

Supporting Learning in the COVID-19 Context: A Summary Brief

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This brief summarizes the key findings from the report *Supporting Learning in the COVID-19 Context*, which offers a framework for districts to use in their preparation to provide quality instruction through distance and blended models. We address modifications that will need to be made in the areas of instruction, content, and student engagement to meet the needs of students in the COVID-19 context. The implementation of quality distance and blended instruction for all students will depend on the extent to which districts provide educators with the support they need to teach successfully in these new contexts. To this end, districts will need to set and communicate expectations about instruction; support educators; develop systems to address greater student needs; and provide technology and data to improve instruction.

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Introduction

Looking ahead to fall 2020, our educational system will face unprecedented shifts that will fundamentally alter how education is delivered to children across California. As districts across the state plan for how education will be delivered this fall, they will need to devise a coherent and comprehensive strategy to help schools and educators adapt to new models of instruction. Without a well-thought-out approach to addressing instruction, districts may find themselves mired in a patchwork of plans with an incoherent and insufficient program of instruction that causes the state's most vulnerable students to fall further behind.

This brief summarizes the key findings from the report *Supporting Learning in the COVID-19 Context*, which offers a framework for districts to use in their preparation to provide quality instruction through distance and blended models, which health guidelines may require in the upcoming year. While new models of instruction (e.g., 2-day rotation, A/B week, looping structure, early/late staggered schedules, or distance learning)¹ will alter the manner in which instruction is delivered, a long-standing research base on high-quality instruction can inform decisions about students' learning and engagement. The recommendations in this brief, drawn from both evidence and expert knowledge, are intended to help California's districts, schools, and educators adapt their instruction to meet students' learning needs. We also highlight key recommendations that districts should implement to support high-quality instruction at scale.

The Instructional Core in the COVID-19 Context

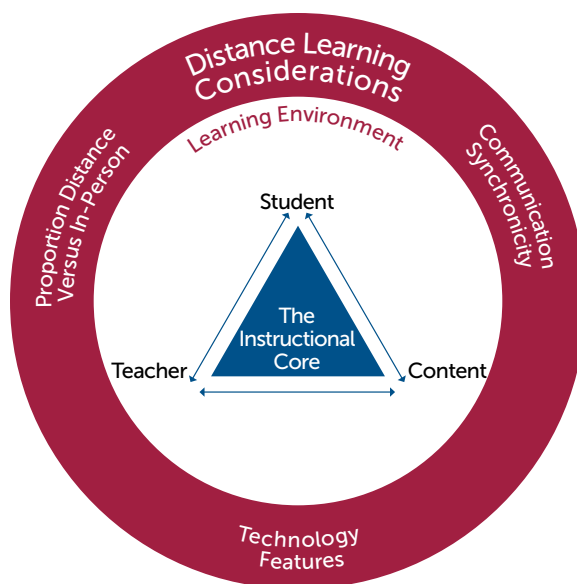
COVID-19 has created what is arguably the largest ever interruption to instruction in California's K–12 education system. In the wake of the pandemic, "teaching as usual" will neither be possible nor sufficient to meet students' needs because California's schools have experienced disruptions to each aspect of the *instructional core*:²

- **Teachers.** COVID-19 has and will continue to transform teachers' pedagogical practices. Teaching and learning will likely occur through distance, hybrid, or staggered approaches in the fall and teachers will need to adapt their instructional approaches to fit these new configurations.
- **Students.** COVID-19 has deeply affected students. With prolonged social isolation, as well as potential health issues or economic instability in the home, students will return to school with heightened mental health and social-emotional needs that are likely to impede their ability to engage in learning.³

- **Content.** COVID-19 has affected the content that teachers will teach. Many students will likely return to school with knowledge and skills lagging substantially behind where they would have been absent the pandemic.⁴ Teachers will need to address critical gaps in knowledge and skills as well as accelerate learning in the upcoming academic year.⁵

The instructional core captures the “who” (teachers and students) and the “what” (content) of instruction. COVID-19 and the restructuring of schooling in response to health guidance have altered the “where,” “when,” and “how” of instruction by impacting three main aspects of the teaching and learning experience:

Figure 1. The Instructional Core in the Context of Distance and Hybrid Instruction



1. **The proportion of instructional time delivered in-person:** students may now receive some or all instruction remotely.
2. **The synchronicity of instruction:** classmates may now engage in learning activities at different times.
3. **The technologies used to deliver instruction:** traditionally, most instruction is delivered or facilitated by teachers in a classroom setting; now students may be relying on a range of media (e.g., readings, video, audio, apps) for some portion of instruction.

With these significant changes, educators will need to adjust their instruction to create a positive learning environment and deliver effective pedagogy that covers the grade-level content students need to learn. Districts must provide support to educators so they can succeed under these new conditions. The remainder of this brief describes evidence-based recommendations for providing quality instruction through distance or hybrid models, then discusses how districts can ensure quality instruction at scale.

Teaching

A fundamental principle of good instruction remains the same in physical and remote classrooms: teachers must start with a learning objective and then identify the pedagogical approach that will best help students achieve the objective. It is important to think through three main pedagogical approaches⁶ when considering how teaching interacts with technology: (a) *expository* (students receive information), (b) *active learning* (students engage in projects, tasks, or exercises), and (c) *interactive* (students interact with each other and/or teachers to construct new knowledge).

Teachers must have access to the full range of pedagogical approaches and should maximize opportunities for students to engage with one another and with educators. Synchronous learning time provides an opportunity for academic and social-emotional interactions between peers and instructors. Asynchronous tasks can also be structured to provide students with opportunities to learn collaboratively. Asynchronous first exposure to content prior to class allows students to prepare to integrate their learning into the next synchronous session. Because prolonged distance learning can result in physical and social isolation as well as attention fatigue, modules of instruction should be divided into smaller chunks that are a developmental match for students' attention spans and allow for interactive learning.

Table 1 shows how teachers can adapt instruction to: new blended and distance contexts for teaching and learning; a mix of synchronous and asynchronous instruction; and a variety of technologies across the three different pedagogical approaches.

Table 1. Intersections Between the Technical Dimensions of Distance/Blended Learning and Pedagogical Approaches

	Pedagogical Approaches		
	Expository	Active Learning	Interactive
Blended	Lowest priority for in-person time because synchronicity does not add much value. Should occur largely asynchronously through readings, video, and apps.	Practice tasks and student attempts to consolidate and apply concepts. Moderate priority for in-person time if used to provide students with rapid feedback.	Top priority for in-person time. Includes discussions, labs, hands-on engagement, group work.
100 Percent Distance, Online	Lowest priority for synchronous time. Should occur largely asynchronously through readings, video, and apps.	Lower priority for synchronous instruction over video. Practice tasks with consistent feedback provided asynchronously.	Top priority for synchronous time. Includes small-group discussions, group projects, and teacher-led small group/individual instruction to help struggling students.
100 Percent Distance, Offline	Primary mode is likely to be paper packets. Other modes include USB flash drives with digital learning material, local public television, or radio.	Students engage in tasks and projects that must include regular check-ins with teachers and peers (telephone, text messaging, written feedback).	Group projects with conference calls can facilitate interaction as well as interactive journals, pen pals, or similar activities.

Assessment. Understanding what students are learning and adapting instruction to address their learning needs lies at the heart of quality teaching. Ongoing assessment is more important now than ever as teachers will need to calibrate their instruction to meet greater and more varied academic needs in new ways. It will be critical that educators regularly track participation and assess student learning progress, ensuring that students receive the support they need and that instruction is appropriately differentiated.

Feedback to students and families. Students need regular feedback to improve their understanding and to recognize and encourage their engagement. Due to limited opportunities for immediate responses and interaction in distance learning, the role of frequent feedback and communication between teacher and student about learning is crucial. Educators should be prepared to provide regular personalized feedback through multiple modes and to communicate with all students regardless of their access to technology. Teachers need protected time to provide individualized or small-group instruction to support students academically and to build the nurturing relationships that are necessary for learning,⁷ as well as to reduce the feelings of loneliness and isolation that can occur in distance learning.⁸ It is also important for feedback to be bidirectional and to include families, who are critical partners in supporting distance learning.

Student Engagement

Educators must anticipate greater student social-emotional needs and should prepare to provide comprehensive support that encourages student engagement. Establishing strong relationships with students is critical for student learning in any educational context,⁹ and it will be essential for educators in the distance context to develop classroom communities through remote relationship-building strategies.¹⁰ Universal Design for Learning, an approach to proactively meet the learning needs of all students, should be applied to create a community that removes barriers to accessing content and learning for students.¹¹

Students should have an adult who maintains an ongoing dialogue with them about their social-emotional well-being; school leadership should ensure that these conversations occur regularly.¹² Individual check-ins may make sense for lower grade teachers who work with fewer students, but upper grade conversations may have to be in small groups to be practical—homerooms or advisories are potential in-person analogues that can be used for distance learning in the upper grades.¹³

Monitoring student engagement and attendance is critical and families must be contacted as soon as possible if students are not interacting. Getting feedback from students about how they are experiencing their learning environments—either virtually and/or in person—can help teachers and staff develop strategies to increase student engagement.¹⁴

Content

Researchers anticipate significant academic losses in reading and mathematics for students, and learning loss is likely most significantly to impact low-income, African American, and Latinx students,¹⁵ as well as students who were already struggling in school.¹⁶ Teachers are going to need to strike a balance between bridging prior years' content and remaining grounded in the current grade level's curriculum.

In contrast to models that emphasize remediation or retention, evidence suggests that high-quality grade-level instruction with robust differentiated support benefits all students.¹⁷ Teachers will need familiarity with the prior year's content because that content cannot be assumed to have been delivered, received, or retained. With clear understanding of learning progressions, teachers can use assessment to calibrate their teaching to address missing precursor knowledge or skills.¹⁸ Ideally, districts would provide guidance on the instructional priorities for the 2020–21 school year; however, regardless of the degree of centralized guidance, teachers should work with grade-level or content teams to analyze grade-level standards alongside standards from the prior year to plan for instruction, assessment, scaffolding, and differentiation.

What Can Districts Do to Support Learning in the COVID-19 Context?

The implementation of consistent, quality distance instruction for all students in the 2020–21 school year should not depend on the heroism of teachers alone but rather on the extent to which districts provide educators with the support they need to teach successfully in a distance or blended model. There are four areas that districts can act upon. These, if implemented well, can serve as the solid foundation on which distance instruction can support student and educator needs in the 2020–21 school year and beyond.

Set and Communicate Expectations About Instruction

Districts should have plans and clear expectations in place to provide students with high-quality instruction under distance and blended conditions. To do so, districts must:

Provide guidance for instructional priorities in 2020–21. Identifying instructional priorities to scaffold teacher planning can be done via a collaborative process that focuses on prioritization in three areas: endurance, leverage, and readiness.¹⁹

Conduct an after-action review (AAR) of the initial implementation of distance learning. An AAR is a method for extracting lessons from an event or project and applying them to others. An AAR addresses four questions: (a) What were our intended results, (b) what were our actual results, (c) what caused our results, and (d) what will we sustain or improve?²⁰

Conduct a needs assessment for the upcoming year. Districts must take stock of their distance-learning assets and needs (e.g., technologies, staff capacity, community resources, and partnership opportunities). Additionally, it is critical that districts identify and reach out to students who had minimal/no engagement during distance learning in spring 2020 and determine approaches to ensure equity and accessibility.

Develop and communicate a plan for distance learning that includes clear expectations. Creating a strong districtwide distance-learning plan is critical for ensuring quality and consistency. The plan should focus on designing a system that is equitable, that is resilient, that backwards maps from student learning, and that is feasible. Any district distance-learning plan should include explicit expectations of engagement for students, teachers, and families—and be accompanied by clear communication and access to support. District plans should also incorporate and utilize resources developed by County Offices of Education in support of distance learning.

Support Educators

Districts can support educators, in the wake of the enormous professional and personal stressors they have encountered, by attending to their mental health and well-being, their professional learning, and the reconceptualization of their roles for distance- and blended-learning contexts. In particular, districts should:

Prioritize educator mental health and well-being. Educators are susceptible to mental health challenges due to stress and secondary traumatic stress.²¹ Districts should help support teachers' physical and emotional safety while being attentive to the unique stressors experienced by different populations of teachers. Districts should provide school leaders and educators with information and training on causes and effects of, and coping strategies for, trauma and stress in both adults and children.

Provide high-quality teacher professional development. Professional learning will be critical since educators are facing one of the steepest learning curves to meet student needs, both academic and social-emotional. Research suggests that teachers need to engage in a four-part recursive cycle to effectively bring new practices into their classrooms: (a) introduction of new practices (through expert modeling, discussion, and professional reading), (b) heavily scaffolded practice (supported attempts at new practices, e.g., through simulations), (c) practice in context (trying them with students), and (d) analyzing practice through reflection and feedback, which is often underemphasized in teacher professional development offerings.²² Professional learning opportunities for the 2020–21 school year should attend to adult needs for self-directed learning as well as teachers' social-emotional needs for a safe learning community that is supportive in the face of the failures that are a necessary part of learning.

Reimagine educator roles for distance and blended learning. Districts seeking to meet the new demands of distance and blended instruction may consider reconceptualizing staffing assignments, allocation of instructional time, and collaborative structures that might not have been viable on site. Districts must set a clear baseline regarding what is expected of educators and provide time for teams to collaborate so that grade-level or content-based teams of teachers can flexibly pool skills and resources to collectively support instruction that enhances student learning.

Develop Systems to Address Greater Student Needs

Schools and districts must develop systems and build their capacity to understand and address increased levels of student needs. Schools must identify students who are most vulnerable and facilitate access to effective services and assistance as needed. This begins with an inventory of the existing capacity of district, school, and community resources that can support students and families. Additionally, teachers must be guided to understand how to identify emerging student needs and be given a clear protocol for working with colleagues and families in response to those needs. Districts must create aligned systems to coordinate available student support (including for English learners and students with disabilities) and set explicit expectations regarding the supports that will be available to students learning from home.

Support Technology and Data to Improve Instruction

Districts must ensure that all students have access to devices and connectivity to support distance learning. In addition, districts should support the collection and analysis of data on student well-being and achievement to drive decision-making around supports and instruction. In addition to continuing to increase student digital access, districts should do the following:

Leverage learning management systems (LMS). LMS are helpful for streamlining information sharing and learning tools. Where feasible, districts should work with instructional staff to identify a single LMS and agree on consistent ways of using it across schools.

Assess student well-being and social-emotional support needs. If districts decide to conduct surveys on student well-being, they need to be clear about the goals of particular surveys and measures, and be intentional about how data can be used to drive decision-making. Districts will also need to incorporate best practices in assessment selection or design, including attending to the reliability and validity of any assessments as well as engaging the community.²³

Understand student academic needs. Districts need to be aware of the social-emotional effects of testing, especially as they administer diagnostic assessments to gauge student learning needs and progress. They will also need to support professional learning and carve out time for teachers to collaboratively analyze and make decisions based on data.

Conclusion

This brief is a summary of the full-length report *Supporting Learning in the COVID-19 Context* and provides top-level highlights of strategies that districts can pursue to provide quality instruction despite disruptions related to COVID-19. We encourage readers to consult the [full report](#) to delve more deeply into the complete set of strategies and recommendations. As a driving principle behind our report, we believe that even in times of unprecedented disruptions, districts and schools can anchor themselves to the core principles that guide teaching and learning as they adapt policies and practices to meet shifting needs. While districts will need to help schools, educators, and students adapt to new configurations in what learning will look like in fall 2020, unwavering are the fundamentals of good instruction and what educators know students need.

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Endnotes

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Related Publications

Borman, G. **What Can Be Done to Address Learning Losses Due to School Closures?** Policy Analysis for California Education. June 2020.

Hough, H., O'Day, J., Hahnel, C., Ramanathan, A., Edley, Jr., C., & Echaveste, M. **Lead with Equity: What California's Leaders Must Do Next to Advance Student Learning During COVID-19.** Policy Analysis for California Education. July 2020.

Kaura, P., & Melnicoe, H. **COVID-19 Crisis Response in Pajaro Valley Started with Listening to Families.** Policy Analysis for California Education. June 2020.

Melnicoe, H., & Kaura, P. **Collaboration and Addressing Student Needs: A Rural District's Response to COVID-19.** Policy Analysis for California Education. June 2020.



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