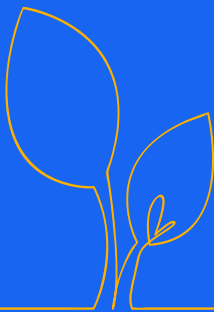


Flexible learning preparedness as a path for school districts to maximize academic growth





How might school districts
prepare to transition
between in-person
and remote learning
environments in a way that
maximizes academic growth
for all students?



“

We are many months into physical school closures and it is increasingly clear that the closures--or some variant--may continue through this entire school year and into next school year.

Without a clear view of what distance or hybrid learning looks like and how to do it well using accessible tools, teachers are left to fend for themselves. In the spring of 2020, we saw that a lack of time to prepare led to massive inconsistencies in implementation with large groups of students getting little to no learning.

We risk a situation where many students experience little to no learning over a 18 to 24 month period. This will disproportionately impact low-income communities. To not lose a generation of learners, it is essential that education leaders have a clear view of best practices that can be adapted to individual district's strengths and needs. That is the purpose of this report.

”



Sal Khan

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Introduction

As we write the flexible learning preparedness index booklet—this guide—in late July 2020, school districts across the United States face a range of wrenching decisions amid unprecedented levels of uncertainty.

Significant learning loss is predicted due to the closure of schools caused by COVID-19. One prominent study estimates that—when students resume school in the fall of 2020—they will do so nearly a full year behind in math¹. Under-resourced communities are disproportionately affected and may suffer the most drastic academic impact.

Our country is simultaneously experiencing health, economic, and educational trauma. And, though the crisis is not yet over, the leaders of more than 13,000 school districts in every city and town across the country are facing tremendous pressure from their communities to provide clear, definitive plans for how schools will function in the fall. Health and education are both essential needs in society, and yet school administrators are being forced to weigh one against the other.



Measuring the risk of reopening against the safety of their communities, many districts—including several of the largest districts in the country—will continue full-time remote learning throughout this fall. Another set of districts, seeking to balance the benefits of in-person learning with safety concerns, have released hybrid models in which some or all students may attend in-person school for part of the week and online learning for another part of the week. A final set of districts, mainly smaller districts or those in regions with low prevalence of COVID-19, are planning to resume in-person learning full time.

Remote, hybrid, or in person? Regardless of a district's initial back-to-school approach, the reality is that all these plans will almost certainly change throughout the 2020-2021 school year.



1- https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/05/Collaborative-Brief_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf

No one—*no one*—knows for certain the future course of COVID-19 in the United States. The most effective school districts in the coming years will be equipped to navigate sudden changes to in-person learning quickly and confidently.

We call this **flexible learning preparedness**, and the goal of this booklet is to chart a roadmap for this preparedness in the months and years ahead. Flexible learning, as used throughout this guide, is defined as a district's ability to transition between in-person, hybrid, and remote learning environments in a way that maximizes academic growth for all students.

Throughout this guide, we will examine flexible learning preparedness across seven dimensions:



Communications



Family engagement



Digital access



Professional development



Instruction, curricular resources, platforms, and data



Support for special populations



Mental health

While the flexible learning preparedness index focuses on the seven dimensions outlined above, it is important to acknowledge that this index does not include the various health, safety and financial considerations that are also critical to flexible learning success. When planning for flexible learning, we recommend following all recommended health and safety guidelines for your state as well as engaging your district's financial team to develop and implement improvement initiatives across the seven dimensions.

In developing the flexible learning preparedness index, we conducted nearly 100 interviews and surveyed over 1,000 school district administrators, families, and teachers. The insights from those individuals form the backbone of this guide's recommendations.

Providing a high-quality education in a predictable, in-person setting is already a complex and difficult task. The uncertainty and limitations on space and time imposed by COVID-19 have magnified these existing education challenges. By making improvements across each of the key dimensions of flexible learning preparedness, school districts can ensure they are prepared to meet student needs despite potential interruptions to in-person learning. The educational benefits will accrue for years to come.

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Methodology

This guide and its accompanying flexible learning preparedness index were developed through extensive qualitative and quantitative research and engagement with diverse stakeholders who brought their unique perspectives and expertise to the project.



We interviewed...

20 parents

40 teachers

20 school and district administrators

20 education experts

We collected surveys from...

701 parents

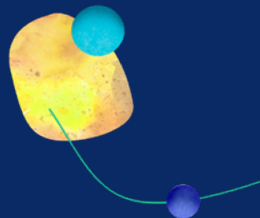
304 teachers

119 school and district administrators

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How to use the flexible learning preparedness resources



1

Start with the flexible learning preparedness index booklet.



The guide you're currently reading details what great flexible learning preparedness looks like across the seven dimensions of the flexible learning preparedness index. Each dimension has its own chapter with detailed best practices for school districts as well as tips, tricks, and case studies to help districts achieve full preparedness.

2

Take the flexible learning preparedness assessment.

[Click here to assess your district through the flexible learning preparedness rubric](#)

The flexible learning preparedness assessment in the Khan Academy flexible learning toolkit can help you assess where your district currently stands in each dimension of flexible learning preparedness. We recommend convening a small, cross-functional group from your school to take the assessment together. A group approach ensures accurate assessment and helps create healthy conversations.

3

Leverage additional Khan Academy COVID-19 center resources.

You've learned the best practices, taken the assessment, and reviewed the resources. Now what?



We recommend creating a small, multidisciplinary team to implement initiatives across the district to improve preparedness. This group should meet regularly and track implementation and outcomes. Consider retaking the assessment each year to see how your school's flexible learning preparedness progresses!



Once you understand how well your district is performing across the seven flexible learning preparedness dimensions, use [the flexible learning preparedness index booklet](#) and [additional resources in the Khan Academy flexible learning toolkit](#) to help your district achieve greater flexible learning preparedness.

The flexible learning preparedness index



Khan Academy defines flexible learning as a school district’s ability to transition between in-person, hybrid, and remote-learning environments in a way that maximizes academic growth for all students. The flexible learning preparedness index is a tool that enables school districts to self-assess their preparedness for flexible learning across seven key dimensions on a four-point scale from one

(poor preparedness) to four (great preparedness). If a district scores a level four, or great, preparedness across all seven dimensions, it suggests that they have laid a strong foundation to seamlessly weather current or future disruptions that may call for quick transitions or oscillations between learning environments.

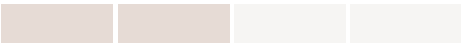


Communications

Scale example



Family engagement



Digital access



Professional development



Instruction, curricular resources, platforms, and data



Support for special populations



Mental health



Flexible learning preparedness can be assessed by rating school districts across seven dimensions.

DIMENSION #1

Communications



- How districts communicate key messages around their approach to flexible learning to all stakeholder groups. Communications allow a district to explain the what and the how of its approach to each of the following six dimensions, set clear expectations for each stakeholder group, collect feedback, and iterate.

DIMENSION #2

Family engagement



- How districts bring students' families in as partners in the learning journey. Whether education is happening in-person, through a hybrid approach, or remotely, bringing families into the learning experience of their children and understanding family context is a critical part of creating a successful learning environment.

DIMENSION #3

Digital access



- How districts address student access to devices and internet to support periods of at-home learning. Understanding current access and adjusting learning delivery accordingly while simultaneously working to provide resources to students without digital access can help districts make progress toward closing the digital divide and providing equitable education across learning environments.

DIMENSION #4

Professional development



- How districts prepare their teachers with the skills they need to seamlessly shift between learning environments. This preparedness training should include the technical skills necessary to teach across learning environments as well as hybrid learning pedagogy, best practices for family engagement across learning environments, and strategies for remote student engagement.

DIMENSION #5

Instruction, curricular resources, platforms, and data



- How districts use instruction, curricular resources, platforms, and data to ensure access to high-quality instruction across learning environments. A strategic approach to tool use in the classroom can help teachers provide instruction regardless of learning environments while also tracking student engagement, progress, and attainment.

DIMENSION #6

Support for special populations of learners



- How districts are addressing the specific learning needs of special populations, with a focus on students with disabilities and English language learners. This preparedness includes creating flexible support systems and strategic plans that are equally effective regardless of the physical location of the student or teacher.

DIMENSION #7

Mental health support for students and teachers



- How districts are supporting the mental wellbeing of both students and teachers. This preparedness includes not only staffing a team of professionals trained to provide comprehensive services but also communicating the available resources to all stakeholders and assessing and monitoring the mental and emotional state of teachers and students.

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We surveyed over 1,000 families,
teachers, and administrators
to understand how they
perceive their districts' flexible
learning preparedness today
and understand how they
currently prioritize the seven
flexible learning preparedness
dimensions



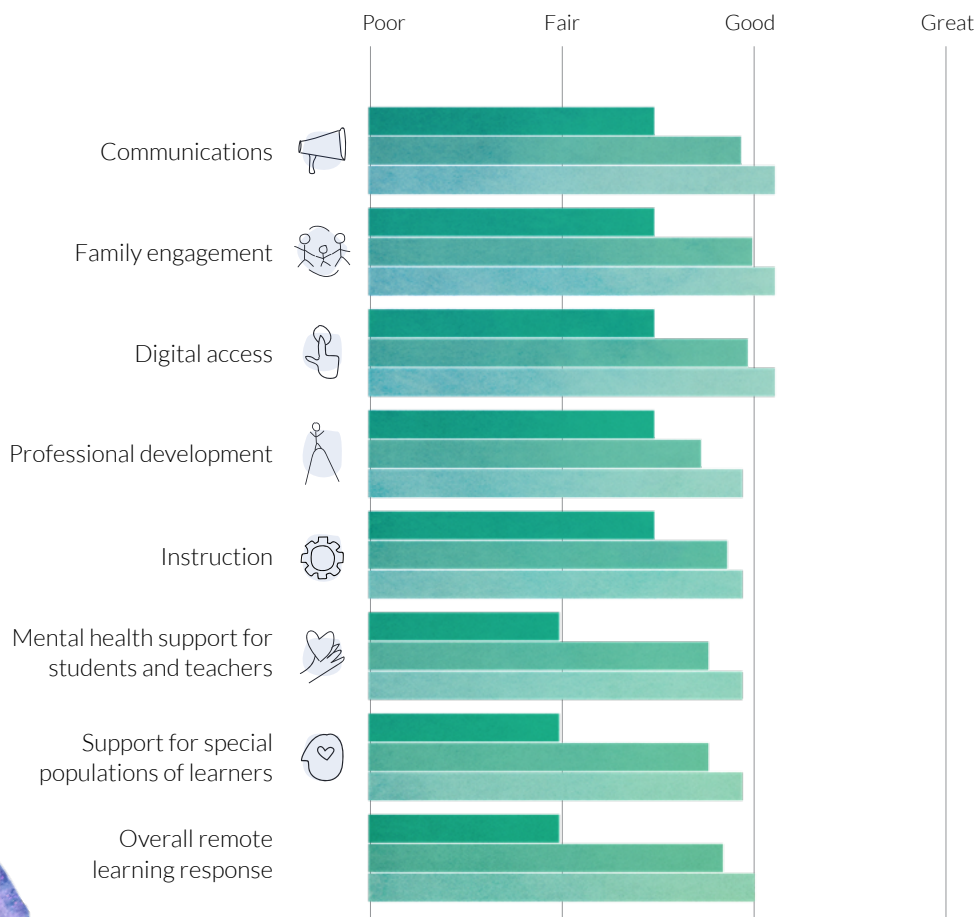
When asked to rate their school district, administrators reported a higher level of flexible learning preparedness than parents/caregivers and teachers across all dimensions.

Ratings across dimensions of flexible learning preparedness when asked:

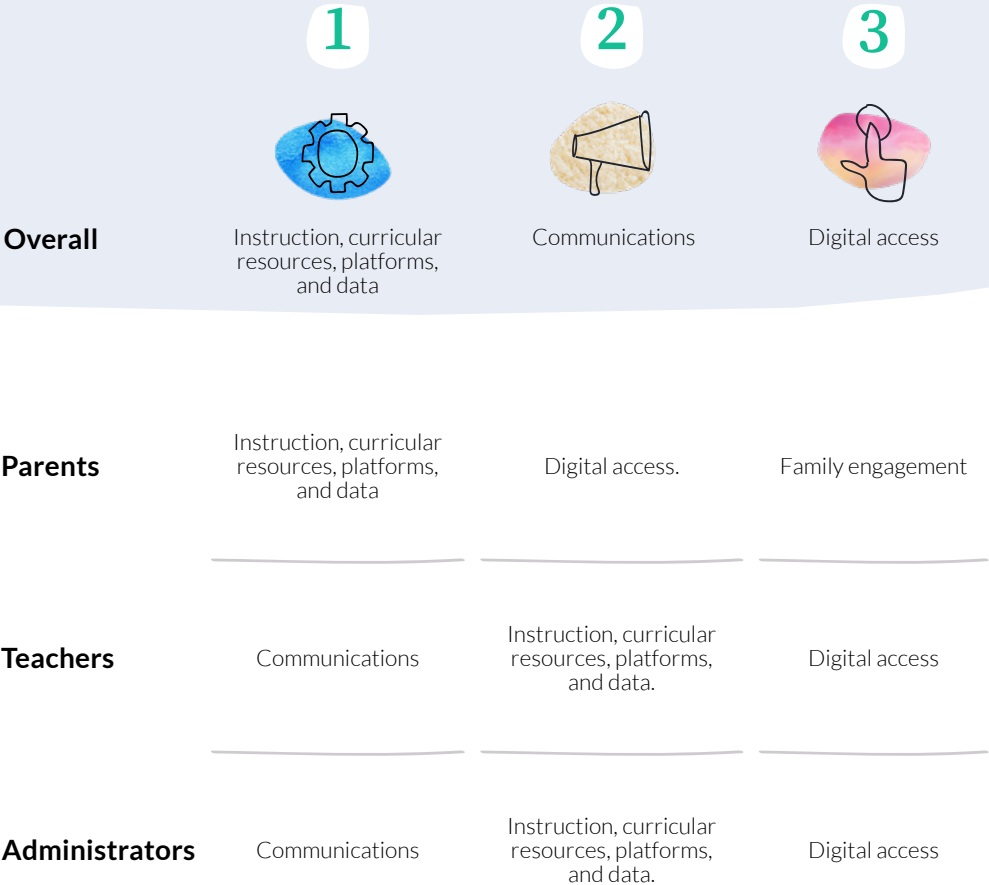
On a scale from poor, fair, good, to great, how would you rate your school district's remote learning response for COVID-19 across each one of the categories presented below

Average rating displayed below

Parents Teachers Administrators



All stakeholders acknowledged that **all seven flexible learning preparedness dimensions are critical**. When asked to prioritize the dimensions based on importance, **however, parents/caregivers prioritized instruction, curricular resources, platforms and data while teachers and administrators prioritized communications**



Parents/caregivers of elementary school children ranked family engagement as the second most important dimension while families of middle and high-school students prioritized digital access

Before creating a plan for your district across the seven dimensions of flexible learning preparedness, **it is critical that you align on a flexible learning plan for the year.**



Step 1

Run a diagnostic to understand current flexible learning preparedness.

Use quantitative and qualitative sources of insight—surveys and interviews, for example—to collect input from different stakeholder groups, such as families, teachers, and school administrators, to understand the district's current ability to seamlessly transition between in-person and remote learning environments

Step 2

Set up a cross-functional team of key stakeholders, including district departments, school administrators, teachers and—if possible—families and students, to develop a flexible learning plan for the year across the seven dimensions highlighted in this booklet.



Tips and tricks



Don't know where to start? Visit the **Khan Academy flexible learning toolkit** for a rubric to help assess your district's flexible learning preparedness.

Some guiding questions to consider:

As you set your flexible learning plan for the year and develop initiatives to improve your district's preparedness across the seven dimensions, consider all of the stakeholders in your district (e.g., school administrators, teachers, support staff, students, parents) and ask yourself:



What kind of experience do we want each stakeholder to have throughout the year?



What are the different challenges that each stakeholder group will face and how will those challenges vary within each stakeholder group? How can we tailor our solutions with those challenges in mind?



What overarching outcomes are we solving for as a district?

With answers to these questions, your district can effectively embark on their flexible learning improvement journey.

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DIMENSION #1

Communications



Communication can make or break a district during times of uncertainty.

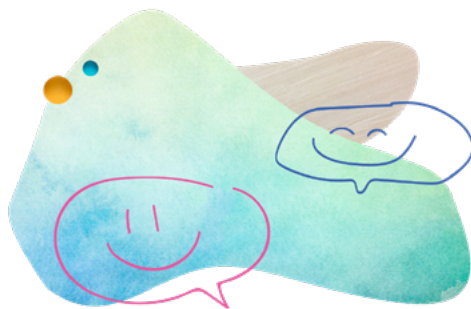
The ability to flex between in-person, hybrid, and remote learning environments requires the ability to quickly and consistently provide key messages to all stakeholder groups within your district: district departments, school administrators, unclassified staff, teachers, families, and students. During times of uncertainty, stakeholders across the district will look to the district central office as the single source of truth—the lighthouse leading the way. Because of this, it is critical that the district develop a communication strategy that enables the quick and consistent dissemination of information while also creating channels to hear back from their stakeholders. A strong communication strategy allows the district to build trust with the community and keep everyone informed.

“Our district’s success came from the fact that we set up clear key messages and sequenced the way we pushed them out. When there was a slight change with the key message that was going to go out to the community, it hit administrators first and then teachers so that everyone was aligned and given the chance to ask questions before the information hit families.”

District administrator

Don’t know where to start with your communications strategy? [Visit the Khan Academy flexible learning toolkit](#) for easy templates, guiding principles, and tips to get you started!

Based on interviews with administrators, teachers, families, and education experts, we established **four steps** school districts should follow when developing a communication strategy for flexible learning:



1 Set clear key messages for your communication strategy

Work with a cross-functional team to develop guiding principles for communication for the year and set overarching key messages to communicate the value of the flexible learning plan. As a rule of thumb, key messages should answer the following four questions:



Tips and tricks



Be explicit regarding what is expected for each stakeholder group. For example, provide clear guidance for teachers on instruction and family engagement, and listen and learn from educator feedback.

Be transparent in your key messages. It's okay if you don't have all of the answers, but stakeholders appreciate hearing how the district is working to get to answers.



2 Make communications accessible to all

Take time to understand your key stakeholders: Where are they today? Where do we need them to be? How will we get them there?

Establish communication routines for the year, including the frequency of communications, channels used for each stakeholder group, and relevant languages to reach them. Consider the following practices:



Sequence communications. Set up meetings for school administrators, staff, and teachers before key messages are launched to garner buy in and provide an opportunity for them to ask clarifying questions.

Provide consistent messaging. Assign someone at the district level to update messaging on each school's website with standardized key messages to alleviate the burden on school administrators.

Reach people where they are. Reach out to all stakeholders through numerous platforms—district website, email, social media, PTA, snail mail, phone hotlines—to ensure communications reach everyone.

“Every piece of communication was available in the three most commonly spoken languages in the district, which gave us confidence that all would understand.”

District administrator

“It's super important not to overwhelm people when it comes to communications. For example, when it comes to parents, a simple 'Hey! Hope everything is going well. All the information is in Schoology' is really all you need.”

10th-grade teacher

Provide a single source of truth. Establish a single, central point of contact—source of truth—to push out communications and publish all key information. A district website is a good example.

Complement centralized communications with personal outreach. Centralize key messages from the district but highly encourage schools and teachers to keep an open line with parents and establish one-to-one communication with teachers and families.

Consider segmenting for elementary and secondary audiences. The expectations, needs and responsibilities of students and their families changes as students get older. Messaging should adapt to different age ranges, with K-5 and 6-12 as the first potential segmentation. Further, customized messaging by grade range is helpful if possible to provide.



3 Establish feedback loops and respond quickly

Ensure the ability to track reach and understanding of key communications—email opens, for example.

Set up two-way channels and additional mechanisms, such as town halls, surveys, and interviews, to gather feedback from key stakeholders.

4 Find moments to celebrate your people and their successes.

Administrators, staff, teachers, and families across your district are working incredibly hard to support the education of students. Find opportunities to celebrate success in your communications!

Establish a team structure to analyse collected data and feedback and visibly address it by updating your communications strategy.

“It’s nice to know that the school and district leadership is your cheerleader. Our superintendent sends us fun, personal videos that highlight successes, and it’s really appreciated.”

Eighth-grade teacher

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DIMENSION #2

Family Engagement



Regardless of the learning environment, effective family engagement is critical to student success.



Parent engagement is the linchpin of student learning in hybrid environments.”

School district administrator

Teachers play a critical role in a student’s education, but we often underestimate the power of the other key educators in a student’s journey: their family. During COVID-19 school shutdowns, we saw the importance of the family further heightened as parents and caregivers were thrust into the roles of teacher, IT support, tutor, counselor, and friend.

Through the forced remote learning brought on by the pandemic, teachers, families, and administrators realized that—regardless of the physical location in which a child is learning—bringing families into a child’s learning experience and understanding family context is critical to creating a successful learning environment.

Through our interviews with parents and caregivers, **we uncovered some of the challenges they faced during school shutdowns and how their needs differed based on their contextual realities.** In particular, we identified three type of parents and caregivers:



The essential worker:

With limited time at home, these parents and caregivers relied heavily on other relatives, such as older siblings and grandparents, to help their younger children with schoolwork.

What they need from schools: Access to child-care and a safe environment for their child.



The work-from-home-er:

These parents and caregivers were faced with juggling working from home, caring for the basic needs of their children, and supporting their children’s at home learning.

What they need from schools: Simple, clear, communications and prescriptive instructions on guiding their student; flexibility; and lots of teacher direction and support.



The full-time tutor: Stay-at-home parents and caregivers took on the role of full-time tutors, entrenching themselves in their children’s education and often feeling like teachers were not providing them with the resources they needed to do so effectively.

What they need from schools: Freedom to expand upon district curriculum, optional ways to enhance learning, tips and resources to efficiently learn the material and provide support.

What does great family engagement mean?

When we asked around 500 parents and caregivers what constitutes great performance in the dimension of family engagement, some of the themes they identified included:

Frequent communication around curriculum, assignments, and expectations

Parent workshops on curricular resources used by their children

Constant contact via video-conferencing, phone calls, and email

Strategies to help children learn at home

Flexibility for families

Explaining parents' role

Weekly newsletter emails with personal videos

Opportunities to provide feedback to teachers and administrators



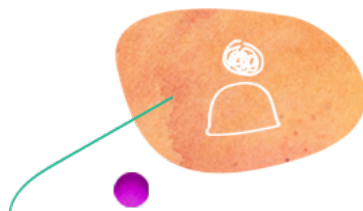
The school needs to provide parents with more flexibility and resources. We are working from home, taking care of our children, and now we are also expected to teach them. We need help.”

Elementary school parent

More than **50%** of parents believe that family engagement is in the top three most important flexible learning preparedness dimensions, but half of surveyed parents and caregivers believe their school district is doing only a poor or fair job in this dimension.



Based on our research, we established three key principles to consider when designing a family engagement strategy



1 Connect and understand the context

It is critical that districts take the time to understand the at-home learning environment for each student before setting an engagement strategy for their families.

At the beginning of the year, make sure there is a plan in place to ensure **teachers, staff and/or school administrators connect personally with families and students to**

- **Build trust-based relationships** among families, educators, and the school;
- **Understand family and home learning environments**, including languages spoken at home and technology access; and
- **Engage parents** as part of the learning experience.

Teachers should continue personal touch points with parents and caregivers throughout the year, establishing a clear cadence from the beginning so parents and caregivers can plan ahead, especially for younger age groups



Tips and tricks



Don't know where to start? Kick off your first one-to-one meeting family meeting by connecting on something you both care about—the student!

Tips and tricks



Consider assigning teachers, staff, and admin ownership of family communication to a dedicated subset of students and their families. When possible, match families with teachers, staff, and/or administrators who speak their native language to make school-family communication more accessible. **Bring each class's parents and caregivers together once a month** to provide visibility on themes arising during class, then, **send a follow-up communication with commitments and actions from the meeting.**

2 Bring families into the learning journey

Families should have the full picture of the educational journey that their child will embark on—from educational resources that students are expected to use to learning outcomes for the year. Parents and caregivers should be familiar with how to use these resources and should receive clear guidelines on how to best support their children's education.

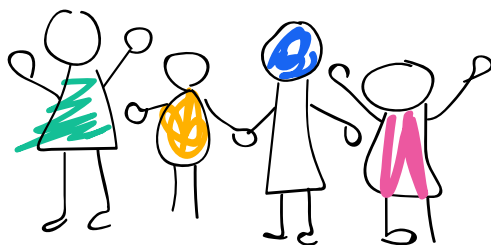
Parents and caregivers should receive clear information and continued support about

- **Educational strategy** (the why behind the current approach to learning);
- **Expectations** for parents and caregivers;
- **Motivation and engagement strategies** for students in remote learning environments; and
- **Educational tools** their children will be using

Create a centralized resource hub—a district website, for example—where families can find tools to help them support their children's learning. Resources should be available in all relevant languages.

“Unfortunately, because of the lack of training and exposure to effective family engagement, many teachers carry with them deficit mindsets about families. Families and the communities where students come from have assets that the teachers and schools need to help students be successful.”

Dr. Karen Mapp, Harvard Graduate School of Education



Case Study

Cajon Valley Unified School District offered interactive parent workshop sessions virtually to help parents better support their students with remote learning during the COVID-19 shut downs. Sessions were heavily attended, and families appreciated understanding the district's approach to remote learning and having the space to ask questions.

Tips and tricks

Provide parents and caregivers who have digital resources access to the online learning resources and platforms their children are using so they can monitor work and progress. Ensure that families have been taught how to use these tools.

For households without digital access, ensure that families receive printed packets with clear guidance on the activities that their children need to complete for a given timeframe.

3 Provide continuous communication and support

Information should be **timely and easy for families to access** so parents and caregivers can collaborate with teachers to design effective interventions. Families should be provided with channels to ask questions and provide feedback on an on-going basis.

Some communication best practices:

- **Develop and implement a two-way communication plan** that includes a wide variety of online and offline channels to ensure reach—email, social media, text, or local parent groups, for example—and opportunities for families to ask questions and provide feedback.
- **Ensure the school has an emergency communication tool**, such as text or the Remind app, setup for information that needs to be received quickly.
- **Develop relationships with community organizations**—food banks, libraries, and childcare facilities, for example—and communicate the resources available from these organizations to families.

Tips and tricks



Communicate in digestible bites through video, voice notes, and bullet point emails.

Build consistency in the timing of communications. For example, send weekly emails at the same time every week.

Consolidate communications from teachers and administrators to avoid overwhelming families with emails.

Clearly distinguish between action needed from families and informational updates in communications.



Our school did such an amazing job of looping in parents. We received phone messages keeping us updated on school closures, assignments, and expectations. We also got emails, were offered free meals, and were given the chance to give input to learning via surveys.”

Elementary school parent

Case Study

Pajaro Valley Unified School District successfully leveraged its website and social media to connect with families. Superintendent Dr. Rodriguez has an FAQ portal called Ask Dr. Rodriguez. Every Friday, she writes and records videos answering 10 questions for the community. Dr. Rodriguez also releases a newsletter every Friday containing updates, family action items, and cheerful stories for families. Families expressed appreciation for the dependable timing of these communications and their thoughtful content.

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DIMENSION #3


Digital Access





Digital access is the cornerstone of equitable flexible learning preparedness.


During shutdowns caused by COVID-19, school systems across the world were confronted with the fact that home access to devices and internet is inconsistent, even in affluent districts in developed systems. Ensuring that education efforts during any future periods of flexible learning—either fully remote or hybrid—effectively address digital access in students' homes is a critical first step to ensuring equity.

School systems around the world took a variety of approaches during the spring 2020 school shutdowns to address the varying degrees of digital access within their student populations.

 France lent devices and provided printed assignments to students who didn't have access to computers or the internet.

 China offered mobile data packages and telecom subsidies and repurposed segments of the state-run television channel to air lesson plans for K–12 education in remote regions.

 U.S. schools in South Carolina deployed mobile hotspots to low-income neighborhoods by equipping school buses with internet.

 The government in Portugal partnered with the postal service to deliver worksheets for students with no internet access.

Our research with families, teachers, and administrators indicates that four key elements are necessary for a school to achieve high-level digital access:

- 1 One-to-one device access for all students
- 2 Reliable internet for all students
- 3 Responsive tech support for all students and teachers
- 4 Digital tools to improve teacher effectiveness, such as monitors, high-quality video cameras, and tablets



When providing these four key elements is not possible, districts must adapt any form of remote learning to the level of digital access that does exist in the student community.

Working to ensure the four key elements of digital access are available to all is only the beginning, though. Some students may need additional support due to language barriers, working parents, or learning/physical disabilities. To narrow the equity gap, resources may need to be disproportionately directed and tailored to those with the greatest needs.

Ultimately, the goal of every school district should be to guarantee that all students receive the same quality education independently of their digital access by following two key steps:

- 1 Assess.** Contact all district families to understand and document the current level of device, internet, and other tech access at home—working internet, personal computer, printer, or scanner, for example. Make sure the district has a clear sense of what kind of schoolwork each student will be able to do based on their digital access.

“Regardless of digital access, some learners just can’t engage well digitally. For those students, we provided packets that they could turn in at the school. It’s critical that teachers flex to match the needs of their students”

Special education teacher

Tips and tricks



Include a series of questions regarding digital access at home in a survey to families before the school year starts. Follow up individually with families that don’t complete the survey.



2 Adapt. Based on the access assessment, develop and adapt the district approach to digital access. Based on our interviews and surveys with families, teachers, and administrators, we found that school districts typically fall into one of three archetypes when it comes to digital access.

Archetype 1

Poor digital access: Districts with poor digital access typically have a low volume of students with access to a device and internet at home. Many of these districts exist in rural areas where low infrastructure may provide additional barriers to internet access. Those with device and internet access in these districts are typically sharing devices between parents and siblings and struggle with internet bandwidth. During COVID-19 shutdowns, these districts focused on non-digital modes of learning delivery to educate students.

“We did our best to make the printed materials fun to keep it ‘equal’ with those who did have digital access.”
Fifth-grade teacher

Tips and tricks



Leverage mobile messaging applications to communicate lessons, send pictures of assignments, and assess progress. Students can send in pictures of their work or voice memos talking the teacher through their thought process, for example.

Encourage teachers to check in regularly via phone or video calls with students and provide contact info so students can reach them when they have questions.

Leverage printed materials and distribute them during already established touch points with students, such as food distribution to families.

Case Study

An 11th-grade English teacher in rural Michigan created packets with eight weeks of material at a time for her students without devices and/or internet access and delivered them by hand.



Archetype 2

Fair digital access: Districts with fair digital access have greater than 50 percent of students with access to devices and internet at home. During COVID-19 shutdowns, these districts focused on providing devices and stable internet to those without access.

“Digital access was a big priority for us. About 20% of our student population didn't have internet, so we partnered with the city to purchase 5,000 hotspots as well as with different local organizations that offer free or low-cost internet to ensure access for all.”

School district administrator

Tips and tricks



Reach out to local foundations, companies, and government organizations to explore grants and discounts for student devices and hotspots.

Use public locations like parking lots, libraries, and schools themselves to provide internet hotspots.

Work with the local government to understand if there is opportunity to leverage pre-existing internet services like city Wi-Fi.

Many socio-economically disadvantaged families struggle to purchase internet due to the cost. For families with difficulty accessing the internet For these families, **either prioritize providing them with individual hotspots or give them the option of receiving printed materials.**



Archetype 3

Great digital access: Districts with great digital access have a student population with mostly one-to-one access to devices and consistent, stable internet. During COVID-19 shutdowns, these districts focused on providing devices and internet to the few students who needed it, setting up tech support to students and teachers during regular school hours, and providing teachers with additional digital tools to improve their teaching.



I need a point-person that can help me quickly with specific technical questions"

Sixth-grade teacher

Tips and tricks



Set up a 24/7 tech support hotline to help students and teachers with technical difficulties. Consider leveraging tech-savvy parents to reduce the burden on teachers and administrators.

For many teachers, having a device and internet isn't enough to successfully teach from home. When possible, **districts should provide additional digital tools to enhance remote teaching**, such as high-quality video cameras, monitors or tablets.

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Case Study

To manage technical challenges faced by families in their district, **Pajaro Valley Unified** set up a two-pronged approach to tech support. They made support available Monday through Friday from 8am to 4:30pm through a hotline staffed by 10 technicians who spoke the two most common languages of the district (with a translator available for the third most common language) and provided drive-up tech support at the district office where technicians were available to fix or replace Chromebooks on the spot.



DIMENSION #4

Professional Development



Professional development for teachers matters.

During COVID-19 school shutdowns, teachers were suddenly faced with the question “What does good teaching look like in the context of remote learning?”

School districts that smoothly transitioned and were successful during this period of remote learning started by **remapping the skills that teachers needed to flex between different learning environments**. This skillset included not only the technical requirements of remote learning, but also **remote learning pedagogy, engagement, and motivation strategies**.



As districts improve their flexible learning preparedness, it is critical that they establish a sustainable professional development model for their teachers, ensuring that all teachers have the tools, knowledge, and resources they need to provide high-quality instruction across all learning environments.



“As teachers we don’t know what good looks like in this new world of teaching, and that’s scary. We don’t know if our approach is good or not, and it’s super helpful to learn from what other teachers are doing.”

Middle school science teacher

Teachers believe professional development is key to maximizing student growth.

We asked 300 teachers “If you had to go through the process of transitioning to remote learning again, what would be the most useful tools and resources to help you maximize students’ academic growth?”

One theme was clear in the teachers’ responses: **professional development for teachers is key to maximizing student growth.**

“Training and support”

“Better preparation on what to expect and how to handle difficult situations”

“Training on how best to streamline instructions so I’m not regularly working until eight at night”

“Ongoing workshops on problems teachers are facing”

“More professional development”

“More information about how to engage students digitally”

“I know the technology, but I wish was given advice on how to be an emotional support for my students in this new environment”

Through our research, we learned that a sustainable professional development program should follow three key phases:

1



Diagnose.

Work with your teachers to understand their current knowledge.

2



Design.

Map the skills your teachers need to be successful and design a professional development program.

3



Deliver and sustain.

Roll out professional development to your teaching staff. Understand ongoing learning needs and provide additional training accordingly.

Diagnose



Before designing a sustainable professional development program, work with a team of district and school level representatives to determine the right balance between in-person and remote learning for your district and the tools necessary to support your approach. Take a look at the [Instruction, curricular resources, platforms and data](#) chapter of this booklet for guidance on this process.

Once you have selected the approach for your district, designate a centralized team to work with teachers across different schools, subjects, and grades to map teachers' archetypes, skills, and learning needs. Some teacher archetypes, skills, and needs uncovered in our research:



The traditional teacher

A teacher with over 10 years of experience who has perfected their in-person lesson plan. They have some experience with technology and understand the basics, including how to conduct video lessons and how to use some digital platforms. Their goal for distance learning is to translate the classroom experience into a virtual experience.



Tech savvy with time to explore

This teacher has used virtual education tools and platforms for a while and feels very comfortable with technology. They spend a lot of time thinking about how to best engage students online and cater to their individual needs. They create their own content—videos, audios, remote learning kits—and are eager to learn from others, including through social media, virtual happy hours, and virtual trainings, to stay at the forefront of distance-learning pedagogy.



Newbie

This teacher has only a couple of years of physical classroom experience. Usually tech savvy and resourceful, they are very eager to learn from more experienced teachers but are also comfortable running their own experiments. While they tap into different resources—including social media, virtual teacher happy hours and virtual trainings—they particularly appreciate one-on-one guidance from other teachers who have spent more time in the field.

Although each teacher archetype has specific needs, we identified some shared challenges:

Work-life balance: Teachers struggle to separate their personal lives from teaching, especially teachers who are also parenting their own kids at home. During the COVID-19 school shutdowns, teachers tried to provide flexibility to their students by extending their working hours and often used their personal time to research and iterate on their lesson plan.

Knowledge of remote learning pedagogy: Teachers often expressed lack of knowledge on remote learning pedagogy. Even those with multiple years of experience felt like newbies all over again.

Knowledge of how best to support special populations: Teachers spent a lot of time trying to connect with and support students with special learning needs, including students with learning disabilities, English language learners, and students in poverty or experiencing homelessness. Teachers expressed frustration about not knowing how best to reach students or how to provide additional support in remote learning environments.



Design



With a clear understanding of the different teacher archetypes in your district, including their skillsets and specific needs, continue to collaborate with teachers to map the skill requirements for them to flex between in-person, hybrid, and remote learning. The teachers and school administrators we spoke with highlighted various skills teachers need to effectively support flexible learning:

Technical skills

- Accessing and navigating digital platforms as both a teacher and as a student, including how to upload content, post assignments, and communicate with students and parents
- Choosing adaptive platforms and content to most effectively deliver instruction, enable student practice, and assess student progression
- Conducting synchronous virtual sessions, including managing interactive features, such as breakout rooms, whiteboard, and polls
- Logistics for delivering content, including mail, email, text/messages, phone calls and video
- Managing advanced features such as data collection and analysis
- Tools for teacher-to-teacher collaboration, including tools to enable teachers to learn from each other as well as tools for coteaching

Remote and hybrid learning pedagogy

- Creating lesson plans that are flexible for both in-person or remote delivery
- Effectively delivering lessons remotely and testing understanding
- Providing opportunities for students to practice, collaborate, and engage with material
- Creating and administering assessments, ensuring student equity
- Balancing modes of student engagement: synchronous vs. asynchronous distribution
- Culturally responsive pedagogy
- Support for special populations



“Our immediate priority was teacher training with a high focus on remote teaching pedagogy. We provided teachers with everything we could think of: technical tools, pedagogy training, office hours with remote curriculum specialist, a digital mentor program and more. It gave our teachers the confidence and tools they needed.”

District administrator





Student and family engagement

- Building high trust relationships with students and families
- Engaging and motivating students remotely by catering to students' individual needs
- Building classroom culture in remote settings, including classroom norms, feedback culture, and peer-to-peer relationships
- Understanding and exemplifying best practices in cultural sensitivity and implicit bias

Mindsets

- Work-life balance through setting clear boundaries between personal and professional time and information on how the district administration will support this balance
- Flexibility in the face of uncertainty
- Management of extraordinary circumstances, including students or students' family members with COVID-19 and students experiencing homelessness

Case Study



During COVID-19 school shutdowns, **Long Beach Unified** set up extensive teacher training immediately. Beyond instruction on technical tools, their professional development covered remote teaching pedagogy—anchored in their K–12 Teaching and Learning Framework—virtual office hours with curriculum specialists, and a digital mentorship program between teachers who had high technical knowledge and those who did not.

Deliver and sustain



Roll out your professional development program, ensuring teachers receive training across technical requirements, instructional training, student and family engagement, and teacher mindset. Consider bringing teachers in for a one-week period, either in-person or remote, of intensive, repetitive, and collaborative training to enable them to be successful at the school's approach to flexible learning.

A sustainable professional development program should allow for feedback and iteration. To this end

- Gather feedback and understand ongoing learning needs of teachers by periodically sending out surveys and conducting classroom observations.
- Create structures for peer-to-peer collaboration and support, such as asking teachers in your district to train other teachers on the tools they are using in their classrooms.

Tips and tricks



Provide a space where teachers can indicate they need help, such as a chat, Slack channel, or recurring meetings.

Host teacher happy hours or social events to give teachers an informal setting to learn from each other!

Pair experienced and new teachers to share virtual learning menus, observe lessons, and provide feedback.

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DIMENSION #5

Instruction, curricular resources, platforms, and data



Bringing the right tools into the learning experience is a key enabler of improving flexible preparedness.

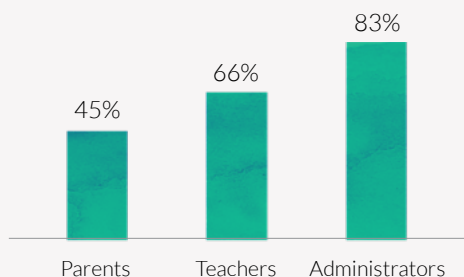
The ability to provide high-quality instruction—including meeting desired teaching and learning outcomes—for all students across in-person, remote, and hybrid learning environments is of critical importance but is something that most districts have yet to achieve.

Parents and caregivers rated instruction, curricular resources, platforms, and data as the most important flexible learning preparedness dimension to consider when planning for future periods of distance or hybrid learning. However, the majority of these parents and caregivers believe that their school district's performance was poor or fair in this area during the spring 2020 period of remote learning.

To maximize flexibility and academic growth across learning environments, **school districts can strategically design a cohesive system of curricular resources, platforms, and data** to provide students with asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities available both remotely and in-person, while tracking results that will enable the district to improve their flexible learning preparedness over time.



Percent of of respondents that believe their district's use of curricular resources, platforms, and data was good or great



More than 50% of parents and caregivers believe that the delivery of instruction and use of curricular resources, platforms, and data was poor or fair in response to COVID-19.

With regard to infrastructure and platforms, this report assumes that school districts have adopted or purchased a student information system and learning management system. The scope of this report, as it relates to platforms, is to recommend effective communication between the various platforms used across the district. Integration of platforms not only helps ensure privacy and security of student data, but also increases the ease of communication between students, teachers, and families as it relates to instruction and curricular resources.

This chapter outlines a series of steps districts and teachers can take to set up a cohesive learning system that will enable flexibility when transitioning between learning environments while maximizing the academic growth of the students.



How do parents and teachers define high-quality instruction in periods of remote or hybrid learning?

We asked around 1,000 parents and teachers what constitutes great performance in the **instruction, curricular resources, platforms, and data** dimension of flexible learning preparedness and some common themes emerged:

"More tutoring on assignments and immediate feedback"

"Smaller group video sessions"

"Centralized content on one platform"

"Creative ways to keep students motivated"

"Ensuring children are completing their work and progressing"







"Show children how to solve assigned problems, particularly for math"

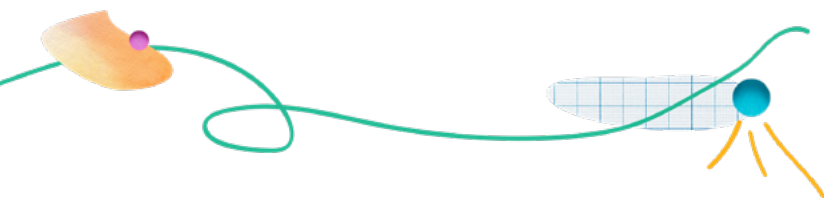
In addition to the surveys, our interviews helped us uncover a series of key actions that district administrators and teachers can put in place to ensure high-quality instruction during periods of remote or hybrid learning.

Actions for district administrators

1 Taking into account the health and safety of your students and staff, determine how best to maximize academic growth by leveraging hybrid or remote learning.

Through our conversations with teachers, families, school administrators, and experts, we gathered a series of questions that your district can ask to help decide on the right balance between in-person and remote learning and how to flex between both environments within the health safeguards required:

- 
What are your desired learning outcomes?
- 
What are the remote capabilities of your district's teachers and students, including digital access, digital capabilities, and teacher mindsets around use of technology in the classroom?
- 
Which grades, subjects, and populations should be prioritized for in-person learning? What is the impact of different learning models for families? Do parents and caregivers have the time to support their children at home? Do students have a good learning environment at home? Do students rely on free or reduced lunch at school?
- 
Which parts of the teaching and learning process should be prioritized for in-person learning? Introducing new content? Practice? Assessment? Social connection?
- 
How will teachers be allocated to students to maximize learning? For example, will teaching teams or teacher looping be used? Will teachers be remote or in person?
- 
What are the guiding principles to monitor progress under different models of in-person and remote learning? How will the grading and assessment—formative and summative—practices be set up so that they are applicable in remote and in-person settings? Remote or in person?



2 Design a cohesive system of educational resources that allow for a seamless transition between in-person and remote learning.

In response to COVID-19, some school districts designated a centralized team of instructional designers and former teachers to develop a **cohesive system of educational resources to ease the transition between hybrid learning environments**, enabling teachers to spend more time connecting with students than searching for content or resources suitable for a remote or hybrid lesson.

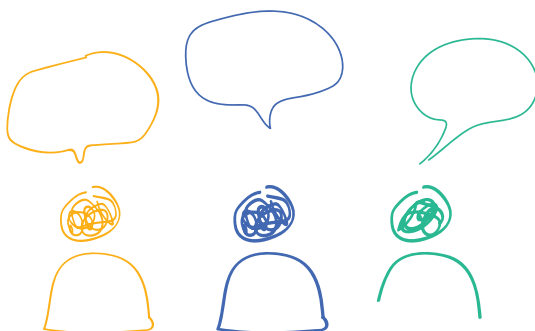
Some of the resources developed by districts included:

- A centralized list of curated curricular resources aligned to the curriculum and learning outcomes for each subject and grade level
- A one-stop-platform for teachers with all available resources to support teaching, including a centralized list of curricular resources, trainings, IT support, and discussion forums with other teachers
- A helpdesk for teachers' questions regarding best use of technology in the classroom and best activities to accomplish learning goals

Case Study

Cajon Valley Unified School District developed a centralized “playlist” for all grades and subjects that teachers can easily modify based on their students’ needs. The content of the playlist was designed for students to be able to complete independently so they can continue progressing in periods of school shutdown.

If developing a centralized “playlist” is not an option for your school district, start by assigning a small team of former teachers to be available to brainstorm with current teachers on available curricular resources, best ways to use technology in the classroom, and creative ideas for students to experiment with at home.



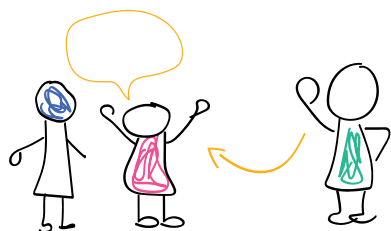
How to select curricular resources

The teachers we interviewed and surveyed helped us put together a list of guiding principles to consider when selecting educational resources to maximize students' learning in any environment for your district. Curricular resources are especially helpful if they

- Are easy to use for teachers, families, and students (for example, minimize the number of different passwords and sign-ins)
- Enable teachers to assess both in-person and remotely each individual student as well as their class overall using multiple inputs to understand their unique strengths and unfinished learning so teachers can tailor future instruction accordingly
- Provide students with the ability to learn at their own time and pace
- Provide guidance and are accompanied by training resources advising when and how to use the resource for in-person, remote, or hybrid learning
- Are free or affordable for families, teachers, and the school district
- Engage and motivate students
- Are downloadable for offline use
- Are compatible with all type of devices, including mobile, tablet, and desktop
- Protect the data and privacy of students
- Target students' zone of proximal development
- Enable students to fill in gaps and accelerate preparedness
- Are evidence-based
- Are authentically standards-aligned
- Have breadth and depth across subjects and grades

3 Support and track student engagement, progress, and outcomes to foster an environment of continuous improvement.

- Ensure students have **easy access to a trusted point of contact**—a teacher or counselor, for example—to share any issues they are facing. This is particularly important for middle- and high-school students, who have multiple teachers and may be confused about the right person to reach out to.



Case Study



Cajon Valley Unified School District developed a cohort model where there is a primary teacher responsible for connecting with all students in their cohort as well as these students' parents. This teacher proactively supports students with engagement strategies and is available to discuss any challenges the students may be facing.

- Provide teachers and staff with a communication tool that facilitates secure and convenient communication. Communication tools can also enable teachers to translate their messages into other languages for families.
- Set-up a **centralized dashboard of leading and lagging indicators** for student performance. During periods of remote learning, engagement metrics— such as number of students logging-in, number of students completing asynchronous learning lessons, number of students attending video-conferencing lessons and, most importantly, student progress toward content mastery— can be used to guide school staff to students who need someone to check in with. To deploy this type of dashboard, ensure curricular software allows you to **track engagement and attainment data across grades, subjects, and students.**

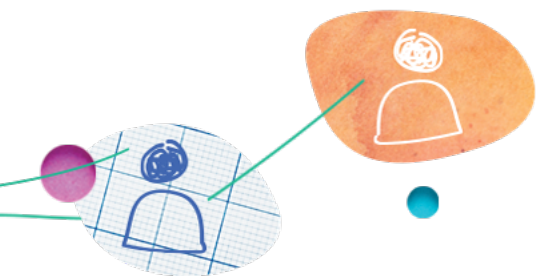


Case Study

- **Leverage insights from the dashboard** to identify where students are not engaging with the content or are struggling with attainment. Then, work collaboratively with teachers to develop interventions.



A charter school network developed a centralized dashboard to track student engagement, lesson completion, and attainment across curricular resources, schools, and grade levels. Using this data, the system administrators have been able to adjust recommendations to teachers based on what is working well for particular classes and identify students that might benefit from an individualized check-ins.



Actions for teachers

Once the school district aligns on its approach to flexible learning, we recommend that teachers follow the steps below as they plan for the upcoming year.

- 1 **Design each step of your lesson plan—introducing new content, enabling group and independent practice, and assessment—to support flexibility and maximization of learning across in-person, remote, and hybrid environments without making students and families feel overwhelmed.**

Consider the following questions as they relate to your school's flexible learning plan:

How will high-quality instruction be delivered for each step of the lesson plan?

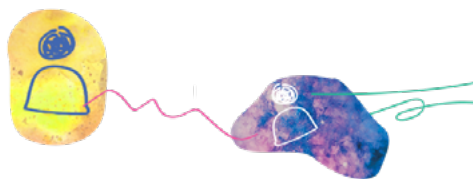
- a) What is the **best format to deliver each step**? Group facilitation? One-to-one teacher-student interaction? Interactive peer-to-peer collaboration? Independent study?
- b) Which **portions of the class syllabus** should be prioritized during periods of in-person learning?
- c) Which parts of the lesson plan should be taught asynchronously vs. synchronously?
- d) How will you switch between in-person and remote delivery for a lesson if needed?
- e) What virtual educational resources will allow for a seamless transition between in-person and remote learning?

How will available data be used to facilitate a seamless transition between in-person and remote learning environments and maximize learning?

Tips and tricks



Don't know where to start? [Visit the Khan Academy flexible learning toolkit](#) for a simple lesson-plan template for hybrid learning environments.



For synchronous remote learning, break the lesson into bite-sized pieces and provide opportunities for students to practice, ask questions.

If you use peer interaction to activate students' prior knowledge within your existing lesson plan, consider ways you can meet this same goal in a remote environment by using small breakout rooms within a video conferencing platform.

How will the overarching learning plan for the year change based on the students' learning environment (e.g., remote, hybrid, in-person)?

How will grading and assessment be set up in a way that allows all students to succeed regardless of learning environment?

What strategies should be used to address the specific needs of populations in the class, such as students who are ahead, students who are on track, students who are behind, students with specialized learning needs, and English language learners?



Tips and tricks



For more information, visit the [Support for special populations](#) chapter of this booklet.

2

Build community with families and students.

Starting a new academic year in a remote learning environment may pose challenges to developing connections between and among administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

These creative methods can build trust and community when starting the academic year remotely:

- Ask the teacher from the previous year to introduce this year's teacher to signal trust. A joint video call at the beginning of the year is one way to accomplish this.
- Connect with students and families one on one at the beginning of the year to understand students' learning environments. At the secondary level, divide students up among teachers and ensure every family has received contact from at least one teacher.
- Spend time throughout the first couple of weeks focusing on relationship-building activities, enabling students to get to know you, their peers, and cocreate the classroom culture.



- Continue fostering a trusting community with students throughout the year whether remote or in-person:

Get the pulse on how your students are doing on an on-going basis by conducting an online or in-person poll asking how students are feeling.

Create opportunities for students to connect with each other. During remote learning, consider setting up fun virtual meet-ups and activities—virtual pajama parties or lunch video calls with friends, for example—to build community outside of formal learning.

Show vulnerability and emotions. Make mistakes, use real examples, and don't shy away from sharing how you're feeling. **It's important for students to know their teachers are human too.**

Tips and tricks



Check how your remote students are feeling:

- Allow **students to provide feedback** and share ideas on a regular basis.
- Ask students to **share how they are feeling** using a number scale in the chat box of video calls.
- Dedicate time each week for students to share personal anecdotes, such as stories about their daily lives or their pets.



3 Create frequent opportunities to check individual student understanding.

- Enable **practice during synchronous interactions.** Leverage as many of the functions within a given virtual platform that mimic a classroom setting as possible, increasing the interactivity between teachers, students, and their peers. Examples include the chat function to facilitate discussion, raise hand and applause functions to react with questions and comments, and the breakout group function for small group instruction.
- Continue **conducting formative assessments.** During COVID-19 school shutdowns, teachers found creative ways to check for understanding. For example, some educators asked students to send a voice memo explaining how they arrived at their answer.

4 Keep students engaged.

- Allow **for public and private recognition**.

The teachers we spoke with highlighted the importance of recognizing not only the performance but the effort that students put into their assignments and tests. Select curricular resources and instructional practices that support this goal.

- **Encourage student participation and peer-to-peer collaboration** during synchronous learning. For remote learning, whenever possible, students should have their video cameras on during class, and teachers should build opportunities every few minutes for students to participate since focused attention is more difficult for students over video. Leverage the break-out room option of video platforms to enable children to collaborate during synchronous lessons. Assign specific roles to each student in the group (e.g., presenter, note-taker, moderator) and ensure students rotate among roles.

- Keep **learning active**. Ensure that within the lesson plan there are opportunities for non-tech activities, such as researching a topic by interviewing family members, conducting experiments at home, or going for a walk to make observations.

- Allow **students to help set their learning goals** to create a sense of control and accountability for academic progress.

- Make **class fun!** Find opportunities to gamify the learning environment—class competitions or virtual learning games, for example—and design live experiments and projects that students can conduct at home.

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DIMENSION #6

Support for special populations



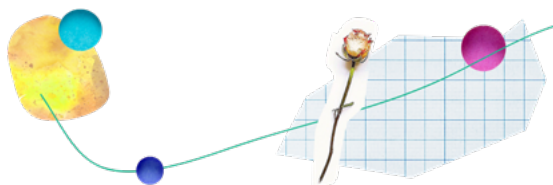
Equitable learning in any environment cannot be accomplished without a tailored approach to educating special populations.

This chapter provides some initial thoughts on how school districts and teachers can best support the needs of special populations during periods of remote or hybrid learning. In particular, it focuses on two populations: students with disabilities and English language learners. This chapter cannot cover the wide range of challenges these populations are facing due to COVID-19. Our intention is to share examples and basic considerations as a resource to help school districts, teachers, and learning specialists maximize academic growth for these learners across in-person, remote, and hybrid learning environments.



“I felt the school gave up on my child. They were asking him to do very basic tasks unrelated to his learning goals. We had made so much progress during the school year, and all of a sudden, I saw him regressing.”

Parent of a 14 year old with autism



Over seven million students with special needs, ages 7 to 21, attend schools across the United States². This number includes students with specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, as well as those with more significant cognitive and physical impairments (see Figure 1) that vary in severity depending on the number of skill areas affected and the degree of the impairment³.

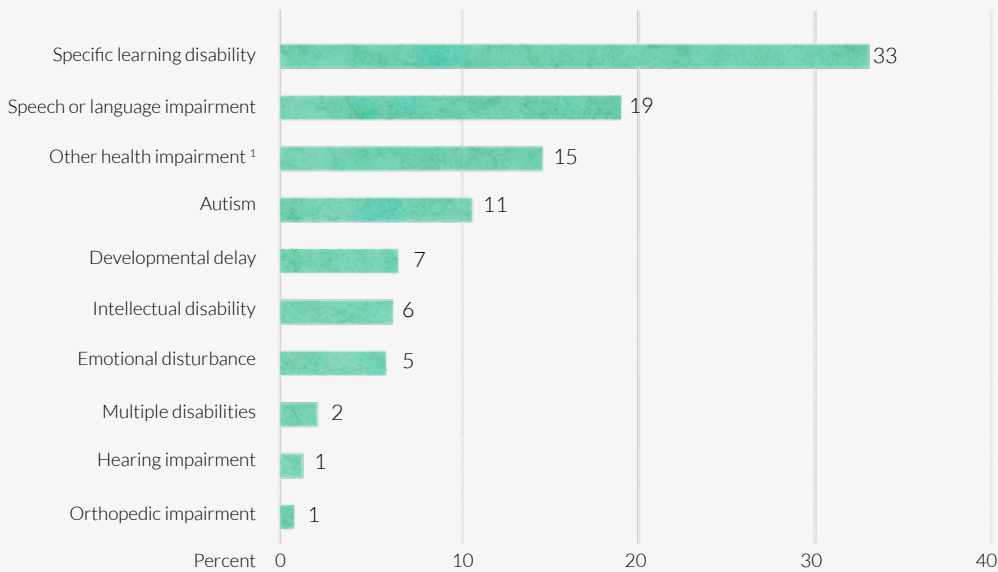


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of students ages 3–21 served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): School year 2018–19⁴

1- The condition of Education – Students with disabilities https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp
2- <https://www.ldatschool.ca/a-t-e-one-differentiate-ieps/>
3- The condition of Education – Students with disabilities https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp

English language learners, of which there are over five million in the United States³, have also faced a series of challenges during the period of remote learning triggered by COVID-19. In some of our interviews, parents and caregivers reported a reduction in the frequency and length of English as a second language (ESL) classes. Parents and caregivers also reported being often unable to access information in their home language when schools shut down, making it especially difficult to access needed resources, such as food or internet. When interviewed, teachers and administrators expressed a lack of knowledge as to how best to build trust and establish regular communication with families of English language learners, especially with parents who were vulnerable to deportation due to their immigration status.

We surveyed over 700 parents and caregivers, 300 teachers, and 100 administrators, asking them to rate their school districts' support for special populations—including learners with disabilities and English language learners—as part of the overall remote learning response for COVID-19. On a four-point scale—poor, fair, good, great—parents on average rated their districts' responses as fair while teachers and administrators rated them as good. During interviews, teachers, parents and caregivers, and administrators agreed that there is still room for improvement to develop a comprehensive strategy to best support both of these populations during periods of remote or hybrid learning.

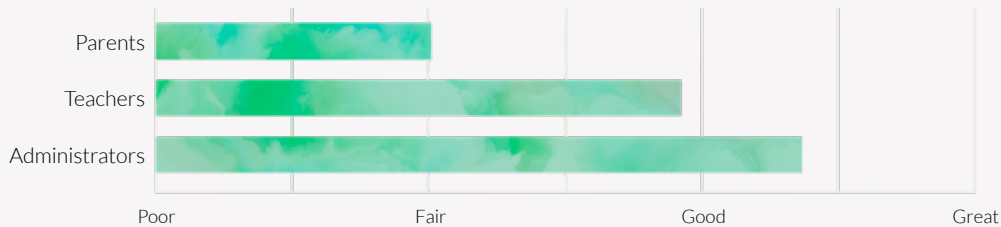
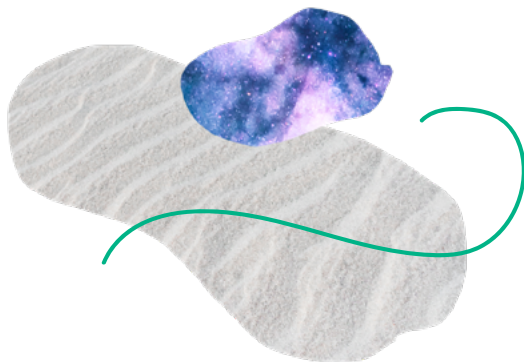


Figure 2. Average response to the question: "Rate your school district's support for special populations (incl. special education students, English language learners)"

4- The condition of Education – English Language Learners in Public Schools - https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgf.asp



Through our research, we identified three key success factors for supporting special populations across different learning environments.



1 Connect and understand the context

The first step in periods of remote or hybrid learning should be to **connect with students and families and understand their realities**, as is outlined in the Family engagement chapter of this booklet. During our interviews with administrators, teachers, and parents/caregivers. We uncovered a series of challenges faced by our two populations of focus.

Students with learning disabilities:

Parents and caregivers of students with learning disabilities shared that their children had a more extreme range of responses to the new learning routines triggered by COVID-19. Some of these students could not engage with virtual synchronous schooling at all whereas others preferred it to in-person schooling. The primary challenge for these families was that parents/caregivers were overwhelmed with the number of tasks they had to do to support their children's education on a daily basis. Beyond playing the role of teacher and family, parents/caregivers had to also play the role of tailoring their children's education to fit their learning disability, the role of language specialist, and the role of paraprofessional, without being provided any additional training.



English language learners faced challenges of their own:

- **Difficulty accessing school's communications** when not translated into their home languages.
- **Lack of adequate learning resources.** Interviewed parents expressed that some of the asynchronous resources, including videos and audio, used by the school, had complex vocabulary and were fast-paced dialogues.
- **Difficulty accessing resources** such as food and internet due to fear of deportation.
- **Marginalization in the school environment** in cases in which schools were not welcoming of different families' contextual realities and backgrounds.

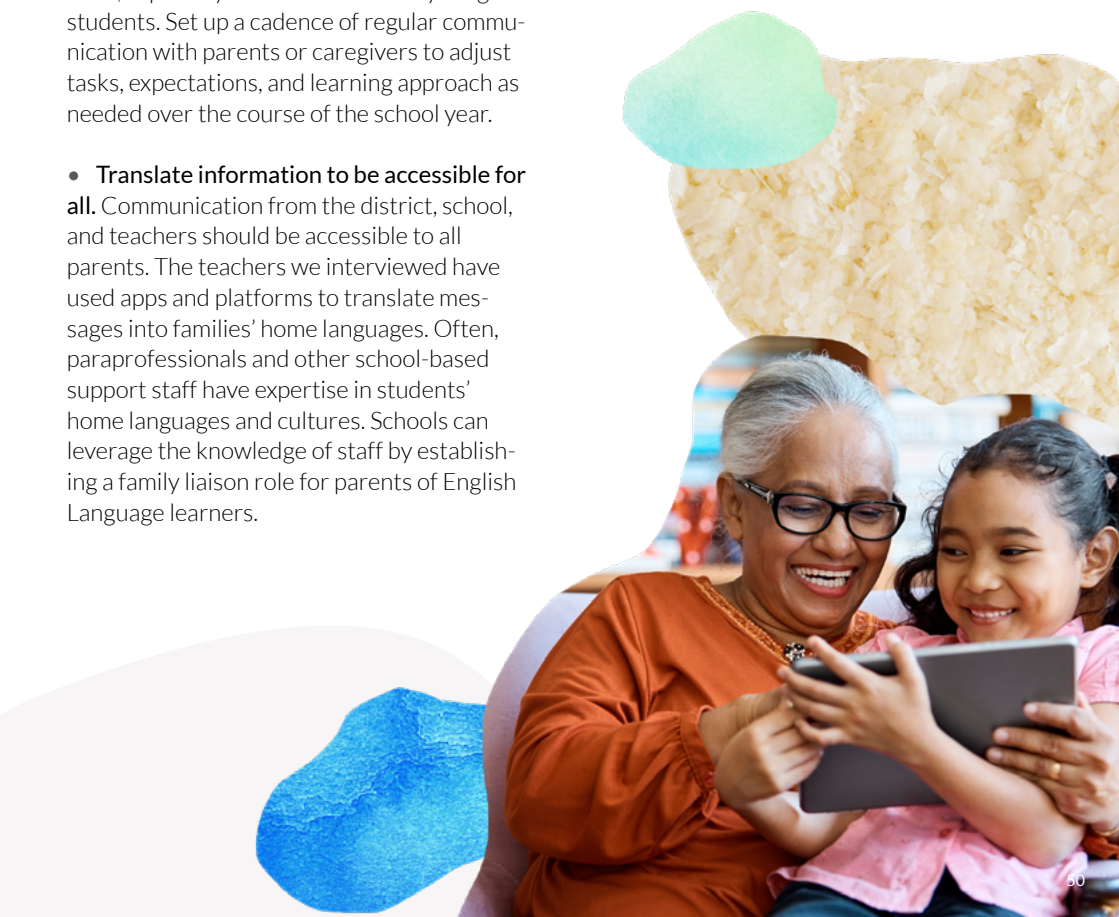
Some practices school districts used to understand the contextual realities of students with learning disabilities and English language learners:

- **Listen closely to families** to understand the individual context for each student at home and use this information as a starting place to respond to the student's needs. Be sure to provide additional opportunities for families of special populations to meet with their child's educators.
- **Establish intensive regular communication with the families.** Conduct personal calls with students and families at the beginning of the school year to tailor the learning approach for the student and align expectations, especially with the families of younger students. Set up a cadence of regular communication with parents or caregivers to adjust tasks, expectations, and learning approach as needed over the course of the school year.
- **Translate information to be accessible for all.** Communication from the district, school, and teachers should be accessible to all parents. The teachers we interviewed have used apps and platforms to translate messages into families' home languages. Often, paraprofessionals and other school-based support staff have expertise in students' home languages and cultures. Schools can leverage the knowledge of staff by establishing a family liaison role for parents of English Language learners.



Finding the families is the most important step in remote learning.”

Teacher of students with moderate learning disabilities



2 Individualize, personalize, and tailor the response for each student.

Tailoring learning plans for each student is not a job that should be done by teachers in isolation. When students are learning remotely across so many different home contexts, it is especially important for school-based teams to communicate regularly to understand and respond to each individual student's needs. For special populations of students with disabilities and English language learners, individualized support is essential.

To achieve this goal, schools should **set up a cadence of recurring meetings for all teachers, co-teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff** who interact with the students. This team should complete the following tasks:

- **Personalize and tailor each student's learning plan.** Start by discussing each student's progress and unique challenges. Use this information to decide on the best learning approach and goals for each student, including potential modifications needed due to their specific learning environments. For example, activities and practices to achieve a certain goal may differ if the student is at home versus in the classroom.

- **Plan activities and resources needed.** Discuss and choose educational resources with accessibility for all learners. Teachers we interviewed highlighted the importance of resources that enable multiple means of action and expression for students to demonstrate what they have learned: drawing, recording a video and/or audio, or reading, for example.

Select educational resources with accessibility for all learners in mind.

- **Train the school-based team,** including all staff members that interact with students. Enable members to communicate regularly, share information, and learn from each other.



Case Study

TLC Public Charter School conducts daily meetings in which the school-based team meets to problem-solve, share information on individual students and families, and reflect on what more they can do to engage and involve every student. Jessica Tunney, the school's founding principal, emphasized the importance of information sharing to develop a comprehensive learning strategy for special populations. "The daily meetings keep information current. Everyone shares one success and one challenge for their students ... As a team it is easier to understand if a family is struggling and why," she says.

3 Work closely with families as partners.

As previously outlined in the chapter on family engagement, working collaboratively with parents and caregivers is key for any learning context, not only for periods of remote learning. To best support special populations, the parents, caregivers, teachers, and administrators we interviewed outlined the following practices for teams working directly with these students:

- **Connect with parents and caregivers of students on a regular basis** to discuss students' progress, provide visibility on the goals for the week, and offer guidance on how to best facilitate activities at home.

- **Be flexible on the plan** to best support parents and students in this journey. Remember that parents are not used to interacting with their children as learners and that they need guidance in the process. Understand constraints the family may have and help them adjust the plan for the week.

- **Understand parents and caregivers as partners and people.** Recognize the emotional difficulty parents and caregivers of special populations face during periods of remote learning as they work with their children at home. Be gentle, flexible, and kind.

- **Help connect families with additional services and supports** available in the community.

Tips and tricks

Provide parents with a priority checklist and a schedule to follow, outlining the learning goals and most important activities for the week.

Provide tech and non-tech solutions; not all learners with disabilities may respond well with tech-enabled solutions.

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Mental health supports for students and teachers



Especially in times of uncertainty, schools play a critical role in supporting the well being of students and teachers.

Prior to the pandemic, a national study indicated that as many as one in six children in the United States between the ages of 6 and 17 had a diagnosable mental health disorder. Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, and anxiety were found to be among the most common mental health disorders in children⁶.

The COVID-19 crisis may worsen existing mental health conditions and lead to an increase in the number of cases among children, families, and teachers. A recent survey conducted across school districts in California reported that more than half of the students who responded to the survey said that they feel they require mental health services. Prior to the pandemic, only 22% of students reported receiving counseling or therapy.

Some of the most common challenges students have described during COVID-19 include a lack of motivation, not seeing their friends, having to work to support families, and keeping up with schoolwork.



“I miss seeing my friends. Some of them do not answer my messages anymore”

Fifth grader

It's important to highlight that mental health assistance for students, teachers, and staff should expand beyond the diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders and encompass wellness practices to address other mental health needs, including trauma and distress caused by the pandemic. Moreover, districts play an important role in supporting these needs since, for the majority of students, school is a primary source of care and the entry point for receiving mental health services.

Our interviews revealed a lack of adequate resources to support students, teachers, and staff dealing with mental health situations not categorized as disorders. Often, the teacher is the only resource available to support students going through trauma or distress, and there are not structures or people in place to train teachers to deal with these situations or to support them with their own mental health and well-being.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Association of School Psychologists, and the National Association of School Psychologists released **resources including checklists for behaviors and reactions to be aware of as well as methods to reduce stress and anxiety.**



6- "US National and State-Level Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders and Disparities of Mental Health Care Use in Children," JAMA Pediatrics, February 2019. JAMA Network. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2724377p>
 7- Summary of student mental health survey results. American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California. April 2019
 8- "Schools Are the Main Source of Student Mental Health Care. Are They Ready?" Education Week, July 2020.
https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2020/02/schools_student_mental_health_care_are_they_ready.html

From our research, we gathered some initial **practices for school administrators to best support students' and teachers' mental health in periods of remote or hybrid learning.**

1 Establish a multidisciplinary team of mental health professionals.

Within the budgetary constraints of the district, try to ensure that schools in your district have an adequate staff of professionals trained to provide comprehensive mental health services for students, teachers, and other school staff. These services include:⁹

- **Diagnostic assessments** used to identify if a student has a mental health diagnosis or is experiencing other circumstances, such as trauma or distress and
- **Treatment**, such as psychotherapy, medication, or counseling, to lessen or eliminate the symptoms of a disorder.

Mental health services can be provided by different types of professionals¹⁰, each of which has its own training and area of expertise. The types of professionals who may provide mental health services include psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric/mental health nurse practitioners, psychiatric/mental health nurses, clinical social workers, and professional counselors.

In addition to adequately staffing an internal team, ensure there are collaboration mechanisms in place with community mental health providers¹¹. Community providers may be able to offer supplementary services outside of the school's scope. Partnerships are recommended to ensure students, teachers, and other school staff receive the support that they need.



9- Explore Data on Mental Health Services in K–12 Public Schools for Mental Health Awareness Month. National Center for Education Statistics. May 2018

10- Explore Data on Mental Health Services in K–12 Public Schools for Mental Health Awareness Month. National Center for Education Statistics. May 2018

11- "School-Based Mental Health Services: Improving Student Learning and Well-Being." 2016. National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/mental-health/school-psychology-and-mental-health/school-based-mental-health-services>

2 Communicate regularly with stakeholders to provide resources and understand needs.

Ensure teachers, other school staff, parents, caregivers, and students are aware of the resources available for themselves and for others. Some practices that can be implemented to create this awareness include

- **Webinars** on available resources and how to identify individuals that may need support.
- **Create a section in the district's and schools' websites** outlining available resources, including a channel to submit questions and concerns.
- **Establish opportunities for regular dialogue with stakeholders** to understand socioemotional health.
- **Include emails, videos, and text messages** with resources and mindful practices for all stakeholders as part of your communication plan.
- **Teacher and staff training** on how to handle common mental health scenarios and the best way to guide students to seek additional support.


Tips and tricks



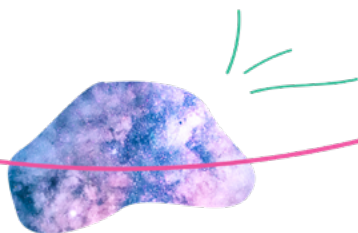
Share daily successes and challenges at daily short debrief meetings with teachers and school staff. The debrief can be done in person or via videoconference. It can include a smaller group organized by grade or subject or a larger group including the overall school staff, depending on the size of the school.

Arrange "coffee chats" with the school principal for families.

Organize wellness and mindfulness meet-ups for families, students, teachers, and staff.

 "Our principal has been sending us weekly emails with resources on mindfulness and mental health which has been super helpful."

Eighth-grade math teacher



3 Assess and respond to the current emotional state of teachers and students.

Start by assessing the emotional state of teachers. During our interviews with over 40 teachers, they shared feelings of anxiety and stress they experienced during the period of remote learning triggered by COVID-19. Some of the common themes are below:

- **Working longer hours and struggling to separate their professional from personal life:**

Teachers tried to accommodate their working hours to different types of students, waking up early in the morning to answer emails that were sent in the middle of the night or staying up late at night answering questions for students that had to work during the day.

“Teachers are conditioned to believe that the wellbeing and education of their students is completely on their shoulders, and then you take away all of the goodness that comes from being with your kids in person every day, and it is so draining and exhausting and hard.”

10th grade teacher

- **Feeling responsible for their students' wellbeing and success:**

All the teachers we interviewed expressed concerns about the students that disconnected when schools shut down. They felt responsible for ensuring the mental and physical wellbeing of all their students. Some of the concerns that were top of mind for teachers were families in financial distress and/or experiencing homelessness, physical and mental violence at home, students' depression, and students with learning disabilities not having adequate support.



4 Assess the mental health state of students on an on-going basis

Leveraging the team of mental health professionals and the relationship teachers have with their students.

Actions for teachers

Create opportunities for students to share how they are feeling:

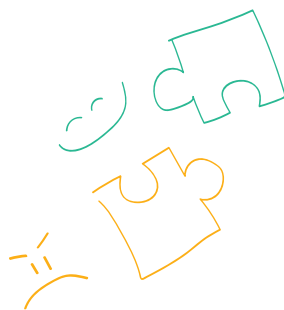
- Schedule non-academic synchronous videoconference group sessions for students to talk about their overall emotional state. Ask them to share topics that are top of mind for them.
- Create one-on-one opportunities to connect with students.
- Launch weekly surveys with simple questions to understand how students are feeling, what is working, and what can be improved.

“I learned about the #IWishMyTeacherKnew movement a couple of years ago, and since then I dedicate time in my class to ask my students what they wish I knew. The answers can be heartbreaking, and it requires a lot of preparation on my side to learn how to best support my students.”

Middle-school teacher

Actions for the team of mental health specialists

- Schedule time to check in individually with each student at the beginning of the school year.
- Create ongoing opportunities—such as individual appointments or group and peer-peer counselling sessions—to work with students on the particular challenges they may be facing.
- Provide guidance to teachers and other school staff on how to report concerns, including behavioral issues, substance-use disorders and trauma.



Case study

Colegio Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza in Peru set up a centralized team of teachers, therapists, and counselors that conducts weekly sessions with students in each grade to understand students' mental health through individual and group activities, such as games and storytelling. Social and emotional skills—including how to be a team player, creating a schedule, organizing your learning space, and how to express emotions in a healthy way—are also explored during the sessions

Conclusion

Throughout the flexible learning preparedness index booklet, we've highlighted strategies and tools that can be used immediately by school districts. We hope you'll take time to self-assess your district and explore the [Khan Academy flexible learning toolkit for additional resources](#).

As we publish this guide, many aspects of flexible learning preparedness are urgent due to COVID-19. Yet, it is also helpful to step back for a moment from the current reality and imagine several years in the future. Imagine a scenario where communities and school districts have closed the digital divide so that all students have access to the tools of the 21st century. Imagine family engagement as the bedrock of K-12 education that has become a true team effort. Imagine teachers, families, and students who feel properly supported to use curricular resources and platforms both in and outside of school. Imagine school districts that are genuinely prepared for emergency disruptions to in-person learning.

We hope this guide provides inspiration for administrators and teachers as they navigate the planning process in the months to come. Ultimately, it is the courage, resilience, and ingenuity of education professionals that provide hope amid our current crisis in education. Teachers and school district administrators are experts at thoughtful planning; they are always thinking ahead and developing back-up plans.

Equip school districts and educators with an effective mix of resources, tools, time, and trust. Recognize that flexible learning preparedness is an ongoing process. Keep the focus on student outcomes and experiences.

Our current crisis will eventually end, and on the other side might be school districts with stronger systems of communication, more robust curricular resources, higher-trust relationships among key stakeholders and, ultimately, stronger student outcomes.

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