

# How to Develop Scalable Remote Learning Plans

Using Familiar Frameworks to Sustain Instruction in Unfamiliar Circumstances

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## What is educational leadership?

**“Educational leadership . . . is the act of influencing others in educational settings to achieve goals and thus necessitates actions.”**

*(Connolly, James, & Fertig, 2017, p. 11)*

Among hundreds of educational leadership definitions, this one is helpful in that it allows for flexibility in many scenarios. While it talks about achieving goals by influencing others into action (which could indicate guiding educators, caregivers, members of the school board, or the community, depending on the situation), it does not define one particular goal, which allows for flexibility of interpretation. In the current environment, it is important to be flexible in defining an educational leader while also taking care not to stray too far from established goals and effective frameworks.

There have been many studies done and books written on what it means to be a good leader; however, few to none took into account the current circumstances. In the face of such high levels of uncertainty, anxiety, inequity, and angst, it is understandable that many leaders believe they need to create a whole new playbook. In most cases, though, the opposite is true. Now more than ever, leadership should rely on what research and practice have shown to work. More specifically, leaders need to consider frameworks, goals, and mission statements that were in place pre-COVID-19 to determine which elements still work and which need modification. After all, effective leadership traits focused on student success inform the familiar frameworks that ensure equitable instruction for all students. These frameworks drive the contingencies (continue, adapt, preserve, monitor) that facilitate continuity of learning in unfamiliar circumstances.

This white paper will apply the familiar framework of WHO, WHAT, WHEN, HOW, and—most importantly—WHY to examine the role of leadership in developing scalable and sustainable contingency/remote learning plans. After walking through six critical traits of effective leadership and their associated frameworks, this paper will present four important phases of building remote learning plans to ensure continuity of learning during these uncertain times.

## What are six critical traits of effective educational leaders? (WHO)

**“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”—JFK**

*(John F. Kennedy in undelivered remarks to the Dallas Citizens Council at the Trade Mart in Dallas, Texas; Nov. 22, 1963)*

Although JFK never actually spoke these words, they point to a powerful connection between leadership and learning that has been underscored by several studies. The six traits that follow have been identified by researchers as influential in driving student achievement and vital in building effective leaders.

### **1. Articulate a clear vision and plan for the academic success of all students.**

High academic achievement is tied to educational leaders who create and articulate a clear vision for student success, as well as a plan to achieve this vision (Hayet, Woods, & Martin, 2016). The leader builds consensus so that vision is shared by all stakeholders—caregivers, teachers, staff, and community members—and develops a plan that outlines rigorous standards and expectations, proven instructional strategies, and the availability of high-quality resources and appropriate support.



## **2. Cultivate community networks that share the vision of student success.**

Effective educational leaders establish and cultivate community networks that are committed to the academic success of all students and include people, organizations, and businesses that will advance “equitable outcomes in and outside of schools’ walls” (Green, 2017, p. 20). This element of effective leadership will be paramount in the current environment, especially when addressing issues related to the digital divide and developing community partnerships to facilitate internet connectivity and the provision of digital devices.

## **3. Promote teachers’ professional development and leadership skills.**

As Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) suggested, “Positive emotions arise when an event promises to help meet a personal goal; negative emotions when chances of achieving one’s goal are harmed or threatened. Such emotions may arise from frequent positive feedback about one’s work and a dynamic changing job” (p. 206). Therefore, effective educational leaders know the career goals of their teachers and deliver authentic, non-judgemental feedback based on objective data. This allows them to talk with teachers about instructional practices (Gordon, Oliver, & Soli, 2016) and provide—with teachers’ input—professional development that is relevant to the personal needs and/or career goals of each individual educator. Empowered teachers are not in control of everything; rather, they are invited to share opinions and be part of decision-making. Ultimately, this feeling of empowerment supports buy-in for new initiatives.

## **4. Rely on data to drive decision-making and measure progress.**

To monitor progress and measure student growth, effective leaders must both use quantitative data and engage in constructive conversations around it. Because of challenges surrounding timely availability, accessibility, and teacher understanding of optimal use for classroom or differentiated instruction, data often does not impact instructional practices (Earl & Katz, 2002). As a result, leaders must strive to make data timely, accessible, and connected to classroom practices as a way to ensure that progress is measured and appropriate instructional decisions are made. Leaders also need to establish frameworks and models for systematically reviewing the data, some examples of which include: Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), Response to Intervention (RTI), and decision-making charts for individual student data teams. The use of these frameworks will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

## **5. Maintain high standards for instruction to meet student needs.**

For students to achieve their learning goals, it is critical to not only set a high bar but to ensure those standards are not lowered, especially for populations that have historically struggled (i.e., at-risk readers, low-income students, EL students, etc.). In other words, leaders need to keep standards in place and then adjust instructional strategies to help students meet their goals. One critical component of this trait involves establishing a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) model, as introduced earlier in this paper. Having a model like MTSS or RTI in place will enable educators to monitor student progress, identify areas of need, and then adjust instructional intensity to ensure progress toward and achievement of high standards.

## 6. Foster the social and emotional learning of students and teachers.

Even under the best of circumstances, school experiences can be stressful for students and adults alike. With this in mind, effective leaders nurture students and adults as they learn how to manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, develop empathy for others, maintain positive relationships, and take responsibility in their decision-making (CASEL, 2020).

### Familiar frameworks (WHAT?)

**“School leaders are willing and able to take the lead in developing world-class education systems that meet the needs of all students . . . System leadership can build capacity in education; share expertise, facilities and resources; encourage innovation and creativity; improve leadership and spread it more widely; and provide skills support.”**

*(Pont, Nusche, & Hopkins, 2008, p. 3)*

This quote is about the WHAT—namely, the frameworks and systems associated with the traits outlined in the prior section of this paper that have been tied to school and district success. It will be these elements, which are most likely already in place in your districts, that you can rely on and build upon to create your contingency/remote learning plans. By using familiar frameworks that have been consistent, reliable, and effective, your remote learning plans will have a higher likelihood of being sustainable and scalable.

### Vision and plan

Your vision and plan are not just one-time proclamations; they are the lifeblood of a culture that values education and instills a passion for lifelong learning. The vision and plan guide decisions and serve as metrics of academic success by outlining high, rigorous standards. When the plan is not achieving the vision, adjustments need to be made to the plan. The vision and plan encapsulate not only what the school/district wants to achieve, but how it is going to get there.

### Community networks

Although “it takes a village” may seem trite, it is also true. Ultimately, community networks composed of parents, teachers, and staff support academic success for students by simultaneously sharing this vision and working toward realizing it. Outside the school community, additional resources, personal or familial support, and assistance with cutting through red tape can be provided by businesses, community groups, and unions.

### Empowered teachers

Frameworks for empowered teachers align with research that suggests what teachers know and are able to do have the greatest impact on student achievement (Piasta, Conner, Fishman & Morrison, 2009; Walters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). Building upon the fact that personalized professional development facilitates continued learning for teachers, the strategic allocation of resources and reliable technology will further support teacher success; ensure sustainability of learning through teacher transitions; and allow for scaling beyond a small, in-person group. Using learning platforms as a method for empowering teachers allows educators to learn at the pace and time most convenient for them. Much like students, educators should be afforded choices and other personalized learning options; for instance, by providing variations of the same course depending on years of experience and empowering teachers through leadership opportunities that encourage taking risks and learning new skills while also establishing a culture of lifelong learning.

## Data-driven decisions

Within the framework of data-driven decision-making, teachers are taught how to use data sets to monitor and measure student progress and differentiate instruction. Data also drive decisions about the purchase of instructional programs and materials. Meanwhile, administrators learn how to critically review research studies and use statistical measures such as effect size to determine program effectiveness. The two key features of data-driven decisions related to assessment data and student growth are data reliability and validity, along with the “typical” growth expected for a particular age and skill. With regard to reliability and validity, it is important to ensure consistency and specificity of measurement. For typical growth, it is important to gauge whether large gains are expected or if research shows that a skill may start to plateau at a certain grade level (e.g., oral reading fluency in middle and high school). Finally, securing multiple data points to inform decision-making and establishing a process for ongoing monitoring of those decisions can be found in the MTSS framework.

## Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)

Equity requires that each student receive the specific instruction they need to learn, accompanied by all necessary resources and support (Mann, 2014). An MTSS framework provides this precise instruction, which is often referred to as personalized learning by educators and is designed to give every student the same opportunity to succeed. In acknowledgment of the fact that data are critical in designing the best instruction for each student, the MTSS and RTI frameworks use data to provide a clear methodology for matching instructional intensity to learner needs. Further, these frameworks offer a problem-solving method or process for continuous monitoring of any decisions made and instructions implemented that can be applied not just to instructional decisions but to those made based on data as well. Monitoring (“Did it work?”) —which becomes paramount once the problem has been identified, its cause has been determined, and a solution has been created and implemented—applies to many aspects of contingency/remote learning plans.

## Social and emotional learning (SEL)

An SEL framework supports teachers in developing the ability to meet the needs of their students as well as themselves (CASEL, 2017). Before students can learn critical SEL life-success skills, their basic needs must be met: Do they have enough to eat? Do they have a safe environment in which to live? Meeting these needs is a vital part of educating the whole child (Hayet, Woods, & Martin, 2016) and may be achieved by leveraging community networks. Lastly, it is important to remember the synergy of SEL and academic learning; that is, SEL supports academic learning and academic learning supports SEL.

## Using Familiar Frameworks to Develop Scalable Remote Learning Plans in Unfamiliar Circumstances (WHEN and HOW)

**“Improvement is a process, not an event.”**

*(Elmore, 2004, p. 254)*

The concept of “a process, not an event” is important to keep in mind when thinking about developing remote learning plans in these uncertain times. As districts and schools will not get everything in place overnight, they should count on needing to continuously monitor their progress and plan to make improvements. During periods of significant change such as that brought about by COVID-19, the first steps compose something of a triage phase before a pivot toward building scalable and sustainable plans can take place. Across the country, the most common issues that arose seemed to be: health, nutrition, and getting students fed; accessibility to and connectivity of devices; and maintaining

relationships between teachers and students. To address these issues, schools/districts used libraries and recreation centers as pick-up locations for school meals, parked buses equipped with mobile hotspots in neighborhoods with low connectivity, and set up video conference platforms for teachers to connect visually with their classes. Once these initial priorities were addressed, school and district leaders needed to turn their attention to a longer-term plan. As stated at the beginning of this paper, although the instinct is to throw out the playbook and start fresh, it is more important now than ever to rely on proven frameworks and instructional strategies to create remote learning plans. The following four-phase approach provides a road map for creating these plans and lists the established traits and frameworks that have prepared schools/districts for this moment. The relationships built with communities, the teachers empowered to step up and become instructional leaders, the MTSS frameworks in place, and the effective online/blended programs reviewed using rigorous methods will all be fundamental aspects of scalable and sustainable plans.

The first phase, **Continue**, emphasizes the importance of continuity of instruction even while schools are closed. The second, **Adapt**, acknowledges that adaptations will be needed in order for instruction to continue in a distance learning environment. The third, **Preserve**, underscores that instructional standards can be perpetuated and high levels of learning can continue with proven online learning solutions. And finally, **Monitor** highlights the necessity of using data to inform decision-making and gauge progress toward goals. Together, these phases are essential to create and maintain a scalable and sustainable remote learning plan.

### **CONTINUE — Continuity (of instruction) is critical to learning**

The closing of schools requires a plan that minimizes disruptions to instruction and learning.

- ☐ Create a communication plan.
- ☐ Empower educators to make instructional decisions.
- ☐ Preserve multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) model to ensure equity.
- ☐ Maintain rigorous standards.

### **ADAPT — New conditions require adaptations for learning**

While schools are closed, instruction can move to a distance learning environment.

- ☐ Ensure adequate infrastructure to support distance learning.
- ☐ Develop plans for students without devices/access.
- ☐ Support educators with instructional materials that align to distance learning programs.
- ☐ Focus on and attend to social-emotional learning (SEL) needs.

### **PRESERVE — Proven online solutions bolster learning**

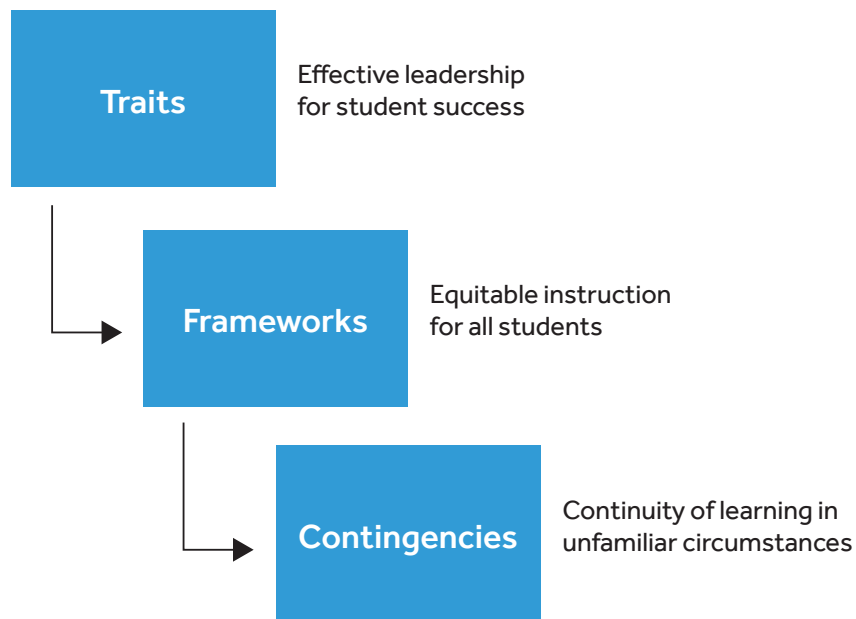
With research-proven online learning solutions, rigorous instructional standards can be maintained and high levels of learning can continue.

- ☐ Require online learning programs to meet ESSA standards of efficacy and content to align with evidence (e.g., Science of Reading).
- ☐ Identify blended learning programs that provide personalized learning from both the teacher and technology.
- ☐ Verify how programs address the needs of multiple populations (e.g., English learners, special education students, students with dyslexia, general education students).
- ☐ Look for acceleration of learning beyond a year's growth in a year's time.

## MONITOR — Data inform learning progress

Data allow educators to check the progress of students working remotely and provide administrators with a measure of progress even when state assessments are suspended.

- ❑ Ensure that online learning solutions can capture, analyze, and synthesize data to generate simple and actionable reports that inform educators about student progress.
- ❑ Verify that data identifies at-risk students so instructional intensity can be adjusted to change students' trajectory of learning.
- ❑ Confirm how parents and administrations will be able to access and use the data.
- ❑ Confirm that data align to high-stakes tests.



Effective leadership traits focused on student success drive the familiar frameworks that ensure equitable instruction for all students. These frameworks undergird the contingencies (continue, adapt, preserve, monitor) that facilitate continuity of learning in unfamiliar circumstances.

The above sections discuss the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, and HOW of the role played by effective leadership in creating scalable and sustainable remote learning plans. However, it is essential to come back to the WHY. The quote at the beginning of this paper asserted that educational leadership involves influencing others to achieve goals, and while most leaders would agree that student achievement and educator empowerment are their primary goals, the ultimate goal is educational equity. Equity, whether it relates to digital access or to the same opportunities to learn, requires a plan guided by a mission and vision, driven by data, built upon solid foundational frameworks, adaptable and scalable in the face of new circumstances, and able to undergo continuous progress monitoring. The north star of this WHY should be top of mind throughout remote learning plan creation, with leaders tailoring their plans and actions accordingly.

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