



# FREQUENTLY ASKED COVID-19 QUESTIONS

For K-12 Education Leaders

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# GOVERNANCE

**Q: What are some of the unexpected challenges facing superintendents during the crisis?**

**A:** Superintendents across the country face a myriad of challenges as they deal with the short-term and lasting impacts of the crisis across the schools and communities they serve. Their most unexpected challenges to-date include:

- **Connectivity:** Districts are struggling to ensure their student populations have access to internet at home to support continuity of learning. In some cases, funding is available to address connectivity issues, but there are no available providers to meet the demand for hotspots. Some states, like Arizona, contact nonprofit and private sector partners as well as communities for help through Mobile Hotspot Donation Drives.
- **Technology:** Districts have varying levels of resources to provide students with devices, such as Chromebooks, if devices are not available at home. Even districts that can provide technology may only be able to provide devices to a limited number of students.
- **Nutrition:** School districts have largely been able to provide meals to students in their communities but are concerned about the long-term sustainability of current processes. As the needs of their communities rise, districts will need to address short-term food supply limitations as well as the safety of staff preparing and delivering meals.
- **Continuity of Learning:** Most school districts had little, if any, time to prepare before states made the decision to close schools, forcing educators and students to learn new technologies and new methods of teaching/learning.
- **Special Education:** Supporting special education students' continuity of learning is one of the key challenges facing school districts. Most districts are still identifying logistics and best practices to meet this challenge with often limited resources.
- **Staff Wellness:** Districts must consider both the health and mental well-being of school staff and teachers as they invest enormous time and effort to adapt and overcome new challenges resulting from the crisis.
- **Grading, Assessment, and Credit:** School and district leaders have had to quickly adopt remote teaching and learning; however, many districts are struggling to identify appropriate and equitable grading and credit-granting practices. This is particularly challenging as it relates to seniors and fulfilling high school graduation requirements.
- **Student Safety:** In the absence of daily visual and verbal interactions with students, districts struggle to identify signs of abuse or neglect despite increasing concern as students spend more time at home. State agencies who oversee child welfare and safety have seen a decline in the number of reports they receive since stay-at-home orders were issued, even though experts suspect that children are at greater risk during the crisis.

**Q: How is school governance changing during this crisis?**

**A:** School boards and superintendents recognize that schools and their communities are facing an unprecedented crisis. As such, district-level leadership demonstrate a higher level of understanding, flexibility, and collaboration. The following trends in school governance have surfaced:

- **Shift to Virtual Meetings:** Individuals' varying degrees of technological knowledge and capacity impact how districts work with boards of governance. Superintendents may now have additional responsibilities to ensure virtual meetings run successfully, such as setting up practice sessions and deciding which sessions will require password protection. District leaders recognize that they, like the communities they serve, must be able to function in a virtual setting.
- **Process Flexibility:** Standard operating procedures, such as committee approval before a board vote, may not be feasible in the current environment. As such, district processes must be more flexible and potentially include additional steps, such as a virtual executive session before a committee meeting.
- **Greater Public Participation:** Some states require meetings to be open to the public, and recent virtual meetings have attracted relatively greater public participation.
- **Meeting Cadence and Agendas:** The current trend is to limit the number of meetings and topics discussed unless there are items that require immediate attention.
- **Limited Meeting Attendees:** In some cases, school board member attendance will be limited at scheduled meetings.
- **Empowered Superintendents:** To effectively manage the crisis, superintendents may be empowered to make quick decisions as needed without prior approval from board members. Timely communication of these decisions to the board allows for board members' continued oversight and involvement without impeding the superintendent's work.

# COMMUNICATIONS

**Q: What mindset do district leaders encourage stakeholders to adopt?**

**A:** Districts leaders communicate the need to stay positive and strong during the crisis, recognizing the reality of the situation while also calling on their communities to support one another. District leaders have a responsibility to keep students and their families well informed while also reinforcing the role of students, families, and staff in limiting the spread of the virus.

**Q: Some parents express anxiety and frustration with school closures. How can school districts best communicate with and support parents during the crisis?**

**A:** The sudden and unprecedented closure of schools has left parents unsettled, as parents must quickly learn how to simultaneously meet the demands of their jobs and the demands of their children. School districts have helped parents meet these challenges by:

- Regularly sending **direct parent communication** to keep them informed of the district's plans for continuity of learning, available learning resources, available staff resources, and other relevant updates.
- Leading all communications with **health messages** reminding families of their role in containing the virus.
- Organizing all school **communications in a single repository**, which helps parents who may miss individual emails or prefer to access messages in a central location.
- Informing parents of available **meal and childcare services**, especially for first responders.
- Expanding **online learning resources** to support continuity of learning at home.
- Informing parents that **teachers are available** remotely to answer questions.
- Instilling a **sense of community** by reminding parents that teachers and school staff are also facing similar challenges at home as a result of the crisis. To overcome these shared challenges, the community must keep spirits high and look to each other for support and understanding.

# STUDENT SUPPORT

**Q: What steps are school districts taking to ensure they can continue to meet their students' needs?**

**A:** When schools closed unexpectedly, districts considered maintaining food services to be their highest priority. Districts also endeavor to provide equitable continuity of learning to all student groups, which includes ensuring access to technology and the internet and consideration of family dynamics. Districts also strive to support the health and mental well-being of their students, families, and staff during the crisis.

**Q: How are school districts maintaining food services?**

**A:** School districts, for the most part, have been able to maintain food services for the students in their communities. Even as schools closed, staff continued to prepare and provide meals, sometimes delivering meals to students in remote areas by bus. Some of the challenges schools face in providing meals to families during the crisis include:

- **Increased Demand:** The need for meals has risen and continues to rise in communities as a result of furloughs and layoffs. Some districts increased the number of meals served per day (from 2 to 3 meals a day) and number of days meals are served per week (from 5 to 6 days a week).
- **Reducing Risk:** As districts expand meal offerings, schools must work to protect meal preparation and delivery staff by limiting their risk of exposure. To provide much needed breaks, other school personnel (often volunteers) help assemble meals on a rotating basis.
- **Monitoring Distribution:** To meet increasing needs, some districts expand meal distribution options, such as by providing meals through multiple school sites. Because families may attempt to take more than their allotted number of meals, some schools using drive-through meal pick-up must mark the tires of families who receive food to ensure that schools will not run out.
- **Securing Supplies:** High market demand for shelf stable food has resulted in fewer shipments of food to some districts. Superintendents therefore partner with state leaders to ensure schools receive the food they need to feed students in their communities.

**Q: How are school districts maintaining essential health and school services?**

**A:** Some districts have maintained phone and email access to health and school services staff during designated office hours.

**Q: How can school districts approach challenges within an equity framework?**

**A:** From an equity perspective, the first challenge is connecting to all students outside of a traditional classroom setting. Limited internet availability, access to technology, and/or inconsistent support structures for continued learning at home need to be addressed before special populations can be supported.

Once reliable and consistent connections with students are made, ongoing collaboration between school leaders, teachers, families, and students can identify feasible supports for remote learning. Some supports, such as extended time, modified assignments, and text-to-speech software, can be easily applied to remote learning. Other supports, such as those provided by paraprofessionals or special service providers, require unique solutions. For example, remote speech therapy can continue through teletherapy sessions within the PresenceLearning platform.

**Q:** How can school districts support the mental health and well-being of students?

**A:** Students experiencing a mental health crisis may still have access to mental health services, school counselors, and social workers through phone or email during regular school hours. Districts may also leverage local city services, as available.

In addition to the possible stress and anxiety caused by nature of the crisis and the sudden change in routine, students may struggle with the lack of interaction and emotional connection that schools typically provide. Districts encourage teachers to regularly check-in with their students online to maintain personal connections, and some schools use online video platforms to allow for “face-to-face” classroom interactions.

# STAFF SUPPORT

**Q: What challenges do districts face as they work to support and meet the needs of their staff?**

A: Just as for students, access to technology can be a barrier for staff. In addition to providing laptops to staff so they can work from home, districts are also expanding online technological resources (such as ordering video conferencing software licenses) and providing access to online training resources to help educators transition to a virtual learning environment.

**Q: How are school districts engaging classified staff?**

A: Some state leaders assured classified staff that they will be able to maintain employment during the crisis; however, districts have found keeping this promise to be a challenge, particularly in the context of “shelter-in-place” and other restrictions. Furthermore, classified staff who are 60 years of age and older are considered high-risk for COVID-19, and accordingly, there are limits to the types of jobs this group can do during the pandemic. With these challenges in mind, districts may consider any of the following:

- **Operational Support:** Identify opportunities for classified staff at buildings that are still operational, such as those that provide childcare or meals.
- **Role Flexibility:** Current circumstances are unique and may require staff to share responsibilities, be flexible, and collaborate.
- **Skill Development:** Encourage classified staff to acquire new skills or expand their capabilities to fill new needs.
- **Remote Work:** Utilize technology so that classified staff can work remotely, such as by providing connections for staff to answer calls from home or by providing tools for remote new-student registration.

**Q: How are school districts collaborating with unions?**

A: School districts continue to work with unions to ensure equitable pay during school closures and to assess the impact of school closures on teacher evaluations. In some states, food service personnel are provided hazard pay for their work while schools are closed.

**Q: How are districts maintaining social distancing during tasks that require in-person engagement, such as meal distribution or laptop provisioning?**

A: Districts coordinate meal distribution at designated school sites such that families can drive-through to pick up meals, thereby allowing staff to maintain appropriate distance. Additionally, districts create rotating schedules of staff support so as to minimize any one individual’s exposure.

**Q: How can school districts support the mental health and well-being of staff?**

A: Some districts have self-care initiatives, including breathing and meditation techniques, to help teachers and staff manage stress. Streamlined but consistent communication, minimal meetings, an appropriate degree of flexibility, and clear expectations also potentially mitigate the additional stress.



# VIRTUAL LEARNING

**Q: How are districts implementing virtual learning?**

**A:** In general, districts first survey their student population to gauge access to technology (laptops/devices) and access to the internet. This allows district leadership to identify potential challenges in transitioning to a virtual learning environment. When access to technology and internet is limited or not possible, districts provide students with hardcopy learning packets in addition to or instead of learning options online. Some districts approach online learning synchronously, with scheduled classes, while others use an asynchronous approach that does not require students to be at their devices at specific times.

**Q: How are school districts providing academic support to struggling students during school closures?**

**A:** Districts recognize that limited preparation for the change to remote learning and limited resources make providing academic support to struggling students difficult. While the level of support may be dictated by law for certain populations, such as students with disabilities, districts still aim to provide support to all students by identifying trends and working with teachers to address needs.

When providing academic resources, districts remain mindful that students may not have access to the same level of support at home and that the home environment may be significantly different than the classroom environment. Consequently, districts are planning for remediation and revised curricula when students return to schools.

# PLANNING FOR THE END OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

**Q: How are school districts handling graduation requirements and ceremonies?**

**A:** While districts first look to general guidelines and graduation requirements provided by their states, they also collaborate with local districts directly. The goal is to identify agreed upon requirements across the state that also respect individual district autonomy. In recognition of the challenges faced by schools and students, several universities in California communicated that they will accept pass/fail grades on applicant transcripts without penalty.

While it will be difficult if not impossible to hold traditional graduation ceremonies during the crisis, districts are developing creative ways to celebrate, and some districts have hosted virtual open forums to gather community feedback and ideas.

**Q: What are the implications for teacher evaluations?**

**A:** While districts approach evaluation differently, some school districts may be directed by legal counsel to use any evaluations that have already been completed and to complete all other evaluations when teachers return in the fall. Districts also work closely with teachers' unions on this issue, as evaluations are part of teachers' contracts.

## LOOKING AHEAD

**Q:** How might lessons learned from the crisis strengthen how school districts operate and teach students in the future?

**A:** The crisis and resulting school closures have rapidly forced changes in teaching, learning, and general school operations, and public education will likely be forever different. While the transition has been difficult, it may inspire technological and pedagogical innovation that teachers can apply to the traditional classroom setting. The crisis may also shift public perception and understanding of teachers and schools to better align with the central role they play in general community support and service.

# ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

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