Sustaining Engagement of Students with Disabilities in Distance Learning Environments

As schools transition to distance learning, ensuring student engagement can be a challenge. How can educators make sure that students are showing up for class, working on assignments, and turning them in? While students are at home, there are more things to focus on than simply completing what is assigned by the teacher.

In this guide, you will find:
- **Connecting with students** to continue building relationships to motivate students to attend class or continue working on assignments.
- **Engaging students** with lessons and activities that keep them coming back.
- **Tracking attendance** for to ensure participation

Marshall has additional related resources for:
- [Connecting with Students with Limited Access to Technology](#)
- [Supporting Student Collaboration in a Virtual Setting](#)

Audience: General Education Teachers, Special Education Teachers

Connecting with Students and Strengthening Relationships

Students at home are missing their teachers and classmates and teachers are missing their students. Maintaining relationships and connection with students helps develop a sense of belonging and can help students and teachers through this time. It also takes intentional planning. Educators across the country are connecting to students in various ways.

In **[7 Ways to Maintain Relationships During Your School Closure](#)**, Sarah Gonser shared ideas that teachers are using to connect with their students. Below, we summarize these ways:

7 Ways to Maintain Relationships During School Closure

1: Say Hello Frequently
 ❏ **Create a video greeting to your students**
     ❏ [Tech High School Teachers Say Hello from Home](#)
     ❏ [I Miss My Students (Never Enough Cover)](#)
     ❏ [Hello Grades 1-2 Roller Coaster](#)
 ❏ **Have students submit videos about their experience during this time**
     ❏ [Learn Outside "The Box"](#)
 ❏ **Make phone calls to students without internet**

❏ Call a group of students each day, split between teachers who have the student, so each student gets at least one call a week.
❏ **Send out letters or cards to your students via snail mail**

2: Maintain Morning Meetings (or other daily routines)
❏ **Have students respond to prompts**
  ❏ Use the interactive whiteboard or chat feature such as sharing your screen in the learning management system (LMS) (students and interact with each other's prompts)
  ❏ Have students email responses
  ❏ Do an audio conference call with a few students at a time who don't have internet access (tag a student to go and the student tags the next student, etc.)

3: Take Temperature Checks
❏ **Find ways students can let you know how they're doing**
  ❏ Students can select a smile, neutral or frown emoji within the LMS
  ❏ Students can use thumbs up, down or sideways
  ❏ Students can copy and drop a various weather icon in the LMS interactive whiteboard
  ❏ Students can complete a survey check-in
    ❏ Student Well-being check-in
    ❏ Distance Check-in
  ❏ Students can check in with each other

4: Create Structures for Student to Student Interaction
❏ **Create Pen Pals, Phone Pals**
  ❏ Send home envelopes, paper and stamps for students who don't have the technology
  ❏ Set up phone pals where students can talk about a prompt
  ❏ Use breakout rooms in the LMS for small groups

5: Create Virtual Groups (not just friend groups)
❏ **Create discussion threads that students can discuss together**
  ❏ LMSs have breakout rooms for verbal discussions
  ❏ Google Classroom or Google Docs will allow for interactive discussions via keyboards

6: Include Families
❏ **Provide opportunities for parents to ask questions or express concerns**
  ❏ Examples of ways to communicate: Email, messaging platforms, such as Remind, SeeSaw or Google Voice, video conference sessions with the teacher, video conference sessions for families to connect with each other
  ❏ See Family Engagement for additional information

7: Get Kids to Name and Process their own emotions
❏ **Create writing assignments that facilitate this**
❏ **Create artistic assignments to support this**
❏ **Give students the option to share with classmates or only the teacher**

Additional Resources on Building Relationships for Distance Learning
- ❏ **[Five Ways to Build Community in Online Classrooms](#)**
- ❏ **[How to Build Meaningful Community for Online Learners #DLNchat](#)**
- ❏ **[Creative Ways Teachers Are Building Classroom Community Online](#)**

Engaging Students

Keeping students engaged with the work they are doing will keep them coming back. Much of the literature tells us to keep routines and structures in place, as much as possible. This is also a time of stress for everyone, so helping students actively engaged with each other will help them want to continue to be in class. Teachers who teach in virtual schools full time tell us that it's important to do things similarly to how they are done in traditional settings, set clear expectations, plan engaging lessons, hold students accountable for their learning, monitor progress and follow up with students.

Engaging and Instructing Students Remotely
Teachers who teach in full-time virtual settings have tips to support teachers who may be doing distance learning for the first time. Making lessons interactive and mixing technology with non-digital activities will keep students engaged.

Teacher Techniques for Remote Student Engagement

Communication is Crucial
❏ **Create a centralized hub for communication**
    ❏ Utilize systems you have in place, such as [Canvas](#), [Blackboard](#), or [Google Classroom](#).
    ❏ Set a schedule for emailing students and families
    ❏ Use group messaging tools such as [Remind](#) or [Google Voice](#)
 	
Utilize various instructional models and methods
❏ [Flipped Classroom](#) or [Blended Learning Classroom](#), where students learn asynchronously for background knowledge, that can be discussed together as a whole group or small group discussions either using synchronous time or phone calls. Students can use software such as [FlipGrid](#) or [Seesaw](#) to record and share videos with teachers and classmates.
❏ **Create tutorials and short lessons,** recorded tutorials or lessons can be watched by students multiple times. Recordings can be made using a smartphone or webcam, Screen and video recording tools such as [Loom](#), video conferencing applications such as [Zoom](#) or [Google Hangouts Meet](#)
 	
Give students opportunities to collaborate
❏ **Create assignments for students to collaborate**
    ❏ Utilize online shareable documents such as [Google Docs](#)
    ❏ Utilize your LMS or video conferencing tool to enable breakout rooms for small groups
    ❏ See Marshall's [Supporting Student Collaboration in a Virtual Setting](#) for more information

Utilize opportunities for hand-on-learning at home

- ❏ **Give students choice** in their learning by creating assignments that let them learn more about their interests and showcase their knowledge. For example, let students pick an activity they enjoy, such as skateboarding, and explain the physics behind it or cooking and describe the chemical or physical changes. CommonSense.org has ideas for [Connecting the Classroom and Real World.](#)
- ❏ **Give students the opportunity to move and have brain breaks** Students will need to get up and move around websites such as [MovetoLearnMS](#) or [GoNoodle](#) to provide opportunities for brain breaks. Get students to be creative with things, like pass the Stretch, where you choose one stretch, everyone does it and it is passed to the next person to choose a different stretch and so on.

Use multiple methods for assessment and provide individual feedback

- ❏ Check-in with students to see how they are doing, you can send out surveys asking what they found hard and then work one on one for a tutoring session.
- ❏ Use online assessment tools such as [Kahoot](#) or [Quizlet](#) to assess everyone at once, then invite small groups to work for modeling and additional instruction.
- ❏ Use tools like [FlipGrid](#) or [Seesaw](#) for students to send in recordings of their learning.

Additional Resources for engaging students in distance learning:

- ❏ [Upgrading lessons for kids at home during coronavirus school closures](#)
- ❏ [Connections Academy: Coronavirus and Teaching from Home: Ten Ways to Engage and Instruct Students Remotely](#)
- ❏ [10 Things We Know About Successful Online Teaching and Learning](#)
- ❏ [Engaging Learners in Online Environments Utilizing Universal Design for Learning Principles](#)
- ❏ [10 Things I've Learned About Teaching Online](#)

Keeping Students With Disabilities Engaged and Learning

As schools are scrambling to move to distance learning, creating engagement for students with disabilities is on the minds of special educators as well as general classroom teachers. The strategies for engaging students in distance learning apply to all students. Below are some additional guidance for engaging diverse learners.

Engagement with Students with Disabilities

Work with families to set up schedule, structure, and routines

- ❏ Help families design schedules that support the student's learning. Tips for this include
  - ❏ Chunk assignments, have students turn in smaller pieces at a time
  - ❏ Use a visual schedule with pictures and icons
  - ❏ Use a kitchen timer to simulate school bells to signal a change in activities
  - ❏ Not everything from school needs to be replicated
  - ❏ Include sensory and movement

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Plan for Various levels of technology
- ❏ Utilize blended learning with technology and offline activities
- ❏ Offer alternatives to technology lessons, such as phone calls, games, and activities that utilize household items

Teach to Student Strengths
- ❏ Utilize student interests in assignments
- ❏ Use Experiential learning
- ❏ Assign virtual or at-home scavenger hunts

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Additional Resources for engaging students with disabilities:
- **The Ability Challenge** has put together [Ten Ideas for keeping students with diverse learning needs engaged](). They have also created a forum to encourage sharing of ideas, curriculum and to ask and answer questions about providing education services and support for diverse learners during this time of school closures, the [Ability Challenge Slack Channel]()
- **Edutopia** provides guidance for [New Strategies in Special Education as Kids Learn From Home](), in an article published on March 27, 2020.

Monitoring Student Engagement, Attendance/Logins

School is not the only thing students have going on from 8 to 3 these days. Educators are wondering how to get students to log into systems and be engaged in remote learning. In addition to connecting with students through the relationships you've built and having engaging activities, here are some ways to monitor attendance, logins, and engagement.

Monitoring Student Engagement

Create student engagement monitoring systems. Steps to create this system include:
❏ Defining how engagement will be measured (What will you count as engagement?)
    ❏ What elements can be included? (Mentoring or 1:1 sessions, progress towards weekly goals, daily class virtual meetings, daily/weekly work completed, student well-being surveys)
    ❏ Are you going to track time in the system or a check-in?
    ❏ What is the purpose of the measurement? Is this part of the accountability system for fiscal reasons?
❏ Determine what parts of monitoring are in automated through your learning management system
    ❏ Is there a goal or assignment tracking process?
    ❏ Is there a way to easily check who is logging into the system each day?
    ❏ Can you determine who is completing the wellness check survey each day?
❏ Determine how you track non-automated engagement
    ❏ What will you track students who log in to the daily virtual class when that's the teaching method (does the video conferencing software let you review who logged in

and for how long?), work completed, adult contacts other than attending class, progress on collaborative assignments are a few examples of things you may track.
- ❏ Follow up with students
  - ❏ Give students specific and timely feedback when they are engaged in the work
  - ❏ Create a plan for having contact with students who are not checking into virtual classes.
    - ❏ Utah Virtual Academy teachers and administrators recommend increasing levels of annoyance, meaning, start with an email, then move to text and calls, including frequency)
    - ❏ Keep mentors in the loop. If your school utilizes mentors for students, make sure they know if a student is not attending and collaborate on communication

KIPP has developed a Virtual Service Provision Calendar that could be adapted to include tracking of other types of engagement. Here is another sample Student Engagement Monitoring Tool that can be adapted to to monitor and follow up on student logins and engagement. Gabriella Charter Schools has a Student Engagement Tracker that is broken down into tiered levels of support.

Review learnings on student monitoring from existing sources
- ❏ Connections Academy has a multi-pronged approach to measuring attendance and engagement that includes:
  - ❏ Physical existence measured by teacher/adult contacts with students
  - ❏ Evidence of recent activity measured by student progress on instruction and intervention
  - ❏ Learning coaches (families) log numbers of hours student spends on school work
  - ❏ Pacing toward completion by the end of the school year without cramming measured by total numbers of hours required divided by the number of hours logged in a set time period (example if 1080 hours of attendance is needed and in 45 days students log 270 hours, they are on track for 100%, if they log 240 hours they would be about 89% on track, 200 hours of less logged, would put them behind (74%) and cause cramming at the end)
  - ❏ Physical Attendance measured by who is in a live lesson sessions
  - ❏ Participation measured by curriculum embedded with engagement (reflections, discussions and assessments) and student progress on instruction
- ❏ Rocketship Public Schools explain their student engagement monitoring system in Rocketship's Reflection on Remote Learning.

Create a positive incentive program for students
- ❏ Valor Collegiate has an incentive program example of an incentive program in their Valor Distance Learning Playbook for Culture.

Additional Resources for engaging students in distance learning:
- ● Present and accounted for? Coronavirus-related school closures create attendance challenges
- ● How are Schools Tracking Attendance During Distance Learning

Additional General Resources

- **Lessons from the Field: Remote Learning Guidance** - The California Department of Education has created a field guide that includes pedagogy and Practices, Accessibility, Content, Tools and Resources and infrastructure and devices. These include tools and suggestions for student engagement.
- **121 Tools for Distance Learning & Strategies for Student Engagement** - Comprehensive list of technology resources used to engage students including tools that promote collaboration and student engagement, screencapture and instructional video tools and remote learning strategies for classrooms and schools
- **Free Online Resources for Schools** has a comprehensive list of free resources by category, including Special Education Resources.

Final Word

Thanks to COVID-19 and the ingenuity of schools, teachers, families and students have seemingly transitioned instantly from traditional brick and mortar schools to distance learning. Yet teachers remain in competition with life outside the classroom during a time that is usually their time and their domain. To encourage student login and engagement, educators can: create relationship-building opportunities with their students, provide engaging lessons, architect opportunities for students to connect and collaborate, and build a system to monitor and follow up with students.

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