EDUCATION IN THE EARLY DAYS OF COVID-19: WHAT STATES ARE LEARNING AND DOING

INTRODUCTION

In March and April 2020, governors in nearly every state issued executive orders closing K-12 schools for the rest of the 2019-20 school year to slow the spread of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Almost overnight, our nation's education system was brought to its knees: 57 million students, their families, and 3.8 million educators scrambled to launch distance learning and address other needs typically met by schools including meals, special education, counseling services, workplace credentials, and college admission support for high school students.

The United States Department of Education published detailed guidance about serving specific student populations including English language learners, special education students, and homeless youth during school closures; it also issued waivers that suspended state testing and certain other federally mandated accountability measures. The United States Department of Agriculture, which operates the National School Lunch Program, relaxed some of its regulations to enable "grab-and-go" meal distribution to eligible students. However, given our nation's highly decentralized education system, outside of the nationally-led efforts mentioned above, each state was empowered to—or left to, depending on your perspective—develop its own game plan for schooling in the time of COVID-19.

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> Currently, this crisis may be the opportunity to create the school that you want."
>
> Montana Office of Public Instruction

At Astra, we were interested in exploring how states responded to this challenge and what that meant for the educators, students, and families in their charge. Just as we saw state governors take radically different approaches to public health and economic recovery, states and the school districts within them also employed radically different approaches for meeting the mandate of providing distance learning and other essential school supports for educators, students, and their families.

This report summarizes the key differences in states' COVID-19 responses and highlights their shared concerns. Through our analysis, we hope to identify policies and practices that states and districts should consider in the event of future school closures, particularly those policies and practices addressing significant, systemic inequities that predate the pandemic.

Finally, we applaud the handful of states that seized upon this crisis as an opportunity to think deeply about their education systems and reinvent how

they approach teaching and learning. It's no small feat to tackle the short-term, mission-critical needs in a complex system *and* simultaneously re-imagine it for the longer-term good. In sharing the stories of states that have done so, we hope to inspire others to ask themselves questions like:

What policies and practices have you let go of during the school closures that you discovered you could do without? What did you add that was valuable and potentially even more meaningful than what you were doing before?

In Montana, staff in the state's Office of Public Instruction posed this powerful question to district and school leaders: "If you could create the school that you wanted, would you create the school that you have? Currently, this crisis may be the opportunity to create the school you want."

How to use this report

If you are a **state education leader**, we hope this report will help you identify promising policies and practices you can adapt and apply in your own state, collaborating with other state agencies, your state legislature, and district leaders.

At the time this report was published in September 2020, COVID infection rates were rising in many states and the question of when and how to reopen schools was politically contentious. We hope this report offers you resources and ideas you haven't yet considered as you strive to open your schools in the safest way possible.

We also hope you will use what you're learning about "alternative" education models to conduct a longer-term, honest appraisal of education as it's always been done in your state and reinvent what is outdated or inequitable.

If you are a **district leader, school leader, or teacher,** we hope this report will enable you and your peers to learn some of the ways that other state agencies, districts, and school systems across the country attempted to meet the complex needs of their students when nearly every decision came without precedent. As you navigate a new school year with significant challenges and unknowns, we hope this information will help you advocate for the resources and assistance you need.

If you are a **family** with students enrolled in the K-12 education system, it's important to understand how well your state's policies and practices addressed critical needs, supported equitable learning experiences, and positioned your child(ren) for positive outcomes in the school year(s) ahead. We hope this report will prompt you to ask for meaningful engagement in shared decision making with school and district leaders and advocate for specific policies, practices, and resources you believe will benefit the students and

families in your community.

Explore state policies, practices, and examples in each of the following areas:
- Instruction: What did states envision for teaching and learning during school closures?
- Technology: What guidance and support did states offer to enable virtual learning?
- Assessment and Accountability: What level of performance and data did states require of districts and schools?
- Graduation: How did states support the Class of 2020?
- Social-Emotional Needs: What guidance or support did states offer to help schools and districts meet social-emotional needs in their school communities?
- Basic Physical Needs: How did states handle nutrition, childcare, and other basic needs?
- Equity: How did states identify and address equity concerns?
- Transformation: Who is using the COVID crisis as a springboard to reimagine their educational systems?

INSTRUCTION

During the time school buildings were closed, 45 states and the District of Columbia required schools and districts to provide some type of continuing remote instruction. In the five states where instruction was optional (IA, NC, SD, VA, WI), state departments of education required schools and districts that chose not to offer continued instruction to identify how they would make up lost instructional time by starting the 2020-21 school year earlier, extending it, or through other means. In Iowa, districts were empowered to mandate summer sessions to make up for lost instructional time.

What were schools and districts asked to teach?
Iowa is a particularly interesting example because it was the only state to compile and share data on how many districts chose to offer remote instruction while school buildings were closed. Leaders in 285 districts chose voluntary enrichment learning, which involved review of previously taught standards without taking attendance or grading student work. Five chose required learning, which the state defined as teaching new material, recording attendance, and issuing grades. Thirty-seven elected to provide some combination of voluntary enrichment learning and required learning, and no school or district opted to shut down entirely. This may suggest that given the choice, most schools and districts across the country would have focused on enrichment versus something more akin to traditional instruction.

Hawaii adopted the enrichment approach statewide. Although it required

remote learning, the state's Department of Education directed districts to avoid teaching new skills and concepts and focus instead on reinforcement and enrichment related to standards taught before March 2020. Missouri strongly encouraged the same: "During this time, attempting to accomplish a previously planned scope and sequence is not likely or advisable."[1]

Other states felt differently. Pennsylvania required its teachers to cover the full set of state standards, writing "Schools are expected to offer Planned Instruction at all grade levels as part of continuity of education plans. Planned Instruction is formal teaching and learning, similar to what occurs in a classroom setting. Within this process, teachers use planned courses of instruction of new concepts/skills aligned to grade level standards."[2] Texas and Montana also required coverage of the full curriculum.

Alabama and Rhode Island's state education agencies asked educators to cover new concepts and skills but published a set of priority curriculum standards they wanted educators to focus on during remote learning. Six other states (AZ, CT, IN, MA, VA, WA) tasked districts with identifying essential standards as part of developing their plans for continued instruction.

How did states, districts, and schools track instructional time?

The states' handling of statutory instructional time requirements (e.g., 180 days of instruction per year) also varied. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia granted a blanket waiver to schools and districts exempting them from meeting these requirements for the 2019-20 school year. In 14 states, schools and districts could apply for waivers of the instructional time requirement; in 10 of these cases, the waiver was contingent upon the state's approval of the district's plan for continued instruction or a brief set of assurances related to key points in the plan. For example, the Colorado Department of Education communicated to its districts, "CDE will provide a statewide waiver from instructional hours and days requirements with the expectation that every district communicates their plans to support learning during this time to the department. CDE wants to make this as easy as possible and so in order to minimize time spent on reporting to CDE, each district will simply need to submit a copy of one example of communications that the district has shared, or will share, with students and families regarding their alternative learning plan."[3]

In 10 states (DE, FL, IN, KY, MD, MA, NJ, SC, VA, WV), instructional time re-

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1   See the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's "Supporting Educators and Learning in the Era of COVID-19." Retrieved from https://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/curr-c19-support-for-district-leaders.pdf.

2   See the Pennsylvania Department of Education's "COVID-19 Guidance and Answers to Common Questions." Retrieved from https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/Pages/AnswersToFAQs.aspx.

3   See the Colorado Department of Education's "COVID-19 Instructional Guidance for Colorado Schools and Districts." Retrieved from https://www.cde.state.co.us/safeschools/covid19-instructionalguidance.

quirements remained in force. For example, Delaware's guidance to districts and schools stated: "Districts/charters must submit a remote learning plan to the DDOE by April 3, 2020. This plan should account for the completion of 1060 hours (grades K-11), 1032 hours (grade 12) and 188 teacher days no later than June 30, 2020."[4]

How much guidance did states provide about how to design and implement remote learning programs?

Thirty-four states provided detailed guidance documents containing requirements and/or suggestions for remote instruction. Typically these documents outlined different types of remote instruction and considerations relevant to each (e.g., synchronous online, paper packet delivery, etc.); suggested instructional strategies and schedules for different grade ranges; made recommendations about feedback, grading, and assessment; and offered guidance about how to engage specific student populations, notably students with IEPs or 504 plans, English language learners, and homeless or migrant youth.

Thirteen states went a step further and provided a template or form for districts and schools to use to develop their plans. Vermont's template was particularly clear and thorough: the state's Agency of Education asked districts to describe how they would support staff collaboration and professional learning; how they would provide timely support to students in need; how they planned to communicate with families; how they would ensure equitable access to instruction; and how they would monitor and adjust their remote learning plan as needed. In addition, Vermont included space in its template for schools and districts to identify key people responsible for each element of the plan and provided checkboxes for districts to indicate if they needed help from the Agency of Education in any particular area. Massachusetts also proactively sought to understand the needs of schools and districts through a thoughtful survey it fielded soon after school buildings were closed so the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education could tailor its support accordingly.

> Vermont's Agency of Education provided a template to districts to use for their remote learning plans. The template included space for districts to identify key people responsible for managing each element of the plan and checkboxes for districts to indicate where they might need extra help from the state.

In summary, states outlined very different expectations for remote instruc-

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4   See the Delaware Department of Education's "District and Charter Remote Learning Plans." Retrieved from https://www.doe.k12.de.us/Page/4201.

tion while school buildings were closed, and this meant that educators, families, and students in different parts of the country were teaching and learning under very different conditions. This, however, is nothing new in the United States; what *was* new was the heightened importance of the digital divide when schools and districts were forced to meet their state's expectations primarily through online learning.

TECHNOLOGY

All states acknowledged the reality that due to inequities, some students were unable to access online instruction because they lacked the appropriate devices and/or internet access. For example, Louisiana's state Department of Education conducted a survey in April 2020 that revealed fully a third of the state's students had no home Wi-Fi and more than a quarter lacked a school-issued device.[5] Florida's published plan for reopening schools identified "Florida's new subgroup of students – students without access to a device and/or the internet."[6]

What did states do to support districts and schools?
So what did states actually do to address inequities in students' and families' access to technology? In the vast majority of cases, it fell to local schools and districts to come up with ways to bridge the digital divide and equip students with the necessary hardware, software, and connectivity. (We should note, however, that states' guidance was published before departments of education received emergency funding from federal and state sources; we anticipate that states will play a more active role in technology capacity-building during the remainder of 2020.)

All states published technology-related guidance during the initial weeks of school closures; typically, the states encouraged schools and districts to distribute devices, set up temporary hotspots (e.g., in school parking lots or via mobile hotspots using school buses), and work with local Internet Service Providers to explore free or low-cost access for families lacking connectivity. States that did a particularly good job with their technology-related guidance included Michigan, which published a very helpful guide for

Michigan published a very helpful guide for schools and districts to use to assess their readiness for online learning, and Oklahoma provided excellent information to its schools and districts about FERPA, student privacy, and online safety.

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5   As reported in U.S. News & World Report on April 26, 2020. Retrieved from https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/louisiana/articles/2020-04-26/many-students-lack-access-to-internet-for-remote-learning.

6   See the Florida Department of Education's "Opening Florida's Schools to Re-Open Florida's Economy." Retrieved from http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/19861/urlt/FDOE-Opening.pdf.

schools and districts to use to assess their readiness for online learning, and Oklahoma, which provided excellent [information](#) to its schools and districts about FERPA, student privacy, and online safety.

States urged (and often required) schools and districts to document their plans to ensure equitable instruction for students who needed hardware, connectivity, or both. They also recommended strategies to serve students who wouldn't be able to access necessary digital technologies; Alaska's "[Offline Options](#)" guidance is a particularly thorough and thoughtful example.

Among those states that played a more active role, nine offered sample surveys that schools and districts could use with staff and families to gauge the feasibility of online learning. Oregon's Department of Education went one step further and sent a technology survey to every district in the state. ODE planned to use survey results to work with philanthropy, business, and industry to identify and support district needs; work with state procurement contracts to ease purchasing barriers; and identify any available state funds and federal stimulus funds to support district purchasing efforts. Wisconsin had a leg up on other states thanks to preexisting data from its annual Wisconsin Digital Learning survey. Because of this readily available information, the state was able to provide more immediate, targeted support to schools and districts as they pivoted to online instruction.

> "We're working to develop a statewide, opt-in learning management system (LMS) so that small rural districts aren't operating at a disadvantage in a distance-learning environment. We need to be ready if Idaho faces a resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall."
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> Idaho Department of Education

Our research suggests that only seven states (CA, CT, FL, LA, NC, PA, RI) directly provided devices and/or connectivity for families in need. For example, in Florida the Governor and the Commissioner of Education announced on April 12 that they would be distributing 32,000 laptops to students in small and rural districts. In North Carolina, the Department of Public Instruction arranged for Wi-Fi-equipped school buses to travel to areas lacking internet so students could turn in assignments, download materials, and email their teachers. Additionally, NCDPI worked with AT&T to create 100 new Wi-Fi hot spots and Duke Energy Foundation to provide an additional 80 across the state. Other states (AL, CT, HI, ID, NV) arranged statewide licenses for learning management systems and/or online curricula for schools and districts to use.

Looking at the 2020-21 school year, many states launched efforts to use federal and state funding to build the infrastructure for online instruction.

The Idaho State Department of Education announced, "We're working to develop a statewide, opt-in learning management system (LMS) so that small rural districts aren't operating at a disadvantage in a distance-learning environment. We need to be ready if Idaho faces a resurgence of COVID-19 in the fall."[7] Nevada's state government created the Nevada Distance Learning Collaborative to develop new statewide infrastructure, professional learning, and instructional materials to enable greater access to digital education. Nevada is also requiring that districts complete a thorough survey of students' technology access by October 1, 2020 and deliver to the state's Department of Education by December 31, 2020 a cost estimate for providing broadband and devices to all students who need them.

How did states leverage infrastructure and expertise from existing virtual schools or pilot programs in online learning?

We were interested to note that while 24 states have virtual schools closely associated with or managed directly by the state department of education (as opposed to virtual charter schools or virtual schools operated by one or more local districts), only half of these states referenced their virtual schools in their COVID guidance. Those who did so promoted various opportunities enabled by their virtual schools including expanded enrollment, course recovery, professional development for educators, technical assistance to school and district leaders, and more. For example, Florida Virtual School offered approximately 100 free digital courses statewide while schools were closed. It also partnered with the state's Department of Education to train 10,000 teachers statewide on virtual instruction. District superintendents nominated teachers for the training; FDE paid participant stipends, counted the experience towards recertification, and approved those who successfully completed the training to teach online at a FLVS franchise school within the state after the COVID crisis has passed.

Three states (IL, KY, MO) had previously launched pilot programs in blended and virtual learning that they were able to leverage and expand during the COVID closures. Because they had already developed policies and practices related to virtual learning, they were able to roll out specific guidance and training to their districts very quickly. For example, Kentucky launched its Non-Traditional Instruction (NTI) program in 2011 to encourage the continuation of academic instruction on days when school would otherwise be

> Florida Virtual School offered approximately 100 free digital courses statewide while schools were closed. It also partnered with the state's Department of Education to train 10,000 teachers statewide on virtual instruction.

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7   See the Idaho State Department of Education's "Fall 2020 Public Schools Reopening." Retrieved from https://www.sde.idaho.gov/re-opening/index.html.

cancelled. Participating school districts create plans to deliver instruction to every student in the district and provide for student and teacher interaction on NTI days, with the ultimate goal of continuing instruction. Because NTI relies on competency-based learning instead of seat time, the state's Department of Education had already developed policies and practices for virtual project-based learning, attendance-taking, grading, and credit approvals.

ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Given that so many students lacked reliable access to the necessary technology and the reality that there was no way for schools and districts to ensure equitable and appropriate conditions, it's no surprise that every state cancelled standardized assessments scheduled during the last quarter of the 2019-20 school year.

How did the shutdown affect school accountability, accreditation, and employee evaluations?
The absence of state testing created other problems for schools and districts. State assessments figure significantly in the school-level accountability data used by states to accredit schools, publish "school report card" ratings, and identify schools in need of improvement. In every case, and fueled by a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education, states decided to hit pause on normal accountability protocols and allow schools to continue operating under their 2018-19 designations.

It's curious, then, that states did not afford schools and districts the same leniency in holding individual educators accountable. Three states (AZ, KS, NV) required schools and districts to proceed with educator performance evaluations as previously outlined in state policy. For instance, Arizona counselled that virtual observations could be conducted in place of classroom observations and that "without a statewide assessment [as evidence of student achievement], schools may use other quantitative data available, which may include but is not limited to, data from benchmark assessments, summative assessments, formative assessments, student learning objectives and aggregate team, grade, or school-level data."[8]

Only 17 states waived educator evaluations entirely, and 17 others modified evaluation policies when schools closed. Where evaluation policies and processes were modified, states directed schools and districts to use the best data available as of March 2020, (which in many cases reduced the total number of classroom observations required) and/or to disregard the accountability component related to student achievement as measured by state

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8   See the Arizona Department of Education's "Guidance on Teacher and Principal Evaluations." Retrieved from https://www.azed.gov/communications/files/2020/04/Guidance-on-Teacher-and-Principal-Evaluations-4.10.2020.pdf.

assessments. In several cases, states modified evaluation policies so that school administrators could waive annual evaluations for experienced teachers but not for those with three or fewer years of experience.[9]

How did states track student attendance?

Daily attendance is another accountability measure that states, districts, and schools had to revisit while school buildings were closed. Fifteen states mandated continued reporting of student attendance data, though a number of these states advised they wouldn't tie state funding to attendance (i.e., the Average Daily Attendance funding formula was waived.) Arkansas was one exception: the state continued to allocate funds according to each district's reported Average Daily Membership, but each district was directed to develop its own way to measure attendance during remote learning.

In Illinois and New Hampshire, students were considered truant if their schools offered remote learning and they did not participate. New Hampshire's Department of Education wrote:

> If a student is consistently not engaging or doing any of the work, they should be considered truant and reported to the district… If there is no response to the letter [to the family], then a welfare check should be done at the student's home. While some districts might engage staff to undertake this task, best practice would be to utilize the School Resource Officer (SRO), or to request that the local law enforcement agency undertake the welfare check.[10]

Fourteen other states and the District of Columbia waived attendance reporting requirements entirely, though they encouraged schools and districts to track student participation in remote learning and log all attempts to engage students and families.[11]

How did states approach grading?

In addition to attendance, schools and districts had to figure out how to track and measure student learning during remote instruction. Nearly all states (44) and the District of Columbia left decisions about grading and awarding credit entirely to local schools and districts; however, most of these states encouraged a "do no harm" approach that enabled students to improve their grades through remote learning but not fall below what they had earned as of March 2020.

States' other recommendations related to grading varied tremendously. For

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9 In 14 other cases, we were unable to access any publicly available information about educator evaluations.

10 See the New Hampshire Department of Education's "Truancy During the Time of Remote Instruction." Retrieved from https://www.education.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt326/files/inline-documents/2020-05/truancy-remote-instruction.pdf.

11 In 11 other cases, we were unable to find explicit guidance on attendance-taking in states' publicly available information.

example, Virginia's Department of Education strongly encouraged no grading at all while schools were closed, while four other states (MA, MI, NM, RI) advocated for a Pass/Incomplete grading system. Meanwhile, Indiana counseled its districts to adopt competency-based assessments rather than a Pass/Incomplete system, arguing that it gave students, families, and next year's teachers more helpful information about student performance. Oklahoma urged its schools and districts to continue providing numeric and letter grades, writing: "Due to the long-term negative implications on grade point averages (GPAs), Oklahoma's Promise, NCAA eligibility and other scholarship opportunities, districts are strongly encouraged to continue to issue traditional letter grades in lieu of Pass/Fail (P/F) grading."[12]

Only six states (GA, HI, NC, OR, SC, WA) prescribed how schools and districts should grade students while schools were closed, with some dictating a Credit/No-Credit approach and others requiring numeric grades.

In a few cases, we were impressed that states gave students and their families agency in grading decisions. Two states suggested (MO, OH) and two mandated (MN, NC) that students and their families be offered a choice in how students would be assessed. For example, in North Carolina, high school students chose either a numeric grade (as of March 13) or Pass/Withdrawal, with no negative impact on their GPA if they chose the Pass/Withdrawal option. Students had the ability to improve (but not lower) their numeric grade via work completed during remote learning, and the state stipulated that remote learning would only cover content introduced before March 13, not the entire course curriculum.

> North Carolina gave students and their families some agency in grading decisions. High school students chose either a numeric grade (as of March 13) or Pass/Withdrawal, with no negative impact on their GPA if they chose the Pass/Withdrawal option. Students had the ability to improve (but not lower) their numeric grade via work completed during remote learning.

GRADUATION

Decisions about grading, promotion, and how to award course credit were consequential for all students and their families, but particularly so for high school seniors. Recognizing this, and not wishing for the Class of 2020 to be penalized for circumstances beyond their control, 35 states and the District of Columbia modified their graduation requirements in some way due

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12   See the Oklahoma State Department of Education's "Coronavirus/COVID-19 FAQ: Guidance for Academic Counselors." Retrieved from https://sde.ok.gov/sites/default/files/AcadCounsFAQ_COVID-19FINAL.pdf.

> Nebraska included the Class of 2020 in its guidance for reopening schools in the fall and plans to continue to find ways to support this group as they begin their postsecondary experiences. This support will include setting up district- or school-level Postsecondary Response Teams and case managers for graduating seniors to ensure they're able to transition seamlessly into a postsecondary pathway by September 2020.

to the school closures. These modifications included waivers of required end-of-course examinations in certain subjects (16), the state-mandated exam or coursework in civics (9), community service hours (5), CPR (5), and others. Six of these states (AL, AR, HI, IA, OR, WV) dictated that schools and districts should use March standings to award credit and determine eligibility for graduation; those students who were not passing required courses as of March were entitled to credit recovery options through remote learning, the state's virtual school, or other means identified by the districts. Oregon went a step further, issuing guidance that seniors who had fulfilled graduation requirements by March were not required to participate in remote learning except to access college and career services.

Four states (IL, KY, TN, WA) reduced the number and type of required credits for graduation. Kentucky and Washington asked schools and districts to submit waiver requests in order to do so, while Illinois and Tennessee automatically reduced the number of required credits to reflect the loss of half of an academic year (e.g., 4.0 required credits in a certain subject became 3.5 required credits.)

Meanwhile, state-mandated graduation requirements remained in force in eight other states (CA, DE, KS, MI, NE, NM, RI, TX). However, several of these states noted that schools and districts had some flexibility in determining whether and how students had met state requirements. For example, Rhode Island's Department of Education wrote:

> State-recognized performance-based diploma assessment options can be delivered remotely to allow students to demonstrate applied learning skills and proficiency in one or more content areas… LEAs have the discretion to decide the best means of carrying out senior portfolios and projects using distance learning. Every effort should be made to maintain the same level of rigor based on distance learning expectations. All performance-based diploma assessments shall be evaluated utilizing a scoring criteria defined by the LEA and aligned with state-adopted content standards and applied learning standards, and/or other relevant nationally-recognized content standards.[13]

Many states noted that local districts had instituted graduation requirements

13   See the Rhode Island Department of Education's "Distance Learning 2020: Guidance for Ensuring Educators, Families, and Students are Supported." Retrieved from https://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/COVID19/Distance_Learning_Guidance_2020.pdf.

above and beyond the state's requirements and urged districts to waive these additional requirements to the extent possible. North Carolina mandated this: "The SBE [State Board of Education] approved policy indicates that any student meeting the SBE graduation requirements will graduate, even if there are local additional course requirements. All local graduation requirements are optional and cannot keep a student from graduating."[14]

We commend those states that provided additional meaningful supports to the Class of 2020. Nebraska included the Class of 2020 in its guidance for reopening schools in the fall and plans to continue to find ways to support this group as they begin their postsecondary experiences. This support will include setting up district- or school-level Postsecondary Response Teams and case managers for graduating seniors to ensure they're able to transition seamlessly into a postsecondary pathway by September 2020.[15] In Kansas, the governor and the State Department of Education established a Senior Leaders Conversation Group, tapping 64 seniors from across the state to facilitate virtual conversations among members of the Class of 2020 to share their feelings, questions, and challenges.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEEDS

The Senior Leaders Conversation Group in Kansas is just one example of the many ways states acknowledged the social and emotional toll that the pandemic and resulting school closures took on students, their families, and staff members. All states stressed the importance of relationships among staff, students, and families; several noted that it was important to schedule time for "non-academic" remote interactions that strengthened bonds and a sense of belonging.

What guidance did states provide to sustain and strengthen relationships among students, staff, and families?
Most states recommended regular 1:1 and small-group check-ins with students; several suggested that school staff establish call lists so that each staff member was responsible for regular outreach to a certain number of families each week. New Mexico's Public Education Department wrote, "This is a great time for school and district staff to reach out to families through videoconferencing and telephone calls. Educators are presented with a tremendous opportunity to make individualized connections with students and families and to transform education." NMPED also advised districts to "emphasize relationships and connectivity in this new learning environment…

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14   In seven cases (AK, ME, MT, NH, ND, VT, WY) we were unable to locate any public information about graduation policies during school closures.

15   Nebraska's guidance builds off of the "Return to School Roadmap" developed by Opportunity Labs; see https://returntoschoolroadmap.org/.

prioritize socio-emotional wellness equally to academic engagement."[16]

States acknowledged the importance of teachers as secure attachment figures for their students and many provided suggested questions and conversation starters that educators could use to understand their students' needs and concerns. The Nebraska Department of Education stated, "In an alternate learning environment, it is essential that students feel cared for, are connected with their classmates and the school community, and engage with interesting and relevant learning experiences."[17] We agree—and while we note that secure, caring relationships may have been particularly important as students and families grappled with the uncertainties and anxieties created by a global pandemic, nothing in Nebraska's guidance should be limited to alternative learning environments—this should be the foundation of every school's culture and work every day.

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Several states offered specific guidance to school and district leaders on how to strengthen relationships among staff and cultivate a positive adult culture while schools were closed. Kansas provided an outstanding blueprint for building and district leaders describing four steps leaders could take to meaningfully engage and motivate their teams. In Alabama and Maine, state superintendents did an especially good job of modeling the kind of caring, supportive culture they wanted school and district leaders to create. Alabama State Superintendent Eric Mackey sent weekly, conversational letters to district superintendents; in one of these he wrote, "I will be working through this weekend, so please feel free to reach out to me if you have specific questions." In another, he lets them know, "I am both honored and humbled to be an educator during these times and associated with so many extraordinary educators!"[18]

> "Amid the fear and loss and physical disconnection, watch empathy, compassion, and humanity shining like the North Star - far above the fray."
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> Maine Commissioner Pender Makin

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16   See the New Mexico Public Education Department's "Implementation Guide for Your Continuous Learning Plan." Retrieved from https://www.newmexico.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/NMPED_Implementation-Guide-for-Your-Continuous-Learning-Plan_FINAL.pdf.

17   See the Nebraska Department of Education's "Considerations for Teaching and Learning Guidance Document." Retrieved from https://cdn.education.ne.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Considerations-for-Teaching-and-Learning_4.16.2020.pdf.

18   See the Alabama State Department of Education's archive of State Superintendent Updates to Local Superintendents at https://www.alsde.edu/covid-19.

Maine's Commissioner of Education Pender Makin addressed district and school staffers as "Champions of Education" and let them know: "I have received countless emails and messages from legislators, parents, community members, and students sharing their gratitude for the steady support, the nutritional services, and the deeply human connections that are provided by educators, counselors, and school administrators." She identifies several 'silver linings' of the crisis, including "We have a perfect opportunity to redesign our state assessment system!" and "Amid the fear and loss and physical disconnection, watch empathy, compassion, and humanity shining like the North Star – far above the fray."[19]

California was another state stressing the importance of relationships, to such a degree that in its guidance for reopening schools it replaced the term "continuity of learning" with "continuity of relationships and learning." The Department of Education explained:

> The physical space of schools is where shared experiences happen, memories are created, connectedness and relationships are built, and meals are shared. When LEAs quickly pivoted to distance learning models, one of the reasons school staff found success was because of the existing relationships and connectedness built during the school year. Relationships and connectedness are at the core of our healthiest school communities. We know from experience and the science of learning and development that meaningful relationships are essential for students to grow as learners. The student/staff relationships are the foundation of students' connectedness to the school community and learning. Staff to staff relationships provide the space for staff collaboration and growth. Student to student relationships allow peers to connect to each other and begin to understand diverse perspectives, helping them become more compassionate human beings. When schools are developing their reopening plans it is important to include a plan to ensure that the learning and the connected relationships developed while the school buildings were open can continue if another school building closure occurs.[20]

How did states approach family engagement?

As part of their work to keep school communities connected, district and school leaders needed to forge different kinds of relationships with families. All states offered guidance about communicating with and engaging families during the spring 2020 school closures. At a minimum, states reinforced the need for frequent communication with students' families in the languages commonly spoken at home and using methods appropriate and already familiar to families. By and large, it appears that states expected districts and schools to leverage existing infrastructure and personnel in order to do this.

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19   See the April 1, 2020 update from Commissioner Makin. Retrieved from https://www.maine. gov/doe/covid-19/April1CommissionerUpdate.

20   See the California Department of Education's "Stronger Together: A Guidebook for the Safe Reopening of California's Public Schools." Retrieved from https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/sandtcontre- lationlearnin.asp.

Additionally, many states underscored the need for school and district leaders to gather information about students' context for remote learning and devise ways to help families support students at home (e.g., setting up a space for study, establishing a regular routine, accessing necessary supplies, and answering questions about assignments.) In Connecticut, the State Department of Education offered regular webinars for educators and families that framed remote learning as a collaborative enterprise: "Please visit our Professional Support Series pages for Families and Districts. You can register for upcoming webinars, review recorded webinars and resources as we learn together."[21]

Indiana posed these thoughtful questions to guide schools and districts in their Spring 2020 planning for remote instruction:

> "Teachers, families, and caregivers work as a team, anchored in partnership. Together, teachers and families co-facilitate learning, design consistent routines, and establish the learning environment."
>
> Oregon Department of Education

- How might the makeup of each family impact the way they engage with continuous learning (race and culture, family structure, location - urban, suburban, rural, financial resources, etc.)?
- How can we provide culturally and linguistically relevant resources for each particular student and family?
- How can we see families and their children's learning through a trauma-informed lens? What social-emotional support can we provide?
- In what ways can we allow families to individualize continuous learning?
- How can we use relationships with families to provide us honest and timely feedback on how the management of learning is going at home and how we can best support them?[22]

Most states encouraged districts to survey families about their readiness for remote learning and their perceptions of remote learning once underway. Many required schools and districts to engage families (and in some cases, students as well) as members of planning teams developing strategies for remote learning during spring 2020 and/or blueprints for reopening schools in the fall.

A few states went above and beyond and framed the staff-family rela-

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21   See the Connecticut State Department of Education's "COVID-19 Resources for Families and Educators." Retrieved from https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/COVID19/COVID-19-Resources-for-Families-and-Educators.

22   See the Indiana Department of Education's "Indiana Continuous Learning Guidance." Retrieved from https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/news/indiana-continuous-learning-guidance-final.PDF.

tionship as a true partnership. Oregon's state leaders counseled, "Teachers, families, and caregivers work as a team, anchored in partnership. Together, teachers and families co-facilitate learning, design consistent routines, and establish the learning environment."[23] In Minnesota, guidance for reopening schools included the following:

> Schools seeking to improve connections with students, families, and communities should consider incorporating Karen Mapp's four essential core beliefs about family engagement: 1. All families have dreams for their children and want the best for them. 2. All families have the capacity to support their children's learning. 3. Families and school staff are equal partners. 4. The responsibility for cultivating and sustaining partnerships among school, home, and community rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders. When engaging families listen for areas where the school's distance, hybrid, or on-site social distancing learning plan may be in conflict with the resources available to or the lived experiences of the families that the school serves.[24]

We note that even prior to the pandemic, many schools and districts across the United States had already embraced these beliefs about family engagement. From a practical perspective, we argue that this undoubtedly made it easier for school staff and families to collaborate when circumstances required students to learn at home. From an ideological perspective, we hope that this crisis drives more schools to value deep and meaningful school-family partnerships as a matter of course moving forward.

What did states have to say about the social and emotional needs of educators and other staff members?

Most states recognized the exceptional demands being placed on school and district staff members. They noted the steep learning curve involved in the transition to remote instruction; educators' capacity to work from home while attending to their own family members; the need to deploy certain staff members in new roles; the sense of isolation possibly experienced by staff members who live alone; and educators' concern about their own health and safety.

Washington State provided the clearest, most detailed guidance specific to employee safety in its reopening plan. It mandates a variety of worker protections and outline employees' rights regarding their personal safety related to COVID exposure.

All states addressed the need to provide school staff with just-in-time pro-

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23   See the Oregon Department of Education's "Distance Learning for All: Frequently Asked Questions." Retrieved from https://www.oregon.gov/ode/educator-resources/standards/Documents/Distance%20Learning%20for%20All%20FAQ.pdf.

24   See the Minnesota Department of Education's "Engaging and Communicating with Families During Distance Learning." Retrieved from https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/health/covid19/supstu-covid19/.

fessional development to equip them for remote instruction. Several other states adopted the [five-day ramp-up schedule](#) Kansas created for its district leaders so they could engage their staff in planning for remote instruction and designing professional development. Additionally, many states explicitly addressed the need for schools and districts to attend to staff members' social and emotional well-being. In Maine, the Department of Education offered virtual wellness sessions for educators statewide at 8:30 am and 3:30 pm each day. The Indiana Department of Education provided thoughtful [guidance](#) to schools and districts about ways to promote self-care and well-being among staff members. This guidance included the following: "Support teachers to set boundaries. They are working harder than ever, under ever-changing stressful conditions, which requires constant flexibility among educators and their students. With remote learning, it is easy to follow-up with students at all hours. Encourage teachers to keep a regular and predictable schedule for themselves and to practice self-care."[25]

> "Support teachers to set boundaries. They are working harder than ever, under ever-changing stressful conditions, which requires constant flexibility. Encourage teachers to keep a regular schedule for themselves and to practice self-care."
>
> Indiana Department of Education

All states that had created reopening guidance prior to this report's publication in July 2020 acknowledged the stress and anxiety many school staff members felt when they considered their own health and safety in returning to work. Washington provided the clearest, most detailed [guidance](#) specific to employee safety in its reopening plan (see pp.24-26). It mandates a variety of worker protections, outlines employees' rights regarding their personal safety related to COVID exposure, and states: "No school district may operate until they can meet and maintain all the requirements in this document, including providing materials, schedules, and equipment required to comply."[26]

What guidance and resources did states provide to support the emotional and mental well-being of students?

States like Indiana recognized that educators' self-care was essential to their ability to care for their students—and all states prioritized students' social and emotional well-being over academic achievement or other instructional considerations. They noted that anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation during

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25   See the Indiana Department of Education's "Indiana Continuous Learning Guidance." Retrieved from https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/news/indiana-continuous-learning-guidance-final.PDF.

26   See the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's "Reopening Washington Schools 2020: District Planning Guide." Retrieved from https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/ [workgroups/Reopening%20Washington%20Schools%202020%20Planning%20Guide.pdf](https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/workgroups/Reopening%20Washington%20Schools%202020%20Planning%20Guide.pdf).

quarantine could affect the mental health of students, their family members, and school staff. Most states provided links to community, state, and national agencies that could provide virtual counseling, helplines, and other resources. Many included in their remote learning guidance specific suggestions for school counselors to engage and support students and their families.

States were keenly aware of the increased risk of abuse, neglect, and domestic violence once family members were confined to close quarters during state-mandated stay-at-home orders. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education shared the sobering statistic that reports of child abuse and neglect in Massachusetts dropped approximately 60 percent due to the diminished visibility of children in their communities. It wrote:

> Normally, a large percentage of reports come to the Department of Children and Fami lies from teachers, due to their close daily contact with students and the special, trusting, and open relationships that students have with their teachers. Social distancing and other effects of the pandemic cause additional stress within families that can elevate already dangerous situations for some children. Although teachers and other school staff now have limited contact with stu dents, the obligation to report any reasonable suspicion of child abuse and neglect remains critical.[27]

All states noted that schools and districts would need to be sensitive to trauma that students experienced due to economic hardship, abuse, and/or COVID-related deaths or illnesses in the family or community. Nearly all the states that had published guidance for reopening schools in the fall noted that schools and districts should be prepared to screen students for trauma and train all staff in trauma-informed practices. Kentucky created a remarkable reopening [guidance document](#) entirely devoted to the social-emotional wellness of students and staff. It recommends ways to create a safe and welcoming environment, address grief and loss, respond to traumatic stress, re-engage disconnected students, and more.

Kentucky created a remarkable reopening guidance document entirely devoted to the social-emotional wellness of students and staff. It recommends ways to create a safe and welcoming environment, address grief and loss, respond to traumatic stress, re-engage disconnected students, and more.

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27   See the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's "Commissioner's Weekly Update 4.27.20." Retrieved from https://mailchi.mp/doe.mass.edu/commissioners-weekly-update-4-27-20-new-remote-learning-guidance-board-to-meet-grant-to-support-students-behavioral-and-mental-health-92260?e=583fc2bc03.

BASIC PHYSICAL NEEDS

While school buildings were closed, all states identified meeting the basic physical needs of students as one of their top priorities. All states continued providing free meals to eligible students through waivers from the USDA, which runs the National School Lunch Program. These waivers enabled schools and districts to modify their meal programs for "grab-and-go" (non-congregate) distribution and to relax the requirement that children must be present when food is distributed.

Although all states identified nutrition as a priority, states went to different lengths to ensure that there was no interruption in school meal service. Only thirteen states required schools and districts to continue providing meals to eligible students during school closures. California and Oregon, for example, directed that schools' state funding would be contingent upon the continued provision of meals, and Montana obligated schools and districts to continue their food programs if they wanted a waiver of instructional time requirements. Michigan and New York required schools and districts to submit plans to the state describing how they were going to provide meals, along with their plans for continued instruction.

In 37 states and the District of Columbia, states encouraged but did not require schools and districts to continue their meal programs. Many rose to the challenge and excelled: for example, in Hawaii all young people age 18 and younger were able to receive free daily breakfast and lunch. These students did not need to attend the school where they picked up their meals and distribution was not limited to public school students. West Virginia schools and districts mobilized to serve more than 1.4 million meals each week to eligible students. And in Washington DC, DC Public Schools (which enrolls about half of the city's 95,000 K-12 students) served breakfast and lunch to all residents under the age of 18 at 29 sites across the city. In one month alone, DCPS served 250,000 free meals to young people throughout the District and then expanded to distribute free groceries at 10 school sites each week.

> West Virginia schools and districts mobilized to serve more than 1.4 million meals each week to eligible students.

Childcare was another basic need that several state departments of education addressed. In 12 states schools and districts were encouraged but not required to provide childcare to essential workers, and those states provided information about how schools and districts could obtain emergency certification in order to do so. Five states (CA, MI, NY, OR, WA) required schools and districts to provide emergency childcare for essential workers, or at a minimum to have a plan to supply this if other community and state agencies were unable to meet the total demand. California and Oregon tied this to

continued state funding for school operations, though California framed this as a requirement that districts would "make every attempt possible" to do so.

Six states (AZ, DE, FL, LA, PA, TX) and DC published directories of available childcare providers or links to other state and community agencies that could supply childcare information. We were surprised to see that 26 state departments of education were completely silent on the issue of childcare. Presumably this was because other state agencies oversaw childcare programs, but these 26 state departments of education did not even provide a link to guide families to the appropriate division of state government.

A few states addressed other basic needs at the state level; for example, South Carolina's Department of Education encouraged schools and districts to use school buses to deliver meals to senior citizens in collaboration with the Department on Aging. In Kentucky, many school nurses continued on-site at their schools as essential personnel, and families often turned to them for medical care before they tried to access other community healthcare providers. Some of the state's school nurses delivered medications to students who were otherwise unable to get them. In Washington, DC, DCPS provided care packages for families of preschoolers that included books, art materials, and home health and cleaning supplies.

Many states acknowledged that it would be extremely difficult for school and district staff to provide the social, emotional, and physical supports that many students needed and had come to depend on when they showed up at school. Of particular concern were those students who simply didn't show up for remote learning and whose families didn't respond to outreach from school staff. In response, states like New York required schools and districts to use multiple means to check on the health and safety of students. The State Education Department wrote:

> When you are unable to reach families through traditional methods, you should attempt to connect with them through the emergency contacts listed in your school records. Additionally, local community centers, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations serving immigrant communities, and homeless shelters may be able to assist you in connecting with and supporting the well-being of families who depend on their services.[28]

It's still not known how many students nationwide fell through the "safety net" and were unaccounted for during school closures; some reports indicate that in many districts fewer than half of all students regularly participated.[29]

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28   See the New York State Education Department's "Supporting Students and Families Disconnected from School." Retrieved from http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/coronavirus/nysed-covid-19-supporting-students-families-5-11-20.pdf.

29   See The New York Times "As School Moves Online, Many Students Stay Logged Out." April 6, 2020. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/us/coronavirus-schools-attendance-ab-

What is clear is that students from low income households, students of color, and English language learners are disproportionately represented among those who didn't engage with their classmates and teachers while school buildings were closed—which likely exacerbated achievement gaps and deepened disparities between students of different races, cultures, and economic circumstances.

EQUITY

Racism, unemployment, homelessness, food insecurity, distrust of law enforcement, eviction, abuse and neglect: too many of America's students and their families struggled with these hardships and others long before the first COVID cases were diagnosed in the U.S. But COVID worsened these problems for many families, tipped the scales for other families whose situations had been tenuous, and significantly disrupted the systems that schools, districts, and states had set up to support students and their families and address inequities.

> "The cries from families, advocates, and educators of inequities that we heard in March…should never fall silent. Every action taken will either promote inequity or work to erawse it."
>
> Connecticut Commissioner Miguel Cardona

Every state department of education publicly acknowledged the equity issues brought on or exacerbated by COVID and related school closures. Connecticut's Commissioner of Education Miguel Cardona was particularly eloquent on this point:

> The cries from families, advocates and educators of inequities that we heard in March, both in Connecticut and nationally, should never fall silent. Every action taken will either promote inequity or work to erase it. As we have heard so many times over the last several weeks, we are all in this together. We recognize that the ways in which we deliver educational services will likely forever be changed moving forward. Let us all stand committed to preserve, as much as possible for the generation that will inherit the decisions we make, the ideals of a free and appropriate public education. As we do this, let's work together to put meaningful actions to the belief that no child should ever be left behind.[30]

As noted earlier in this report, a significant percentage of that nation's students lacked the technology to participate in online learning at home. Many

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30   See the Connecticut State Department of Education press release dated May 4, 2020. Retrieved from https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Press-Room/Press-Releases/2020/A-New-Era-in-Educational-Access-and-Advocacy.

states acknowledged that devices and connectivity were only the first step, however, in supporting student learning at home: these states knew that some students wouldn't be able to participate because they needed to supervise younger siblings, care for sick family members, and/or work to support their families financially. States strongly encouraged schools and districts to provide accommodations in these circumstances; in particular, they urged that seniors making a good-faith effort to engage in remote learning should be granted credit whenever possible.

The majority of states also explicitly recognized that some students would have less support from parents, caregivers, and other adults as they worked on assignments at home because of those adults' work schedules, health status, language barriers, and other circumstances.

In response, a significant number of states counselled school and district leaders to extend grace, compassion, and patience to students and their families. New Mexico's Public Education Department advised district and school staff members, "Encourage patience and support and extend grace to all."[31] West Virginia stated that its guidance on remote learning was "grounded in compassion, communication, and common sense rather than traditional compliance measures that most are accustomed to in our education community."[32]

What strikes us about these declarations is the idea that compassion, patience, and accommodation are positioned as something extraordinary, to be leveraged in a pandemic rather than given freely to all students every day—and in particular, to those students who were already vulnerable before the spring of 2020 and remained so while learning at home and shouldering other challenges.

Equity concerns prompted many states to issue "do no harm" guidance for grading during the period when school buildings were closed (see the Assessment section above), counseling that students should not be penalized if they were not able to engage in remote instruction. As noted previously, this drove some states to

> "We know that we have a much higher responsibility than teaching content in classrooms. We know that each of us owns a piece of injustice. We have an opportunity in the reopening of our schools to take another step forward in what must be a lifetime of energy toward a more just world."
>
> Washington Superintendent Chris Reykdal

31   See NMDEP's "Implementation Guide for Your Continuous Learning Plan," retrieved from https://www.newmexico.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/NMPED_Implementation-Guide-for-Your-Continuous-Learning-Plan_FINAL.pdf..

32   See the WV Department of Education's "West Virginia Remote Learning Framework," retrieved from https://wvde.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/WV-Remote-Learning-041520.pdf.

require or strongly encourage Pass/Incomplete grading for the spring semester, while others came out strongly in favor of numeric and letter grades.

Washington State Superintendent Chris Reykdal required schools and districts to issue numeric grades, while noting that none of the assessment options were ideal:

> In high schools, our students face post-secondary consequences that are the difference between gaining access to well-paying jobs and health benefits or not. Grading implicates hundreds of millions of dollars in scholarship opportunities. Grading systems can impact military recruiting, college athletics, access to college majors, and more. But grading systems also shine a spotlight on the inequities of an education system that despite real progress, still functions in high correlation to family income and access to enrichment activities. To put it simply, we have built a national education system at the high school level around seat time and grades, even as the experts have challenged us to think more critically about deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem solving.[33]

In his letter introducing Washington's plan to reopen schools, Reykdal also squarely addressed the call for racial justice that erupted after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. He wrote:

> The Workgroup [to develop the state's reopening plan] was influenced by the civil unrest across the country in response to overt racial injustice and inequality. We are educators. We know that despite real progress, educational systems and institutions continue to contribute to racial inequality and injustice. We know that we have a much higher responsibility than teaching content in classrooms. We know that each of us owns a piece of injustice. We have an opportunity in the reopening of our schools to take another step forward in what must be a lifetime of energy toward a more just world. This guidance is grounded in my belief that the most equitable opportunity for educational success relies upon the comprehensive supports for students provided in our schools with our professionals and the systems of supports we have built. We will do this together, keeping student and staff safety and well-being as our highest priority in the reopening.[34]

Minnesota, the epicenter of civic protest and unrest following Floyd's murder in Minneapolis, also recognized the need to address systemic inequities with renewed commitment and in new ways. In its guidance document for reopening schools, the state's Department of Education wrote:

> This could be your first year ever not greeting students as they bounce through school doors into new classrooms to meet their new teachers and classmates on the first day of school. And regardless of whether we begin

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33   See the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's "Student Learning and Grading Guidance." Retrieved from https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/communications/OSPI%20Student%20Learning%20and%20Grading%20Guidance_4-21-2020.pdf.

34   See Washington OSPI's "Reopening Washington Schools 2020: District Planning Guide." Retrieved from https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/workgroups/Reopening%20Washington%20Schools%202020%20Planning%20Guide.pdf.

the school year in an in-person, hybrid learning or distance learning model, the first day of school routines that you've leaned on in past years are likely irrelevant in our new social distancing and virtual contexts. More importantly, students will enter your classroom transformed and likely traumatized by their months of pandemic isolation, surges in unemployment and economic uncertainty, and the racial justice movement ignited by the killing of George Floyd while in Minneapolis police custody. Your students, classrooms, daily routines, curriculum and instruction, and family and community relationships must adapt to fit our new understandings and realities.[35]

What Minnesota, Washington, and a handful of other states came to understand is that there was no way to go back to "the way things were"—nor did they necessarily want to. This idea, profoundly unsettling and profoundly liberating at the same time, challenges us to create something better than what came before and answer the question asked in Montana: "If you could create the school that you wanted, would you create the school that you have?"

TRANSFORMATION

When it posed this question, Montana's Office of Public Instruction was not just paying lip service to the idea of reinventing schools. Where many states waived statutory instructional time requirements for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year, Montana went a step further and authorized schools and districts to abandon them permanently. OPI writes: "In addition to identifying and incorporating offsite learning in satisfaction of aggregate hours, districts have the authority to also enact permanent leeway of aggregate hours and pupil attendance required, through a proficiency model as outlined… Districts may want to begin the discussion of what alternative learning models can be offered, in a blend with on-site learning for post-pandemic."[36]

Tennessee may be following suit. In its reopening guidance the state's Department of Education wrote:

> Most importantly, this framing around the definition of a school day requires the state to put stakes in the ground related to what is critically important in that school day, with rationale as to why. Are hours the driving force? Content? Mastery? These are the types of discussions that typically do not occur

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35   See the Minnesota Department of Education's "2020-21 Planning Guidance for Minnesota Public Schools." Retrieved from https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/health/covid19/.

36   See the Montana Office of Public Instruction's "Guidance on Attendance during School Closures." Retrieved from http://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/Education%20Advocates/Reflections_4-2-20.pdf?ver=2020-04-03-114518-630.

in a traditional format because a "day" is driven so much by time. When time is no longer always in the control of the school system due to an at-home education setting, the system should then take a different approach related to how access and opportunity for an equitable education is defined. The TDOE will partner with the State Board of Education (SBE) to provide clarity to the field about how this will be reviewed in a potentially distance environment.[37]

In their guidance about remote learning, many states encouraged districts and schools to consider progressive practices like project- and place-based learning, interdisciplinary study, student agency, authentic assessment, and mastery-based progression—but they framed these as something akin to desperate measures necessitated by desperate times. Nebraska is a good example: "School districts may decide to allow students choice in how they respond to learning activities. By providing students options for how they can demonstrate their knowledge (e.g. submitting a video or audio recording, providing a typed/written response, creating a picture, etc.), school districts/school systems highlight how personalized learning might look in an alternate learning environment."[38]

We believe students deserve voice and choice throughout their education, not only during a pandemic, and so we are encouraged that states like Montana, Tennessee, and Washington have demonstrated a willingness to question conventional approaches and move toward more student-centered authentic learning experiences.

> "There has never been a bigger moment to examine our education system and improve our practices to further close opportunity gaps."
>
> Washington Superintendent Chris Reykdal

In his letter introducing Washington's plan to reopen schools, State Superintendent Chris Reykdal wrote:

> Please take the opportunity over the next three months, to not just reopen schools, but to make changes you have wanted to make for years or to make permanent a practice you thought was a temporary response to the COVID-19 shutdown, but now you realize it's simply a better practice. Dive into your grading policies, homework policies, disparate technology access, learning standards, mastery and competency-based learning models, flexible options for students, multi-tiered systems of support, and other innovations. There has never been a bigger moment to examine our education system and improve our practices to further close opportunity gaps. This is a moment to

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37   See the Tennessee Department of Education's "Reopening Schools: Overview Guide for LEAs." Retrieved from https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/health-&-safety/Reopening%20 Schools%20-%20Overview%20Guide%20for%20LEAs.pdf.

38   See the Nebraska Department of Education's "Considerations for Teaching and Learning Guidance Document." Retrieved from https://cdn.education.ne.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Considerations-for-Teaching-and-Learning_4.16.2020.pdf.

reconsider and shift past practices that have contributed to racial inequality and a lack of equitable opportunities for so many of our students. I trust your first priority will be to safely open schools, but I also know you are committed to using this moment to build more transformative systems for our students.[39]

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39   See the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's "Reopening Washington Schools 2020: District Planning Guide." Retrieved from https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/workgroups/Reopening%20Washington%20Schools%202020%20Planning%20Guide.pdf.

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