

Virtual Listening Tour 2020

BEST PRACTICES IN PREPARING EDUCATORS AND FAMILIES FOR DISTANCE LEARNING

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused life-altering disruptions in many people's personal and professional lives. Data from our listening tour show that when Florida's education system transitioned to distance learning, educators, students, and families experienced myriad challenges. Educators pivoted from face-to-face instruction to distance learning almost overnight, but many lacked the experience, familiarity, and technical skills to be successful. According to [The Hechinger Report](#), educators should receive support for several weeks or better yet, several months, before launching a distance learning program. Resuming school safely will likely include some form of distance learning and educators as well as families will need support. A series of key themes and recommendations emerged from our interviews and surveys of over 4,000 parents and educators and families from across the state.

THEMES

Educators and families were not adequately prepared to successfully facilitate distance learning.

In communities across Florida, schools were forced to quickly shift to distance learning, resulting in multiple challenges for students, parents, educators and administrators. Lacking the benefit of in-person teaching left many struggling to navigate new technologies and engage students in collaborative and effective learning experiences. A third of educators responded that they felt unprepared to support parents and caregivers with home-based instruction. Families also found the shift to distance learning to be a significant challenge. Some educators recognized that while they'd been using a platform with parents to communicate, they had never trained the parents how to use it.

Limited access for educators to collaborative peer support impacted teaching.

The absence of professional learning communities stymied the ability for districts to connect with and support educators remotely. Poor access and lack of an opportunity for advanced planning limited how districts responded to these new demands. Thirty-six percent of surveyed educators responded that they consider support from peers or colleagues the most impactful form of professional development. Building professional learning communities around distance learning fosters innovation and improves instruction.

Districts that lacked well-trained teams accustomed to using technology lost critical instruction time as educators and parents transitioned.

Eighty-two percent of teachers reported that they were not fully prepared to utilize the technological platforms and programs that facilitated distance learning. This learning curve impacted how educators connected with students, communicated with parents and assessed student learning. Those educators previously implementing technology as part of their in-person instruction fared far better.

CONSIDERATIONS

PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE, SYSTEM-WIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN DISTANCE LEARNING FOR THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY, INCLUDING EDUCATORS, SUPPORT STAFF, ADMINISTRATORS AND PARENTS.

Successful distance learning instruction is a result of educators and leaders effectively designing and facilitating online learning communities using high-impact technical and pedagogical tools. There is a need to also address the technical competency of educators, students, and parents/caregivers alike so the platform complements instruction (age-appropriate, accessible, familiarity of use). The School District of Indian River County provided comprehensive technology [professional development](#) for the past two summers, helping educators and families quickly pivot. Miami-Dade County Public Schools developed an innovative [virtual training and development system](#) designed specifically for non-instructional staff, keeping them engaged and developing their skills during the closure. This innovation not only benefited the team but also fostered a sense of community and commitment. Polk County Public Schools developed an online [collaboration space](#) for educators, school leaders, community members and district staff to share and talk about current issues. This added support engages the entire community and improves access to resources.

There are a number of educators who recognize the benefits of integrating technology into their teaching. By creating communities focused on enhancing both their technical and instructional skills, educators enhance learning. Administrators must champion this effort and recognize the critical importance that technology plays in education. The School District of Osceola County has long embraced this model for its educators and continued the professional learning communities electronically during the COVID-19 school closures, allowing teachers to connect and learn from one another as they overcame challenges. [Horizon Middle School](#) implemented an evidence-based professional learning community to improve student learning. These early investments enabled the school district to better manage the closure and foster collaboration among educators.

LEVERAGE EDUCATOR EXPERTISE AND EXISTING STRUCTURES TO CREATE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AROUND DISTANCE LEARNING.

INTEGRATE TECHNOLOGY AS A VITAL INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENT IN ALL CLASSROOMS TO SUPPORT HIGH-QUALITY, INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING.

Technology augments instruction in many beneficial ways. Well-trained educators will successfully use technology in the classroom and out. As distance learning becomes more prevalent, educators must be ready to instruct students in multiple ways. The School District of Palm Beach County's [Technology Trailblazer Program](#) is one example of an approach to train educators on incorporating technology into their instructional time. In addition, Pinellas County Schools has a dedicated [Digital Learning Department](#) that provides ongoing professional development in the classroom so educators can successfully leverage technology to increase student engagement. There are also resources available at no cost through the [Online Learning Community](#) offered by Florida Virtual School.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, a national leader in researching and improving how teachers deliver learning, launched a comprehensive analysis of the responses and approaches taken by birth through 12th grade public and private education programs throughout Florida during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of a Virtual Listening Tour, researchers interviewed students, parents, teachers, early childhood and K-12 educators and administrators about the effect of COVID-19 and how it impacted the delivery of educational services. The work was made possible with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.