

➔ Continued Learning during COVID-19

By Joseph Hedger

Since states closed school buildings to protect students from COVID-19, schools have had to adapt quickly to keep students learning. Nearly all states put out guidance or resources to help districts and schools institute continuous learning and surmount the challenges faced by students in homes with limited or no internet access and those with disabilities.

In states like Alabama, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, and West Virginia, much of this work took place with the help of a task force or advisory group quickly assembled and comprising educators and administrators from across the state. Resulting district plans for continuous learning encompass use of online platforms to conduct classes, streaming and TV-based content, teaching assistance online or by phone, assigning and mailing resources and lesson plans, and even in-person interactions for students with disabilities in homes or classrooms.

Plans address accessibility of instruction for all students, teacher and staff resources, and needs services for students with disabilities.

According to analyst Georgia Heyward of the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), a review of districts' learning plans show that state directives strongly shaped them, even as local officials craft tailored plans to meet the needs of their districts.

EQUITY AND ACCESS

The **Kansas** Continuous Learning Task Force suggested questions for administrators and teachers to ask in forming their plans, a sequence of tasks to enable educators to make their plans over a five-day period, a parent survey, guidelines for adjusting learning time for students at different grade levels given the new distance learning context, content and grade-level guidelines, alternatives to online-based resources, safety recommendations for online learning, and links to free resources.¹ The Kansas state board approved 350 resulting plans April 14.²

The **Illinois state board's** guidance covers appropriate time and tasks for remote instruction, grading, and considerations for multilingual learners. "All students should have the opportunity to redo, make up, or try again to complete, show progress, or attempt to complete work assigned prior to the remote learning period in that time frame," it says.³

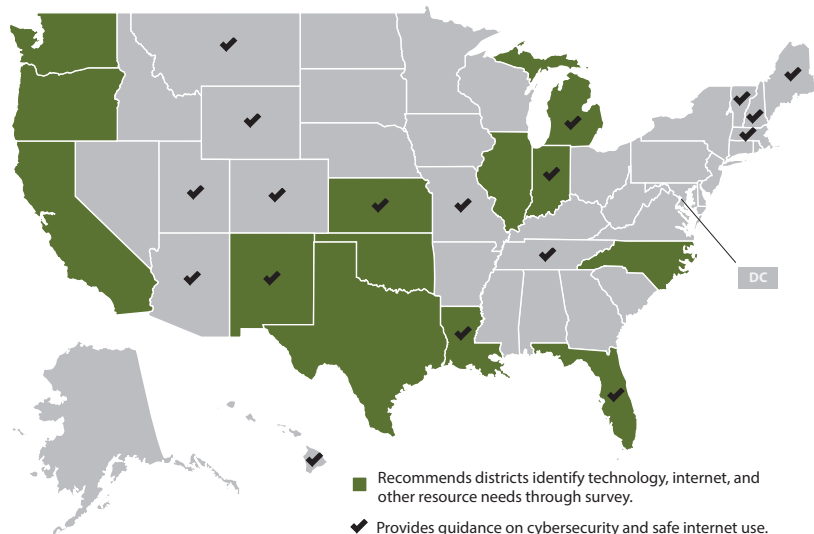
State guidance recognizes that not all homes are equally well equipped for online learning. **California's** guidance asks districts to consider where a student falls in a continuum of content delivery options:

- teacher interaction and assistance through online learning platform;
- online curriculum for students to work on at home;
- online curriculum in computer lab or classroom, consistent with social distancing guidelines;
- paper packets of instructional materials for students to work on at home; or
- in-person settings, consistent with social distancing guidelines.⁴

Illinois's guidance leans away from teaching new content during the pandemic, stating that students "cannot be required to master and cannot be penalized for failure to master the new content." Meanwhile, **Indiana's** guidance links to ILearn Blueprints to help districts identify the high-priority standards they are expected to address in each grade band for the remainder of the school year.⁵

Many states recommend working with internet and cellphone providers or direct distribution of technology to ensure that students and families can access online learning. Thirteen states recommend that districts identify the technology, internet, and other resource needs of students through surveys (see figure 1). Education technology association ISTE suggests that districts buy or rent wi-fi hot spots and determine how best to distribute them to teachers and students who need them.⁶ South Carolina

Figure 1. State Guidance on Surveying Technology Needs



Source: Author's scan of state education COVID-19 resources.

and Indiana leverage school buses to serve as hotspots in rural areas of their state.

According to **West Virginia's** remote learning framework, districts should not only consider access to technology. They must also ensure that their instruction methods account for students who are at home alone while adults are working, students who are caretakers for siblings or ill family members or are coping with illness or loss, students who have special needs or are struggling with anxiety or depression, and staff who are working remotely while simultaneously providing care for their families.

State recommendations vary in level of detail. For example, 10 states recommend minimum daily learning times for students participating in distance learning.⁷ **Massachusetts** encourages students to engage in meaningful, productive learning for approximately half the length of a regular school day. Other states break down recommended time frames to grade bands, mostly splitting daily expected learning times between prekindergarten, kindergarten, 1-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12.

Indiana and Oklahoma's recommendations break down each day's work into their own blocks of time to represent what a sample school day plan might look like remotely.

Oregon provides a similar sample plan, which splits work time into three categories for each grade band: teacher-led learning, learning and supplemental activities, and meeting nutrition and wellness needs.

Many students may not or cannot adequately engage in distance learning, and while some states have waived requirements for tracking attendance, districts still must plan how to engage students meaningfully during this time.

TEACHER SUPPORT

In providing e-learning day expectations for staff, **Nebraska** points to teachers as important social, emotional, and instructional touchpoints for students. Thus the coronavirus only heightened the need for teachers to check in with and support students who are particularly vulnerable to loss of instruction.

The document also holds education leaders accountable for supporting the well-being

and effectiveness of teachers; managing the schedule of instructional delivery and vetting resources; managing communication with teachers, students, and family members; and gathering data on student performance to help teachers target key learning needs.⁸

In April, the **South Carolina** Department of Education released an online portal to resources for students, families, and teachers. The site includes tips and tools for virtual learning; ways to build and maintain relationships with students, including checking in daily and sharing stories; digital learning tools; and a remote education checklist with recommended actions for educators.⁹

In **New York State**, the education department extended deadlines for subject-area certification requirements, obtaining classroom experience, and eligibility applications for special education teachers so they can focus all their efforts on supporting the students and families they serve.¹⁰

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

On March 19, the U.S. Department of Education released an FAQ on continuation of services for special needs students. "The LEA must make every effort to provide special education and related services to the child in accordance with the child's individualized education program (IEP) or, for students entitled to free appropriate public education (FAPE) under Section 504, consistent with a plan developed to meet the requirements of Section 504," it said.¹¹ While ED is expected to release more related guidance, many states have used this as a starting point for communicating special education requirements to their districts.

The **Iowa** Continuous Learning Task Force suggested letting educators determine how best to reach all students, including online, through home delivery or making resources available for pickup, check-ins online or by phone, or other innovative methods. They also require IEP teams to reconvene to determine how FAPE can be provided continuously.¹²

In a memo to school superintendents, the **New York** Education Department addressed alternative instructional options for students with disabilities, resources to help districts provide continuity of learning and communicate with

parents, and whether IEPs need to be amended for online learning.¹³ **Alaska's** Special Education Team has been hosting webinars related to special education during the pandemic.

Nobody is facing this pandemic alone. State boards and other state education policymakers must reach across agencies and across the country to discover how best to guide their school systems through the equity and social-emotional challenges students are facing.

"States shouldn't lose sight of the forest for the trees," said CRPE analyst Ashley Jochim. "One of the most important things they can do in this time of crisis-fueled uncertainty is set a vision for what learning looks like in the months ahead."

Joseph Hedger is NASBE's associate editor.

NOTES

1 Kansas State Department of Education, "Continuous Learning Task Force Guidance," March 2020.

2 Kansas State Board of Education, "Summary of the 2020 April State Board of Education Meeting," April 14, 2020.

3 Illinois State Board of Education, "Remote Learning Recommendations during COVID-19 Emergency," March 27, 2020.

4 California Department of Education, "Distance Learning," web page, March 17, 2020.

5 Indiana Department of Education, "Indiana Continuous Learning Guidance," March 2020.

6 Jennifer Snelling and Diana Fingal, "10 Strategies for Online Learning during a Coronavirus Outbreak" (International Society for Technology in Education, 2020).

7 These states are Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, and West Virginia.

8 Nebraska Department of Education, "3 Models for E-Learning and Staff Expectations," 2020.

9 SC Remote Learning, "Digital Teaching and Learning Resources," web page.

10 New York Education Department, "Memo: Special Education SOCE Limited Extension," April 2020.

11 U.S. Department of Education, "Questions and Answers on Providing Services to Children with Disabilities during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Outbreak," March 19, 2020, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/memosdctr/qc-covid-19-03-12-2020.pdf>.

12 Iowa Department of Education, "COVID-19 Guidance: Provision of Continuous Learning," March 27, 2020.

13 New York Education Department, "Memo: Provision of Services to Students with Disabilities during Statewide School Closures Due to Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak in New York State," March 27, 2020.

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