Supporting Learning in the COVID-19 Context

Research to Guide Distance and Blended Instruction

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Executive Summary

This report offers a framework for districts to use in their preparation to provide quality instruction through distance and blended models. In the wake of COVID-19, "teaching as usual" will be neither possible nor sufficient to meet students' needs because California's schools have experienced disruptions to each aspect of the instructional core: teachers, students, and content.

Teachers will need to adapt their choice of pedagogy to align with the affordances and constraints of distance and blended learning, which will be shaped by the proportion of instructional time delivered in person, the synchronicity of instruction, and technologies used to deliver instruction. Ongoing assessment will be critical as teachers will need to calibrate their instruction to meet greater and more varied academic needs. Students and families will need regular feedback to improve learning and promote engagement.

Educators must anticipate greater student social-emotional needs in the fall 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, and it will be essential for educators in the distance context to develop classroom communities through remote relationship-building strategies.

Teachers will need familiarity with the prior year's content because content typically covered in the prior year cannot be assumed to have been delivered, received, or retained. Schools should anticipate significant academic losses for all students, and learning losses are likely to most significantly impact low-income, Black, and Latinx students as well as students who were already struggling in school. Educators should plan to provide high-quality, grade-level instruction with robust differentiated support.

The implementation of consistent, quality distance instruction for all students in the 2020–21 school year will depend 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 done well, can serve as the solid foundation on which distance instruction can support student and educator needs: (a) set and communicate expectations about instruction, (b) support educators, (c) develop systems to address greater student needs, and (d) support technology and data to improve instruction.

Introduction

On July 17th, 2020, Governor Newsom announced that all K–12 schools in California counties on the state's monitoring list for rising COVID-19 infections would be required to close for in-person instruction. As of the announcement, the majority of counties in California (32 of 58) were on the state's monitoring list; with the exception of three, this list included all of the state's most populous counties. Consequently, most of California's over six million students will start the 2020–21 school year with distance learning. Leading up to Governor Newsom's announcement, much of the discussion about schools has centered on the logistics of reopening school buildings, but with the new reopening restrictions, now is the time to focus our attention on learning and redouble our commitment to providing high-quality, equitable public education to all students in California through distance, blended, or in-person instruction.

Looking ahead to the 2020–21 school year, our educational system will face unprecedented shifts that will continue to alter fundamentally how education is delivered to children across California. Without a well-thought-out approach to address instructional practice, districts may find themselves mired in a patchwork of plans with an incoherent and insufficient program of instruction—and the state's most vulnerable students will fall further behind.

Fortunately, even in the context of COVID-19, how educators foster students' learning and engagement rests on several long-standing principles for high-quality instruction. Districts will need to help educators adapt these principles to unfamiliar contexts amid new modalities of learning, limited resources, and ongoing COVID-19 health risks. In navigating these new realities, districts must also consider ways to continue supporting teachers and their instructional practice.

This report is organized around the fundamental elements of the instructional core: teachers, students, and content. We begin by describing the instructional core and the ways in which each of its elements has been disrupted by COVID-19. We then offer research-based strategies to mitigate that impact on students in distance and blended contexts. The final section describes the role districts must play to ensure that students receive quality instruction at scale: focusing on setting and communicating expectations about instruction; supporting educators; developing systems to address greater student needs; and improving technology and data infrastructure. The strategies and recommendations are intended to be used to frame conversations among district leaders and to guide strategic planning for the 2020–21 school year.

For the purposes of this report, we use the definition of "distance learning" used by the California Legislature in Senate Bill 98, the education omnibus trailer bill to the 2020 Budget Act (SB-98; Education finance, 2019–2020), which is "instruction in which the pupil and instructor are in different locations and pupils are under the general supervision of a certificated employee of the local educational agency [LEA]" (Sect. 43500). "Blended learning" is a combination of distance

learning and in-person instruction. Distance learning in California must ensure the following six components (Education finance, 2019–2020, Section 43503):

- Confirmation or provision of adequate technology and connectivity for each student to access and complete assigned work.

- Content aligned to grade-level standards at a level of quality and rigor equivalent to in person instruction.

- Academic and other supports to assist students not performing at grade level, English learners, students with exceptional needs, students in foster care or experiencing homelessness, and students requiring mental health support.

- Special education and any services required by a student's individualized education program.

- Designated and integrated instruction in English language development.

- Daily live interaction with certified employees and student peers for purposes of instruction, progress monitoring, and maintaining school connectedness.

No rigorous studies have ever been conducted on the most effective ways to move all public schools from an in-person to a distance- or blended-learning model over a short period of time. As a result, the evidence shared here comes from three places: (a) prior studies of distance or blended learning, where both educators and students self-selected into an online/blended learning environment, and/or where the students/programs studied were often focused on high school and postsecondary students; (b) wisdom from interviews with over 35 researchers and other experts with deep knowledge of teaching and learning; and (c) emerging knowledge from educators and system leaders who are developing approaches to meet student needs in the current environment.

While uncertainty will be a mainstay moving forward, what is certain is that education—and the daily work of educators to foster the learning and development of students—will continue and endure. What education will look like, its quality, and its responsiveness to the needs of children throughout our state will depend critically on our educators and their instructional practices as well as on the leadership and systems in place to support them. This report provides a framework for districts to use in thinking about what is new about the current environment; what we know from research about teaching and learning that we can apply to this new context; and how to think about creating a robust system that supports teaching and learning regardless of whether schools are using an in-person, a fully distance, or a blended schooling model in the fall.

We intentionally focus this report on distance and blended learning given the role that both modalities will play in districts' plans for the 2020–21 school year. The majority of school districts

will begin with distance instruction and will only have the option to reopen for in-person learning when their county is off the state's monitoring list for 14 consecutive days.[1] Districts that are in counties deemed safe to reopen in person should also have a distance learning plan in place to be prepared to provide equitable, quality instruction for students in case of increased infection.

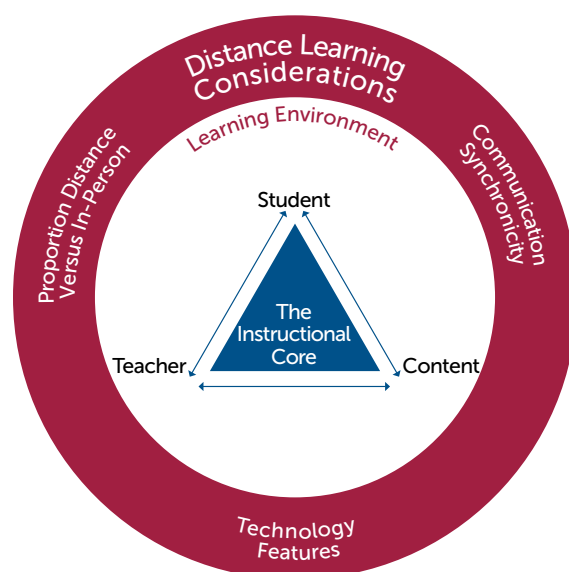## The Instructional Core in the COVID-19 Context

On March 13, 2020 Governor Newsom announced that California schools closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic would continue to receive full funding (Exec. Order No. N-26-20, 2020). This executive order effectively resulted in the shutdown of schools across the state. Many school districts rapidly mobilized to meet the basic needs of students, including nutrition (providing lunches for children; Tadayon, 2020) and technology (distributing computers and devices for students to access class material at home; Johnson & Burke, 2020). Many educators and leaders initially saw closures as temporary—a hiatus of but a few weeks—thus most districts did not anticipate needing to transition completely to distance instruction for the duration of the school year. The implementation of distance learning has been rocky in many places, leading some to describe it not as "distance learning" but instead "crisis schooling" (Wenner Moyer, 2020).

The sudden and rapid implementation of distance learning—along with the stress and isolation caused by the pandemic, increased economic hardship, and a sharp rise in racial tension—have all combined to create an environment rife with stress and anxiety for students, families, and teachers. Along with mental health and wellness concerns, significant learning loss is expected (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). The implementation of distance learning was uneven. In a study of districts nationwide, only one in five districts were found to have delivered rigorous distance instruction. Districts that met the rigor threshold delivered content through online platforms; offered some synchronous learning (via Zoom or another video conference platform); tracked student attendance or otherwise expected student participation; and provided feedback on student work to some extent (Malkus, 2020). The parents in California who are most concerned about their child falling behind academically due to distance learning include those with a child with a disability, those who belong to underrepresented groups and who are without college degrees, those with lower socioeconomic status, and those who are Latinx. Low-income parents in California are less likely to report success with distance learning than more affluent parents, due to less access to technology, less digital literacy, and language barriers (The Education Trust—West, 2020). These disparities in access and opportunity threaten to expand California's already wide achievement gaps (Cano, 2020; Reardon et al., 2018).

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[1] District superintendents in counties on the state monitoring list may apply to local health officials for waivers to permit in-person instruction in elementary schools.

In times of disruption and uncertainty, it is helpful to return to the fundamentals of what we know to be true about teaching and learning. Instruction consists of the interactions among teachers and students around content (Cohen et al., 2003). Taken together, these three interdependent components—teachers' knowledge and skill, students' engagement in their own learning, and academically challenging content—are generally considered to be the "instructional core" (City et al., 2009; Cohen et al., 2003). In the current context of distance/blended learning, we adapt the instructional core framework to include dimensions of online learning (Means et al., 2013; Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Instructional Core in the Context of Dimensions of Distance and Blended Learning

COVID-19 has introduced what is arguably the largest ever interruption to instruction in K–12 education. The pandemic has impacted each element of the instructional core, and "teaching as usual" will not be sufficient to meet student needs—or be possible given the current context. First of all, COVID-19 has and will continue to transform the pedagogical practices of **teachers**. Distance instruction will continue for many teachers in the fall. And teachers who will return to physical schooling under models of staggered or rotating instruction will also need to adjust their previously familiar approaches to in-person instruction to new configurations and disease-containment protocols.

Students have been deeply affected by COVID-19. Many students will not return to school at all while others will return to school with heightened mental health and social-emotional needs that are likely to impede their ability to engage with learning. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McLeod, 2018) is a lens through which we can understand fundamental human needs and the impact that COVID-19 has had on students' lives. COVID-19, related shutdowns, and economic

collapse have increased students' basic needs for safety, belonging, esteem, and, for some, food and shelter. And under distance learning conditions, opportunities to engage will be constrained to remote participation. In-person engagement and one-on-one conversations with teachers will also be restricted due to health guidelines for social distancing and sanitization. This will also reduce opportunities for small-group or project-based work.

Due to the learning loss and widening learning gaps associated with extended school closures and inequitable access to distance learning opportunities, it is estimated that some students will perform an entire grade behind where they otherwise would have been at the beginning of the 2020–21 academic year (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). Therefore, the **content** that teachers teach will likely need to be adjusted to address critical gaps in learning and accelerate learning in the upcoming academic year. The combination of the sudden closure of schools in March with the modified learning scenarios for when schools reopen in the fall will require educators to reexamine both the content and curriculum needed to preserve learning progressions and to help students catch up to—and stay on—grade level.

The instructional core describes the "who" (students and teachers) and the "what" (the content); in the COVID-19 context, instruction will now be subject to new technical dimensions around the "where," "when," and "how" of teaching and learning. There are three main technical dimensions (modified from Means et al., 2013) that both constrain and enable instruction in distance and blended learning that educators will need to consider when adapting instruction to distance and blended environments (see Figure 1):

1. **The proportion of instructional time delivered in-person.** Given state and county public health guidelines, few California schools are likely to be "100 percent in person" in the traditional sense over the upcoming school year. Some schools will offer exclusively distance instruction; others may stagger their schedules and facilities in such a way that most instruction will happen in person. There will likely be wide variability among schools in the degree to which in-person learning occurs at the start of the school year, with some probability of changes in the proportions over the course of the year.

2. **The synchronicity of instruction.** In-person school provides primarily synchronous (at the same time) instruction, which enables teachers and students to interact in real time. When schools turned to distance learning in spring 2020, some teachers used web conferencing for virtual synchronous communication. Most teachers offered asynchronous (not at the same time) learning experiences, such as readings, videos, projects, or assignments. Students with limited access to technology and Wi-Fi typically received only asynchronous experiences during the spring of 2020. For obvious reasons, if there is limited synchronous communication, students are not able to interact with teachers or peers, which has negative impacts on their engagement in a learning environment. However, almost all instruction in spring 2020 was

asynchronous, with only nine percent of districts providing synchronous instruction to all grade levels as of April 2020 (Lake & Dusseault, 2020).

3. **The technology used to deliver instruction.** Virtual classrooms enable a range of options for interaction and engagement that include video conferences, text chat, small-group breakouts, interactive whiteboards, application sharing, and polling. Digital tools clearly offer a range of potentially helpful features (e.g., machine-scored diagnostic assessments, a variety of applications, etc.), but the fundamental pedagogies described below can be delivered effectively with either traditional or digital media.

As districts prepare for the 2020–21 school year, they will need to develop a plan for achieving consistently high-quality teaching and learning of grade-level content in distance or blended learning contexts. The next section will present evidence-based recommendations for addressing the constraints and challenges that COVID-19 imposes on the instructional core in the areas of teaching, student engagement, and content.

Teaching in the COVID-19 Context: Pedagogy, Assessment, and Feedback

Students will only learn what they are taught effectively. Under the new conditions of teaching and learning, teachers will need to bring novel approaches to their practice. This section describes how teaching in the COVID-19 context intersects with the key technical dimensions of distance learning to shape the quality of learning experiences that students receive. In this section on teaching in the COVID-19 context, we address issues of pedagogy, assessment, and feedback.

Pedagogy. Though the context of the physical classroom differs from the virtual or remote context of distance instruction, a primary principle of good instruction remains the same: teachers must start with the learning objective they have for their students and then identify the pedagogical approach that will best help students achieve the objective. In distance or blended classrooms, pedagogical approaches can be classified into three groups (Means et al., 2013): (a) expository, wherein the teacher or the computer presents one-way information; (b) active learning, wherein students engage in projects, tasks, or exercises; or (c) interactive, wherein students interact with each other and/or teachers to construct new knowledge.

The appropriate pedagogical approach will depend on the learning objective, therefore it is important for teachers to have access to the full range of pedagogical approaches as well as the option to divide a segment of instruction into smaller chunks that are a developmental match for students' attention spans. Varying the types of engagement required across these dimensions can be a helpful approach.

Table 1 shows, at the highest level, how the pedagogical and technical dimensions would interact in the designing of distance instruction.

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

		Pedagogical Approaches		
		Expository	**Active Learning**	**Interactive**
Technical Dimensions	Blended, 40 percent in person and 60 percent online	Lowest priority for in-person time because synchronicity does not add much value. Use a range of media (movie clips, readings) to deliver information.	Moderate priority for in-person time. Sometimes rapid cycles of practice and feedback might be worth limited in-person time.	Top priority for in-person time (to the extent health protocols allow) because students need to interact with each other and/or teachers.
	Distance, 100 percent online	Lowest priority for synchronous time because synchronicity does not add much value for expository pedagogy. Expository activities can be delivered via video or audio clips, text, or other media for students to engage with asynchronously. When lectures are necessary, they should be delivered as video or audio clips.	Moderate priority for synchronous time because rapid cycles of practice and feedback can be embedded within synchronous time to make this approach worthwhile.	Top priority for synchronous time because students need to participate in a community of learners. Teachers can facilitate interactive learning *synchronously* through breakout rooms and small-group conversations, and *asynchronously* by allowing students to share active learning products and to give and receive feedback.
	Distance, mostly offline	Primary delivery mode is likely to be paper packets. Districts have also provided USB flash drives with digital learning material or made use of learning platforms (e.g., Google Classroom, Canvas, some apps) that allow students to download content and then work offline. Some districts have worked with local public television stations and radio to provide content as well.	Students can engage in practice and projects in a range of traditional ways. Regular check-ins with teachers, other adults with relevant knowledge, and peers must be included (telephone, text messaging, written feedback).	Group projects with regularly scheduled check-ins on conference calls could facilitate peer-to-peer interaction. Interactive journals, pen pals, or other similar activities could be shared across students asynchronously.

Research recommends that educators do the following to create opportunities for students to be actively engaged in the process of learning and collaboration in distance and blended classrooms.

Provide an opportunity for students to gain exposure to concepts prior to engaging in synchronous time. Asynchronous engagement prior to class allows students to reflect upon what they are learning and prepare to integrate their learning into the next synchronous session. Through independent activities such as reading articles, watching videos or Powerpoint presentations with voiceover, or completing modules online, students can independently build an

initial understanding of content prior to class. Active learning and expository approaches such as these can be delivered asynchronously so that students can digest them at a time and pace that is convenient for them. Teachers can also use these asynchronous modules to provide targeted scaffolding or essential background information for those students in need of extra support in a particular area. In addition, teachers can use these preclass assignments as formative assessments of student understanding or preknowledge and adjust their instruction accordingly (Brame, 2013). There is a substantial research base showing the promise of "flipped" classrooms, for which offering first exposure to new content asynchronously is a foundational approach to instruction (Brame, 2013; Crouch & Mazur, 2001; DesLauriers et al., 2011; Gorres-Martens et al., 2016; Lage et al., 2000; Lasry et al., 2008; Walvoord & Johnson Anderson, 1998).

Maximize opportunities for students to engage with one another and with teachers. Synchronous classes might start with a brief and targeted mini-lecture on aspects of the content that preassessments show students did not learn, but the focus of the time is on the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy—such as drawing connections, justifying a stand, or creation—as opposed to recalling facts (Persaud, 2018). Activities such as experiments, debates, data analysis, and groups solving challenging applications together could serve to synthesize and extend student knowledge. Studies of online schools show that many students benefit from synchronous individual or small-group support in addition to whole-group distance instruction (Gill, 2015; Hanover Research, 2011; Means et al., 2013, 2014). Synchronous learning time provides an opportunity for social-emotional interactions between peers and the instructor, and can improve student engagement; students in remote learning settings generally prefer synchronous instruction and collaborative learning opportunities (Cavanaugh, 2001; Chou, 2002; Offir et al., 2008). This is especially true for younger students who struggle to stay engaged through distance learning (Musgrove & Musgrove, 2004).

Asynchronous tasks can also be structured to offer opportunities for students to collaborate and build learning together, for example through discussion boards and by providing peer feedback. Teachers can structure learning opportunities that encourage collaboration by accommodating flexible grouping options for completing work. It is critical to establish a set of class norms for participation in asynchronous and synchronous learning activities to guide appropriate participation.

Set reasonable expectations for student engagement and prioritize brevity. Research shows that prolonged distance learning can result in feelings of physical and social isolation as well as attention fatigue (Cavanaugh, 2001; Youth Liberty Squad, 2020). Fatigue among instructors and students from excessive video calls is attributable to the difficulty and stress of trying to interpret social cues virtually, and can ultimately lead to lower levels of participation and collaboration (Sklar, 2020). If synchronous time is only used for students to passively learn in large groups, those feelings of isolation and fatigue will only intensify. Instructors expressed that getting students comfortable engaging in large-group distance learning environments can be difficult,

which further accentuates the need for individual or small-group instruction. The following quotes from California students capture a sense of struggle to stay engaged and keep up with schoolwork (Youth Liberty Squad, 2020):

> I feel overwhelmed by the amount of schoolwork I am getting. I feel like I am being assigned more work than I can handle in certain classes. The pandemic already adds enough stress into my life, I think that we shouldn't be as overwhelmed with schoolwork given the circumstances. (p. 3)

> I have to balance my classes, zoom meetings, homework, AP exams to study for, and work. Currently I'm the only one working in my family therefore I provide any necessities for my family. I work during the night so it's difficult to wake up early. (p. 4)

> Some students don't have a healthy environment at home. People in the district or the teachers in the classroom dismiss the change in circumstances and continue assigning tons of work that accomplish nothing but add to our stress. (p. 4)

Plan for equitable access to learning opportunities. Instruction designed for distance, blended, or in-person learning should be designed so that it is accessible for students with a wide variety of learning needs. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a framework that helps instructors develop learning opportunities that all students can access regardless of their specific learning needs (CAST, 2018; Lambert, 2020). UDL focuses on providing multiple means for (a) engaging with the "why" of learning, (b) representation of the "what" of learning, and (c) action and expression of the "how" of learning.

This framework can be used by instructional teams to develop curricula and lessons that are more easily accessible for students regardless of their academic needs, to develop executive functioning and regulation skills, and to provide flexibility in how students display their learning to instructors. School closures and distance learning have stripped students of opportunities to have autonomy and choice in their school experience. Through UDL, staff with different content and specialized instructional expertise can work together to create lessons that encourage student engagement and that give students opportunities for autonomy over the learning process.

Internet-based technology can offer power tools within a teacher's pedagogical approach. Although active and interactive learning opportunities are easier when students have widespread access to technology, with sufficient planning it is possible to enable all pedagogical approaches regardless of the available technology. In districts where technology access varies across students, it is critical that all students be offered similarly high-quality learning opportunities. Districts should work with teachers to ensure that both virtual and more traditional (e.g., paper, phone) approaches to delivering each module of instruction are available. However, teachers should not be expected to develop these approaches independently, because that would likely

result in a wide variation in the degree and quality of execution. Alternately, schools could be staffed flexibly (see the section "Reimagining Educator Roles for Distance and Blended Learning" on page 37) to ensure students without technology access also experience high-quality learning opportunities.

Assessment. Understanding what students are learning and adapting instruction to address their learning needs lies at the heart of quality teaching, and ongoing assessment is more critical now than ever before as teachers will need to calibrate their instruction to meet greater and more varied academic needs.

Though the delivery mechanisms of assessment may change when transitioning from traditional instruction to distance learning, the same principles that guide student assessments in a traditional learning environment are constant in the face of changing modalities, synchronicities, or technologies. Assessments become even more important in online environments, because without face-to-face interactions and real-time classroom observations, teachers will need increasingly to rely on formative assessments to gauge student engagement and learning. Virtual instruction can make assessment more efficient, useful, and sustainable (Rovai, 2000). When assessing students in the upcoming year, the following approaches are recommended.

Measure attendance: The first step to accessing learning. Tracking participation in distance and blended learning is critical to ensure that all students are receiving instruction, and can inform outreach and follow-up. Also, under SB-98 (Education finance, 2019–2020), districts must establish a plan for tracking attendance and reengaging students who are not participating in instruction; districts are furthermore responsible for maintaining a weekly engagement record for each student including synchronous and asynchronous activities.

Miami Dade School District—a large urban school district with significant low-income (73 percent free or reduced-price lunch) and English learner (20 percent) populations (Shneyderman, 2018)—was able to maintain 92 percent average daily attendance within a week of starting distance learning with teachers taking daily attendance through an online learning system and district staff following up with absent students daily to troubleshoot access and resource issues (Bakeman, 2020). Rapid, daily outreach ensures students and parents know what is expected and drives increased attendance rates.

One framework for understanding and monitoring attendance under distance learning has been developed by Attendance Works (2020), and includes the following measurable points: (a) **contact:** working contact information for each enrolled student and their family; (b) **connectivity:** students and families have access to needed technology; (c) **participation:** the extent to which students show up and complete learning activities; and (d) **relationships:** students and families respond to activities that build relationships and support their social, emotional, and physical wellness.

These types of measures should be monitored and assessed within the first few weeks of school for each student. These data would sharpen understandings of unequal access to resources and the need for differentiated supports. For a guide to monitoring absence and a comprehensive set of tiered approaches to addressing chronic absence in the context of COVID-19 , see *Attendance Playbook: Smart Solutions for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the COVID Era* (Jordan, 2020).

In spring 2020, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) modified its student information system and data dashboard to track attendance data during distance learning. Using the Aeries Student Information System, Oakland engaged in the following practices to collect and track attendance data:

- **Contact:** Collecting, confirming, and inputting working phone numbers and email addresses was a school site responsibility. Front office staff and teachers reached out to families that did not respond to schoolwide requests to submit updated contact information. Families with no response from various methods (including exhausting all emergency contacts) were referred to the Coordination of Services Team (COST) for additional outreach.

- **Connectivity:** OUSD surveyed students and families to track the degree to which they had access to devices and internet connectivity. The categories of connectivity included: device and internet; device and no internet; no device and internet; and no device and no internet. School staff entered and updated this information in their student information system on a regular basis.

- **Participation:** Teachers were responsible for taking attendance every day on the same online attendance site they used prior to the transition to distance learning. OUSD is continuing the process of defining participation and attendance in the distance learning context.

- **Relationships:** OUSD is in the process of determining how to measure the fourth element at this time.

Focus on formative over summative assessment. Assessments of student learning take different forms and can be applied for different purposes. The framework in Figure 2 organizes different kinds of assessments of student learning by purpose and focus.

Figure 2. Four-Quadrant Framework for Describing Types of Assessments (adapted from Brookhart, 2015, p. 1)
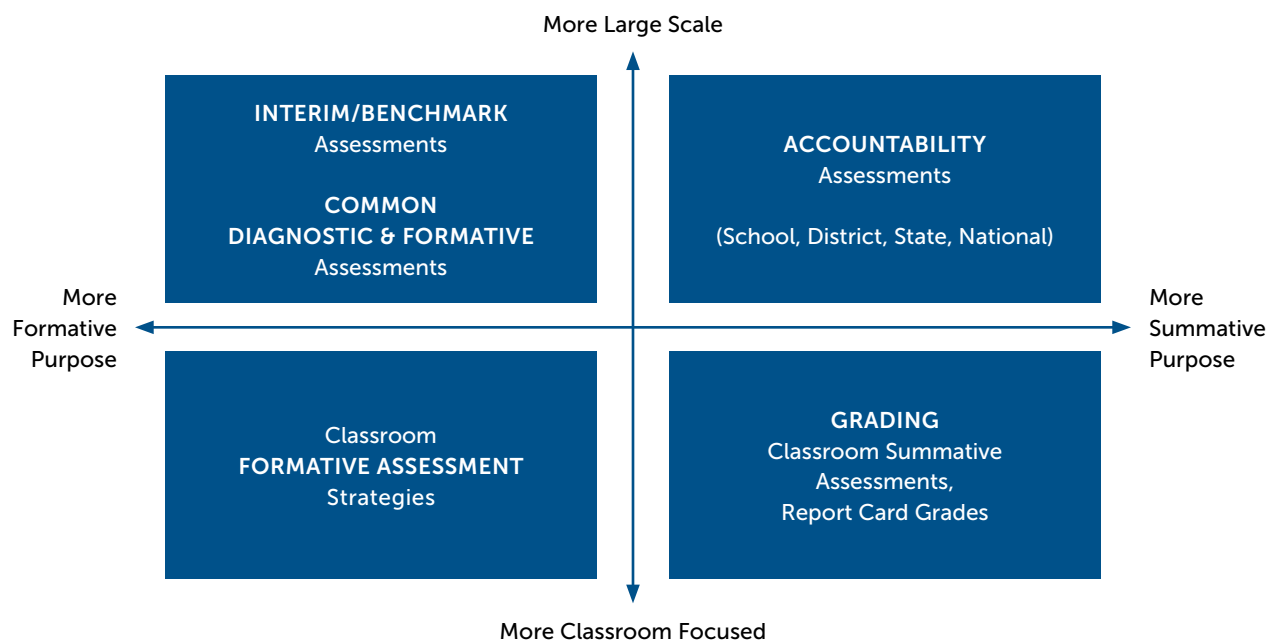
Data are applied for summative purposes when used to make judgements about learning relative to benchmarks. When applied on a large scale, summative assessments can play a valuable role in providing information to shine a light on achievement gaps for school accountability purposes. At the classroom level, teachers judge student performance and document the evaluation as a grade in that student's record, which has implications for future life opportunities. When applied to make evaluative and consequential decisions such as these, it is important for the data to be trustworthy. The reliability, validity, and fairness of assessment data are dependent on many factors but require at least the following for the students who are assessed (D'Brot, 2020): (a) an opportunity to learn the content expected in a given grade, (b) comparable conditions for learning that content, and (c) standardized conditions to administer the assessments.

When these conditions are not met, judgements about student learning should not be applied for consequential decision-making. The extent to which these conditions can be met in the 2020–21 school year is still uncertain. Thus, in the presence of widespread inequalities in opportunities and situations caused by COVID-19, emphasis on summative assessments and grading should be relaxed. Districts should support teachers to extend the grading flexibility that most schools introduced in spring 2020. Options may include: (a) shifting from grades to "credit/incomplete," (b) allowing students to choose their preference between a grade and "credit/incomplete," (c) adding an asterisk to the grade to indicate that the course was completed

under extraordinary circumstances, or (d) developing specific procedures that allow students to improve their grade by redoing assignments or assessments (Guskey, 2020).

Assess student learning frequently and through diverse approaches. Teachers improve their understanding of student learning by measuring student progress frequently using diverse assessment tasks. Common assessment techniques that can be administered online can be classified into these four categories: comprehensive-type, discussion board, reflective-focused, and project-based. Teachers should select the assessment type based on the learning goals they have for their students, and then identify the data that will help them best understand student progress towards those goals. These assessments can be used as both a formative assessment or a summative assessment depending on the intent and use (see Martin & Ndoye, 2016, for analytic approaches for these assessment types).

- **Comprehension-type assessments:** These are multiple-choice or quick response type activities that reveal student understandings. These tools quickly gather information to inform necessary adjustments. These assessments can be embedded synchronously in a real-time lesson or asynchronously between synchronous sessions to help a teacher understand if students have learned the material and to shed light on gaps in learning.

- **Student discussions:** These can also be used for formative assessment of student learning, whether they are synchronous and video-, audio-, or text-based, or asynchronous and text-based, as on a discussion board. Student–teacher and student–student discussions can be used to assess emerging understandings of concepts and theories, as well as skills such as reasoning, evaluation, and argumentation. Active facilitation as well as guidelines and rubrics for participation and posting protocols positively impact the quality of discourse and students' understanding of the course content (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005).

- **Reflection-focused assessments:** These focus not only on comprehension of the correct answer but also emphasize the thought processes that led to that answer (Frederick, 2002). Students are expected to explain their responses to questions related to skills and knowledge learned in the course. Examples of these assessments include short answers, concept maps, essays, minute papers, research papers, reflection papers, recorded "think-alouds," and so forth. These tasks are generally done asynchronously to allow time for reflection, but brief reflections can also be done synchronously, and can allow teachers to gain insight into students' thinking processes (Burns, 2017).

- **Project-based or performance-based assessments:** Students organize their work as a project that addresses authentic, real-world challenges through inquiry, discovery, knowledge building, and design—leading ultimately to the construction of knowledge in project-based learning (Thomas, 2000). Capstone projects, portfolios, research

projects, or design challenges are examples of project-based or performance-based learning opportunities that can be used for formative assessment of learning. Formative assessment requires a rubric that clearly captures project expectations and dimensions of quality for reference. Demonstration of learning can be live, recorded, and documented through text or photographs. Project-based assessment provides an opportunity for students to work in groups or individually, and the interaction among group members can be analyzed as part of this assessment.

Multiple online tools exist for ongoing assessment, including Edpuzzle (edpuzzle.com), Edulastic (edulastic.com), Flipgrid (info.flipgrid.com), Gimkit (gimkit.com), Google Classroom Question Tool (Google, n.d.-a), Formative (goformative.com), Google Forms (Google, n.d.-b), InsertLearning (Google, n.d.-c), Kahoot! (kahoot.com), Mentimeter (mentimeter.com), Nearpod (nearpod.com), Padlet (padlet.com), and more (see Bell, 2018; Dyer, 2019; Global Online Academy, n.d.). In situations where reliable technology is not accessible, exchange of paper–pencil formative assessments or telephone conversations can provide opportunities for ongoing assessment of student learning and feedback.

Feedback to students and families. Students need regular feedback to support their learning and to recognize and encourage engagement; this is particularly true for students in distance learning. Due to the limited opportunities for immediate responses or interaction in distance learning, the role of frequent feedback for signaling the importance of work submitted, and for opening and sustaining communication between teacher and student about learning is crucial. Effective feedback provides students with two types of information: verification and elaboration. Verification indicates whether an answer is correct, and elaboration provides information to guide the student towards the correct answer (Kulhavy & Stock, 1989). More elaborate feedback leads to higher learning outcomes than does simple verification feedback, particularly for higher order learning outcomes (Van der Kleij et al., 2015).

Teachers must regularly review and provide feedback on student work and provide feedback to students and families because feedback helps to reinforce the learning objectives, supports the monitoring of learning, and activates self-evaluation and adjustments in the learning process. In a distance learning environment, students can suffer from isolation and detachment, and explicit connections between a teacher and student about their learning is critical to keeping the student engaged. With regular contact, teachers signal that the student's work is valuable and can help to keep students engaged in the learning process. And it is also important for feedback to be bidirectional. Teachers should solicit feedback from students and families in order to differentiate instruction.

Offer multiple modes of feedback delivery. Though feedback is generally provided in a written format or as annotation, audio and video recordings offer different modes for students to receive feedback in distance learning. Decisions about mode of delivery should take into

account student reading ability—nonwritten feedback may be appropriate for younger students, struggling readers, or other students with modification needs. If feedback is complex or could benefit from a demonstration of how to do something, video feedback can be effective. Taking advantage of a teachable moment in student work may be better suited to oral feedback. Video or audio feedback can mitigate some of the misinterpretation that can occur through text due to the absence of nonverbal cues (Brookhart, 2017; Fiock & Garcia, 2019).

Research has shown that computer-based assessment and feedback can be effective for promoting student learning and engagement (van der Kleij et al., 2015). Computer-based assessments, often built into learning management systems (LMSs), provide timely feedback and automated scoring. Teachers can program these systems to provide immediate elaborated feedback, giving just-in-time help to resolve gaps in student understanding, and many have plug-ins that provide modifications such as translations and closed captioning. Balanced with the efficiency of automated feedback must be opportunities to use feedback to signal care and establish connection. Whether or not students feel cared for by teachers can have profound effects on their engagement and investment in learning, and feedback is an opportunity to develop connections with students. In fact, a recent study found that the quality and timeliness of a teacher's feedback was the most valued form of learning connection identified by students in distance learning (Ragusa & Crampton, 2018).

Schedule time to provide individualized or small-group instruction and build nurturing relationships with students. In response to assessment results, teachers may differentiate instruction for small groups or individuals. Prioritizing frequent, individualized touch points with students in order to provide feedback and differentiate instruction must occur in conjunction with the support for students' social-emotional needs. Literature suggests that personalized instruction such as tutoring or small-group instruction with a teacher or paraprofessional (Bloom, 1984; Slavin et al., 2008) or even individualized learning through online platforms (Van Lehn, 2011) improves student outcomes. The positive effects of these supports on student performance are largely dependent on the relationship between a student and their teacher (Pane, 2018; Slavin, 2018). On-site differentiation through one-on-one or small-group instruction could often occur within class periods with the whole class—this can also be facilitated in virtual pull-out rooms with coteachers, but this type of interaction must be scheduled in a distance learning environment. Studies on adult experiences in distance learning show that human support, whether in person or through various forms of media, is essential for reducing feelings of loneliness and for driving learning (Burns, 2011; Hord et al., 2008). Students in the current climate will similarly need individualized contact with instructors (Brenneman & Karpman, 2020). Maximizing these opportunities for students should be prioritized to differentiate instruction and build the relationships necessary to support distance learning for all students.

Educators should prioritize formats of engagement with students that maximize individualized instruction across all formats—breakout rooms on video calls, small-group

conference calls to review on or offline work, or regularly scheduled meetings with groups of students with similar needs.

     Provide regular feedback to families. In distance learning, teachers must lean on parents as partners in student learning more than before and should provide consistent guidance and feedback to families on their child's learning. Researchers have found that sending parents information about their child's absences, missed assignments, and grades through text message increases attendance and test scores, and the effect of regular feedback via texts is larger for students who were lower achieving to start (Bergman & Chan, 2019). These effects were identified prepandemic. The power of regular feedback to parents may be more significant in distance learning conditions because families are craving more teacher contact—94 percent of parents in California believe that more contact with teachers would be helpful (The Education Trust—West, 2020). Postcards sent to parents about their child's school attendance have also shown to be effective at reducing absenteeism (Rogers et al., 2017). This feedback serves as a "nudge" to prompt parents to encourage greater student engagement.

     Beyond monitoring participation and assignment completion, parents can also work with teachers as genuine partners in their child's learning. The Academic Parent-Teacher Teams offers a model of teacher–family partnership through which teachers gain better understanding of families and teachers build their capacity to provide meaningful support for student learning. At the core of the Academic Parent-Teacher Teams process are teacher-facilitated teacher–family meetings (WestEd, 2017), which can be conducted in person or online.

Student Engagement in the COVID-19 Context

     Student engagement is the second component of the instructional core. For a variety of reasons, students have been deeply affected by COVID-19. With stressors such as fear of infection, frustration, boredom, reduced freedom, isolation, uncertainty, lack of personal space, and potential family instability, it is not surprising that COVID-19 is showing to have negative impacts on student mental health and well-being. Recent research on the psychological impact of COVID-19 among elementary students during lockdown due to COVID-19 in China found a 23 percent incidence of depression symptoms and 19 percent incidence of anxiety symptoms (Xie et al., 2020). Reports of anxiety and depression among California's students are also on the rise, with more than half of students who participated in a recent survey saying they are in need of mental health support (Jones, 2020). And mental health outcomes tend to be worse for those from low-income families because children from economically disadvantaged families generally experience more daily hassles and negative life events that result in greater emotional distress (DuBois et al., 1994; Hawryluck et al., 2004). Mental health outcomes are also worse for those under quarantine for longer durations (Brooks et al., 2020). Disease-related stigma from others is also a stressor (Brooks et al., 2020), which is relevant because reports of anti-Asian racism have increased in association with the geographic origin of the virus (Redden, 2020).

Economic strains have a significant impact on students as well. After the Great Recession, schools saw a dramatic increase in the number of students suffering from depression and anxiety as well as an increase in suicides (California Children's Trust, 2018). The impact of COVID-19 has already had a larger economic impact than the Great Recession on many families while at the same time adversely affecting the physical and mental well-being of individuals across the country (Panchal et al., 2020). Added to the stressors of COVID-19, recent events that have highlighted racial injustices have aggravated mental health issues for people of color. Within a week of George Floyd's death, reports of anxiety and depression among Black Americans increased from 36 percent to 41 percent (Fowers & Wan, 2020).

Educators must anticipate the social-emotional needs of students and families in the return to school in fall 2020 and should plan to create opportunities to provide comprehensive supports. Addressing student social-emotional well-being must be a priority for learning to occur, whether online, blended, or on-site. Despite the challenges of suddenly transitioning from in-person to distance learning in spring 2020, one advantage that all educators had for distance learning was that they had already established relationships with their students. In the 2020–21 school year, most educators will need to engage deeply in the work of building relationships virtually or through limited in-person class time. To increase student engagement in distance learning environments, research indicates that educators should follow the suggestions laid out below.

Create a community, not just a classroom. Establishing strong relationships with students is critical for student learning in any educational context (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010; Raider-Roth, 2005), and it will be essential for educators beginning next year in a distance learning setting. A helpful framework of best practices on how to "create a community, not just a classroom" through distance learning has been published by the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education (Brenneman & Karpman, 2020). Sample strategies for creating community of learners online include:

- Greet participants by name as they enter the online classroom. Check in and chat with those who come in early. Encourage and allow for social interaction to connect on a personal level.

- For the first session(s) online, provide an ice breaker and/or game to play so students become comfortable in the online classroom. For example, use the whiteboard feature to play Pictionary.

- Before class officially begins, have participants engage with the content by posting a warm-up question or idea to connect with their background knowledge on topics that will be discussed in class. In addition, the class polling feature can be used to "warm up" on the content. Responses can be written in the chat box, then the instructor can use these written comments as launching points for the initial discussion.

- Encourage and allow for the chat box (and private chat) to be used for students to ask questions, make comments, and post links and documents. Validate and acknowledge their contributions. Remember to keep an eye on the chat box.

- End class with an invitation to stay after to talk over individual needs/issues.

Pedagogical moves such as these play a key role in fostering conversation among students so they can get to know each other and connect as a community of learners. Educators play a key role in encouraging dialogue among students so they can get to know each other as well. Frequent opportunities for students to engage with educators and other adults who support their learning must be strategically built into lessons and regular check-ins. Building effective relationships may prove more difficult for secondary educators who may work with upwards of 150 students. Partitioning responsibility for regular engagement with specific students could be divided across grade-level teams; other school staff and community partners could be integrated into the learning community. To foster online learning communities, districts must provide teachers with the time and resources to build strong student–teacher and student–student relationships in the distance and blended context.

Ensure each student receives regular, individualized contact from a staff member. Students should have an adult that maintains an ongoing dialogue with them about their social-emotional well-being and school leadership should ensure that these conversations occur regularly. Students who have a strong relationship with an adult or mentor and engage with them consistently experience social-emotional benefits, including reduced rates of depression even among students from high-risk backgrounds (e.g., low-income, single-parent households, higher rates of suspension; Herrera et al., 2013). Conversations and check-ins can also be conducted in small-group formats. Individual check-ins may make sense for lower grade teachers who work with significantly fewer students, but in the upper grades conversations may have to be in small groups to be practical—homerooms or advisories are potential in-person analogues for distance learning in the upper grades (Opalka & Gill, 2020). This staff member can be responsible for noticing areas of concern for students and connecting them to necessary supports.

Regularly monitor student engagement. In addition to monitoring attendance and participation in distance and blended learning (described on **pages 11–12**), another way to measure student engagement is to get feedback from students about how they are experiencing the classroom. Research on student motivation and engagement (PERTS, 2020) indicates that to engage students in distance learning, teachers need to create learning conditions that help students: (a) feel valued and respected in the learning environment, (b) understand how schoolwork is relevant to their own lives and goals, and (c) recognize setbacks and constructive feedback as opportunities to grow.

Just as teachers formatively assess their students in distance learning, teachers can also have students formatively assess their teaching, and the extent to which the teacher supports

student engagement. The Copilot-Elevate survey (PERTS, n.d.), from the Project for Education Research that Scales, a nonprofit institute, offers a free, 5–10 minute survey that students anonymously take to assess the learning conditions in their physical or virtual classroom. Teachers receive anonymized, disaggregated results. Based on patterns in their students' feedback, teachers receive a set of evidence-based recommendations for adjustments to their practice. Teachers can regularly collect this data to inform cycles of practice improvement to increase student engagement.

Content in the COVID-19 Context

Teachers are going to face a daunting challenge in the 2020–21 school year: students will need to be educated at grade level, yet many will enter far behind. While it is not possible to know the exact impact that extended COVID-19-related school closure will have on student achievement, recent research extrapolating from patterns of summer learning loss project significant academic losses in reading and mathematics for students. This projected decline in student learning has been dubbed the "COVID-19 slide." Learning loss will likely occur for most students, but losses will be greatest among low-income, Black, and Latinx students (Borman, 2020; Dorn et al., 2020). Other research has found that when students switch from traditional to virtual schooling, they experience large drops in math and ELA achievement that persist over time (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020), with students who were already struggling in school the least likely to learn well through distance learning options (Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Heissel, 2016; Woodworth et al., 2015). These trends are exacerbated by differences in access to opportunity—with estimates suggesting that 90 percent of high-income students are regularly logging into online instruction, while only 60 percent of low-income students are doing so (Dorn et al., 2020). This year, teachers are going to need to fill significant student knowledge gaps in the prior years' content, while remaining grounded in the current grade level's curriculum.

Avoid focusing on remediation or grade retention as approaches to addressing learning loss. With the magnitude of the learning loss that research projects due to COVID-19, grade retention or remediation may seem like appropriate approaches to meeting student learning needs. However, there are reasons to be hesitant to address learning loss in these ways. Remediation courses for students who are missing foundational skills are sometimes seen as a way of "meeting students where they are," but they often fail to provide grade-level content to students, without which students will never catch up (TNTP, 2018). Alternatively, high-quality instruction with an emphasis on grade-level content seems to benefit all students, especially those furthest behind. Evidence suggests that educators should focus on supporting robust quality instruction for all students that includes differentiated support for all learners.

Similarly, studies show that grade retention should not be considered as an approach to addressing learning loss because it has not been found to boost student achievement in the long term. Grade retention increases students' likelihood of dropping out, and lowers rates of

college attendance, with these negative effects larger for middle and high school students than for elementary school students (Marsico Institute, 2012; Steiner & Weisberg, 2020; Xia & Nataraj Kirby, 2009).

Understand students' prior year's standards and assess critical linkages in the learning progression. Though remediation should not be the focus of instruction in 2020–21, teachers should develop deep familiarity with the prior year's content in preparation for addressing significant student learning loss in the fall. The content typically covered at the end of the prior year cannot be assumed to have been delivered, received, or retained. Teachers should be prepared to recognize and fill student knowledge gaps as part of delivering differentiated, grade-level instruction.

Effective teaching and learning rely on teachers having clear learning goals and success criteria for their students within a broader progression of learning. Learning progressions outline the stages that students go through as they progress towards learning a skill or concept in a content domain. The Common Core State Standards (n.d.) were developed with an understanding of students' learning progressions in each domain. It is not enough that the appropriate content instruction is delivered, teachers must monitor student learning along a trajectory of development that connects knowledge, concepts, and skills within a domain. With a clear understanding of the connections between what comes before and after a particular point in the progression, teachers can use assessment to calibrate their teaching to address missing precursor understanding or skills, and determine what the next steps are to move the student forward from that point (Heritage, 2008).

Ideally, the district will provide guidance on the instructional priorities from the previous year's standards and curriculum, as well as instructional priorities for the 2020–21 school year (see section "Provide Guidance for Instructional Priorities in 2020–21" on **page 22**). However, whether or not guidance is available from central leadership, teachers should work with their grade-level or content teams to analyze grade-level standards alongside the standards from the prior year. Together, teams should assess implicit linkages in the learning progression to identify those precursor understandings or skills from the prior year that will be critical for students to learn in order to access grade-level curriculum.

Pursue grade-level standards while embedding instruction of precursor standards. Educators should pursue grade-level standards with differentiated interventions as a means to address significant learning losses and to accelerate student learning back to grade level. However, grade-level instruction will differ this year, as teachers will need to regularly assess student understanding to identify learning gaps that might require whole-class or small-group instruction or scaffolding. For students who are behind grade level, intensive small-group or one-on-one tutoring have shown to substantially accelerate student learning (Fryer & Howard-Noveck, 2020; Kraft, 2015). TNTP recommends identifying content knowledge and skills gaps that

students will have and filling those potential gaps "just in time," when the material occurs in the school year. See the Learning Acceleration Guide to learn how to develop a systematic plan to accelerate student learning in response to COVID-19 learning loss (TNTP, 2020b).

District Considerations for Supporting Learning in the COVID-19 Context

So far, this report has described adjustments to instructional practice that can support quality teaching and learning in the distance and blended learning context. The implementation of consistent, quality distance instruction for all students in the 2020–21 school year, however, should not depend on the heroism of teachers alone, but rather on the extent to which districts provide educators with the supports they need to teach in this way. Our research has identified four areas of district action that, if done well, can serve as the solid foundation on which distance instruction can support student needs: (a) setting and communicating expectations about instruction, (b) supporting educators, (c) developing systems to address greater student need, and (d) supporting technology and data to improve instruction.

Setting and Communicating Expectations About Instruction

Every district will need to develop a plan to provide students with high-quality learning using technologies broadly construed (including computer and internet-based technology as well as options for those students without reliable computer and internet access) that work for distance and blended approaches. Possibly the most important thing to know is that evidence suggests that the quality of teaching is more important for student outcomes than how (e.g., in person, blended, online) the lesson is delivered (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020).

To implement high-quality distance learning—or to be prepared for distance learning in case of a school closure contingency—districts must have plans and clear expectations in place to meet student needs under remote conditions. Districts must engage their communities by inviting their input into the decision-making process, providing clear explanations behind the decisions, and clarifying expectations for new processes and responsibilities (Chan Kim & Mauborgne, 2003). To develop and communicate a distance learning plan that supports consistent, high-quality distance teaching and learning, school districts must engage in the following:

Provide guidance for instructional priorities in 2020–21. It is unrealistic to expect teachers to cover the content that students should have received in the prior spring in addition to the entirety of the current year's content. In acknowledgement that teachers and students will be facing unprecedented expectations and constraints in the 2020–21 school year, districts can support teachers by reviewing each grade level's scope and sequence from the time of March school closures and identifying instructional priorities to guide instructional planning for

the upcoming year, or by providing support for schools to do this work. Instructional priorities should draw from the standards that each cohort should have covered from spring 2020 as well as standards for the 2020–21 school year. The prioritization will be the first step in ensuring that teachers are prepared to help all students learn the prerequisite knowledge and skills required for learning current grade-level content.

Identifying instructional priorities to scaffold teacher planning can be done in a collaborative process that focuses on prioritization, not elimination. Stakeholders should seek objectivity as they apply selection criteria to guide prioritization. Criteria for identifying priority standards may include: (a) **endurance:** the degree to which the concept or skill represents learning that goes beyond one grade level or grade, (b) **leverage:** the degree to which a concept or skill has crossover applications within the content area and interdisciplinary applications to other content areas, and (c) **readiness:** the degree to which the standard is a prerequisite concept or skill for the next grade or course. External exam requirements may also come into consideration as criteria (Ainsworth, 2013; Reeves, 2001). Ainsworth suggests the following process for developing instructional priorities:

- Mark initial selections using selection criteria and reach initial consensus.
- Look for connections to state tests and make changes as needed.
- Chart and compare selections for each grade.
- Vertically align selections across grades, resolve uncertainties, and reach group consensus.
- Acquire feedback from all involved sites.
- Revise, publish, and distribute the instructional priorities.

To a greater extent than in years past, teachers will have to cover content from the previous school year while also being responsible for teaching grade-level standards. Guidance on instructional priorities will scaffold teacher discussion, collaboration, and planning as educators determine how to integrate critical content from prior grades into the scope and sequence for the coming school year while also advancing grade-level instruction.

Conduct an after-action review of the initial implementation of distance learning. The summer prior to the start of the upcoming school year is an opportunity to step back, take stock of what was learned in the process of implementing distance learning in the spring, and plan for a system that supports high-quality distance learning reliably for all students.

An after-action review (AAR) is a method for extracting lessons from one event or project and applying them to others (Boss, 2016; Darling et al., 2005). Having originated in the U.S. military to capture and share knowledge following every mission, AARs are now widely used among business leaders to support knowledge management and accountability. The 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? AARs engage diverse perspectives to draw from knowledge typically embedded in silos to build collectively a shared knowledge base to inform continuous improvement. District leaders, school administrators, teachers, and families should be included in the process. See Salem-Schatz et al. (2010) for a guide to implementing AARs by the Center for Evidence-Based Management.

Conduct a needs assessment for the upcoming year. The district must undergo a process to assess its community needs with respect to distance learning. In addition to a broad diagnostic, it is critical that the district identify and reach out to students who had minimal/no engagement during distance learning in the spring of 2020 to determine what approaches might be necessary to ensure equity and accessibility. A needs assesssment might include taking stock of the distance learning assets and constraints within the district, such as technology resources and needs as well as local community resources and partnership opportunities. In the rush to get students online during the spring of 2020, many LEAs did not take the time to investigate fully potential issues with platforms and software (Bradley, 2020). Developing appropriate policies and ensuring that educators and other staff receive requisite training are central to developing an appropriate distance learning plan.

For an example of the set of key considerations for a distance learning plan, see San Diego County Office of Education (n.d.). In addition, the Digital Learning Playbook (Digital Promise, n.d.) offers guidance for district and school leaders developing digital learning opportunities and focuses on leaders, technology, and teaching and learning.

Develop a plan for distance learning that includes clear expectations for teachers, students, families, and school and district administrators. Even for districts that start the year in person, it is important to develop a distance learning plan that prepares school systems to get instruction transferred to a distance or blended environment in a way that ensures equitable access to grade-level content in case schools are forced to shift back to a distance-only learning environment at some point during 2020–21. Initial data from spring 2020 suggest that creating a strong districtwide distance learning plan is critical for ensuring quality and consistency; in districts where plans left much up to school or teacher discretion, the result was undesirable variation in the quality of instruction (Pillow & Dusseault, 2020). Regardless of the technologies selected, the goals of the planning process should be to design a distance learning system that:

- **Is equitable:** Takes into account how all students can engage meaningfully with the system.

- **Is resilient to shifts in delivery modalities:** Local trends in COVID-19 infections will in large part determine the role of in-person schooling in a district, and these infection trends are unpredictable and may shift over time.

- **Maps backward from student learning:** Leaders need to create a system that starts with students' learning goals (i.e., prioritized grade-level standards) and identifies supporting practices and pedagogies, with technology (construed broadly to include both virtual and more traditional—paper, phone—technologies) selected to support students to meet those goals.

- **Is feasible:** Recognizes that few educators have much experience with distance teaching and will need appropriate technology solutions that teachers can use well enough to enhance teaching and learning (Hamilton et al., 2016).

Distance learning blurs traditional boundaries of home and school. It is therefore particularly important that district plans include ideas for gathering feedback from families and staff, and also acknowledge the competing demands that work or other circumstances might place on families' time. Similarly, plans need to recognize that educators may be simultaneously undertaking their work and family roles, while ensuring that students' needs are met.

Any district's distance learning plan should include explicit expectations of engagement for students, teachers, and parents, and be accompanied by clear communication support. Providing consistent information offers necessary clarity to all participants in distance education (Digital Promise, n.d.; Means et al., 2013; TNTP, 2018) and builds relational trust between schools and their community that encourages family engagement (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Schneider et al., 2018). Additionally, research shows that in any distance or blended learning environment, there is a greater need for parental engagement to support learning (Chingos & Schwerdt, 2014; Gill, 2015). Districts should approach this time as an opportunity to establish communication channels and build robust systems that support more parental and community engagement. Expectations for students, educators, and parents should include considerations around the following questions:

Expectations for students

- What are their expectations for engagement (frequency of engagements, hours of synchronous and asynchronous engagement, time period for assignments to be completed)?

- How many hours should they be spending on academic work each day/week?

Expectations for families

- What do families need to do to support the learning of their children?

- How much time should parents anticipate spending with their child guiding student work?

- What resources and tools can parents use to support and augment student learning—especially high needs students (e.g., students with disabilities, students in special education, English language learners, recent immigrants, and youth in foster care)?

- To which consistent staff member can parents reach out when they need support? And how can they reach that person?

Expectations for educators

- What should be the frequency of communication about assignments, assessments, and grades (e.g., weekly calendars, sharing feedback on student work, attendance, etc.)?

- What learning management system (e.g., Canvas, Google Classroom, etc.) will be used for instruction and how do students and parents access it?

- What are expectations for professional development and training?

- How can educators access support if needed?

Expectations for district and school administrators

- Where and how will information regarding distance/blended learning plans be shared?

- How should students, parents, and instructional staff expect to be contacted with updated information about distance learning plans (e.g., communication mode—phone, email, district website, mail)?

- What learning management systems will be used consistently across which grades and schools in the district?

- To whom should students and parents reach out if they have issues with communication or need technical support?

Organize for outreach. Much of the anxiety around schools' responses to the pandemic is driven by ambiguity and uncertainty; to counteract that anxiety, communication should occur early, often, and bidirectionally. Students, families, and staff must have access to and understand district plans and expectations. Also, the district must have clear channels of communication through which they can regularly gather feedback from and respond to the concerns of the community. Districts must communicate clear expectations of what is expected of students, teachers, and parents in a distance learning environment and have clear structures and processes for sharing information.

Districts could consider formalizing a diverse district communication team that provides guidance and resources to foster clear and direct communication for this moment. Districts can create specific messaging materials, talking points, and scripts that can be used by schools

and partners to disseminate consistent information, especially related to safety protocols, schedules, and other systemwide decisions that have been made. Expectations and protocols for communication should also be developed and agreed upon as to appropriate channels for communication, recommended frequency of communication to different stakeholder groups, and processes for aligning messaging with partner organizations. Conflicting messages from district leadership, the state, the county, unions, and community entities can add to confusion and create or exacerbate rifts within a district if not carefully designed.

Districts must consider how to reach everyone, including students and families who may have differing communication or language translation needs. Districts can facilitate broad communication utilizing a variety of tools already in use at schools, including, but not limited to, district websites, phone calls, mass texts, physical mail, email, distribution through partnering public agencies and organizations, and TV and radio broadcasts. Conducting surveys of families may be a critical component of a district's outreach efforts. However, it is crucial that surveys are quickly followed with analysis of results and the dissemination of relevant information for families.

Supporting Educators

Teachers who return to school in fall 2020 will have to grapple with challenges such as changes in the structure of their day, heavier workload, the potential need to follow public health guidance in their classrooms, lack of resources, and uncertainties about the future—all while also responding to students' own higher levels of stress or trauma from experiences during the pandemic. All of these stressors are in addition to challenges in teachers' personal lives, which may include having to balance childcare and distance learning for their own children with the demands of distance instruction, concern about contracting COVID-19, or general discomfort with the computer technology that distance learning requires. This section of the report focuses on areas in which districts can support educators: mental health and well-being, professional learning, and the reconceptualization of their roles.

Prioritize educator mental health and well-being. COVID-19 has affected the mental health of all Americans, with one third showing signs of anxiety or depression (Fowers & Wan, 2020), but there are reasons to believe that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the well-being of educators in particular. One national survey conducted in May 2020 suggested that the vast majority of all teachers (83 percent) find distance teaching more difficult than in-person teaching and two thirds reported that they have not been able to do their job properly since starting to teach remotely (Page, 2020), a task that most say they had not been prepared to do (Educators for Excellence, 2020). Furthermore, distance learning removes for many teachers a primary motivating factor—their relationships and daily interactions with students (WeAreTeachers Staff, 2020).

The interpersonal nature of teaching makes teachers prone to take on the emotional weight of students' traumatic experiences or situations and to experience similar physiological effects as if the teacher had experienced those stressors firsthand. This condition, known as vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress (STS), can be as damaging as if teachers had experienced trauma themselves. Female, less-experienced, and more empathetic teachers tend to experience higher rates of STS. STS is related to burnout and compassion fatigue, all of which contribute to teacher attrition in the first 5 years of teaching (Eyal et al., 2019; Hydon et al., 2015; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019).

Educators who face high levels of stress are more likely to feel overwhelmed by challenges and less able to solve problems in the novel contexts that schools will face in the fall. Teaching quality may decrease for even the most competent teachers. Ultimately, stress could contribute to surges in attrition and daunting systemic challenges to education (Belcastro & Gold, 1983; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018; Eyal et al., 2019; Hydon et al., 2015). To address the mental wellness of teachers, it is recommended that district and school leaders follow the recommendations laid out below.

Support educator physical and emotional safety. Educators need to feel physically and emotionally safe in order to teach and function well. While physical considerations for how to structure schools to maximize the physical health and safety of staff and students are important (CDC, 2020; EdSource, 2020), the emotional safety of educators is also critical. They may feel uncertain as to what expectations their principal has for teaching performance in a new context. They may be experiencing a sense of loss over in-person teaching practices that they have crafted and honed over years in the classroom. They may fear losing their job or changing responsibilities if funding decreases. Leaders should acknowledge and transparently address these emotional threats as actively as physical ones to diffuse them to the extent possible.

While leaders may have a general sense of what challenges staff are facing, there is no substitute for listening. Leaders may need to create the time and space to understand what sources of stress already exist in their context. This could be done in one-on-one conversations, or more formally through a site-based committee responsible for gathering input from staff. School leaders may also make use of school culture/climate survey data to get ideas about which challenges may have existed in the past and which are still relevant in the current context. However, in rapidly shifting contexts, such as during the first few weeks of school, frequent opportunities to check in with staff are critical.

Leaders should also keep in mind that stressors may be quite different for different populations of teachers. For example, Black teachers may be experiencing additional emotional repercussions related to heightened stresses of racialized trauma and feelings of unsafety. Older teachers may be more fearful about the health impacts of COVID-19. Teachers with children may be more worried about childcare and the learning needs of their own families. However, instead of assuming circumstances or effects, leaders need to listen first.

Promote coping strategies and resilience-building at school. Districts should provide school leaders and educators with information and training on causes and effects of trauma and stress in both adults and children as well as training on coping strategies that have been shown to reduce stress and build resilience. The sidebar below contains a noncomprehensive list of techniques that have been shown to help trauma survivors in various situations and could be well suited for adaptation to diverse school settings (Franke, 2014; Sandberg & Grant, 2017; Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, n.d.). For example, leaders may set norms to guard time and space for teachers to process and discuss difficult experiences during staff or team meetings, or set aside time for teachers to meditate at the beginning of staff meetings.

Coping Techniques Shown to Help People Process Stress and Trauma, and Build Resilience

- Discussing what is inside and outside participants' control
- Using relaxation and breathing techniques
- Using visualization techniques
- Cultivating supportive relationships and community connections
- Increasing opportunities to talk safely about personal situations
- Writing/journaling
- Tracking "small wins," contributions, or joyful moments
- Exercising

The district should regularly direct school leaders and educators to further resources for staff members who continue to struggle with stress (for example, by offering and widely publicizing appropriate counseling services) and provide clarification on the extent to which school health personnel could act as resources to help identify and manage adult stress and trauma (Belcastro & Gold, 1983; Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, n.d.). District leaders can also build or strengthen partnerships with community support organizations, managed care organizations, and county offices of health equipped to handle issues of adult mental health.

Leverage peer supports and collaboration. Personal and professional relationships can mitigate much of the stress that comes with teaching. One study that focused on new teachers found that induction programs that include elements like common planning time, seminars, and more support from administrators and other teachers are correlated with feeling less overwhelmed or burned out (Harmsen et al., 2018). Districts can provide time and training for schools to strengthen their professional learning community structures to ensure that no

teacher is working in isolation, especially with difficult problems like adjusting lessons for distance learning, or figuring out technology solutions that will work for their students. Districts may consider including noninstructional staff in these professional learning communities as well; welcoming social workers, nurses, or other support staff to the table could enrich the planning and learning process. Additionally, schools might consider developing a "buddy system," or leveraging existing friendship and professional networks among staff, to ensure that every teacher has at least one person checking in on their emotions, stress, and workload, and who can help support and communicate needs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).

In addition to providing emotional support, peer groups can provide professional learning opportunities, such as venues for reflecting on what worked with distance learning and what needs to be adjusted in the future. Peer groups may also begin to codevelop plans for supporting student academic and social-emotional needs in the return to school. By protecting space for teacher teams to collaborate, leaders can both support teachers and address instructional challenges that, in turn, can help teachers feel less stressed and more empowered. These collaboration opportunities can be conducted virtually or in person.

Example: A Program for Teaching Teachers About Stress and Coping

The Mind-Body Group for Teacher Stress was a pilot program in which a small group of teachers volunteered to participate in a 3-week program to learn about stress and coping techniques (Eyal et al., 2019). The group met for one 60-minute session each week after school on campus. The weekly session learning content was as follows:

- *Week 1*: Build relationships, learn about stress and mind-body trauma relief.
- *Week 2*: Learn more about trauma and stress, see an overview of student trauma, and understand self-care as an antidote to trauma.
- *Week 3*: Practice mind–body strategies such as belly breathing, stretching, and an "emotional body scan"; discuss how to use these in practice.

The course was designed to be short (three 60-minute sessions over 3 weeks) and scheduled at a convenient time so that teachers could attend. The content was meant to be immediately applicable to attendees and was expressly designed by the school psychologist in response to requests from the staff so it reflected the needs of the school's teachers. After the program, participants responded that the sessions were generally helpful and useful, that they would use the skills they learned in the future, and that more teachers needed this course. Participants also indicated that they appreciated the safe environment in which to connect with colleagues.

Clarify teachers' roles vis-à-vis the role of other school support providers. Teachers are often the first adults beyond students' families to learn about dangerous or challenging circumstances in a student's life. While it is critical that teachers be emotionally responsive and present for students, teachers must have boundaries in order to maintain their own mental and physical health (Crosby, 2015; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). School and district leaders should consider how to clarify and streamline referral processes or resources so that teachers do not feel like they must shoulder those challenges alone. Making it easier for teachers to be "facilitators of connection" (Shevrin Venet, 2019) will help them set boundaries between healthy and unhealthy levels of connection and caring for their students. Helping teachers understand and be part of a network of support will lower the risk of teachers feeling overwhelmed or experiencing secondary stress from students' personal challenges.

Provide high-quality teacher professional development. Meeting students' social-emotional and academic learning needs in the COVID-19 context, whether in an in-person, blended, or online environment, will require perhaps the steepest learning curve from educators in recent history. What can districts do to support teachers in learning the new practices necessary to meet the evolving needs in the coming year? Fortunately, as we consider the question of how best to support teacher learning, there is ample research on the types of learning opportunities that do and do not change teachers' practices. This section begins with foundational understandings of teacher professional learning that have been tested against evidence, because these give decision makers the best guidance about how to evaluate best practices and apply them to their own unique settings.

The first foundational understanding is that teachers will need to learn new practices—not just gain new knowledge—in order to meet students' needs. Ideas from Grossman et al. (2009) and McDonald et al. (2013) suggest that educators are most likely to be able to take up new practices and use them effectively when they engage in the following cycle: (a) **introducing and learning**, where educators build knowledge about the new approach and see examples of others demonstrating specific aspects of it; (b) **heavily scaffolded practice**, where educators have opportunities to explore key ideas in simulations and practice discrete skills before combining them into an overall approach; (c) **practice in context**, where educators get to try out the new ideas in their own teaching; and (d) **analyzing practice and consolidating learning**, where feedback and reflection support teachers in recognizing aspects of practice they are enacting well and how they could further improve.

Most teacher professional development provides insufficient opportunity for teachers to have iterative cycles of practice in context and analyzing practice necessary to consolidate teachers' learning about how to use new approaches successfully. As a result, much of teacher professional development is ineffective at improving teacher practice (TNTP, 2015; Timperley et al., 2007).

To improve in-service teacher professional development for distance and blended learning, districts and schools need to draw on a second set of foundational understandings that come from adult learning theory. Adults are self-directed learners, who will be most likely to engage deeply in learning opportunities that respond to their top-priority learning needs in ways that feel relevant and applicable. Furthermore, school leaders need to recognize that teachers' work changing their practices is deeply personal. Teachers are more likely to adopt substantially new practices if they are learning in a supportive professional community where they feel emotionally safe discussing challenges as they try to implement new practices (Powell & Bodur, 2019).

Based on this prior research, professional learning opportunities teachers need for the 2020–21 school year should attend to 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. Also, teachers should have opportunities to try new approaches in professional development and offer iterative cycles of practice, reflection, and feedback to consolidate their learning. And these supports should be ongoing as teachers try new approaches with their students throughout the year (McDonald et al., 2013).

Finally, teachers should be given a degree of agency in identifying the most relevant content (Powell & Bodur, 2019). With the vast array of teacher needs and limited time for professional learning, allowing teachers to prioritize their biggest learning needs is vital.

In the case that teacher professional learning opportunities will be delivered in virtual or blended contexts, we recommend the following for the design and delivery of online educator professional development.

Use professional development as a model for teachers' instruction. As principles for teacher learning are transferred to an online environment, it is important to start with a clear vision of the important elements of teachers' practice that the professional learning opportunity is designed to support (e.g., particular pedagogical approaches, use of technology, ways to build relationships with students in an online environment) and to use the professional learning as a model for what and how teachers should be delivering to students. Given how drastically COVID-19 has changed teaching and learning, it is safe to assume that few, if any, participating teachers will have had experiences as a distance learner with the type of instruction leaders want them to offer students. It will also be important for professional development providers to think about modeling how to deliver instruction that does not include digital technology so that teachers can experience models that will work for students with limited digital technology and Wi-Fi access.

Backwards map the design of the teacher professional development from the instructional environment teachers should offer students, not from the technology. As schools transition into the 2020–21 school year, teachers will be looking to acquire new

tools to support students' social-emotional wellness and learning needs. To that end, plans for educators' professional learning should start with backwards mapping from the learning environment educators should be creating for students and then helping educators learn how to use available technologies well to create that environment. This will mean avoiding the temptation to teach solely the technical aspects of any new technologies, instead teaching about effective pedagogies and how technology can support them.

Example: Professional Development That Keeps Instruction in the Foreground, Considering How Technology Can Support the Learning Environment

One aspect of online learning that is challenging for many teachers is that it precludes many of the strategies that exist during in-person learning for supporting student engagement. As a result, teachers' instruction will need to shift, breaking up learning into smaller chunks of time with differing activities. Providers could conceptualize the learning objectives for professional development around this issue in one of two ways:

- "Teachers will learn how to set up 'breakout rooms' and 'polls' in a video-conferencing app."
- "Teachers will learn several approaches for increasing student engagement in online synchronous instruction," and as part of that objective provide explicit direction around breakout rooms and polls.

Professional development that leads with student learning would have clear objectives in line with the second example. In keeping with the idea that professional learning should be a model for teachers' instruction, professional development providers should similarly chunk learning and vary activities so teachers learn simultaneously through direct instruction and their own learning experience.

Build a community of learners by creating opportunities for educators to share their personal and professional selves. Interviews with professional development leaders and existing research highlight the importance of using approaches that allow educators' "full selves" to be present during professional learning. This means, especially for longer term professional communities, that it is just as important to invest in helping educators get to know each other online as it would be in an in-person professional community. Given the added strains that many educators are feeling due to COVID-19, it is important that the community create spaces

for participants to share in relevant ways. There are many ways to use technology to enable participants to present themselves to others in the community. A few examples include using FlipGrid to allow educators to make and upload short videos to introduce themselves to others at the start of the professional learning; or using annotation or commenting features to enable participants to respond to each others' contributions. Again, this can serve as a model for educators, who will be facing a similar need to build community in their classrooms.

Sample Sequence of Teacher Professional Learning Experiences

This example, developed from interviews of experts experienced in delivering blended teacher professional learning, shows how a mix of synchronous and asynchronous time across a few weeks could provide teachers the full professional learning cycle necessary to help them gain skill in a new practice.

- Prior to the first session focused on the new skill, teachers do a short professional literature reading about a new approach and watch a couple of short videos of teachers using it with students (introducing and learning).

- In the first session (after an opening time focused on building community and shared norms), the professional development provider comments on the approach and then breaks teachers into breakout rooms to discuss the text and videos (introducing and learning).

- After bringing the breakout room groups together to share and providing explicit direction in a particular technological aspect of the approach, the provider again splits teachers into breakout rooms to do a simulation of the approach (heavily scaffolded practice).

- Teachers convene for a closing, where they are asked to try the approach with students and create a FlipGrid video of themselves doing so (practice in context).

- Teachers upload their FlipGrid video, along with a written response to two reflection questions. They are then asked also to comment on the videos and reflections of two other educators in the learning session (analyzing practice).

Ideally, this structure would iterate over time as teachers, in a professional learning community, build an increasingly more nuanced understanding of the pedagogies for distance learning and how to use the technologies available to them to deliver effective instruction.

Examples: Promising Approaches to Remote Educator Professional Development

1. When schools in Siskiyou County shut unexpectedly this spring, the Siskiyou County Office of Education (siskiyoucoe.net) created EdConnect to support their educators' response to the rapid changes. They began offering a weekly, hour-long video call to connect the educators spread out across California's fifth largest county. EdConnect is voluntary and is scheduled during the contract day (to maximize the number of educators who can attend). The facilitator designed the first call to let educators talk about their biggest challenges, which then formed the basis for subsequent agendas. The facilitators chunk each session into three parts: (a) group time where participants discuss professional reading done asynchronously in advance, (b) breakout sessions on topics where selected teachers teach their peers about promising approaches they're trying (with one facilitator actively facilitating while the other takes notes on takeaways and areas that need further exploration—these shape topics of subsequent meetings), and (c) time to reconvene at the end. Throughout, there is modeling of online/blended teaching, including dividing the time into smaller chunks and use of specific tools and approaches. The facilitators hope this supports educators and starts to build a professional community that will be sustaining as educators dive into some of the deeper professional development programs planned for the fall.

2. The Literacy Collaborative (literacycollaborative.org) provides professional development in a research-based approach to preK–8th grade literacy instruction. While the Literacy Collaborative has historically focused on in-person professional development, they have been working to transfer their offerings to a distance format in response to COVID-19. They have taken what was historically a multiday in-person summer institute and revised it to take place during 3 days, for 4 hours per day. Prior to the initial day, participants do a 5-part asynchronous orientation that gives them background on the institute, helps them create a virtual introduction of themselves, works to create community norms, and engages them in an initial professional reading. Each subsequent day involves a 2-hour synchronous video conference followed by 2 more hours of asynchronous work, which ends with an exit slip that supports facilitators in tweaking the following day to best meet participants' needs. After the institute, the participants will meet monthly to cover specific key components of the program's model. As a built-in experiment, the Literacy Collaborative is offering participants a choice of synchronous and asynchronous tracks for the monthly follow-up to test whether they can support teachers equally through both options.

Professional development should be designed to leverage educators' desires to help one another. If educators realize that they are counted on to bring something to others' learning, in addition to receiving others' wisdom, that intrinsic reward of mutual benefit builds a deeper commitment to the community of learners that keeps educators coming back to online, blended, and in-person events.

Consider which learning activities are best done synchronously and asynchronously. Finally, it is unrealistic to expect educators to sit for as many hours of synchronous online instruction as they might have been able to engage with in person (Sklar, 2020). This suggests the importance of being strategic about which parts of learning need to be done in person (synchronously) and which can be done asynchronously. Delivery of new knowledge, such as a portion of a professional learning experience where new knowledge is delivered, can be acquired by reading or watching a video, whereas teacher discussion and collaboration is best done synchronously. Asynchronous and synchronous times should ideally be woven together in ways that support each other.

Experienced professional development providers offered two salient tips for thinking about the mix of synchronous and asynchronous learning. First, realize that asynchronous learning can have big benefits because educators can take their time reflecting on materials posted by each other or by the instructor. Second, to take advantage of that, providers need to make sure that educators' expectations for the time commitment are based on the total amount of time for synchronous and asynchronous activities—and typically educators inexperienced with online professional development underestimate the time commitment for asynchronous activities.

Reimagining educator roles for distance and blended learning. Districts across the state employ staff with varying levels of capacity, knowledge, and skills for establishing distance learning environments and supporting adults and students working in that context. While it is necessary to develop staff capacity at all levels to enact distance learning, it is unreasonable—and potentially unnecessary—for all staff to have the complete set of technical expertise needed to shift learning practices online. Distance instruction provides an opportunity to reconsider flexibility in staffing assignments, allocation of instructional time, and collaborative structures that might not have been viable on-site. District and school leaders can use this flexibility to put their staff in positions that best utilize their professional capacities to meet the demands of distance and blended instruction.

District leadership must also be sensitive to the fact that staff have their own competing priorities in a distance learning environment. An examination of the National Center for Education Statistics found that as many as one third of teachers are over the age of 50 and are at an increased risk for contracting COVID-19 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Teachers may also have children to care for at home, assist in their children's or grandchildren's online learning while also leading their own classrooms, or cohabit with family members who are highly susceptible

to the virus. This has led to many teachers considering if it is worth returning to work—particularly those over the age of 55, the age demographic that has accounted for over 90 percent of pandemic-related deaths—or simply retiring early (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). This crisis necessitates retaining as many qualified experienced teaching professionals as possible. It is well documented that experienced teachers are critical for supporting positive student outcomes and that schools that serve low-income communities, students of color, and students with special needs are generally most adversely impacted by teacher turnover (Cardichon et al., 2020; Ondrasek et al., 2020). District leaders should prioritize flexible staffing models including distance learning so that all available instructors and staff can support students and school communities while also preserving their health and that of their families.

It is clear that districts and schools have not been structured to meet the demands of distance instruction. Meeting the new demands of distance and blended instruction without increases in funding will require a reconceptualization of previous staffing structures and roles. It is recommended that districts consider the following as they reconceptualize teacher roles to meet student needs in the distance and blended learning context.

Establish a baseline of what is expected to implement distance instruction.
The immediate response to instruction during school closures was to lower requirements for instruction (e.g., eliminating requirements for teaching new material, canceling regular assessments, and reducing the number of required instructional hours). These reductions made sense given that many districts and schools were unprepared to move quickly to distance learning but this should not be the case beginning the new school year. While each district has different contextual realities affecting their communities, there is a need for baseline expectations for distance learning that prioritizes best practice principles that have emerged from the past several months.

Under SB-98 (Education finance, 2019–2020), the state has specified daily instructional minimums for students in the 2020–21 school year as being 180 minutes for kindergarten, 230 minutes for Grades 1 to 3, and 240 minutes for Grades 4 to 12 (Section 43503). However, what is considered instructional time in a distance or blended learning environment will be left up to the district to determine and articulate in their distance learning plan. The state requires LEAs implementing distance learning to have a delivery plan in place that articulates the following:

- How the LEA will provide continuity of instruction to ensure students have access to a full curriculum of substantially similar quality regardless of the method of delivery and the potential for transitioning between in-person and distance learning.

- A plan for ensuring access to devices and connectivity for all students to support distance learning whenever it occurs.

- How the LEA will measure participation and assess student progress through live contacts and synchronous instructional minutes, and the time value of student work.

- What professional development and resources will be provided to staff to support the provision of distance learning, including technological support.

- To the extent that staff roles and responsibilities change because of COVID-19, what the new roles and responsibilities of affected staff will be.

- What additional support for students with unique needs will be provided, including for English learners, students with exceptional needs served across the full continuum of placements, students in foster care, and students who are experiencing homelessness.

- How the LEA will address student learning loss that results from COVID-19 during the 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years and how the effectiveness of the services or supports provided to address learning loss will be measured.

- How the LEA will monitor and support the mental health and social and emotional well-being of students and staff during the school year.

- What professional development will be provided to staff and what resources will be provided to students and staff to address trauma and other impacts of COVID-19 on the school community.

- How to ensure student engagement and outreach, including the procedures of the LEA for tiered reengagement strategies for students who are absent from distance learning, and how the LEA will provide outreach to students and their parents or guardians, including in languages other than English, when students are not meeting compulsory education requirements or the LEA determines the student is not engaging in instruction and is at risk of learning loss. (Section 43509)

Clarifying expectations and setting the baselines of distance learning for staff are essential for establishing consistent strategies that support students.

Restructure staff responsibilities to best utilize available capacities and respond to shifting student needs. One benefit of distance learning is that instruction from a single teacher can reach far more students. Districts and schools can work with teachers to structure instructional time that frees up more teachers to prioritize individual and small-group student instruction. Any reconceptualizing of teacher time to facilitate this type of instruction should consider strategically dividing the necessary tasks for effective distance learning among a team of teachers according to teachers' areas of expertise or needs for flexibility given their time commitments. Success Academy and Achievement First Charter Networks have designated one lead synchronous instructor for all students in a given grade or course, utilizing other teachers to fulfill critical roles such as conducting weekly individual student check-ins, providing rapid

feedback on submitted assignments, conducting small-group differentiated instruction, and managing online learning platforms (Dusseault et al., 2020; Wilson, 2020).

Examples of roles that could be distributed across teachers teaching the same grade level or course in the distance or blended context might include: (a) live instruction (in-person and distance), (b) reaching out to individual students and their families, (c) small-group supplemental instruction, (d) grading, (e) providing formative feedback, (f) attendance and engagement monitoring, (g) lesson planning, (h) assessment planning and data analysis, (i) identifying students for intervention, (j) coordinating responses for Tier 2 support, (k) creation/curation of supplemental materials, and (l) development/processing of materials for students without internet access. The roles of other support staff—including paraeducators, expanded learning providers, and content specialists—can also be creatively deployed in service of meeting student learning needs in distance and blended learning contexts.

System leaders should also consider how to restructure staffing designations at every level—county, district, and school. For example, the Kern County Office of Education consolidated their instructional support staff into teams to build grade- and content-specific curricula that could be administered in a distance learning setting for use across the districts they support. Restructuring staff roles and responsibilities requires close coordination between district leaders, teachers, and labor leaders; it is recommended that districts and schools establish leadership teams to guide the shifts necessary to accommodate distance learning and conduct ongoing needs assessments (see Digital Promise, n.d.; TNTP, 2020a). Everything does not need to be recreated to facilitate distance learning; system leaders and staff should prioritize maximizing present resources, including the best leveraging of staff, considering that budget cuts may occur over the next several years due to declines in the economy.

Resources for Reconceptualizing Teacher Roles

The Center for Reinventing Public Education (CRPE, n.d.) is a nonpartisan research center based out of the University of Washington Bothell. CRPE has been tracking district responses to the COVID-19 crisis since school closures began in March 2020. This database details 82 response plans from districts across the U.S. including both public and charter districts. The database is regularly updated and includes commentary around overarching trends regarding key concerns emerging from the crisis including staffing, attendance, grading, and instructional time policies. The district sample is not representative—it skews towards larger urban districts—but the available plans and subsequent analysis can provide valuable insight to district and school leaders in any context.

Provide expanded time for collaborative planning. Districts must provide time for teams to collaborate so that teachers can pool resources they use in support of synchronous instruction for both students and teachers. For example, instructors at Rocketship and Uncommon Schools have used this time to create asynchronous supplementary content in the form of recorded lessons for students, professional development for teachers, and grade-level channels on YouTube (Dusseault et al., 2020). In order for this to work there also needs to be time for coordinated planning in teachers' schedules, more so than many teams had in physical schools. This can be used to coordinate resources, conduct staff training, and identify students in need of additional outreach.

Strengthening Systems to Address Greater Student Needs

Schools and districts must anticipate the support needs of students, families, and staff. This means working to establish a clear process and system, informed by evidence and community experience, to create a reliable response framework and tools that meet the needs of the school community. At the same time, schools will be facing increased student social-emotional needs while also grappling with limited resources. To that end, it is critical for districts to assess and leverage the existing programs, partnerships, and resources that they have within their systems to support student needs. Schools and communities have already reported cases of increased fear and anxiety due to shelter-in-place mandates; anti-Asian sentiments; online bullying; students who have experienced sickness, loss, and grief; and increased cases of domestic violence and child abuse (Guild, 2020; Redden, 2020). In addition, those students who will be going through additional transitions to a new school (e.g., recent immigrants or new enrollees) may also lack the personal/social connections and familiarity with their "old" teachers and friends, and face additional stressors and anxiety this fall.

Educators will need to be proactively trained and supported to anticipate heightened student needs and to have access to the resources to address them. Preparation might include explicit guidance for teachers and staff around how to recognize and respond to student stressors in and out of the classroom, for example, addressing anti-Asian bullying or attitudes; integrating pandemic-reflection opportunities into instruction; and recognizing how trauma exhibits in student behavior and how to support students through their transitions (Pate, 2020).

The asynchronicity of distance instruction during COVID-19 provides an opening for educators and support staff to understand and respond to the individual and collective needs of students and school communities differently. Traditionally, support staff in California, such as school psychologists or other specialists, are rarely assigned to support a specific school community and instead are assigned to several sites. Using the efficiencies of distance learning might allow for more effective allocation of staff to meet specific student and school needs across campuses. To do so, however, will require consistent and aligned district-level approaches around schoolwide assessment and referrals for specific student, family, and teacher needs.

Priority areas for strengthening systems to address greater student needs must include the following.

Strengthening school-based connections with families, community partners, and students to respond to, and, where feasible, prevent crises. Long-term, trusting relationships with students, families, and community partners are essential to supporting student learning, especially during crises. Schools can proactively conduct outreach to families and community organizations to understand needs, identify those that are most vulnerable, and facilitate access to effective services and special assistance as needed. This begins with an inventory of existing needs and capacity—at the district, school, and family level (Attendance Works, 2017). Districts should conduct districtwide and school-level (Bain Pillsbury, 2019) audits of existing student support resources (including academic supports), programs, and partnerships (Attendance Works, 2019). The inventory should be informed by conversations with professional staff, community partners, district department leaders, school administrators, teachers, formal and informal family and parent organizations, and students. The inventory should include all of the district-level (or city/county) strategies, staff, resources, and current/prospective funding sources and resources available to complement site-level strategies. Districts should also provide guidance to schools on the specific steps to access these resources, as well as guidance on how principals can flexibly use their site budgets to meet local needs.

Training teachers to identify signs of risk and to engage protocols to connect students with additional support. Research on early warning indicators has focused on identifying early signs of disengagement that could, without direct intervention and support, lead to further academic decline (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Teachers and other school staff who generally

Example: Develop an Inventory of Existing Resources in the District

Catalog current and anticipated needs and capacity:

Domains to cover might include (a) academic support, (b) family support and education, (c) physical and mental health, (d) social-emotional learning and support, and (e) community engagement and development.

District leadership should have a clear understanding of what resources and services can and will be centrally provided (e.g., technology, academic, food, and social-emotional supports; at-scale partnerships with public institutions like libraries, universities, hospitals, county agencies) and what schools should tailor to their own needs. Guidance to school sites should consider how schools might use and reallocate existing staff and community-based organizations (e.g., afterschool program staff to meet existing and anticipated needs).

have regular contact with students must be guided and supported to understand how to identify emerging student mental health needs (Sust, n.d.) and be given a clear protocol to work with colleagues and families in response to those needs. This also means developing easy-to-use check-in tools for teachers to gauge attendance and engagement, accessibility to learning materials, and other basic needs; these tools can then be easily reviewed by case management teams.

Creating systems to coordinate available academic student supports. Districts and schools should establish clear systems for providing differentiated support across a distance learning environment. Regardless of educational setting, schools are required through federal law to provide free and adequate public education to all of the students they serve. The expectation for all educators to provide all the same support that was available at school to students learning from home must be made explicit. This does not mean, however, that teachers are responsible for providing all support to their students. Just as learners can feel isolated in a distance learning context, so too can instructors who may also have their own children to care for at home. It is imperative that general education teachers are not expected to have the expertise or bandwidth to address all of their students' needs in a distance learning environment. Coordinated support systems to be considered include but are not limited to: (a) support for English language learners, (b) services for students with disabilities and students in special education, (c) mental health services, (d) physical health services, and (e) information technology support.

Many of the specialists who provide these supports to students and their families can support students during scheduled class times (e.g., English language learner or special education instructors helping to coteach a lesson with the general education teacher, having a breakout room for students needing differentiated assistance, and working with teachers to design lessons). Districts must work to ensure that these supports are fully integrated into the planning and execution of the distance learning environment and are not siloed services that instructors have to seek out.

Most schools and districts have implemented some version of response to intervention (Response to Intervention Action Network, n.d.; e.g., a Coordination of Services Team or COST) to support learning and behavior needs of students. In its simplest form, response to intervention organizes student learning support and interventions provided by teachers, special educators, and specialists. Effective school-based response teams are structured to provide a seamless, multidisciplinary "one-stop shop" to identify and support student needs, ensure that the right people are in the right conversations, and identify schoolwide trends in terms of needs. Particularly salient given the physical separation required by both shelter-in-place as well as physical-distancing mandates, a virtual team must have a clear case management system and structure to review data, design tiered responses, and track progress over time. A referral process is used to guide the work and can be easily accessed by students, families, and teachers. There should also be multiple ways and opportunities for students, families, and teachers to access the referral and support process (e.g., help box, help desk, telephone help lines, website resources).

Example: School-Based Response Teams

Provide guidance on how to structure school-based response teams and establish a standardized referral process and set of tools to support teachers, families, and school staff. Effective school-based response teams, sometimes called Coordination of Services Teams (COST), are structured to provide a seamless, multidisciplinary "one stop shop" to identify and support student needs, ensure that the right people are in the right conversations, and identify schoolwide trends in terms of needs. A referral process is used to guide the work of a COST structure and can be accessed by students, families, and teachers.

- A COST team should include experienced classroom teachers (general and special education), administrators, and student support specialists, as well as family and community partners. The team should review referrals and emerging cases on a weekly basis, at minimum.
- A proactive COST approach also includes specific time to connect with each teacher on a weekly basis (instead of waiting for referrals) as well as "open office hours."
- A referral process should be simple to complete and review. A referral form might include basic student and teacher information, level of priority, special education or English learner information, and, to the extent that it is known: student strengths, home/life information, current interventions and program participation (both school-based and community-based), and academic, health, behavioral, social-emotional, and basic-needs concerns.
- The process must ensure clear follow-up to referrals, including regular check-ins with teachers, students, and parents to assess the efficacy of supports and resources appropriate to their needs, areas of progress, or other emerging challenges.

Example: Specialized Leadership Position Dedicated to Alignment

Specify a dedicated administrator to support each school site by serving as the "chief of staff," whose focus is to ensure alignment and coordination and act as a key partner to the principal. The chief of staff or resource manager's work will support a COST approach, review student and school-level data, and create and strengthen interdisciplinary approaches to meeting student/family and teacher needs. In a distance-learning setting, this might mean retooling the role of existing school leaders (e.g., assistant principals) or deploying central-office staff to fulfill this role for schools.

Anticipating biases and harm. In response to the direct and indirect anti-Asian sentiments articulated by some government officials and leaders, there has been a rise in anti-Asian harassment and xenophobia. In addition, the national focus on anti-Black racism and police brutality has also prompted important conversations about racial bias and racism. Schools and districts must have a strong, restorative approach to naming and addressing harm. Teachers and other school staff must be given specific tools and prompts to help them facilitate conversations with students, families, and each other (Dillard, 2020). Schools and districts should prepare and provide support for school staff to integrate constructive and supportive conversations about race and ethnicity, government and power, and community voice and action (Teaching Tolerance, n.d.).

Technology and Data Infrastructure

Under SB-98 (Education finance, 2019–2020), all students in California must be ensured access to devices and connectivity to support distance learning whenever it occurs. However, the digital divide between students who have access to technology and who do not is significant in California. Without adequate investment in access to technology and connectivity, preexisting inequities in opportunity and achievement will be exacerbated. About 20 percent of all California students, nearly 1.2 million, cannot access the internet at home; this divide is wider in rural areas of the state, in which only one in three households subscribe to internet service (Johnson & Burke, 2020). In spring 2020, districts made strides in supporting student access to devices and the internet, however, more must be done. This section addresses issues of technology access; at the same time, we recognize that districts are facing budget constraints and that more investment must be made at the state level for all students in California to have access to devices and reliable internet connections. In addition to technology issues, we also describe the data that districts could collect to support well-being and academic growth in distance, blended, and in-person environments.

Continue to increase student access to computer and internet technology. Providing computer technology to support distance learning was a primary focus of districts in spring 2020. Districts with portable technology for students such as laptops and tablets reevaluated device policies so that students could take those devices home. Now, in addition to distributing computers to every student, districts must ensure that they take into account the recommendations listed below.

Build on efforts to increase student internet access. Districts and schools have made progress to increase internet access for students by expanding the range of their Wi-Fi networks into school parking lots, outfitting buses with hot spots in single locations or moving along routes so that students can download their work to complete without internet access. Many districts across the state have worked with technology and internet providers to ensure students have access to devices and reduced-price or free internet where available. Often discounts or other

resources are available to families, but families do not know about them. Districts could play a brokering role, connecting families with resources to support distance learning. For example, one strategy has been for schools to deliver fliers about discounts for internet access with free meals they are already giving to students (Johnson, 2020). Ultimately, these are short-term solutions that will need to continue while long-term, permanent solutions are developed to provide in-home internet access for all students. As an example of such, in spring 2020 Los Angeles Unified School District purchased internet connections and computers for all students using bond funds (Stokes, 2020). Additional resources and support from the state will be necessary to equip smaller and rural districts with the technology capacity they need to support distance instruction for all students (Johnson, 2020).

With the increase in time students are spending online to do schoolwork, it is imperative that schools introduce or reinforce internet safety practices (for example, navigating to authentic or credible websites, avoiding sharing personal information in public forums, and avoiding forming online relationships with strangers). Organizations such as Common Sense and GCFGlobal have lessons designed to teach children as young as kindergarten to understand online safety strategies, as well as to support parents in teaching their children (Oh, 2020; GCFGlobal, n.d.). School districts should consider how they will ensure that all students are trained to navigate the internet safely as students spend more time online for distance learning.

Offer noninternet-based, home-learning opportunities for students without reliable internet access. While districts increase their efforts to distribute computer hardware and boost internet connectivity, accommodations must be made for students without internet access. A variety of other technologies can be used to provide learning opportunities in instances where students have no internet or devices. Lodi Unified School District responded to the variability in internet access by providing USB flash drives at packet pickups with downloaded work and instructional videos. Where one-to-one device provisioning is not possible, districts can encourage teachers to use services designed for smart phones as those are more prevalent in households compared to computers or tablets. Smartphone applications can be used to push reminders to students, and to provide updates on assignments and grades; they can also be used for regular communication with students provided that the platform meets district privacy and safety guidelines. The Education Development Center published an expansive guide on distance learning methods used for educating teachers in nations without internet infrastructure (Burns, 2011). Communication does not have to occur synchronously with students—the use of individualized feedback on assignments, review of content through short videos, or voice and text messages are all ways that educators can provide asynchronous support around individualized needs. Guided instruction can be broadcast through public television channels or on the radio. The San Francisco Unified School District has used public television to broadcast read alouds since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, paper packets are a widely used solution for providing distance learning. Of California parents, 90 percent say that being provided paper packets of instructional materials during distance learning would be helpful,

though only 39 percent report that their school is providing this option (The Education Trust—West, 2020). Ensuring equity in access to noninternet-based learning material will require districts to set expectations and provide support and resources for the development, production, and dissemination of this printed material.

Provide ongoing technical support for students and families. Districts should also anticipate variability in family digital literacy and the ongoing need to support parents as partners in distance learning. Ninety-one percent of parents in California say that technical assistance for distance learning would be helpful, but only 29 percent say their school provided this (The Education Trust—West, 2020). Hotlines for parents and students to call when they need technical support in their home language can provide timely support when it is needed. Hardware support and troubleshooting is also a predictable need for distance learning. Pajaro Valley Unified School District established a drive-thru at their district office for Chromebook repair or replacement, in which parents could safely and quickly access technical support and repair from district technicians (Kaura & Melnicoe, 2020).

Leverage learning management systems. Among districts with reliable access to computer and internet technology, many schools and teachers are utilizing LMSs such as Canvas, Google Classrooms, Schoology, Edmodo, Moodle, and Blackboard to provide regular postings for students and families about assignments, grades, feedback, and supplemental resources, as well as to facilitate student conversation around content. LMSs are helpful for streamlining information sharing and learning tools—many come with the ability to integrate other learning tools and provide modifications for students with specialized learning needs—and can greatly simplify sharing and locating relevant information for all stakeholders in distance learning. However, this benefit is lost when each instructor or team utilizes a different LMS.

To the extent possible, therefore, districts should work with instructional staff to identify a single LMS to use across schools to reduce confusion for students and parents—especially those with multiple children at various ages—and reduce the knowledge barrier for all stakeholders to learn to navigate multiple systems and manage multiple accounts. Identifying a single LMS to be used across as large a swath of the student population as possible helps build consistent processes across grades and schools that allow family members to support one another in navigating familiar tools. A larger number of users might also reduce the unit cost for districts interested in subscribing to a LMS provider. LMS tools also facilitate geographically flexible instruction—instruction that can shift from in-person to distance learning—in the event of future school closures, use of blended models, or students in quarantine.

Assess student well-being and social-emotional support needs. Districts play an essential role for many students and families by providing access to resources to support mental health and safety. Given the nature of the threat of COVID-19 and necessity for a rapid response,

many efforts to determine the effects of COVID-19 on student and family well-being are being rolled out immediately. This section describes general guidelines for the development or selection of an assessment of student social-emotional well-being and mental health.

Select or design assessment tools to pursue a strategic goal. Any assessment tool that districts or schools implement to assess student well-being or mental health should support action towards specific and concrete strategic goals for meeting student needs. A clear focus on the desired outcomes for students and the actionability of the measures ensures that the resources invested in an assessment process are used to maximally benefit students. For example, the selection of a strategic goal for the administration of a student well-being survey will help school staff and community members understand why the set of measures is being used and how it can connect them and their students to resources. Some possible goals might include:

- **Crisis response:** Items focus on crisis response needs like food, shelter, and safety. The school or district has a plan to immediately address and intervene on the needs they are asking about.

- **Mental health screening:** Items are part of a comprehensive system of support in place at the school or district and help identify students who need additional mental health support. The school or district has a plan to provide additional mental health support or a referral to additional mental health support for students who need it. The school or district also has a system for protecting student privacy.

- **Diagnostic:** Assessment is administered one to two times per year and is aimed at helping students communicate their social and emotional well-being to teachers and other educators. This includes resources for teachers or other educators who find that their students are experiencing problems with well-being or social networks during the pandemic.

- **Pulse instrument:** Assessment is similar to a diagnostic but designed to be administered on an as-needed basis and is focused on a specific topic (like sense of connectedness in a virtual classroom.) Designed to get real-time data to support interventions or course-correction, and, like the diagnostic, is connected to resources for educators who are expected to respond to the results.

- **Student social-emotional learning survey:** Items focus on long-term support for student social-emotional learning. Examples include growth mindset, self-management, social awareness, and self-efficacy. The survey is conducted several months into the school year. If there is evidence that a student needs additional support, the school or district will implement an intervention.

The assessment must also do no harm. Effort should be taken to ensure that assessments do not retraumatize, stigmatize, or marginalize students. It is recommended that all items be reviewed for potential harm by diverse stakeholders. Assessments of immediate needs such as food and shelter are a special case—these should be used in the context of a larger crisis response strategy. It should be noted that these types of items may necessitate privacy or mandatory reporting requirements, depending on the subject matter.

Incorporate best practices in assessment selection or design. Assessments of student well-being should be consistent (reliable) and should assess the construct they are supposed to assess (valid). Reliability and validity may be difficult to determine in cases where the assessment is new or the context of the survey has become very different, but to the extent possible efforts should be made to use instruments with demonstrated reliability and validity. Bias in question design is both a harm issue and a validity issue, and should be avoided.

Because the current context is unique, it is particularly important to leverage research, evidence, and the knowledge of educators and other experts in the design or selection of new surveys. Bartolino Krachman et al. (2016) recommend getting input from key stakeholders like teachers, families, professional support staff, and students to ensure that items respond to community needs and obtain buy-in from those stakeholders.

It is also not enough simply to implement previously successful surveys, because although identical wording is used, the interpretation of students' responses may be different pre- and post-COVID-19. For example, the prompt "I feel safe at school" in the year 2020 in the midst of a pandemic takes on a qualitatively different meaning from what it might have meant just a year prior. Instead, districts must adapt these survey items for a comprehensive assessment and support strategy, and engage educators with subject-matter knowledge to accomplish this adaptation. The involvement of educators in the design and selection process will help ensure that the measures are well-suited to practical needs and strongly link to concrete and specific education goals.

Survey questions must be specific, be meaningfully comprehensible to students at the target developmental stage, and be designed so that it is possible for students to perform the cognitive work necessary to formulate an answer (Dillman et al., 2009, Groves et al., 2011). Questions should be:

- **Short:** The longer a question, the more complex of a cognitive task it is to answer the question. This is especially important for children who may lack the developmental complexity to comprehend longer sentences.

- **Simple:** Questions should use familiar and developmentally appropriate words and designers should be mindful of the cognitive difficulty of tasks like remembering the number of hours spent doing an activity. Questions should not feature double negatives such as: "I am not happy at school Y/N."

- **Specific:** Questions should use specific, concrete, and direct language. Questions should not be "double-barreled"—a question like "Do you feel happy and safe?" should be broken up into two questions: "Do you feel happy?" and "Do you feel safe?"

It should be noted that implementing well-being screening for students in grades K–3 is a different and, in some ways, more difficult problem than implementing a survey for students in later grades because K–3 students have less ability to answer questions by themselves.

Example: Assessing Student Social-Emotional Needs with the Rally Platform

The **Rally Platform**, which is being developed by Education Analytics in partnership with the CORE Districts, assessment providers, and education stakeholders, is an interactive platform to help teachers and school leaders understand the well-being and academic effect that the COVID-19 disruption in schooling is having on their students. The platform reports the results of student well-being surveys developed to follow the best implementation practice discussed above. The student well-being survey will be available August 3, 2020 and will be made freely available to schools and districts. The Rally Platform will support a range of student well-being surveys assessing different constructs aimed at supporting goals developed by school and district leaders in consultation with educators and stakeholders, for instance:

- **Diagnostic Survey:** This survey is aimed at providing educators with a clear and actionable picture of Grade 4 to 12 student well-being as students return to school in fall 2020. Constructs measured by this survey include:

  - **Personal well-being:** Student wellness and affect.

  - **Interpersonal well-being:** Strength of social support outside of school.

  - **Learning environment:** Quality of recent learning environment, sense of safety, strength of social support from adults at school, environmental fitness for distance learning.

  - **About me:** Selected and free response items that are a way for students to communicate their educational interests, skills, and needs to their teachers.

- **Pulse Instruments:** These minisurveys will be aimed at providing immediate information on specific topic areas closely aligned with educator goals. Example pulse instruments might include physical and emotional student-needs assessment and an assessment of distance-learning self-management skills.

This type of screener will need to be administered with the help of a teacher, parent, or specialist. Screeners may be conducted with the student present or be administered to adults who know the student, but due to time constraints, universal screening will likely either need to require parental involvement or be completed by school staff who know the student. Higher tiers of COVID-19 well-being response will already be placing a high strain on specialist caseloads, so given this factor and the scarcity of specialists, it is probably more feasible to have teachers or parents administer or complete the instruments. The Department of Health and Human Services has recommended teacher referral as an initial mental health screening tool (SAMHSA, n.d.).

Understand student academic needs. Good decision-making about how to address learning loss for students will depend on educators' access to relevant, timely, and accurate information. Effective differentiation to meet student academic needs will require information on students' starting knowledge base, interests, and approaches to learning to inform instructional planning. This will be particularly true in the 2020–21 school year, when reporting on learning progress from the prior year will be less informative than in previous years, due to state guidance that allows districts to loosen their grading and reporting policies under distance learning. In addition, standardized testing was suspended in all schools for the 2019–20 school year. Although this shift in assessment and grading acknowledges the uneven access to distance learning for students, it also means that in the 2020–21 academic year teachers will return to school with less information about their incoming students than in years past. Identifying student strengths and learning needs is important every year; however, this will be particularly important in the 2020–21 school year. In administering assessments at the beginning of the school year, districts are encouraged to consider the following research-based recommendations.

Administer diagnostic assessments with recognition of the social-emotional effects of testing. Standardized testing is one form of assessment that can be a source of information about student learning for teachers, and districts might consider working with their assessment providers to repurpose spring assessments into diagnostic assessments for the fall to accommodate for distance learning. However, there is reason to wait to begin standardized academic testing. Testing immediately at the start of the school year necessarily directs administrator and teacher time to implementing assessments, when the beginning of the school year should prioritize welcoming students back, establishing expectations, setting students up for success, and building relationships.

Testing can induce disproportionate psychological stressors on some students and counteract the development of a safe learning environment. Black and Latinx students and, in some domains, girls are most susceptible to stereotype threat (Gonzalez et al., 2002; Spencer et al., 2016; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat is the fear of being "viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype" (Steele, 1999, para. 10). Research has shown that assessments can conjure

negative stereotypes that raise anxieties and self-doubt in test takers, and that hinder their performance and lead to questions about whether students like them can succeed in the given learning context. Moreover, students living in poverty are most affected by "stress bias" induced by standardized testing. Research has shown that changes in levels of the stress hormone cortisol during weeks of standardized testing hurt student performance—and students coming from neighborhoods in which families with lower incomes live and where there are more incidents of violence, were most affected (Heissel et al., 2018). Research has shown that students who have experienced trauma can react to even neutral events as if under threat, and minor stimuli can trigger emotional responses (van der Kolk, 2005). Caution must be taken to communicate that the purpose of testing is not to make judgments about students' intelligence but rather to inform teachers' instruction to ensure the content is appropriate and necessary. Computer-adaptive assessments that tailor content to students' skill level in the tested domain improve the reliability of the results and reduce student frustration. Adaptive assessments can be applied to measure gains that cross content from multiple grade levels (New Classrooms, 2019).

Support professional learning and protect time for teachers to develop and analyze data together. For data to become useful to inform instruction, it must be analyzed and interpreted. To do so, teachers must regularly make plans for assessments, and then gather, analyze, interpret, and respond to information about student learning to improve it. Teachers need resources and professional support to implement formative assessment well. Research has found that many teachers believe in the importance of formative assessment to deepen student learning; however, there is a discrepancy between these stated beliefs and actual knowledge and classroom practices (Morrison & Lederman, 2003).

Collaboration about assessment has been found to be more predictive of school and teacher performance than collaboration about other instructional domains (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). School leaders can support formative assessment and data use for improving student learning by establishing collaborative structures (e.g., grade-level or content-area meetings) and norms for where student achievement data and the implications for instruction are discussed regularly (Parker Boudett et al., 2013). In the spring of 2020, some teachers may have developed some expertise with formative assessment within a virtual context. Protected time for teacher collaboration should foster opportunities to share best practices and to analyze data together. The Data Wise Improvement Protocol (Oberman & Parker Boudett, 2015; Parker Boudett et al., 2013) offers a comprehensive and robust protocol for collaborative data inquiry that can be used to maximize teacher learning while reviewing student data and planning for assessment.

Examples: Diagnosing Student Academic Needs

Some districts that already had comprehensive external assessment systems in place (e.g., Measures of Academic Progress, iReady) are currently working with the assessment providers to alter summative assessments that would have been administered in spring 2020 to serve as a diagnostic assessment of academic growth in fall 2020 (EdSource, 2020).

Other districts may consider administering standardized diagnostic assessments from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium Interim Assessment System (California Department of Education, n.d.), a Common Core aligned resource available to all California teachers to assess student learning. This system offers comprehensive tests similar to the summative exam that is typically administered in the spring, as well as shorter, more detailed assessments. It should be noted that, unlike the Smarter Balanced summative assessment, these interim assessments are not computer adaptive and most require at least some degree of teacher involvement in grading.

An example of an innovative resource that will be used in fall 2020 to understand student outcomes is the Rally Platform, which was designed to help teachers and school leaders understand the well-being and academic effect that the current disruption in schooling is having on their students. Rally includes historical student data, early-year diagnostics, ongoing formative and progress monitoring data, an interactive note-taking tool, and future student performance predictions. The platform also provides links to resources for teachers to differentiate instructional support for students based on data.

Conclusion

In uncertain times, it is helpful to revisit what we know to be true: educators' commitments to teaching essential content and meeting students' needs in the face of severe challenges and unpredictability. Also unwavering are the fundamentals of good instruction and what educators know to be best practice. Though the manner of delivery may change in the 2020–21 school year in response to public health directives, schools can anchor themselves to the principles that guide instruction and support generally as they adapt specific practices to meet changing needs. This report outlines the considerations for teaching and learning in the COVID-19 context over both technical and instructional dimensions. It also highlights the ways in which districts can support educators to provide high-quality distance and blended learning opportunities by providing foundational support in the areas of planning and communication, educator support and roles, referral processes, and technology and data infrastructure. As schools across the state find themselves in uncharted territory and try new approaches to teaching, it is critical that they take a stance of learning, reflection, and continuous improvement as we strive to build more knowledge in this critical area of distance and blended education in K–12 schools.

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Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

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