**THE Moving to Digital Learning *FAST!* # Questions Answered**

Most of my teachers haven't done this before. Where should we start with them?

* It’s important to remind teachers that the best practices they use in their face-to-face classroom are important to uphold in the online classroom. Some of the best practices will need to be adapted, but it is important that teachers prioritize relationship-tending and clear communication.
* From a curricular standpoint, help teachers make decisions about what are the **most critical lessons and assessments** related to their curriculum. “Less is more” will be a helpful guiding philosophy. Give teachers the autonomy to make judgments around priorities within the curriculum to ensure students are meeting necessary standards without having to complete superfluous assignments.
* From a technical standpoint, be sure to provide teachers with training and resources they need to successfully facilitate learning remotely. Let them know how to get support with technical questions and how to answer **basic** student questions about accessing online curriculum and submitting work.

Same question regarding students: If they don’t have experience with online learning, where’s a good place to start?

* Make sure you understand technology and internet access/barriers your students may have. Provide students with laptops, as needed, and provide families with resources for internet access ([Comcast](https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19) is an example of an internet service provider committed to provide low-income families with 2 months of free internet in response to the pandemic, some restrictions apply)
* While most students tend to feel confident around technology, teachers need to avoid making assumptions that students will all understand how things work. It is important to be crystal-clear in communication of how to navigate technology, course content, and expectations for student work and participation.
* Create screenshares or screen shots with instructions for using the technology, as needed.
* Provide clear instructions around how to submit work to their teacher (dropbox, email, Google Drive, Office 365 Teams, etc…) and what to do if they don’t understand or can’t get the technology to work.

What are the easiest components of a course to transition to online delivery? Low-hanging fruit?

* Submission of written work is the easiest and most familiar form of work that students can complete. The process of completing and grading student work are almost identical to the process in the face-to-face classroom.
* Using discussion boards for group discussions, student questions that may impact the group, and supervised “student lounge” areas are intended to mimic the f2f discussions that occur in a class. These types of groups are familiar to students and teachers who have used message boards or social media sites like Facebook. Teachers do not need to address every comment a student makes, but they need to be sure to monitor the discussions.
* Uploading images of work products, videos of presentations, or voice recordings of student responses is another way for students to demonstrate their understanding. Again, these are technologies many students will be familiar with, but they may not know the nuts and bolts of the academic technology. While additional formats (videos/images, etc…) bring variety to the ways students can show what they know, they also may bring additional challenges, so a “plan b” is important to have ready (“If you can’t create a video, make a transcript and email the Word doc to your teacher…”).

Are there offline activities we should be promoting?

* Students should be encouraged to get plenty of sleep, adequate nutrition, and physical activity. Because this will be a challenging time for many of us- teachers, students and their families included- encouraging students to participate in self-care is important.
* Provide resources for families with food security issues to access food within the community. Many schools are providing one or meals for students (and their families). Food pantries, churches, and civic organizations may be able to help as well.
* Encourage students to get physical activity whenever possible. Going outside (if they can do so without coming into close contact with others), is important for everyone to keep their bodies moving and to get fresh air and vitamin D from the sun.
* To combat feelings of isolation and to help resist the temptation of going to friend’s houses or other public spaces, students can interact with family and peers using social media or interactive online games (board games, card games, video games etc…).

How can our teachers include active forms of learning in what we're doing?

* Teachers can poll students to schedule online synchronous discussions using a video chat client, either as a whole-class or small group experience.
* Discussions could be held using a chat feature or discussion board with a “real time” back-and forth rather than an asynchronous experience.

How do we make sure our students with accessibility issues are being taken care of?

* Students who have accessibility issues documented in a learning plan (IEP or 504) will need these accommodations met by their teachers.
* Provide students with laptops, as needed, and provide families with resources for internet access ([Comcast](https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19) is an example of an internet service provider committed to provide low-income families with 2 months of free internet in response to the pandemic, some restrictions apply)
* If students have technology at home, but it is being shared by multiple students/adults, stress the importance of scheduling time so that students can complete school work, parents can complete their work-from-home tasks, and everyone can access technology to connect with friends and families.

Is now really the time to adopt new technologies?

* Generally, limiting the number of new technologies students and teachers need to navigate is important to reduce frustration and further disruption to learning. As technology becomes familiar and the bugs are worked out, educators and tech team members can identify further needs (thinking: nice to have vs. necessary to have) and add new resources/tools that will best support teaching and learning goals.
* Technology choices rely on school resources, budget, and skills and comfort level of teachers. Some new technologies will be intuitive and will provide strong benefits to students and teachers while others may be “nice to have” but not be as impactful or have a too-steep learning curve, so it may not be worth the investment of time or money.
* Get clear on the goals you have as a school/district and avoid jumping around from one tool to another as much as possible. Relying exclusively on email or other existing tools (Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, etc…) for a few days while getting clear on goals and appropriate tools will minimize confusion, lost time, and unnecessary spending.
* The technology team and/or instructional technology department (or person) in your school/district will need to be able to support the technologies you implement, so you will need to consider whether they can sustain the support.
* For schools that will be closed for longer than a few weeks or are open to using supplemental technology as a blended learning experience once schools are open again, consider using an early adopter model for technology that the school or district is thinking of using. Having teachers who are comfortable with technology try new software will allow space for feedback before bringing it to scale.

What's essential and what's non-essential in developing our digital learning plan for the next two weeks?

* Ask the question: what is the minimum amount of work students need to complete to keep them moving forward in the curriculum? Identify the assignments that are superfluous to students attaining learning targets and make those assignments optional or eliminate them all together. Be objective and willing to rework your lesson plans.

What about the two weeks after that?

* By the time schools are into their third and fourth week of virtual learning, teachers and administrators will have a better sense of what’s working for students and teachers so far, and hopefully, they will have a better sense of the duration of time the schools will remain closed. Using feedback from teachers and students, identify best next steps. If students need more of a challenge or report that they are spending minimal time on their work and are still doing well, teachers can identify ways to increase the engagement and rigor of the work either by changing expectations on assignments or bringing back some lessons that were initially omitted.

Should our teachers worry about finals or big projects during this period?

* Teachers need to look at finals and big projects to identify the learning goals of these assignments. If a project or final exam is easily transferrable to the online environment, there may not be a need to adapt. If the assignment can be scaled back somewhat without impacting the learning goals, this may make the workload for the student and teacher more manageable.
* Schools and teachers will need to consider that finals (and all work students are turning in) will be difficult to proctor remotely. This may be waived completely, or schools may ask students to sign an “honor code” document promising to complete their own work (maybe just for finals; maybe for all work). Alternately, schools could ask a parent or guardian to sign a document stating they will proctor the student during exams. Any of these options could present challenges, so the schools will need to determine the best approach for their community.

What should we do about students who don't have good internet access?

* If students are unable to secure internet at home, the school’s technology team will need to work with state and local resources to possibly secure a hotspot or sign up for free internet from a provider like [Comcast](https://www.internetessentials.com/covid19).
* If students have limited access to a computer and the school is unable to provide a laptop, they may be allowed to turn in work via email attachment or Google Docs, particularly if there is new software that is not compatible with the computer a student is using.

What should the IT staff be focused on during this time?

* IT staff will need to support learning remotely as well, providing clear processes for students and teachers to efficiently communicate issues as they come up.
* IT staff may create resources to share with the school community, including:
  + Documents of frequently asked questions and basic troubleshooting
  + “How to” documents and/or a knowledge base, including screenshots or screencasts to provide visuals and clear steps to follow
  + Recommended online tools to help teachers

How can we better support our teachers through this transition?

* Communicate with teachers regularly so they understand the decisions being made, the decision-making process/timeline, and expectations. Don’t leave teachers hanging- if you are held up in the process, send a quick note to let them know you’re working on things.
* Make expectations clear including:
  + What all teachers must do with steps and deadlines, as needed (teacher participation/presence/availability, grading expectations, communication expectations, etc…)
  + Where teachers can exercise autonomy in curriculum, instruction, and assessment
  + How do get support if they aren’t sure how to fulfill expectations
* Provide support and training for any new technology or existing technology being used in a new context.
* Let teachers know what to do if they or someone they care for falls ill. Have a clear plan that is transparent to teachers so the process is predictable should they be personally impacted by the pandemic.
* Encourage the same recommendations around sleep, nutrition, and physical activity for teachers as you do for students, providing teachers with resources and ideas to help them take care of themselves.
* Be patient and empathetic to teachers as they navigate the new learning landscape.
* Consider creating a virtual space for teachers to come together. If you already have professional learning communities or critical friends groups in your school, offer to host a space for teachers to connect with these colleagues. If these groups are not pre-established in your school, find out which teachers would like to connect with others. This could be a full group “faculty lounge” discussion page or smaller content-based or grade-level based groups. When creating groups for teachers, be transparent about privacy, who can see the discussions, and how the information is archived.

What online tools are proving most helpful?

* There is no one size fits all that will work at every school and for every student, and it’s difficult to know how to get started. There are many online tools available to help students and schools and many organizations are willing to provide assistance at low or no cost.
* If a school does not already have an online learning management system in place organizations like D2L, provider of the platform Brightspace, can help schools get started (https://community.brightspace.com/s/article/Changing-from-classroom-to-online-courses-during-the-COVID-19-virus-outbreak)
* Other tools such as video conferencing platform Zoom (https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-covid-19-spread-zoom-video-lift-call-limit-2020-2) can help provide synchronous learning options and office hours.
* Nonprofit VHS Learning can provide expertise in online learning and best practices (https://vhslearning.org/online-learning-during-school-closures)
* Organizations such as Space Station Explorers also provide exciting and engaging STEM and interdisciplinary options for students working remotely, while using the International Space Station as a resource (https://www.spacestationexplorers.org/).

Do you have any advice regarding how we keep our school community informed?

* Weekly announcements (or more frequently, if needed) is a good way to help the community to stay plugged in. Streamline communication through a single channel (school level) while allowing teachers to communicate with parents as they normally would via email.
* Provide resources to families regarding free internet access, ways to acquire food for the family, and other local and online resources that can help families during this challenging time.
* Give families a recommended schedule for students to follow. Help them create structure for their student(s) as they learn to “do school” from home.
* Provide families with clear instructions on what students should do if they experience a technical challenge or need support from their teacher/school

How do we get back to normal if schools reopen before the end of the school year?

* Much like coming back from a long break mid-year, returning to school after a 3 or more-week closure will require some culture tending.
* Schools should work with teachers to identify any online practices that they would consider adopting long-term to supplement their face-to-face instruction.
* Teachers can identify technology tools that they would like to continue to use throughout the school year.
* Ask for student and teacher input on what they need to successfully transition back to the face-to-face environment. Find out what everybody learned from this experience and consider how this may change the day-to-day structures of school.
* Be patient as students reacclimate to the more highly structured school day. Students, teachers, and staff will need to create space for social connections and for general mental and physical fatigue that comes with transitioning to a highly structured environment.

Is there a silver lining – online teaching practices that can improve courses even when they go back to face-to-face?

* Without the benefit of visual and social cues that come from face-to-face interactions, teachers in an online classroom often develop a much stronger communication style both in tone and clarity. It will quickly become apparent to teachers any ways that their written communication is ambiguous or incomplete, and they often default to reading their messages through the student lens to ensure clarity and warmth before sending.
* Another silver lining is that the most important practices teachers have been developing throughout their careers are relevant and transferrable to the online classroom. It may feel daunting at first, but teachers will soon discover that they already have most of the tools ready to go in their toolbox. They just need to figure out how to use these tools in a different environment. Whether in the online classroom or face-to-face, students benefit when teachers:
  + Build and nurture relationships
  + Lead with empathy
  + Provide clear expectations on participation, assignments, deadlines, and conduct (academic and behavioral)
  + Create and follow structures that allow for flexibility
  + Provide substantive, timely, actionable feedback
  + Communicate clearly with a positive tone
  + Effectively facilitate classroom discussions, allowing students to drive the discussion while asking questions that deepen the discourse and gently redirecting as needed
  + Clearly and kindly respond to student concerns and inquiries in a timely fashion
  + Make accommodation based on student needs, whether circumstantial or based on an education plan

Do you have any parting words of advice for teachers and IT people?

* Communicate – clearly, thoroughly, kindly, and frequently
* Be patient – all stakeholders –students, parents, teachers, administrators, specialists, support staff—are doing their best. Let people ask questions and provide support to help one another understand processes and expectation.
* Accept that this is going to be messy and everyone is going to make mistakes. Try to get comfortable with the discomfort. Let this be part of the learning process.
* Be compassionate and empathetic to everyone. In a physical school, students, teachers, and staff set aside their personal lives (for the most part) to be present in the shared work of teaching and learning. With everyone working from home, personal and professional lives are intersecting. We can’t know what kinds of challenges everyone is facing—illness, food insecurity, unstable homes, accessibility concerns, financial concerns, anxiety and fear of the unknown, and limited space are just a few challenges that you may not know a student or colleague is dealing with while trying to transition to online learning as smoothly as possible. Give a little extra kindness to everyone right now, including yourself.