Addressing COVID-19 Online Learning Challenges: First Questions for State Chiefs

The public health crisis surrounding COVID-19 has led to long-term school closures across the country, creating a need to transition to online learning environments. However, 41 percent of districts report that they are not prepared to lead online learning for all students. To help address this, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) have outlined a series of foundational actions that state leaders can take to assess district needs and create immediate and long-term plans. In doing so, state leaders should consider the following questions and recommendations to leverage existing and external resources and scale the most impactful ones.

TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE: How can you ensure and sustain equitable connectivity infrastructure and availability of devices in your state?

The current pandemic reveals serious implications of the "homework gap," where vulnerable student populations — particularly from low-income families — do not have regular at-home internet access. The U.S. Senate reports that 12 million students from around the country are impacted by the gap, facing limited opportunities to receive educational services. Furthermore, 17 percent of students do not have access to a computer at home.

Chief state school officers can lead by:

- Taking advantage of the CARES Act, which provides over $13.5 billion that may support the technical infrastructure necessary for online learning. State chiefs can also consider submitting waivers authorized under the CARES Act to temporarily relieve restrictions on use of other federal funding sources on technical infrastructure.
- Assessing students' at-home access immediately to procure broadband services and devices to the most impacted regions and communities, especially low-income, transient or otherwise vulnerable families.
- Investigating public-private partnerships. See SETDA's compilation of national and state programs that provide students and families with access to devices and the internet.
- Collaborating with state edtech directors, chief information officers, and district technology coordinators to provide ongoing technical support to families and students as they implement online learning.
- Leveraging community resources. For example, local libraries are checking out mobile hotspots to families, while other districts are deploying school buses equipped with Wi-Fi capabilities to residential neighborhoods.
- There are multiple requests to the FCC to temporarily allow schools to use E-rate to provide at-home access. Should the FCC move forward with this request, state and local E-rate coordinators can collaborate to leverage this funding.

ACTIVE LEARNING CONTENT: Are you curating and delivering digital content that promotes active learning strategies to families and students?

State leaders can help districts sustain learning opportunities in an online environment by curating and delivering engaging digital content across subject areas to students and families. Such content must promote students' active engagement and continuous learning with the material. Content should not simply take the form of prerecorded videos and readings that students will passively click through. State leaders additionally have the responsibility to guide educators away from purchasing content that may not effectively ensure learning.

In curating and delivering digital content, state leaders must realize that the most vulnerable student populations have different needs. Students with disabilities may not be familiar with a digital learning environment and lack of access to a trained educator who can guide them through content. English learners may require access to specialized digital content. Young students may require active supervision from parents and caregivers to manage technical difficulties, and many of those parents and caregivers are working full time. Finally, researchers highlight the importance of unstructured, unplugged time for all learners and especially for young students, who benefit from social interactions with their families.

Chief state school officers can lead by:
- Creating and sustaining an active learning content hub. State leaders do not have to recreate the wheel, as there are ample opportunities to link to content created from other states or organizations. For example, Michigan's adapted version of the ISTE Standards for Students provides a framework by which the state's Open Educational Resource (OER) hub is organized, providing an on-ramp that educators can use to incorporate active learning strategies. Utah provides standards-aligned OER through the Utah Education Network. Organizations like EdReports also provide high-quality, comprehensive, open and free curricula.
- Leveraging existing rubrics to curate appropriate, vetted content. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's #GoOpen Launch Packet provides useful content rubrics that emphasize student agency and learner variability, while Wisconsin's district online learning plan template calls for experiences aligned to the state's ITL Standards (adapted from the ISTE Standards for Students). SETDA has compiled a number of other evaluation tools.

EDUCATOR TRAINING: Do classroom teachers and school leaders in your state have the necessary training to design, implement and oversee effective online learning?

Even before the outbreak, many educators in the United States did not feel ready to integrate technology into student learning experiences. That issue has become more apparent in recent weeks as schools transition to online learning. Both classroom teachers and school leaders need professional learning opportunities, where they can learn how to design, implement and oversee effective online learning. State leaders must keep in mind that this professional learning cannot be achieved in a one-and-done format that employs passive adult learning (e.g. reading materials, slide decks). Effective professional learning is supported by ongoing, job-embedded coaching and encourages active learning.

Chief state school officers can lead by:
- Considering how state leaders can use the expanded reach to classroom teachers and school leaders, offered by online platforms, to empower experts who can propagate best pedagogical practices within their school communities. For example, could the state coordinate frequent webinars led by district and instructional leaders who have successfully implemented online learning models?
- Providing flexible means of accessing professional learning resources (e.g. see LearningKeepsGoing.org, as well as Kentucky and Wisconsin's resource hubs as examples). This will be especially important to teachers whose parental or caregiver duties necessitate on-demand, asynchronous access to professional learning resources.
- Creating a help line or online communities that teachers can access to ask questions about online pedagogy, interact with peers about practices that they are incorporating or receive technical support (e.g. see ISTE's COVID-19 Educator Help Desk, which is free and open to all). A similar help line can be created specifically for district leaders seeking policy guidance or access to networks of supporting state partners.
- Developing a long-term plan that includes training, certification and strategic deployment of expert educators and edtech coaches (e.g. see Rhode Island's template for districts developing a comprehensive online learning plan).

ONGOING COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION: How will you continue to collaborate with stakeholders and update strategies as conditions evolve?

Information on COVID-19 is changing rapidly, and strategies appropriate for today may not be so tomorrow. Therefore, districts must not be latched to a singular model of online learning. To ensure that iterative improvements occur as efficiently as possible, there must be robust lines of communication between students, families, educators and leaders to continuously identify and share areas of success and need.

Chief state school officers can lead by:
- Establishing a tiered system of working groups, as well as a clear method of sharing information about how online learning plans should be created, adjusted and rolled out across the state. For example, district or regional working groups can be convened and responsible for articulating their individual online learning plans, determining and measuring metrics of success and convening stakeholders on a regular basis to identify areas of improvement (e.g. SETDA's eLearning Coalition has compiled sample district online learning plans and communication tools). Consensus reached by these district or regional working groups can be regularly communicated to a "central" working group at the state level, which would be in charge of coordinating additional supports based on identified challenges.