

April 15, 2020

Fact Sheet 20-11: Teaching Amid the COVID-19 Crisis

Source: NYSUT Research and Educational Services

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Maintaining best practice during school disruptions and long-term closures

The COVID-19 health crisis and resulting school closures have forced NYSUT members to reconsider how they engage students in a remote and often virtual school environment that did not exist just weeks ago. Such an upheaval has been unsettling to our members and the students and families they serve. NYSUT members have rallied to provide not only instructional opportunities for students sheltering in place but also the non-instructional needs of children and families in the community.

This guidance is designed to provide considerations for instructional practice as educators and school districts reassess their personal, building, and district-wide learning plans. These strategies may be applied to both virtual and non-virtual teaching and learning to support sound instructional practice even as schools return to on-site learning.

Address student health and safety and social/emotional concerns proactively:

The key issues to address during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis start with health and safety concerns and the social emotional needs of students and staff. Review student and staff needs on a regular basis. As school disruptions continue, students and staff will likely be under increased stress. Home situations change and students who did not have acute food or emotional support needs at the onset of school closures may now be faced with the need for additional supports. Be patient and be prepared to make accommodations to meet individual student needs.

Protect student privacy and PII (Personally Identifiable Information):

Protect student information and data by only using products, tools and platforms that your district has approved. Question the use of free tools that are not approved by your district and may not comply with Ed. Law 2-d and Part 121 of the Commissioner's Regulations. Contact your school administrator and request approval before using any new online platform or program.

Educators should also be cautious not to share students' Personally Identifiable Information (PII). PII may include, but is not limited to: student name, student ID number, student email address, contact names, student or contact addresses, student photos (including screen shots), video of students, student birthdate, student birthplace, student medical information, and special education information. This applies to any information that may be entered into or created at any point, by any user, including: students, faculty, administration, integration routines, etc. Review privacy needs for all students, especially students with disabilities, while implementing synchronous/real-time teaching tools such as chat rooms and video conferencing which may jeopardize student privacy.

Review communication practices:

Take time to review your methods for communicating with students, parents, and colleagues. A student or family's preferred method of communication may have changed since the start of remote learning. What worked yesterday may not work today.

Consider using multiple platforms (email, text, posts) to insure you are reaching all students and families but be careful not to overwhelm students with unnecessary emails or posts. Remember the old adage, 'less is more,' and consider low-tech communication like phone calls and hand-written notes to reach all students and increase student and family engagement.

Collaborate with your colleagues in grade-level and student-centered teams:

Collaboration across student-centered teams, often set up as grade-level teams or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), can help insure a balanced approach for all courses and content. These teams are well suited to collaborate on weekly schedules, classroom tele-meetings, and assignments. Teachers may choose to collaborate on interdisciplinary projects that meet the content and assessment needs of multiple classes while minimizing the workload for students.

Be sure to include all teachers and support professionals that work with students including ENL teachers, teaching assistants, special-area teachers, social workers, school psychologists and others.

Re-evaluate expectations of students and families:

Recognize the need for students to take care of family needs and well-being first and academics and instruction second. Parents may be out of work, struggling to pay bills and feed their families, or facing the loss of a family member or friend. When they need help, they may not know where to turn. Because teachers have established trusting relationships with families, parents will look to them for guidance. Work with administration to refer parents to trusted community and family-health resources. Be reasonable with assignments, deadlines, and expectations for communication with school.

Rely on researched-based best practice for student engagement and learning:

Even though remote learning is a dramatic shift from the traditional classroom, educators should still rely on proven, research-based best practice for engaging students. Inquiry based, hands-on activities, including those that allow students to step away from screens and technology, are well-established ways to engage students and improve learning.

Suggestions for remote learning activities:

- Keep learning simple, positive and fun.
- Focus on student-centered, creative experiences, that allow students to work at their own pace.
- Use project or inquiry-based learning to relate schoolwork to your students' interests, talents and gifts.

- Give your students choice. Academic Choice is an effective strategy that supports children’s intrinsic motivation to learn and draws on their different strengths and abilities.
- Create interactive lessons. Practice interactive modeling through the use of short videos, Screencasts, and sample lessons.
- Review student privacy concerns and school district policies if using synchronous/real-time teaching tools such as chat rooms and video conferencing. Define clear objectives for lessons and set clear expectations for student behavior and classroom etiquette during synchronous sessions. Prepare students for the sessions ahead of time and practice the technology before going ‘live’ with students. Be sure sessions are accessible by the intended participants only.
- Give clear instructions and provide sample assignments to illustrate expectations. Be careful not to skip steps in your explanations, which may confuse students and parents. Don’t assume background knowledge. Repetition and skill scaffolding are proven effective strategies, even in the virtual learning environment.
- Be intentional and identify clear learning objectives, outcomes, and deadlines for work. Undefined deadlines, though they may be intended to relieve stress, can be ambiguous and confusing to parents and students and can lead to anxiety and frustration at home.
- Less is more – Assignments may take longer to complete at home because of many different factors. Assign a reasonable workload and encourage students to balance online and offline activities and connect with others.
- Seek student feedback about their workload, emotional state and learning pace. Make adjustments for each student; remember that one size learning does not fit all.

Seek out professional development and offer support for fellow educators:

Many educators were asked to develop remote learning plans with only a day or two of planning as school closures spread across the state. In most cases, they have received little or no professional training around remote learning and the technology that many have since been asked to use.

Educators are encouraged to reach out to their districts and request professional development opportunities to support their remote and online teaching. Support colleagues as they learn and apply new skills. NYSUT’s Education & Learning Trust (ELT) offers high quality professional

learning courses and seminars that support teachers and school-related professionals. Visit <http://elt.nysut.org> to learn more about what ELT has to offer.

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APRIL 2020