



Distance Learning During COVID-19: 7 EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS



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Government officials are taking swift public health actions to slow the rapidly spreading COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of March, statewide school closures affected 55.1 million K-12 public school students across our country.¹ Over 20 million of these students live within the seventeen states covered by the Southern Education Foundation, and a majority of these students live in poverty.²

While school closures affect all students, students from underserved communities feel this impact even greater. Data on digital disparities reveal that nearly 20 percent of African American children ages 3-18 and 21 percent of families earning less than \$40,000 per year have no access to the internet at home.³ The Southern Education Foundation is working to bring awareness to digital equity issues and provide state and district leaders with resources and promising practices as they make quick and difficult decisions to ensure that all students have access to learning opportunities during this crisis.

What is Distance Learning?

Distance or remote learning is often thought to be synonymous with online learning. In fact, they are different. Distance learning may incorporate online learning, but it may also include other components. For example, some school districts have opted to create packets for students and families to pick up which include learning materials and exercises. In other districts, teachers are using online platforms to provide instruction for students

and to communicate with students and their families. Districts should keep in mind the needs of their students and families when choosing how to implement distance learning during school closures.

Keeping Learning at the Center

District and school leaders are turning to remote or distance learning in an effort to minimize COVID-19's disruptions to instruction. While technology is important, providing laptops and materials are not enough to ensure that learning is taking place. Research on the science of learning highlights the importance of collaborative project work, real-world problem solving, and supportive and safe relationships with adults and peers.⁴ Schools and districts should keep learning at the center by engaging in developmentally appropriate, project-based learning, and by supporting teachers and families with training and guidance on distance learning practices. Instructors should interact and communicate with students by creating active and collaborative ways to learn that differ from the traditional classroom setting. In addition, schools and districts should be especially mindful of grade transitions during this time and leverage curricular or community resources to provide additional social, emotional and academic support to students who are moving from preschool to elementary school, from elementary to middle school, from middle school to high school, and from high school to college or career.

7 Distance Learning Equity Considerations

We have reviewed publicly available digital learning plans for the seventeen states covered by the Southern Education Foundation to see how schools and districts are meeting the needs of their most vulnerable students and families. They have taken different approaches for distance learning based on the needs of their student populations, grade level, and current technology or infrastructure. To help schools and districts determine what is best for their students and communities, we provide these equity considerations along with examples of how some districts are addressing these issues now.

1 How is your district reaching students and families who don't have internet access?

In addition to providing digital learning in online formats, districts should also consider providing printed materials and partnering with libraries (where open and accessible), community organizations and local television stations to provide learning opportunities. Districts and schools should also be mindful that children and families experiencing homelessness may not be able to participate fully in online learning. Consider partnering with shelters and community organizations to meet these students' learning needs.

2 Do students have access to technology equipment and the internet to engage in distance learning?



If your district has chosen to utilize online tools and platforms, there should be procedures for providing access to resources for families. This may include providing laptops, tablets, or hotspots for students' families or partnering with internet providers in your community.

WiFi & Internet Access

In South Carolina, [Charleston County School District](#) is deploying 10 buses equipped with WiFi to provide additional online coverage for students.

In Texas, the [Dallas Independent School District Board of Trustees](#) approved the purchase of 12,000 WiFi hotspots to support distance learning.

In [Caddo Parish Public Schools, Louisiana](#), the NAACP and Comcast have joined forces to provide two months of free internet to help families without internet access engage in virtual learning activities.

Equipment Rentals & Distribution

[The School District of Palm Beach in Florida](#) is distributing devices on loan for students. Families are allowed up to one device, allowing for families with more than one student to share the device.

[Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland](#) is distributing Chromebooks to students and families. Chromebooks are distributed at elementary and high schools across the county. Families without internet access will be able to get free service through Comcast.



School closures are impacting all families, but students from underserved communities feel this impact even greater.

Print Materials & Instructional Television

[Charlottesville City Schools, Virginia](#) is enabling families to check out laptops and is also providing low-tech options like print-outs of educational materials to ensure continued learning for students at home.

In [Hamilton County Schools, Tennessee](#), office supply company Staples has offered to print and distribute the district's continued learning packets at no cost for families that do not have the ability to print at home.

[Jackson Public Schools, Mississippi](#) is developing a range of learning materials that are paper-based, online, and shared via their Instructional Television Channels.

Special Needs & ELL Supports

[Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Florida](#) has provided supplemental resources for parents with students on modified curricula and students with physical impairments as well as guidance occupational and physical therapy supports. The district also provides instructions for families in English, Spanish and Creole.

[DeKalb County School District, Georgia](#) is providing students with IEPs or 504 plans hard copies of virtual learning assignments, instructional telephone calls with students and/or parents, instruction and tutoring by phone or the internet, daily check-in by phone or internet, shortened assignments, and extended time to complete tasks.

3 How is your district supporting students with special needs and English language learners?

Districts should thoughtfully provide services and learning opportunities for special student populations. Parents of children with special needs may be particularly challenged in the context of school closures and stay-at-home orders due to the distance from their support networks of health aides, therapists and coaches. For English language learners, schools and districts should ensure that families have access to information on school meals and other services in both English and their home language, as well as virtual tutoring and coaching where needed.

4 Are there wraparound services and supports your district offers that students and families are no longer receiving?

If your district offers wraparound services and supports to students and families, evaluate the impact school closures will have. If these services are provided through partners, communicate with partners to determine if services are essential and assess their ability to continue working with students and families.

District & Community Assistance Resources

[Henry County Schools, Georgia](#) has provided parents and families with a list of resources for food assistance, transportation, and mental health services.

[Cedar Hill Independent School District, Texas](#) offers free and confidential emotional assistance and counseling to students and families experiencing issues related to COVID-19.

5

Are teachers given the support they need to adopt developmentally appropriate digital learning practices?

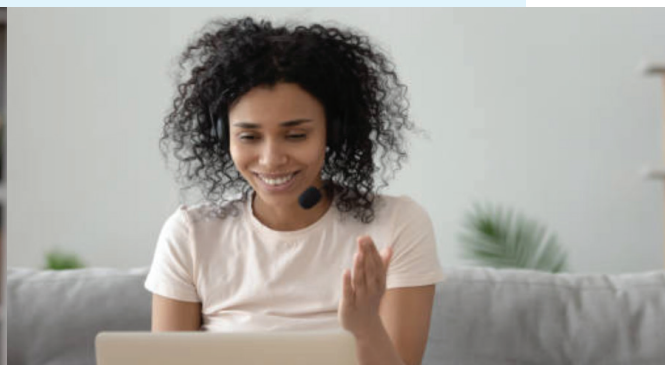
Teaching remotely requires skills and practice to keep students engaged and learning while providing personalized instruction and support. Districts and schools should assess the extent to which their teachers and home educators are informed of remote learning best practices and provide professional development through webinars, help desks or conference calls where possible.

Professional Development & Support

SCETV, South Carolina's public broadcasting and education network, is providing [free virtual professional development sessions](#) to educators on home learning and technology best practices.

[Hillsborough County Public Schools, Florida](#) is providing professional development webinars on distance learning to better support teachers. Webinar topics include teacher training for online platforms, how to leverage technology to monitor student learning, how to create dynamic online videos, how to support students' transition to online learning, and how to provide students with differentiated assignments based on their needs.

[Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Florida](#) has developed new [Instructional Continuity Pacing Guides \(ICPGs\)](#) to help teachers develop distance learning lessons and assignments for students across all grade levels. The ICPGs include general recommendations for how much time a student should spend (weekly or daily) engaging with each subject based on the age and grade level of the student.



Tech Tools

Microsoft has provided a [robust list of tips](#) for making remote learning effective and engaging.

Google has [provided guidance](#) on how teachers can keep their lessons going during school closures and [tips for enabling distance learning](#) through their apps.

6

What impact is COVID-19 having on students' and teachers' mental and emotional health?

COVID-19 and school closures may have a significant impact on students' learning and their ability to complete coursework. Students may be dealing with feelings of isolation, increased responsibility of caring for family members, changes in family income, death, and other issues brought on by the pandemic. Schools and districts should also consider ways to support the social and emotional well-being of teachers, administrators and staff during this time.

Southern Education Foundation

is proud to partner with Common Sense Media for its launch of the [WideOpenSchool.org](#) platform which provides a free collection of online learning experiences to help families and teachers engage students as they are learning from home. The initiative will also bring awareness to digital equity issues; provide a clearinghouse of information for lower-income families to gain access to broadband services; and aggregate trusted resources to help families access urgent services addressing health, hunger, shelter and psychological needs.



Mental & Emotional Health Services

[The San Antonio Independent School District in Texas](#) has opened a virtual school counseling office to support students and their families in addition to [resources](#) on helping children cope with COVID-19, both are available in English and Spanish. [Northside Independent School District, Texas](#) counselors are meeting with students who request support via Google Hangouts. Students are able to request appointments M-F 8:00am to 4:00pm.

[Atlanta Public Schools, Georgia](#) has provided six weeks of social emotional learning lessons to each grade band including lessons for teachers and leaders to help students process their emotions during this time. APS is also providing adult care through virtual Wellness Wednesdays and [SELf-care Fridays](#) with partners providing yoga lessons, mindfulness, and other experiences to support teachers.

Parent Resources

[Wake County Public School System, North Carolina](#) has provided guidance for families broken down by grade and subject. The District has also provided guidance for students on IEPs and has provided phone numbers for translation services for families who do not speak English at home.

[Baltimore City Public Schools, Maryland](#) has provided its parents with learning packets for students at every grade level. Learning packets include materials for each full day of instruction. Additional guides are provided for students with special needs, English learners, and gifted and advanced learning.

Rowan-Salisbury School System, North Carolina has a [dedicated help desk](#) for home learning and technology best practices.

7 What expectations do you have of parents for distance learning?

Some families are parenting, teaching, and working while students are at home. Some students have parents who are essential workers, and these parents may need additional support to ensure their children are “checking in” to school, receiving assistance with school assignments, and engaged for blocks of time that are appropriate for their age and level of development. Districts and schools should consider the capacity of parents to step into a teaching role and how to support these families, especially those with younger children.

The Southern Education Foundation is tracking these rapidly changing developments, and we seek to provide relevant resources to schools and districts as they make choices about how to best serve their students. If you have any questions or suggestions for additional examples we should share, please contact Titilayo Tinubu Ali at tali@southerneducation.org. [SEF](#)

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