

# Supporting Educator Growth During Distance Learning

During this time of rapid change with schools moving to distance and online learning, teachers are quickly learning a new way to teach. Learning curves are steep for students, parents, teachers, coaches and administrators as they navigate this new reality. The learning and growth of teachers will transition through different learning needs. In the beginning, educators typically focus on learning a new teaching platform and technology, as well as supporting students with these tools. Once established, educators will be connecting with and supporting students and families in new ways, engaging students in a new environment, and supporting student learning and mastery through a new instructional delivery method. This document provides resources for supporting educators' learning and growth during distance learning.

In this guide, you will find:

- **Coaching in the Time of COVID-19** which provides guidance on coaching during these stressful times and a virtual coaching model to support coaches and teachers.
- **Teacher Collaboration** for supporting growth and development in a virtual or distance learning environment, including finding professional learning communities outside your network.

**Audience:** Coaches, Administrators, General Education Teachers, Special Education Teachers

## Coaching in the Time of COVID-19

Coaching is used in schools to support the growth and development of teachers in order to support student learning. It is also one way to provide ongoing job-embedded professional learning, which in the new reality of virtual and distance learning, is crucial for educators as they learn and navigate the new system.

### Advice for Coaches

As all schools transition to distance learning, coaches are figuring out their role in supporting teachers. There are varying degrees of capacity and readiness for educators in distance learning. Coaches need to develop strategies to continue relationships with teachers, understanding their role in the support of teachers and students at this time.

### Understand the Coaching Role

Teachers' needs may be different than they were in the traditional classroom, and those needs will change over time. To begin with, teachers need to understand the distance learning plan and required technology for instruction, including teaching live classes virtually or sending

videos. Coaches can rely on their coaching skills to continue supporting teachers. It's important to be intentional and strategic with your moves.

### The Role of the Coach

- ❑ **Support Teacher Thinking and Problem Solving.** Continue collaborating, asking probing questions and having discussions, and being only as directive as necessary.
- ❑ **Give Instructional Support.** Continue the discussions around instruction, model online lessons, provide professional learning of the features of the online platform, provide best practices for independent work, provide resources and models.
  - ❑ **Collaborate on observations.** Determine what the learning priorities are for the teacher and coach at this time and then set a goal for observations. Collaborate to determine Look-Fors, think about how students are engaging with the learning, and how teachers are [checking for understanding](#).
  - ❑ **Keep focusing on equity.** Ask questions that keep equity at the forefront of the planning. Equity at this time takes into account technology discrepancies. Help teachers plan instruction for students with [limited and full access to technology](#).
- ❑ **Accommodate Different Needs.** Assess the needs of those you support to determine the level and type of support needed. Group teachers together to support common needs around technology use. Coaches can model using the online platform and connect teachers with peer experts for collaboration.
  - ❑ **Provide professional learning.** Differentiate professional learning for teachers by meeting them where they are. Use your network resources, such as technology experts to support this learning. Some types of professional learning opportunities may include:
    - ❑ Using online learning platforms and specific instructional strategies, such as [small groups](#) and breakout rooms
    - ❑ Strategies for [engaging students](#) in the platform
    - ❑ Adjusting instruction to an online environment
    - ❑ Providing [accommodations for students with disabilities](#) or English Language Learners for distance learning
    - ❑ [Creating accessible materials](#)
    - ❑ [Teaching students to collaborate](#) in the distance learning setting
    - ❑ Recording a modelled lesson to give teachers opportunities to see a class taught online
  - ❑ **Facilitate Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings.** Model using features and tools of the online platform by facilitating a PLC meeting. Encourage problem solving and collaboration between colleagues to leverage network and human resources.

- ❑ **Take over a class.** Gain empathy by stepping into the role of a teacher in distance learning. Teach a class online with the teacher observing to help understand the struggles teachers are dealing with, then collaborate to problem solve and come up with solutions.
- ❑ **Utilize Your Networks.** Connect with those inside your organization, as well as the larger world of educators.
  - ❑ **Building network and district leaders.** School principals and network/district directors can be a great support to you. Let them know what you need to support your teachers and your own learning.
  - ❑ **Network/district technology experts.** The tech gurus in your network can help solve technical issues and support your learning and understanding of the platforms teachers are using. They can help you guide teachers in the usability of the technology and provide network resources for training users to navigate these systems.
- ❑ **Access Outside Networks.** Many existing and new organizations and social networks are available to provide support during the COVID-19 crisis.
  - ❑ **Professional organizations.** Many associations have created hubs of information to support educators on the ground during this time. They can provide both academic and emotional support. A few examples follow:
    - ❑ [Online Learning Communities](#) (see below)
    - ❑ [Learning Forward COVID Support Community](#)
  - ❑ **Social media groups.** Educators are turning to each other to gain support in their work. Many social groups have been formed on Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Instagram that have provided a space for educators to share best practices.
    - ❑ **Twitter** coaching hashtags to find support include [#educoach](#) for instructional coaches of all content areas focused on improving education and [#instructionalcoach](#) provides space for coaches to share and get feedback on developing professional development and workshops. Find additional information in the article, [Further Your Instructional Coaching Practice on Twitter](#).
    - ❑ **Facebook** groups have been set up to support coaching. Some groups include [The Instructional Coaching Group](#) which is a professional development group for coaches, teachers, and administrators, [Future Ready Instructional Coaches](#), which is for educators interested in innovation and student-centered learning approaches and [Principal Principles Leadership Group](#), a professional learning network for future and current school leaders.
- ❑ **Maintain Reasonable Expectations.** Just as you have patience with those you support and meet them where they are at, remember to have patience with yourself. This is most likely a new spot for you to be in just as much as the educators you support, and the learning curve is steep. Set high, yet reasonable,

expectations for everyone, including yourself. Create space and time for teachers to vent and lean on a listening ear, while also setting boundaries to ensure space and time to collaborate on expectations or goals. You won't have all the answers and that's okay. Use this time to build trust and find solutions together.

- ❑ **Make Time to Recharge.** Accept that you may not be able to do everything you did in the traditional building, and that the needs for support may be high. Establish a schedule or routine that makes time for you to recharge and build in activities like breathing, meditation, exercising, etc. to maintain a healthy balance. Take care of yourself so you can be the support teachers need.

[Coaching during a crisis: Advice from experts](#) - Much of the information above is from a blog by Learning Forward that gives advice to coaches based on a [#VirtualCoaching Twitter chat: Coaching in a time of crisis](#) held on April 2, 2020. The chat included participants sharing their most pressing challenges right now.

## Coaching Virtually

Coaching virtually gives teachers opportunities for support utilizing technology. The traditional coaching model shifts from in-person coaching to an online platform through the use of video observation and feedback, collaborative documents and digital tools to foster planning and collaboration. However, the coaching cycle is structured a little differently for online coaching.

### Coaching Cycle for Coaching Virtually

- ❑ **Pre-Coaching Conversations**
  - ❑ Conversations are held using a virtual platform such as Google Hangouts, Skype or Zoom.
  - ❑ Collaborative documents are used to create agendas, notes, plans, etc.
  - ❑ Goals should be co-created; teachers should voice what is needed most for this coaching cycle based on the needs and purpose of learning. Look-fors are co-created.
- ❑ **Virtual Classroom Observation**
  - ❑ Coaches can stop by a virtual classroom setting to observe, looking for the defined "Look-Fors." [Shift to Digital: Classroom 'Look Fors'](#) gives a sample of walkthrough rubrics and tools to support blended learning that can be adapted for virtual classroom observations
  - ❑ If permitted by district policy, teachers can record the virtual classroom and the coach and the teacher can watch the video together
- ❑ **Debrief Conversations**
  - ❑ The coach and teacher participate in a second virtual visit
  - ❑ They discuss the virtual observation or watch the recorded virtual class

- ❑ Predetermined “Look-Fors” are discussed
- ❑ Data is reviewed together to determine next steps
- ❑ Collaborative documents are revisited, updated and new goals are set

[Virtual Coaching for Anytime, Anywhere Teacher Development](#) - Stephanie Affinito discusses the Virtual Coaching Cycle, as well as benefits to the virtual coaching cycle. Stephanie has also set up a [Virtual Coaching Toolkit](#) that she is sharing publicly. [Coaching in Crisis: Revise and Rethink eLearning on the Fly](#) is a webinar by edWeb that gives specific samples and ideas for coaching in this transition to distance learning.

## Virtual Coaching

[Virtual Coaching](#) is a coaching model that allows a coach to virtually observe a classroom and discreetly give immediate feedback to a teacher. This model is similar to [Real Time Coaching](#), a model that utilizes a walkie talkie and an ear piece to provide feedback to a teacher during the lesson. The power of this method is the immediate feedback the teacher can utilize to make a change in the moment. This method can be adapted for a virtual live class, using a chat feature in the learning management system or by utilizing text via a phone. Virtual coaching has a “bug in the ear” component.

### Virtual Coaching Model

- ❑ **Virtual Coaching Cycle.** Similar to other coaching models, the coaching cycle includes a preconference, an observation and a debrief. The coach observes the lesson and gives the teacher feedback through an earpiece or through chat or text. The coach uses cue words or phrases to guide the teacher to make immediate changes in instruction.
  - ❑ **Pre-conference.** The teacher and coach determine the objective for the lesson. During this time, the teacher and coach determine key words and phrases the coach will use to help the teacher to make changes mid-lesson if necessary. The coach and teacher also practice this process to better understand how it will work when they do it live. For virtual live class, this practice would include the words and the video tools being utilized.
  - ❑ **During the lesson.** While the teacher is instructing students online, the coach joins the class and observes the moves the teacher is making and the responses of the students. If an instructional strategy is not landing for students, the coach can type out a cue word or a phrase to guide the teacher to pivot or make a change to the lesson immediately. The coach should maintain a log of what and when feedback was given to use in the debrief session.

- ❑ **Debrief.** The coach will guide the teacher to reflect on the lesson, including what went well and what didn't. They will also reflect on how and why the prompt worked, and what changes need to be made in the future. Lastly, they determine next steps and new goals to repeat the cycle.
- ❑ **Virtual Coaching Skills.** Virtual Coaching, like other coaching, is based on a relationship of trust between the coach and the teacher. There are additional skills that will help with this model of coaching.
  - ❑ **Saying more and saying Less.** Determining the type of feedback to give a teacher is one skill coaches need to develop. Directive feedback (say more) is sometimes needed, while at other times using guiding and probing questions allows teachers to figure things out on their own.
  - ❑ **Setting and evaluating goals.** Collaborating with teachers to set goals for learning will guide the coaching process and development of the teacher.
  - ❑ **Personalizing feedback.** Personalizing the feedback to meet the goal of the individual teacher is critical for individual growth. The coach and teacher together should decide how the feedback is given in the moment. For example, if a teacher is wandering off topic, a code word of "bird walking" could be a reminder for the teacher to get back on track. This can also be used to help teachers with classroom management, for example a code word could be "camera-Child A", to remind the teacher to check what the student is doing and get them back on task.
  - ❑ **Encouraging positively.** During this lesson, the coach should be supportive and use encouraging statements, as well as praise as part of the feedback. A four-to-one positive statements to corrective statements ratio is recommended.

The purpose of virtual coaching is to collaborate with teachers to improve their practice in support of improved student learning. This coaching should not be evaluative and should be utilized in a shared leadership approach. A relationship between the teacher and coach built on trust will translate into successful instruction and increased outcomes for students.

## **Teacher Collaboration and Professional Learning Communities**

During distance learning, teachers supporting each other through collaboration continues. Many teachers are seeking support from teammates on technology, lessons, emotional wellbeing, and more to support student learning. Teachers are also finding ways to collaborate with and support each other across the globe using online learning communities.

### **School Based Virtual Teacher Collaboration**

Schools have various committees and groups that collaborate within the confines of their buildings. Perhaps now, as schools have moved to a distance learning setting and educators have moved to working from home, teacher collaboration is more important than ever. In addition to collaborating about lesson plans for upcoming units and supporting each other in

differentiated instruction for students with disabilities, English language learners and other diverse learners, teachers can support each other with the learning platform and technology.

### Collaborating Virtually With Peers

- ❑ **Share the Load.** Educators teaching the same content with a shared scope and sequence can share the load in recording videos for skill development and standards based teaching. Working together to collaborate on instruction and sharing the workload of curriculum and tutorial creation will benefit everyone. This is also a way to include special education teachers in creating videos for the adaptations and scaffolds for students with disabilities.
- ❑ **Keep the Focus on Student Learning.** Maintaining a focused eye on student learning is important. Keeping instruction rigorous, yet reasonable, for the setting will help students feel a sense of normalcy. Teachers won't be able to present instruction on all the standards and skills they originally intended in their yearly plan. Collaborate together to determine the specific skills and content that will be the most powerful and hold the most leverage for creating success in the future, then plan lessons to address them. In grade level team meetings, include social emotional check-ins and discuss students you have in common. If there are students who are not engaging or attending, divide up the roster to make contact and share information with each other.
- ❑ **Seek Out Expertise From Special Education Teachers.** Providing accommodations and modifications may be different in the distance learning setting. Collaborate with education specialists on adapting lessons and providing scaffolds for students. Continuing to focus on student IEP goals will be important to help battle COVID slide. If teachers are participating in co-teaching, planning together will be important not only for instructional strategies, but also support strategies in the virtual classroom.
- ❑ **Peer Learning Visit.** As teachers are implementing new tools and strategies for student learning, watching another teacher facilitate an online class can be helpful. This structure creates a peer-coaching model that can be supportive to learning new processes and strategies. Defining this process upfront can help focus the visit. Here are some guidelines.
  - ❑ **Pre-visit conversation.** 15-20 minutes (Participants can include visiting teacher, presenting teacher, instructional coach)
    - ❑ Define the specific skill goal for the visit. *What do you want to see that will help you in your virtual classroom?*
    - ❑ Define the norms for the visiting teacher. *Will the visiting teacher's camera be on or off? Can the visiting teacher ask questions of the students or teacher via the chat feature of the online platform? If so, when?*
    - ❑ Schedule up a time for a debrief and to ask follow up questions.

- ❑ **Virtual classroom visit.** 10-15 minutes. (Note: this could be completed as a video recording and the two teachers could watch it together) The visiting teacher will log into the class they are visiting and observe the teacher's moves as well as the students' responses. Create an observation protocol to guide the focus of the observations. Some guiding questions could be:
  - ❑ How is the teacher getting the attention of all students? How do the students respond?
  - ❑ How are the expectations and objectives presented to students? How are they engaging with them?
  - ❑ How are the students engaging and showing their thinking? How is the teacher monitoring this?
  - ❑ How is the teacher checking for understanding? How are students' responding to this?
  - ❑ Which routines and practices has the teacher implemented to support the online setting?
- ❑ **Debrief.** 15-20 minutes. If possible, have the debrief the same day as the visit. This is the opportunity to process the visit and ask follow up questions.
  - ❑ Anchor the debrief in the following questions:
    - ❑ What is your major take-away from the visit and how does it connect to your practice?
    - ❑ What did you see the teacher do that you also do? Did students respond the way you expected?
    - ❑ Were there things the teacher did that you want to bring into your practice? What specific questions do you have about how the strategy is implemented?
    - ❑ What are the action steps you will take to implement your learning into your practice?
    - ❑ What support do you need to make this happen?
  - ❑ Discuss the plan for implementation, including scheduling a reciprocal visit, to get feedback on the implementation of the strategy or skill.
- ❑ **Reciprocal peer visit and debrief.** The teacher that was visited first can now visit the other teacher's class to provide support and feedback on the implementation of the new learning. Using the questions from the original visit (above), the teacher can take notes on what is observed and later provide feedback.

The information on peer learning visits for an online setting was adapted from information in the article [\*ONLINE EXCLUSIVE: With peer visits, teachers see for themselves how to improve practice.\*](#)



**Virtual PLCs, Team Meetings or Other Collaboration Meetings** - Staying connected with colleagues and sharing practices will help support teachers and students in the distance learning environment. Holding PLCs and other team meetings online are not that much different than holding them in person.

### Virtually Collaboration Meetings

- Set Goals.** Set the purpose of the meeting. [Athlos](#) suggests using CARE (Curriculum, Assessment, Remediation and Enrichment) as a guide for setting focus.
- Establish Norms.** Set behavioral norms in “We will” statements as a team. They should address things like decision-making, participation and confidentiality. They should also include online etiquette and platform norms including:
  - Before the meeting
    - Checking technology before the meeting
    - Environment and distractions (are there things in the background that will distract others?)
    - Dress
  - During the meeting
    - Microphone norms (muted when not talking)
    - Video norms (is video on at all times?)
    - Chat feature norms (this is can be the side talk, or a way to ask questions of the group without interrupting)
- Assign Roles.** Assign roles to share the responsibility and help the meeting run smoothly. Typical roles include facilitator, recorder, timekeeper, reporter. Other variations include notetaker, action item recorder and squirrel identifier (identifying when discussion goes off topic).
- Prep for the Meeting.** Doing some work ahead of time will help the meeting go smoothly. This is completed by the Facilitator.
  - Set up a shared folder using Google Drive or One Drive
  - Create a PLC agenda template and complete pre-meeting information (include the meeting link in the agenda)
  - Send out a calendar invite with meeting link and agenda document link
- During the Meeting.** All participants fill their role.
  - Recorder notes who is in attendance and takes notes
  - Timekeeper ensures meeting starts and ends on time, monitors the time according to the agenda
  - Reporter reviews the norms and quick summary of the last meeting. This can be done via a screen share and/or aloud
  - Facilitator leads the meeting
  - All participants contribute to the content of the meeting

- ❑ **After the Meeting.** Recorder saves the notes in the shared folder.
- ❑ **Virtual PLC and Team Meeting Sample Agendas.** Below are two virtual PLC agendas that can be used and adapted for your use. One thing to keep in mind as you adapt these models is to think about where to add adaptations for diverse learners (differentiated instruction), reteaching and enrichment, and which students fit into each category.
  - ❑ **Virtual PLC Essentials Workbook** - This resource provided by Athlos includes a fillable PLC agenda.
  - ❑ **Virtual PLC Agenda** - this resource is a PLC agenda protocol provided by edconnective.

[Athlos](#) has provided guidance on moving meetings to the virtual setting, including a [Youtube video on Virtual PLCs](#). It includes a workbook with a virtual PLC agenda. [Bolstering Collaboration Through Virtual Professional Learning Communities](#) also has tips for creating virtual PLCs.

### Online Learning Communities

Many teachers are turning to online learning communities as they try to find ways to quickly and successfully support students thrown into the new learning reality of distance and online learning. Teachers are turning to social media and online communities for support outside of their regular district, network or school channels. Some of those resources include the following:

#### Social Media and Online Learning Communities

- ❑ **Twitter.** Teachers are utilizing twitter to quickly find resources to learn new ideas, find web pages for in-depth ideas, speak with other educators live or delayed, and find valuable educators to connect with. Many are using the hashtag [#virtualschool](#) to share resources.
- ❑ **Facebook.** Groups such as [Special Education and Temporary School Closure Support](#) and [Educator Temporary School Closure for Online Learning-Elementary](#) have been created for teachers to support each other with resources and ideas, as well as emotional support from peers. Searching for “Online School Closure Educator Support” will bring up many groups for different educational subjects and areas.
- ❑ **EdWeb.** This organization has many different online professional learning communities, including [New Models for Professional Learning](#), or [Elements for eLearning](#) that teachers can join. They support webinars as well as blogs and other resources.

- ❑ **National Education Association (NEA).** NEA has established [edCommunities](#) to support professional growth through open exchange of strengths and resources amongst educators.

To learn more about using social media and online communities, this chapter on [Teacher Collaboration Online Professional Learning Communities](#), has additional information and resources.

## Final Word

Educators are participating in a large learning curve as they rapidly navigate through distance learning to deliver instruction. This is a time when teachers, coaches and administrators are looking for new ways to inform how they interact and teach kids. To support student learning, teachers are seeking knowledge and skills through virtual coaching, broader online professional learning communities and virtual PLCs and team meetings. As this learning continues to evolve over the next few months, the information in this document will be updated.



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