

Equity in State Remote Learning Guidelines During the COVID-19 Pandemic

POLICY BRIEF

What is Remote Learning?

States use different terminology to describe efforts to provide learning opportunities for students who are at a physical distance from their teachers and schools. Such efforts are often referred to as remote or distance learning. Remote learning is not synonymous with online learning, which requires technology; rather, remote learning can include both online and offline learning.

Remote Learning and Issues of Equity

School closures due to COVID-19 have impacted over 55 million students across the United States. All states and territories closed school buildings for extensive periods of time between March and June, with most closing for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. In response to these unprecedented times, state education agencies (SEAs) issued guidance to schools and districts on how to continue educational and social services for students during the pandemic, including recommendations on remote learning and how to address technology and connectivity issues. At the same time, education researchers and policy organizations published articles highlighting the need to attend to equity when designing remote learning experiences for students (Dreesen et al., 2020; EdTrust & Digital Promise, 2020).

To explore whether states were emphasizing equity in education, we collected documents from each SEA and examined the state-level guidance for remote learning during the school closures. To conduct the analysis, we first developed a framework of dimensions of equity by drawing out critical aspects of equitable learning that have been identified in the literature on education in remote contexts. This equity framework (described below) was then used to conduct a content analysis of the SEA documents.

Dimensions of Equity

We identified four broad dimensions of equity in remote learning:

- 1. Access to technology.** Students' and families' ability to access devices and the internet is critically important. Research on broadband internet access has found that 15% of U.S. households with school-age children do not have broadband access—and that there are disparities in broadband use by race and ethnicity (Anderson & Perrin, 2018). State plans can address the digital divide by providing recommendations for improving access to resources and suggestions for surveying technology needs.
- 2. Home learning environments.** The social resources and supports in students' home learning contexts are another critical component that can contribute to inequities. States can support home learning environments by ensuring consistent, clear communication with students and families and gathering feedback from caregivers on their remote learning experiences and needs.
- 3. Teacher and student readiness.** As part of the adjustment to a very different context for teaching and learning, schools and districts must attend to the professional needs of teachers and the learning/social needs of students, including diverse student populations (e.g. students with disabilities, English learners) to create an equitable learning environment.
- 4. Programmatic offerings and policies.** The state guidelines for programmatic offerings and policies (e.g., instructional time each day, grading policies, multiple delivery methods for instruction) during remote learning are also highly relevant for issues of equity. These policies can impact students and families, particularly those with limited access to technology and other resources.

State Guidance on Delivering Remote Learning

We collected and examined the primary document detailing remote learning guidance for each state in the U.S. to determine the extent to which states were addressing the four dimensions of equity in their plans during school building closures. The documents were collected during a seven-day period in June 2020. These documents on remote learning guidance varied substantially in length and detail, ranging from 3 pages to 93 pages in length (the average length was 23 pages). Given the variation in length of the documents, our analysis focused on aggregate findings across states. Most state documents included in the analysis addressed all four dimensions of equity (75%). As shown in Figure 1, there was some variation in the percentage of states addressing each of the four dimensions of equity. In terms of explicit statements about the importance of equity, we found that three quarters of the state remote learning documents included such statements.

Figure 1. Percentage of state remote learning guidance documents that address the four dimensions of equity



Our analysis suggests that, overall, SEAs across the U.S. succeeded in addressing the major considerations for guiding districts and schools in developing more equitable remote learning plans. This is especially promising given the unexpected urgency of creating these guidance documents on short notice during the pandemic. As states work to develop similar remote learning plans for the 2020-2021 school year, they should continue to emphasize issues of equity in their guidance. The complete equity framework is available below.

Policy Implications

- Given the important role that states play in ensuring equity in schools, SEAs should make equity an explicit emphasis in remote learning plans. Beyond attending to the four dimensions of equity outlined in this brief, states should include direct statements about equity in their guidance for districts. As an example, the remote learning guidance from the Virginia Department of Education begins with a statement about the importance of equity and covers equity considerations first before addressing other recommendations related to remote learning.
- When defining equity in remote learning for districts and school leaders, several of the exemplar SEAs emphasized the importance of centering the student: Educators should be responsive to the differing circumstances faced by students and their families (e.g., uneven access to resources and technology; varying home, caretaking, and school/work responsibilities). Remote learning guidance that centered the student also recommended providing students with choices in their learning (e.g., options for assignments and assessments) and tapping into resources available in students' home learning environments. Language on centering the student is helpful when seeking to communicate the types of considerations that are fundamental to equitable remote learning.
- As states grapple with remote learning options for the 2020-2021 school year and beyond, SEAs should consider using an equity framework as a blueprint for developing comprehensive guidance on addressing issues of equity. For example, we found that 1 in 5 SEA documents did not directly address home learning environments in their guidance. By utilizing an equity framework, states can ensure that their guidance is comprehensive in addressing the major equity considerations for remote learning.

References

- Anderson, M., & Perrin, A. (2020). Nearly one-in-five teens can't always finish their homework because of the digital divide. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org>
- Dreesen, T., et al. (2020). Promising practices for equitable remote learning: Emerging lessons from COVID-19 education responses in 127 countries. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef-irc.org>
- EdTrust & Digital Promise. (2020). 10 questions for equity advocates to ask about distance learning. The Education Trust. <https://edtrust.org>

Remote Learning Equity Framework

Dimension 1: Access to Technology

Subdimensions:

1. Recommendation for gathering information about technology or connectivity issues
2. Recommendations for addressing technology and/or connectivity issues

Examples:

- Surveying families about tech needs
- Encouraging the provision of multiple delivery methods

Dimension 2: Home Learning Environments

Subdimensions:

1. Recommendations for how schools should communicate expectations to caregivers and students
2. Recommendation on school-home support

Examples:

- Providing resources in multiple languages
- Providing training/resources for caregivers

Dimension 3: Teacher and Student Readiness

Subdimensions:

1. Recommendations on professional development and support for teachers
2. Recommendations on pedagogy for online learning
3. Recommendations for diverse learners
4. Recommendations on supports for students

Examples:

- Ensuring opportunities for general education teachers to work with specialists
- Adapting the scope and sequence of work
- Supporting English learners
- Training students on the use of devices/software

Dimension 4: Programmatic Offerings and Policy

Subdimensions:

1. Recommendations for length of school day
2. Recommendations on grading policies
3. Recommendations about student engagement
4. Recommendations on directed instruction

Examples:

- Maximum or minimum instructional hours per day
- Implementing credit/no credit policies
- Creating interactive, web-based lessons
- Engaging in cross-curricular instruction