

## COVID-19 Digital Learning & Equity

As many schools, districts, and campuses work on transitioning to digital learning models due to COVID-19, it is important for teachers, education support professionals, higher education faculty and staff, administrators, and local and state officials to keep equity in mind and consider how these decisions affect all populations of students. Students with disabilities, students without access to internet, and other under-represented populations of students are at higher risk of experiencing school closures more intensely. This document contains:

1. Questions to Assess Decisions for Equity
2. Special Education Considerations
3. Internet Access & the Homework Gap
4. Additional Digital Learning Resources

### Questions to Assess Decisions for Equity

Following are examples of questions that affiliates can keep in mind as important decisions are being made to ensure equity for all students:

- Clarifying Your Goals
  - What kind of decision is under consideration (e.g. policy, program, budget)?
    - Do all my students have access to the internet? If not, who does? Who does not?
    - Should I assign digital work to students if I don't know whether they have internet access? How much flexibility should be built into digital learning experiences and assignments?
    - How do I ensure my students with disabilities are properly accommodated?
  - What results or changes are you seeking to/that advance racial/social justice?
- Engaging Necessary Stakeholders
  - Who is most directly impacted, especially those most marginalized or under-represented (e.g. educators or students of color, students with disabilities, rural students, lowest-paid workers)?
  - How can they be meaningfully engaged and empowered in this process?
- Analyzing Data
  - What is the relevant history and current context?
  - What data do we have, and what do we need? Is it disaggregated by race?
  - Who benefits, and who is most burdened? How are different racial/ethnic groups affected differently?
  - What are the root causes of the problem? Are there intersecting dynamics?
- Generating Options
  - What proposed solutions can address the root causes, remedy existing negative impacts, and change systems?
  - How will this proposal advance racial and social justice, equity, and inclusion?
- Assessing Impacts
  - What are the positive and negative impacts on different racial communities?

- How will marginalized groups and communities of color benefit from each option?
- How can this help counteract dominant patterns of white supremacy?
- What positive values, norms, and narratives can we affirm and project?
- How does this align with our values, vision, mission and priorities?
- Deciding a Solution
  - What are the pros and cons of each option?
  - Are there ways to revise the options to prevent adverse consequences?
  - Which option best advances equity?
- Developing an Implementation Plan
  - What strategies, staffing, and funding are needed to ensure success?
  - What is the implementation plan and timetable? Who will move it forward?
  - How will we document and measure progress? What are the success indicators?
  - How can we ensure ample communication, participation and accountability?
- Operationalizing Equitable Change
  - How can we operationalize equity practices to sustain success?
  - How do we institute these changes, so they become ongoing practices, protocols, habits – a part of our organizational culture?

## **Special Education**

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues and many schools attempt to make the transition to digital learning, students with disabilities must not be forgotten. First and foremost, students with disabilities are general education students. Digital learning opportunities offered to general education students must also be provided to students with special needs. Supports for instruction, present levels of performance, specific objectives and goals, and where instruction and services are delivered are all components of a student’s individualized education program (IEP). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees procedural safeguards for all students with IEPs to ensure that a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) is provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act directs the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) to report to Congress on recommendations for possible legislative waivers to IDEA, “to provide limited flexibility... to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities...”

In a surprising change of direction, the USDE Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and Office for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) [announced](#) that schools “should not opt to close or decline to provide distance instruction, at the expense of students, to address matters pertaining to services for students with disabilities.” The Department reiterates that ensuring compliance with IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act should NOT prevent any school from offering educational programs through distance instruction.

School districts are reminded that the provision of FAPE may include, as appropriate, special education and related services provided through distance instruction virtually, online, or telephonically. During this national emergency, schools may not be able to provide all services in the same manner. While it may not be feasible to provide physical therapy, occupational therapy, or tactile sign language educational services, many disability-related services can be provided online, such as extension of time for assignments, videos with closed captioning or embedded sign language, accessible reading materials, and speech or language services through video conferencing.

The NEA believes that Congress can and should allow for some targeted flexibility in legal requirements to allow for creative problem solving and implementation of innovative solutions that ensure all students have access to learning opportunities while schools remain closed.

It is critically important that state and local officials are supported as they consider the unique needs of their communities as they respond to COVID-19 and develop appropriate learning opportunities for ALL students. We believe that the school-based multi-disciplinary IEP team, along with parents and guardians, is in the best position to make all decisions related to students' social, emotional, and academic development.

Congress and USDE must provide additional funding to schools to help provide equitable access to assistive technology and program needs during this unprecedented crisis. Many school districts lack the infrastructure to comprehensively and equitably support student learning in a digital environment. Now is the time for Congress to provide states with the necessary funding and guidance to minimize the impact that COVID-19 has on all student learning.

### **'Homework Gap'**

The COVID-19 epidemic has shone a bright light on the "homework gap" experienced by millions of students in every corner of this country who do not have internet access at home. Already, more than 70 percent of educators assign schoolwork requiring the internet, which leaves many low-income and rural students at an educational and technological disadvantage. The National Education Association believes that the federal government, and specifically the Federal Communications Commission, should provide home wireless service to existing school devices and hotspots for students who lack internet access at home.

We encourage the federal government to reduce all barriers to teaching and learning that are currently affecting millions of students and educators who continue to experience academic access challenges due to COVID-19. We are asking the federal government to use all emergency powers to temporarily waive relevant E-rate program rules to ensure that all K-12 students have adequate home internet connectivity during school closings.

The NEA believes that legislation such as the Homework Trust Fund Act of 2020 (S. 3633/H.R. forthcoming), recently introduced by Sen. Van Hollen, which would allocate \$2-4 billion of the proceeds from the auction of C-band spectrum to provide students with access to the internet at home, is the type of solution that would help work to close the homework gap.

School districts and teachers are struggling with how to bring learning online where several of their students may lack the connectivity to participate. While we continue to wait for the federal government to appropriately respond, we are pleased to share additional digital learning resources to help educators navigate the practical side of online teaching and learning during this time. To further iterate the importance of this issue, please consider the following:

- The coronavirus epidemic has shone a bright light on the "homework gap" experienced by 12 million students in this country who don't have internet access at home and are unable to complete their homework, at a time when more than 70 percent of educators assign schoolwork that requires the internet.
- The existing inequity among students experiencing the homework gap is only exacerbated during a time of crisis (e.g. coronavirus, weather events, etc).
- E-rate is positioned to provide up to \$2 billion in discounts to schools to procure Wi-Fi hotspots to loan to students who do not have internet at home. It could also be used to equip devices schools won with Wi-Fi capability for loan to students.

## **Additional Resources**

Lastly, below are additional resources for teachers on digital learning that could be helpful throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These resources range from practical do's and don'ts to digital "netiquette" to advice from other teachers and more.

### **[COVID-19 Resource Hub](#)**

*Instruction Partners has curated this website of COVID resources for educators, ranging from different types of digital instructional models to various subject-level resources to a school hierarchy of needs.*

### **[Learning Keeps Going Coalition & Educator Help Desk](#)**

*This coalition, led by ISTE, provides resources, webinars, school closure maps, and most notably, a COVID-19 educator help desk, a growing group of educators coming together to help each other throughout this crisis.*

### **[Video Conference Etiquette](#)**

*Zoom's blog post provides the necessary "netiquette" so you know how to act, where to look, what to wear, and so forth during your video conferencing.*

### **[Zoomtopia: 10 Zoom Tips and Tricks You May Not Know](#)**

*This 45-minute webinar from Zoom can help you learn many of Zoom video conferencing's tips and tricks, such as recording transcripts, screen sharing, and even touching up your appearance or adding a virtual background.*

### **[Professors, Don't Be Scared. Teaching Online Is Great.](#)**

*This blog from a professor who regularly teaches online can help soothe some uneasiness by providing some tidbits and lessons that she has learned.*

### **[Protecting Student Privacy on Social Media: Do's and Don'ts for Teachers](#)**

*Student data privacy is always of importance, but particularly so during times of digital learning. These do's and don'ts help know how to keep your students' privacy protected.*

### **[Six Ways to Avoid Those Social Media Landmines](#)**

*This blog post from NEA reminds teachers how to navigate the often-tricky situations of teachers' social media presence.*

### **[Podcast: Remote Collaborating and Planning - Timely Tips from AASA, Digital Promise, and CoSN](#)**

*This half-hour podcast covers how to convene and collaborate through digital platforms, key questions that need to be asked of education decision makers, the importance of engagement, the role of the educator in remote collaboration, security and safety concerns, how to bring in higher education, and advice on how to present information in the digital space.*

### **[Resources for Online Learning During School Closures](#)**

*This culmination of resources from NEA include online articles, webinars, and different mediums teachers can use to get connected.*

### **[With School Closures, Teachers Can Keep Their Lessons Going Remotely](#)**

*This blog gives tips and strategies on how to keep students engaged using tools such as Google Classroom, Google Forms, and Hangouts.*

[Checklist for Distance Learning: Preparing for COVID-19 School Closure: Interactive/Printable Handouts](#)

*This checklist developed by AFT provides educators a one-page reference of considerations for teaching, technology, engaging students with disabilities, and support for English language learners.*

[Distance Learning Solutions](#)

*The list of educational applications, platforms and resources below aim to help parents, teachers, schools and school administrators facilitate student learning.*

[Considerations for Special Education Administrators](#)

*This resource provides a list of considerations for special education administrators from how to talk about COVID-19 to how to schools should respond to the pandemic.*