

Responding to COVID-19 and the Demand for Virtual Learning: Challenges, Opportunities, and Actions for Schools to Ensure Responsible Inclusion



Issue	Opportunity	Challenge	Action
<p>Accessibility</p>	<p>New doors of opportunity to learning are being opened to students at an increasingly rapid pace.^{1,2}</p>	<p>Many technologies were not developed with built-in accessibility features. As a result, some students are being denied access to enhanced technology-dependent opportunities.³</p> <p>Environmental conditions (e.g., access to high-speed internet, Wi-Fi, and hardware) vary widely, as does the availability of adult support needed to perform in a virtual learning environment.</p>	<p>Assess the main features of the ed tech platform and tools being deployed against principles of Universal Design for Learning as defined by CAST. That means that instruction includes multiple options for presenting information and offers students multiple ways to demonstrate their learning.</p> <p>Communicate the features of UDL with students and their families, and provide needed support to ensure that students can both access subject matter and utilize ed tech tools and accommodations.</p>
<p>Identification</p>	<p>Some technologies have shown promise in helping to identify and pinpoint the needs of students who may have a disability and need an evaluation.⁴</p>	<p>Some technologies may pose barriers to identifying students with disabilities. Ed tech tools may have limitations, e.g., an inability to capture visual cues like facial expressions and body language, no allowance for multiple attempts at task completion, and no opportunities for reflection and self-correction.</p>	<p>Create and implement a calendar for check-in times with students. Be explicit and intentional about what information is essential to determine how well students are adjusting to online instruction.</p> <p>Note whether adjustments need to be made in the pace of learning (e.g., signs of boredom or underlying unaddressed disability) or whether other actions need to be taken to understand why a student is not making progress.</p>

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<p>Stigma</p>	<p>Technology levels the playing field when designed with all students in mind, enabling all students access to learning opportunities.⁵</p>	<p>Students may feel singled out and stigmatized if they are the only ones using ed tech or if they use it in a different way than their peers.⁶</p> <p>Lack of reliable high-quality internet access can contribute to a sense of diminished self-worth, particularly for disadvantaged populations.</p> <p>Insecure or unstable home environments can be harder to hide when virtual learning takes place from the home, posing significant challenges to privacy and potentially exacerbating social stigma.</p>	<p>Communicate with students and families to identify barriers to virtual instruction. This might include an agreement on protected places and times for students to access hardware, join with teachers and peers online, and complete work without distractions. It should also include opportunities for students (and parents) to share questions and concerns about their participation in online instruction. (Note: Be sure not to single out individual students. Help all families provide the best possible support for their children.)</p>
<p>Student Engagement</p>	<p>Technology can facilitate greater student engagement and help students feel a sense of ownership over their learning.⁷</p>	<p>Technology can unintentionally result in some students being assigned less engaging, more rote activities.⁸</p>	<p>Keep the same focus on content and skills for all online learners, and provide accommodations as needed to help students succeed. When students with disabilities struggle in online environments, the first question to ask should be, “Are there environmental features that are preventing students from engaging in learning?”</p>

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<p>Accountability</p>	<p>New technologies provide much more detailed, ongoing data about student progress and increase the capacity for educators and schools to account for and report student achievement and outcomes.⁹</p>	<p>Proprietary and privacy limitations (e.g., who owns, has access to, and stores data) can inhibit accountability.¹⁰</p>	<p>Make sure that student data (e.g., engagement, performance) is properly stored, saved, and deployed.</p> <p>Empower IEP teams and other designated school professionals to reflect on student data to inform how systems can be improved to better serve all students.</p>
<p>Personal Connection</p>	<p>Ed tech tools can provide information to educators on which types ed tech tools and accommodations of content are most successful at engaging students.</p>	<p>Online education can pose inherent challenges by requiring extended screen times and limiting interpersonal connections among students and educators. This is especially problematic for students with disabilities as they struggle to cope with feelings of anxiety and insecurity during these uncertain times.</p>	<p>Conduct regular one-on-one check-ins with students, focusing both on their sense of academic accomplishment and their social and emotional needs.</p> <p>Reach out to parents to share impressions about students' progress. Ask them how well their children are coping with online instruction and social isolation from peers, and offer support (e.g., web-based resources) to keep students engaged, connected and hopeful about their success during this time of disruption.</p>

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<p>Family Engagement</p>	<p>In addition to storing and organizing materials, gathering assessment data, and providing tools for students and teachers to interact (e.g., blogs, forums), learning management systems have built-in features that can be used to communicate with families.</p>	<p>Families of students with disabilities are often called on to serve a variety of roles (e.g., nurse, case manager, co-teacher) and may need considerable support during this time when students are home for an extended period of time.</p>	<p>Work with families to clarify roles and expectations for home-based online instruction, and commit to a collaborative plan that respects the family's life circumstances and capacity to engage.</p> <p>Collaborate with faculty and members of the school-based support team (who know the child and family best) to coordinate communication and minimize stress on families during these difficult times.</p>

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Endnotes

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