

# Education in the time of COVID-19: From crisis learning to a new normal

VOICE OF EDUCATOR REPORT—JULY 2020

## Executive summary

In June and July of 2020, NWEA® interviewed 22 educational leaders from districts across the United States. These educators represented large and small districts in rural, suburban, and urban areas and a range of low to high poverty levels. We discussed their experience in the spring, their plans for the fall, and their approach to assessment.

While every district had unique challenges, there were common themes that surfaced in every conversation. Across the board, the focus in spring was on keeping students and teachers safe. It was a time of *crisis learning*, with limited to no time to prepare. Summative assessments were suspended in every state, as were grades and attendance in many states and districts. The focus was on safety and engagement and most schools favored reviewing what had already been taught over introducing new content. Schools were accountable for feeding students, reaching students on and offline, providing technology to make remote learning possible, reorienting teachers and students to remote learning, and connecting with students regardless of the learning that was or wasn't taking place. Common challenges faced by districts included limited planning time, overwhelmed teachers, under-supported parents, and new difficulties in achieving equity in education.

For the fall, school leaders are preparing to meet accountability requirements for a “new normal” school year. Regardless of where learning takes place, in the school or the home, they plan to teach students grade-level content with the standard goal of getting students to proficiency for their grade level by the end of the school year. They plan to deliver the required number of instructional days, to take and report attendance, to give grades to students, to track credits earned and needed, and to do all the other instructionally relevant tasks schools normally do. They plan to do this with shifting school models: traditional, remote, and a hybrid of the two. They are preparing to seamlessly shift from one model to another for one or all students, for one or all teachers.

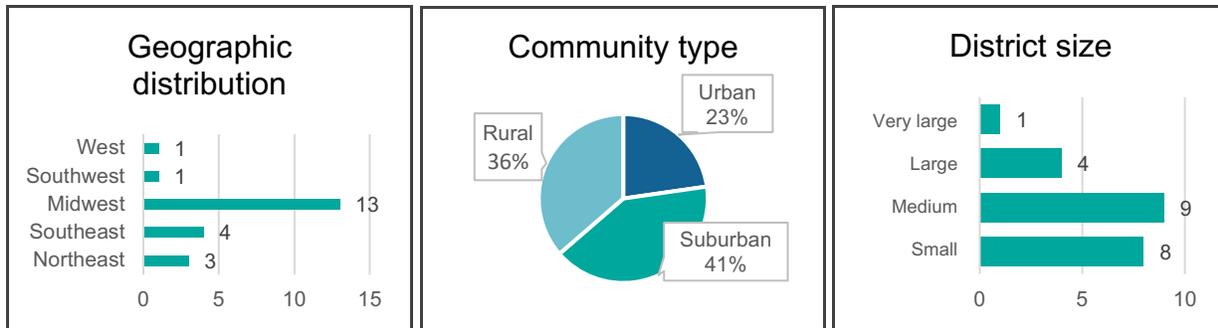
In the fall, districts will face the same challenges they had in the spring, but they will also need to care for the emotional and social well-being of teachers, address the complex logistics of assessment, ensure continuity and comparability between on-site and remote learning, and meet standard accountability requirements. Districts are approaching these common challenges with different solutions.

## Research methodology

NWEA conducted qualitative research consisting of 22 semi-structured in-depth interviews with school district leaders across the country. NWEA staff were trained to conduct these interviews, designed to understand the district leaders' problem sets as managers. Interviewers were provided with an interview guide that included a suggested structure and questions. In each interview, key topics were raised and explored with the district leader.

The top-level topics for the interviews were: school shutdown in the spring, planning for back to school in the fall, plans for assessment, and how roles or engagement changed with stakeholders.

Participating district leaders were nominated by NWEA account managers and had roles that included superintendent, curriculum and instruction director, assessment director, and other similar titles. Participating educators were required to have a leadership role in the district that included responsibility for assessments. They were selected to provide a balanced representation of districts in terms of metropolitan status (rural, urban, suburban), district size, and Title I population. Participating districts were more likely to be from the Midwest.



The NWEA market research team contacted the nominated district leaders and ultimately scheduled interviews. No incentives were provided to participating district leaders beyond a summary report of the research findings provided at the conclusion of the research project. Interviews were conducted over a five-week period in June and July of 2020.

## Findings: Crisis learning in spring

The initial school stoppage in spring started as a temporary disruption and quickly turned into a crisis. Most districts had one or two days at most to prepare for remote teaching. Preparation included providing equitable access to technology, converting in-class teaching to remote instruction, establishing new communication channels with parents, training teachers on technologies they hadn't necessarily used before, determining how to deliver services to students with special needs, and managing the delivery of meals to students whose families depended on schools to prevent hunger.

The challenge was huge and, in general, districts took a “do our best” approach. One assistant superintendent summed it up this way: “We survived. I think that’s the success.”

### Using technology to deliver instruction

Instructional planning quickly focused on the use of technology. Where feasible, districts leveraged technology to support remote learning. They provided students with digital devices (iPads, Chromebooks, laptops) and with internet access. In many districts, local or national vendors offered free devices and internet service for students in need. In other districts, enterprising leaders turned buses into mobile Wi-Fi hotspots, partnered with public television to air classes on TV, or provided instruction by teleconference. Grants and community donations were used to make sure that every student had access to the learning technologies being used by their teachers.

“When I was in the classroom, we would do a unit on Australia. And the kids were just always so interested in the air school where the teacher was in one spot. And in the outback, the kids were so scattered out that the kids would tune into them on the radio. And that's how they would do school. And I thought, ‘That’s where we’re at. Like, that's what we're doing.’ Technology is a little bit better than it was when I was doing that unit 20 some years ago, but it's the same concept.”

**Assistant superintendent**  
Medium-sized rural district in the Midwest

Where technology wasn't equitably available, especially in rural or dense urban areas, districts distributed and then collected printed packets of instructional material for students, often in concert with meal distributions. Regardless of the medium—online or off—the instructional focus was generally on reinforcement and practice with lesser attention given to teaching new content or skills.

## **Focusing on social and emotional well being**

Understandably, social and emotional health was a primary focus in the spring. A good portion of live instructional time—and sometimes all of it—was spent checking in with students and discussing how they were responding to the changes in their school and personal lives. In many cases, instruction was done asynchronously so time spent meeting one-on-one or as a class could be used to maintain connections between students and with the teacher.

## **Relying less on live instruction, more on asynchronous learning**

Overall, students spent significantly less time in live instructional environments once they moved to remote learning. The reduction in teacher-led, live instructional time was stark. One district calculated the reduction in instructional time led by a teacher. Before schools were shut down, in a nine-week term students received an average of 45 hours of instruction plus homework in math and also in reading. Compare that to the instructional time in the nine-week period of crisis teaching when schools were shut down: high school students had a total of 13.5 hours of teacher-led instruction per subject. Middle school students had nine hours per subject. And elementary students had only six hours of teacher-led instruction per subject for the same nine-week period. The rest of student learning time was independent or family led.

Some teachers struggled with the reduction in class time, contrasting it to the six or more hours per day students spent learning in a traditional in-school model. Despite some pushback, the reduced learning time was consistent across districts.

Even with the reduced time, in-person instructional practices generally weren't as effective online and teachers scrambled to find ways to effectively support student learning in this new remote world. They did their best to bridge the gap by providing online videos of the instruction they would have delivered in the classroom, providing digital instructional resources, or by creating lessons for airing on public television made available in so many districts. They worked with students asynchronously through email, texts, and messaging boards offered in their learning management systems and often simply focused on keeping students engaged.

Teachers' instructional focus was generally on review and reinforcement of material previously covered, practicing skills instead of learning new ones. In some districts, much of the spring instructional time would have been dedicated to that kind of reinforcement anyway as well as to test prep. These districts were hopeful that they would have less learning loss because of that.

## **Taking creative curriculum approaches**

Districts experimented with new and old approaches to teaching, using trial and error to find an approach that was effective for their subject and their students. Districts gave teachers room to get creative and they did. They collaborated on cross-curricular projects. They centered learning on current events, taking advantage of student interest in the pandemic and later in the protests against systemic racism. They embraced a flipped classroom approach where students learned on their own time and spent live instruction time asking questions and getting help. Project-based learning gained new interest, as teachers worked to define learning projects that could be done at home, with minimal materials and limited oversight. Teachers created reading and math adventures to engage students in independent learning in the lower grade levels. Many of the creative approaches worked to engage students even if they didn't generate as much learning as would have been gained in the classroom.

## **Erasing barriers to communication**

Teachers collaborated with each other remotely, breaking down barriers to collaboration that are inherent in a traditional school where teachers are isolated in their classroom for most of the day. In the spring's remote context, teachers had more flexibility with their schedules, and some met virtually to share what they were doing, what they

were encountering, what was working and what wasn't. This collaboration allowed common problems to be identified and resolved with more expediency.

Communication and collaboration between district staff and teachers also saw a significant improvement, as they united to face a common challenge of keeping students engaged in learning. In many instances, teachers felt more empowered and district staff felt more connected not only to teachers but also to what was happening in the virtual classroom.

Every district conducted surveys of key stakeholders at the end of the school year to get feedback on the spring. Most districts surveyed parents and teachers and are using what they learned to inform their plans for the fall.

## Facing common challenges

While every district had challenges that were specific to their educational community, there were common challenges that were shared by all the districts we interviewed. Across the board, districts dealt with the same disrupted learning environment as their school day routines were replaced with the unknown.

“As school people—let’s face it—**we’re used to routines**. We do similar tasks at the same time of the year, every year. [...] It just turned everybody who was very routine-by-nature upside down.”

**Assistant superintendent**  
Medium-sized rural district in the Midwest

## LIMITED PLANNING TIME

No one had much time to prepare for what turned into months of remote learning. Most districts had only one or two days of notice that they were closing. In many instances, the closure happened near spring break and was initially expected to last for two or three weeks. Announcements of extended closures, in many states for the remainder of the year, came quickly.

Districts leveraged planned in-service days, spring break, and waiver days for planning time to quickly build out an approach to remote learning. Lesson plans were rapidly revised for a remote environment and teachers were rapidly trained on new tools and new instructional approaches. Despite the shift to remote instruction, the primary focus for districts was the health and safety of their students as evidenced by the universal mobilization to distribute meals to students who normally received breakfast and lunch at school.

## OVERWHELMED TEACHERS

Teachers were immediately drafted to transition to a remote learning context with almost no preparation time. Across the board, districts report that teachers were overwhelmed.

Districts asked teachers to rebuild their lesson plans and restructure their curriculum. They adapted to a new model where most instruction was asynchronous, while direct, live instructional time was dramatically reduced. They recorded instructional videos, learned new software and adopted new online instructional resources. They reached out to students and parents individually at all hours of the day and evening, working to keep students engaged and support parents' efforts to help their children. And students reached out to them well after the conventional school day was over. Teachers operated outside the structure of the classroom and class period, navigating a largely unbound remote learning environment as best they could. They did so from their homes, where many of them had their own children learning from home.

Overall, teachers delivered but they did so on the edge of chaos for a good part of the spring. Consistent and frequent communication with parents became the new norm. Teachers shared their expectations for students, communicated and clarified lesson plans, answered parents' questions, and supported parents who were undertaking

their own trial and error approach to remote learning. While parents often disagreed with the amount of instruction offered, many teachers stated that they had never had such strong and collaborative engagement from parents before.

### UNDER-SUPPORTED PARENTS

The dramatic reduction in live, teacher-led instruction meant that parents became key contributors to their children's learning. The lower the grade level, the more important that parent engagement became.

Parents came to the challenge with no training in how to teach and no familiarity with the curriculum. They discovered that instructional approaches had changed since they were in school. And they found themselves teaching themselves the instructional content in order to help their children. In many cases, they simply couldn't provide the needed guidance and turned back to the teacher for help.

Even when parents were comfortable with the instructional content, they faced plenty of other hurdles. They weren't familiar with the technology tools used by the school. Learning management systems were more difficult to navigate than expected and suddenly schools were called upon to provide technical support to parents.

Parents also struggled to provide their children with access to technology when live classes were scheduled. This was particularly challenging where a parent had more than one child at home sharing a single device. It was even harder when that device was also used by the parent to work from home.

Finally, parents struggled to provide environments that were conducive to learning. Oftentimes parents and their children would respectively work and learn at the kitchen table or on the couch with the usual household background noise and disruptions of other family members. Younger children needed more support, which was difficult for parents to provide if they were working full-time jobs whether they were an essential worker leaving the home or working from home near their child.

**“We know how students come in at [age] five. Why are we expecting that these families are any better prepared to address their educational needs at 7, 11, or 15?”**

**Assistant Superintendent**  
Medium-sized rural district in the Midwest

### AMPLIFIED EQUITY CHALLENGES

The shift to remote learning in the spring amplified existing equity problems, especially where services to students with special needs were not easily provided in a digital environment.

Some equity problems were a matter of logistics, like the distribution of meals to students who qualified to receive them. Others were a matter of materials, as was the case with the digital divide. Here, districts distributed devices and hotspots, created Wi-Fi hotspots out of buses, provided instruction independent of technology, and partnered with vendors and public TV stations to deliver instruction into each student's home.

Students with IEPs were often the last to be supported, with varying degrees of service provided. Across the board, districts pushed as hard as they could to deliver an equitable educational experience to all students, but they weren't always successful. Students that needed in-person assistance often didn't receive it.

One district found that the shift to remote learning provided a new perspective on their success in delivering an equitable education to all students. They realized that they had become accustomed to not reaching a percentage of students, expecting some failure and accepting it. When school shifted to a remote context, some of those failing students began to succeed while others who were successful on-site began to fail. The change in student

performance challenged their acceptance that some students wouldn't succeed and has shaken them out of what they now describe as complacency. They are newly committed to the success of every student in their district.

Districts were also acutely aware of the range of experiences students had in the kinds of learning environments they had at home, the kind of support they received from their parents, and the kinds of resources they could access to supplement the learning offered by their schools. Students in high poverty households were more likely to face significant barriers to learning than were their counterparts in low poverty households. Districts are expecting increased learning gaps between these student populations when they return to school in the fall.

## Findings: Fall planning means being ready for anything

As districts closed out the school year and began looking ahead to fall, they quickly recognized that they would need to be ready for a return to traditional schooling, a continuation of remote learning, or a combination of both.

### Planning as teams

To tackle fall planning, most districts formed teams made up of stakeholders from across the district, assigning each group a different aspect of planning. For example, one district established the following teams:

- District-level oversight team: overall planning, representation on other teams
- Curriculum team: scope and sequence, defining essential skills and standards, remote learning that mirrors in-person learning
- Technology and innovation team: learning management system and instructional tools, ensuring instruction and learning drives the tech and not the other way around
- Facilities and operations team: protocols, PPE, facility needs, deep cleaning requirements and resources

Regardless of the team structures, districts are generally taking a collaborative approach to planning so that many key stakeholders are represented in decisions.

### Gauging spring learning loss

Whether school is opened on site or remotely in the fall, every district must address the learning loss now commonly referred to as the COVID slide. Districts are working to identify power standards to focus learning on critical concepts in the coming year. They are working with teachers to adjust the planned scope and sequence of instruction to focus on those critical concepts and scaffold in the foundational concepts from the previous year. The adjusted scope and sequence of instruction means that every teacher will have a change in their instructional approach, that every teacher will need to modify their lesson plans, leverage new instructional resources, and expand the scope of their instruction.

### Opening schools with remote learning only

Most district leaders talked about remote learning programs as an almost virtual certainty for the fall. They recognized that some percentage of parents simply wouldn't be comfortable sending their children to school until the virus was contained or a vaccine was provided. They didn't expect to see children at school who had family members that were in high risk categories for the virus. Moreover, not providing a remote learning program for them potentially risked significant funding if more than a few students enrolled in virtual schools outside of the district.

Most districts planned to give parents the option of continuing a remote learning program. One district highlighted the fact that some students excelled in a remote context and from an equity perspective believed those students deserved to continue in a learning environment that worked for them. They anticipate offering remote learning to students well past the end of the pandemic.

## SETTING EXPECTATIONS AND PROVIDING STRUCTURE

Across the board, districts agreed that for fall they needed to establish stronger expectations and provide a clear and well-defined structure for remote learning for students, teachers and parents.

The suspension of accountability in the spring won't continue in the fall. Attendance will be taken and grades will be given for student work. This is a critical change from the spring, and students, teachers and parents all need to understand how that works in a remote environment. Minimally, they need to know what qualifies as attending class, how often attendance is required, what work is graded and how grades are determined, whether participation in live instruction is required, and the required cadence and frequency of communication. Several districts reported significant value in the spring communication between teachers and parents and at least one district is setting standards for the timing and content of those conversations. Other districts are setting boundaries on student communication with teachers, limiting the hours for communication so that teachers are not communicating with students in the late evening.

## ADAPTING THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH AND FOCUSING INSTRUCTION

Defining expectations and structure provide the context for learning, but the pedagogy and curriculum for in-class learning don't transfer "as is" to a remote context. Simply put, what works in person doesn't necessarily work online. Educators learned a lot in spring and will be applying that learning to their fall plans. Some districts are even making their own instructional videos for teachers, providing teachers with videos on everything from best practices for remote instruction to the use of instructional technology tools and resources.

Teachers are adapting their instructional approach as they adjust their lesson plans to reflect changes in the required scope and sequence of instruction. They are leveraging digital resources, planning for limited live instruction. Asynchronous learning will be the name of the game. Students simply can't sit in front of a computer for six to seven hours a day. Additionally, many students don't have learning environments that aren't disrupted by the rhythms of family life at home. Districts are assuming a significant reduction in live instructional time and working to determine what that means for accountability metrics like attendance. One district is setting a minimum number of live instructional hours per week and a minimum total hours of instruction per week, by grade.

## CHOOSING THE RIGHT TOOLS

Remote learning will continue to largely be a digital experience. The digital tools districts will use need to be effective in both on-site and remote contexts—and they need to be easy to use. Districts shared the challenges they had providing technical support to parents and helping younger students use online resources.

Whereas the use of different tools across classrooms and schools had little negative impact when used on site, new problems arose in a remote setting where parents suddenly had to navigate multiple learning management systems and instructional resources. Districts are taking a hard look at the tools they are using across the district, asking if they work for remote, hybrid and on-site schooling, if they support collaboration between teachers and parents, and if parents can easily navigate the tools and check on their child's activity. For middle and high school especially, districts made it clear that they need one communication channel between teachers and parents—not one per teacher.

One district leader pointed to the need for tools to provide continuity of learning, too, so students can seamlessly transition from on-site to remote and back as needed without missing any instruction or learning time. There's a sense that the spring's "use whatever works" approach to online resources may shift to a much more controlled approach.

## Opening as a traditional on-site school

Every district is ultimately working toward a return to the traditional school environment but there is a significant lack of clarity on when and how that can happen. The politicization of school openings along with the resurgence of the virus in so many states has made this even more difficult.

In interviews conducted in early June, administrators were optimistic that they would be able to re-open schools and were discussing remote learning as a backup option or an approach for providing students who were quarantined due to virus exposure with continued education during their quarantine. As time passed, that optimism faded as most district leaders acknowledged that return to full on-site schooling was unlikely any time in the fall. Only those small districts in very rural areas with little to no active COVID cases indicated a commitment to a full reopening on site. Since we completed our interviews, press reports have indicated many other districts retreating from plans to re-open on time and on site.

The major objectives for returning to on-site schooling were the emotional and social health of students and the confidence that it was the best environment to make up for the spring learning loss and get students back on track. District leaders planning for a return to on-site schooling generally planned to assess students in their first few weeks back in school in order to inform instructional plans for students. As optimism about returning to on-site schooling faded, some district leaders continued to state their desire to assess students when they returned, but their reason was less to quickly determine the students' learning needs and more to ensure testing occurred before schools shut down again.

### **Trying the best of both worlds: A hybrid approach**

Most of the districts we spoke to expected to open school with a hybrid model, where students would attend school for one or two days a week and learn remotely on other days. Districts were generally preparing for a two-days-on, two-days-off schedule, although some districts were considering alternate days or staggered weeks.

One district was planning for half the students to attend on Mondays and Tuesdays, half the students to attend on Thursdays and Fridays, and for Wednesday to be used for intervention, professional learning for teachers, instructional planning, and communication with parents.

Another district was working on an approach that would provide on-site schooling for all students in grades K–5 and remote learning for students in grades 6–12. Their reasoning was that students in the higher grades were more likely to succeed in a remote learning setting and that providing on-site schooling for younger students would provide a better economic support for their community. However, they worried that they wouldn't have teachers with the right skills since they expected to have to double their elementary teachers to meet social distancing requirements.

Hybrid programs require districts to provide an educational experience that meets non-pandemic requirements for minimal instructional days, attendance, and proficiency in grade-level standards by the end of the year. The challenge for districts largely comes down to logistical constraints and staffing. On the logistics side, they are tackling transportation challenges given social distancing requirements, the need to schedule students in a family to the same on-site schedules, meal delivery, and more. Staffing presents different challenges, since teachers will be spending their days with students in class and will not be available for any substantial engagement with students who are learning at home. Districts are trying to structure a hybrid plan that minimizes teacher engagement during at-home learning days while also reducing reliance on parents. These two objectives are generally in conflict, particularly for younger learners.

### **Acknowledgement that remote learning must be offered**

Regardless of the reopening model adopted by a district, every district is expecting to offer a remote learning program in the fall. Every district acknowledged that a percentage of their parents would not be open to sending their children back to school until the virus was contained or a vaccine were available. In order to retain these students in their district and not lose what could be 20% or more of their enrollment-based funding, districts are planning to provide remote learning programs for these students.

Additionally, remote learning programs will give districts the ability to provide students uninterrupted learning if they are exposed to the virus and must be quarantined. In such an event, the student can participate in the remote learning program during their quarantine period.

Therefore, unless a district is offering remote-only instruction, they are preparing multiple programs that they will execute simultaneously.

### The stoplight model

One district is using a stoplight model where green represents a full, traditional on-site program. Yellow would represent a hybrid approach, with two cohorts of students. One would attend school on Monday and Tuesday, the other on Thursday and Friday. On Wednesdays, schools would be deep cleaned. Red would represent a fully remote program.

The district's goal is to be fluid, to be able to move from one color to another, based on the virus activity in their community. They're envisioning being green for a period of time with all students in school and then having to shift to a hybrid model, yellow, for a period of weeks. Then shifting back to green or red, as dictated by the threat of the virus.

A key concern for this district's leader is the need to prevent a sense of chaos for their school community, to give students confidence that they can succeed academically, and to give teachers confidence that they can teach in new contexts and a fluid environment.

### Facing common challenges

While every district is facing challenges that are specific to their communities and schools, there are common challenges for the fall that surfaced in our conversations with district leaders.

#### LIMITED TIME TO PLAN

Across the board, districts are struggling with the limited time they have to plan. At the time of our interviews, no district had received definitive guidance from the state. There was overwhelming consensus that they needed to wait for state guidance to develop their school reopening plans. At the same time, they felt an acute need to move forward. Critical concerns focused on communicating with teachers and parents, addressing shortfalls in materials and personnel, and placing orders for PPE that would be required to open schools.

Without state guidance, they were moving forward with tentative planning, realizing that waiting would leave them with insufficient time to plan, often just three to four weeks. They recognized that they risked developing plans that would have to be fully revised if their plans were not consistent with state guidance.

**“What happens if [equipment] is backordered? What happens if we don't have it? Can we even open school? We're waiting for money. We're waiting more to see the public health orders. Once we know a direction, then it'll take us some weeks to schedule and implement it, but we don't even fully know the direction we're going.”**

**Executive director**  
Large suburban district in the Southwest

## THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH OF TEACHERS

As districts look ahead and plan for on-site and remote learning, many are facing significant pushback from teachers. Some districts have a large percentage of teachers in higher age brackets and/or with underlying conditions that put them in higher risk categories for the virus. These teachers are not prepared to return to on-site schooling. They aren't willing to risk their health, perhaps their lives, to teach on site.

In contrast, other teachers are loath to continue teaching remotely. They deeply dislike the experience, miss the daily, personal engagement with students that is a key source of satisfaction for them, and are even considering leaving teaching if they are asked to teach remotely for any extended period.

**“We’ve had some teachers that said, ‘If you ask me to come back to school full face-to-face, I will resign. It’s too dangerous.’ We have some teachers who said, ‘if you tell me I have to do this again next year, and it’s fully virtual, I will resign.”**

**Executive director**  
Large suburban district in the Southwest

While district leaders are confident that teachers will take care of students' social and emotional health, they are worried about teachers' own social emotional health. Every district leader we talked to expressed concern about the demands on teachers, the importance of supporting their needs, minimizing their stress, and setting them up for success.

Just figuring out which teachers to assign to what classes, on-site or remote, is difficult on its own. One district shared their concern that they would have to move subject-specific middle school teachers to teach elementary classes, where teachers covered all subjects. They also thought they might need to move high school teachers to middle school and shared their concern that the teachers were not trained or prepared for the different demands of younger students. Ultimately, they were concerned that teachers would not be prepared to succeed and would be overwhelmed with the challenge.

Even when teachers are in the ideal teaching role, they will still face the stress of massive change. Virtually every teacher will need to adjust their lesson plans to incorporate concepts that are normally taught in the spring of the previous school year. They will have to do so with very little lead time, given that state plans are late in coming and districts don't have funds to bring teachers back early.

Teachers with remote classes will have to further adjust their lesson plans to adapt to the online learning environment. In most cases, the changes to their instructional approach will be significant. And while teachers had a crash course in remote schooling in the spring, in the fall they will need to take attendance, assess their students, and give grades. The demands in the fall will be higher.

Teachers returning to on-site classes will also face significant changes. They are being asked to adjust their tried-and-true routines for instruction and classroom management to an environment where social distancing is the norm. No longer can a teacher ask students to take a paper and pass the rest down a row. Students can't exchange papers. They can't grade each other's quizzes, work in pairs to solve problems, or share any learning resources like math manipulatives unless they are cleaned in between uses. Teachers need to engage their students, teach them and help them, while keeping students distant from each other and maintaining their own distance from their students. That's hard enough with older students but may prove much more difficult with younger learners.

On-site teachers will be asked to enforce mask and social distancing discipline and to maintain clean classrooms, contribute to regular deep cleaning of their classrooms, and monitor the health of their students all while making up the spring learning loss and delivering on-grade instruction.

It's possible that teachers won't be either remote or on site but will have to shift from one to the other and back as schools close and reopen in response to the virus spread in their community. The possibility of that change and the concerns that the pandemic threat represents on its own are another source of stress for teachers.

Finally, the public attention on the learning loss students have already suffered, the need to make that up, the pressure to open schools in order to support economic recovery, and the concern that support for teachers will turn into demands are all on the minds of district leaders as they look ahead to fall.

## **CONTINUITY**

Another significant challenge facing districts in the fall is the need to provide continuity in on-site and remote learning.

Districts need to do more than set up separate educational programs, one on site and one remote. They also need to ensure that students can move from one program to the other seamlessly. The need for continuity between the programs raises the bar for the specificity of the plans that need to be developed and puts more pressure on teachers to collaborate and coordinate as the year progresses.

## **COMPARABILITY**

Districts are also concerned with equity across the learning modes. Regardless of whether students are learning on site or at home, they need to receive equivalent educational programs with equal opportunity to learn and engage. Districts are committed to high levels of learning for every student.

One district is addressing this by building a plan that has in-class learning and virtual learning mirror each other. They plan to have a complete, full-year instructional plan for every grade and subject by the start of the school year. To ensure the programs mirror each other, they are tightening up their scope and sequence and planning professional learning for teachers so that all the teachers are on the same page. They're planning on training teachers on the same technology tools and using them in all learning contexts. They've described the work as a monumental task where they are building a structure for students so that it's consistent across grade levels and learning environments but still manageable for staff and beneficial for students. They are also focused on the challenge of maintaining a mirrored approach to instruction while still embracing the different best practices for in-class versus virtual instruction.

Another district is solving the challenge of comparability between on-site and remote programs by using the same remote instructional approach adopted for students learning at home with students in the school. The difference will be the location of learning and the in-person engagement with teachers.

## **MANAGING MULTIPLE MODELS**

Districts share a common challenge of managing remote learning programs within their current structures. A few districts are considering whether to essentially create a separate division with a remote learning manager and dedicated remote learning teachers to manage all remote learning, or to outsource remote learning altogether.

## **ADMINISTERING FALL ASSESSMENTS**

All the districts we interviewed traditionally use NWEA's interim assessment at the beginning of the school year as a screener to identify students at risk academically and to provide insight into what students are ready to learn, to inform instruction. They also use the assessment in the winter and spring to measure student growth and to continue to inform instruction. All the districts expressed a strong need to identify what students' learning needs were given the learning loss they expect most students to have suffered and the lack of data on student learning that would normally come from end-of-year grades and assessments.

Planning for on-site assessments in a hybrid environment and/or supporting remote administration of assessments both require complex logistical planning that districts were just beginning to address.

Early in our interviews, district leaders were expecting schools to reopen with on-site learning. But they expressed concerns that schools would not stay open and therefore planned on administering assessments as quickly as they could once school opened. Their goal was to get good information on each students' learning needs as early as they could to inform the instructional plans for each student.

As we continued interviewing districts, the optimism that schools would reopen in a traditional way faded and districts increasingly expressed their expectation that they would have to shift to a hybrid or fully remote model for the start of fall. They expressed concern at using limited on-site instructional time for assessment but felt the tension of losing the insights they needed that assessments would provide.

Upon learning that they could administer MAP® Growth™ remotely to students learning at home, they shared their cautious relief and new concerns. Across the board, district leaders emphasized their need for quality data. They shared their concerns that test scores could be impacted by family interference, disruptive home environments, and technical challenges. They clarified that if some students were testing remotely and others were testing on site, that the data needed to be comparable—that a student would obtain the same score regardless of where they took the test. Districts were referred to school and family remote testing support materials provided by NWEA to learn more, including promising information on the psychometric analysis of remote testing.

Except for a couple of exceptions, all the district leaders shared their preference for administering the assessment on site if possible but a willingness to administer assessments remotely if necessary. One district used test scores for high stakes decisions and therefore was understandably not open to anything but a highly secured, on-site testing environment.

## Conclusion

Despite having virtually no time to prepare, districts survived the spring by focusing on health and safety, giving their teachers flexibility, and loosening accountability requirements. They experienced unexpected improvements in communication and yet lost touch completely with a percentage of the student population, experimented with new approaches to curriculum and instruction, and exposed equity issues. They learned by doing and they are bringing that learning to their fall plans.

As they look ahead to the fall, districts are preparing for the unknown but committed to providing students with the same learning, wherever it occurs. They are preparing for a return to learning accountability that changes the expectations for remote learning and requires the reintroduction of basics like attendance, assessments, and grades in a planning environment that isn't well defined. Despite the challenges they face, they are working together to provide students with the learning they need, whether that happens in school, in home, or in both.