Remote Learning in Times of Crisis: School and District Triage

A Plan for Establishing the Organization and Beginning the Work
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Executive Summary

On March 14, 2020, all North Carolina K-12 schools closed due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Educators across the state were tasked with developing inclusive remote learning plans while receiving minimal guidance around best practices. As school closures went from temporary to permanent for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year, students, families, teachers and administrators adapted to long-term remote learning. This unprecedented situation provided the opportunity to gather critical information regarding the implementation and administration of remote learning that will help inform how school districts will return to school this fall.

This white paper examines the responses of schools and districts across North Carolina to COVID-19. As part of a broader effort at the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation to better understand how educators have responded to this crisis and to support the transition back to school in the fall, this paper aims to document what districts prioritized during this crisis, how these priorities shifted over time, and where valuable lessons and best practices from the field can be found that might guide North Carolina’s transition back to school this fall. We report on our examination and critical review of 1) school district remote learning plans, 2) transcripts and participant feedback surveys from remote learning support programs delivered by the Friday Institute, and 3) school district leaders’ responses to a statewide survey administered by the NC Department of Public Instruction.

Key Findings and Lessons Learned

How do NC schools triage education services in times of crisis?

- **Schools initially prioritized content review; educators then pivoted to delivering new content and prioritizing social and emotional needs.** Although adhering to state standards remained a top priority, teachers recognized the need to adjust and craft lesson plans tailored to the remote learning needs of their students. Prolonged remote learning prompted teachers to transition from reviewing previously taught content to introducing new instructional content. It also brought forth the need for teachers to address their students’ emotional needs by facilitating intentional social-emotional learning (SEL).

- **Educators quickly discovered the need to avoid instruction that was too complicated, too unpredictable and too lengthy.** Shortly after transitioning to remote learning, educators discovered that the number of daily instructional hours required in the physical classroom was an unrealistic expectation for remote learning. Shorter yet consistent schedules proved to be more effective. Additionally, educators realized that housing all instructional material in a centralized place (an online platform) was helpful to students.

- **School districts employed a range of strategies to support students and staff in the transition to remote learning.** Accessibility and feasibility were the focal points for all support provided. School districts offered technical assistance/resources to students. Additionally, students with special learning and personal needs received accommodations accordingly. Teachers received professional development regarding delivering remote instruction and were offered resources in areas that supported their holistic well-being.
What lessons can help us determine appropriate priorities for the transition back to school in the fall?

1. **Simple strategies are usually the most effective strategies.** Teachers and schools should take care to limit the number of new tools and processes introduced and should work to standardize as many elements as possible across a student’s teachers. In order to create a routine and a sense of predictability for students and families, the establishment of “norms” in a remote learning classroom is a critical success factor for remote learning.

2. **There is no “right” way to do remote learning.** There is no formula for remote learning, and it will look different for every student, in every classroom, in every school and in every community. Remote learning needs to reflect and support the needs of the student and community where it is occurring. For example, a school district where every student has a device and internet access is reliable and widespread will have very different challenges than a district that is now working to provide these resources for the first time.

3. **It is critical to remain aware of the trauma teachers and students experience.** The challenge of remote learning compounds the trauma (i.e., the pandemic) that prompted schools and districts to move to remote learning. For the same reasons that remote learning is traumatic for students, it is also traumatic for educators. It’s critical for educators during these periods to extend grace and flexibility to themselves as well as to each other, practice and promote self-care, and focus on the needs of students.

4. **The systemic inequities inherent in our education system and society are exacerbated by remote learning, impacting our entire school community, including students and staff.** One of the primary concerns when schools shifted to remote learning was providing food and specialized services for families; our schools provide for the well-being of many of our students, and this support system has been stretched during the pandemic. Additionally, our non-white families are impacted by COVID-19 at a significantly higher rate than white families.

5. **Our students with disabilities and our English learners cannot be easily served remotely, especially if intensive interventions are needed.** Many of our families who do not have internet access because of cost or location are finding themselves increasingly cut off from a world that is more dependent on virtual communications each day. It is important to remain aware of these inequities at all times, but in this time, it is especially critical to keep these disparities at the forefront. We must act with intention to avoid creating further inequities, and we must take intentional action to reduce inequities at every opportunity.

6. **We cannot approach remote learning in a vacuum.** We must learn from effective instructional practices and allow effective classroom practices to inform remote learning and vice versa. Specifically, teachers and school leaders should consider how these principles factor into procedures and norms during remote learning: we must consider how to maintain connections with students and families, how to select content and how to assess
students. Different school communities will also need to identify and address the needs of the unique subpopulations within each school community.

**Introduction**

**School Closures, Crisis and Triage**

On March 14, 2020, Governor Roy Cooper ordered all K-12 public schools in North Carolina to close for a minimum of two weeks in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools and districts had from a few hours to a few days to prepare themselves for what seemed a temporary situation. As it became clear closures would extend through the remaining school year, educators across the state faced an unprecedented crisis and developed makeshift plans to provide guidance on instructional content and delivery. Teachers rapidly acquired new skills and improvised lessons, and students and families adapted to learning from home. It was, at best, a triage to assist at this critical point and to support and resume some level of learning, teaching and healing.

**Remote Learning Plans and District Survey**

In late March, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, in collaboration with the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation, administered a statewide survey to district leaders to gather information about charter school and district plans for continued remote learning. By early April, 89% of charter schools and districts indicated they had a remote learning plan in place and 10% indicated that a plan was in development. Charter schools and districts were also asked to share these plans.

Remote learning plans varied widely in terms of format and length, as well as in the breadth and depth of topics addressed. However, upon review of these plans, the Friday Institute found that areas commonly emphasized by most schools and districts focused on: curriculum taught and assessed, methods and tools used for delivering instruction, and student services to be maintained.

1. **Curriculum & Assessment.** Most schools planned to continue providing core and elective courses and curriculum aligned to the North Carolina K-12 Standards. However, roughly half of reporting charter schools and districts (51%) focused on previously taught content, while the other half planned to introduce new material (49%). Most plans indicated they would stop providing grades to students in K-5, and only half indicated they would continue grading in middle and high school.

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1 [https://sites.google.com/dpi.nc.gov/k-12-sc/home](https://sites.google.com/dpi.nc.gov/k-12-sc/home)
2. **Instructional Delivery.** A large majority of charter schools and districts included multiple approaches for delivering content and instruction, such as synchronous meetings, online and offline activities, check-in phone calls, and take-home packets for students with limited or no access to the internet. Plans frequently specified software applications for instructional delivery, including Google Classroom, Canvas, ClassDojo, Remind and Zoom.

3. **Staff & Student Supports.** Most schools and districts reported providing some form of support to assist staff and students with transitioning to remote learning environments, particularly students from vulnerable populations. For example, schools planned to offer supplemental resources instruction to help students who may be struggling with at-home learning or learning in general, such as UNC-TV’s At Home Learning initiative.² The majority of public schools also planned to continue offering support for exceptional children (EC), English learners (EL), and academically or intellectually gifted (AIG) students.

**Remote Learning Support Programs: Session Transcripts and Feedback Surveys**

To assist in the support of public school districts and charter schools implementing their remote learning plans, the Friday Institute offered role-alike support discussions and strategies with its series FI Connects³ as early as three days into the school closures across North Carolina. This was soon followed by the Remote Learning to Support NC Educators series,⁴ a project developed in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, offering targeted webinars and resources aligned to the newly developed Instructional Design Principles for Remote Teaching and Learning.⁵

Transcripts and feedback surveys from these programs and series sessions were reviewed through the lens of the three key areas that surfaced from our statewide survey—Curriculum & Assessment, Instructional Delivery and Staff/Student Supports—in an effort to better understand how these plans were carried out in practice and the shifts in priorities and perspectives as the period for remote learning extended from two weeks into several months.

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² [https://www.unctv.org/unctv-at-home-learning/](https://www.unctv.org/unctv-at-home-learning/)
³ [http://go.ncsu.edu/ficonnects](http://go.ncsu.edu/ficonnects)
⁴ [https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/projects/remote-learning-to-support-nc-educators/](https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/projects/remote-learning-to-support-nc-educators/)
⁵ [https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/resources/instructional-design-principles-for-remote-teaching-and-learning/](https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/resources/instructional-design-principles-for-remote-teaching-and-learning/)
Shifting Priorities and Perspectives

Curriculum & Assessment

_Schools initially prioritized content review; educators then pivoted to introducing new content and prioritizing social and emotional needs._

As highlighted in the Introduction, nearly half of the public schools in North Carolina asked their teachers to focus on reviewing content previously covered during traditional class instruction—a band aid during the initially proposed two weeks of remote learning and teaching. Once schools announced that teachers and students would not be returning to the classroom to complete the 2019-2020 school year, however, the need to push forward with the necessary content and instruction to attempt to prepare students for their next grade level was too important to ignore.

Great effort was made to prioritize standards and identify what was essential for student success and growth. Simultaneously, educators were required to create compelling, engaging and inclusive content. A content priority study\(^6\) conducted by the Friday Institute during the 2018-2019 academic year found that educators preferred to create learning objects of their own (or adopt learning objects created by other teachers in similar content areas of study) based on the belief that the content developed better met the prioritized standards and correlated to the remote learning needs of their students. Traditionally an educator can rely on their presence to fill in the instructional gaps present in curriculum materials and/or resources during class instruction. The limits on recommended synchronous remote learning require that educators create succinctly crafted lessons while also creating opportunities for differentiation, personalization and flexible independent learning time. This is no small task. A mindset shift was necessary to teach in this new paradigm.

“There is only so much reviewing I can do with my students.... [Right now], the most important content we can be teaching are ways in how we can support each other in implementing both academic instructions as well as social-emotional learning.... We need to identify these teachers, students and families who need this extra support and coaching and offering them opportunities to express their desire to do more [to] implement SEL.”

– Elementary Educator

School—whether done remotely or through other kinds of distance learning—can give students a sense of normalcy, but it was important to acknowledge the anxiety and uncertainty felt by all. Beyond the curriculum, educators recognized the need to connect with their students emotionally. Social-emotional learning (SEL) focuses on helping learners understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, show empathy for others, maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions. These are soft skills that, to a degree, are naturally integrated and supported in face-to-face

\(^6\) [https://ncdl.fi.ncsu.edu/about/2018-2019/consortium-requirements.pdf](https://ncdl.fi.ncsu.edu/about/2018-2019/consortium-requirements.pdf)
Figure 1. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs


Figure 2. Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy

classrooms, but when teaching takes place in remote environments, their implementation needs to be intentional and impactful.

Remote learning has shifted from focusing on content to taking its cues from the students themselves, as educators listened to them for what was needed most. The concept of “Maslow before Bloom” suggests that if educators fail to honor the basic levels of Maslow’s pyramid, climbing Bloom’s pyramid will be extremely difficult.\(^7\) It suggests considering first a student’s most basic needs before expecting them to focus on content and instruction. This concept extends to educators as well. There is growing recognition that educators who take care of their own social and emotional needs first are better equipped to help students learn.

“Maslow before Bloom is a really important statement... I’ve personally [been] experiencing a lot of mixed messages from my district about how we should be building digital lessons to support students academically, and we’re just now shifting towards a student support focus. I know this is due to everyone trying to figure out what we should be doing at this time, but it was very validating to hear that we should be focusing on students' needs first and putting less stress on the academic side where possible.”

– Secondary Educator, Remote Learning Supports

The ways in which educators reached out to students and each other were as varied as implementing the Whole Child Model\(^8\) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, using the K-12 Advanced Learning Labs\(^9\) created by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) and offering synchronous and informal opportunities to connect and discuss needs, concerns and solutions.

As educators grappled with assessment, schools observed waning student engagement.

Learning outcomes required a further distilling of curriculum to essential learning and targeted outcomes. The sudden shift to remote learning also required educators to reexamine the suitability of traditional summative assessments and recognize the inequities that exist between home and school. Educators had to ask themselves:

- Can every student complete the assessment regardless of access to technology?
- Can every student complete the assessment without assistance or support from a family member?

\(^8\) https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wscc/index.htm
\(^9\) https://www.dpi.nc.gov/students-families/enhanced-opportunities/advanced-learning-and-gifted-education/2020-aig-remote-learning-resources
• Can every student complete the assessment considering the time provided, access, acquired resources, etc.?
• Can every student complete the assessment while also taking advantage of peer and teacher support?

Educators turned toward performance tasks—asking students to apply their knowledge to a fresh and innovative situation—and long-term, project-based learning assessments. For formative assessments in distance learning, educators relied on conversational, oral or written defense of content mastery for grading purposes, ultimately relying on educator-to-student feedback as the “new grading” standard. The NC DPI stated in its Grading Workgroup Guiding Principles\textsuperscript{10} that it would strive to develop a statewide grading policy that “positively impacts as many students as possible, with grace and generosity.” Thus, after the initial month of educators, students and their families grappling and adapting, it was hoped all parties would begin to settle into a remote learning routine.

When Governor Cooper announced that school buildings would remain closed for the rest of the 2019-2020 school year, and with uncertainty pertaining to end-of-year grades, educators observed a steep decline in student communications and student completion of remote learning assignments. The anxiety of knowing an entire class of students would have to recover three months of instruction drove some educators to visit their students’ homes, sounding their car horns or calling by phone multiple times until a family member responded. Keeping students on target was important, but teachers knew they had a long way to go before they would be back on track.

“We had to do some work to track down students who weren’t engaging—in most cases, we found out that there was something going on where we could help. Bus drivers ran their normal routes and tried to stop at students’ homes to check in and figure out what they needed. Our principals would visit homes and honk the horn until someone came out. For some of our students, they were caring for family members or the students had to go to work. Some families also moved and the houses were empty. We had to work to figure out where those students went.”

– District Assistant Superintendent

This is an obvious choice between the carrot and the stick. If grades alone are the motivator for a student’s participation in class, it is not surprising that the tail end of the emergency remote learning experience observed students and even teachers “logging off.” If students are not inspired to log on and learn each day, productivity and progress will suffer a loss in productivity and progress will follow. Yet despite the waivers and the foregoing of performance reports, educators continued to seek out methods of providing feedback and instruction to foster motivation and engagement.

\textsuperscript{10} \url{https://files.nc.gov/dpi/documents/newsroom/covid-19/academics/updatedguidance.gradingk-11andseniors.5.5.20.pdf}
Instructional Delivery

Schools scaled back on seat time expectations, focusing more on consistent content and student connection.

During the first two weeks of remote learning instruction, reports of inch-thick packets and six- to eight-hour student schedules going home flooded social media, along with frustrations, more questions and a myriad of highly creative educators triaging issues as fast as they appeared. It quickly became apparent to educators that the amount of time students were expected to learn and complete academic work in a remote setting differed from instruction delivered in a physical classroom.

Soon the packets going home received a makeover, incorporating QR codes linked to asynchronous instructor support videos and messages, and limiting the quantity of material for quality instruction. Remote learning schedules were cut in half, incorporating teacher office hours, small group instruction and shorter synchronous class instruction with longer independent learning expectations. Depicted below is a sample of one district’s early attempt at a daily remote learning schedule for third through seventh grade students, starting at 8 a.m. and ending at 9 p.m. (Figure 3). It was soon replaced with a flexible weekly plan (Figure 4), blocking time for both students and staff.

Figure 3. A District’s Initial Remote Learning Schedule

Figure 4. A District’s Flexible Weekly Plan for Remote Learning
Educators’ remote learning norms rely on consistency—in scheduling, content location, communication modes, and expectations for teachers, students and families. Even after a few weeks to iron out the kinks, families with essential workers still had to leave students alone to complete assignments, and the students themselves often had to balance their day by caring for younger family members while also attending remote learning classes. On the other hand, families also quickly learned firsthand the many facets of a teacher’s role when supporting their students in their remote learning curriculum.

Reportedly, one of the most difficult shifts for educators was navigating the change in their role from the one they had in the traditional classroom setting to that of remote learning facilitator and lesson designer. One instructional framework currently gaining traction relies on explicit instruction and clear scaffolding. Although sometimes referred to as the “I do – We do – You do” approach, this instructional framework is known as the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model\textsuperscript{11}. While this model is built on several theories, when combined with opportunities for students to learn in collaboration with their peers (“you do it together”), it creates an impactful learning structure\textsuperscript{12}.

\textbf{Figure 5. Gradual Release of Responsibility}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{gradual_release.png}
\end{figure}


In many cases, the “I do” portion of the focused instruction was asynchronously captured in a video and text format so that students could preview the teacher-focused curriculum in preparation for the synchronous “we do” and “you do it together” portions of the lesson. After receiving constructive teacher and peer feedback and having the opportunity to ask clarifying questions, students would then log off and be responsible for the “you do it alone” independent learning. This final step completes the lesson with an assignment/project to demonstrate mastery.

Additional models shared with educators to support remote learning instruction and content delivery:

**Figure 6. Structure of a Digital Minilesson**

| **Greet** | Connect with students on a personal level. Welcome, reminders, and SEL. |
| **Teach** | Name what you are about to teach and why. Provide instruction. |
| **Show** | Provide a quick model of what students will do. “Watch me before you try…” Anchor chart and/or clipboard. |
| **Do** | Now you go try... Language like “press pause while you go work,” “remember to reread the video,” “post a photo of you work on SeeSaw” are seamlessly woven into the video. |
| **Keep Thinking** | Thanks for coming back. How did it go? Turn and talk with someone in your family or reflect on your own. As you continue to do your work this week, remember to think about (teaching point). |


**Figure 7. Distance Learning Lesson Design by Katherine Goyette**

- **Set the Stage**: Welcome students to class. Provide overview of protocols for the upcoming learning experience. **Format**: Virtual Meeting Space or Previously Recorded Video. **This is vital. Students benefit from seeing you, even if it is by virtual means. Connections matter.**
- **Content**: Direct students to resources to access and explore academic content, document thinking. **Format**: texts, videos, digital simulations, tours, audiobooks, virtual field trips, etc. Multiple methods of representation of content increases access for all learners.
- **Synthesize Learning**: Provide students opportunities to demonstrate learning using a method of their choice. **Format**: digital uploads (images of physical/visual representations, video, slides, text, etc.) Multiple options for demonstrating understanding addresses learner variability and increases motivation.
- **Collaboration**: Provide students opportunities to engage with content in a collaborative environment. **Format**: verbal discussion platforms, collaborative documents, blogs, protected chat rooms, etc. Remote learning that connects rather than isolates builds community and strengthens learning.
As simple as these models are, they are open to a great degree of customization on the part of the teacher to accommodate student age, access and content needs. Yet, it was with urgency that educators scrambled to figure out which tools and resources best supported their synchronous and asynchronous instructional delivery. They sought recommendations for communication platforms and strategies to support connections with students and their families, as well as with their colleagues.

*Educators shifted instructional delivery vehicles to promote communication and collaboration.*

In the shift to virtual learning, schools initially struggled to find an appropriate medium for large-class communications. Essential features that schools were looking for included the ability to accommodate low-bandwidth connections, share screens, and enable call-in sessions by telephone for students without reliable internet access. Many districts used Zoom initially as it became free for schools but pulled back due to some privacy and security concerns that became public shortly after schools closed. While some districts were able to work through these concerns, most districts ended up using either Google Meet or Microsoft Teams for collaboration. All these tools enable real-time sharing and collaboration, have robust host controls and allow for call-in by telephone.

More flexible schedules combined synchronous instruction with asynchronous activities and independent learning objectives. Synchronous class time was best used for teacher and student “checking-in” and/or conferencing. Additionally, teachers could incorporate breakout rooms, polling and collaborative conversations with small groups. Delivering synchronous class instruction in smaller groups enabled educators to not only be more responsive but to also make these blocks of time more productive.

Asynchronous instructional time was most appropriately used for short lessons and “chunked” assignments with clear, concise structures. Educators used this time to give instructions, model and demonstrate learning, and teach new content material. Whether in written form or video, the medium offered students flexibility and the ability to re-watch, reread or review content for clarity versus trying to capture the information in a live online lecture or synchronous class.

**Support Services**

*Schools gained perspective in order to support special student populations.*

As schools moved to remote learning, they struggled to support students with special needs. Students with disabilities, English learners and students from low-income households (who may lack internet access) posed unique challenges for schools to address.

Students with severe and profound disabilities may not be able to be served at home, and schools may have to provide supports to parents. For other students with disabilities, caseloads were reported to be quickly overwhelmed without time to plan. Special education advocates advised that parents of students with accommodation services immediately contact their children’s teachers or schools to discuss a contingency plan; however, in the absence of clear guidelines, educators struggled to devise and implement plans to address their requirements remotely, often waiting for
guidance from their district offices or even from the state.

Related service providers such as occupational therapists and physical therapists struggled to figure out how to serve students, from making phone calls home to potentially transitioning to a teletherapy model. Cleveland County schools, for example, created a guidebook for serving students with disabilities, in which the district stated that teachers should ensure that resources and instructional activities:

- Are directly related to the student’s IEP goals.
- Are provided for all IEP goals that can be addressed outside the school environment.
- Can be completed as independently as possible.
- Will assist the student in accomplishing their IEP goals.
- Allow corrective teacher feedback with the opportunity to receive reteaching and additional practice/review.
- Can be shared using a virtual platform (e.g., Canvas, Google Classroom, Zoom, ClassLink, Google Docs).
- Can be completed with equipment/materials available to the student (either at their home or provided by the teacher).

Additional emergent best practices for teachers serving students with disabilities include:

- Using multiple means of representation to share content and allow students to express their learning.
- Integrating the principles of Universal Design for Learning into the Remote Learning classroom.
- Establishing a routine that encourages flexibility but provides structure for students who need it.
- Using timers to provide opportunities for students to stand up and wiggle.
- Creating activities to help students regulate before synchronous learning activities.
- Allowing students who are overwhelmed to have a way to take a break.
- Making expectations on due dates and assignments clear and explicit.
- Providing explicit instructions for deliverables and ensuring students know where and how to submit assignments.
- Collaborating frequently with EC staff and including EC staff in synchronous learning activities.

14 http://udloncampus.cast.org/page/teach_executive
https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/child-learning-disabilities/sensory-processing-issues/how-sensory-processing-issues-can-affect-motor-skills?_ul=1*1q3esql*domain_userid*YYW1wLUR3LTvZTEkySDBEQkJaZ19kS3JsR3c
16 http://udlguidelines.cast.org/
Remote learning can be particularly difficult for English language (EL) learners and their families. The following four questions can help inform the design of remote learning curriculum for EL students:

1. What is the home context for the EL student?
2. How is instruction being delivered to support English learning as well as opportunities to develop the student’s home language?
3. What resources will amplify the remote learning experience for the EL student?
4. How can digital content be leveraged to provide students with instruction in both English and their native language?

Unreliable or inconsistent access to the internet, as well as to appropriate devices, presented additional hurdles for many students and their families adapting to remote learning. Foundational practices for delivering specially designed instruction (for learning differences, special education or English language learners) target the concepts of accessibility, adaptation, accommodation and teaching matched to the learners’ priorities.

Communicating by telephone and using flash drives to send instructional video content and worksheets to and from school are ways to help support students with no internet at home. Schools have also been distributing hotspots to students and equipping school buses with WiFi to bring internet access to students without connectivity. Being able to access a learning management system (LMS), such as Canvas, PowerSchool or Blackboard, enables students and teachers to sync up offline activities, even when the internet is accessed only intermittently. However, according to the NC Department of Public Instruction and the NC Broadband Infrastructure Office, approximately 75,000 students in North Carolina live in areas where wired internet is not available, and many of those students also cannot access cellular service.

Cultural considerations need to take into account the added responsibilities a student may have to their family when also managing to learn from home (i.e., caring for younger family members or taking on a different role as a family translator, etc.). Communication preferences need to be communicated and materials will have to be translated for both students and their families. Finally, social-emotional supports should be balanced with making sure that the student is staying engaged with cohesive lesson content.

Family dynamics also need to be considered with remote learning. Many students will have to care for relatives and loved ones who have fallen ill or for siblings while parents are at work. Students are also having to work during this pandemic—many jobs held by high schoolers designate them as essential workers. For families who have lost income, a student might be the sole breadwinner.

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16 [https://accessibility.blog.gov.uk/2016/09/02/dos-and-donts-on-designing-for-accessibility/](https://accessibility.blog.gov.uk/2016/09/02/dos-and-donts-on-designing-for-accessibility/)
17 [http://help.canvas.yale.edu/m/55452/l/914657-download-course-to-view-offline](http://help.canvas.yale.edu/m/55452/l/914657-download-course-to-view-offline)
at home. Schools need to monitor the needs of their families so supports can be implemented as needed. Additionally, for families where English is not the primary language, structures need to be set up for materials to be provided in a way that is accessible to these families.

As with all students, establishing and collaborating on specific student learning goals, and providing regular and consistent feedback, is essential; communicating with students’ families is equally important. Reviewing their child’s expectations described in a weekly planner, for example, will facilitate where resources can be found, reinforce the need for the student to find the space and time for schoolwork at home, and foster the family’s support of their child to find opportunities to also develop their home language.

**Educators received a crash course in supporting accessible content.**

With the emphasis on digital tools and resources to supplement classroom instruction, educators were giving themselves crash courses in creating digitally accessible content as well. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing, have low vision or are blind, have physical disabilities, or have neurodevelopmental disorders—such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—may require the use of screen readers and alt text on images. Synchronous teaching formats may not provide students necessary American Sign Language interpreters or real-time captioning (transcriptions of speech produced by a person, not computer-generated), something they may have had in in-person classes. These considerations and accommodations added a new and more complex layer to the remote learning experience. In addition to the general recommendations for remote learning, the following guidelines can enhance content accessibility.\(^{19}\)

- Use clear, consistent organization and layouts for presenting content.
- Structure headings and lists for easy information access and use the styles panel instead of inline formatting.\(^{20}\)
- Use large, bold fonts on pages with plain backgrounds.
- Use color combinations that are high in contrast and can be read by those identified as colorblind.
- Use descriptive wording for hyperlink text (e.g., “Learning Resource” rather than “click here”).
- Provide concise text descriptions of the content presented within images.
- Do not rely solely on color or iconography to convey meaning.
- Caption videos and transcribe audio content.
- Assume students have a wide range of technology skills and provide options for gaining the skills needed for course participation.
- Make examples and assignments relevant to learners with a wide variety of interests and backgrounds.
- Provide adequate opportunities to practice.

\(^{19}\) [https://accessibility.blog.gov.uk/2016/09/02/dos-and-donts-on-designing-for-accessibility/](https://accessibility.blog.gov.uk/2016/09/02/dos-and-donts-on-designing-for-accessibility/)

\(^{20}\) [https://support.google.com/docs/answer/116338?co=GENIE.Platform%3DDesktop&hl=en](https://support.google.com/docs/answer/116338?co=GENIE.Platform%3DDesktop&hl=en)
Once schools reopen, it will be up to special education teams to determine whether students with disabilities who missed services are entitled to make them up, and up to the teachers and educational leaders to consider curriculum continuity.

**Support shifted from students back to educators in an effort to model self-care.**

Educators have been pulled in many directions as well. As educators focused furiously to support their students and their families, many felt they were in danger of letting their own stress overtake them. The professional and personal lives of every educator have drastically changed, and it is important to recognize that many staff members are facing social and economic challenges. A survey[^21] conducted at the end of March 2020 by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence[^22] and the Collaborative for Social Emotional and Academic Learning asked educators to share the three most frequent emotions they felt each day. The five most-mentioned feelings were **anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed and sad.**

For educators to emotionally support students, they must first manage their own stress and practice self-care. Some strategies include:

- Establishing some control over the situation.
- Focusing on what is within one’s control and what is most important.
- Getting sleep.
- Moving your body.
- Taking brain breaks.
- Asking for help if you need it.

Beyond physical care, there is also the social aspect of care. School buildings can be stressful places, but they are also places where educators have built strong relationships. Being in school each day can be a big comfort, and the need to maintain social connection with colleagues as well as students during remote learning led educators to plan informal virtual gatherings, organize festive “parades” that passed by students’ homes, and take part in trending online challenges. The outpouring of support and empathy enabled educators to band together and find solidarity in networks new and old. Managing physical, emotional and social well-being is crucial for educators and serves as a model for students also learning to cope with crisis. Empathy is our greatest teacher.

[^22]: [https://www.ycei.org/](https://www.ycei.org/)
Implications for Transitioning Back to School

Based on the data collected in this report, the Friday Institute has identified a set of six “core values” for a successful remote learning initiative. These principles have become the foundation of the Friday Institute online course Teaching Remotely: A Practical Guide and serve to frame student needs for remote learning.

1. **Simple strategies are usually the most effective strategies.** Teachers and schools should take care to limit the number of new tools and processes introduced and should work to standardize as many elements as possible across a student’s teachers. In order to create a routine and a sense of predictability for students and families, the establishment of “norms” in a remote learning classroom is a critical success factor for remote learning. Students and families need to be able to locate the instructional content from teachers, identify assignments they are supposed to be completing, and understand how to submit them to the teacher for assessment. In addition to relying on a well-structured Learning Management System, using fewer tools with greater fidelity will help eliminate confusion and frustration and reduce “tool fatigue.”

2. **There is no "right" way to do remote learning.** There is no formula for remote learning, and it will look different for every student, in every classroom, in every school and in every community. Remote learning needs to reflect and support the needs of the student and community where it is occurring. For example, a school district where every student has a device and internet access is reliable and widespread will have very different challenges than a district that is now working to provide these resources for the first time. Likewise, schools with high populations of English learners, migrant students or students who are homeless will all need to adopt different approaches to support these populations with individualized supports. As with teaching in a physical building, the needs of each school will look different when education takes place remotely—students, families and teachers will all need different supports and structures in order to make it work.

3. **Remote learning compounds the trauma (i.e., the pandemic) that prompted the move to remote learning.** It is critical to remain aware of this trauma, identify the needs of each student in your classroom and extend both grace and flexibility as needed. For the same reasons that remote learning is traumatic for students, it is also traumatic for educators. In addition to the events taking place in the world around you, teachers are facing the loss of their professional connections and colleagues, adapting to new forms of learning, caring for their own families and having to adapt instruction quickly and in unexpected ways. Planning, adapting to unexpected changes and managing the use of time all look very different during remote learning. It’s critical to remain aware that remote learning impacts not just students but their teachers as well; educators should extend the same grace and flexibility to themselves as well as each other, practice and promote self-care, and focus on the needs of students.

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4. **The systemic inequities inherent in our education system and society are exacerbated by remote learning**, impacting our entire school community, including students and staff. One of the primary concerns when schools shifted to remote learning was providing food and specialized services for families; schools provide for the well-being of many students, and this support system has been stretched during the pandemic. Additionally, non-white families are impacted by COVID-19 at a significantly higher rate than white families. Many low-income families are unable to work remotely during the pandemic and are working in high-risk jobs. In the midst of the economic downturn, many students working in grocery stores and restaurants have become the sole breadwinners in their families.

5. **Students with disabilities and English learners cannot be easily served remotely, especially if intensive interventions are needed.** Many families who do not have internet access because of cost or location are finding themselves increasingly cut off from a world that is depending on virtual communications more and more each day. It is important to remain aware of these inequities at all times, but in this time, it is especially critical to keep these disparities at the forefront. We must act with intention to avoid creating further inequities, and we must take intentional action to reduce inequities at every opportunity.

6. **Educators cannot approach remote learning in a vacuum.** They must learn from effective instructional practice and allow effective classroom practice to inform remote learning and vice versa. Specifically, teachers and school leaders should consider how these principles factor into procedures and norms during remote learning; they must consider how to maintain connections with students and families, how to select content and how to assess students. Different school communities will also need to identify and address the needs of the unique subpopulations within each school community.