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Innovations in Teaching During the Pandemic

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an unprecedented challenge to the world's educational systems since March 2020. As schools adapted to distance learning, new challenges and concerns emerged for students who are historically marginalized and underserved. Students with multiple and intersecting marginalized identities are disproportionately more likely to be impacted negatively by the pandemic not only academically but also psychologically.¹

However, in the face of adversity, many educators have responded by devising innovative approaches to support students and families. Lessons from such innovations may productively shape educators' practices in future contexts, even beyond the pandemic-induced distance learning. This brief summarizes recent research on some innovations and provides reflection questions to support educators in carrying forth these creative solutions.



Introduction

In this brief, we reviewed findings from four recent research studies to better understand the ways public K–12 schools implemented remote learning both in the United States and internationally during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings reveal promising practices in remote learning as well as potential changes in schooling that will likely continue upon the return to in-person instruction.

Finding #1

In some cases, the adoption of remote learning, although forced, has **increased creativity in lesson planning for teachers and in student learning activities.**² Using digital tools and online resources, teachers implement a variety of instructional approaches, such as combining synchronous and asynchronous delivery modes and student-led discussion and teaching.² When successful, **these multi-mode instructions effectively engage students with different learning styles to attain their individually targeted outcomes at their own pace and with timely support from the instructors.**² Without the practical constraints of place and set hours, virtual learning may provide some students greater access to the abundance of online resources.³ Additionally, the use of innovative technology may allow some students to be more creative online than in their traditional classrooms. Knowing the importance of social interactions in learning, some teachers also use social media platforms to facilitate team-based projects, which may allow students to be seen and heard who might otherwise not speak much during class.³

Finding #2

In some places, **online education has allowed for greater flexibility to meet the changing needs of students,² along with providing more professional development opportunities for teachers.**⁴ Some schools are able to offer their teachers additional professional development on hygiene strategies, online education, and mental health.⁵ Staff meetings are adjusted and held virtually, which in some cases also makes them more efficient with respect to the use of teachers' valuable time.⁴ Some schools have adjusted teachers' instructional time. **The increased level of flexibility is also evident in assessments of student achievement.**³ Many teachers alter their assessment strategies in the online environment. This affords 1) a greater focus on evaluating students' mastery of the course materials and 2) implementation of flexible deadlines for assignment completion, which could help alleviate the stress for students who have other family responsibilities or have unstable internet connections.² Qualitative studies show that, in some places, students felt that their teachers were more accessible and that the feedback they received from teachers on their school work was more helpful than prior to the pandemic.² Similarly, teachers also reported that they provided more feedback for student assignments than normal. With this greater level of flexibility, some students also became more independent during remote learning.³

Finding #3

Additionally, in many spaces **frequency and quality of family–school communication have increased and improved during online learning.**³ **Schools and districts have taken various actions to keep parents informed about COVID-19 as well as to support parents with more resources in order to assist student learning at home.** Examples include sending class packets to homes, airing instructional presentations on local broadcasting stations, and meeting with parents/caregivers through video conferencing.² Many school leaders plan to maintain these modes of regular communication with parents as a crucial practice to provide equitable and individualized support and resources for students from diverse backgrounds. The use of digital tools aids in increasing this communication and establishing better relationships between educators and parents/caregivers.³ For these benefits, schools and school leaders are willing to continue offering virtual or hybrid instruction.

Finding #4

In the reviewed studies, **educational leaders have also amplified concerns over inadequate funding,**⁴ as it hinders some districts' ability to provide high-quality instruction and to support students. It is important to note that funding is particularly imperative in addressing disparities in students' learning opportunities, access to technology resources, and professional development opportunities for teachers who work with underserved student populations.⁴ This is also important for students with special education needs and for multilingual learners. Resources and guidance for teachers to address students' social and emotional well-being are equally important.⁵

Reflection Questions

“...I am heartened by the lessons we have learned as educators in this moment. What’s most energizing to me is how we will continue to use the power of virtual instruction to disrupt barriers like staffing, space, and time to optimize student learning and experiences (and educator experiences, too).” —*Chief executive officer of a charter management organization*⁴

Moving forward, we offer the following reflection questions for educators to consider in order to maximize the advantages of remote learning toward more equitable instruction upon returning to in-person instruction.

Reflection Questions for Classrooms (Teachers & Teacher Leaders)

- ▶ What technology tools did you implement during remote learning to engage your students?
- ▶ Of these technology tools, which ones served what groups of students best? Are these tools equitably accessible for students from diverse backgrounds?
- ▶ What factors (e.g., student-teacher ratio; teacher-parent collaboration; access to internet and technology) might have a major impact on the quality of instructional support you provide for your historically marginalized students?
- ▶ What types of professional development would best meet your needs in supporting student learning in a multi-modal delivery method?
- ▶ During remote learning, some students became more independent in working on their school assignments. How will your lesson plans be directly affected by this independence, and how will you ensure that students receive adequate support?

Reflection Questions for Schools (Site Leaders)

- ▶ What are some of the innovative strategies the school has adopted to facilitate effective communications between teachers and parents from diverse backgrounds (e.g., language, culture, and education level)?
- ▶ How will the school ensure and promote closer communication with parents from diverse backgrounds? What are some potential barriers for teachers to establish close and stable relationships with parents from different backgrounds? How could the school support teachers to overcome these potential barriers?
- ▶ In what ways was your school well-equipped to transition to remote learning in March 2020, and what are some of the important supports your school needs to adapt to the multi-mode delivery method in order to serve the school’s diverse population well?
- ▶ What new technology tools will the school invest in to continue offering remote learning to students who benefited from virtual platforms?
- ▶ What are the sources of information that help school administrators understand the needs of teachers, students, and families in the school?

Reflection Questions for Districts (District Leaders)

- ▶ What are the potential ways of attracting more funding for the schools in your school district?
- ▶ What specific types of resources and support could the district provide to support historically marginalized students and families as a means of preventing them from being disproportionately influenced by the pandemic and future unexpected events?
- ▶ What specific types of professional development, resources, and guidance could the district provide to support teachers on the front line with greater access to high-quality online teaching materials?
- ▶ What type of ongoing or new professional development will be required for teachers and administrators to prepare them for unexpected adversity in the future?

About 21CSLA

The original California School Leadership Academy was established by Senate Bill 813 in 1983 and administered by the California Department of Education until 2003. Senate Bill 75 re-authorized the 21st Century School Leadership Academy (21CSLA) in 2019. The grant is dedicated to the professional learning and support of California's educational leaders—teacher, site, and district—to create more equitable learning environments that improve success for underserved students. Headquartered at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education, 21CSLA is led in partnership with UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, the California Subject Matter Project, and seven Regional Academies across the state.

The 21CSLA initiative provides high-quality, equity-centered professional learning for educational leaders of schools and districts in California that receive Title II funds. Programs are free to participants and include leadership coaching, communities of practice, and localized professional learning to improve instruction and achievement outcomes for multilingual learners, students with disabilities, low-income students, and other historically marginalized students.

21CSLA Equity Statement

Leaders for equity transform education to improve access, opportunity, and inclusion for students and adults, especially those who are systemically marginalized and historically underserved, so that they can thrive.

21CSLA Bridging Research and Practice

21CSLA seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice in education, especially for educational leaders. These Research Briefs compile and present current research in a concise format. They also include reflection questions to help leaders adapt and adopt the information into their own practice. Companion Practice Briefs gather and lift the voices and the experiences of educational leaders for dissemination among researchers.

21CSLA also regularly produces Research-Practice Webinars in which scholars and practitioners engage in conversations about timely issues. For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/21csla-webinars>

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Additional Resources

- To learn about how teachers deployed interactive digital tools to engage students through online learning and how they may continue using the tools upon returning to in-person instruction,
 - See research brief “Reimagining Schools? Undoing Disparities in Student Engagement” [<https://tinyurl.com/undoingdisparities>]
 - Watch the 21CSLA Research-Practice Webinar “Pandemic Innovations.” [<https://tinyurl.com/21cslaRPPWebinar>]
- To hear from teachers, watch “Teachers Talk of Digital Tools, How to Enlive Classrooms.” [<https://tinyurl.com/talkofdigitaltools>]
- To read more about case studies of six school districts’ approaches to remote learning during COVID-19 from the perspective of district and CMO leaders, see “Lessons from Remote Learning in Six School Systems.” [<https://tinyurl.com/remotearninglessons>]

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Recruitment

Are you an educational leader willing to share your experiences to be highlighted in our companion 21CSLA Practice Brief? Visit <https://tinyurl.com/sharewith21CSLAPracticeBrief> to let us know!