Promising Practices Brief: Improving Student Engagement and Attendance During COVID-19 School Closures

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Executive Summary

Nationwide school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have created an unprecedented level of activity in the online learning space. A scan of remote learning plans during school closures found that as of May 6, 2020, nearly 60 percent of districts were providing some form of remote curriculum, instruction, and progress monitoring.[1] Meanwhile, educators and policymakers have expressed concerns about adequate student engagement through remote learning or, in some cases, inability to reach students completely. The move toward remote learning has created questions about whether and how attendance should be taken and measured in an online environment[2] and highlighted the importance of meaningful remote engagement that leads to learning.

Attendance is an important predictor of student success, in addition to serving as a daily wellness checkpoint for students. Chronically absent students are at risk of lower academic achievement and educational attainment. Without daily face-to-face interactions, monitoring student attendance in remote learning during extended school closures serves as the primary means for ensuring student well-being in a time of unprecedented disruption to home and family life.

This promising practices brief explores research on monitoring and promoting attendance and engagement in online learning and summarizes the findings from conversations with a small number of school districts about their transition to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The brief provides a resource to states and districts on promising practices in measuring and improving attendance and engagement during extended school closures.

Our approach

Our information gathering included a review of existing research and conversations with four school districts serving different geographic locales and student populations and one accredited distance learning provider. We facilitated these virtual interviews in spring 2020, after districts had pivoted to remote learning. There is very little research that focuses on attendance or engagement

in K–12 online settings, and we were unable to identify any substantive research on attendance and engagement for remote learning during extended emergency school closures. To address this gap in specific, relevant research, we summarize general research on online student engagement and research on postsecondary online practices.

District alignment to remote learning research

There is no established definition of "attendance" in an online environment. The districts we spoke with rely on elements of their remote learning plans to monitor attendance and prioritize wellness over participation in instruction. Most of the districts we spoke with aim to have at least one weekly "live" checkpoint between the teacher and students, although the format varies. Some districts track participation through submission of assignments. When a student is not present for a checkpoint, the teacher follows up with the family by e-mail or phone and escalates calls to school leaders or support staff when a student is unreachable.

In the absence of defined attendance measures, districts seek to measure and understand student and family engagement. Research describes some measures of active participation that could help districts understand engagement levels (e.g., time spent on a learning platform, frequency or quantity of online learning activities completed). In some instances, districts are tracking participation in live virtual instruction or through submission of assignments. Some are also administering engagement surveys to students, families, and teachers to inform improvements to their distance learning plans and supports.

Research on online learning in higher education points to several approaches to improving engagement in K–12 remote learning. The research suggests considerations for how pedagogy can influence engagement, the use of synchronous (i.e., offered in real time) versus asynchronous (i.e., available at any time) instruction, the role of the teacher in promoting engagement, and

strategies for supporting student self-regulatory practices that can improve engagement. While the research does not focus on K–12 strategies, the districts we spoke with are incorporating some of these practices.

Promising practices and lessons learned through early implementation

Asynchronous learning provides more flexible and equitable opportunities for students to learn. Asynchronous learning enables families to schedule learning time that aligns with their varied home schedules and provide shared access to devices across multiple students in a household. Resources such as recorded video instruction, online activities, and assignments can be downloaded or accessed online. Other resources can be disseminated via mail or picked up at a central location. Although some districts originally considered synchronous learning opportunities to be the preferred mode of delivery for remote learning, the districts we spoke with primarily offer asynchronous instruction.

Synchronous instruction can provide opportunities for wellness checks, small-group instruction, office hours with teachers, or peer-to-peer engagement. The districts we spoke with complement asynchronous instruction with limited synchronous instruction, which varies by school or grade level. Some teachers gather students virtually via online platforms for a "morning meeting," which may provide both a wellness check and limited instruction. Others offer "office hours" to students for asking questions about their work. Some teachers offer small-group virtual instruction in core areas.

Districts are actively seeking to improve access to the Internet. District leaders are sensitive to the fact that not all students have consistent access to the Internet. Some districts have invested in mobile hotspots to improve families' Internet access.

Districts are exploring opportunities to provide one-to-one device access to all students. Not all students have a device for online learning such as a laptop or a tablet. While some districts provide devices to all students (particularly at the secondary level), limited resources make offering one-to-one access to all students challenging. Some districts hope to provide one-to-one access to devices in the fall.

When schools partially or fully reopen, students may require additional support for social and emotional learning, trauma-informed learning, and student and family re-engagement. Districts are exploring how they will provide support services to students who may have experienced trauma during school closures, ranging from losing a loved one or living in an unsafe or unstable home to more basic challenges of being isolated from their peers or enduring greater stress than usual.

Districts are preparing several contingency plans to align with public health guidance. These plans consider what instruction and engagement will look like during continued partial, full, or rolling school closures.

Introduction

Nationwide school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have created an unprecedented level of activity in the online learning space. The Center on Reinventing Public Education's scan of district learning plans during school closures found that as of May 6, 2020, nearly 60 percent of districts were providing some form of remote curriculum, instruction, and progress monitoring.[3] During this time, educators and policymakers have expressed concerns about adequate student engagement through remote learning or, in some cases, inability to reach students completely. The move toward remote learning has created questions about whether and how attendance should be taken and measured in an online environment[4] and highlighted the importance of meaningful remote engagement that leads to learning.

This promising practices brief explores research on monitoring and promoting attendance and engagement in online learning. It also summarizes the findings from conversations with a small number of school districts about their transition to remote learning—including online learning and other distance learning strategies—as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper aims to provide a resource to states and districts on promising practices in measuring and improving attendance and engagement during extended school closures.

Our approach

Our information gathering included a review of existing research and conversations with four school districts and one accredited distance learning provider.

Review of the research literature on student attendance and engagement in online learning. There is limited research that focuses on attendance or engagement in K–12 online settings, and we were unable to identify substantive research on attendance and engagement for remote learning during extended emergency school closures. To address this gap in specific, relevant research, we identified several related topics potentially applicable to the K–12 online setting. This brief provides an overview of the limited research on effective online engagement in higher education settings. It also includes research findings on related topics, such as the domains of student engagement, the role of educators in online settings, and self-regulation strategies that promote engagement. Through this review of the research, we aim to identify practices in supporting online student engagement that could be applicable for districts supporting K–12 distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, the lack of evidence-based strategies in K–12 online engagement suggests an opportunity to learn from the widespread remote learning taking place during this pandemic and address gaps in the research base.

Interviews with select districts about their remote learning and engagement plans. Given the limited research on effective online engagement and attendance strategies for K–12 schools, we also interviewed four districts across the country and one accredited distance learning provider about their pivot to distance learning in spring 2020 as a result of schools physically closing. We purposefully selected districts serving different student demographics and located in different geographic locales that had announced K–12 distance learning plans in the early weeks of school closures. This small number of districts is not intended to be a representative national sample but instead illustrative of a few different approaches to supporting extended distance learning and engagement. With the fluidity of circumstances in districts during extended school closures, it is important to note these interviews represent a snapshot in time of district efforts.

The four districts we spoke with were (1) a northern Virginia district in the Washington, DC, metro area serving a large number of English learners and low-income students; (2) a charter management organization with urban schools serving predominantly low-income students in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York; (3) a suburban Illinois district that had a state-approved distance learning plan in preparation for weather-related school closures; and (4) a suburban district in Washington state that had elements of distance learning in place before school closures (see figure 1).

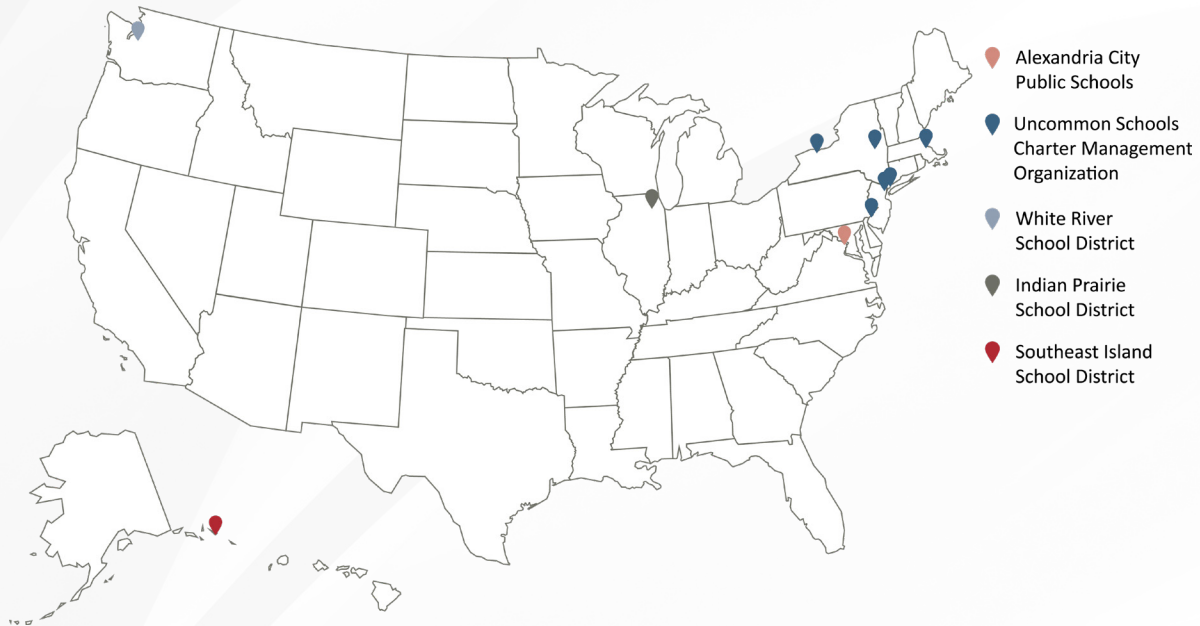*Figure 1. Overview of interviewed districts' geography*

Table 1. Geography and student enrollment in interviewed districts

District name	Geography	Number of students	Number of schools
Alexandria City Public Schools	Midsize urban/suburban Northern Virginia district in Washington, DC, metro area	16,062	18
Uncommon Schools Charter Management Organization	Large urban public charter schools in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts	20,054	54
White River School District	Small suburban district in Washington State	3,923	7
Indian Prairie School District	Large suburban district serving portions of Naperville, Aurora, Bolingbrook, and Plainfield, Illinois	27,400	33
Brightways Global Academy	N/A – Global	77	1
Southeast Island School District	Remote islands in Alaska	197	9

Table 2. Student support services and student demographics in interviewed districts

District name	Student services			Student demographics				
	FRPL	EL	SWD	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other
Alexandria City Public Schools	56%	32%	10%	28%	25%	37%	5%	<5%
Uncommon Schools Charter Management Organization	84%	3%	12%	2%	85%	9%	0%	5%
White River School District	29%	4%	15%	81%	1%	11%	1%	6%
Indian Prairie School District	17%	11%	12%	42%	9%	12%	32%	4%
Brightways Global Academy	17%	4%	6.5%	67.5%	1.3%	7.8%	10.3%	13%
Southeast Island School District	64%	0%	33%	72%	n/a*	6%	1%	21%

* included in "other"
FRPL = student eligible for free and reduced-price lunch; EL = students designated as English learners; SWD = students with disabilities

For each district, we facilitated a 60-minute discussion with district leaders about their current approaches to student engagement and attendance in the virtual setting, the challenges they have faced, bright spots in implementation to date, and their planning considerations as they look ahead to the upcoming school year this fall. We also spoke with Brightways Learning, an accredited distance learning program serving homeschooled students around the world, to understand the strategies the program uses to engage students and families, both during normal operations and during COVID-19 disruptions to schooling. Brightways Learning provides support to the Southeast Island School District, which comprises nine remote schools on the islands of southeast Alaska. Based on these interviews, this brief highlights some key themes and promising practices that emerged across the district conversations.

The appendix contains district vignettes that include demographic information for each district; an overview of the features of their remote learning plans (as of April 2020); the design principles that influenced their remote learning plans; and highlights of the promising practices, challenges, and future plans.

Findings

Attendance is an important measure of school quality and a predictor of student success. Chronically absent students are at risk of lower academic achievement and educational attainment; they are less likely to perform well in math and reading[5, 6] and less likely to advance through high school in a timely manner.[7, 8, 9] School attendance is so important that in studies of high school freshmen, attendance was more predictive of high school graduation than prior academic achievement.[10, 11] Measuring attendance is also a requirement for schools, and 36 states and the District of Columbia include chronic absenteeism as an accountability measure in their state plans for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act.[12]

In addition to attendance reporting requirements, monitoring attendance serves as a critical element for assessing student engagement during extended school closures, including those as a result of COVID-19. Attending school serves as a daily wellness touchpoint for students and enables teachers and other educators to identify student wellness needs and report any concerns to the appropriate authorities. Without these daily face-to-face interactions, monitoring student attendance in remote learning during extended school closures serves as the primary means for ensuring student well-being in a time of unprecedented disruption to home and family life.

Measuring attendance in online or remote settings: Research literature

There is no established or commonly accepted definition of "attendance" in an online environment—whether it be real-time participation in a live virtual session, completion or submission of an assignment or assessment, or other participation measures.

In the absence of research on this topic, we can examine the media coverage of COVID-related school closures to get a broader understanding of how school systems are navigating attendance through distance learning during extended school closures. Eighteen states require districts to track attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 20 states do not require it.[13] As of early May 2020, 32 states had taken steps to release districts from "seat time" requirements, and 17 states had provided guidance on hourly participation in remote learning, ranging from 30 minutes for preschoolers to 3–4 hours a day for high school students.[14] Challenges with unequal access to the Internet, lack of one-to-one access to devices for one or more students in a household, varied family work schedules or sibling school schedules, and general disruptions to home life as a result of the pandemic are among the many reasons measuring attendance during remote learning is challenging.[15, 16]

Measuring attendance in online or remote settings: District practices

The districts we spoke with echoed these types of challenges and generally emphasized the importance of supporting student engagement and wellness over student attendance during COVID-19-related disruptions to schooling.

We asked the districts how, if at all, they are monitoring student attendance in their remote learning efforts. For the most part, districts we spoke with draw upon elements of their remote learning plans as touchpoints for student attendance and prioritize student well-being and safety above rigorous learning experiences. The following strategies emerged in our discussions.

- **Schedule a weekly touchpoint between the teacher and students as a wellness and attendance check.** Districts aim to have at least one "live" touchpoint (i.e., a meeting that takes place in real time) between the teacher and students per week, although the format varies, even among teachers or schools within a district. Some teachers host a virtual video conference with the full class or small groups of students. These engagements may include instruction or focus on wellness. Other teachers facilitate weekly one-on-one phone calls with a parent or guardian for each student. Districts indicated the touchpoint frequency may vary based on student or family need. When a student is not present for a touchpoint, the teacher follows up with the family by e-mail or phone. If they cannot reach a parent or guardian, the check-in may be escalated to a school dean, school leader, or social worker. Districts are tracking this outreach in call logs or other databases.

- **Track student attendance during live instruction.** While not all districts are offering live instruction, those that do are, in some cases, using this time as an attendance checkpoint by recording who is present during live sessions.

- **Track student completion and submission of assignments.** Although most of the districts we spoke with are not grading student assignments, the submission of schoolwork is another mechanism some are using to measure student attendance or participation. Some districts are also able to monitor completion of reading assignments or other online activities using features within a learning management system or app that track student progress and completion.

- **Prioritize wellness and social and emotional learning over participation in remote learning.** Several districts noted the importance of prioritizing wellness and social and emotional learning for students, families, and educators above students' participation in instructional activities. Districts recognize these supports are critical both now during school closures and when looking ahead to potential reopening in the fall.

Monitoring engagement during online and remote learning: Research literature

In the absence of defined attendance measures, measuring student engagement in remote learning can serve as an indicator of the extent to which students are participating in daily instructional activities.

Without a concrete definition of attendance in the K–12 online space, research on online learning has historically focused on three domains of student engagement—behavioral, affective, and cognitive—associated with online participation. According to engagement theory, these three types of engagement reinforce each other.[17] For example, if a student understands the value of education after high school (cognitive), then the student wants to learn (affective) and participates more (behavioral). This increased participation can lead to a greater sense of belongingness, which strengthens affective (or emotional) engagement and further reinforces cognitive and behavioral engagement.

Behavioral engagement. Actively participating in learning, including self-regulatory behaviors.

Affective engagement. Wanting to learn, sense of belonging within learning community.

Cognitive engagement. Understanding the importance of and valuing learning, metacognitive strategizing.

Researchers describe this triad of engagement as a "student's devotion of time, energy, value/interest, attitude, learning strategy or even creative thinking in e-learning environments and the motivational and action processes elicited."[18]

There are numerous controllable measures of active participation (i.e., behavioral engagement) within an online learning environment, which many online platforms automatically track (box 1). Notably, researchers identified these measures through their studies of online engagement in college coursework. As a result, some of these measures may be less appropriate for K–12 students, although some may be useful to consider for secondary students.

Monitoring engagement during online and remote learning: District practices

Interestingly, three of the districts we interviewed indicated they experienced increased engagement from some families who had reached out to share feedback and concerns or seek support services. These districts also experienced increased engagement among students who had made a personal connection with a teacher by sharing more about their home life or interests via video conference. More than one district indicated this increase in engagement pointed to the need to consider how online approaches to instruction may be beneficial to some students even during normal school operations.

Several districts noted the students and families that have been challenging to reach or engage during school closures are, in some cases, the same students and families they struggle to engage when schools are open. More than one district is administering student, family, and teacher engagement surveys, which will inform ongoing improvements to remote learning and improve outreach and engagement efforts, particularly as districts plan for fall learning plans. At least one district we spoke with plans to administer similar surveys every 3 weeks through the summer of 2020.

Our conversations with districts identified a small number of active participation measures of behavioral engagement to measure student attendance or engagement (see table 3).

> **Box 1. Controllable measures of active participation (behavioral engagement) that can be tracked by online platforms[19]**
>
> - Time on online platform (in hours)
> - Time watching videos (in hours)
> - Number of videos accessed
> - Number of login sessions per week
> - Mean length of session (hours)
> - Mean time between sessions (hours)
> - Quiz submission timeliness
> - Proportion of session time spent watching videos
> - Average platform time per week
> - Number of revisited video lectures
> - Number of discussion forum visits
> - Number of forum contributions
> - Percentage of time spent on quizzes

Table 3. Interviewed districts' use of selected measures of active participation

Measures of active participation (behavioral engagement) from research	How districts we spoke with used these measures of engagement in their distance learning plans
Time on online platform	• Record which students access the online learning environment. • Record which students participate in live instruction (e.g., virtual lessons, morning meetings, office hours). • Record how much time students spend in the online learning space (e.g., learning management systems, learning apps that track participation).
Number of login sessions per week	• Record which students access available videos or complete reading assignments in online platforms.
Assignment submission timeliness	• Record when students submit homework assignments. • Capture when students completed quizzes.

Promoting improved attendance and student engagement through online or remote learning: Research literature

The research provides some guidance on promoting student engagement through online learning, including considerations for how pedagogy can influence engagement, the use of synchronous versus asynchronous instruction, the role of the teacher in promoting engagement, and strategies to support student self-regulatory practices that can improve engagement. While much of the research on online learning is based on distance learning in higher education and not K–12 classrooms, the findings may be helpful in thinking about online engagement for K–12, particularly secondary students. Districts also shared many strategies they are using to promote engagement through their distance learning plans and other outreach efforts.

Promoting engagement through pedagogical approaches. Educators seeking to increase online engagement can influence participation directly and indirectly. To influence engagement directly, educators can require discussion posts in an online platform, participation in live instruction, or completion of assignments. To influence engagement indirectly, they can promote cognitive or affective engagement using practices that target student social-emotional competencies, attitudes, or mindsets, such as the students' sense of belonging and connectedness within the online community, the value they place on learning activities and the benefits derived from them, their feelings of self-competence about technology use and academic content, and their sense of autonomy or independent decisionmaking.[20] Activities for formulating long-term goals and breaking them down into smaller goals, for example, can increase feelings of coursework relevance and autonomy.

Student engagement may be influenced through the use of different pedagogical practices:[21]

- **Lecture/didactic learning:** The teacher delivers instruction, and the students are passive listeners.[22]

- **Student-driven learning:** A hands-on approach to learning through problem solving and critical thinking.

- **Interactive or two-way learning:** Students and teachers learn from each other.

In addition to these pedagogical approaches, educators may also consider other practices shown in box 2, such as the extent to which learning is purely online versus a blend of face-to-face and online; whether instruction is done in real time (synchronous) or available at any time (asynchronous); and the different types of media features, assignment formats, and interactions with peers. Each of these practices promotes different levels of engagement.

> ### Box 2. Online learning practices that affect student engagement[23]
>
> - Pedagogical approach (lecture/didactic, student-driven, interactive/two-way)
>
> - Proportion of course online (purely online versus blended online and in person)
>
> - Communication synchronicity (synchronous, asynchronous)
>
> - Media features (video, text, animation)
>
> - Instructor presence and opportunities for interaction
>
> - Opportunities to interact with peers
>
> - Use of problem- or project-based learning
>
> - Student opportunities to practice or test skills
>
> - Student opportunities for feedback

Promoting engagement through synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. When designing distance learning programs, educators can use synchronous instruction or asynchronous instruction, depending on the needs and contexts of their students. Table 4 describes the difference between synchronous and asynchronous learning and what the research says about each approach.

Table 4. Synchronous versus asynchronous instruction

	Synchronous instruction	**Asynchronous instruction**
What is it?	• Delivered in real time with students	• Time lag between presentation of content and student interaction with the content
What might it look like?	• Delivery of live instruction via a video conference platform	• Delivery of prerecorded lessons or other instructional materials that students may access at any time
What does the research say?	• Real-time communication may strengthen relationships and enhance students' feelings of belonging in online communities.[a] • Real-time technical problems can be a major barrier to engagement.[a]	• Asynchronous approaches enable students to engage with course material at a pace appropriate to their ability levels, in a safer space freer from judgment because synchronous environments can encourage relatively anonymous or passive participation. • Purely asynchronous approaches or those that combine synchronous and asynchronous learning are more effective in engaging students than purely synchronous approaches.[b]

[a] McBrien, J.L., Cheng, R., and Jones, P. (2009). Virtual Spaces: Employing a Synchronous Online Classroom to Facilitate Student Engagement in Online Learning. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 10*(3).
[b] Nortvig, A.M., Petersen, A.K., and Balle, S.H. (2018). A Literature Review of the Factors Influencing E-Learning and Blended Learning in Relation to Learning Outcome, Student Satisfaction and Engagement. *Electronic Journal of E-learning, 16*(1): 46–55.

Promoting engagement through the role of the teacher. Research emphasizes the importance of a strong educator presence for increasing student engagement in the online space, whether in support of synchronous or asynchronous learning,[24] including through regular communication with students, consistent feedback, and acting as a model for reflective thinking in discussion group discourse.[25] Researchers generally stress that educators use several modes of communication, such as e-mails to students, discussion forums, or real-time chats.[26, 27] Research has found that students reporting the use of two or more channels of communication with teachers had higher engagement levels than students using only one communication channel.[28] How teachers communicate with students, however, is not as impactful on student engagement as the frequency with which educators interact with students.[29, 30]

Promoting engagement through online discussion spaces. While our research included the use of online discussion spaces and groups, most available research focused on postsecondary education. Accordingly, there is limited ability to assess the efficacy of these tools in K–12 learning. However, our research suggests an opportunity for additional engagement in secondary education in particular. Teachers' proactive management of online discussion groups can have an immediate impact on student engagement. When teachers provide clear guidelines on the content of discussion room posting, students tend to exchange posts that are more self-reflective and constructively critical.[31] Other researchers have identified different discussion group behaviors associated with higher engagement that teachers can promote and model, including addressing fellow students by name, quoting other students' posts, asking questions, bringing in examples from outside the classroom, replying to threads instead of starting new threads, and expressing appreciation to other students.[32, 33, 34] Some researchers also encourage teachers to require posting, in addition to following up with students who could improve their posting individually.[35]

Promoting engagement through self-regulatory learning strategies. Online learning gives students autonomy and promotes self-directed learning, yet it also requires them to exercise self-regulation in managing their time. Although most experimental research in the online self-regulatory learning space comes from higher education, the principles of student

self-regulatory learning are the same across grade spans and have been shown to be effective in the K–12 space and replicable in the digital environment.[36, 37, 38, 39] The promotion of key self-regulatory behaviors for students, including goal setting, planning toward goals, and monitoring progress, can increase engagement in online environments.[40]

Digital individualized learning plans, in use in at least 42 states, offer one model for facilitating self-regulatory learning behavior for middle and high school students. These plans provide space for students to set weekly, semester-long, and long-term goals; identify learning strategies, such as finding a study partner or breaking goals down into tasks; and reflect on their progress toward goals to adjust their approaches.[41]

Promoting engagement through goal setting and formative feedback. Outside of individualized learning plans, researchers have identified other evidence-based goal-setting practices that teachers can adapt.[42, 43] Formative feedback embedded in goal-setting processes can also play a role in improving student engagement and performance. For example, teachers can play a critical role in providing students feedback on their progress toward goals to help them course correct. Automated online student engagement data can also be used to support feedback. In one large study, college students who received frequent feedback on average online time, forum contributions, quiz questions attempted, on-time quiz submissions, and number of video lectures viewed improved along each of these measures.[44] Other research found that setting daily goals for the amount of time spent in the academic digital space led to greater engagement time.[45] Researchers have also pointed out that teachers should receive training or guidance on the use of these automated tracking features to further promote student self-regulation.[46]

Promoting improved attendance and student engagement through online or remote learning: District practices

As we reviewed the existing literature on online student engagement, the educator's role in online learning, and self-regulation strategies, we noted several research-based strategies that were discussed in our district interviews. Table 5 summarizes the research-based strategies districts mentioned during our conversations. It also includes some additional strategies that could be applied in a K–12 online setting but were not explicitly noted by the districts we spoke with, indicated by an asterisk (*).

In addition to promoting engagement through remote learning strategies, the districts we spoke with shared some of the approaches they have taken to engage students and families outside of instructional delivery:

- **Engage students through their peers and friends.** More than one district indicated that some teachers have been successful in contacting hard-to-reach students through their peers or friend groups. For secondary students in particular, enlisting students' help in reaching their peers via text message or social media has been successful, as has reaching out to groups of students who are friends and may be more likely to engage alongside their peers.

- **Solicit feedback and answer questions at the district level through virtual meetings, surveys, or other two-way communications.** Some districts administered engagement surveys to students, families, and staff to solicit feedback. Some districts also engaged the community during school closures through virtual meetings that were open to the public or through live Q&A sessions with district leaders, which were recorded for future reference.

- **Communicate with families via e-mail, phone, postal mail, and social media.** The districts we spoke with leverage various communication strategies to remain in touch with students and families during school closures, including e-mail, postal mail, and social media. Some teachers and school leaders also routinely communicate with families by phone to check on student well-being, learn about family and student needs, or share feedback on student work and engagement.

Table 5. Interviewed districts' use of selected measures of active participation

Engagement strategies from research	How the districts we spoke with have integrated these strategies into distance learning plans
Pedagogical approaches	
Media features (video, text, animation)	All four districts we spoke with mentioned integration of media features into their distance learning, including activities from different learning apps and platforms, such as video, text, and animation, to deliver lessons.
Didactic/lecture learning	All four districts we spoke with include some form of live or prerecorded didactic instruction, where teachers provide content for students to listen to.
Student-driven and interactive pedagogical approaches	Districts we spoke with did not explicitly mention these strategies as part of their distance learning plans. Some strategies that could apply to K–12 distance learning include • students working together to help support peers in learning content* • project-based learning approaches where students select a topic to delve into*
Opportunities for students to interact with peers	Districts we spoke with do not use discussion boards for peer interactions, although some provide small-group virtual instruction that enables more peer-to-peer interaction. Some additional strategies that could be applicable in a K–12 setting include • Zoom sessions for students to interact and problem solve together (e.g., online student-led study groups)* • students teaching other students content (e.g., peer learning)*
Synchronous versus asynchronous approaches	
Synchronous learning	All four districts we spoke with offer some limited form of synchronous instruction: • "morning meetings" live via video conference • limited full-class or small-group live instruction via Zoom or other online video platforms • "office hours" for students to participate in video conferencing to ask questions, receive feedback on work, or engage in a "wellness check"
Asynchronous learning	Four districts noted their primary type of learning is asynchronous and includes some of the following components: • prerecorded video instruction online or via public television • downloadable activities or assignments • instructional activities, games, or other learning via online apps or platforms • printed instructional packets or learning kits with manipulatives mailed to students' homes
Teacher's role	
Frequency of teacher communication	Districts we spoke with vary in the frequency of direct teacher-to-student communication. • Some districts offer daily live instruction with full classroom sections or small groups of students, while others offer live instruction three or fewer times per week. • Some districts require a certain number of teacher-to-student communications or interactions per day or week. For example, one district requires teachers to spend at least 1 hour per day communicating with students and families.
Modes of teacher communication	Districts we spoke with provide various modes of communication between teachers and students and their families. • Teachers communicate directly with students via e-mail, text, instant messaging, and other technology platforms. • Teachers communicate "live" via Zoom or other virtual instruction and via recorded asynchronous instruction. • Teachers also provide written feedback on assignments through various learning platforms.
Instructor presence and opportunities for interaction	In districts we spoke with, some teachers host live "morning meetings" with students, facilitate small- or full-group virtual instruction, or host office hours to speak directly with students and families.
Guidance for high-quality discussion groups	Districts we spoke with did not explicitly mention these strategies as part of their distance learning plans. One strategy that could apply to K–12 distance learning is • establishment of classroom norms and time for students to respond to comments in the chat box during the session*
Integration of social and emotional learning focus, including improving student sense of belonging and self-efficacy in the digital environment	One district we spoke with has intentionally embedded social and emotional learning questions in student surveys to gather data on student well-being and use these data to inform supports or interventions or share aggregate data with teachers to inform their approach.
Self-regulatory practices	
Integration of self-regulatory strategies such as feedback on student participation and student goal setting and planning	Districts we spoke with mentioned some use of formative feedback on student work, including teacher comments on work in apps such as Seesaw or feedback during office hours. Districts did not explicitly mention the use of goal setting as a self-regulatory practice.

- **Deliver wraparound supports.** Several districts continue to provide wraparound services to students during school closures, including providing free grab-and-go meals or delivering meals and learning materials to families, ensuring access to services for students with special needs, and sharing information about how to access healthcare services or COVID-19 testing.

Themes and Lessons Learned: District approaches to remote learning during COVID-19 extended school closures

Although the research on measuring attendance and engagement in online learning is limited, particularly in the K–12 space, there are a number of decisions educators can make about the design and delivery of remote learning to improve student engagement. This section summarizes what we learned from our conversations, including promising practices for student engagement and attendance and other themes that emerged. This summary also provides some context for the design principles districts used in conceptualizing their distance learning plans and their rationale for selecting one approach over another. For more detailed information about districts' remote learning plans, their current challenges and successes in implementation, strategies for measuring and supporting attendance and engagement, and plans for the 2020–21 school year, we provide a short vignette for each district at the end of this brief.

> ### *Learning From Distance Learning Providers*
>
> Brightways Global Academy is an accredited distance learning program serving homeschooled students and their families around the world. Some of its strategies for engaging students and families remotely during normal operation follow:
>
> - **Moderate a Facebook page** for enrolled parents and families to share homeschooling strategies and resources and build community among students.
> - Administer Cognia's **parent and student engagement survey** periodically and adjust supports and instructional supports based on survey feedback.
> - Circulate **e-mail newsletters** to students and families to share updates and celebrate holidays and traditions.
>
> During COVID-19, a family support representative for Brightways Global Academy **published a list of resources (https://www.brightwayslearning.org/covid19resources) to support parents with homeschooling**, based on Brightways' best practices for distance learning.

Approaches to remote learning

The districts we spoke with varied in how they provide instruction and engage students during school closures, basing these approaches on the local needs and context of the students and communities they serve. A few common elements emerged in our conversations.

- **Asynchronous learning provides more flexible and equitable opportunities for students to learn.** While some districts originally considered synchronous learning opportunities to be the preferred mode of delivery for remote learning, the districts we spoke with primarily offer asynchronous instruction. Asynchronous learning enables families to schedule learning time that aligns with their varied home schedules and provide shared access to devices across multiple students in a household. Resources such as recorded video instruction, online activities, and assignments can be downloaded or accessed online. Other resources can be disseminated via mail or picked up at a central location.

- **Synchronous instruction can provide opportunities for wellness checks, small-group instruction, office hours with teachers, or peer-to-peer engagement.** The districts we spoke with offer limited synchronous instruction, which often varies by school or grade level, for various purposes. Some teachers gather students virtually via Zoom or other platforms for a "morning meeting," which may provide both a wellness check and some limited instruction. Others offer office hours to students for asking questions about their work or receiving feedback. Some teachers offer small-group virtual instruction in core areas.

- **Offering learning opportunities through various modalities provides access to instructional materials for students with varied learning preferences, access to technology, and home schedules.** Districts aim to provide learning through a variety of modalities, including online synchronous and asynchronous instruction, learning kits with manipulatives, printed or downloadable learning packets, and learning apps and online platforms. This variety is intended to account for the different learning styles, preferences or comfort level of families supporting learning, access to the Internet or devices for remote learning, and schedules of students and families.

- **Identifying prioritized learning standards for instruction can help prepare students for the next grade level despite more limited instructional time.** Several districts we spoke with had identified "power standards" or "prioritized standards" to cover during the last quarter of the school year. This strategy narrowed the focus of instruction on the standards that were most important to prepare students for the next grade level while acknowledging the more limited opportunities for and challenges with introducing new content to students through distance learning.

Challenges and lessons learned

While our conversations focused on a small number of districts, several themes emerged regarding challenges, promising practices, and plans as district leaders look ahead to the fall.

- **Districts are actively seeking to improve access to the Internet.** District leaders are sensitive to the fact that not all students have consistent access to the Internet. Some districts have invested in mobile hotspots to improve Internet access for families. In the meantime, districts are mindful of providing alternatives to digital instruction (e.g., printed activities).

- **Districts are exploring ways to improve access to devices.** District leaders realize that not all students have access to a device such as a laptop or a tablet. Although some districts offer devices to all students (particularly at the secondary level), limited resources make providing one-to-one access to all students challenging. One district also noted a shortage in the availability of Chromebooks to purchase in spring 2020 because of a surge in demand. New devices also require setup by IT staff and training for teachers and students, which is logistically challenging during school closures. In the meantime, districts are mindful of providing asynchronous learning opportunities for families where students may be sharing one device or providing alternatives to digital learning (e.g., learning through the television or printed packets).

- **When schools partially or fully reopen, students may require additional support for social and emotional learning, trauma-informed learning, and student and family re-engagement.** Districts are exploring how they will provide support services to students who may have experienced trauma during school closures, ranging from losing a loved one or living in an unsafe or unstable home to more basic challenges of being isolated from their peers or enduring greater stress than usual. Some districts are also considering how to infuse social and emotional learning supports more broadly into the curriculum and how to re-engage families that may have disengaged during school closures.

- **Looking ahead, districts are preparing for several contingency plans to align with public health guidance, including what instruction will look like during partial or full school closures.** Given the uncertainty surrounding public health guidance, districts are preparing several plans for resuming instruction this fall:

  ▸ fully reopening schools with increased public health and safety measures, such as checking students' temperature, spacing desks apart, limiting or eliminating large numbers of students gathering in one space, and disinfecting school facilities;

  ▸ opening schools for "staggered learning," where some students attend school on some days and other students on other days; or

  ▸ continuing to provide fully remote instruction until certain public health and safety criteria can be met.

Closing

Our review of the research literature on engagement and attendance in online learning suggests there is limited knowledge about effective strategies in this area. Based on conversations with a small number of districts, we identified several promising practices related to online learning and supporting student attendance and engagement. We share more details about each district's experience with engaging students during extended school closures in the vignettes at the end of this paper. However, the lack of evidence-based strategies in K–12 engagement points to the opportunity to learn from the widespread online learning taking place right now through targeted research. As fall 2020 learning plans emerge, we hope to follow up with these districts or others to learn more about how they are approaching the new school year and designing learning plans to engage and meet the needs of all learners.

District: Alexandria City Public Schools[47]

District Demographics[48]

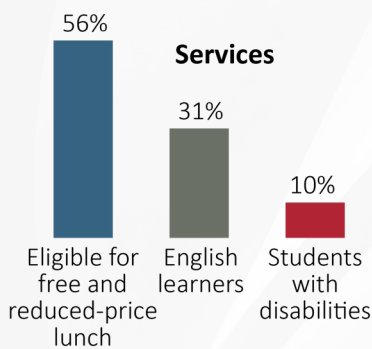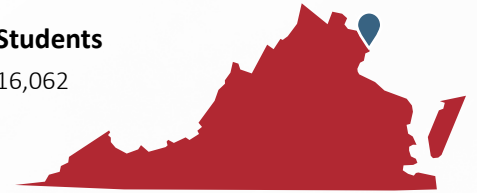**Geography**
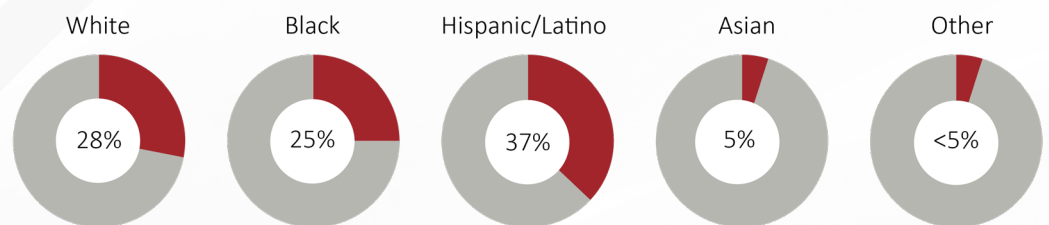Suburban, Washington, DC, metro area in northern Virginia

Schools
18

Students
16,062

Services

- 56% Eligible for free and reduced-price lunch
- 31% English learners
- 10% Students with disabilities

Student Race/Ethnicity

White	Black	Hispanic/Latino	Asian	Other
28%	25%	37%	5%	<5%

Early Implementation Successes

✓ **Distribution of 700 mobile hotspots for families that lacked access to the Internet.** Within a month of school closures, 100 percent of ACPS students had access to the Internet.

✓ **Widespread "grab-and-go" meal distribution.** As of May 1, ACPS had distributed nearly 200,000 meals to families through grab-and-go distribution sites across the city.

✓ **Fostering family engagement.** In some ways, the pandemic has fostered more family engagement and communication: District and school leaders have heard from increasing numbers of families in recent weeks, and they are building new relationships that they hope will endure into future years.

Student Engagement and Attendance

"Student attendance is not a student issue—it's a family engagement and communication issue."

—Elementary school leader

Primary Attendance and Engagement Strategies

- Teachers are expected to dedicate a minimum of 1 hour a day to **student and family communication.**
- Virtual **"morning meeting"** is a primary touchpoint for most students.
- If a student does not report to morning meeting, the teacher will **follow up with the parent or family by e-mail or phone**. These calls are documented in a **shared call log**.
- For grades 3–12, teachers can **see which students log in daily in Canvas** and which students complete assignments.
- **Escalating outreach:** If a teacher is unable to reach the family, **the social worker or assistant principal is notified for follow-up outreach**. These calls are also documented in a shared call log.
- ACPS issues an **ongoing engagement survey** to students, families, and teachers to measure engagement and **inform formative improvements** to instructional planning, delivery, and other supports.

Additional Engagement Strategies

- Some teachers are **using students to help locate and contact their peers**: Students (particularly older ones) can sometimes reach a peer more easily through texting or social media.
- **Wellness checks for students across schools** are documented in a secure, shared Google doc and may include Internet access, food resources, rent supports, utilities, and health.
- **Families without Internet access have received Kajeets** (mobile hotspots) and have been connected with the ACPS helpdesk for tech support.

Remote Learning Plan: Key Features

Elementary School (varies by school)

- Asynchronous recorded instruction
- Some limited "live" instruction via Zoom
- Learning packets and kits mailed home
- ACPS-TV educational programming

Secondary School

- Assignments and communication via Canvas Learning Management Platform
- Daily office hours via Zoom
- Asynchronous recorded instruction for electives
- Virtual "field trips"
- All grades 3–5 students have district-issued Chromebooks

Remote Learning Design Principles

- Identify **prioritized learning standards**.
- Provide a **range of resources** and strategies to support achievement for all learners.
- Ensure all ACPS staff have **clear expectations** about their roles and responsibilities.
- **Connect with students and families** regularly during closure using e-mail and Google Classroom to answer questions and provide feedback.
- **Differentiate resources** and strategies to accommodate a range of student needs.
- Make available to all learners a **range of distance learning resources** and digital learning activities.
- Support families with services and information to support **student well-being**: physically, academically, psychologically, and socially.

ACPS Continuity of Learning Plan (https://www.acps.k12.va.us/continuityoflearning)

Challenges

- **Language barriers:** approximately 32 percent of ACPS students are English learners, with families speaking approximately 120 native languages.
- **Digital access:** 12 percent of students do not have access to the Internet.
- **Family hardships:** job loss, economic hardship, relocation, illness, older students providing sole source of income for household.

Looking Ahead

- ACPS is **forming a task force** to inform its Continuity of Learning Plan 3.0 (summer learning) and 4.0 (fall learning for the new school year).
- District leaders believe all students are going to need some form of **summer learning**.
- They are focusing efforts on **several contingency plans and scenarios**, including the possibility of staggered school times, hybrid (virtual and in-person learning), or rolling closures. Each scenario has a domino effect on other aspects of schooling, such as transportation, teacher contracts, food and nutrition, and capital improvement plans.
- **Feedback from the ongoing community** survey will inform longer term plans.

District: Uncommon Schools Charter Management Organization[49]

District Demographics

Geography
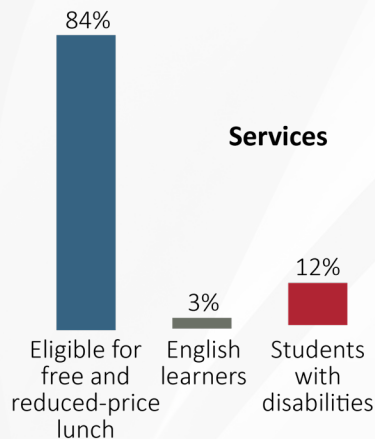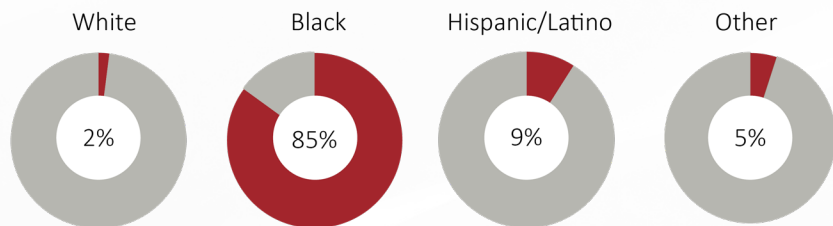Urban schools in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts

Schools
54

Students
20,054

84%

Services

12%

3%

Eligible for free and reduced-price lunch

English learners

Students with disabilities

Student Race/Ethnicity

White
2%

Black
85%

Hispanic/Latino
9%

Other
5%

Early Implementation Successes

✓ **Public access to K–8 remote instructional materials.** "The decision that we made to open up our K–8 learning platform is a great point of pride [for which] we've received a lot of recognition. Some districts are using it as a model as they are trying to figure out their own remote learning plan." —Chief schools officer

✓ **Eagerness among students and families to embrace new ways of learning.** "We were not a one-to-one environment for K–8 before, and we've learned that there is appetite and skill with our students and families to embrace new ways of learning. We see a lot of opportunities for how we can [...] integrate these new ways of learning [into longer term instructional planning]." —Senior director of external affairs

✓ **Prompt and effective actions as a result of a strong vision.** "We are proud of the speed at which we were able to get this up and running. I don't ever want to hear again why we can't get anything up and running, because this experience has shown that as long as you have a good vision, you can do what's right for kids and do it quickly." —Chief schools officer

Student Engagement and Attendance

- Attendance in most schools has been 80–85 percent, with some schools exceeding 90 percent.
- Teachers enter attendance data in PowerTeacher, based on different data points by grade span (see below).
- Between 10 and 15 percent of students are harder to reach during normal school operations and may need more frequent touchpoints (daily or several times a week).
- Staff are provided "scripts" with talking points to troubleshoot engagement challenges and identify support needs.
- The remaining 1–5 percent are typically students who are less engaged when school is in normal operation and may be struggling academically or personally. Leadership discusses these hard-to-reach students in every senior leader meeting.

Primary Attendance and Engagement Strategies

Elementary School: Teachers collect data based on Epic books logins, completion of assignments, and weekly parent check-in calls.

- Teachers use Epic books platform to track attendance based on student login times and the content they complete (how many books/pages they engage with); students must log in for 30 minutes daily.
- Students upload deliverables/classwork weekly, and teachers follow up with families via e-mail or phone when work is not completed.
- Communication escalates to Dean of Students or other school leaders if a teacher is unable to connect with families.

Middle School: Teachers collect data based on Google Classroom logins, completion of assignments, and weekly parent check-in calls.

- Middle school assignments align with several instructional videos from the week, and teachers can see which lessons and assignments have been accessed.
- Work is reviewed for completion and accuracy using a rubric; this review informs attendance and grading.

High School: Teachers collect data based on Google Classroom logins, completion of assignments, and participation in Zoom office hours during each classroom period.

- High school students submit work at the end of a particular instructional period, which is used for attendance purposes.
- Work is reviewed for completion and accuracy using a rubric; this review informs attendance and grading.

Remote Learning Plan: Key Features

Elementary School (varies by school)

- Daily asynchronous instruction in reading/writing, math, science, and social studies
- Resources (accessible via Google Classroom at https://sites.google.com/uncommonschools.org/k-8remotelearning/elementary?authuser=0):
  - EPIC books (https://www.getepic.com/): Assigned daily independent reading based on reading level
  - Freckle (https://www.freckle.com/): Phonics skill practice

Secondary School

- Daily asynchronous instruction in reading/writing, math, science, social studies, and selected electives (also publicly available)
- Schedule of five 1-hour instructional class periods, including 20-minute instructional videos and 40 minutes of assignments
- Assignments submitted at the end of each period, contributing toward attendance records

Remote Learning Design Principles[50]

- **Accessibility.** "All students can use remote learning regardless of their access to different kinds of Wi-Fi enabled devices."

- **Workable for families.** "Our plan must be workable for families without access to childcare and/or multiple Wi-Fi-enabled devices and should not impose additional hardships for either student or staff families."

- **Preparation for next grade level.** "The goal is to prepare students for the next grade level by prioritizing the most important remaining content from this year with an emphasis on reading."

Uncommon Schools Remote Learning Plan
https://sites.google.com/uncommonschools.org/k-8remotelearning/

Challenges

Digital access. "We're still not at a place of one-to-one programming technology. There are some looming budget cuts coming down the pipeline, so we are thinking: is our program enough in the fall to say we are teaching students new content? I don't think we have that figured out and are ready to go. We are still trying to think about how to improve and enhance this experience, how to innovate and reallocate funding." —Chief schools officer

Engagement of the hardest to reach students. Approximately 1–5 percent of students in schools have been challenging to reach; Uncommon Schools leadership explained that in most cases these students had challenges with engagement during normal operation. "We discuss this in every meeting we have with our senior leaders. These are the students that keep us up at night." —Chief schools officer

Looking Ahead

"We've learned to get a little more comfortable with the uncertainty. This has allowed us to use the data from the health department and data from our own best practices that are emerging through this crisis to figure out how to move forward. Whatever we decide to do, the data will help inform us how to move forward."

—Chief schools officer

- Uncommon Schools is planning for several contingencies this fall, given the uncertainty, with public safety as the priority.
- Key considerations are how age and size of the building will affect the ability to socially distance in the classrooms and during transitions.
- The district may consider staggered school times, with some students learning remotely and others in the school building.
- The district is considering implications for large-group gatherings, such as district- or Charter Management Organization-level professional development and school-level community gatherings.

District: White River School District (WRSD), Washington[51]

District Demographics[52, 53, 54]

Geography
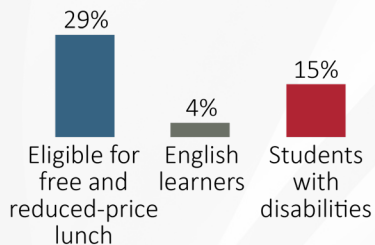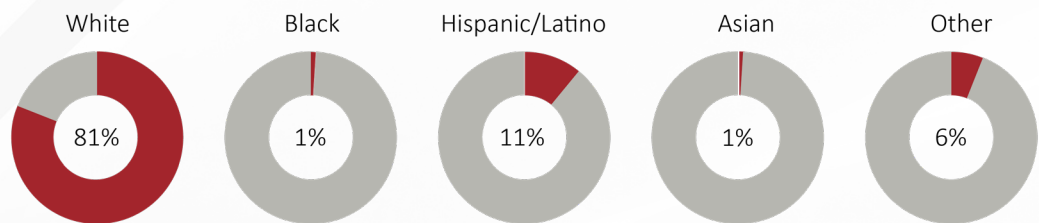Suburban, Buckley, Washington

Schools
7

Students
3,923

Services

- 29% Eligible for free and reduced-price lunch
- 4% English learners
- 15% Students with disabilities

Student Race/Ethnicity

- White 81%
- Black 1%
- Hispanic/Latino 11%
- Asian 1%
- Other 6%

Early Implementation Successes

✓ **Focus on social and emotional learning.** District prioritized integrating social and emotional learning and student wellness into its remote learning activities.

✓ **Engagement of hard-to-reach students.** Technology has connected some previously hard-to-engage families with teachers.

✓ **Support for English learners.** A paraeducator for the elementary school with the highest population of English learners rides the food delivery bus every day to deliver packets and maintain a connection with families who speak limited English.

✓ **Improved Internet access.** District surveyed families before closure and ordered and delivered 200 hotspots for families that needed them.

Student Engagement and Attendance

"Staff are connecting with students on a one-to-one level and tracking engagement. If a student is disengaged, the staff … uses that as a sign to reach out and discover the root cause of disengagement (parent unemployment, etc.), track these things, and see if they can support the student in any way."

—District leader

Attendance and Engagement Strategies

- **Monitor Google Classroom.** The elementary school looks for engagement and participation on Google Classroom. Staff can see activity and submitted assignments, in addition to direct teacher and student communication.

- **Track "wellness" data.** The middle school uses a Google "Wellness" form to track attendance and student well-being by asking students to check in on student engagement, academics, and mental health.

- **Embrace social networking.** The middle school has had some success using social networking to track down disengaged students. Teachers are e-mailing groups of students that socialize together rather than individuals and families.

- **Understand social and emotional learning needs.** The high school tracks attendance and student well-being through several programs: Go Formative assessment and surveys to ask students how they are doing on a social and emotional learning level.

- **Conduct follow-ups by telephone and in person.** When students are not engaged in remote learning, teachers follow up by phone. For families who cannot be reached by phone, district social workers travel to homes and stand at a distance to check on the students who have been unreachable as a "well-child check."

- **Follow up with disengaged students.** The district does not have a systematic approach for following up with disengaged students but reported "creative solutions," including in-person child wellness checks at a safe distance outside the student's home and reaching out to peers of nonresponsive students over e-mail.

Remote Learning Plan: Key Features

All parents receive a weekly e-mail with a message (https://www.whiteriver.wednet.edu/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=1692556&type=d&pREC_ID=1915184) from the school superintendent.

WRSD COVID-19 Distance Learning Plan (https://www.whiteriver.wednet.edu/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=1692556&type=d&pREC_ID=1852255)

Elementary and Middle School

- Grades K–1 students are mailed weekly learning packets.
- Grades 2–8 students were issued Chromebooks as a result of school closures.
- Grades 2–8 engage in some core learning via Zoom, Google Classroom, or other platforms.
- Asynchronous prerecorded instruction is also available via Google Classroom and YouTube.
- Additional digital resources include Second Step for social and emotional learning and Kelso's Choice at some schools.

High School

- Daily asynchronous instruction in reading/writing, math, science, social studies, and selected electives (also publicly available)
- Schedule of five 1-hour instructional class periods, including 20-minute instructional videos and 40 minutes of assignments
- Assignments submitted at the end of each period, contributing toward attendance records

Remote Learning Design Principles

- Ensure a **focus on social and emotional learning.**
- Provide asynchronous learning by recording all lessons to enable students to **complete tasks on their own time.**
- **Communicate directly with families to adjust class schedules** as necessary and provide alternate sessions for students who cannot attend synchronous meetings.
- Collect data from schools to **identify gaps in device and Internet access.**

Challenges

- **Digital access.** The district is still learning which students and families have trouble accessing devices (PK–1) and the Internet (PK–8). Now that the district has hotspots, it is proactively working to distribute them to families in need, specifically English learners or those in remote geographic locations.
- **Schedules for elementary school students.** Leaders attempted a virtual school day for elementary students involving online core learning in the morning, a lunch break, and pull-out Zoom sessions in the afternoon for students with individual needs. However, this schedule does not accommodate all families' needs, requiring creative, asynchronous alternatives.

Looking Ahead

Online learning has highlighted opportunities for the district to improve delivery of instruction and engagement of families:

- **Blended learning to support improved engagement.** Teachers have appreciated fewer disruptions to class and are considering how blended learning approaches for some student groups may improve engagement for all students.
- **Support for students with special needs.** Through their exposure to day-to-day instruction at home, parents have become partners in learning in a way that the traditional classroom does not promote. Parents can observe Tier 2 and 3 interventions intended to engage and socially connect with students with special needs.

District: Indian Prairie School District (IPSD) 204, Illinois[55]

District Demographics[56, 57]

Geography
Suburban, including portions of Naperville, Aurora, Bolingbrook, and Plainfield, Illinois
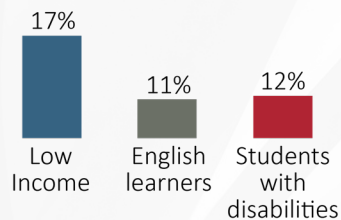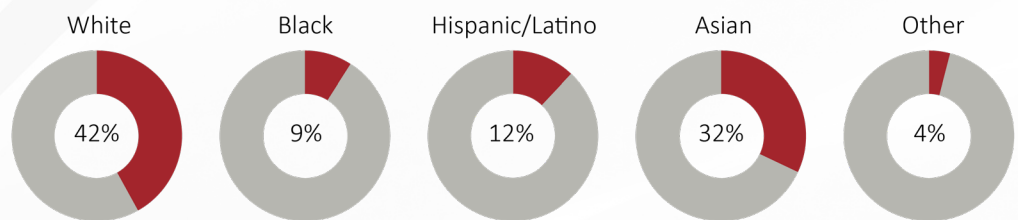
Schools
33

Students
27,400

Services

- 17% — Low Income
- 11% — English learners
- 12% — Students with disabilities

Student Race/Ethnicity

- White — 42%
- Black — 9%
- Hispanic/Latino — 12%
- Asian — 32%
- Other — 4%

Early Implementation Successes

✓ **Creation of an online Support Center (https://support.ipsd.org/support/home)** for school staff and families to access digital resources and technology support during e-learning or receive technical assistance 24/7.

✓ **Increased student enjoyment of and engagement in an online learning environment** compared with the traditional brick-and-mortar school environment. The district is discussing incorporating elements of e-learning once schools physically reopen to continue engaging these students.

Student Engagement and Attendance

"The biggest motivator for a student is a teacher whom they want to be with and work with."

—Chief academic officer

Attendance and Engagement Strategies

- **Personalized approaches based on identifying root causes for poor attendance.** Engagement approaches vary among schools and grade levels, all with a focus on identifying the root causes of engagement. Schools do not collect daily attendance; however, if teachers have not heard from a student in a few days, they reach out. Building teams identify motivators for students and gaps in outreach. Schools and building teams reach out to the district if they need services and supports to promote student attendance and engagement.

- **Internet access.** The district has secured funding through the 1 Million Project to provide hotspots and Internet access to students and is working with local and national providers to secure free or discounted rates for families and students.

Remote Learning Plan: Key Features

Elementary School (varies by school)

- **Whole-class synchronous activities.** Class meetings focus on connection with each student and their social and emotional well-being.

- **Asynchronous digital activities** and instructional materials, including prerecorded instruction, can be accessed through various platforms (Google Classroom, Zoom, or WeVideo).

Secondary School

- **Asynchronous assignments** posted online: Teachers post assignments online by 8 a.m. on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and/or Friday (dependent on class period).

- **Limits on time** spent on classwork and learning each day: Each student has no more than four classes to track each day and receives activities and assignments totaling approximately 25–30 minutes per day per course.

- **One-to-one device access:** Each student has been issued a device (before school closures as part of traditional instruction).

- **District-issued Chromebooks** for all grades 3–5 students.

Remote Learning Design Principles

- District's **e-learning plan was designed for short-term school closures** (i.e., inclement weather), but it informed the current remote learning design and jumpstarted thinking around issues of student and family access to technology and the Internet.

- **Range of distance learning strategies** that consider different family schedules and varied access to technology and the Internet.

- **Prioritized "Portrait of a Graduate" competencies** (flexibility, communication, and citizenship) and social and emotional competencies from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

IPSD Remote Learning Plan (http://www.ipsd.org/ Subpage.aspx/RemoteLearningPlan)

Challenges

- **Maintain personal connections.** Students and teachers have expressed concern and even sadness at the loss of the traditional school setting and daily face-to-face interactions between teachers and students.

- **Deliver wraparound supports.** The district is struggling to identify and deliver academic and wraparound supports to students.

- **Teachers' workloads.** Many teachers are balancing the dual roles of working and caring for their own families under the stay-at-home orders.

Looking Ahead

- Leaders hope to create **several contingency plans and scenarios** for school in the fall. They shared detailed plans with all stakeholders to alleviate stress surrounding unknown scenarios.

- The district ensures that **feedback from the ongoing staff surveys informs revisions to e-learning**, district-provided supports and resources, and the long-term education plan.

- Leaders are **identifying aspects of e-learning that worked well** and which groups of students benefitted from e-learning to **shape the future of education in the district** to benefit all learners.

- The district plans to systematically assess students to **identify and address gaps in student achievement** that may have developed or exacerbated during the distance learning transition.

Learning From Accredited Distance Learning Providers: Southeast Island School District, in Partnership With Brightways Learning

Background and Demographics

Brightways Learning operates an accredited distance learning program called **Brightways Global Academy** that supports students around the world. It also serves as a learning partner to the **Southeast Island School District** (SISD), which comprises nine remote schools on the islands of southeast Alaska.

For Brightways Global Academy students, the parent is the primary instructor, with support from Brightways. While engagement and attendance may look different for students who are accustomed to distance learning under normal school operations, the Center spoke with Brightways Learning and a leader at SISD about some of the strategies they use to engage families and students remotely and how they measure attendance through distance learning. Selected examples of the strategies they use for attendance and engagement follow.

Student Engagement and Attendance

Measuring Attendance

- Attendance at the Global Academy is less about "seat time" and more about mastery of skills and completion of assignments.
- Students must complete assessments to complete a course in core subject areas.
- Students must satisfy a certain number of learning hours or "Carnegie units" for performance-based electives, which are documented in log sheets.
- During COVID-19 closures, SISD is tracking attendance in PowerSchool based on students and families picking up breakfast or lunch at food distribution sites.

Strategies for Remotely Engaging Families and Students

- **Brightways Global Academy** routinely engages students and families (during normal operations) through various strategies:
  - **Moderate a Facebook page** for enrolled parents and families to share homeschooling strategies and resources and build community among students.
  - Administer Cognia's **parent and student engagement survey** periodically and adjust its supports and instructional supports based on survey feedback.
  - **Circulate e-mail newsletters** to students and families to share updates and celebrate holidays and traditions.
- During COVID-19, a **family support representative for Global Academy published a list of resources (https://www. brightwayslearning.org/covid19resources) to support parents with homeschooling**, based on Brightways' best practices for distance learning.
- **SISD** has offered a few creative strategies for engaging students and families during COVID-19 school closures:
  - **Hold community-wide parades.**
  - **Host Zoom events**, including Zoom graduation ceremonies.
  - Create and **disseminate Facebook videos to connect with students** who have Internet access.
  - Use **breakfast and lunch delivery to help track attendance and deliver school assignments** because it also provides a personal connection with families, many of whom do not have Internet access.
  - Use **postal service to connect with students** who do not have Internet access.

Endnotes

[1] Dusseault, B., and Pillow, T. (2020). *Still No Consistent Plan for Remote Learning for Hundreds of Thousands of Students at Some of America's Biggest School Districts.* Retrieved from https://www.crpe.org/thelens/still-no-consistent-plan-remote-learning-hundreds-thousands-students-some-americas-biggest.

[2] In the wake of the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education has granted many states waivers for reporting accountability measures (including chronic absence) in the 2019–2020 school year.

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[4] In the wake of the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education has granted many states waivers for reporting accountability measures (including chronic absence) in the 2019–2020 school year.

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