

Advice from Educators who are Dealing with COVID-19¹

We are in a rapidly changing educational environment brought on by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Many schools are closed, many are going online. While numerous districts engaged in online learning for years, others are just starting to learn how to do this effectively. Educators are problem solvers. As you would expect, teachers, principals and district administrators have risen to the occasion and are happy to share what they are learning. Following are some pointers from teachers, principals, and district administrators derived from online chats and publications.

The Digital Divide and Equity Issues

- Equity issues are particularly prominent in remote learning. What districts have to provide this varies widely.
- There is an inequity between parents who work and parents at home. Try some of these ideas but be thoughtful. For example, you can offer online meetings a couple of times a day—during the day and after dinner.
- Online devices can be a challenge. Some schools don't have enough for everyone, some families don't have online access, and some families have siblings who need to use devices and be online at the same time. Some districts are programming devices with offline content. Others are putting together packets to send home (safely) to students and their families.
- You may want to put together packets for students for review, including games kids have played already, etc. One district puts weekly packets together that have not been touched for three days that can be picked up in the front foyer at the school.
- Don't worry about grading, just worry about the learning at this point. It is unfair and inequitable to grade kids who do not have the opportunity to do the work.
- Check who is engaging online and follow up with students who are not engaged. Make a list of who is working online and who is not. Equity is an issue, so if students are not interacting, use packets. Some schools have Paraprofessionals call these students.
- Some districts may not be distributing packets because of "stay at home" orders.
- No Internet access and limited cell phone reception may be issues—use packets if needed.
- You can do drive-through packet pickup—People don't even have to get out of the car.
- Assign online ELL resources to ELL students. Many teachers don't do this because they think that ELL students don't have access to technology at home.
- Publicize free Wi-Fi hotspots that can be accessed while maintaining social distancing, set up additional ways to get families connected.
- Special education meetings can be held successfully online. A big concern is with autism—it is not going to be possible to send people out to homes to help some students.

¹ Extracted from teacher, principal and administrator conversations convened by the Montana Office of Public Instruction, REL Midwest; and articles from Education Week and the New York Times in March, 2020.

Curriculum and Instruction

- Train the teachers on how to use online platforms if this has not been done already.
- In some schools, packets are sent home for K-2 students, and 3rd through 6th students are using the iPads.
- Some schools are cleaning devices, recording serial numbers, etc., and putting them in Ziplock bags before safely distributing them to deliver instruction.
- There are a lot of organizations offering resources online. Don't let this overwhelm you. Ignore what you don't need and focus on what is important to you right now.
- If you have snow days or other weather-related closures curriculum and instruction activities already prepared, go with that first.
- Focus on what you already had planned for the year and don't worry about changing curriculum just because something is free.
- When in doubt, focus on what you want the students to learn for the year and filter out everything else. Pick what is connected to what you are already planning.
- Your district or state standards are a good place to start when looking at any new online materials. By focusing on this, you can eliminate a lot of the noise. Online resources are difficult to vet.
- Without standards, the quality of online learning can vary considerably.
- Think about performance tasks versus having something due every single day.
- Groups of students are reacting differently. Those who are not typically engaged in regular school activities are now very involved. Students who are typically highly engaged in regular school activities may not make the adjustment as well—they may need structure.
- Start small and build up from there.
- Give tasks and a chunk of activities for the week. Also provide access during different times of the week.
- Start with review, and then cover new material, based on what you want the students to know.
- When covering new material, start small and go slow. Less is more.
- Don't send too much home, this is not just busywork.
- It is difficult to learn mathematics independently. Try to leverage parents and provide them with the skill sets to facilitate that.
- Use short assignments (like 20 minutes). This is very “doable” for teachers.
- Do what works for you. We are in unprecedented times.
- You can have students take pictures of homework and send it back electronically.

Communicating with Parents/Guardians/Families

- Approach the parents. They are worried and concerned about their children's education.
- Check in with students online or by phone. There are a lot of students who just want to talk to teachers.
- Communicate with parents that you are available to help at any point in time.
- Call the parents. It is really enlightening to hear about families and siblings.
- Consider teaching the way that parents used to do math—think of this as another strategy.
- Have someone in the students' life right now serve as a tutor.
- Parents may resist Common Core or new math. It is important for kids to make models of math with visuals or reasoning. Have parents say, “prove it to me”.

- When kids are playing games, add a couple of discussion questions. Whenever parents hear these discussions, they are more accepting of the new ways of teaching math.
- Try to respond quickly to students and parents. Some schools do this within 5 or 10 minutes.
- Attend to the social and emotional needs of students, families and educators.
- Have families check in on physical and emotional health online.
- Use translation software with families.
- Create online resources for parents of learning activities they can conduct with their students.

School and Community Building

- Teachers, kids and parents are all on a learning curve. Don't expect perfection and do the best you can.
- Keep your priorities straight. Food, physical and emotional health, safety are first. Education comes next. Take care of yourself first. These parents and students need you.
- Hold online meetings with PLCs and with staff every day to talk about what is working and what is not. You can also have informal daily staff check-ins to talk about what works and what does not.
- Some principals hold "facetime office hours" online regularly and let people know what they are.
- Look for strategies where students can interact with each other.
- Some schools have the counselor meet with the teachers every day to identify student and family needs for mental health services.
- Look for ways to build school culture online. Maybe have daily announcements and focus on the positives.
- Some schools are holding "car parades" where the staff drive through neighborhoods and wave. The kids stay on their own property to avoid contact.
- Dress up days can be held with kids sending in pictures that can be posted.
- Some teambuilding activities can be done online.
- Keep things light! Publish pictures of pet photos, etc.