUS INSTRUCTION**

In a digital reading program, students identify and manipulate letter sounds to assemble new words.

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**CAREGIVER SUPPORT**

Caregivers can access a website that provides easy reinforcement activities that can be done at home.

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SOURCES: Amplify CKLA and Amplify Reading, Education Week reporting



Remote learning is built on **connections that matter**

The education community has demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of rapid school closures, and it's clear the connections between students, teachers, and their communities have never been more essential.

Whether you're familiar with remote learning tools or an absolute beginner, we have free resources to help you make the transition to an inclusive online classroom.

lish-language learners, but it's especially important if students are expected to do asynchronous online work (on their own time rather than in a live class). Instructions should also be provided in multiple languages.

### Taking a “remote-first” approach to instructional planning could make hybrid schedules (and socially distanced classrooms) run more smoothly.

“In the back of my mind I can't help but think—if we go back, it's going to be very short-lived,” said Laura Haddad, an English teacher and technology coach at Glastonbury High School in Connecticut.

Earlier this summer, before her district decided on a reopening model, Haddad planned to go “the technology route,” she said. If the district decided to start online, she would be ready; if they started in-person, she could adapt—and she would be prepared for a shutdown if there were an outbreak. It's easier to bring an online class into a physical space than the other way around, she said.

Haddad learned that the district plans to go back on a hybrid schedule. But even though she'll be in the school building, she's been told she'll be behind plexiglass at her desk. Her students won't be able to work in pairs or groups. So her high schoolers might have to rely on devices in class, too.

“You've got to tell the teachers to go paperless from day one,” Haddad said. “You've got to tell them to use mandated [online] applications from day one.”

Some lessons might need to be changed so that students who do them online have the same experience as students who do them in class—for example, adjusting a science experiment so that it can be done with common household items.

### When students do have time in person, they should be collaborating with each other, having discussions, and working through problems.

A common hybrid plan looks like this: Students in group A are in school Monday/Tuesday and at home Thursday/Friday; students in group B have the opposite schedule. All students do distance learning on Wednesday, which is also a planning day for teachers.

In such a schedule, students in group A and group B don't need to be working on the same lesson at the same time. Teachers can think about content in weeklong chunks instead, di-

viding up activities based on what works best in each environment, and leaving flexibility for students to complete remote work on different timetables.

### In person

Even if students can't sit together at tables or huddle over math problems in pairs, they will at least be in the same room at the same time. This is the opportunity for peer interaction and collaboration. It's also an opportunity to support kids' social-emotional health by focusing on instructional work that builds relationships. In-person activities could include:

- analyzing student work, sharing their thinking behind how they approached a task;
- collaborating to solve problems;
- conducting a Socratic seminar or debate;
- investigating scientific phenomena;
- conferencing about student writing;
- providing small-group instruction in response to individual student needs;
- introducing a new concept and answering student questions;
- explicit instruction of foundational skills, like phonics;
- and performing music (for safety purposes focusing on percussive, rhythmic, and pitched instruments that do not require breath).

### Remote

Students can do more independent work outside of class, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't have any peer interaction. Teachers should also think about how they will integrate students' questions about remote work into in-person lessons. Remote activities could include:

- listening to recorded read-alouds and/or reading text independently;
- listening to a short lecture or video providing direct instruction;
- working on problem sets;
- responding to asynchronous discussion prompts on message boards;

- self-assessment;
- giving peer feedback;
- contributing asynchronously to group projects;
- and writing.

### What can schools expect from curriculum publishers?

Some providers are updating their offerings and technology platforms to better support distance and hybrid instruction. “People are gearing up for a long haul of teaching in these new models. It's not, can you hold down the fort in a triage way,” said Larry Berger, the CEO of Amplify.

“Our expectation is that a student may be in a classroom Friday, and then the following Monday, education may just go completely remote,” said Bethlam Forsa, the CEO of Savvas Learning Company. “We prepared with that mindset.”

Education Week talked to six publishers—Amplify, Great Minds, Illustrative Mathematics, Match Fishtank, Open Up Resources, and Savvas Learning Company—to understand what this preparation looks like, and what supports schools should ask for. The list spans big companies and smaller startups, for-profit groups and nonprofit open educational resources. Here are some snapshots of what they've done:

### Putting content online

Some companies have created new online interfaces specifically for this moment. Great Minds, for example, developed digital resources for Eureka Math, PhD Science, and Wit & Wisdom (for English/language arts) that adapt core curriculum for blended environments. The materials, called in Sync, come with features like a digital classroom edition, digital classwork, and recorded lessons and read-alouds. Beyond materials, the company is also providing guidance to teachers on how to adapt classroom protocols for a virtual space, said Rachel Stack, the chief academic officer for humanities at Great Minds.

And companies that have long had these blended learning capabilities are adding new features, too. Savvas, which hosts lessons on its learning management system Realize, is building in videos for parents and caregivers that introduce concepts and explain how to use materials. The LMS also offers Google Classroom integration.

Amplify recently started to offer alignment with Google Classroom, which Berger said was a necessity as teachers juggle multiple online programs

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People are gearing up for a long haul of teaching in these new models. It's not, can you hold down the fort in a triage way.”

**LARRY BERGER**  
CEO, AMPLIFY

during distance learning. “It's not okay to make teachers use one platform for Amplify that they use for science, and another platform for a different program they use for math,” he said.

### Identifying priority content and just-in-time supports

All six of these publishers had created guidance to help teachers and schools identify priority standards for this year, and/or areas where teachers may need to shore up unfinished learning from last year so that students can be prepared for grade-level work. For some, this is paired with new assessment tools that show where that unfinished learning is.

“We believe strongly that kids are resilient and capable of engaging in grade-level content, while acknowledging that if there's a specific gap it can derail a lesson,” said Jill Diniz, the chief academic officer for math at Great Minds. The company designed a new tool for Eureka Math, called Equip, that diagnoses where these gaps may be.

“We only assess right before that module: Do you have that knowledge that you need to engage in this grade-level content?” Diniz said. Based on the results, teachers get targeted recommendations for “sprinkled, just-in-time” supports for students.

Amplify ELA has debuted new writing prompts for middle and high school, called Starting Point, which teachers can give at the beginning of the year to get a sense of students' abilities. Each asks students to respond to quotes from literature or pop culture, but they're also an “invitation to write about challenges or different things that you've gone through,” Berger said. If students want to share their experience of the past few months they can, giving teachers another source of information about students' social-emotional health.

And Illustrative Mathematics is developing guidance on how to interpret the results of “cool down” activities—short diagnostic questions that come at the end of each lesson, said William McCallum, the CEO and a professor emeritus of mathematics at the University of Arizona. In some cases, he said, the concepts students need more practice with might come up again in future lessons; in others, it might be important to go back and reteach.

In the Savvas LMS, teachers can create personalized “playlists” of lessons for individual classes and students, using the company's guidance on key concepts at each grade level. Teachers can include lessons designed for different grade levels depending on student needs, said Forsa.

### Creating adaptations for different modalities

Illustrative Math has given teachers guidance on which activities should be done for in-person class or synchronous online time, and which can be done more easily remotely, in an asynchronous environment. Sharing ideas and synthesizing learning—engaging in mathematical discourse—is a priority for in-person time, said McCallum.

The in Sync resources from Great Minds also attempt to preserve some student conversation, even when kids might not be together, said Diniz. Teachers in video lessons encourage students to speak out loud and write down their thoughts, she said.

Amplify has taken some of its in-person assessment online. mCLASS, a foundational reading skills test, is based on observation in the classroom—listening to students identify and blend sounds, said Berger. The company has provided guidance on how this can be done over video conference and created a digital, asynchronous version. “Whatever modality you find yourself in, and especially if it suddenly gets switched in the middle of the year, you have a reliable, valid measure of where kids are,” Berger said. ■

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## Cyberattacks Disrupt Learning Even More During COVID-19

By Alyson Klein

**J**ust two weeks into the school year, the Rialto schools in California had to shut down virtual instruction for a week due to a malware attack.

Designed to disrupt or gain access to a school's network, the malware attack also forced the 25,500-student district to collect—and fix—thousands of school-issued digital devices. Staffers wore masks and gloves as they worked, to protect themselves from potential COVID-19 infection.

Cyberattacks on school districts are nothing new. In fact, there have been nearly a thousand such incidents since January of 2016, according to the K-12 Cybersecurity Research Center.

But, as schools nationwide are engaged in full-time remote instruction or a hybrid of in-person and virtual learning, such attacks are arguably even more disruptive, both to students' educational as well as social and emotional needs.

“I thought to myself, why would somebody do this to students? They are already going through so much,” said Syeda Jafri, a spokeswoman for the Rialto district. She noted that many children in the district had lost a relative to the virus or had someone close to them get very sick. “COVID is disheartening enough for children. It's just one more layer of chaos that could have been eliminated.”

What's more, with so many students taking classes only from home, a cyberattack can have an outsized impact on schooling.

“If a school experiences a cyber incident and even a significant one in normal times, you still have a teacher in the classroom with students,” said Doug Levin, the founder and president of the K-12 Cybersecurity Resource Center. In that scenario, teachers “may not be able to follow their lesson plan, but can still do valuable things with that time. But if a cyber incident occurs in times of remote learning, the loss of that online access stops teaching and learning in its tracks.”

Plus, cyberattacks compound what is already a tense and difficult time for schools. “Everybody is on edge and has very little tolerance for these

sorts of disruptions,” Levin said.

Not only are cyberattacks more troublesome at a time when virtual learning is at its peak, they appear to be on the rise since the beginning of this school year, said Levin, who has been tracking cyberattacks on schools since early 2016.

So far, there have been 220 attacks for the 2020 calendar year, compared with 348 for the full 2019 calendar year. But the start of the school year is bringing a wave of new disruptions, Levin said. “The cyber hackers are back at work,” he said. “Since Aug. 1, I’m seeing a spike for sure.”

This school year, Levin says, there have been, on average, two hacks a day. That’s unusually high, even for the start of a school year, when hacks tend to spike, he added.

### Preparing for Cyberattacks

So how can school districts prepare for the possibility of an attack?

Levin suggested including not just IT staff, but the legal counsel and public relations department in creating a plan for how to handle a cyber-attack. Districts should also know who their law enforcement contacts are, and consider having a cybersecurity firm on retainer that can help with recovery and forensics.

And he suggests that districts advocate for resources to help build up their IT capacity, team up with nonprofits for cyber security monitoring, and partner with other school systems.

Communicating clearly with parents, teachers, and the community is also key, said Patty Mazur, a spokeswoman for the 25,000 student Toledo school district in Ohio, which experienced an attack on Sept. 8, the first day of school. At the time, teachers were working from their classrooms in school buildings, while students were home, online.

The district recognized almost immediately that something was up.

“Around noon, we started hearing from schools that were losing their internet connection,” said Mazur. Some teachers were able to continue instruction using hotspots, but many had to stop teaching.

The district quickly launched a forensic search of its computer system. The pause in learning was relatively short-lived, with classes fully back online about a day and a half later. The district also contacted the FBI, which is looking into the attack, Mazur said.

“It was just one more challenge that COVID-19 has put in our paths for getting ready for the 2020-21 school year,” Mazur said. Her advice to other districts: Put out crisp, accurate information on the problem for the public. “Stay on top of it, be upfront,” and be sure that you have all the facts straight, so that you don’t have to backtrack, she said.



— Getty

### ‘It Is Disheartening’

In Connecticut, the 18,000-student Hartford Public Schools had planned to open on Sept. 8, for both in-person and online instruction. But the district suffered a malware attack that disrupted the system the district uses to communicate transportation routes with its bus company, Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, the district superintendent, told NBC Connecticut. The district’s learning management system wasn’t affected, she said. Hartford was able to resume classes the following day.

Sometimes, students are behind the attacks. That was the case in Miami-Dade, the nation’s fourth largest district, which experienced a spate of technical glitches in its first week of instruction, beginning Aug. 31. A 16-year-old student used an online application to carry out the attacks and has been charged in connection with them, according to a statement from the 345,000-student district.

“It is disheartening that one of our own students has admitted to intentionally causing this kind of disruption,” said Superintendent of Schools Alberto M. Carvalho in a statement.

And in Virginia, the state’s largest system, Fairfax County Schools, was hacked this month. The attackers are asking for a ransom payment. They have threatened to disclose personal information, including student disciplinary records and grades, according to WRC-TV in Washington. The 187,000-student school system is working with law enforcement to resolve the problem.

Smaller districts haven’t been immune from cyberattacks, either. The 7,000-student Haywood school district in North Carolina’s Appa-

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**SYEDA JAFRI**  
SPOKESWOMAN, RIALTO DISTRICT

lachian Mountains, had to pause its all-virtual instruction for a week, due to an attack that is now under federal investigation.

The superintendent, Bill Nolte, suggests that districts make sure their networks are in good shape before an attack happens, since that will make an attack easier to fix. And he urges districts to “call on every available resource”—local, state, and federal—to fix the problem.

“Things happen and the question is: how do you respond?” he asked. ■



E+/Getty

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## Bridging Distance for Learners With Special Needs

By Corey Mitchell

**A**s summer transitions to fall, millions of students began the new school year the same way they ended the last: physically separated from the teachers and staff who are crucial to their academic success.

For English-language learners and students with physical or learning disabilities, the indefinite shift to distance learning poses even more challenges.

Under federal law, these students are eligible for special education services designed to help them succeed in school. But those services are not always easily transferable to distance learning, or even in-person learning with social distancing.

Some special education students have gone months without occupational, physical, and speech therapy services and other supports. In districts that provided virtual therapy, parents were pressed into duty, forced to try to replicate the therapy that trained specialists would normally provide in school.

Many English-learners don't have dependable internet and technology at home, surveys show. Their teachers face a digital divide of their own:

English-learner specialists undergo fewer hours of professional development with digital learning resources than traditional classroom teachers.

Schools must also acknowledge that some students will need both English-learner and special education support services.

After the rocky rollout in the spring, states such as California and Oregon urged schools to prioritize in-person learning for children with disabilities and those learning English when classes resume. If that return is weeks or months away, here are some steps, developed by English-learner and special education advocacy groups, and state departments of education, school districts can take now to connect with their students doing distance learning:

### 1. Listen to families

During the school shutdowns, parents were likely to become even more attuned to the needs of their children. As schools work to determine what students need, they should continue to gather feedback from parents.

Children whose parents are involved in supporting their learning do better in school. That

support becomes even more important when the schooling is happening away from school.

Do not wait for families to ask for help. Reach out to them. Some families will simply not feel comfortable advocating for their children or pushing back against requirements that will not work for them.

For English-learner families, that often means finding a way to overcome language barriers. Roughly 75 percent of the nation's roughly 5 million English-learners are native Spanish speakers. That means that more than a million are not.

Find out what those home languages are and connect families with staff or volunteers from community agencies who can help you communicate. That communication is key to student success and access. Some schools are relying on multilingual staff to connect with English-learner and immigrant families.

During the pandemic, Individualized Education Programs, or IEPs, the carefully constructed legal documents that determine what services students with disabilities are entitled to receive, became imprecise guides.

Some families reported severe learning loss and skill regression while schools were closed during spring and summer. Document the observations and concerns of parents and other caregivers. Let those observations guide revisions to their IEPs—and your instruction plans, if possible.

With classes resuming, some special education administrators are fearful that a deluge of lawsuits from frustrated parents and disability rights advocates will overwhelm schools. That could well happen, but experts recommend focusing on what you can do for families, not what you cannot.

Parents will certainly expect more this fall. Make sure you can explain what your district has done to shore things up. Experts recommend being upfront and direct about what parts of an IEP or 504 plan cannot be met during distance learning. That could pave the way for an extension of what some educators called a "grace period"—the implicit understanding that, with their buildings shut down to slow the spread of coronavirus, schools were doing their best to serve students under trying circumstances.

### 2. Make online learning accessible

Logging onto school-issued devices and district learning platforms was a nightmare for some native English-speaking families in the spring. Imagine how difficult that is for families trying to access tech support in their second or third language.

A nationally representative survey from the

polling firm Latino Decisions conducted on behalf of Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors, a parent-led educational organization, found that 82 percent of Spanish-speaking parents want more technical support with learning websites and apps and 83 percent needed more help navigating distance learning platforms. The Clark County, Nev., schools hosted virtual workshops for parents to help guide them through tutorials on how to use Canvas and Infinite Campus.

But families also may not even have internet access or adequate digital devices to begin with. Another Latino Decisions survey, this one conducted on behalf of Somos, a New York City-based health delivery network, in April, revealed that close to 40 percent of Latino families did not have access to broadband and one-third of Latino families did not have enough computers for their children to use at home during the nationwide school shutdown.

The concerns do not end there, though. A 2019 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that teachers of students learning English were more likely to use general digital education resources, rather than those specifically designed for English-learners.

To overcome those issues and support English-learners during distance learning, WestEd recommends that teachers prioritize live instruction and extra office hours to model language use. In the South Bay Union, Calif., schools, where roughly half of the 7,000 students are English-learners, the district will offer virtual breakout groups for personal instruction for smaller groups of students to encourage more discussion and engagement.

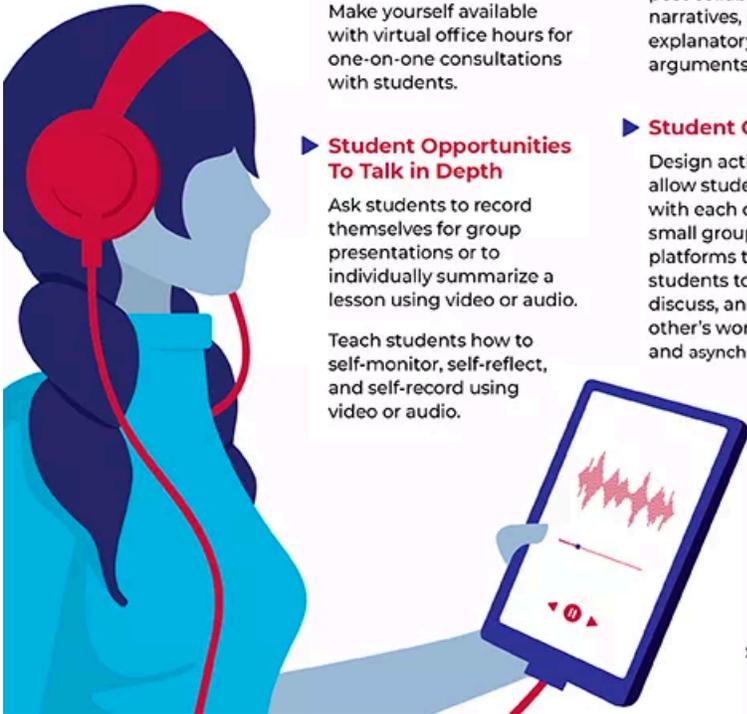
The federal Education Department also devoted pre-COVID 19 research funding to deepen understanding of how students with disabilities learn online.

A 2016 report from the Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities determined that most online learning platforms were “poorly aligned” with the needs of students with disabilities, offered little support beyond rote drills and practice exercises, and often failed to accommodate the needs of students who may struggle to focus or multi-task.

With the new school year underway in many schools, students with disabilities will need more and better instruction than they have received in the past—and the challenges and solutions will be different for each student.

In the spring, disability rights and educational advocacy groups launched EducatingAllLearners.org, a resource hub designed to provide insights and tips on improving remote learning for students with disabilities. The National Center for Learning Disabilities and Understood.org,

## How to Support English-Language Learners In Distance Learning



**► Synchronous Learning Time**  
Use live instruction to provide necessary background knowledge, to model language and processes, and answer questions.  
Make yourself available with virtual office hours for one-on-one consultations with students.

**► Reading and Writing**  
Integrate activities that get students to discuss, argue, and analyze high-quality texts. Allow for students to provide feedback on each other's work and to post collaboratively written narratives, informational/explanatory texts, and arguments.

**► Student Opportunities To Talk in Depth**  
Ask students to record themselves for group presentations or to individually summarize a lesson using video or audio.  
Teach students how to self-monitor, self-reflect, and self-record using video or audio.

**► Student Collaboration**  
Design activities that allow students to engage with each other in pairs or small groups, and select platforms that allow students to comment, discuss, and edit each other's work synchronously and asynchronously.

Icons: Getty  
SOURCE: WestEd

which has published guides about the types of support that students with disabilities may need as school resumes. The organizations belong to the COVID-19 Education Coalition Centering Equity, which produced an equity guide for students with disabilities, English-learners, and other students whose needs may be overlooked or misunderstood as school resumes.

Understood.org has also written extensively about the supports that students with disabilities may need as the school year gets underway.

Part of the challenge lies in ensuring that students have access to appropriate accommodations and assistive technologies, such as text-to-speech software to help students with cognitive- or speech-related disabilities communicate with their teachers or devices that help magnify screen text for students who have impaired vision.

Students with IEPs or 504 plans may need ac-

commodations such as web captions to follow live instruction or tools that allow them to access transcripts or recordings so they can listen and re-listen to teachers as they talk through assignments and lessons.

While many districts are trying to soften the blow of budget cuts on education for students with disabilities, finding money to pay for the accommodations and assistive technologies could prove challenging. In Georgia, the state department of education used \$6 million in funds from the federal coronavirus relief package to help districts cover the costs.

### 3. Focus on co-teaching

The ever-evolving nature of education for students with disabilities and English-learners means that teachers need to collaborate to best serve their students because students do not learn in bubbles.

More than three-fourths of students with disabilities spent most of their day in traditional classrooms with peers who are not eligible for extra supports. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates that children who receive special education services should, whenever possible, be taught alongside students who are not eligible for special education services.

Students in high schools—especially immigrant students—who are still learning English are often enrolled in separate programs. But programs that segregate English-learners in English-only classrooms have fallen out of favor and practice nationally as research has indicated that other instructional models are more effective.

That means that general classroom teachers must communicate with special education and English-as-a-second-language specialists to review and determine what supports students need, and how and when they receive those extra supports. Without the collaboration and extra aid, the struggles that students and teachers slogged through in the spring could re-emerge this fall.

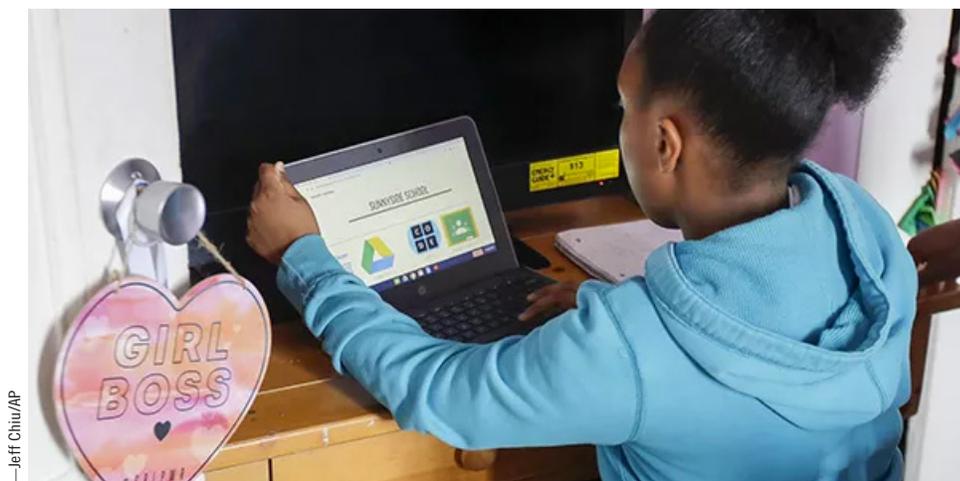
Schools must also acknowledge that some students will need both English-learner and special education support services. English-learner and special education specialists should also communicate with each other to distinguish between English-learners who struggle with the language and those who have learning disabilities.

When students are not in class full-time, it would behoove schools to think of parents as co-educators, too. Until students return to in-person instruction, they are your eyes and ears.

Children whose parents are involved in supporting their learning do better in schools. Research has borne that out time and again. But parental involvement has taken on a new meaning amid the pandemic.

When possible, provide parents with the tools they need to succeed—resources that can help them guide students through virtual therapy, modified math lessons or reading instruction for children with dyslexia.

When school resumes, schools will face a high-stakes test of their ability to serve some of the nation's most vulnerable students. And, without access to technology, the proper support services, and cooperation between educators and families, the students most in need of in-person schooling face an uncertain future. ■



—Jeff Chiu/AP

Sunnyside Elementary School 4th grader Miriam Amacker tackles a school assignment at her home in San Francisco last spring. Experts say many students will likely be transitioning back and forth between remote and in-person instruction this school year.

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## How to Balance In-Person and Remote Instruction

By Mark Lieberman

**T**he Nashville, Tenn., schools made the decision to stick to full-time remote learning when the 2020-21 school year begins. In Bennington, Neb., the school district is planning to open schools for all students five days a week. And the New York City public school district is designing a hybrid model in which students would be in school a few days a week and learning remotely the other days.

Deciding among those three options can be an excruciating decision for school officials. They all have their benefits and drawbacks, and supporters and opponents. And they represent a much different look for the coming school year than what we saw this spring, when virtually all schools were operating remotely.

But the choice many schools appear to be leaning toward is the hybrid model, at least for now. Some will welcome students only four days a week. Others will split students into groups who attend for only part of the day, or on certain days of the week, or on certain weeks of the month. When they are not in school buildings, they will be learning remotely.

Some school and district leaders are leaning toward the hybrid model because they are concerned about the health of students and staff members if buildings reopen, and about the learning loss that can happen in fully remote environments. Many

students will arrive carrying traumatic experiences from the spring and summer, whether dealing with the virus firsthand or feeling the effects of long-term social isolation and academic loss. The cancellation of summative tests and the disruption to the last quarter of the school year has also set back many students from meeting learning objectives and acquiring the knowledge and skills they'll need to advance in their new classes.

These are the conditions that schools will face this fall as they reconfigure operations to meet the new reality and choose the models they think will work best for students and educators.

Here's what experts and educators say an effective hybrid model should emphasize:

### 6 Essentials for In-Person Instruction

#### 1. Identify the students who would benefit most from in-person instruction

- Students in elementary school
- Students who need to work one-on-one with a tutor, assistant, or aide
- Students who lack at-home internet access or suitable digital devices

- Students whose at-home situation or whose family responsibilities for work and child care don't lend themselves to consistent remote learning
- Students learning English as a second language

**2. Devote face-to-face time to technical training for students and teachers**

During the first week or two of in-person instruction, teachers should walk students through the learning management system, class pages, videoconference platforms, and any other tools they might be using when they are learning remotely. Ask students to check whether the digital devices they used at home this spring are still working. Deploy IT teams where needed for troubleshooting and equipment repair.

**3. Partner with local businesses and community organizations**

“Learning can happen anywhere,” said Susan Patrick, CEO of the Aurora Institute, a research and advocacy organization for online and blended learning. Tutors working with students at local churches or libraries can provide supplemental instruction that accounts for limited capacity in school buildings and gives students a sense that learning doesn't stop when they're not physically at school. Local organizations and businesses that are open safely can also provide internet connections for students and teachers who don't have them at home.

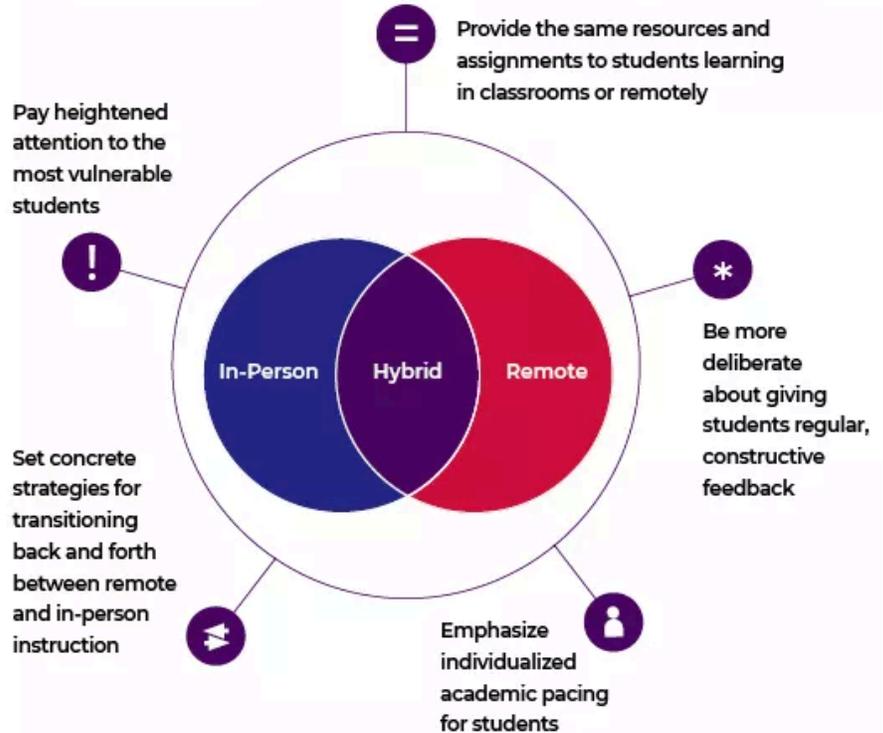
**4. Focus on curriculum components that are most difficult to teach remotely.**

Remember that in-person instruction may stop being an option at some point during the school year due to a resurgence of COVID-19. Identify material ahead of time that's a priority for in-person instruction. Reorient the structure of the course to focus on those in-person priorities.

**5. Provide students with learning tools and supplies to take home**

- “Manipulative” bags for elementary schoolers
  - colored chips for counting
  - base ten blocks
  - dice
  - rulers
  - readers
- School supplies
  - Crayons
  - Mini-whiteboards
  - Graph paper

# The Essentials for Hybrid Learning



SOURCE: Education Week reporting

**6. Do not spend too much time lecturing**

Particularly for teachers who aren't trained in delivering individualized instruction remotely, classroom time should be devoted to interacting with students, asking them questions, and constructing active experiences. This will give teachers an opportunity to get to know the students better and the kids opportunities to get to know each other better, so they can be a source of support for each other when they are learning remotely.

provide guidance and mentorship.

Some schools will send teachers to the school building regardless of whether students are attending. Those teachers will be able to use the tools and Wi-fi in their classrooms, and, in many cases, spread out more than they would at home.

**2. Create a landing page in the learning management system for each course. That page should include:**

- Contact information for teacher and school
- Calendar with office hours, semester schedule, and assignment due dates
- Links to virtual meetings for synchronous instruction and office hours

These pages should look the same across all courses in a school, and ideally in a district.

This summer, the Opelika school district in

**10 Essentials for Remote Learning**

**1. Play to teachers' strengths**

When possible, teachers with expertise in online/remote teaching should be designated to work closely with students who have chosen or been selected to remain at home for the school year. Teachers who are more comfortable with in-person teaching can work with students who are able to come in. Teachers with online expertise can pair up with teachers who need help to

Alabama pulled in 60 K-12 teachers and asked them to design a virtual fourth week of the courses they regularly teach. The school's tech team gave participants parameters for which LMS and software programs to use. When the participants shared their finished work, the tech team identified which virtual classes had the cleanest layout and required the fewest clicks. Those courses will serve as a model for the visual presentation of courses throughout the district.

### 3. Balance high- and low-tech offerings

A 45-minute phone call with each student on a regular weekly schedule may be as effective, if not more so, than regular videoconference calls with large groups of students. Students may be using mobile devices rather than laptops or tablets while working at home, which means learning materials should be presented in digestible chunks whenever possible.

Many online tools can be accessed offline easily by downloading webpages as PDFs and loading files onto hard drives.

### 4. Offer students a variety of pathways to learn

The biggest mistake newcomers to teaching remotely make, experts say, is assuming that students need to be engaged in live instruction 100 percent of the time. What students really need is variety and options, to account for their wide range of preferences and behaviors while learning. To illustrate a concept, educators should think about providing some combination of the following:

- Readings
- Videos
- Diagrams
- Images
- Animations
- Games
- Interactives

Here are some resources to consider for creating those options:

- OER Commons
- CK-12
- Merlot
- MIT Open Courseware
- Open Course Library
- Open Learning Initiative
- CNX
- Florida Virtual Course
- eDynamics

### 5. Encourage interaction among students

Use videoconference meetings to give students an opportunity to see and interact with each

“  
Cybersecurity is a big concern for me because of the increase in remote access into our systems and users possibly logging into accounts and systems from personal devices rather than district owned devices.”

**TERESA REHMAN**  
DIRECTOR OF TECHNOLOGY,  
ROXBURY DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

other. Emphasize the value of teamwork by encouraging students to collaborate or share ideas. Consider videoconferencing with small groups of students at a time rather than an entire class.

### 6. Prioritize helping students develop healthy habits

- Learning how to learn: Find out from students early on what kinds of synchronous and asynchronous supports they prefer. Advise them to be honest about what worked and didn't work remotely in the spring.
- Self-regulation: Clearly communicate assignments to students and be explicit about when and how they're due. Emphasize activities that encourage students to develop questions or explore areas of curiosity.
- Goal-setting: Encourage students at the start of each week to establish clear, measurable, and attainable goals. Check in with them periodically to ensure they're making progress, and offer help to students who are struggling.

### 7. Ask teachers what they need, such as:

- Microphones and headsets for effective videoconferencing

- Internet access (at home or in an alternative location)
- Camera for video recording
- Access to the school building/classroom (if safe and legally permitted)
- Mini-whiteboard and markers

### 8. Take things slow, master the technologies first

Don't rush into teaching the curriculum before students are fully acquainted with the technology they'll need to use. Focus on introducing one tool to them at a time, making sure they understand it and then moving on to the next one.

And consider chunking lesson planning into weeks rather than days. It will be difficult to ensure daily that every student is progressing through the learning material at the same pace, but setting weekly goals will help account for different approaches students will take to completing assignments and gaining knowledge.

### 9. Ensure contracts with education and technology companies protect students' data

Some schools entered into rapid agreements with tech companies this spring, bypassing some of the more elongated contract negotiations they'd typically do. That opened the door for some major data privacy concerns.

Designate a privacy expert for your school or district if you don't have one already. A few questions that person should help schools ask about technologies that will be used by teachers and students this fall:

- What was the goal for using it this spring and is it really needed for the coming school year?
- Did the technology meet that goal, and will that goal be the same in 2020-21?
- Does the tool meet the school's privacy and security standards under normal circumstances?

### 10. Strengthen cybersecurity protections

Cyberattacks against schools have been on the rise for years prior to the pandemic, and widespread remote learning only heightens the risk. Teachers and students are accessing the school network from a wider variety of devices than ever before, offering hackers more opportunities to infiltrate the system. When teachers use tech tools that haven't been officially sanctioned by the district, they risk the possibility of

their account information, or students' information, getting stolen.

"Cybersecurity is a big concern for me because of the increase in remote access into our systems and users possibly logging into accounts and systems from personal devices rather than district owned devices," said Teresa Rehman, director of technology for the Roxbury district in New Jersey.

Cybersecurity priorities should include:

- Installing:
  - Intrusion prevention/detection
  - Malware scanning
  - Secure access control
- Implementing two-factor authentication for logins
- Instructing students and parents to avoid accessing school materials on personal devices when possible
- Training teachers to be judicious and proactive when opening emails and detecting cybersecurity threats
- Consulting organizations like the Consortium for School Networking, Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center, and the K-12 Cybersecurity Resource Center ■

Published on October 5, 2020, in Education Week

## Teacher Tips: How to Reduce Screen Time When School Is Online

By Catherine Gewertz

**L**ike a long shadow sweeping the country, the coronavirus has transformed K-12 schooling, forcing millions of students to learn from home, parked in front of computers for many hours each week. And that's triggered new concerns about how much time kids are spending looking at screens.

Santhana Pierre's daily schedule offers a glimpse of many students' new realities. The 10th grader opted for the all-remote option at her school, Pathways College Preparatory in St. Albans, N.Y. She's on her laptop in her bedroom or on the living room couch pretty much constantly for the school's entire day, which runs from 8:30 a.m. to 1:39 p.m. After a quick break, she goes back to the screen to start her homework.

"I hate it. It gets me so tired," she said. "I never really leave the screen all day except for lunch break. I wish we had more assignments that were off the screen."

How much time kids spend with digital screens is hardly a new concern. Adults have worried about it for years, mindful of research showing that excessive time using computer screens or watching TV is linked to eye strain, trouble sleeping, and other difficulties. The American Academy of Pediatrics urges parents to set consistent limits on screen time, but doesn't specify maximum time parameters for children 5 to 18.



### Screen Time 'On Steroids'

But now, when the pandemic has shuttered many school buildings, children are adding dozens of hours of screen time each week as they learn remotely. A massive review of research on screen time, landing in the journal *JAMA Pediatrics* just as schools closed down in March, was a tart reminder of the risks that were about to escalate.

"The same screen-time issues we faced before COVID, now we're facing them on steroids," said Seth Evans, who leads the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood's work on digital devices in schools.

Off-screen learning is particularly important when there are still so many students who don't have regular or sufficient access to devices and the internet, said Michael Barbour, an associate professor of education at Touro University California who specializes in virtual learning.

"Regardless of whether screen time is good or bad for kids, strictly from an equity perspective, teachers should be thinking about how they can deliver instruction in ways that don't involve a screen," he said.

But these concerns are colliding with reality.

“  
The same screen-time issues we faced before COVID, now we're facing them on steroids.”

**SETH EVANS**

THE CAMPAIGN FOR A COMMERCIAL-FREE CHILDHOOD

Many teachers trying to manage their students'—and their own—screen use are caught in a bind if their districts require hefty doses of logged-on school time.

“So much of what the kids do, even when they are with me, is on the computer,” said Shannon Guevarez, who teaches 4th grade at South Hanover Elementary School in Hershey, Pa., where students come to school some days and learn from home on others. “They need some opportunities to just close their screens sometimes.”

### Taking a Don't-Stress Approach

While some experts urge teachers to pay special attention to creating assignments that take children away from their computer screens, others are urging compassion and flexibility.

Erin Wilkey Oh creates online media resources for teachers at Common Sense Education, which has long studied children's digital habits and cautioned against excessive screen time. The organization's most recent survey, in 2019, showed that children 8 to 12 years old averaged nearly five hours a day using screens recreationally—TV, videos, gaming, social media, video chatting. Teenagers averaged more than seven hours daily. Computer-based schoolwork added only another 20 minutes for the tweens and an hour for teenagers, amounts that are surely soaring now with remote and hybrid learning.

Nonetheless, Oh urged teachers not to stress themselves out too much over screen time right now.

“We've never faced this before, and there are bigger concerns,” like equal access to remote instruction, Oh said. Teachers are already struggling to manage district mandates on remote instruction time, and they're worried about students who aren't connecting. “I'm awed by how they're stepping up. I wouldn't want to put more burdens on them right now,” Oh said.

Education Week asked teachers and remote learning experts for easy, low-stress ways to find a healthy balance of on-screen and off-screen time for their students.

**Remember that not all screen time is equal.** Quality, not just quantity, matters. An hour online discussing *Song of Solomon* with a teacher and other students is not the same as an hour alone in a basement playing *Mortal Kombat*. Active engagement matters, too. Experts urge teachers to choose lively games or discussions rather than lecture, for instance. And in these times of isolation, screen time that lets students make good connections with their teachers and peers is important, too.

**Don't let tech blind you.** Guevarez, the Hershey, Pa., teacher, said that teachers can

“  
Regardless of whether screen time is good or bad for kids, strictly from an equity perspective, teachers should be thinking about how they can deliver instruction in ways that don't involve a screen.”

**MICHAEL BARBOUR**

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION,  
TOURO UNIVERSITY, CALIFORNIA

sometimes let “the technology block our vision a little bit.” They feel surrounded by teachers trying new technologies, and think they should, too, but they forget all the things they know that don't have to do with the new technology.

Teachers are also putting a lot of pressure on themselves to be “within reach” all day, in part because they miss their kids, said Christine Pinto, who teaches kindergarten in Arcadia, Calif.

**Think learning goal first, format second.** Jessica Twomey, a Long Valley, N.J., kindergarten teacher who works with Pinto to design offline activities for teachers in a project called “Innovating Play,” encourages teachers to put technology second when thinking about remote instruction. “Think first about your learning goal,” she said. “What experience do you want to provide? And then consider your options. The screen is only one option.”

**Choice boards can play a new role.** These grid-shaped sets of instructional activities have been around a long time; some know them as learning menus. During the pandemic, they're getting renewed attention not only for including

offline instructional ideas, but for giving students agency in a world that feels out of control. Teachers are creating and sharing their own versions on social media.

Catlin Tucker, a former teacher and the best-selling author of books on blended learning, was so concerned about heavy screen time during the coronavirus that she created free choice boards with activities designed to take elementary and middle school students off their screens and help them get active, like doing math with pieces of pasta, or drawing a comic strip based on a newspaper article. (There are wellness boards to help teachers take breaks from the screen, too.)

**Carve out non-screen time, even during live sessions.** Some teachers divide online classes into chunks, with time to introduce a new topic, time away from the screen to work on it, and then a regroup for questions and reflections at the end. Maria DeRosia, who teaches 5th grade in Ann Arbor, Mich., said her students are supposed to leave their Zoom on from 8:10 a.m. to 3:13 p.m. daily, but she directs them away from the screen periodically to work on assignments. She remains online, within reach if they have questions.

**Remember the old-fashioned stuff.** Asking kids to use pencils or pens with notebooks, work with manipulatives, or read books or articles made of paper can give them a break from their screens. Students in hybrid models can pick those materials up on in-school days, but schools doing all-remote learning would have to manage curbside pickups or driveway deliveries, which isn't always feasible. A new whitepaper from the Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood urges schools to use printed materials and handwritten homework whenever possible.

**Consider listening.** Audiobooks, podcasts, and recorded read-alouds are getting renewed attention as teachers try to break up their students' pixel-gazing time. Lately, Guevarez has been using “The Imagine Neighborhood,” a story podcast designed to help students deal with emotions sparked by the pandemic. When the children are at home, they can listen while they relax on the couch or take a walk. When they're in the classroom with her, she plays the episode through a sound projector and the kids sit quietly or color while they listen. Teachers at her elementary school also like “TinkerCast” and “Brains On!” for science, and “Forever Ago” and “The Past and the Curious” for social studies. They've also recorded social studies read-alouds from Joy Hakim's *The History of Us*.

**Don't forget the power of handwriting.** Barry Frank, an English teacher and coach at Queens School of Inquiry in Flushing, N.Y., said he is having his students keep handwritten notebooks throughout the year. They'll also

be sketchnoting on paper, rather than taking notes in a Word document, during some lectures and videos. Students will submit their notes by taking pictures and sending them electronically. Frank has nothing against technology; he's the tech coordinator for his school. "I love it, but we have to find a balance," he said.

#### Harness the power of hands-on learn-

ing. Most experts said that now is a great time to use hands-on and project-based learning. Learning fractions by cooking a recipe or exploring nature and writing about it can get children off their computer screens while they master academic standards. DeRosia creates new choice boards, each with 25 activities students can choose from, every Wednesday. They always include off-screen

options, such as building a catapult out of household materials. Experts said there are many projects students can do, both at home and in their communities, that can be carried out masked and socially distant, from gardening to documenting images of a COVID-19 world. ■



## OPINION

Published on August 12, 2020, in Education Week's Ask a Psychologist Blog

# Making Distance Learning Vibrant: Student Agency Is Key

By Anindya Kundu

**M**y students come from diverse backgrounds. How can I inspire them to take learning into their own hands?

Last year, I toured several school districts across the country to discuss how to foster student agency—the influence kids have over their own lives, reflected in their ability to find resources and navigate challenges. In other words, we talked about how to help students help themselves.

Luckily, many of the lessons apply equally well in the classroom or in distance learning. Here are some of the main takeaways:

Be open to recognizing different kinds of giftedness. Intelligences are multiple, and teachers can help kids recognize their own strengths.

In my book, one of the stories I share is of J-Stud to illustrate how agency can blossom. A Black student from a low-income neighborhood in Queens, J-Stud had individualized education programs (IEPs) into high school. Every day, he sat in the back of his classes and scribbled away in a notebook, seldom looking up. Eventually, his English teacher asked to see what he was writing, and he revealed pages and pages of rap lyrics, beautiful in prose and literacy.

She seized the opportunity and offered him a deal: "Keep showing up to class, do the homework, and I'll help you record your music at a studio my friend works at so you can put out a CD." J-Stud immediately complied; his teacher noticing his talent inspired him to work harder not only on music but also on schoolwork.

Encourage students to seek help and build

their own networks. At the studio, J-Stud met mentors who showed him the financial side of the business and even invited him back for summer internships in accounting, a type of responsibility he never had been given before. This set off a chain of life events that culminated in J-Stud working at finance internships during college to pay for his degree.

While you may not have access to a recording studio, you can allow students to explore their passions and connect with others who are like-minded. One initial interest can branch off into other productive avenues if stimulated. In distance learning, this might mean letting students pick their own topics of exploration, to ask their own questions, and then find answers independently. If and when they get stuck, pose the question, "Who is someone who might be able to help you, and how can you reach out to them?"

Create "standing ovation moments." In English class, J-Stud performed a song for his classmates and received a standing ovation, one of the most memorable experiences of his life. You can create similar moments for students by allowing them to share online what they're excited about with each other. Celebrating their skills and competencies encourages them to collaborate and explore new questions together.

Though support is harder to provide from a distance, this crisis presents us an opportunity to remember that not all learning takes place inside school walls. Learning also happens in the recording studio, kitchen, or park.

Today, 15 years later, J-Stud is a successful investment banker who still lives in Queens. He does so to set a good example for the kids in his neighborhood—the kind he wishes he had more of growing up, before his English teacher changed his life. That's the lasting power of student agency. ■

*Anindya Kundu is the author of The Power of Student Agency: Looking Beyond Grit to Close the Opportunity Gap and a sociologist at the Graduate Center, CUNY LMIS. His work has appeared in NPR Education and MSNBC, and he has given two TED Talks, each with millions of views.*



## Teamwork at Scale: How Miami-Dade County Prepared for Remote Learning Amid the Pandemic

### Customer

[Miami-Dade County Public Schools](#)

August 25, 2020

### Products and Services

[Microsoft Intune](#)  
[Microsoft Teams](#)  
[Office 365](#)  
[Windows 10](#)

### Industry

[K-12](#)

### Organization Size

[Corporate \(10,000+ employees\)](#)

### Country

[United States](#)

Miami-Dade is Florida's largest county, home for nearly 3 million residents, spread across the socioeconomic spectrum. Home to over 345,000 students, almost 400 different schools, staffed by over 40,000 employees, Miami-Dade County Public Schools provides education to the same 2,000 square miles of diverse and vibrant communities that make up Southern Florida. It is, to put it simply, big.

When the pandemic reached Florida, the district faced a unique challenge because of the sheer scale of what was required to convert everyday classroom activity into a new normal of remote learning. Thanks to the district's Digital Convergence initiative, and its use of Microsoft education solutions, Miami-Dade County Public Schools has pulled something amazing out of what some might have once thought impossible.

## Making it happen for devices and connectivity

The Digital Convergence initiative, pioneered by the county's assistant superintendent in Innovation and School Choice Dr. Sylvia Diaz, allowed the county to integrate increasing amounts of technology methodically and effectively into the classroom. This baseline allowed students and educators to become increasingly attuned to how technological learning works, both in general, and in the classroom.

Once the time came, then, to close the county's schools, this earlier groundwork empowered Dr. Diaz, the teachers, and the school district to commit to a remote learning transition that would ultimately maximize the learning experience of each student.

This was never going to be an easy task. The scale and disparity in student access to resources created an initial roadblock to the county's transition. An initial survey of parents (with respondents totaling 208,000 families) showed that 42,000 children required a device for remote learning, with another 28,000 requiring internet access. For most other counties, the volume of students who required equipment would have torpedoed any hope of a successful remote learning transition.

Miami-Dade's long-term planning, however, helped catalyze its ability to scale fast. Miami-Dade was able to build on its partnership with the 1Million Project (which had already provided around 11,000 students with smartphones to use as hotspots) to ensure students had access to the Internet. A check-out system was established for distributing mobile devices, and in the first four days an astounding 40,000 devices were delivered. Today that number has scaled to 116,000.

## Microsoft Teams to the rescue

Not only did the district's foresight allow sufficient devices to be handed out, but it also meant it had already set-up important programs needed to promote effective remote learning; the most important of which was Microsoft's Teams platform. Teams is a communication and collaboration platform which allows students and teachers to hold virtual meetings, submit assignments, and work collaboratively through lesson plans. The district was able to effectively utilize Teams by working with Microsoft to create short, easy to understand video workshops for students and teachers.

As Dr. Leo Rabinovich, Executive Director at the Department of Instructional Technology, explained, "We released two online workshops for Teams. One was created by Microsoft. Another one that we custom built with Microsoft right before spring break." These workshops allowed teachers to begin thinking about how a remote learning curriculum might be structured, with an emphasis on utilizing the unique features present in the Teams platform. Ultimately, this pre-pandemic collaboration with Microsoft allowed Miami-Dade, in Dr. Rabinovich's estimation, to "have better outcomes, from teachers enjoying the comfort of teaching online and students having good learning experiences via blended or distance learning."

## Learning from afar

Of course, the speed of the pandemic and the size of Miami-Dade County meant the transition was not entirely seamless. With over 20,000 teachers in the district, many of whom had long careers of more conventional classroom-based education, any transition was going to involve a steep learning curve. Fortunately, the software and planning were such that teachers could embrace the challenge. Yolanda Miranda, Middle School Science Educator, expressed a commonly held sentiment among teachers in the district: "I can tell you that in 21 years of teaching, I have learned more in the last 11 weeks than I ever would have imagined I could."

These new remote learning tools have also helped improve teaching outcomes for students. Unlike a traditional classroom setting, conducting work through Teams greatly increases the ability for a teacher to provide feedback on a student's work. Yolanda notes that with Teams she can "give the feedback right there, and the kids get to see it right away. Sometimes in the classroom we receive student work, we grade it, it goes in the file, and the kids do not always get it back. Now they do."

This allows for students and teachers to use Teams to engage in more meaningful conversations about their work. Students receive educator comments, they adjust their work, they resubmit, they receive more comments, and so on. Having this collaborative experience gives students a chance to see their mistakes and correct them, in a way that seemed infeasible before the district's use of remote learning tools.

Yolanda believes this is one of things that makes Microsoft's platform an inevitable part of the district's future curriculums, noting: "A lot of teachers plan to continue using Teams once the school year starts. As more teachers utilize the platform, they are discovering new and innovative ways to teach their students. Even after COVID-19, these new teaching techniques will positively impact our student's learning experience."

Another area where Microsoft's platform was able to help the county was with cyber-security. Miami-Dade closely monitored the situation in Fairfax, Virginia where the county's reliance on Google's G-Chat function led to large increase in cyber bullying. Paul Smith, Administrative Director of Network, Cyber Security and Technical Services, was very proud of the preemptive actions taken by the district under Microsoft's tutelage. They were able to, he notes, "put measures in place where within, for example, the Teams apps and these chat apps, we will only turn on things that have been vetted by the district."

In fact, Paul explains why these safeguards were a main reason they choose to use Microsoft's platform: "Microsoft inherently has a lot of authorization hierarchies built into the tools and we're pretty familiar with them." Creating systems with such safety precautions allowed the school district to continue its scale up of remote learning without ever jeopardizing the safety of its students and teachers.

### [A remote learning success story](#)

Stay-at-home requirements have radically altered how schools approach educating their students. For many schools, managing that tradition has proven extremely difficult, often to the detriment of their students' learning experience. Thankfully, Miami-Dade's measured, thought-out, and broad-ranging approach to remote learning has made the transition smoother than anyone could have imagined. Sufficient devices were ready for distribution and nearly all students had the capacity to utilize those devices for remote learning—thanks to the Microsoft Education platform and the efforts of Miami-Dade County Public Schools' staff.

Faced with such an extreme challenge, Dr. Diaz never considered doing less than what they did with the academic calendar they had left. "The transition from brick and mortar to remote instruction required content, tools, and special support for teachers and students. Even when you have everything you need, putting them together in a way that allows you to deliver meaningful instruction and robust learning opportunities was challenging." The early adoption and use of remote learning tools, and the deployment of Microsoft Teams to connect students with teachers, has enabled Miami-Dade to navigate this crisis with a level of success despite the magnitude of the challenge.

[View the story online at:](#)  
<http://aka.ms/TeamsatMiami>

## OPINION

Published on August 21, 2020, in Education Week's Classroom Q&A Blog with Larry Ferlazzo

## What Does Blended Learning Look Like in a Distance Learning Environment?

By Larry Ferlazzo

**E**lements of successful blended learning  
 “Blended learning” has typically meant combining instruction in the physical classroom with asynchronous instruction online with videos or interactive tools.

In this era of distance learning, it could still have that same meaning in hybrid environments where students are spending part of the time at the physical school and other hours working online at home.

But it can also mean, like in my situation, where we are spending part of the time in live video-conference classes and students do “on-demand” activities online at other times.

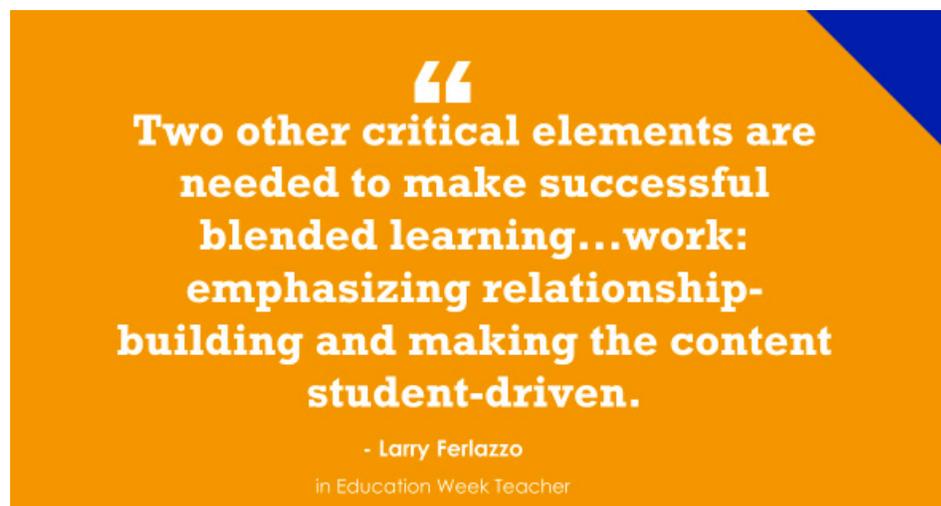
I was somewhat successful in the spring’s distance learning (if you define successful as having most students participate—in terms of learning, I think we managed more of a “holding pattern” and not much of a gain).

I hope to define “successful” this year by having most students participate and also learn new skills and knowledge.

Toward those two ends, here are the perspectives that will guide my work:

\* Emphasize online student cooperation in asynchronous time by having group projects like jigsaws, presentations to demonstrate learning, creating timelines, etc. In other words, reducing the amount of individual student work and increasing the amount of time that students can work with their classmates on learning together through the use of collaborative tools like Google Slides, Google Docs, and Padlet, and then subsequently present their creations in small breakout rooms or full class virtual gallery walks. “Relatedness” is a key element of intrinsic motivation, and student motivation is going to be the name of the game this year.

\* Since recent research, and teacher experience, shows that a majority of students find answers to homework via tech instead of using retrieval practice to come up with their own responses, I plan on emphasizing to students that the number of answers they have correct on any asynchronous reinforcing work will have no impact on grades. In fact, I will be more impressed with seeing some errors! What’s more impor-



tant is that they actually do the “homework” so it can be a helpful form of formative assessment to inform my future teaching and their future learning.

\* Since it may be a challenge for some students to change their mindset to one where they are OK showing mistakes, I will also be applying other forms of formative assessment, including student self-assessment and peer assessment.

\* Because so many of our high school students are spending at least 20 hours each week either caring for younger siblings or working at a job to help support their family during the recession, I plan on keeping the total amount of work for my class (including live Zoom sessions) to five or six hours each week.

\* I am going to keep the number of online tools to a minimum and be focused on ones that are very simple and versatile. In addition to Zoom, Google Docs (I recently was thrilled to learn how easy it is for students to collectively annotate PDFs in it), Google Slides, Brainpop, Nearpod, and Padlet should easily handle any and all interactive learning activities we’ll be doing this year.

\* Of course, two other critical elements are needed to make successful blended learning—and just about any kind of learning—work emphasizing relationship-building and making the content student-driven (as much as possible). Relevance is another element needed for intrinsic motivation: Will students see what is being taught as relevant to their interests and hopes and dreams?

### The flipped classroom

*Dr. Alva Lefevre has been a language teacher, administrator, university professor, and teacher trainer for almost 40 years. She is passionate about working with English-learners and finding ways to apply educational research to the classroom. In her spare time, Alva enjoys traveling, gardening, and art.*

*Laurie Manville is an ELD/AVID Excel teacher and ed-tech virtual tech team coach at Brookhurst Junior High, as well as a 7th grade ELA teacher with Cambridge Virtual Academy both in the Anaheim Union High School District in California. She enjoys helping her students figure out what they are meant to do in life and guiding teachers in lesson-design creation. In her free time, you will find her backstage (or near a stage) assisting with line memorization, costumes or concessions, analyzing a screenplay, or at home journaling or mastering PiYo.*

So what is blended learning? It is a model of delivery of instruction combining classroom and online education, enhanced by synchronous and asynchronous learning. It has been around for many years, but the trend has propelled it forward by the reality of our technology-immersed lifestyles and the exigencies of a pandemic. In addition, blended learning is the natural next step in more individualized education.

Originally, the idea of the flipped classroom appealed to me because it was the merger of constructivist learning with direct instruction and it caters to each of the three distinct roles in con-

structivism: the active learner, the social learner, and the creative learner. Flipping my classroom could allow all three to flourish.

During discussions, students take an active role instead of just listening to a lecture and taking notes or reading the textbook and answering questions. Through the constant interaction of the constructivist approach, students discuss ideas, debate hypotheses, investigate and design and work on projects that are meaningful to them. The collaborative activities bring into play the social learner. Knowledge and understanding are constructed through dialogue with others and through the application to real-life scenarios. Finally, as creative learners, students take what they have learned from all avenues and apply it to a real-life situation or problem. This engages them in a discovery process and yields deeper understanding as they learn to make connections between what they learned and their “real” environment. It’s one way of engaging learners in an active problem-solving exercise that connects the knowledge they are acquiring with a real-world application.

The flipped classroom has many positives and a few challenges. Starting with the good stuff, blended learning fosters an environment where students take responsibility for their own learning. They can work at their own pace and review the original materials as often as they need since the content is archived for easy retrieval. For differentiation, students who are more familiar with the content can go through the direct instruction at a faster pace while those who are not native speakers of English, for example, can take their time and look up words they don’t understand or check other resources for explanations of concepts. Blended learning also raises the level of engagement because it allows activities to be personalized and provides time for clarification and idea exchange. Finally, students do not fall behind if absent.

There are also challenges to blended instruction. Some are external, such as the level of technology or internet connection/bandwidth available to teachers and students. Others are internal, such as changing our perception of how and why we do things in a certain way.

The most difficult thing for us to do was to let go of control. We needed to trust that our students would do what was necessary in order to actively participate and focus, and we needed to take advantage of every face-to-face moment to prepare them for the next step. But we also had to be realistic. That required providing a means of participating in activities while some students were catching up. One excellent way to do that was through collaborative groups. That means students holding each other accountable in ways that teachers never can (peer pressure).

Another challenge is the huge time invest-



ment involved in creating either a fully online class or a hybrid class. More now than ever we cannot do teaching alone. In online teaching, our lessons need to be frontloaded with screen-casts or videos, discussion-board questions, slide decks for real-time synchronous teaching, and slide decks for independent student learning.

Splitting up the online workload is crucial. We did this when we worked with colleagues in a summer enrichment course, designating a lead designer for each week. We kept track of synchronous and asynchronous components by sharing a lesson template, which included standards, essential questions, and discussion-board questions. The nonlead designer teammates collaborated on the off weeks by helping create shared synchronous slide decks. They also split up the daily emails and follow-up announcements for students, interns, and tutors on our teams. The same could be done by grade-level teams in the fall.

### “The station-rotation model”

*Luisa Palacio is an ESL and Spanish teacher from Colombia with 19 years of teaching experience. Luisa holds a bachelor’s degree in modern languages: English and French, and an M.A. in TESOL from Greensboro College. Currently, she teaches K-12 at Northampton County schools, in North Carolina, and Spanish with South Carolina Virtual Education:*

Blended learning is combining e-learning with traditional pedagogical classrooms methods. We are not leaving all the strategies used in a “traditional” classroom setting behind; what we are doing is combining all those strategies and methodologies with the tools we have available now thanks to technology.

I enjoy blended learning when I use it through the station-rotation model, which, as defined by C. Christensen (2015), is “a course or subject in

which students rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher’s discretion between learning modalities, at least one of which is online learning.” In the ESL classroom, I choose to have my stations either by domain, subject area, or learning target. I communicate with content teachers to see which standards they are covering at the time and I create my stations in such a way that students practice academic language specific to those standards. In the stations, students can be led by the teacher, collaborate in small groups, do online research, or design and create. There can be games, role play, or practice activities that allow students to get familiar with the academic vocabulary so when they go to their content teacher, they can make connections between the new content and what they learned in the ESL classroom.

One of the greatest advantages of incorporating technology is that it eases communication, even when several languages are spoken in one classroom. Students might be familiar with technology, but we have to guide them on how to effectively use academic tools to improve learning. It is important to keep in mind that we can provide students with all the technological devices there are, but we gain nothing if we do not teach them how to use them. Students need guidance and structure.

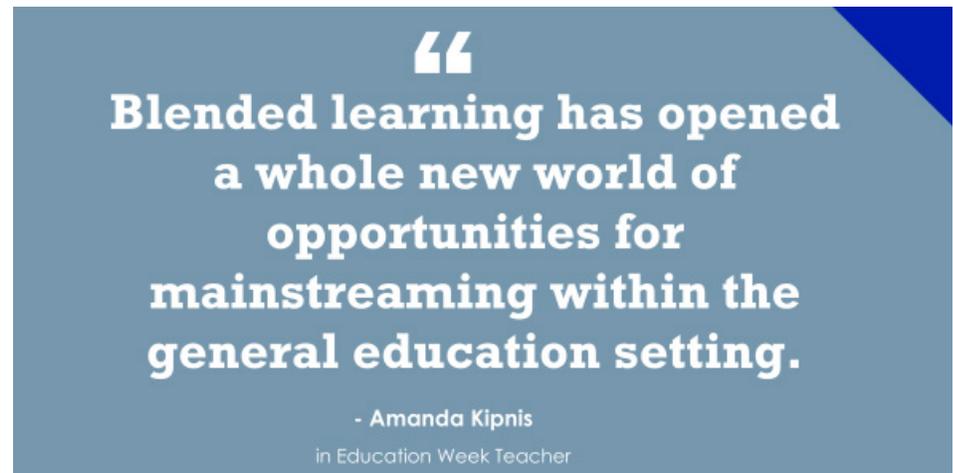
### Blended learning and students with moderate to severe disabilities

*Amanda Kipnis is a passionate educator who teaches a 3rd-5th grade special day class for students with moderate to severe disabilities in Lemon Grove, Calif. She enjoys finding new ways to incorporate social-emotional learning into curriculum and spends her little free time coaching softball & Girls on the Run. Amanda was named to the 2020 class of Curriculum Associates Extraordinary Educators:*

Blended learning simply means blending the

digital world with the face-to-face world. But there's nothing simple about it. Blended learning is one of the few ways in our scripted curricula world to let teachers' creativity shine. As a teacher of students with moderate to severe disabilities, I was hesitant to try this model. Could my students access academic technology? Would they be motivated to do so? Is it reasonable to expect them to learn via independent learning?

The answer to these questions and more is YES! Blended learning has forever changed the way my classroom runs. There are two primary ways this method has revolutionized my teaching. First, it allows me to break my students into smaller groups to further differentiate my instruction to their unique learning styles. This doesn't happen overnight. The beginning of the year is busy with explicitly teaching the students how to log in, what to access, and how long to access it for. Once in, online curriculum "automatically" differentiates instruction to my students' individual needs. For example, many of my students receive instruction at a higher level in sight words than they do in comprehension. This is especially true for students with autism spectrum disorder who often have difficulties with language and/or auditory processing. As an added bonus, the online programs tend to increase academic vocabulary, preventing us from unintentionally "dumbing it down" to our students' level. For example, I never thought I'd be teaching acute and obtuse angles to students still learning to count to 20. But online curriculum provides us the opportunity to analyze performance on



individual content standards, thus pushing me to push them forward.

In addition to smaller work groups, blended learning has opened a whole new world of opportunities for mainstreaming within the general education setting. Traditionally, many students with more severe disabilities have very limited access to a general education setting. Are lunch, recess, PE, and library really the best we can do? Not with online instruction! Armed with a Chromebook, my 5th grade student can proudly walk to “his” (general ed) class and blend in with his peers. An outside observer would see that all students using Chromebooks are engaged in the same program, with the same characters. But my student may be working on kindergarten standards while the child next to him is working on grade-level standards.

After a while, many of my students are even able to mainstream independently, without the conspicuous teacher's aide standing at their side. I knew online instruction would be engaging and interactive. I knew it would provide intense, comprehensive data. However, I never predicted the influence it would have on children's self-esteem and ability to work independently. So what is blended learning? A game changer. ■

*Larry Ferlazzo is an award-winning English and Social Studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif., Larry Ferlazzo is the author of Helping Students Motivate Themselves: Practical Answers To Classroom Challenges, The ESL/ELL Teacher's Survival Guide, and Building Parent Engagement In Schools.*

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