Best Practices for Distance Learning K-12

Vision

Distance learning will most likely be necessary at times in the upcoming school year. While face-to-face learning remains the preferred mode of instruction, thoughtful planning for distance learning will increase equity and effectiveness of the educational experience. This document intends to outline best practices for students, teachers, and families for online distance learning.

Specific Considerations

- Students, teachers, and families are often navigating new spaces online and remotely. Ensure that all parties have clear communication and training in order to best access and deliver distance learning.
- Constructing norms and setting clear expectations are as foundational to distance learning as it is to in person.
- Student engagement in distance learning relies upon tools and instructional strategies that support personal connections.

Best Practices

Strategies to support varied remote environments.

Building Student and Family Relationships

Clear and consistent communication.	Plan and implement regular family/student communication related to schedules, assignments, and performance. Communications should be in language the parent/guardian understands. Be sure to include translated versions as needed; apps like Talking Points support two-way communication with multilingual families.
Streamline outgoing communication.	When possible, combine correspondence into one email from several faculty members (e.g., middle level team) or one grade level email with a link to a webpage with all subjects listed. Many families have more than one child and emails add up quickly, becoming less effective. Be sure to reference the school and grade since many parents have multiple children in the same district. If you use Google Classroom or other learning management system (LMS), include parents' email in the system so they can view upcoming assignments and missing work.
Personal outreach.	Check in with all families regularly. A quick phone call or email can help to troubleshoot issues with access or workload. Create a shared contact log for all staff to record outreach consistently. Conduct periodic surveys with families and students to learn which areas need improvement with distance learning. Consider using an app like Google Voice which allows educators to make calls without showing their personal phone number.

Establishing Norms

Teach the distance learning technology upfront.	Make sure students and families are familiar with accessing, navigating, and documenting their participation. Model and practice using online tools with students until it's seamless. If students are in-person, have them access and use online resources while in the classroom so there will be less adjustment if they have to go distance learning or for the planned distance learning days.
Co-construct norms with students.	Teachers and students should work together to generate a vision of a supportive classroom community by agreeing to actions and behaviors that are respectful, equitable, develop a positive classroom culture, and move learning forward. These norms should be applicable to both in-person and remote instruction.
Begin each activity with norms.	After launching norms, be sure to revisit norms, building them into daily lessons and assignments whether in-person or online. Do not assume students will refer back to a posted document. Refer to the norms often- posting them in the physical classroom and making a poster to have near your camera to pull in when discussing them online.
Be consistent with the norms.	Engagement exists when productive teaching practices, a safe environment, and positive relationships come together. Consistent use and reminders of the norms will support student engagement. Build time into class to revisit norms and make adjustments as needed. Have students focus on improving in one area of the norms each day or have students reflect on which norms they can improve on.

Engagement

Asynchronous instruction should include interaction.	Asynchronous instruction is not intended to replace a full day of school and in most instances should be used in combination with synchronous instruction. Collaboration between students and teacher feedback to students can increase engagement in asynchronous activities. Communication can be in the form of comments in a document, emails, comments on Google Classroom posts, entries on a digital whiteboard, or video or audio clips that give verbal feedback. Strategies to maximize engagement with asynchronous virtual learning include regular teacher-student communication, timely and frequent replies, and using appropriate technology for student/family, personalizing feedback. Even when teaching asynchronously, it is important to schedule mandatory check-in time in small groups or individual students.
Non-screen activities are necessary for student learning, particularly for younger students.	Activities that do not rely upon screen time are a valuable resource for student learning. Examples of non-screen activities include choice boards, writing letters, taking photos of finished products made by hand, drawing or hand-writing responses to questions, art projects photographed and emailed or uploaded, movement and brain breaks, and other physical activities (e.g., dancing, games, sports skills, scavenger hunt).
Students need to interact with others, not just complete assignments.	To support personalized instruction and social emotional needs, be mindful that instruction does not solely utilize asynchronous assignments nor rely on apps or videos to "teach" students. Teacher-student and/or student-to-student interaction needs to be included, especially in younger grades. Contextualization and scaffolding are necessary, particularly for differently-abled students or multilingual learners.

Ensure that online teaching methods and tools are equitable for all technological situations.	Class activities and assignments need to be planned so that technology does not create a barrier to access, especially for students whose devices or bandwidth might cause issues for synchronous access. (e.g. Have students record and transfer presentations ahead of time to the teacher, the teacher then streams during a class, or the teacher posts them for students to watch and submit individual reflections to the teacher about what they learned from their peers).
Include students in developing criteria to show proficiency.	Put the students at the center of establishing criteria for successful participation or product. Collaborate in a synchronous discussion to develop criteria or asynchronously create a shared document or Jamboard where students share their suggestions. Synthesize the student ideas into a set of criteria for success or incorporate their ideas into a rubric.
Let students showcase their knowledge and include their voice.	Include opportunities for student sharing and collaboration. Activities like jigsaws, student facilitated gallery walks with digital group docs, or group project presentations can be shared synchronously. Digital tools such as Google Drawings, Screencastify, and Flipgrid can enable asynchronous sharing.
Engaging in the practices of the subject area.	Avoid long videos or readings with questions at the end. Use EdPuzzle to focus on video segments with custom questions built in that require completion to advance the video. Give students specific prompts to consider while they annotate a pdf of a reading selection.
Leverage the tools embedded in technology to increase engagement.	Use break out rooms for small group discussions, creation of collaborative products, and development of models or explanations. Use online polling features to keep all students engaged. During synchronous sessions, encourage appropriate participation such as verbal responses, non-verbal nods/gestures in video, built-in signals such as clapping or hand-raise, or written responses (in chat or in a shared document).

Other Considerations

Train teachers in online tools.	Make appropriate tools available to teachers and support staff and provide training. Ask for teacher input on their students' needs in order to find tools that can be used in a variety of learning scenarios and support teachers' effective instructional strategies. Look for tools that integrate with the learning management system (e.g. Google Classroom) to simplify student access.
Model use of tools and visuals for students.	New tools and resources need explanations. If class is not meeting in-person or synchronously, teachers can record a screencast video while navigating the tool from the student perspective and giving directions verbally. Annotated screenshots of visuals will also help students and their families learn a new resource.
Set clear expectations to students.	Provide explicit criteria in assignment descriptions, include rubrics, or post a resource document for criteria on standing assignments to the class webpage or portal (e.g., Google Classroom).

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Use the same structures, tasks, and remote-friendly tools that are familiar to students.	Design a thoughtful transition to distance learning by mimicking in-person experiences as much as possible. Update structures and procedures as needed (e.g., use of videoconferencing, students recording and sharing videos rather than live presentations). Start using online tools with students in-person (if possible) so that they become familiar with navigation and effective use.
When planning for potential remote learning with multilingual learners, use tools and technologies that scaffold their learning.	For example: 1. Include resources in the student's home language, such as videos, to support learning when scaffolding any given lesson. 2. Create videos (with a screencasting tool) that use familiar terms for the beginning of every assignment (and every week) to walk students through the assignments (and weekly plan). 3. After creating a video lesson, create an accompanying online organizer for students to fill in with key words/terms from the lesson. 4. Create standards-driven competency activities (typically in a familiar format like a quiz) that students can complete multiple times until they get them right to help them become familiar with vocabulary. 5. Use a videoconferencing tool (e.g., Google Meet) that allows you to facilitate a dialogue among students, especially when discussing a primary or secondary source. 6. Use caution with commercial (or free) content videos/materials since they may have too many unknown words for students to decode.
Allow students to become proficient with online tools and provide support.	Start with a fewer number of online tools and systems to avoid overload and provide consistency. If possible, have teachers collaborate on a school-wide list of tools to minimize student-confusion and overload. Find or make video tutorials for online tools, post to the class webpage or portal (e.g., Google Classroom) as reference materials.
Streamline student documents for assessing and providing feedback.	Consider using one document per student as their class notebook or journal. New entries, with date, occur at the top. This saves time for teacher to open student work, assess, and provide feedback.
Single sign-on makes online accounts more manageable.	If the district's technology department has enabled a single sign-on system (e.g., Google Education, Clever), try to use this as often as possible so that students do not have to manage multiple username/password combinations for accessing digital resources.

References

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