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State Guidance on Distance Learning During COVID-19: A Review of Four State Approaches

Date: July 13, 2020 Request: 202006

Background

Considering how COVID-19 may impact the upcoming school year, members of the Region 7 Comprehensive Center (R7CC) Advisory Board requested information about best practices on distance and blended learning. To help slow the spread of the disease, social distancing strategies may include limited to zero access to school buildings, allowing for safety and health of the school community. The CDC's guidance for schools provides recommendations that may be challenging for districts to implement. As such, educators will require effective technology innovations to best provide continued learning for K–12 students during the pandemic. In response to this inquiry, this Fast Response provides a summary of guidance on what four states are providing for distance and blended learning.

This Fast Response is organized into the following sections:

- Procedure
- General Limitations
- Four State Approaches on Distance Learning During COVID–19
- Conclusion

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Procedure

To locate resources for this report, the R7CC Fast Response team searched every state's Department of Education website for *guidance on distance and blended learning programs*. R7CC researchers found only six states—Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Washington—provide unique guidance for their districts. Because Oregon's guidance was influenced heavily by Kansas and Washington's plans (personal communication, 2020), the team reviewed only four states—OR, IN, LA, and MA. These four states provide guidance across a variety of pertinent issues related to distance learning. Although other states provide *resources* on distance and blended learning as well as COVID-19 related resources, *guidance* on implementing distance learning was not available when the researchers conducted the search. The reviewed states represent a broad cross-section of contexts with important features common among the states in Region 7, including large urban centers, rural districts, and student demographics. Information about each state's guidance on distance and blended learning is provided below, organized by theme. Links are provided for the reader to access the cited documents.

General Limitations

As with many topics in education, there is a limited research base of information on K–12 distance and blended learning. This fast response reports on a specifically requested aspect of distance and blended learning, namely guidance that other states have released. In this report, R7CC does not validate the evidence-base supporting the states' guidance.

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Four State Approaches on Distance Learning During COVID-19

The tables below aggregate common themes in guidance from four states on distance and blended learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five themes discussed in the guidance include overall recommendations for distance learning, distance learning instruction, protected student subgroups, grading and promotion, and social and emotional learning and needs. An additional comprehensive resource reviewing all 50 states is referenced in the footnote[1].

Overall Recommendations for Distance Learning

Document	State	Notes & Considerations
Indiana Department of Education: Continuous Learning Guidance	IN	IDOE uses the term "Continuous Learning Guidance" versus eLearning, distance learning, or virtual learning to promote a holistic perspective to meet the needs of all students. Equity and access provide the framework for the guidance. Overall principles encouraged for stakeholders in decision-making are described. 1. Focus on essential learning. 2. Be flexible and ready to adapt. 3. Emphasize relationships. 4. Support local decision making. 5. Decision must support all student populations. 6. Encourage current use of platforms, materials, and resources. 7. May use blended technology. 8. Extend grace to all. 9. Support educators with professional development and wellness.
Remote Learning Recommendations During COVID-19 School Closures	MA	Guiding principles focus on holistic needs and developing a remote learning model. The state added guidance in May to provide core instruction focused on prerequisite content standards that are most critical for student success in the next grade (see Educator Resources). *Holistic Needs* • Top priority is safety and well-being of students, families, and staff. • Equity needs to be a top consideration because crisis disproportionately affects most vulnerable students. • Maintain connections between school staff and students. *Remote Learning Model* • Remote learning cannot replicate in-person schooling. • Remote learning has an obligation to engage students in meaningful and productive learning opportunities. • Remote learning is not online learning in that it can include components off-line. Screen time must be considered seriously. Special guidance has been provided for SWD and ELL.

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1   Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Teaching Systems Lab website COVID-19 Guidance for State Leaders and Educators features a comprehensive report of the how states are responding COVID-19, a recorded webinar supporting remote learning, and an interactive map with links to each state's COVID-19 website.

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Document	State	Notes & Considerations
Distance Learning for All	OR	Oregon's overall recommendations are as follows: · Attend to social, emotional, and mental health of students. · Partner with parents, families, and caregivers. · Consider instructional time. · Focus on equity and access (Universal Design for Learning). · Make changes to teaching and learning. · Plan operational and administrative logistics (e.g. attendance and progress reports).
Continuous Education Toolkit for School Systems: Guidance and Tools	LA	Three guiding principles in Louisiana for continuity of learning include (a) focus on quality by adhering to the planned course sequence and adapting for online use; (b) focus on simplicity by using appropriate instruction for grade levels, using consistent schedules, and partnering with parents; and (c) focus on families by empathizing with the support asked of families. The document provides a set of questions LEAs should ask themselves to prepare for distance learning around three primary steps. 1. Identify resources – curriculum, technology, staffing, and student/family needs 2. Develop approach – consider both high-tech (online, remote) and low-tech (paper, packets) options with focus on considerations for accessibility 3. Support teachers' implementation of continuous learning plans. Supports include (a) ensuring essential learning of grade/subject level material and minimizing unfinished learning, (b) remote instruction delivery with a focus on using technology effectively and promoting student engagement, and (c) communication with students (e.g. feedback loops), families, and colleagues.

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Distance Learning Instruction

Practice	State	Notes & Considerations
Class Time	IN	Recommended minimum time for remote learning per grade level is 30 minutes for Pre–K, 45 minutes for Grades K and 1; 60 minutes for Grades 2 and 3; and 90 minutes for Grades 4 and 5 (Grade 6 also if in an elementary school). For middle and high school students, the state recommends 30 minutes per teacher for a daily maximum of three hours of instruction.
	MA	MA recommends remote learning occur for half the length of a regular school day as a combination of educator-directed learning and student self-directed learning. Updated guidance in May suggests that class time should be adjusted by grade level (no specifics provided).
	OR	The Oregon DOE recommends digital learning time be spent in three activities: teacher-facilitated learning, applied learning, and wellness. For Grades K–3, they recommend 60–90 minutes per day of teacher-facilitated learning, one to two hours of applied learning, and two hours of wellness activities for a total time of four to five-and-a-half hours of learning per day. For Grades 4–5, the recommendations are slightly higher for teacher-facilitated learning (90–120 minutes per day), but the same in the other categories for a total of 4.5 to 6 hours per day. For higher grades, the state recommends time for each class, not spread across the three activities recommended in the lower grades. For Grades 6 to 8, the state recommends 15 to 30 minutes per class per day with a maximum time of 90 to 180 minutes a day. For Grades 9 to 12, 20 to 45 minutes per class per day are recommended with a maximum of 2 to 4.5 hours a day.
Schedule	IN	Indiana provides recommendation on times and activities for student learning based on age, from early learning/Pre–K through Grade 12 in content areas and electives/specials. The website provides sample schedules and suggested extended learning activities.
	MA	State recommends educators provide opportunity to connect multiple times per week with students, multiple hours of academic content per day directed by educators, time each day for physical activity, and additional time each day for enrichment activities (dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual arts).
Pacing	MA	Remote learning will be individualized and teachers must prepare for students to learn at different paces depending upon a variety of factors, but including access.
Engagement	MA	The state spent significant space in its guidance on remote learning to discuss the importance family engagement. The recommendations are to (a) prioritize meaningful connections between educators and peers; (b) provide core instruction focused on prerequisite content standards that are most critical for student success in the next grade; (c) offer opportunities for enrichment, exercise, and play; and (d) ensure programming is accessible, secure, and streamlined for students and their families. For students not engaged in remote learning, teachers and schools need to collect information to understand the lack of engagement and provide supports to further engage that particular student (and allow access to that strategy for all students). Appendix C provides a basic framework for a tiered support system for nonengaged students and Appendix D provides a sample script for family outreach.
Online Delivery	MA	The state recommends asynchronous learning to allow greater accessibility as well as freeing up teachers for meetings with peers, families, and students.

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Protected Student Subgroups

Group	State	Notes & Considerations
Special Education	IN	State guidance recommends ensuring equal access as their peers, collaborating between general and special education teachers, continuing to work on the IEP, and evaluating paperwork in a timely manner. Special education administrators should support individual teams for online meeting formats To enhance their learning experience, the state recommends developing highly motivating, interest-based activities; allowing for flexibility and choice among students; working with families on goals/benchmarks; and considering the unique support needs and opportunities for families.
	LA	The state has published several documents with guidance for serving students with disabilities. The Direct Services document provides guidance for services such as specialized instruction, speech and language therapy, and counseling/social work to fulfill students' IEPs. The Accommodations document provides assistance with ensuring equitable access to high-quality instruction and materials. The Accessibility of Instructional Materials helps LEAs to expand accessibility across continuous learning formats. The Staffing Guidance helps school staff expand accessibility and extend accommodations to students. Finally, the Guidance for Special Educators extends prior state guidance by considering context specific resources, instructional planning, delivering lessons, and monitoring progress.
	MA	State guidance states that "[d]istricts should make every effort to use creative strategies to provide special educational instruction and services to the extent possible." The state has a resource page, FAQ, and webinars available to support students and families of students with special needs.
	OR	Guidance recommends revisiting students' IEPs/504s to determine necessary adjustments to accommodate students. If a school cannot meet accommodations in online setting, they must report to the state. It must be documented when a student with an IEP/504 is off-track, otherwise, the student is held harmless during school closure (e.g. must be promoted).

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Group	State	Notes & Considerations
English Learners	IN	The IDOE supports communication with families, encouraging the implementation of effective communication systems in multiple languages to inform families on all school matters, including support for e-learning if the district uses it. The state also focuses on equitable access such that all students have technology and WiFi needed or alternative options, collaboration between EL and classroom staff for differentiated instruction and student goals, implementation of language instruction and assessment to improve outcomes, tutorials on using online resources, and virtual interaction to promote language development.
	LA	State guidance includes an EL Accommodation Checklist to determine needs for EL students. For teachers and schools, the state recommends working with EL specialists, establishing communication with families, providing supplementary materials that may help ELs (e.g. videos or annotated texts), modifying assignments, providing paper-based assignments for those without access, and using a guidance document for provisional identification of ELs. The document includes three suggestions for families including (a) obtaining internet access, (b) supporting reading and writing in English, and (c) utilizing online resources. Other resources for teachers and families are included.
	MA	This Massachusetts document supporting ELs in distance learning calls for collaboration between core content and ESL teachers. The state guidance reminds teachers that ESL instruction is a required part of any ELE programs and provides some resources for teachers. The guidance recommends amplifying EL's voices by finding more opportunities to speak and engage with English. Additional state recommendations include breaking content down into smaller pieces, allowing flexible pacing, and using online tools to link to the main lessons in content areas. The state also provides some recommended offline activities for ELs such as journaling and using subtitles.
	OR	Oregon requires schools and teachers to "make every effort" to provide EL services using classroom teachers and supports. Guidance recommends considering and reviewing the student's language proficiency. Access to materials should also be considered and potentially accommodated. "Communication to students and families should be in the home language."

Grading and Promotion

Category	State	Notes & Considerations
Grading	LA	Local systems decide whether to award grades or move to pass/fail grading. LEAs also determine if students demonstrate proficiency in grade-level content to award credit.
	MA	All grades should be "credit/no credit," but districts have the ability to set different grading standards. Teachers should provide feedback on student work completed at home. Before giving a *no credit* grade, teachers should consider whether students have had equitable access to learning opportunities.
	OR	The state required the use of Pass/Incomplete grades for 2019-20. A *Pass* indicated a student completed essential learning. Examples of passing grades include letter grades of A through D, check/check plus, S/S+, standards levels 2-4, exceeds/meets/nearly meets/ does not yet meet, consistently/sometimes meets standard. All other grades were given *Incompletes*.
Promotion	LA	In 2019-20, decisions to promote or retain a student in Grades K through 8 were made locally based on a "preponderance of evidence." State recommended creation of *Individual Academic Improvement Plans* for struggling students in Grade 4, but they were not mandated. Families must be engaged in the process. Evidence may come from one of the following sources: high-quality interim assessment results, curriculum-embedded assessments, course grades, student growth, IEP goals, and/or attendance records. Promotion for Grades 9 through 12 were based upon grades using the state's universal grading system.
	MA	State guidance encourages districts and schools to promote students to the next grade level and according "to the research" (they did not cite specific research). Guidance suggests focusing on content standards most critical for success in the next grade.
	OR	Guidance states "[n]o child shall be held back or retained due to impacts of extended school closure." Thus, grade promotion was a given for students in Oregon during COVID-19.

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Social and Emotional Learning

Category	State	Notes & Considerations
Student Support	IN	The IDOE offers general guidance on social and emotional needs, including links to mental health services and regular check-ins with students. The department also shares the following strategies to promote student wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic: (a) proactive language, (b) positive behavior intervention supports, (c) regulation strategies, (d) literacy integration, and (e) mindfulness practices. Strategies are included to foster safe and supportive environments such as normalizing calming behaviors, establishing daily routines, and learning about student's passions and needs beyond school. Technology supports are listed that promote calmness and Indiana's social-emotional learning competencies. There is a grade-band SEL toolkit with online videos and lesson plans.
	MA	The state recommends the inclusion of counselor-facilitated peer support groups as a strategy for helping students.
	OR	For secondary students, the state suggests building time into the school day for advising/mentoring type activities.

Conclusion

The impacts of COVID-19 on learning has been tremendous and on-going. With future impacts still uncertain, states are preparing to optimize distance learning plans for their students, teachers, and constituents. This document highlights details of state-led guidance on distance learning. The purpose was to provide R7CC states with examples of practices that other state education agencies are employing to implement and manage distance learning. For further information, links to state guidance are conveniently provided in this report.