

Digital Learning & COVID-19

The National Education Association recognizes that now, more than ever, the work of education professionals throughout the country is fundamental to the nation. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause school closures and education systems transition to out-of-classroom learning, NEA is here to provide guidance on professional standards that can assist you in maintaining the quality of public education for all of our students throughout the country.

Where schools and districts have to adopt digital learning, it is critical that public school districts and postsecondary institutions work in close collaboration with educators and local associations to develop comprehensive learning plans that address all the elements of incorporating technology into the instructional program. These plans should be living documents, constantly reviewed, and adapted as changing circumstances require, but always keeping the focus on student learning.

In the mist of rapid decision making on the part of States and districts in response to COVID-19, the NEA believes that student learning needs can best be met by public school districts and postsecondary institutions meaningfully engaging educators in planning for ways to continue learning despite school closures. Any plans made for digital learning throughout the COVID-19-related closures should include the provision of adaptive technologies to meet individual students' needs, including assistive technology to support students who are English Language Learners and students with a variety of disabilities or challenges.

This document reviews critical considerations for educators tasked with implementing digital learning programs due to COVID-19 related school closures. Detailed responses to the questions below are provided in the pages that follow.

- I. How should schools and districts prepare to transition to digital learning systems?
Whenever possible, NEA strongly recommends that states and districts closing schools allocate at least one day to allow educators to familiarize themselves with digital learning formats, test functionality, and troubleshoot issues.

- II. What should I consider when implementing a digital learning program?
Accessibility for all students and stakeholders is critical with regard to content delivery. The needs of English learners, students with disabilities, and families must all be considered with efforts made to provide instruction and critical information in the languages that students and families speak at home.

- III. What special considerations need to be contemplated regarding higher education?
Higher education faculty and staff must participate in the creation and administration of comprehensive digital learning programs. Whenever possible, professional learning opportunities should be provided to ensure technical issues are addressed and mitigated with rapidity. Faculty should confer with regional, national, and other accrediting agencies to secure approval for long-term digital learning solutions.

IV. Regarding student data privacy, what are some guidelines I should consider when receiving personally identifiable information?

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act dictates the kinds of information that educational agencies and institutions can collect, maintain, and disclose with permission. Safeguarding personal data of students and educators must be a top priority and data privacy must be of paramount concern. Educators should not publicize identifiable information of students and should take care to comply with FERPA in addition to state and district policies.

V. What resources are available to me?

The United States Department of Education is maintaining a site, [COVID-19 Information and Resources for Schools and School Personnel](#), where the latest glance and information is being disseminated for schools. NEA assembled a list of additional resources below.

(I) How should schools and districts prepare to transition to digital learning systems?

The NEA strongly recommends that all districts transitioning to digital learning models take a day in advance of school closures to help educators prepare for the abrupt shift to digital learning formats; and to troubleshoot issues and test functionality of the online platform in order to identify and ameliorate any issues with online content delivery and publication of critical information to educators, students, and families.

Digital learning is consistent with face-to-face courses, in that, teachers must set forth clear expectations for students, activities and assessments should account for different learning styles, and latest best practices should be implemented. Any online courses should also be offered equitably and should not be contingent upon technological resources available at a student's home.

(II) What should I consider when implementing a digital learning program?

As the COVID-19 coronavirus continues to spread, [schools around the globe are shifting to digital learning](#) in an effort to slow the spread of the disease. [The International Society for Technology in Education \(ISTE\) strongly recommends that all schools have a digital learning plan and tools in place](#) to enable a quick pivot to digital learning if needed.

1. Ensure digital equity & design independent learning

Equity is an important obstacle to consider in preparing for digital learning. Not all students and their families have sufficient internet access at home, and consideration or alternative arrangements may need to be made. Ensure that your plan considers both family access to technology and Wi-Fi and capacity for families to be involved in the digital learning process.

2. Communicate daily schedules & set clear expectations with students and families

Consistent and clear communication between administrators, staff, parents, and students is crucial throughout digital learning. Ensure that frequently asked questions have answers so that everyone is on the same page, and be prepared to provide extra support so that students know when to be online and everyone involved knows how to ask for help.

3. Provide robust learning & choose the right tools and stick with them

ISTE recommends various key principles to guide digital learning that is both engaging and beneficial to student learning when face-to-face instruction is not an option. Those principles include breaking learning into small chunks, be clear about online expectations and participation, providing prompt and frequent feedback to students using online knowledge checks and comments, and being sure to include virtual meetings, live chats, and video tutorials as much as possible. There are a variety of free apps and digital resources available to ensure that students are engaged as best as possible; however, it is also recommended that rather than try to use all tools available, to instead limit the number the tools so that families and students are not overwhelmed.

4. Address the emotional toll

It is important for educators to check in with students and colleagues, especially those who are less comfortable with digital tools and digital learning. Additionally, though there is a convenience to work from home, it can be challenging to keep to a regular schedule. Some things that can help include taking regular breaks, making time to exercise and move, keeping a regular sleep schedule, limiting distractions when possible such as social media, setting daily goals, and being sure to take time to socialize and decompress.

(III) What special considerations need to be contemplated regarding higher education?

Though digital learning and digital education have long been components of the higher education landscape, there are still many unique challenges that HEI faculty, staff, and students face. Below is a list of special digital learning considerations for higher education practitioners.

1. HEI faculty and staff need their institutions' faculty senates, administrations, trustees, and other governance and shared governance groups to meet and create comprehensive plans that determine how they will ensure that quality learning continues whenever a campus has ceased normal operations during the COVID-19 pandemic and others natural disasters and acts of God
2. HEIs need to ensure that they provide quality training for faculty to learn how to navigate online platforms, such as Blackboard and Canvas, and other technologies so that they are equipped to use all available technologies to drive student learning
3. HEIs need access to digital learning supports when faculty encounter technical issues delivering online, digital, and other digital learning instruction
4. HEIs need to plan for considerations that some faculty, staff and students may not have personal and individual access to technology such as personal computers, laptop computers, tablets, and other devices that can be used for digital instruction and digital learning; institutions must be able to provide access to these technologies when they are needed
5. HEIs must confer with regional, national, and other accrediting agencies to receive approval for temporary and long-term digital learning solutions when normal campus operations cease due to natural disasters and acts of God, such as COVID-19, to ensure that students are protected against their programs and classes not being recognized as meeting minimum standards for graduation, transfer, and federal financial aid, and other areas related to accreditation
6. Online courses at HEIs should be offered equitably and should not be contingent upon technological resources available to students
7. Digital learning at HEIs must be consistent with face-to-face instruction and faculty must set forth clear expectations for students; additionally, activities and assessments should account for different learning styles and consider accommodations for students with disabilities and other learning varied needs

(IV) Regarding student data privacy, what are some guidelines I should consider when receiving personally identifiable information?

Safeguarding personal data of students and educators must be a top priority and data privacy must be of paramount concern. Educators must be informed about the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and student data privacy laws, regulations, and policies. FERPA prohibits educational agencies and institutions from disclosing personally identifiable information (“PII”) from students’ education record without the prior consent of a parent or eligible student, with a few specific exceptions.

The Student Privacy Policy Office (“SPPO”) published [guidance](#) on March 12, 2020 to assist school officials working with public health officials in managing public health issues related to COVID-19. At this time, protecting student privacy in the context of COVID-19 brings up unique issues pertaining to student health and education records.

The following is a summary of the guidance provided by SPPO that educators should keep in mind when managing communications to students and families in cases where digital learning has been adopted due to school closures:

1. Parents and eligible students must provide consent before an educational agency (i.e. district) or institution (i.e. school) discloses PII from education records. The consent must specify the record that may be disclosed, state the purpose of the disclosure, and identify the party or class of parties to whom disclosure may be made. SPPO provided a [model consent form](#) that can be used in situation where prior written consent is needed.
2. FERPA permits educational agencies and institutions to disclose, without prior written consent, PII from student educational records to appropriate parties in connection with an emergency, if knowledge of that information is necessary to protect the health or safety of a student or other individuals. Typically, individual educators should not be placed in a situation where they are responsible for disseminating such information. Law enforcement officials, public health officials, trained medical staff, and parents are appropriate parties for making such disclosures. If you are asked to share information that you believe is not properly shareable, be sure to contact your school or district administrators.
3. FERPA does not permit nonconsensual disclosure, even in the event of a health or safety emergency, to the media. Educators who are apprised of a student’s illness due to COVID-19 should not disclose or alert any such information to the media, as they are not “appropriate parties” under FERPA’s health or safety emergency exception.
4. SPPO advised that educational agencies should not identify a particular student, educator, or school official as having COVID-19 to parents or family members of other students in the school. Nothing in FERPA prevents schools from telling parents and students that a specific teacher or other school official has COVID-19 because FERPA applies to students’ education records, not records on school officials. However, there may be State laws that apply in these situations. Educators should be deliberate in not sending out or sharing information pertaining to the identity of an individual who is infected and determined to have COVID-19.
5. In rare situations where general notice is insufficient, school officials may determine it is appropriate to disclose identifiable information of a student with COVID-19 in order to alert the education community of the need to take precautions and appropriate protective actions due to exposure to the virus. It is generally not within the province of individual educators to make such determinations. Please defer to the case-by-case determinations of school officials and do not independently disclose the identity of sick individuals.
6. School officials with questions can contact the Department of Education’s Student Privacy Policy Office with questions about FERPA by email at FERPA@ed.gov or phone at (202) 260-3887.

(V) What resources are available to me?

Tools & Resources

[Free Tools for Schools Dealing with Corona](#)

This Google Doc has compiled companies that have announced enhanced or free services to schools as they deal with COVID-19-related closures.

[COVID-19 Resource List](#)

The National Network of State Teachers of the Year created this Google Sheet, which encompasses online resources, relevant strategies and articles, considerations for educators, and a list of what conversations are looking like in schools and districts across the country.

[Common Sense Education EdTech Tools](#)

This robust library of more than 3,500 tools encompasses all P-12 grade levels and a variety of subject areas.

[Top 25 Learning Tools for When School is Closed](#)

Tech & Learning compiled their list of sites, platforms, and online resources that support remote learning when school is closed.

[105 Tools for Distance Learning & Strategies for Student Engagement](#)

The Albert team provides a comprehensive list of helpful learning tools, information on common benefits and drawbacks of remote learning, and a few strategies for keeping students engaged while remote.

[Tech Against Coronavirus](#)

This list encompasses a wide variety of software solutions to maintain collaboration and work remotely with your team.

[Education Companies Offering Free Subscriptions Due to School Closings](#)

This spreadsheet includes more than 100 education companies offering free services to educators during the COVID-19 outbreak.

[Navigating Uncertain Times: How Schools Can Cope with Coronavirus](#)

ISTE and EdSurge published this set of tools – including articles, podcasts, webinars, and community resources – for helping schools navigate the difficulty of dealing with coronavirus.

Webinars

[Distance Learning with PBS LearningMedia Webinar](#)

Wednesday, March 18 – 7:00pm EST (1 Hour)

Hosted by PBS Education, this webinar will help educators of children of all ages as they plan for a variety of scenarios in response to the coronavirus health crisis by focusing on skills, tips, and techniques educators can apply to prepare for successful digital learning.

[Understanding the Impact of Coronavirus on K-12 Education](#)

Fridays – Starting March 13 – 2:00 EST (1 Hour)

This webinar series, hosted by ISTE and EdSurge, will focus on how K-12 schools are coping with

coronavirus and the move to remote learning and how students and educators are being impacted.

Strategies

[6 Lessons Learned About Remote Learning During the Coronavirus Outbreak](#)

This article provides best practices related to digital learning to ensure quality and engaging instruction during the suspension of face-to-face learning during the COVID-10 pandemic.

[A Coronavirus Outreach Plan: 5 Steps for District Leaders](#)

Included in this article are five action steps to help school leaders craft an effective outreach plan for dealing with COVID-19.

[10 Strategies for Online Learning During a Coronavirus Outbreak](#)

This article includes best ideas from educators from around the world, many of whom have already been teaching during coronavirus closures.

Higher Education

[8 Tips for Setting Up and Teaching Online Classes During Coronavirus Closures](#)

This article provides a step-by-step guide on how to prepare for and teaching in Higher Education from one's online introductory video to assisting students who are having difficulty adjusting to the transition.

[7 Guidelines for Successful Teaching Online](#)

Similarly, this article provides tips for online teaching in higher education; however, it also provides guidelines on 'active' learning, group assignments, and multimedia assignments.

[Interim Guidance for Administrators of US Institutions of Higher Education: Plan, Prepare and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019](#)

This CDC document provides guidance for Higher Education administrators of public and private institutions prevent the spread of COVID-19 among students, staff, and faculty.

[Preparing for Emergency Online Teaching](#)

The Chronicle of Higher Education provides resource guides that walks instructors through different scenarios, including complex ones, such as how to replicate lab activities online.

[How to Make Your Online Pivot Less Brutal](#)

This article provides tips, best practices, and encouragement for higher education faculty to provide engaging pedagogy regardless of one's comfort level with online teaching.