

A GUIDE BY NEWSELA

Beyond masks and Wi-Fi

Ensuring learning continuity
beyond reopening



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INTRODUCTION

A pop-up vocabulary has emerged in school reopening talks. Government leaders mention hotspots, hybrid, distancing and masks often. But if educators listen closely, they'll notice other terms are absent. The missing piece in these talks is a discussion of **learning**.

In other words, reopening discussions must include curriculum, instruction, content, engagement and differentiation. Ignoring these words means more irrevocable learning loss for the nation's most vulnerable students.

Some will rush to note that health and safety are top priorities — and who could disagree? Right behind health and safety, though, must come discussions of how to guarantee a quality learning experience for all students, even during a crisis that makes school planning an exercise in embracing uncertainty.

While it's true that many districts are largely focused on safety measures, it's hard to blame them for being relatively single-focused. They're getting little help from state and federal governments that are reluctant to provide guidance on curriculum, instruction, and content.

As a recent CRPE article put it, [“states have largely ceded their role in defining how school systems must address the COVID-19 pandemic”](#) to districts. When examining the little guidance that states do give, readers find little to no advice on how to ensure continuity of learning.

At the same time, most districts find themselves in one of two situations. Some will begin the year virtually, hoping to return to school when possible. Others will begin the year in a hybrid or in-person schedule, knowing that a return to virtual instruction is possible at any moment.

These both reveal the risk students face: another year of inconsistent rigor, demotivating environments, and disruptive changes to where and how school happens.



In this unique context, new challenges require new solutions.

A global crisis has upended the usual dynamics between U.S. school districts and state and federal governments. Districts that may have once embraced autonomy and bottom-up decision-making must now consider plans that include guidance from both state and federal levels — but this alignment can co-exist with freedom of choice at the school and classroom levels to ensure all learners' needs are adequately met. By incorporating guidance on instructional content in reopening plans, districts can maintain rigor, motivate students, and keep learning happening whether school meets virtually or in person.



Develop a district-wide plan for maintaining rigor at scale

The deck is stacked against district leaders working to maintain instructional rigor this fall.

Few states have included specific measures in their reopening plans to encourage or require districts to maintain rigor across in-person, virtual and hybrid learning. Rhode Island, to cite a rare example, requires districts to prove that virtual instruction is at a similar level of rigor to in-person instruction. Most states lack a similar measure.

Few, if any, teachers have navigated the uncertainty of moving from in-person to virtual instruction, and possibly back again, in one school year. At the same time, traditional indicators of teacher effectiveness have been upheaved. There is little clear correlation between a teacher's success in the traditional classroom and their ability to adapt to virtual or hybrid environments.

Pair these dynamics with learning loss that students experienced in the spring, and it becomes essential for districts to consider new ways of maintaining rigor in all classes. Aside from the classroom-level reasons,

maintaining rigor during this time has important district-level implications, too. Unlike last year, when waivers cancelled most standardized testing accountability, [Betsy Devos has suggested](#) that districts may not take the same actions this year.

Districts need to plan with the assumption that they may face the difficult task of preparing students for standardized testing or other accountability measures imposed from above. They'll need to do it while starting the year with record stress levels and a school calendar that could be subject to significant changes.

If districts can leverage instructional content efficiently across all classrooms, it can help to maintain a baseline level of quality instruction to ensure student success on these assessments even if many other factors are working against them.

Beyond preparing for assessments, teachers experience other benefits from shared high-quality instructional content, too, even if it is implemented in a more prescriptive way than teachers might be accustomed to.

With the many demands on teachers during this crisis, having a single, flexible content resource frees them to focus on planning instruction and supporting students whose needs are greater than ever.

Teaching the same content as colleagues also provides a centerpiece for collaborative conversations. Positive accountability increases as teachers know they have the resources they need. The baseline level of instruction rises as teachers reflect on struggles and share what works, all from a single source of truth. The increased time, collaboration, and focused priorities unlock a pathway to help districts maintain rigor, even at a large scale and under uncertain conditions.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Leveraging instructional content consistently and efficiently across all classroom types helps maintain a baseline level of quality instruction.

Challenges reopening K-12 schools

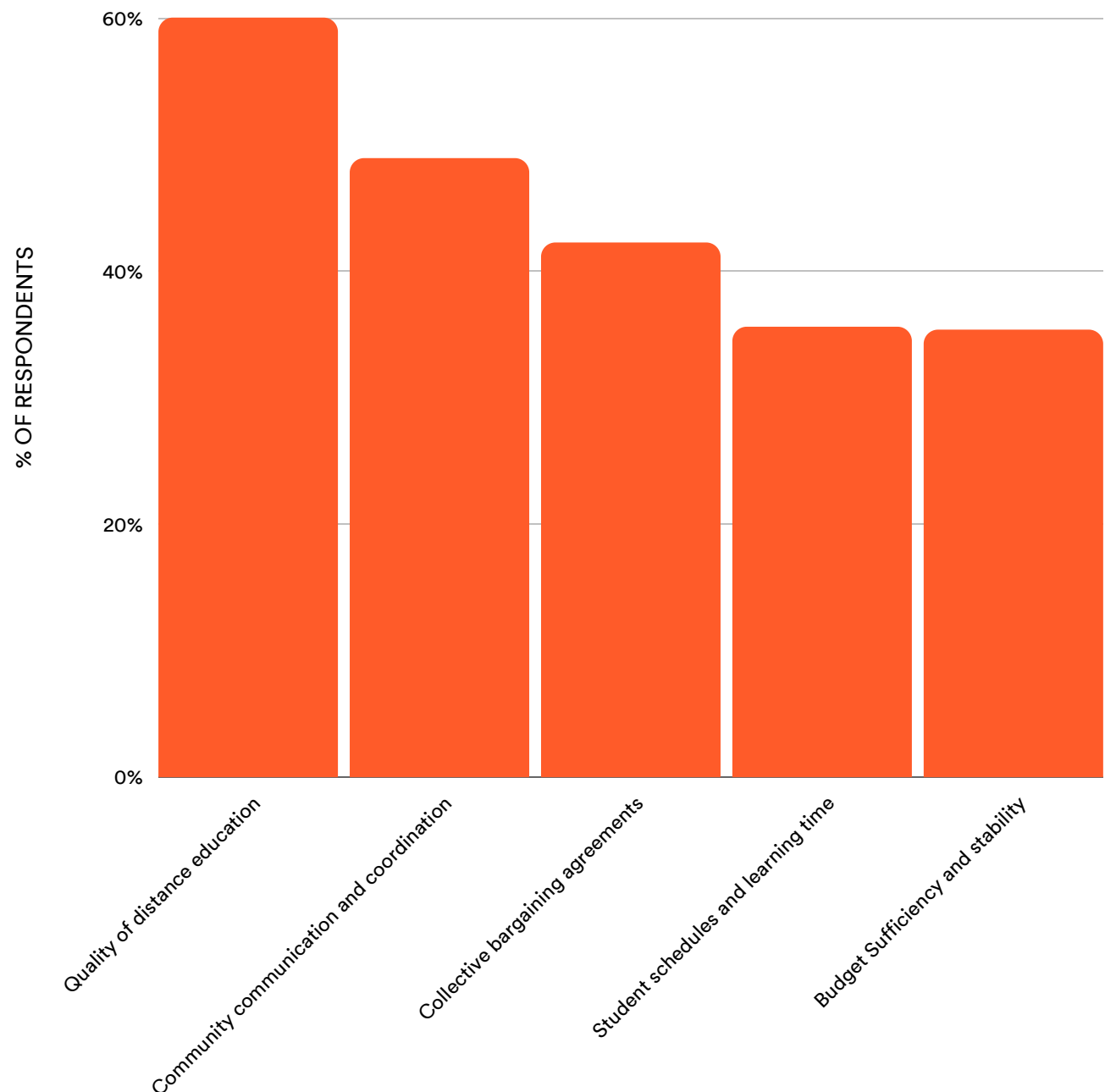
IDENTIFY THE FIVE MOST CRITICAL BUT OVERLOOKED CHALLENGES TO THE REOPENING OF K-12 SCHOOLS

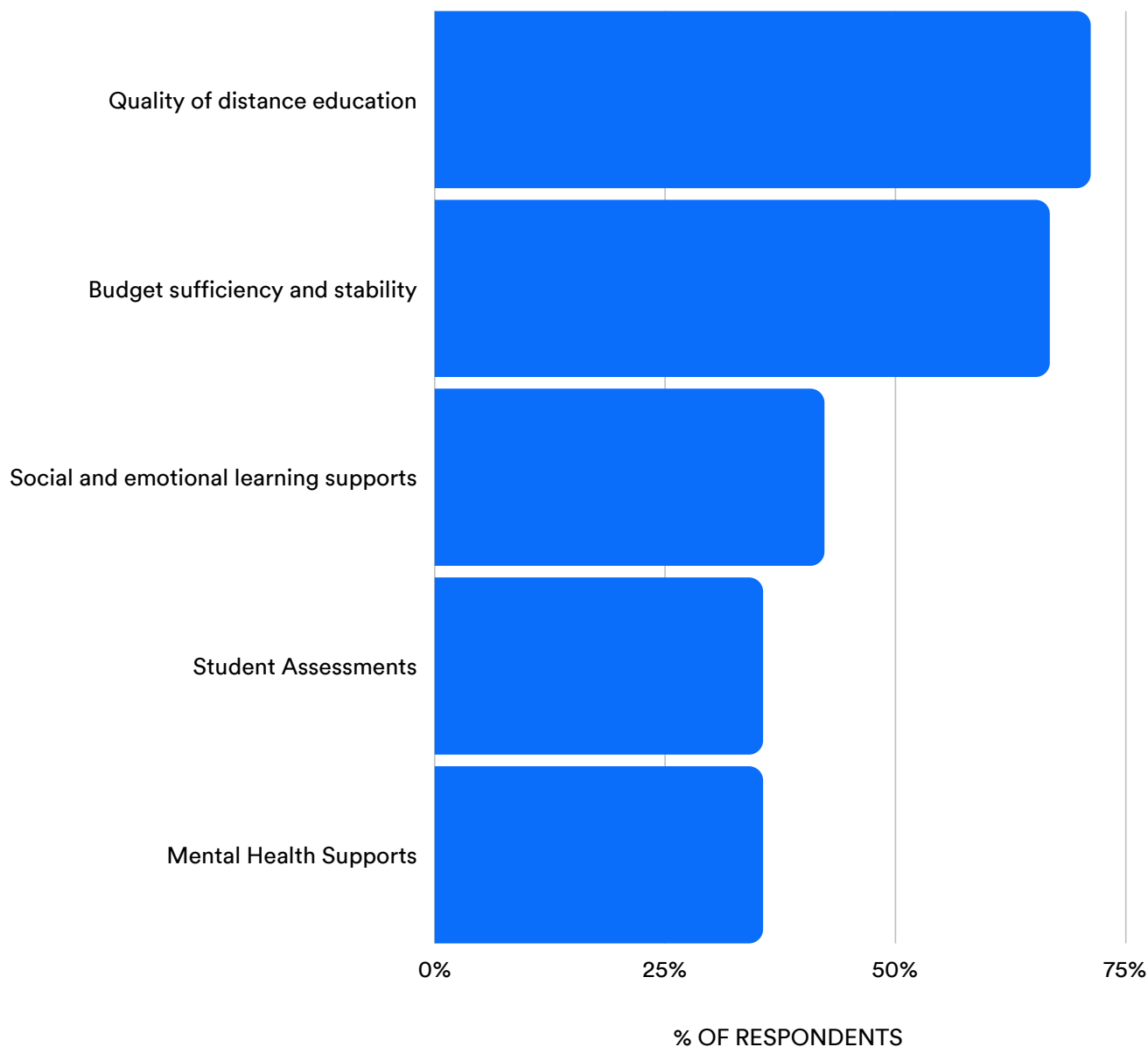
The following five issues were identified as the most overlooked challenges as states enter school reopenings.

60 percent found the quality of distance education as the top challenge.

"The biggest one to me seems clearly to be the quality of online learning. Which we've known was an issue for many months."

["EDUCATION INSIDER: The Next Stimulus & Reopening"](#),
Whiteboard Advisors, August 18, 2020





Future challenges in K-12 school operations

WHICH FIVE CHALLENGES ARE LIKELY TO HAVE THE MOST LASTING IMPACT ON K-12 SCHOOL OPERATIONS?

The following five issues were identified as the ones that would most impact the future of K-12 school operations.

The quality of distance education remains on top, budget issues moves up and SEL, assessments, and mental health supports join the top five.

"Schools are going to have to pay way more attention to mental health supports and social and emotional learning supports for years after this crisis."

["EDUCATION INSIDER: The Next Stimulus & Reopening"](#), Whiteboard Advisors, August 18, 2020



Offer students a compelling reason to engage in their work

When [500 Australian middle and high school students were studied](#) during remote learning this spring, the results had startling implications for educators working to keep students engaged during virtual or hybrid instruction.

The study, which tracked the content students viewed on school devices, found that twice as many students were categorized as “frequently distracted” after the switch from in-person learning to virtual instruction.

Students spent more time on websites and apps categorized as “entertainment” compared to those categorized as “education,” and they switched between content types more often.

These students attended a high-tuition private school, where they may have had more support at-home than in districts in lower income areas where all adults may be out of the home at work. With that considered, it’s clear this study is the tip of the iceberg.

Again, support from the state and federal government provides little support for addressing these concerns. California, for one, [requires districts to make daily time for students to interact](#) with classmates and teachers, to help students stay connected and allow teachers to monitor progress. Unfortunately, directives like these are far too rare across the country.



ENGAGE STUDENTS IN THEIR WORK

Learning at home for many kids is hard. Switching between a school setting with new health measures and masked faces and at-home virtual instruction is even harder.

Although educators can't blame students who struggle to engage during virtual or hybrid instruction, districts can give students more of a reason to do so by making instructional content relevant and reflective.

If students see teachers consistently integrating recent, relevant topics into their lessons, it [increases the likelihood that they will take the first step of engaging](#) with their work. We are living through a pivotal moment in history as change accelerates across several fronts. The way we live, work, and learn is being altered — most likely permanently — because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Additionally, racial unrest, social upheaval, and the advent of another election season make the teachable moment too important to ignore. There have been few opportunities in recent history that are more ripe for teachers to inject meaningful, relevant, personal literacy experiences, driven by high quality content.

Once students begin consistently engaging in class, they experience carry-over benefits. They will be more likely to interact with teachers and classmates in discussions, in-person or virtually.

They will even begin to see their [teachers as more credible](#). As Dave Stuart Jr. writes, students perceive if teachers care about them, are passionate about their work, and are competent at their jobs. Integrating content that students care about is a signal to students that all three of these indicators are true.

Districts struggled with losing contact with students for weeks or months during remote learning. In April, the New York Times reported that [one-third of students in Los Angeles were not logging in](#) for virtual instruction. In Cleveland, where child-poverty rates are some of the nation's highest, [30 to 40 percent of students did not have reliable Internet](#) at home. Even by the end of May, there were still over [2,000](#)

[Chicago students who had not returned contact](#) since schools closed. Maintaining relationships this year goes beyond academic benefits and carries over to the health and wellbeing of students.

High-quality content is the lead domino in the cycle of engaging and motivating students. When districts begin here, [students engage more in learning](#) because the content they read reflects their experiences. They progress faster because teachers can [present content at the best reading level for them](#). And they feel more motivated because [teachers can offer choice](#) to students about what they read.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Districts must give students more of a reason to engage in virtual or blended instruction by making instructional content relevant and reflective.





KEY TAKEAWAY

District leaders must provide instructional content that accommodates varying levels of technology access, as well as both in-person and virtual instruction.

Give teachers a source of truth for instructional planning

Departments and instructional teams around the country are working to plan the scope and sequence of their year while awaiting daily policy updates from their governor. Too often, these updates say nothing about maintaining instructional continuity during switches between in-person and virtual instruction that feel almost inevitable.

Districts in thirty-five states [received no guidance from their governor](#) for planning a remote learning option if needed, and districts in thirty-nine states are on their own when it comes to developing instructional practices that support students during remote or blended learning.

During this past spring and summer, many districts made pushes to get more students access to devices and WiFi. Again, these efforts varied greatly across states, and [support from state governments filled the spectrum](#) from little more than “recommendations” to sweeping infrastructure projects.

For example, state governments in Florida, Georgia, Indiana and Montana included recommendations or information on how districts could determine student tech needs, but did not provide funding or infrastructure to make it happen. Elsewhere, in states including Maine, Connecticut, and

PROVIDE A SOURCE OF TRUTH

South Carolina, governors took matters into their own hands by directly purchasing and distributing WiFi-enabled devices or hotspots for students in need of access.

Despite these varying levels of support, many districts made impressive efforts to get more kids online, for both the spring semester and with the knowledge that more school closures were possible for this fall.

While these newly expanded capabilities are an important step towards ensuring that all kids receive an equitable education as schools reopen, the plans cannot stop there. Devices alone will not educate kids. Students also need high quality instructional content and teachers who have time to plan and prepare their instruction.

This last piece - teachers who have had time to plan - is another strong reason why districts must prioritize flexible content when designing reopening plans. Districts need content to be flexibly used with students who have varying levels of

technology access and those who still require paper resources. Additionally, the content must work for both in-person and virtual instruction. This allows teachers to add, reorder, and remix lessons easily based on changing student needs, teaching modalities, and instructional priorities.

Without flexible content, instructional planning is challenging. Teachers and supervisors already must plan the year without knowing whether instruction will be in person, remote, or both. It is impractical and wasteful to have different resources for each scenario.

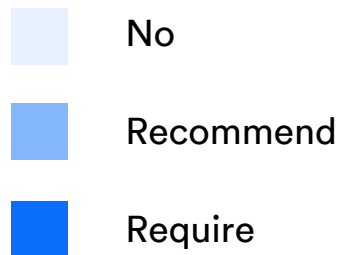
Conversely, flexible content that can be used in-person or at-home, digitally or in-print, means schools have a firm understanding of how curriculum will progress throughout the year, even if they don't know where or how it will be implemented. This allows stakeholders to know this is what our year looks like, which is something teachers, students and parents are looking for.

Districts have limited resources, and budget cuts are happening now or likely in the near future. To guarantee student access to continuous learning opportunities, districts need flexible content.

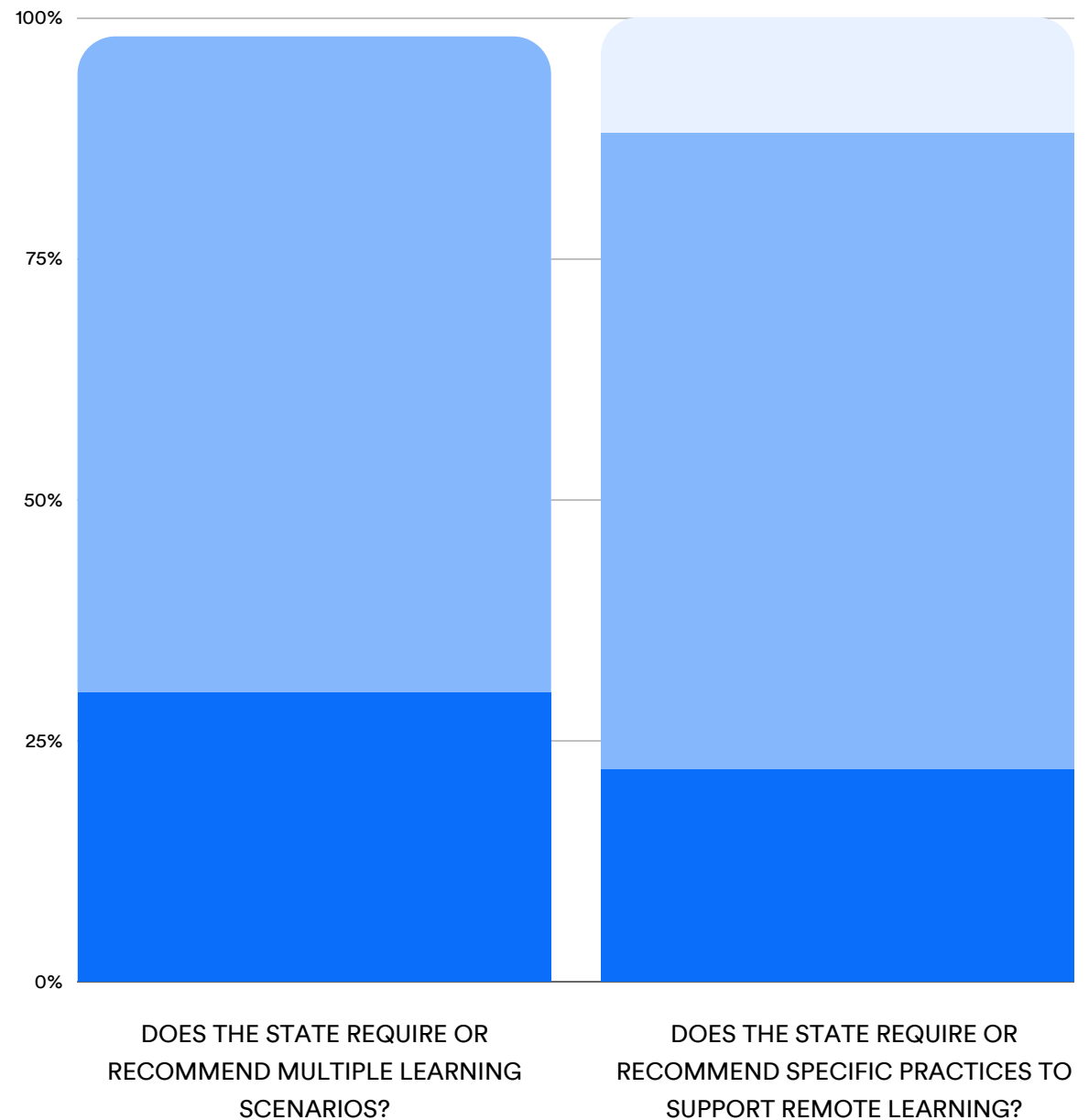
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State planning for multiple learning scenarios

"Just 15 states required districts to plan for a remote learning option, and only 11 expect districts to put in place specific practices to support students with disabilities (11) or English language learners (7) in remote settings. As a growing number of districts announce plans to open with remote-only instruction, the lack of decisive state action on remote learning is a missed opportunity."



States must take decisive action to avert the coming education crisis" , CRPE, July 2020
<https://www.crpe.org/thelens/states-must-take-decisive-action-avert-coming-education-crisis>



PROVIDE A SOURCE OF TRUTH



CONCLUSION

The new frontier:
instructional chaos
vs. equitable
continuity

5 essential considerations for school reopening plans

These are five areas, outside of physical health and safety, that districts must address to ensure equitable continuity of learning and minimize instructional chaos this fall.

	INSTRUCTIONAL CHAOS	EQUITABLE CONTINUITY
INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT	Separate resources for in-person and virtual instruction	Flexible resources that work digitally on or on paper, in-person or virtually
TECH INFRASTRUCTURE	Gaps in access to devices and Wi-Fi	Hotspots and devices distributed to all students in need
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING	Missing plans for maintaining contact with students and families	Sustainable systems for addressing SEL needs
INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY	Inflexible instructional methods relying on in-person teaching	Clear best practices for virtual and hybrid teaching
CURRICULUM PLANNING	A flimsy scope and sequence that will change through the year	A robust plan that can withstand changes to instructional mode and location

3 Strategies for Success



DEVELOP A DISTRICT-WIDE PLAN FOR MAINTAINING RIGOR AT SCALE

Leveraging instructional content consistently and efficiently across all classroom types helps maintain a baseline level of quality instruction.



OFFER STUDENTS A COMPELLING REASON TO ENGAGE IN THEIR WORK

Districts must give students more of a reason to engage in virtual or blended instruction by making instructional content relevant and reflective.



GIVE TEACHERS A SOURCE OF TRUTH FOR INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING

District leaders must provide instructional content that accommodates varying levels of technology access, as well as both in-person and virtual instruction.

CONCLUSION

With so many variables to consider, it's as if districts must prepare for anything this fall. While navigating this crisis, many are realizing that this situation will bring permanent changes to the way learning happens.

Although the educators have been working tirelessly through the pandemic for months, meaningful learning must continue to happen this fall. Parents and students expect their education to continue. State and federal governments may expect districts to meet assessment and accountability measures.

Facing seemingly impossible challenges, now is the time for districts to be truly innovative. Implementing new approaches is the only way that will allow districts to provide students from every zip code, race, and socioeconomic class the education they deserve, whether that's at home, in school or both. Despite ever-increasing income inequality in society, [education remains one of the solutions](#) that people feel optimistic about.

By taking decisive leadership where state and federal governments fall short, district leaders can prescribe a clear path forward for their district by offering concrete directives for physical safety and continuity of learning.

Districts always know what is best for their local communities, but given the crisis, there is a quickly emerging need for pedagogy to also be part of the conversation. In the past, districts may have objected to taking actions that appear to limit autonomy or increase standardization. However, the current crisis has reframed the conversation around the need to minimize instructional chaos and achieve equitable continuity of instruction.

If instructional content can become a pillar that a district builds on top of, then educators at all levels will have the autonomy they need to best serve their students.

Health and safety must remain the top concern in school reopening discussions. But if districts are working to promote the long-term wellbeing of students, then learning must be another major part of these talks.

By making instructional content a centerpiece of school reopening plans, districts can develop scalable, sustainable solutions to increase the likelihood that all students will keep learning when schools reopen this fall.



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