

Equity in Distance Learning: Best Practice and Resources

Simply providing access is not the same as providing an equitable education. Minnesota's students deserve equitable access to an equitable education at all times.

Equity in education was already elusive, but the current global pandemic further complicates the lives of many students, in particular: students of color, indigenous students, students facing housing insecurity, students receiving special education services, immigrant students, LGBTQ+ students, English language learners, and students receiving free or reduced-price lunch services. Educators provide critical services for all students, and there are methods and practices that will help preserve some continuity of support and care during the time of COVID-19.

What follows is a list of resources, practices, and tips on how to equitably serve students during this uncertain moment in the history of the United States. This information will grow, expand, and change as we learn more about COVID-19. Actions by the federal and state agencies will also contribute to modification of these resources.

Our goal is to provide the most recent information to members of Education Minnesota, so they can stay safe, protect their students, and provide a quality, equitable education. Our goal will be to always providing the answer to the following questions:

What can educators do to help districts shift to equitable, distance learning models, for the foreseeable future?

What proactive measures can be taken to prevent the exacerbation of known educational inequities worse as well as the creation of new inequities?

COVID-19 and Minnesota: What do we know to be true?

Governor Tim Walz has authorized the Minnesota Commissioner of Education to implement distance learning from March 30, 2020 through May 4, 2020. These dates could be altered as the state receives new data, but we know that the majority of Minnesota's students will not be in brick-and-mortar school buildings for more than a month.

This long absence from routine and structure can present uncertainty and stress for many students, especially those in traditionally vulnerable communities. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic is revealing new issues that may end up further stalling efforts to curb known inequities. School systems were struggling to deliver equitable education before this pandemic, and we know this will continue as many educators implement distance learning for the first time. Educators must do everything possible to prevent the growth of educational inequality.

Finally, the lack of quick effort by the federal government prevented Minnesota from being able to successfully bend the curve of infections. The shelter-in-place protocol will buy the state enough time to prepare for an inevitable spike in infections. This means students, parents, and

educators will fall ill at some point. Thus, we must do everything we can now to prepare for what health experts tell us will happen in the near future.

What is distance education?

“Necessity is the mother of innovation.” –Plato

There is not simply one type of distance education. Educators will approach distance learning in manners best tailored for the population of students they serve. Educators should see this as an opportunity to explore new ways to meet the individual needs of all students. Not all platforms or technologies will work for all students. Minnesota’s educators can use this moment to learn new ways to reach all students.

As we enter a world of distance learning becoming the new normal, we stress two maxims that should guide all efforts.

1. Be open to redefining what “success” looks like in a distance learning model.
2. Do not conflate accessible and equitable.

What does success look like in distance-learning efforts?

Prior to the pandemic, it was relatively easy for students and families to know if they were doing well in school. Seale (2020) rightly stated, “In normal circumstances, students would know if they were doing ‘good’ in schools based on their in-class test and report card grades, standardized test results, and internal benchmarks schools use to measure their academic progress.” Educators will still grade assignments and assess student progress, but the delivery of material and the style of assessments will certainly change.

Educators should not try to rush success and perfect implementation. Families and students will need time to learn new technologies and find the best way to implement distance learning into their home routines. Patience will be critical. In addition, Seale (2020) has also reminded us that “These are not normal circumstances. Some working families are managing the double-whammy of figuring out how to work remotely and how to be brand new home school parents. Some families are economically impacted by the coronavirus pandemic and are rightfully prioritizing their financial survival. Leaders should accept the reality that digitized math worksheets are probably not a priority for all students.”

With that in mind, it is imperative that you have a clear definition of what success looks like in a distance learning model. As we explore uncharted waters, be courageous enough to ask yourself, *“this is a new world--how can I reimagine education?”* Distance learning can provide many advantages to help serve individual academic needs that students have. Think beyond the traditional measures for success and view this as a chance to explore new models for collaboration with students and educators.

What is the difference between access and equity?

Universal, equitable access is a key component of delivering an equitable education, but it is not the sole requirement for meeting the needs of all students. Simply providing tools and programs

is not the same as figuring out what will work best for students. We realize educators will be building the plane as they fly it, but we know Minnesota has some of the most creative and prepared educators in the nation.

Seale (2020) reminded educators that “the presumption that every student has the necessary technology, time, motivation, and support to succeed in a distance learning model is simply not real-life.” He has also alerted educators to the following equity issues:

- Rural and low-income communities do not have the same access to high-speed internet compared to their urban, suburban, and more affluent counterparts.
- Many parents and guardians will not be able to help children with schoolwork (Seale, 2020).

We know many districts have adopted one-to-one programs that provide all children with a tablet or computer. We also realize information technology companies are providing easier access to high-speed internet during this crisis. However, please remember the following:

1. There is a difference between handing a child a tablet and teaching a child to use a tablet in ways that best meets his or her needs.
2. Simply having a tablet and the possibility of internet access is not enough for all students, particularly the housing insecure.
3. First responders and healthcare workers will be on the front lines of this health crisis. These guardians will not have the same blocks of time to provide instruction and personal support to their children.
4. Students will see family members get sick. Older students may be caring for younger siblings while also completing their own work. These burdens may limit the progress of many children, and educators must adjust to this reality.
5. Many families are going to experience financial distress during this pandemic. These stressors will limit the abilities of students in those homes.
6. Educators are not exempt from the ramifications of COVID-19. We will see colleagues fall sick, experience financial loss, and struggle with a multitude of other issues. Educators should practice good communication, meaningful collaboration, and authentic compassion with families, colleagues, and students.

Seale (2020) has stressed that achieving equity in distance learning requires educators “to focus on those populations who were already marginalized in the traditional model of education.” Equity is a process, not a destination. This pandemic, though it is dangerous and scary, presents new opportunities to close gaps and heighten opportunity for all students. Educators should give particular attention to:

1. The format and delivery of distance learning.
2. The socioemotional learning and mental wellbeing of students.
3. **The unique needs of special education, ELL, and housing insecure students.**
4. The vital role of Education Support Professionals and Paraprofessionals.
5. The need for direct, comprehensive communication with administration.

Format and Delivery of Distance Learning

The Minnesota Department of Education defined distance learning as a process in which “students...have access to appropriate educational materials and receive daily interaction with their licensed teacher(s).” (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020, March 12). However, equitable distance learning will need to build on access by utilizing both technology as well as tools that don’t require internet access. Here are some tips to keep in mind as format and delivery decisions are made:

- Print lesson plans and assignments for students and families to safely retrieve from district approved locations. This will improve access for housing insecure students and students without consistent internet access.
- Utilize, as much as possible, the technological tools already implemented in your traditional classrooms. This continuity of tools will help provide some sense of stability in an otherwise uncertain time period.
- Research online learning tools and determine which will best suit your students’ needs. Remember, one tool may not be enough to meet the needs of all children in the same class.
- Resist the urge to become an expert on all tools and platforms. Only choose a few online learning tools, so you do not overwhelm yourself and your students.
- Outline concrete learning goals, due dates for assignments, a schedule, and overall expectations for distance learning. Share these with students, families, administrators, and colleagues.
- Adopt a flexible view of time and deadlines. Your students are adjusting to distance learning and doing schoolwork remotely rather than at school. It will be more difficult for some students to focus and get work done outside of the school building. Give students grace with deadlines and avoid harsh grading or punishments.
- Cultivate a growth mindset for you and your students. Learn from strategies that do not work. Distance learning is new and will be challenging to navigate. If something doesn’t work out the way you planned, accept that it didn’t work and try something else.
- Deliver lessons into shorter chunks to allow for processing time and necessary brain breaks.
- Use YouTube videos to make lessons dynamic and provide supplementary information on topics, and if possible, use videos that have closed-captions available.
- Provide multiple resources to teach every topic. Supplementing lessons with extra articles, videos, activities like crossword puzzles, and other various resources will support all learning styles.
- Connect with students daily through emails, posted announcements, and recorded or live video chatting. Remember, not all students will have access to the same modes of communication.
- Maintain professional boundaries, especially on social media. The same rules of decorum and respect must be upheld in all platforms. Monitor your communication style to preserve the student-teacher relationship.
- Promote a positive learning community among your students and address any online negativity or bullying immediately and firmly.

- Give students the opportunity to connect with each other, whether that's through email, WhatsApp, social media, FaceTime, or texting.
- Watch for COVID-19 driven discriminatory acts. Asian American students are vulnerable targets of bullying, xenophobia, and racist comments due to the original origin of COVID-19. Unfortunately, many elected leaders are only increasing this discrimination by calling COVID-19 "the Chinese virus" or "the China virus." Be aware of what your students are saying and the impact that can have on others reading or hearing it.
- Live video chatting can be helpful in some cases and for certain lessons. It might not work for others. In addition, remember to provide recorded access to lessons. Some students may miss a live video less because they are caring for a family member.
- For any video you create/record, open a Google Doc and activate voice typing before you start talking. It will create a transcript of what you say, which you can send out to students via email or printed copy.
- Follow the best practice of allowing some students to complete a lesson independently on their own time, and not through a live video chat. Use and trust your own judgement about what will work best.
- Provide frequent feedback on student work as quickly as possible. This will help keep students motivated and inform your lesson planning for future lessons.
- Elicit feedback from students on what is working well for them remotely and what isn't working; adjust accordingly for your future lesson plans and assignments.
- Make sure to know who to contact with questions and issues with technology when they arise.

Socioemotional Learning and Mental Wellbeing

It's critical to take care of your own mental health as well as checking in with your colleagues and students. Remember to engage in self-care while working from home. In addition, consider the following recommendations:

- It can be helpful to create a schedule and stick to a routine, both for yourself and for the distance learning plan you created for your students.
- Reach out to students who you notice are struggling, not completing work, or who are absent from lessons. Students may be absent for a variety of reasons. Assume good intent.
- Show students you care about them; ask how you can support them with their academics and what questions they have about content.
- Ensure your students and their families feel valued and heard. When talking virtually, listen actively and authentically to everything they share with you.
- Remind your students that language matters. Many students are accustomed to using specific language in forums such as video games. These styles of communication are normally not appropriate in academic settings. Help students learn how to use appropriate messages for their audience and setting.
- Reach out to colleagues and share ideas about what is working well with your distance learning plan and learn from others. This can build a sense of community and enrich your lessons.

- Although it is important to stay informed, monitor your intake of the news and social media. Take breaks from it to focus on activities that bring you joy.
- Physical distance doesn't have to mean emotional distance. Connect with loved ones using FaceTime, Zoom, or Skype at designated times to feel socially supported one-on-one or with a small group of people. Even some social media sites, like Facebook, have a video chat feature.
- Familiarize yourself with your district protocol for accessing student mental health supports. You may need to direct some students to a school counselor, social worker, or psychologist.

Special Education, English Language Learners, and Housing Insecure Students

Providing services to protected classes of students can seem difficult in distance learning environments, but you may find it easier to provide some supports. Education Minnesota will provide specific guidance related to special education, IEPs, and 504 plans in other communication. However, here are some important things to remember:

- In most cases, you have already built relationships with student families. Use these connections to design the best way to provide the services these groups of students need.
- Remember that environment matters for all students, but it can be a powerful force for some special education students. Some students may thrive at home because the triggers of the classroom are gone. At the same time, other students may be triggered by the home environment. Watch for these triggers and build on the knowledge you already have about your students.
- Watch for new manifestations of certain diagnoses. For example, you may see students with an EBD diagnosis behave in new ways. An outburst online will look different than an in-person reaction.
- Remind yourself that students are still learning internet communication. For example, all of your students might not understand that a sentence in all capital letters indicates anger and shouting. They may simply think all capital letters are easier to type. Use these instances as teachable moments.
- Maintain boundaries. Do not let the veil of technology blur the distinction between personal and professional relationships.

Education Support Professionals and Paraprofessionals

Education support professionals and paraprofessionals are vital to the success of distance learning. Consider the following ways to utilize the unique strengths of these support staff:

- ESPs can check in on individual students daily. This could be through email or any kind of video or messaging app.
- ESPs can support students both academically and emotionally. Show them you care and ask how you can help them.
- Work with teachers and send them supplementary academic material that will help all students learn and master topics.

- Create a “resource room” during the school day. Have an ESP or paraprofessional be available during certain hours to answer student questions.

ESPs and paraprofessionals should not be afraid to approach administration and teachers with ideas. They often know more about student communication styles and student home life than other staff. ESPs and paraprofessionals should speak up as they are the staff that can best help implement equitable practices in education.

Communication with Administration

Educators should establish consistent education patterns with administration. Strong communication comes from mutual trust, respect, and honesty. Ask questions. Stay informed. In addition, consider doing the following:

- Exchange contact information necessary to keep in touch.
- Discuss your distance learning plan with your administrator.
- Discuss expectations for work hours and communication.
- Set up standing meetings via email, phone, video chat, or whatever mode of communication works best for you. Use these meetings as opportunities to discuss what is working well in your classes and any questions, concerns, or supports you need from leadership.

Resources: Tools for Distance Learning

- *Teaching Tolerance* put together the following article with links to printables for student learning, tips on maintaining emotional and mental health, COVID-19 and social justice, and so much more: <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/teaching-through-coronavirus-what-educators-need-right-now>
- If you or a loved one need some emotional support and/or self-care, check out this free *Coronavirus Sanity Guide*: <https://www.tenpercent.com/coronavirussanityguide> Also check out these self-care resources connected directly to the pandemic: <https://www.tarabrach.com/pandemic/>
- The *CDC* has information on stress and coping with COVID19: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>
- *ShareMyLesson* has collected a plethora of free online resources, including online learning platforms, online tools to help ELL and SPED students, and resources broken down by age and subject matter: <https://sharemylesson.com/collections/free-online-resources-educators-parents-and-students#free-online-resources-for-english-language-learners>
- The *Minnesota Historical Society* has made its “Northern Lights” interactive e-book available for free online. This resource covers various topics related to the history of Minnesota. Access it here: <http://mnhs.org/nl/#/en/>

- **MDE** provides content specific supports for student instruction:
<https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/health/covid19/AcademicStandardsCOVID-19Resources/>
- This article from ***Education First*** outlines how to maintain positive working relationships with your colleagues and administrators: https://education-first.com/covid-19/?mc_cid=81ee45e743&mc_eid=a2fb06eece&utm_source=Transforming+Education+Subscribers&utm_campaign=3981b07ddb-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_09_03_02_53_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_99e6730d6b-3981b07ddb-421930489
- ***The National Association of School Psychologists*** provides tips for educators on addressing stigma and racism in connection to the coronavirus:
<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/countering-coronavirus-stigma-and-racism-tips-for-teachers-and-other-educators>
- **Learn more about student privacy and distance learning from the U.S. Department of Education:** <https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/>
- **The National Board of Certified Teachers** is cultivating a series of crowdsourced documents online. Those documents can be found here:
 - [Teachers Helping Teachers: Articles, Platforms and Tools](#)
 - [Teachers Helping Teachers: Pre-K-3](#)
 - [Teachers Helping Teachers: Grades 4-8](#)
 - [Teachers Helping Teachers: Grades 9-12](#)

References

- Minnesota Department of Education. (2020, March 12). *Guidance on distance learning*. Retrieved from <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/health/covid19/>
- Seale, C. (2020, March 17). Distance learning during the Coronavirus pandemic: Equity and access questions for school leaders. *Forbes*. Retrieved from www.forbes.com