Shifting to Online Learning in the COVID-19 Spring

By Julie Young and William Donovan

Introduction

The coronavirus known as COVID-19 has worked its way into nearly every corner of the globe and caused, among other restrictions, a shutdown of most schools across the United States. By the end of March at least 124,000 public and private schools had closed and at least 55.1 million students were affected.[1]

Desperate not to lose time away from the classroom, school officials are rushing to shift instruction to the Internet. Districts and schools face a daunting challenge to convert as much of their instruction as possible, as swiftly as possible, in an organized, effective manner. Even schools with online or blended learning elements in place will have a struggle moving their model to entirely tech-based. Those with little or no experience are asking basic questions such as "Where do we start?" and "What do we need?"

It's a frenzied scramble for many districts. Some are unsure if their state will allow time spent in newly added online courses to count towards completion of state-mandated days in school. In March, the Michigan Department of Education declared that online instruction would not count toward the annual requirement for classroom-based instructional hours. Its argument? The time students spend at home online continuing their education can neither be monitored by professional educators nor assessed to determine what they are learning and retaining.[2]

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A first step for state commissioners then would be to clarify the confusion around what is being allowed to count towards instructional time for either funding purposes and/or instructional minutes requirements.

A second would be to create a new page on the website of each state department of education providing answers to frequently asked questions about the transition to online learning. Abundant communication is critical to help parents and students find their way. Similarly, districts should be encouraged to do the same on their websites, in addition to telephone calls and mailings to ensure that all families are fully informed.

This brief presents some important considerations for school administrators and teachers as they attempt to shift their efforts to a virtual platform. It refers to students, families, teachers and technology. At a time when there is much uncertainty about public health, employment and personal finances, it will hopefully assist in the continuing effort to move education forward.

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1. Understand the level of devices and Internet access that families have.

Do students have the means to participate in virtual learning from home? Requirements include Internet connectivity and appropriate devices such as personal computers, laptops or tablets.

"The concept is to start by understanding where you are as a district, both in terms of what your students and families have and can do and what your own capabilities are," says John Watson, founder of the Evergreen Education Group in Colorado.[3]

Districts should conduct a survey of the families they serve to determine who needs devices and who is without access. Many families lack broadband access at home and may rely on adults' mobile devices that have limited data plans. For those without bandwidth, districts should investigate how to buy or rent Wi-Fi hotspots. The Federal Communications Commission and Congress are working to provide funding to cover emergency distribution of Wi-Fi hotspots to needy students.[4]

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Many districts have gotten creative in providing hotspots. In Illinois, Belleville Township High School District 201 deploys four school buses equipped with Wi-Fi to serve as Wi-Fi hotspots. Between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. every weekday, drivers park the buses next to seven parks throughout the town and Belleville's downtown YMCA, depending on the day of the week.[5]

Districts should also be aware that even families with high-speed connections may not have enough devices for multiple children to use during the day. It's risky to assume that a family with one computer can meet the needs of a student. Many parents are working from home due to COVID-19 and there could be siblings as well.

In Boston, officials estimate that at least 15 percent of the district's 54,000 public school students do not have a laptop or computer at home for online learning. When schools closed in mid-March, more than 13,000 students were given study materials and laptops. Another 20,000 Chromebooks were delivered to the district for distribution shortly after.[6]

2. Equip schools for virtual instruction.

A district's information technology team is critical in an online environment. Those experts provide valuable support to teachers, students and parents through set-up and training. They provide answers to ongoing questions and solutions to problems. Ensuring that all parties are connected and accessible is fundamental to a smooth transition.

The most critical piece of technology is a learning management system (LMS), the set of tools that houses course content and provides the framework for communication between students, teachers, and parents."

The LMS allows teachers to post announcements, organize course content and give online quizzes and exams. Students can participate in threaded discussion boards and forums, as well as work on group projects. Specific accounts can be set up for administrators and parents, as well as teachers and students.

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When choosing an LMS, program, administrators can select an open source product, which is low cost and open to customization. Alternatively, they can license LMS software from a commercial provider who will be responsible for installation and for ensuring that the product runs properly.

"In the short term, if they have an LMS, it's easier to work with a provider who builds courses to just put courses in that system," says Kay Johnson, director of strategic communications with ASU Prep Digital[7], a virtual college prep program based at Arizona State University that provides online high school and university courses. "Many providers are offering discounted rates to finish out the school year and some even into the summer. That can be a stopgap for those who have a learning management system."[8]

There are more than 1,000 LMS vendors in the market, offering different tools and features.[9] Among the most active are Agilix Labs, Blackboard, Desire2Learn, Moodle and Pearson Learning Solutions. Popular LMS programs include Google Classroom, Pearson Online Learning Exchange and Haiku Learning.[10]

Many districts that do not have an LMS and some that do are still concerned about attempting to scale a learning curve with *all* teachers. In such cases, districts are choosing to stick with more basic online options they already understand. One district in Arizona, already equipped with an LMS, opted to use Google Classroom for all teachers as a temporary measure. Because more district teachers were familiar with Google Classroom than the LMS, the district stayed with what most staff knew. Google Classroom is a free web service for sharing files between students and teachers.[11]

In its early review of how districts are reacting, Johnson says ASU Prep found that many districts are either using the provider they already have or using the online tool most of their teachers are already familiar with, such as the Arizona district noted above.

Another administrative tool that integrates with the LMS is a student information system (SIS). The SIS houses all the basic information about students, including their schedules, their academic performance and demographic details. It is also used for registering students and creating reports such as progress

reports and report cards. Most districts already have an SIS, so integration with the LMS will be a vetting aspect the technology team will want to review.

3. Prepare your teachers.

As anxious as states and districts are to resume instruction, it's critical that teachers be given time to acquire some basic skills and prepare their online courses.

"Teaching online and teaching in a classroom are very different and they require different teaching strategies, different management, different systems," says Johnson of ASU Prep. "It's a lot to have instantly. It's a lot for any teacher to transition from classroom to online. It takes time."

Teachers unfamiliar with learning management systems should be allowed time to practice using the system and reviewing the content to avoid problems when they go live. Prior to its shutdown, a school in Washington state broke into teams to ramp up in everything from logistical issues, like the setup of Zoom meetings, to instructional ones, such as different home support models. Then they reported out to the larger group. Such teamwork is still possible from remote sites after a school closes, giving teachers an opportunity to plan before fully jumping into online instruction with students.[12]

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The vast number of online lessons, videos, simulations, and activities, combined with the pressure to get started, have left many teachers feeling overwhelmed. Ideally, school administrators or principals can provide guidance on selections and uses. One suggestion is for teachers to leverage whatever resources their schools already have. A Spanish teacher in Kentucky, for example, wanted to keep his students engaged in the same reading they were doing in class. He made a video recording of himself reading aloud from a short novel and posted it to Flipgrid, an online tool his students were already using.[13]

Assistance is also available from other online educators. When the current crisis began, ASU Prep officials created ASU For You[14], a resource that includes video lessons and live tutoring for students and training videos for teachers.

"It's not a Master's degree, but it is enough to get that teacher at least a day or two ahead of the students right now," says Johnson. "That level of support needs to be broadened and it will."

Florida Virtual School, founded in 1996 as the first full-time online school in the U.S., has "digital education consultants" assigned to regions of the country. They consult on content, teacher training and general online classroom questions.[15]

4. Most special needs students can be served

Students with disabilities make up 14 percent[16] of the public-school student population. For those students this is a particularly unsettling time. The CARES Act[17] approved by Congress and signed into law in March, provides Education Secretary Betsy DeVos the right to grant waivers to states regarding their Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) implementation. That possibility has created uncertainty and worry among stakeholders and advocates in the special education community.

Watson says the large majority of special needs students, meaning those with Individual Education Plans, can easily be served when shifting to online instruction. These include students whose plans allow for accommodations such as extra time for assessment, a seat closer to the teacher, or receiving additional resources. Similarly, others who are visually or hearing impaired can be served through closed caption or screen readers.

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But for students with multiple or significant disabilities it becomes more challenging. "Many students are severely disabled and the reality is that their instruction isn't going to work online," says Watson. Online schools are typically "schools of choice," he says, and in many cases "parents recognize that being in a school is better for them."

5. Establish daily schedules.

The sudden shutting of schools has scrambled many daily routines at the buildings and in homes. To maintain continuity after moving online, expectations should be clear about when teachers and students need to be logged on.

Flexibility is important under trying circumstances. The appointed time can vary from the traditional early morning start. Some schools are choosing two check-in times—a morning meeting and an afternoon check-in—which gives families some leeway when organizing their at-home school schedule. Other schools are opting to spread one school day over two days. Students attend three classes in the morning and have the afternoons to work independently and visit teachers during their "office hours." On day two they attend the rest of their classes online in the morning and then virtually meet with the teachers of those classes in the afternoons. Another option has been to reduce the number of subjects to one or two per day from five or six, as long as students are continuing to be on pace and are progressing.

Along with flexibility, consistency is also important for parents. Very young students might require parental assistance

with online instruction. How do they log into apps? What is their password? Yet, parents may also have work schedules that include video conferences and phone conference calls with coworkers or clients.

Summary

The sudden need to employ online learning has exposed a deficiency in public school education. The long-term implications will be a demand for more undergraduate teacher training programs and a call for more leadership training to equip school and district leaders to manage a remote workforce. The need to ensure that all students have a device and access to the Internet has also become clear. Similarly, statewide assessments by education officials to ensure that every district and school is equipped to offer online and blended learning options should be more frequent and complete.

But in the short term, the charge is a swift but orderly move to virtual learning to prevent the loss of up to a third of the current school year. For many students, that much of a break will surely be a setback similar to learning loss during summer vacations.

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One study found that on average, students' achievement scores declined over summer vacation by one month's worth of school-year learning. Those declines were sharper for math than for reading, and the extent of loss was larger at higher grade levels. They also concluded that income-based reading gaps grew over the summer, given that middle class students tended to show improvement in reading skills while lower-income students tended to experience loss.[18]

By maximizing the tools at their disposal, providing proper support for their teachers, and setting reasonable expectations for students and families, districts can offset the impact of the COVID-19.

Endnotes

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