

# With Schools Closed and Distance Learning the Norm, How Is Your District Meeting the Needs of Its Students?

10

## Questions for Equity Advocates to Ask



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**ACROSS THE COUNTRY, SCHOOL BUILDINGS REMAIN CLOSED DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.** These school closures are a stark reminder of the important role that schools can play in the lives of children and young adults. For many students, schools are a place of stability, where they can learn, grow, and nurture relationships. They are even a [source of daily meals](#) for many students.

However, students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups such as homeless students and students in foster care, were less likely to have rigorous, engaging, and positive educational experiences before the pandemic. There is a real risk that school closures will deepen these existing inequities in our education system.

Many states are leaving decisions about how to continue instruction during school closures [up to districts](#). Digital Promise and The Education Trust partnered to compile the following questions to guide equity advocates and district leaders as they engage in conversations about ensuring that our most vulnerable students have equitable access to distance learning, both now and for however long school buildings are shuttered. Depending on public health guidance, distance learning may be needed for the summer and parts of the next school year.

In this guide, we share ideas that advocates and district leaders can consider when planning for how to continue teaching and supporting students, based on what other states and districts have begun to do. But these are unprecedented times. There isn't yet research and data on best practices for ensuring continuity of learning during a global pandemic. A key role for advocates and district leaders is to monitor how the challenges posed by school closures are being addressed and to urge transparency about the impact of these efforts on all students in their communities.

Still, even under the best circumstances, distance learning is not a substitute for in-school education. The [learning loss](#) created by the COVID-19 crisis is going to be massive. Districts should be planning now for how to [make up this lost learning time](#), which particularly affects our most vulnerable students, by implementing summer programs, extending the school year, and extending or restructuring school days for summer 2020, the 2020-21 school year, and summer 2021.

### Federal Stimulus Dollars

District leaders should provide answers to these types of questions in their application to the state for federal stimulus dollars. Districts' plans for using these dollars to address challenges posed by the pandemic should be made immediately available to the public with full transparency.



# 1 How are you ensuring all students have access to the devices they need to fully participate in distance learning?

## *The Challenge:*

- In many communities, students do not have consistent access to their own devices to connect to distance learning opportunities. Even families that have laptops or other electronic devices may not have enough for every child in their family to engage in online learning. This digital divide is not a new phenomenon facing school-aged children of color and children from low-income backgrounds, but it has been brought into sharper focus as schools have closed in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

## *Ideas to Consider:*

- **Map student access:** An important step is for district leaders to get a comprehensive picture of students' access to devices by calling, emailing, or surveying families. For example, educators in [Boise and Meridian school districts \(ID\)](#) and [Phoenix Union High School District \(AZ\)](#) attempted to call every household with students to find out who needed additional resources and conducted [home visits \(using appropriate social distancing techniques\)](#) for the students they were unable to reach. Leaders in districts like [Milwaukee Public Schools \(WI\)](#) and [Duval County Public Schools \(FL\)](#) asked parents to complete a survey about their access to devices.
- **One-to-one devices:** Districts can then distribute existing resources from their schools or find other methods to provide devices. Some states and districts have partnered with businesses and local philanthropic organizations to provide devices to students in low-income communities. For example, [New Orleans Public Schools \(LA\)](#) has begun distributing nearly 10,000 Chromebooks to students in need, [prioritizing homeless students](#), and in Seattle (WA), Amazon donated over 8,000 laptops to students in [public schools](#). [New York City Public Schools](#) worked with Apple and T-Mobile to provide LTE-enabled iPads to distribute to students who did not have access.
- **IT Troubleshooting:** Districts must have a plan for repairing broken devices and providing IT support to students and families. For example, IT staff at [Rock Hill Public Schools \(SC\)](#) don masks and gloves to operate a computer drop off at the curb of the high school where parents or students can go to fix computer problems. Parents have three options to notify the IT team of an issue: use an internal link, email the help desk, or call. [Owsley County Schools \(KY\)](#) has produced a series of [how-to videos](#) to help parents and students troubleshoot problems at home and to respond to common questions.



## 2

## How are you ensuring all students have access to reliable, high-speed internet to continue their education?

### *The Challenge:*

- Even for students who have a device, a considerable challenge for many is [lack of access to reliable, high-speed internet](#). In 2017, [14 percent](#) of school-aged children did not have any access to the internet, and [national](#) and [state data](#) show that students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners are more likely to lack access. Homeless youth, in particular, may be less likely to have access to reliable internet at shelters and hotels/motels where they may be living.
- Libraries and commercial establishments often fill gaps in access for students, but these places are closed due to the requirements of social distancing, leaving many families completely disconnected from the internet.
- Even in districts where a provider has offered free internet access, [families with unpaid bills](#) are left behind. Unless broadband companies work with communities to waive late fees and maintain service for all residents who have outstanding balances, families will not have access to the free internet being offered. Families should also be able to receive internet services without providing a Social Security number or credit card, which may prevent undocumented or mixed-status families from securing internet access.

### *Ideas to Consider:*

- **Expand access:** Districts can work with internet providers to bring mobile hot spots and/or affordable options to all students and families, particularly in communities without reliable internet access. For example, [Highline Public Schools](#) (WA) provided [1,000 hot spots to families](#), and Austin school district officials (TX) deployed more than [100 Wi-Fi-equipped buses](#) to apartment complexes and neighborhoods across Austin to help students with online learning during the coronavirus pandemic. [Lindsay Unified School District](#) (CA), working with the City of Lindsay, and Morris School District (NJ) working in partnership with the private sector, [designed and implemented community Wi-Fi programs](#) that give students and parents free at-home internet access. The [Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind](#) is sending out “jet packs” (portable Wi-Fi hot spots), particularly for students living on the Navajo Reservation in Southern Utah, and Castleberry Independent School District (TX) even [purchased their own transmission towers](#). [Chicago Public Schools](#) (IL) plans to deliver thousands of mobile hot spots to the district’s homeless students.
- **Alternative methods:** Districts must also think about alternative methods for providing content to distance learners without internet access. [Los Angeles Unified School District](#) (CA) and the [New York State Education Department](#), for example, partnered with public broadcasting channels to provide programming for all ages to ensure that students lacking internet access can continue to access instructional content. Acknowledging that not all students have internet access, districts like [Austin Independent School District](#) (TX) and [District of Columbia Public Schools \(DCPS\)](#) prepared printed packets of learning materials for every grade level, and DCPS has continued printing materials for students each week. Similarly, Richland Two and Lexington One School Districts (SC) distributed computers to students in grades 6-12 and [distributed printed packets to students in grades K-5](#).



# 3

## How are you supporting schools in structuring instructional time to meet the needs of students with varying levels of access to the internet and technology?

### *The Challenge:*

- With the move to distance learning, schools are considering the best ways to provide instruction based on students' needs. One option is asynchronous learning, which allows students to complete their work without connecting with their teachers and/or peers, for example, by watching a recorded lesson and completing an assignment. Another option is synchronous learning, which allows teachers and students to be "together" in real time by using various conferencing tools (e.g., Zoom, Bluejeans, Google Meet, etc.).
- Districts will need to consider how to offer learning opportunities in a variety of formats, taking into consideration the benefits and drawbacks of each:
  - Synchronous learning most closely resembles live classrooms. Teachers can engage students similarly to how they might in a live face-to-face setting, as well as allow students to have peer collaborations. However, synchronous learning requires students to have reliable internet access, which many students — disproportionately students of color and students from low-income backgrounds — may not have, and to be available at a specific time, which may be challenging given students' family and home contexts.
  - Asynchronous learning is most convenient because students can review the materials when they have time and when and where they can find a device and high-quality internet, an especially important consideration in communities without access. It allows students to return to the materials when necessary and provides the flexibility many parents, especially essential workers who have to be away from home during the day, need to support their child's learning. However, it does not allow for virtual face-to-face interaction, and teachers will need to figure out ways to provide regular, constructive feedback and to support students in setting goals and managing their time. This lack of interaction is particularly harmful for some of our most vulnerable student populations, including English learners.

### *Ideas to Consider:*

- **Provide flexibility:** Ideally, districts can offer online learning in a variety of formats. Given device limitations and family circumstances, students should not be penalized for not participating in synchronous learning and should be given another option. For example, [Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools \(NC\)](#) [instituted a policy](#) that any live instruction teachers choose to offer should be available in an asynchronous, recorded format as well. Educators in [Rowan-Salisbury Schools \(NC\)](#) prepared and distributed a remote learning guide, which includes tips and guidelines for teachers in a number of scenarios and grade levels.
- **Guidance on different methods:** One way districts can support schools is to issue guidance on the use of different methods and for whom particular methods are most appropriate. For example, [Digital Promise](#) developed this guide for educators in Wisconsin on when and how to use different instructional structures. The guide details the different types of online and distance learning available and provides instructional materials for teachers and students for each format.

Districts should also provide guidance around [privacy and security issues](#) to let educators know which conferencing tools are secure enough for students to use, what the district explicitly approves of, and what images of students can and cannot be shared by teachers. The district should also provide guidance around cyberbullying, which may increase given that technology is the main form of communication for students, and around creating and maintaining a positive virtual classroom climate where all students feel welcome and engaged.

## 4 How are you supporting students with disabilities who need specialized instruction, related services, and other supports during school closures?

### *The Challenge:*

- Schools will need to change the way they provide instruction and services — and will likely need to provide compensatory services for students with disabilities. But [students' rights](#) under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) do not disappear when the doors of the physical building close.
- Students with disabilities may require specialized hardware or assistive technology to access distance learning opportunities. For instance, students may need a specialized mouse and monitor to interact with online learning platforms or software that offers built-in accommodations and supports. Other students with disabilities require related services, such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and school psychology services.

### *Ideas to consider:*

- **Provide information about distance learning accessibility:** Districts should disseminate information on accessibility features and privacy challenges of platforms like Zoom and Google Classroom to school staff. Districts should also provide support to school staff on how to adjust their instruction in this environment, and they should encourage collaboration between special educators and general educators to determine the best way to support students' learning needs.
- **Provide resources for families:** Districts can work with school specialists to communicate with families regarding ways to deliver services while schools are closed, including holding IEP and 504 meetings remotely, and plans to deliver services once students return to school. [Jefferson County Public Schools](#) (KY), for example, set up live video conferencing and is providing families with online resources for therapeutic activities and documenting all services that students with disabilities miss during this nontraditional instructional period to inform compensatory services when traditional school resumes. The Virginia Department of Education offers a monthly ["Engage Your Family"](#) newsletter to families of students with disabilities to provide information and resources related to distance learning, including new webinars and video resources. [The San Francisco Unified School District \(CA\)](#) created a website for families of students with disabilities, which includes home learning activity ideas and a guide created by speech, occupational, and physical therapists with activities caregivers can do at home with children.



- **Provide training sessions for families:** For various therapies, such as occupational or physical therapy, many students with disabilities also require in-person assistance. Districts can provide training sessions for families to support their children's needs and requirements. For example, the [Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind](#) has developed training sessions for parents to help with different therapies that formerly were done in person by specialists.
- **Find alternative ways to provide services:** At the [Rock Hill Schools/York 3](#) (SC), mental health and speech therapy providers are engaged in teletherapy, using the SLP Assist app for younger children and digital task cards called SLP Boom Cards for older elementary children. The district's mental health service providers are also using Zoom to provide one-to-one and group therapies. Occupational Therapists created a brief survey to get parental preference for serving children. Owsley County School District (KY) already had [nontraditional instruction \(NTI\) days](#) that relied on computer technology, helping students with special needs be comfortable logging on and working online.

## 5

### How are you ensuring the instructional needs of English learners (ELs) are supported during school closures?

#### *The Challenge:*

- School closures pose unique challenges for the academic progress of ELs, who require support in both language acquisition and academic content. Distance learning may exacerbate the likelihood that ELs do not receive tailored supports for both. Although there are many digital learning resources for teaching ELs, [teachers report needing more support](#) to effectively use them. According to the [U.S. Department of Education](#), even when schools are not closed, few teachers assign ELs to use digital learning resources outside of the classroom, in part because of concerns about students' lack of access to technology.
- School closures may also widen the communication gap between schools and ELs and their families. Connecting with ELs can pose challenges due to language and, in some communities, access to technology, and districts will need to take extra time and effort to communicate and connect with ELs and their families. Community-based organizations that serve and work with immigrant families can also be seen as a trusted resource for districts in reaching immigrant families and students.

#### *Ideas to Consider:*

- **Provide information and distance learning materials in multiple languages:** It is important, and legally required, that districts and schools provide information from the school in a language that families understand. Districts should make sure to provide information about distance learning and updates related to school closures in multiple languages. For example, [District of Columbia Public Schools](#) offers instructional and general resources for students and families in various languages. [And the New York Public Library partnered with online tutoring service Brainfuse](#) to provide all New York area students access to free after-school homework help, in English and Spanish.

- Provide support and distance learning materials specifically for ELs:** Districts should provide support specifically for English learners and make available distance learning materials specifically designed to support English learners. For example, [Minneapolis Public Schools](#) (MN) online enrichment resources webpage offers EL Learning Choice Menus, which provide virtual language acquisition and grade-specific learning ideas for English learners.
- Make interpretive and translation resources available:** Districts should identify staff who are responsible for providing interpretation. To avoid [unfairly burdening bilingual staff with the task of providing translation services](#), districts could consider setting up a translation hotline or subscribing to a commercial service such as [Language Line](#). There are also tools that can help districts fill gaps in translation services, such as apps (e.g., Talking Points) that can translate messages between teachers and families in different languages. At Highline Public Schools (WA), for instance, a district interpreter is available for meetings or parental contacts. If the district interpreter is not available or the language needed is not supported by the interpreter, the Language Line can be used.
- Protect student privacy:** Students with undocumented status or living in mixed-status households may have concerns about their online security. Districts will need to take [appropriate steps to protect the privacy of students and their families](#), for example, by prohibiting the sharing of students' images or videos and having strict guidelines about which platforms are approved.
- Connect immigrant families with services:** For immigrants, especially those who are undocumented or in mixed-status homes, one of their biggest concerns may be continuing to provide for their families, especially given their exclusion from federal relief and uncertainty about which institutions they can trust. Districts can play a role in helping connect immigrant families with [available services](#).





# 6

## What kind of support and professional development are you providing to school leaders and teachers, especially in schools serving students of color and students from low-income backgrounds and educators of students with disabilities and English learners?

### *The Challenge:*

- With schools closed, many teachers are setting up distance learning experiences for the first time. Teachers will need technical support and professional development to create and manage classroom websites and online learning platforms, as well as to create a culture of successful distance learning for students. This is especially true in high-poverty, underfunded schools that may have less of the staff capacity and expertise to adapt teaching practices to online learning, vet and deploy tools, and identify and meet students' varying needs during this time.
- Additionally, general education teachers and specialist teachers (e.g., special education and EL teachers) will need ongoing time and support to work together on instructional plans.

### *Ideas to Consider:*

- **Map teachers' readiness:** For distance learning to be successful, district leaders must know the areas in which teachers will need the most support. Districts can survey teachers about their readiness to use online learning platforms to identify and meet students' varying needs, engage and assess students online, and regularly communicate with all students and families. This [readiness quiz provided by the Center for Teaching Innovation at Cornell University](#), although intended for university staff, is an example of the kinds of questions district leaders should be asking teachers. Districts should also consider surveying teachers about their own access to functional devices and reliable internet.
- **Instructional coaching:** Districts are increasingly investing in coaching programs to improve teacher practice and student outcomes. [Digital Promise's Dynamic Learning Project \(DLP\)](#) found that effective coaching programs: 1) foster a culture of partnership among teacher, coach, and principal; 2) facilitate voluntary and non-evaluative participation for teachers; 3) provide opportunities for teachers to engage in active learning that is relevant to their current teaching/classroom needs; 4) are sustained over time, and protect coaches', principals', and teachers' time for coaching. District leaders can and should continue to use instructional coaching as a way to support teachers as they navigate online teaching, especially in high-poverty schools, which have disproportionate numbers of [less experienced and less effective educators](#) who need additional support. The [Barbara Bush Middle School \(TX\)](#), for example, was able to seamlessly move coaching online partially due to strong teacher/coach relationships built prior to school closings. Teachers, administrators, and a coach from the DLP have scheduled daily calls from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., before students begin online learning.
- **Provide methods and tools for online learning:** District leaders can provide or suggest learning management systems for teachers to use (e.g., Seesaw, Canvas, Schoology, Google Classroom), if the district does not already have one in place. Districts should also ensure teachers have access to instructional materials to support student learning, by providing access to or curating a list of free and district-provided online curricula and subscriptions to digital resources, especially resources for identifying and meeting students varying needs. For example, [Polk County Public Schools \(WA\)](#) developed an Instructional Continuity Guide for their schools that includes resources teachers can use, aligned by grade level and content area.

## 7 How are you supporting the social and emotional well-being of students, their parents/caregivers, and teachers during school closures?

### *The Challenge:*

- Schools serve students' social and emotional, as well as academic, needs, as important places where students connect with their friends and adults. For some students, school may be the place where they engage in their most meaningful relationships. School closures make it more difficult to maintain those relationships, and this may take a toll on students' social and emotional well-being.
- The social-emotional needs are going to be greater for children of color and children from low-income backgrounds, whose families are more likely to experience direct health impacts and family job losses as a result of the pandemic. Students in foster care, students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, or students who have experienced abuse or illness may be at particular risk of not having an emotional support system outside of school. School closures also make it difficult to monitor the health and well-being of students, including those in foster care, as reports of child abuse and neglect often come from teachers' reports.
- Teachers are vital in supporting the social and emotional needs of students during school closures and when students return to school. Teachers and school leaders, especially those in schools with vulnerable student populations, will need training and support to transition to new ways of communicating, teaching, assessing, and supporting online. They also will need social and emotional support for themselves, as they navigate the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 crisis for their students and their families.

### *Ideas to Consider:*

- **Provide time for connection:** Districts can encourage teachers to provide time for students to [personally connect with educators and each other](#). This should occur by directly reaching out to families and students to check-in, as well as during academic time, by incorporating innovative ways of connecting (e.g., social media) through assignments. For example, [Phoenix Union High School District \(AZ\)](#) implemented an "Every Student, Every Day" initiative, in which school staff reach out to all students on a daily basis to check in and relay information about needed resources back to the district. Additionally, [El Segundo Unified School District \(CA\)](#) transitioned their existing social-emotional learning programs, [RULER](#) and [Profile of a Graduate](#), to home-based learning.
- **Provide guidance to families:** Districts should also provide guidance in multiple languages to families for supporting the social and emotional well-being of their children during this stressful time. Districts should also communicate about parent mental health services (including tele-mental health, when allowed in the state), given the heightened levels of stress many families, especially low-income families, are experiencing. For example, the [Ohio Department of Education](#) and [Los Angeles Unified School District \(CA\)](#) have dedicated websites to the COVID-19 situation that offer guidance for supporting the social and emotional well-being of students and provides links to resources that may support the needs of families. Guidance should be provided to families in multiple languages.



- **Connect with vulnerable students:** Districts should use [McKinney-Vento](#) homeless liaisons and foster care liaisons to continue to identify and serve homeless and foster care students, and to maintain positive relationships that students have built with staff members. [The Texas Education Agency \(TEA\)](#), provided guidance for educators, local education agencies, and the Department of Family and Protective Services on supporting the unique and individualized needs of students in foster care. The New Mexico Public Education Department created a [check-in form](#) for assessing the health, safety, and basic needs of homeless students during school closures, and Kern County Superintendent of Schools (CA) launched an [online referral form](#) for community partners to connect families and youth to McKinney-Vento liaisons for education-related needs. According to [SchoolHouse Connection](#), a number of districts are using social media to connect with homeless students.

## 8 How are you maintaining regular communication with students and families — particularly the most vulnerable — during school closures?

### *The Challenge:*

- Schools play a vital role in providing stability for students and families and cultivating strong relationships within communities. When schools are open, families often rely on them for their connections with other families and to support students' academic and non-academic needs and concerns. During these school closures, schools must work even harder to maintain regular communication with students and families — especially the most vulnerable — to ensure that their needs are being met during these uncertain and trying times.
- Students and families, especially vulnerable populations, often do not receive necessary or accessible information in their native languages from schools, and this issue may be exacerbated by school closures. Families are also receiving unclear information about procedures for accessing online resources or expectations for continued learning. Districts can play an important role in helping schools streamline and coordinate communications to families in a clear and accessible way.
- This is a stressful time for many families. Poll results from [Ed Trust-New York](#) and [Ed Trust-West](#) show that parents, especially low-income parents, are worried that being out of school will be a major set-back for their child. Financial concerns also top the list of worries, especially for low-income families. Many families may also be experiencing uncertainty about how to access the services that have traditionally been provided through schools.

### *Ideas to consider:*

- **Develop a communication plan:** Districts, schools, and teachers must have a clear and accessible communication plan to engage with students and families, especially the most vulnerable, about their well-being and needs during school closures. These plans should include platforms that, if possible, are already familiar to students and families, and should provide materials and information that are accessible to all students and families regardless of their language needs or disabilities. Districts can use multiple means and platforms of communication to stay connected with students and families, including social media and texting apps. For example, Anchorage School District (AK) created a [Help Center](#) resource for technology, homework, and curriculum support. The center allows users to fill out an online form to request assistance via email or phone. In addition, the district has a COVID-19 [support phone number](#) for people to call if needed during this

pandemic. [In Lakota School District \(OH\)](#), the superintendent releases weekly videos to provide information and stay connected to his community of learners. And Boulder Valley School District (CO) utilizes a number of [applications](#) that are used for classroom instruction, communication, and to provide updates to students and families. These apps can be accessed via phone or computer.

- **Create a central website:** Districts can create a user-friendly, multilingual online hub for families and students to receive up-to-date information and resources. These sites should also be phone-friendly, as many families who may not have access to laptops or computers have access to smartphones. For example, Miami-Dade County (FL) developed a mobile-friendly COVID-19 website that includes resources in multiple languages for families on health, safety, and educational needs as well as updates on [the impact of school closures](#).
- **Encourage regular two-way communication:** Districts should encourage their school leaders and teachers to maintain two-way communication with their students and families and establish norms for staff members on how and when to communicate with students. For example, all teachers in [Richland School District Two \(SC\)](#) have “office hours” Monday through Friday, 9–10:30 a.m. and 2:30–4 p.m. to be available to check and respond to emails. Parents and teachers can also arrange to talk via telephone or video chat during office hours, and through a school closure hotline that operates from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily. The superintendent also has made himself available to families through [Facebook Live events](#).

SchoolHouse Connection [suggests](#) using an online calling service (e.g., Skype or Google Voice) as a way for teachers to communicate with families without using their personal phones.





## 9 How are you measuring student progress to ensure students and families have an accurate picture of student performance for this school year?

### *The Challenge:*

- Schools in all 50 states will not be administering state-level assessments that provide students and families with information about how students are performing against grade-level standards, and many districts will likely modify grading procedures for the second half of the year or give students flexibility to complete additional work or make up missed work. In addition to grading policies, districts will need to modify assessments to determine progress toward grade-level standards and successful course and grade completion.
- This means that schools will lack the data that is critical for advancing equity in schools. This is the data that helps state and district leaders target additional resources to the schools most in need, school leaders identify individual students for additional opportunities and supports, and parents and community members know how well their schools are serving students.

### *Ideas to Consider:*

- **High-quality assessment alternatives:** This year, as states across the country have cancelled end-of-year assessments, students should have multiple opportunities to demonstrate readiness through traditional and non-traditional measures like written work packets, projects, course exams, etc. The [American Federation of Teachers](#) has proposed ending the year with capstone projects specifically tailored to students' grade level and internet access.
- **Equitable grading:** An important step for districts to take is to make sure that students, especially students of color and students from low-income backgrounds who are less likely to have access to devices and reliable internet and whose families are more likely to experience direct health impacts and job losses as a result of the pandemic, are not penalized during the grading process for school closures. But they must not underestimate what students of color or students from low-income families are capable of, even during a public health crisis.
- **Clear communication with students and families:** Districts can also support schools by creating a model for communicating in multiple languages about progress toward grade-level standards and how students who are currently not on track will be supported to meet benchmarks while school are closed and when they reopen.
- **Diagnostic assessments:** Districts should also be preparing to use diagnostic assessments to determine the learning needs of all students when schools reopen, with specific attention to the needs of historically underserved groups of students, including students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, students with disabilities, and students who are homeless or in temporary housing.

# 10

## How are you supporting all high school students, especially seniors, in staying on track to graduate and preparing for college and career?

### *The Challenge:*

- Seniors have had their last year of high school interrupted — and possibly ended by the coronavirus. They may not have the opportunity to complete all required courses to graduate and/or enroll in postsecondary institutions. And in many cases, they will not have the opportunity to take exams required for graduation.
- It is critical that districts have a plan for how to ensure that the pandemic does not derail the aspirations and achievements of this generation of students. This is especially true for students of color, Native students, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and English learners, who were already [less likely to be supported to graduate](#) under “normal” circumstances.
- Districts should give students support and flexibility to demonstrate proficiency in multiple ways that do not rely solely on the use of technology so that they can graduate on time and be prepared for college and career opportunities.

### *Ideas to Consider:*

- Intensive instructional support:** Districts should ensure that seniors receive additional supports from their core subject teachers, using written communication, telephone, video chat, and online learning when available, prioritizing students of color and students from low-income backgrounds who were already [less likely to be supported to graduate](#) and are most impacted by this crisis.
- Summer dual enrollment opportunities:** Districts can partner with local institutions of higher education to offer high school students opportunities to earn college credit by taking tuition-free online classes during the summer. For example, Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) used federal stimulus dollars to launch a [summer schedule of free online classes for high school students](#).
- Postsecondary transition plan:** Districts should make sure that all schools are supporting students in [developing a plan](#) that identifies their postsecondary aspirations and the resources the district and high school will provide the student to assist with the transition in these unique circumstances. Additionally, school counselors and other staff can provide personalized virtual support to seniors, including help completing the FAFSA and making college and career plans. Districts should target this support to students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, who are already [underrepresented in colleges and universities](#) and whose families are more likely to experience the economic fallout of the coronavirus.
- Regular communication:** Districts can support regular communication with high school students so that they do not become disconnected, disengaged, and so that they do receive support to stay on track to graduate. For example, [Seattle School District](#) (WA) required school staff to reach out to high school seniors with a focus on wellness, access to technology, academic engagement, and graduation requirements. Similarly, [Highline Public Schools](#) (WA) hosted their first [video meeting with the superintendent](#) to answer student questions about their senior year in high school. It is available in English and Spanish. [Other video chats are planned.](#) [Colorado](#) has issued guidance on the many ways districts/schools can keep students and faculty connected to each other during this period of distance learning.