



Considerations for Teaching and Learning Guidance Document

During this time, Nebraska's education mission remains the same - to prepare all Nebraskans for earning, learning, and living. In an alternate learning environment, school districts/school systems have an opportunity to innovate so all students, across all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and abilities, have equitable access to continued learning outside of a "traditional" classroom.

Continuity of Learning plans offer a snapshot of how school districts/school systems are serving students during this time. The implementation of and continuous refinement of these plans requires an examination of many "traditional" practices including grading, attendance, scheduling, and more. Given the current context, teaching and learning will look, feel, and sound different. Continuity of Learning plans are a great tool to communicate the expectations for students, teachers, the school, and the district with the school community. As such, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) recommends each school district/school system make their Continuity of Learning known to the public and provide updates to the plan as needed.

This health emergency presents multi-dimensional needs for educators, students, families, and communities. Because of the complexities, school districts/school systems may wish to reexamine teaching and learning priorities, approaches, and practices. The interconnectedness of student and family health and well-being, continuation of student learning and growth, as well as serving students with varying needs (i.e. English Learners, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged, etc.), requires careful consideration and planning.

The [Crescendo Education Group](#) offers three principles that frame the NDE's Considerations for Teaching and Learning while operating in an alternate learning environment:

1. Stress related to COVID-19 will negatively impact student academic performance.
2. Student academic performance in an alternate learning environment is more likely to reflect racial, economic, and resource differences.
3. Teachers are being asked to provide high-quality instruction remotely, for which most are not prepared.



Aspirations for School Culture

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. A national non-profit, [Instruction Partners](#), highlights these points:

- Students have regular, personal touchpoints with teachers and/or other school staff to check-in on their basic needs, social-emotional well-being, and academic needs.
- Students have regular touchpoints with their classmates to continue to build community.
- Students engage in learning experiences that are holistic and are guided by both grade-level expectations and student interests.

Additionally, school districts/school systems should provide the time and space for educators to connect and reflect. Educators should not feel pressured to have all the answers to questions/concerns raised by students and families. School leaders should check-in with their staff regularly, pay attention to what educators share, and keep a record of questions or needs that are identified. This is a stressful time. It is important that leaders follow up on unmet needs of their staff and flag any emergency and/or immediate needs.

For more information and resources on student and staff care, please see this resource from the [NDE's Healthy School's Program](#).

Communicating with Families and Caregivers

Students are experiencing a dramatic change in routines, as are parents and caregivers. During this time, it is important that school districts/school systems increase the frequency of communication with parents and caregivers. This helps to ensure that everyone is informed of information related to the continuity of learning. When communicating with families and caregivers, consider the following:

- Parents and caregivers are not expected to replace all the things that would normally happen during a school day. It is important to acknowledge that, in addition to helping students transition into an alternate learning environment, parents and caregivers are also experiencing change (or even trauma) in their own lives.
- Messages about teaching and learning should be communicated in multiple



languages and distributed in multiple platforms. For example, the [Scheduling in the Home Environment](#) resource from the NDE is available in Spanish and English. Consider using a readability app (e.g. [Readable](#)) to determine how easy it is to read the information.

- Communicate the structure of the daily schedule and how remote instruction is going to happen. This includes expectations by role, who students will be meeting with and when, and what support may be needed. It will be important for general education teachers, special education teachers, para-professionals, and specialists to agree on a consistent structure for the daily schedule.
- If the school district/school system is using e-learning, make sure parents/caregivers know the platform, applications, and/or software being used. There should be one primary point of contact at the school for technology-related questions.
- Communicate proactively with parents of students with disabilities. School districts/school systems should communicate their plans to consider or appropriately address the needs of students with disabilities.
- Remember communication is a two-way street. Encourage feedback from parents and caregivers, as they are now the eyes and ears of the learning experience students are having.

Scheduling the “School Day”

In an alternate learning environment, parents/caregivers should not be expected to replicate the school day schedule. School districts/school systems should provide guidance relative to the amount of time students should spend with each content area and for each learning activity. Even with this guidance, parents and caregivers should be reminded they are the expert on their student's individual needs. Example schedules can be tailored to meet the needs of the student and their caregiver's schedules.

The amount of time students spend each day engaged in learning activities should vary by grade level. While school district/school systems leaders ultimately determine appropriate time suggestions for their district/system, the NDE offers the following suggestions:

- Grade Level PK: Approximately 1 hour per day
- Grade Levels K-2: Approximately 1.5 hours per day
- Grade Levels 3-5: Approximately 2 hours per day



- Grade Levels 6-8: Approximately 3-4 hours per day
- Grade Levels 9-12: Approximately 3-4 hours per day

Even with time suggestions, school districts/school systems must be mindful of the trauma students and adults may be experiencing and communicate flexibility. Scheduling can establish a sense of comfort and order through routine. Families can plan together a daily schedule that represents household needs, learning time, and personal needs, allowing student voice and choice in the process. The NDE offers this document, [Scheduling in the Home Environment](#), which includes tips and example schedules.

Emphasis on Feedback and Student Learning Versus Grades

During this difficult and unprecedented time, school districts/school systems should reexamine local policies on grades and grading. It may be impossible to utilize current grading practices in an alternate learning environment and any changes in grading practices should be communicated to students, parents, and caregivers.

When determining the grading practices within an alternate learning environment, it is important to use an equity lens. The practices should reflect overarching beliefs about learning, equity, and student/family well-being. If equity is not considered, traditional grading approaches may negatively-affect students who are economically disadvantaged, students who lack access to a device/the Internet, or students who may not have parents/caregivers to help with learning at home. Absent universal access, grading of work or required "log-ins" at specific times may require resources not available to all learners and can deepen inequities.

Equity-centered approaches to consider:

- Providing more feedback than grades, especially at the elementary and middle school levels.
- Using "Pass" or "Incomplete" instead of traditional numeric or letter grades.
- "Freezing" grades at the point the school entered the alternate learning environment but providing opportunities to students wanting to improve their grade.

The continuation of learning should create opportunities for students to receive feedback on work versus grades alone. School districts/school systems 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.

Professional Learning for Educators

Most teachers and administrators have received little, if any, professional learning related to providing instruction in an alternate learning environment. The shift to this model has been sudden and dramatic. It is important to acknowledge the steep learning curve that may be present for even the most experienced educators. In addition to significant professional changes, many educators are also likely dealing with significant stress and anxiety related to the health and safety of their families and friends. Below are three quick suggestions to support teachers in this transition:

- If e-learning is being used, host brief (and optional) “how to” trainings on the platform used to deliver instruction. The training can include a tech component (e.g. here is how you share your screen).
- Provide a checklist of the most important skills needed for the e-learning platform. For example, the NDE has created [Tips and Tricks for Zoom](#).
- Host optional, regularly scheduled office hours to support educators as they transition and adapt to the alternate learning environment.

It is important to consider **what** professional learning can be provided and **how** the professional learning can be provided. Professional learning should reflect continuity of learning plans, and it should consider teacher and administrator capacity. It is likely that most, if not all, professional learning will have to be facilitated remotely. School districts/school systems should consider synchronous, asynchronous, or blended professional learning models. Each model has advantages and disadvantages but all models offer the opportunity for educators to engage in high-quality professional learning.

The resources available from Instruction Partners (located [here](#)) can be a starting point for building teacher knowledge of remote teaching and learning. Outschool is offering [free teacher training, webinars and resources](#) for educators and district leaders on how to adapt their teaching practices to a virtual classroom. Also, the NDE has developed professional learning resources including:

- [Screencasting Apps for Teachers](#)

- [Creating e-learning in OER Commons](#)

Similar to students, teachers should be offered feedback on their instruction versus formal evaluations. If an evaluation of a certificated employee was scheduled to be completed after March 13, 2020, the actual classroom observations (as required by Nebraska Revised Statute 79-828 (2)) are not possible because of the need to protect the health and safety of students and staff. Also, all previously-approved evaluation policies and procedures under section 79-318(5)(h) on file with the NDE do not require actual classroom observations for an entire instructional period for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year.

Supporting Students with Disabilities

More than ever, it is important for families and schools to collaborate and communicate regarding services for students with disabilities. The NDE's [Q&A for Providing Special Education](#) states "Ensuring compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act should not prevent any school from offering educational programs through distance instruction." If the district continues to provide educational opportunities in an alternate learning environment, this includes provision of special education and related services, too, as part of a continuity of learning plan.

Instruction for students with disabilities that are on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) may be provided by special education staff, including related service providers. School districts/school systems will need to address translation and interpreting needs for students and families when developing and providing instructional materials. This can occur through a variety of means including:

- Paper packets or worksheets, which could be distributed and collected several times a week at a central location, while following Directed Health Measures;
- Textbooks;
- Telephone instruction;
- Digital resources (take into account availability of broadband); and
- Instruction via the school's e-learning platform or other platforms (e.g. Skype, FaceTime, or Zoom).

School districts/school systems should modify instructional materials/resources for students with high or unique support needs (i.e. such as students who are deaf, deaf-



blind, or blind) and/or students who are on a 504 plan to meet the needs of each individual student. Information and materials must be provided, as appropriate, in alternate accessible formats to facilitate effective communication to all students.

Supporting English Learners

When supporting English Learners (ELs) in an alternate learning environment, begin by connecting with students and families to determine what support is needed. If e-learning is included in the continuity of learning, ensure that all students have appropriate technology, devices, and Internet access. If not, alternate options should be provided. It is important to foster consistent collaboration between EL and classroom staff to ensure best practices for language acquisition are implemented and to differentiate grade level instruction. For example, it may be necessary to provide content-specific vocabulary lists for ELs.

Other considerations for supporting ELs include:

- Identify the language demands of instruction, learning, and assessment and provide appropriate supports based on student language proficiency. Students with lower levels of English proficiency may require more personalized instruction, such as phone calls or individual online sessions.
- Utilize audio/video to explain and demonstrate content, allowing students to both read and listen to academic language.
- Create opportunities for students to produce content-specific, academic language both written and orally.
- Provide tutorials on how to use online resources and supports, such as online translators. Consider providing established office hours with interpreters available to support students and families.
- Create opportunities for virtual interaction between students to foster the sharing of ideas and language, and to maintain community.
- Leverage technology to further individualize instruction, allow for student to student and student to teacher interaction, connect students with language supports, etc.
- Chunk material and allow ELs additional time to complete tasks.
- For families with students in multiple grades, coordinating around common themes may help students learn together.

Additional resources to support ELs are located on the NDE e-learning page (located [here](#)).



References:

[Considerations for State, District, School Leaders per Parent Communications](#) (SETDA)

[Considerations for Teaching and Learning during COVID-19](#) (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction)

[Continuous Learning Task Force Guidance](#) (Kansas Department of Education)

[Equity Considerations for Online & Distance Learning](#) (Great Lakes Equity Center)

[Indiana Continuous Learning Guidance](#) (Indiana Department of Education)

[Recommendations for Grading During Covid-19 School Closures](#) (Crescendo Education Group)