



## 9 Things All School Must Do In The Fall, No Matter Their Model

As students prepare to return to school for the 2020-21 school year, it's imperative that they are provided a safe, rigorous, and engaging education. As you know, Governor Walz's recent executive order, [EO20-82](#), allows districts and charter schools to determine the most appropriate learning models to resume instruction this fall based on defined public health criteria—distance, hybrid, or in-person learning. As districts and charter schools make their decisions, it is important that state education leaders—including this committee—provide guidelines and resources that will ensure learning is equitable and high quality no matter the model it resumes in. Here are nine things all districts and charter schools must do, no matter their model.

### 1. Make Sure Every Student is Online and Has a Device

The Governor's framework means that many Minnesota students will be online for at least part of the year—whether that's part of a hybrid model, temporary school closures, or full-time distance learning. And with [at least 25,000 students](#) still without internet or device access, ensuring internet and device access should be a top priority so that no student falls behind due to preventable technical barriers.

The onus to provide students with reliable internet access and devices cannot be on districts and charter schools alone. First, the Minnesota Department of Education should play a coordinating and supporting role to ensure districts have what they need to connect students this fall. For example, in response to feedback from stakeholders who identified universal internet as a top issue, the [Maine Department of Education](#) secured internet and devices for 100% of families with school-aged children who reported a need. MDE should also play a role in gathering and disseminating updated information on ongoing gaps in access to technology to help policymakers understand and address ongoing gaps. To support this work, this committee and the Legislature must pass legislation during the next special session to close the digital divide, ensuring all students have access to reliable internet and devices in order to meaningfully engage in distance learning.

### 2. Identify Each Student's Learning Needs

Students will return to school this fall having lost between [one-third to half of what they would have](#) learned in a normal school year. Given this, it's imperative that all schools measure where each student's at—communicating areas for catch-up and growth to students and families, and using findings to inform teaching, tutoring, and additional supports. [Some districts across the country](#) are identifying and implementing simple diagnostic assessments to accomplish this early in the school year, and it will be a critical foundation for getting back on track.

### 3. Address Learning Loss with Targeted Interventions

[Research-based interventions](#) have been shown to accelerate learning in math and reading. Schools should seek to implement such practices. For example:

- High-dosage tutoring that is directly tied to classroom content;
- Extended learning time inventions, including acceleration academies and double-dose math structures; and
- Strong data systems for monitoring early student warning signs coupled with strong norms and routines.

### 4. Prioritize Strong Student-Teacher Relationships

When students come back to school, nothing will be the same. Not only will the model and delivery of education be different, but they will have different teachers and adults who are supporting them.

Educators must spend the first weeks of school building one-on-one relationships and creating communities where students feel safe, known, cared for, and respected.

#### 5. Support Social-Emotional Needs

Minnesota students have faced disruption in many areas of their lives, and nearly [two-thirds](#) of students have indicated a decline in their mental health due to the pandemic. It's vital that, in addition to supporting students academically, schools are also addressing social-emotional and mental health needs. Schools must make guidance counselors, social workers, and other mental health supports accessible, and should also provide training for teachers on how to support social-emotional needs when not in the classroom full-time.

#### 6. Equity-Focused Learning Models

Many families are hesitant to return to school, while the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing. This is particularly true for families of color and Indigenous families who have been [most vulnerable to the virus](#). From an equity lens, it is imperative that districts provide excellent distance learning and hybrid throughout the year, making them a top priority rather than an afterthought.

On the flip side, while distance and hybrid learning provide the greatest protection against the risks of COVID-19, they introduce different risks for families who cannot provide care for young students while they work. For these families, districts must ensure safe care options for students in settings where distance learning can be effectively proctored and supported.

#### 7. Clear, Collaborative Communication with Families

This is going to be a stressful and confusing school year for families as they navigate distance learning, complex hybrid schedules, and patchwork support systems that look very different from what they are accustomed to. Leaders at all levels should make it a top priority to ensure clear, accessible communication at every step along the way—avoiding complex Powerpoints, dense emails, and modes of communication that might miss certain families.

#### 8. Ensure Comparable Rigor Across Schooling Models

Last spring, distance learning happened very quickly. Educators and families made the best of a crisis, but many key practices that support learning and ensure a strong feedback loop between teachers and families fell by the wayside. This fall, all school plans must clearly state how they will do the following:

- **Teach New Content:** While it will be important to address learning loss and gaps in knowledge, it's also important for teachers to teach new, grade-level academic content. [Research found](#) that even when students started behind grade level, they closed gaps with their peers after six months with access to stronger instruction.
- **Provide Live Instruction and Office Hours:** Teaching content in real-time leads to enhanced learning, student-centered instruction, and more timely formative feedback. Office hours where students can ask questions and get one-on-one support can supplement this.
- **Provide Feedback on Assignments:** Tracking student progress by collecting assignments, and assessing students' progress toward academic benchmarks or grading will help students stay on track during distance learning.

#### 9. Build Tailored Programming for Special Education Students and English Learners

For some students, the lack of regular, in-person education services creates unique barriers. Students receiving special education and English Learner services received some tailored supports during distance learning this spring, but this varied from district to district and still left significant gaps. Schools must build clear plans to ensure that students receive the services that they are entitled to, as well as how they will work with families to deliver accommodations. Districts should give these students priority access to any in-person services, considering [research-backed strategies](#) like small-group or one-to-one intervention three to five times per week.