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The Pivot Back to Remote Learning: Checklists for Teachers, Principals, and Ed-Tech Leaders

Cathlean Snyder, top right, a teacher in the Caddo Parish schools in Louisiana, was juggling a full-time online teaching load, and helping her five children with their school assignments, during the coronavirus school closures. When the 2020-21 school year begins, many teachers across the country will be juggling remote teaching and child care responsibilities again.
—Henrietta Wildsmith/The Times-Picayune/The New Orleans Advocate

By Mark Lieberman

July 22, 2020

Here's the painful reality: It is likely that during the 2020-21 academic year, many school districts will have to shift back to full-time remote learning, some just for short periods and others for much longer stretches of time.

A growing number of school districts have already decided they'll be **starting the year with full-time remote learning,** acknowledging it's widely regarded as the safest approach despite stern warnings from federal officials to reopen school buildings.

Schools and society at large have an advantage this time around, though: Nearly everyone experienced it in the spring, and the memories are still fresh. Efforts to bridge tech equity gaps that became evident in the spring are **already underway,** and more time to prepare reduces the risk of being caught off guard.

But that does not mean there still isn't a lot of work to be done. Experts are imploring schools to take steps now to account for the possibility that another rapid transition back to full-time remote learning will take place if the coronavirus continues to spread in most parts of the United States.

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Here's how to get ready for that rapid transition:

Teachers

Continue to learn remote teaching skills even while schools are open

Some professional development programs will be mandatory, while others will be optional. They'll cover basics like how to use the learning management system and steps for communicating more effectively with students. **Teachers will also need training** on establishing a remote learning "cadence," balancing synchronous (live lessons) and asynchronous (assignments and projects completed anytime) teaching, finding supplementary online curriculum materials, and reconfiguring time management to remote teaching environments.

Share virtual teaching tips and online curriculum ideas—now!

At a time when everyone is stretched thin, teachers can help each other by sharing lesson plans and curriculum materials, and by sharing expertise and tips on online tools with each other. They can also team up to reshape the curriculum with virtual learning in mind, by cutting out excess material and leaving more room for the fundamentals. Teachers who are comfortable working with students remotely might be assigned populations of students who most benefit from carefully designed, personalized remote instruction.

"This idea that a teacher walks into the room, closes the door, and she's the queen of her castle, that often doesn't produce as good of results as when you have folks that are team teaching in a way where folks can do things to their strengths," said Michael Barbour, an associate professor of instructional design at Touro University California.

HOW WE GO BACK TO SCHOOL

District and school leaders are confronting difficult, high-stakes decisions as they plan for how to reopen schools amid a global pandemic. Through eight installments, Education Week journalists explore the big challenges education leaders must address, including running a socially distanced school, rethinking how to get students to and from school, and making up for learning losses. We present a broad spectrum of options endorsed by public health officials, explain strategies that some districts will adopt, and provide estimated costs.

Part 1: The Socially Distanced School Day
Part 2: Scheduling the School Year
Part 3: Tackling the Transportation Problem
Part 4: How to Make Remote Learning Work
Full Report: How We Go Back to School

Require that students use the learning management system

Lack of experience using learning management systems was **a problem in many places** last spring when schools pivoted to remote learning. Even if most students are in school buildings, educators can prepare them for a potential shift to full-time virtual learning by requiring that at least one assignment per week is done online, and by using the learning management system as the primary hub for course materials.

Teachers can also get the school year off on the right foot by working with students and parents to turn off unnecessary email and text notifications that the district automatically sends to parents and students.

How to Prepare for a Pivot Back To Remote Learning

Checklists for Teachers, Principals, and Tech Leaders

TEACHERS

✔ Continue to learn remote teaching skills even while schools are open

✔ Share virtual teaching tips and online curriculum ideas— now!

✔ Require that students use the learning management system

PRINCIPALS

✔ Anticipate more emails and online feedback from parents

✔ Construct and distribute a readiness assessment

✔ Explore external partnerships

TECH LEADERS

✔ Get 'everything' uploaded online

✔ Advocate for low-cost Internet access

✔ Carefully vet tech products and scrap those that didn't work

Icons: Getty
SOURCE: Education Week reporting

Principals

Anticipate more emails and online feedback from parents

At-home learning gives parents a daily window into the classroom that they don't have when students are in school buildings. That means some will gain a new appreciation for the hard work teachers do, while others will find more opportunities to be critical of their kids' teachers and schools.

In almost all cases, parents will need more help than they usually do, whether they're seeking information about technology tools or guidance on how to help their child learn within the limited windows of time they have. Some districts are creating online "**parent academies**" that anticipate as many questions parents might have as possible. Preparing those materials ahead of time also reduces the burden on staff to answer emails and phone calls once the school year starts.

Construct and distribute a readiness assessment

The school needs to know whether parents want or need to send their children to the physical building; what kind of digital device and broadband access students will have if they stay home; and whether students' living situations and learning habits are conducive to virtual education. Teachers will also need to have a plan for how to gauge students' progress through the learning material given the disruptions this spring.

It's particularly important to understand the additional support students feel they would need to learn more effectively at home. Children of essential workers should be prioritized in this data-gathering operation, as they're most likely to need additional support while their families are not at home during the school day.

Those plans will help guide the district's next steps, which could include:

- purchasing and distributing mobile hotspots

- dispatching Wi-Fi-equipped buses to communities underserved by internet service providers
- establishing an emergency IT repair desk to handle quick fixes on students' essential equipment
- developing a list of students who will most need in-person support this fall

Explore external partnerships

State-run online schools as well as local virtual charters and online education support organizations have spent years developing resources that could be useful for districts getting up to speed with remote learning. Priorities should include:

- Borrowing or adapting digital content that's already proved effective in virtual classrooms
- Gaining insights and best practices from virtual teachers' experiences
- Establishing partnerships to share online courses and minimize duplication of resources

Tech Leaders

Get 'everything' uploaded online

Don't assume teachers and students know how to productively use even the most familiar or basic technology programs. Offer frameworks and structures that teachers can mimic for structuring content in the online platforms they use to deliver content to students. A primary goal should be getting as many learning materials as possible into a digital environment, in time for the start of the school year regardless of the reopening strategy. Similarly, schools should prioritize developing a consistent standard for measuring attendance/engagement and, where necessary, adopting a technology platform that can help teachers easily track those metrics for students.

Professional development opportunities will be most valuable to teachers if they mimic the delivery method of a course their students will experience this fall. For instance, If students will be learning at home using digital tools, professional development for teachers should be offered using those same digital tools, so teachers can see how students will experience them.

Advocate for low-cost internet access

Many internet service providers have been offering discounts on broadband service to households that need it during the pandemic. Some of those offers expired this summer, and new ones are cropping up as the new school year approaches. Keep track of the available offerings in your area, and if they aren't sufficient to address access gaps in your district, contact those providers and advocate for increased access. Be mindful of specific areas within your district that might need special attention, such as Native or rural communities.

Ed-tech groups are also calling on Congress to **provide billions of dollars** to improve broadband infrastructure nationwide.

Carefully vet tech products and scrap those that didn't work

Decisions to sign contracts with technology providers should be **driven by schools' demonstrated needs**, and governed by principles including keeping students' data safe and secure, and avoiding or minimizing bias perpetuated by algorithms. Whenever possible, schools should consult usage data from the spring, combined with qualitative insights from students and teachers, to get a clear picture of the technology needs and to identify products that might not be worth another investment.

> *For more on this topic, read: **How COVID-19 Is Shaping Tech Use. What That Means When Schools Reopen***