

APRIL 2020

Five Things State Leaders Should Do to Ensure Students Have Equitable Access to Learning Opportunities During COVID-19 School Closures



Over the past several weeks, The Education Trust has monitored states' tireless efforts to support districts, schools, educators, and families to ensure the well-being and safety of all students as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads. While that remains our highest priority, we know that states are beginning to identify the actions to take, in partnership with other stakeholders, to ensure that their most vulnerable students, including students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness, foster care, or engaged in the juvenile justice system, have equitable access to the resources they need to thrive while schools are closed and to ensure action will be taken to address lost instructional time.

In order to best support school districts in allocating local, state, and federal resources to ensure all students have access to high-quality learning, we believe states should take the following actions:

- Create and maintain centralized, clear, and regular communication to community stakeholders.
- Maintain and strengthen critical supports for students and families in need.
- Provide guidance and resources to districts on educational services for vulnerable populations.
- Support districts to develop plans with short- and long-term solutions to address COVID-19 challenges.
- Ensure federal stimulus funds are distributed and used equitably.

Create and maintain centralized, clear, and regular communication. School and district leaders and direct-service providers are navigating an enormous volume of information and disinformation about COVID-19 and also managing families' anxieties and concerns. We urge states to:

1. Create a user-friendly, multilingual online hub for families and students to receive up-to-date information and educational resources. The platform should allow families to access links to guidance and materials in multiple languages, as well as to submit questions to state education agencies (SEA) that are responded to in a timely fashion. Beyond online resources, states should consider setting up and advertising telephone hotlines in multiple languages to field questions and concerns or using text message/push notifications to share critical updates.
2. Engage directly with community leaders and organizations to get input and ensure that community needs are met.

Maintain and strengthen critical supports for students and families in need. We urge states to:

1. Opt-in to [Pandemic EBT](#) to provide access to food for both families who have been participating in the school meal program and those who have not but have a high level of need. States should implement Pandemic EBT so that all eligible families seamlessly receive financial support to purchase food without additional application or verification requirements.
2. Work with districts to ensure that students who rely on school meals continue to receive them. Districts should make meals easily accessible for students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, including by coordinating multiple meal pick-up points as well as, if possible, meal drop-offs via school bus routes or other transportation partnerships. The state should also collect and make public data on meal distribution by district.

3. Work with districts to coordinate supports for students with disabilities, via (where possible and supported by the student's IEP and/or 504 plan) telephone or internet lessons and at-home study and activity packets tailored to student needs and to prepare for a return to school that allows for (a) quickly resuming the provision of special education services and (b) providing additional services to address any learning loss due to inaccessibility of distance learning opportunities.
4. Work with districts to coordinate mental health supports for students via multilingual hotlines staffed by counselors, school psychologists, and other relevant staff, and provide lists of resources and supports available to meet students' mental health needs.

Provide guidance and resources to districts on educational services for vulnerable populations. School closures are detrimental to all students who need instructional time and support to reach their academic potential. But this is particularly important for the most vulnerable student populations who need additional supports to ensure that their educational needs are met. The state is well-positioned to provide districts with guidance and resources to provide students access to the additional supports to fulfill their educational needs.

We urge the state to:

1. Leverage their bulk purchasing power and/or partner with businesses and internet providers to offer laptops/tablets and expanded internet service in high-poverty communities to enable all students access to distance learning opportunities. See, for example, [California's partnership with Google to provide mobile hotspots and Chromebooks to students in rural areas](#).
2. Create and provide resources to support English learners and students with disabilities, including a centralized site that houses high-quality instructional materials and language supports. See, for example, the [Louisiana Department of Education's Family Toolbox for Supporting Students with Disabilities](#).
3. Provide professional development for educators to effectively facilitate distance learning. The state can lean on expertise of schools and institutions that already engage in this practice, such as universities or online K-12 providers with track records of success. See [New Hampshire Department of Education's database of resources](#) on distance learning for educators, including webinars and self-guided learning series.
4. Reallocate and repurpose any unspent state McKinney-Vento and Title I funds to help districts meet the urgent needs of students currently identified as homeless, and families and youth who become newly homeless as a result of the economic crisis. See [the Ohio Department of Education's clear and specific guidance here](#) for maximum speed and flexibility of reallocating and increasing McKinney-Vento and Title I Part A funds to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness.

Support district planning to address long- and short-term COVID-19 challenges. Schools and districts are under enormous pressure to ensure that students' needs are met during the emergency school closures. Some districts have far greater capacity to meet these needs than others, and states should be strategically supporting those with the greatest unmet needs.

In order to ensure all students are meaningfully served, states should require district leaders to make publicly available how they and the schools within their boundaries will address the challenges of extended school closures, especially the following equity concerns:

1. How districts will communicate regularly with all students and families in multiple languages and formats.
2. How districts will ensure that students from low-income backgrounds will receive meals, including those who may lack transportation to meal sites, who move frequently, and/or who may be staying outside of the district's boundaries due to homeless or foster care status.
3. How districts will support continuity of learning for all students, and specifically how they will target supports for those who are most vulnerable (students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, English learners, and students experiencing homelessness, foster care, or engaged in the juvenile justice system), including by:
 - a. Addressing inequitable access to learning opportunities during and after school closures, including access to technology and high-quality instructional materials.
 - b. Providing postsecondary transition planning for high school seniors if closures extend through the end of the school year, including providing determinations of independent status for the FAFSA for unaccompanied homeless youth.
 - c. Sharing data about student learning at the end of the 2019-20 school year with parents and families absent annual assessment data.
4. How districts will address the socioemotional and mental health needs of students both during and after school closures.
5. How districts will support and engage educators throughout this period of disruption, including:
 - a. Childcare, sick leave, and telework policies
 - b. Clear guidance on expectations for student instruction and other forms of student support, and a process for obtaining support for students experiencing crisis or in need
 - c. Professional development, especially related to the use of distance learning
6. How districts will explicitly use McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons to be essential personnel and ensure that homeless liaisons have access to the resources needed to continue to identify and serve homeless students, including through new stimulus funds (see below for description of new stimulus funds that can be used for this purpose).
7. How districts will utilize federal funding through the new stimulus package to meet the needs outlined above.
8. How districts will partner with local entities, including both local government agencies and community-based organizations, to meet these needs.

States should (1) ensure that district plans are immediately made available to the public with full transparency and (2) target additional support to those districts with the weakest plans that also have substantial student need. This support could take the form of dedicated SEA staff time to “virtually embed” into the local education agency (LEA) for a short time period, an SEA offer of emergency funding to support a particular need, or an offer for the SEA to create and support implementation of a draft plan on behalf of the LEA if the LEA would welcome such assistance.

Ensure federal stimulus funds are distributed and used equitably. On March 27, 2020, the president signed [the CARES Act](#), providing additional resources to states and school districts to address challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic. \$13.5 billion will be distributed to states and school districts based on Title I formulas. These funds can be used for a variety of purposes based on the state’s unique needs. To ensure these funds are used to support the state’s most impacted students and families, SEAs should ensure funds are targeted to schools with the greatest needs. They should also ensure stakeholder input on use of funds and publicly report on – and require districts to report on – how funds are used. We also urge states to use the 10% of funds allowed for state activities on:

1. Creating or expanding mental health/crisis hotlines and other virtual supports that will be critical for students, educators, and school system employees (or laid off employees) and their families around the state.
2. Ensuring that districts that serve large numbers of students from low-income backgrounds have the additional supports and resources they need to meet the needs of their students.
3. Direct support for McKinney-Vento liaisons in districts with large concentrations of students experiencing homelessness.
4. Direct support for coordinators of programs for special education and English learners in districts with large concentrations of students with disabilities or English learners.

In addition, \$3 billion will be distributed to governors to use on either K-12 or higher education. The CARES Act does not specify how governors must distribute this money but the SEA should ensure funding is targeted toward schools, institutions of higher education, and districts with the greatest needs. SEAs should now begin to think about how to strategically use their state funding streams in coming years to close learning gaps resulting from school closures and ensure all students ultimately meet grade-level standards by supporting students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities who had less access to high-quality educational experiences before this pandemic and whose need for support and services is even more urgent now.

We sincerely appreciate the continuous efforts across the country to support families through this crisis. We know that these are extraordinary times and no single agency or organization has all of the answers. The Education Trust remains ready to support states in any way we can, and commits to being a thought-partner and resource to agencies and organizations throughout the country.