

Improving Distance Education in the Early Grades

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California districts were forced to shift to distance learning models in the spring of 2020 and the transition to distance learning for students in the early grades—transitional kindergarten through third grade (TK–3)—has proved difficult for students, parents, and teachers alike. As distance learning persists, administrators and teachers can continue to adapt their practices to meet the needs of students and families. This brief identifies challenges experienced during distance learning and suggests promising practices and potential policy changes that can positively affect the current experience of students, parents, and teachers involved in TK–3 distance learning.

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Introduction

In response to the onset of COVID-19, most California districts were forced to shift to distance learning models in the spring of 2020. The immediate solutions, although not ideal, were feasible for middle and high school students. However, the transition to distance learning for students in the early grades—transitional kindergarten through third grade (TK–3)—has proved difficult for students, parents, and teachers alike. Throughout the summer and fall of 2020, PACE interviewed 15 district and school leaders, teachers, parents, and researchers to identify areas for improvement of distance education for students in the early grades. The policies and practices addressed in this brief are also informed by dozens of additional interviews that were conducted as a part of PACE’s broader work around California’s COVID-19 response and distance learning. This brief identifies challenges experienced during distance learning and suggests promising practices and potential policy changes that can positively affect the current experience of students, parents, and teachers involved in TK–3 distance learning.

Recommended Shifts for Improving Early Grades Distance Learning

Prioritize Synchronous, Interactive Instruction

Policies providing guidance for how to structure synchronous class time can build consistency in the distance learning experience for early grade students. Research suggests students—especially those in the early grades—need synchronous, interactive instruction to build both academic and social-emotional skills.¹ Synchronous instruction is any learning opportunity that occurs at the same time between teachers and students; interactive instruction includes learning opportunities in which students are working with their peers or the teacher. Interactive learning is most likely to occur for early grade students during synchronous instruction such as small group or partner work; ideally, distance instruction should also prioritize this type of instruction.

The state of California implemented policies to ensure more consistent distance learning experiences for students and can apply policies to improve the quality of distance education in the early grades in a similar way. Research found that in the spring of 2020 students in kindergarten to second grade only received an average of 130 minutes of daily instruction (Grades 3–5 only received 10 more minutes of instruction).² In response, California enacted a new distance learning policy (SB-98) that mandated at least 180 instructional minutes per day for kindergarten students and 230 minutes for Grades 1 through 3.³ California law defines instructional minutes as “the time value of assignments as determined by an employee [of the school or district],” which can include asynchronous independent work, small group, or whole class instruction.⁴ SB-98 also mandated that students experience “daily live interaction” via

telephone or internet with their teachers and peers.⁵ This requirement ostensibly suggests that two things must occur in distance learning—synchronous instruction and interactive learning. However, this is not how distance learning has been structured in classrooms across the state. State policy provided guidance on *how much time* students should spend learning but did not provide guidance on *what instruction should look like*—emphasizing the quantity of instruction without giving enough attention to its quality.⁶ This has significant implications for distance-education experiences for early grade students across the state.

The structure of instructional time in early grade distance education varies widely across California. Students in TK through Grade 3 can experience anywhere from 30 minutes to 4 hours of synchronous instruction each day depending on district guidelines.⁷ Advocacy groups across the state have asked the state to set additional guidelines around synchronous instructional time, stating that special populations need face-to-face time with teachers.⁸ This variation sets the stage for inequities across districts and exacerbates trends in distance learning that indicate Black, Latinx, and low-income students are more likely to face barriers to engagement in distance education.⁹

Setting baseline requirements for instructional minutes and daily interaction is critical to improve distance learning but is insufficient to meet younger students' learning needs. While extending synchronous learning is an important foundation of distance learning it can present challenges for young learners when unstructured. Children in the early grades typically have a shorter attention span than their older peers and need a variety of opportunities for interaction with peers in small groups.¹⁰ Focusing on short interactive lessons with small group learning opportunities benefit both students and teachers. Learning in small groups with peers rather than with the whole class helps to keep students' attention while providing teachers frequent opportunities to give individualized feedback and facilitate social interactions between students. Distance classrooms can mirror this approach as teachers become more comfortable with distance learning and find ways to utilize their knowledge of how children learn best to structure learning opportunities.

Maximize Available Adult Support to Guide Distance Learning

Students in the early grades require greater adult support to facilitate learning than do their older peers. It is true that both asynchronous and synchronous instruction place a burden on parents because early grade students generally need adult supervision and guidance to complete distance learning activities. However, synchronous instruction ensures teachers—and not parents—are leading learning activities as compared to asynchronous activities. This is similar to why TK–third grade classrooms are often staffed with instructional aides and are required to maintain lower student-to-teacher ratios than are upper grade classes—to give teachers increased opportunities to work directly with students and redirect them when necessary.

Optimizing synchronous instruction in distance learning can be made easier by lowering student-to-teacher ratios in virtual classrooms but current California staffing policies make this prospect difficult. The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) was set to reduce student-to-teacher ratios to 24:1 for Grades TK–3 by the 2020–21 school year and it appears that the state has met those marks.¹¹ However, California districts can set higher student-to-teacher ratios in labor agreements, resulting in higher TK–third grade student-to-teacher ratios in districts across the state.¹² California has the highest upper limits for student-to-teacher ratios for kindergarten (33:1) and grades 1–3 (32:1) compared to any other state with established limits.¹³ High student-to-teacher ratios in distance learning make it difficult for teachers to implement best practices for TK–3 distance classrooms and place a heavy burden on teachers and families. Districts can reconceptualize staffing to support young students’ distance learning. Schools can use paraprofessionals, aides, and volunteer partners to decrease student-to-teacher ratios to make individual and small group engagement more feasible. Districts can also coordinate with student teacher programs and community-based organizations to bring in additional adults.

Use Available Funds and Partnerships to Ensure Childcare and Other Family Supports

Families need childcare, especially parents that must return to work. A survey of California parents found that 42 percent of parents of TK–third grade students “don’t know” how they will manage distance learning this year. Of those families, one in four parents in households earning less than \$90,000—the same households that are most likely to have suffered wage losses since the onset of the pandemic¹⁴—indicated they need to hire a tutor or caregiver to supervise distance learning so they can return to work compared to one in twelve affluent families.¹⁵ Partnerships with childcare and instructional support providers can increase the number of available adults to guide students in distance learning while also supporting parents that need to return to work.

Districts across the state are working to provide high-need families with childcare options while schools remain closed, but additional funds from the state or federal governments are needed to keep childcare centers open. San Francisco Unified School District is partnering with community organizations to create “hubs”—spaces where high-risk students (early grade, low-income, and students with learning disabilities) can complete supervised distance learning.¹⁶ Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is working with nonprofits that provide childcare services in closed school buildings.¹⁷ However, the number of partners is rapidly decreasing as funds from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Support Act (CARES Act) are used up and no additional funding from state or federal governments is forthcoming. One out of four day care facilities—about 9,300 centers across California—have closed since March 2020, disproportionately affecting low-income and minority communities,¹⁸ and as many as half of minority-owned day care centers will close permanently without government assistance.¹⁹ Closures of childcare facilities are forcing families to decide between working or supporting their children in distance education.

Providing safe learning opportunities with childcare will look different across California schools. While some parents are unable to find or afford childcare²⁰ to support their young students' distance learning, others are opting out of public schools for other options including homeschooling,²¹ private online schools,²² or learning pods.²³ Enrollment projections across 11 large to mid-size school districts in California showed declining student enrollment for TK (down 23 percent) and K (down 10 percent) for the 2020–21 school year compared to 2019–20. Schools also face pressure to reopen. California established pathways for in-person instruction allowing small cohorts (less than 14) at schools to limit exposure,²⁴ and a waiver application that allows early grade schools to reopen even if COVID-19 transmission rates in the county remain above state reopening requirements.²⁵ An LAUSD survey of schools that have received waivers found that private schools and schools serving more affluent populations were more likely to take advantage of this program than were schools that serve higher percentages of students receiving free and reduced lunch.²⁶ Black, Latinx, Native American, and low-income families are more likely to face barriers that limit the effectiveness of distance learning²⁷ and more likely to have their health impacted by COVID-19,²⁸ leading to a hesitance for schools serving them to reopen and for families to send their student back after reopening.

Communicate with Families to Understand Their Context and Provide the Supports They Need to Engage Students in Learning

Schools can communicate with families to learn what they need to participate in distance learning. Many families experienced a piecemeal response to school closures with inconsistent communication and unclear expectations regarding instruction, grading, and attendance.²⁹ Research suggests that schools can use regular communication to build relational trust with families and boost student engagement.³⁰ Research also indicates that parents and students benefit from consistent structures and processes—such as regular communication—for engagement, especially after experiencing the disruptions associated with school closures and related impacts of COVID-19.³¹ Such structures include morning meetings to check in on student and family well-being, regular one-on-one conversations, and weekly email updates. Parents need regular updates on student outcomes to support distance learning. Individualized communication with students and families can be used to share student progress, highlight learning gaps, and set expectations for engagement. Research recommends that this year schools should approach grading and assessments such that students are “graded on the learning they do, not when they do it.”³² The text box provides an example of how schools can communicate with families to create synchronous interactive learning opportunities that meet the needs of families and students.

Puget Sound Elementary: Adapting Distance Learning Structures and Processes for Students in the Earliest Grades to Meet Student and Family Needs

Puget Sound Elementary (PSE) is a charter school—operated by Impact Public Schools and serving students aged 4–10 years—based out of Tukwila, Washington. The school qualifies for Title 1 funding and supports students speaking 11 different home languages. The school uses a coteaching model from early entry kindergarten through third grade with each class having 28 to 34 students. While this staffing structure differs from what other schools may maintain, the shifts PSE made as a result of teacher and parent feedback show the need for lower student-to-teacher ratios in early grade distance learning.

In the shift to distance learning PSE established an instructional schedule that successfully engaged 95.5 percent of its students in distance learning after school closures in March. During the spring of 2020, PSE elected to teach students 5 days a week with shortened instructional time on Wednesdays and Fridays for planning, family outreach, and professional development focused on distance learning. The school offered Alternative Learning Plans for students who were unable to attend virtual school, which could be completed offline or asynchronously. This was done at the request of families who worked during the day and were unable to provide support during the synchronous times; an additional plan was also created for parents who wanted to limit screen time. Below is the daily schedule from a first-grade teacher during the spring of 2020.

Table 1. Puget Sound Elementary Spring 2020 Distance Learning Schedule

Synchronous Time 9 a.m.–2 p.m.	Description
9–9:30 a.m. Mentee Time	Check-ins with students focused on well-being, social-emotional learning (SEL), and community-building activities.
9:30–11 a.m. Literacy (30 mins each)	Center 1—Lexia (independent online literacy platform). Center 2—Zoom lesson with the teacher. Center 3—Amira (Artificial Intelligence-guided reader support). Alternate option 1—EPIC (online library) reading practice. Alternate option 2—Offline reading: independently, with parent guidance, or families reading to their student.
11–11:30 a.m. Recess	Students offline—Time doubles as teacher planning, check-ins with students, completing assessments.
11:30 a.m.–12:15 p.m. Enrichment	Individual learning—topics include chess, yoga, and coding.
12:15–12:45 p.m.	Lunch
12:45–1:15 p.m. Math	Zoom lesson with the teacher or using an online math tool.
1:15–2 p.m. Project-Based Learning Workshop	Project-based learning that includes writing components. Students had the option to work independently on Zoom to get help from the teacher or work with their family.
2 p.m.	Closing—Students encouraged to leave computer for the day.

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PSE collected feedback from families at the end of the year and identified barriers that young students experienced with prolonged synchronous distance learning:

- Students struggled with transitions between teacher-led and independent work.
- The five-hour block was too long for students; families shared it was too much time to support synchronous learning, especially for working parents.
- Working parents still needed childcare so they could go to work each day.
- Families wanted flexible options for completing asynchronous work given their varying time and resources available to support student learning.

In response, PSE modified their distance learning model for the fall of 2020. Each class was split into an a.m. and p.m. learning cohort (Monday–Thursday) with about 15 students in each. Teachers work with each cohort synchronously for 3 hours. The whole class convenes Friday from 8–10a.m. to share updates (families are invited to attend), celebrate accomplishments, conduct SEL activities, and interact in group project time. PSE also reduced the number of transitions in the day, since those had proved difficult for students to navigate and negatively affected pacing.

Teachers can lead small group work more frequently than they could in spring 2020, ensuring students receive more teacher-led learning as opposed to independent work during synchronous time. The schedule also reduces the amount of synchronous time for students each day, addressing families’ need to reduce the amount of time required to facilitate learning and screen time for students.³³ Finally, PSE is coordinating with a local community organization to provide childcare for students of working families, so students have a place to complete distance learning with adult supervision and support.

Table 2. Puget Sound Elementary Fall 2020 Distance Learning Schedule—a.m. Example

Synchronous Time 8a.m.–11:30a.m.	Description
8–8:30 a.m. Morning Meeting	Well-being check-ins, SEL learning, and community-building activities.
8:30–10 a.m. Literacy (30 mins each)	Center 1—Phonics lesson with teacher 1. Center 2—Guided reading lesson with teacher 2. Center 3—Lexia (independent online literacy platform).
10–10:30 a.m.	Recess—Doubles as teacher prep.
10:30–11:25 a.m. Math (30 mins each)	Center 1—Zoom lesson with teacher 1. Center 2—Zoom lesson with teacher 2.
11:25–11:30 a.m.	Closing for a.m. cohort.
Afternoon Cohort 12–3:30 p.m. (30-min. break between cohorts)	Asynchronous learning for the afternoon includes: 30 mins of Dreambox (online math tool), 30 mins of project-based learning, 60 mins of physical activity, 10 mins spelling practice, and 10 mins of math facts.

PSE used parent feedback to make changes that improved the distance learning experience for all involved. It is also important to recognize that state policy played a critical role in setting PSE up for success. Washington state caps student-to-teacher ratios for high-poverty schools like PSE at 15:1, ensuring those students receive more individualized instruction from their teachers. PSE aims to continue refining their instructional model to best serve students and families as distance learning continues.

Develop Curriculum and Resources for Teachers and Parents to Guide Learning

State, county, and district education agencies can create resources to support distance learning for early grade students. The California Collaborative for Education Excellence has compiled grade-specific distance learning resources created by Kern and San Bernardino County Offices for both teachers and families of students from Grades TK–12. These resources include (a) instructional materials for math, ELA, and SEL for Grades TK–3; (b) courses for instructors around foundations for flipped classrooms, Universal Design for Learning, English Language Development, and technology use; and (c) courses for parents on how to support young students in distance learning.³⁴ Districts can also provide resources and training that parents can use to help students learn foundational concepts through daily activities offline including reading to students—or listening to students read—in any language, learning math through household activities,³⁵ and learning science concepts and skills through cooking. Districts can ask parents what they need help with—related to student learning—and provide educational opportunities around key issues such as navigating learning-management systems.

Teachers can provide asynchronous learning alternatives for students in addition to synchronous teacher-led instruction. Districts can provide access to online platforms for literacy, math, and science for families to work with students asynchronously as working parents are not always available during synchronous learning blocks. Some families have to coordinate competing interests for device and internet access (e.g., multiple students at home) and low-income families continue to experience unreliable internet access despite districts' efforts to expand access in the spring.³⁶

Teachers can provide flexible learning opportunities for students that allow parents to cocreate or modify learning tasks so that they are interesting to students and are relevant to their current context and family for asynchronous learning. California parents named sustaining student “interest” and “motivation” as the two largest challenges of distance learning.³⁷ Instruction that allows for flexible assignments and student choice can lessen the burden parents feel in distance learning and drive student engagement³⁸ respectively. Teachers PACE interviewed shared that they have used this as an opportunity to engage in culturally relevant teaching, creating units on social justice and the election. Instruction can also incorporate play and student interaction whenever possible such as sharing aspects of their family life and culture with classmates through show and tell.

Conclusion

Distance learning for our youngest students is challenging for students, families, and teachers but it can be improved to better meet the needs of all involved if policies and practices are aligned to support the critical components of early grade distance learning. Policies and practices to improve distance learning for students in the early grades include:

- prioritizing quality interactive synchronous learning over quantity of screen time;
- maximizing the number of available adults to support student learning at a distance through partnerships and increased funding for childcare providers;
- communicating directly and regularly with parents to understand their needs and to adjust support over time; and
- developing ready-to-use curriculum and resources that help teachers and parents support students in distance learning.

Current policies for distance learning in the early grades place much of the burden of educating students on families that are already stretched thin. The shifts in policy and practice described in this brief can better support early grade distance education, but on their own, they will not provide all of the supports students, families, and teachers need to engage in distance learning. Additional health and economic support in communities across California is desperately needed to provide guidance and resources that can improve distance learning for young students and their families.

Endnotes

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Author Biography

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