# VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS

# A COLLECTION OF BEST PRACTICES FOR EDUCATORS

## TABLE OF CONTENTS


**INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESOURCE** ..... 5

What is this resource? ..... 5

Who is it for? ..... 5

Why was it created? ..... 5

Where does the information in this resource come from? ..... 6

How is the resource organized? ..... 6

**STEP ONE: Establish a digital home base** ..... 8

1. Pick ONE platform: ..... 8
2. Choose your online teaching platform wisely ..... 8
3. What online teaching tools are out there? ..... 8
4. Most importantly: ..... 9

**STEP TWO: Make it feel safe** ..... 9

1. No assignments. No learning outcome. Just human connection: ..... 9
2. Establish rules together: ..... 9

**STEP THREE: Establish virtual routines, rituals and systems** ..... 11

1. New skills students need for your systems to work: ..... 11
2. Rituals that students can count on make a big difference: ..... 11

**STEP FOUR: Make it fun** ..... 12

1. Costumes, costumes, and more costumes: ..... 13
2. Themes are FUN: ..... 13
3. Let students participate in friendly competition: ..... 14
4. Get students moving: ..... 14
5. Keep explanations and activities short and concise: ..... 15
6. Doing demonstrations and giving examples is KEY: ..... 15
7. Keep it simple: ..... 16

**STEP FIVE: Make wellness checks a part of your routine** ..... 16

**STEP SIX: Help them connect** ..... 17

1. Introduce assignments that require student collaboration: ....17
2. Take the time to REALLY notice students: ....18
3. Integrate individual touchpoints into your weekly schedule:....18
**STEP STEVEN: Develop a virtual classroom management system**....19
1. Test the technology beforehand:....20
2. Involve students in establishing norms:....20
3. Emphasize engagement:....20
4. Create Connections with Small-Group Sessions:....21
5. Create a Positive, Engaging Environment ....21
6. Engage students who are unable or unwilling to turn on their video:....21
7. Reduce or eliminate common virtual frustrations:....22
8. Make your virtual classroom inclusive:....22
9. Create a reward system that motivates students:....23
**STEP EIGHT: Plan your lessons and homework assignments**....24
1. Be consistent in how you post your content and share information:....24
2. Create a regular timeline for providing information and activities:....24
3. Use a consistent layout for sharing tasks and activities:....24
4. Offer multiple means of representation:....24
5. Remember to use multiple means of action and expression.....24
6. Introduce new tools in low-stakes ways:....24
7. Provide a structured drop-in option for help, questions, and support:....24
8. Create a flexible timetable....25
9. Set weekly goals and targets ....25
10. Engage with students daily:....25
11. Remember that simplicity is key:....25
12. Prioritize longer, student-driven assignments:....26
13. Get creative about ways that students can demonstrate their learning ....26

**STEP NINE: Adapt to Virtual Assessment** ..... 27

1. Find sustainable modes of formative assessment: ..... 27
2. Engage with parents ..... 27

**STEP TEN: Get parents on board** ..... 28

1. Praise Parents ..... 28
2. Manage Expectations ..... 28
3. Help Families Get Organized ..... 29
4. Emphasize Everyday Learning Opportunities ..... 29
5. Empower Parents as Partners ..... 30

**STEP ELEVEN: Improve distance learning for students with IEPs** ..... 31

1. Parent Engagement ..... 31
2. Synchronous Strategies ..... 31
3. Asynchronous Strategies ..... 32
4. Be Yourself ..... 33

**STEP TWELVE: Consider barriers that stop students from attending** ..... 33

**Appendix A: Themes, Themes, Themes** ..... 35

**Appendix B: Parent guide for distance learning** ..... 36

**Appendix C: Check-list for Educators** ..... 39

**Appendix D: Visual Check-list for Educators** ..... 40

**Appendix E: A Letter to Educators Teaching Online for the First Time** ..... 41

# INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESOURCE

### What is this resource?

A resource for educators that reviews best practices for engaging, motivating, teaching and connecting with students through virtual classrooms.

### Who is it for?

Any educator who is expected to lead virtual classrooms for students.

### Why was it created?

Many teachers, students, and parents are proving to be remarkably resilient during this time when it comes to the effects of the pandemic on school, education, and student learning. It is not easy to teach in a physical classroom one day and turn it into a virtual classroom the next.

> *"Learning how to teach on-line is a little bit like learning to skate. You don't just tie on your skates the first day and glide like an Olympian. You fall a lot and it feels awkward and uncomfortable for a while. You feel self-conscious and a little bit like a baby. But if you really commit to it, then after a while, you find your glide. And a few months in you can't believe there was ever a time when you didn't skate."*
>
> - *Teacher*

As millions of teachers and families discovered this fall, learning virtually is hard. For many students, it's difficult to engage with classmates and participate in class. For many teachers, it's difficult to help struggling students and form solid relationships with only video, chat and email. Exhausted parents-turned-tutors, especially those trying also to work from home, say it's not sustainable.

> *"Ahmed has fever and he's not feeling well so he couldn't participate today. But he will join you as soon as possible because he loves this camp and he enjoys all the activities so much. Everyone in our neighborhood is talking about it and how great it is, the kids love the program. No one expected that an online camp can be this fun. Thank you for giving our kids this quality time. keep going!"*
>
> - *Parent of a Jays Care virtual camper*

Many teachers are still trying to replicate what they do in a classroom, with what they are doing online. It's important to shift that way of thinking and continue to adapt. Most of us will never feel as confident or competent about how we teach virtually as we do when the students are in front of us. This adaptation is not easy, but we have to start looking at the parts of virtual teaching that are not working and let them go, and begin looking at the places where we can go a little bit deeper (see ***Appendix E*** for a great letter to Educators who are trying Virtual Teaching for the first time).

Unfortunately, solutions are not readily at hand.
"There is a surprising lack of research into what techniques make for high-quality virtual instruction," said Brian Fitzpatrick, a sociologist at the University of Notre Dame and former middle school teacher. "The COVID pandemic has certainly drawn attention to the need to identify best practices."

Since March of 2020, Jays Care has had the opportunity to design and lead virtual camp, club, sport and after school programming for more than 12,000 children and youth. This experience

has helped us to test, fail, adapt, adjust and succeed in creating virtual programming that inspires children and families to engage. Now we are ready to share that learning. Our hope is that this resource, combined with our educator training, will help educators enhance their confidence in creating virtual classrooms that are:

- **FUN and FEEL SAFE**
- **PROMOTE CONNECTION**
- **MOTIVATE STUDENTS TO ENGAGE AND LEARN; and**
- **ENHANCE COMPETENCE**

### Where does the information in this resource come from?

There are a significant number of blogs and videos as well as on-line resources to support teachers as they transition to virtual learning. However, it can be daunting to sift through all of them and piece together the best practices. This guide has attempted to bring together the best practices from a wide range of resources to make it easy for educators to pull the most essential learning and themes. This guide does not refer to the wide variety of tech tools that exist to help bring lessons to life, but focuses on the day-to-day practices teachers can integrate into their virtual classrooms to enhance engagement and connection. Much of the content in this guide has been taken directly from great on-line teacher resources including:

- Kickboard for Schools: https://www.kickboardforschools.com/
- Edutopia: https://www.edutopia.org/
- Ed Tech Team Canada: https://events.edtechteam.com/canada-virtual/resources
- Virtual Teaching Commons: https://virtualteachingcommons.org/
- Nearpod: https://nearpod.com/
- Common sense education: https://www.commonsense.org/education/
- National Council of Teachers of English: https://ncte.org/resources/resources-virtual-instruction-online-learning/
- PBS Social: https://www.pbssocal.org/education/
- ACS International Schools guide for distance learning: https://acs-schools.com/parents-guide-distance-learning
- 3P Learning: https://www.3plearning.com/
- Education Week: https://edweek.org/
- Infused Classroom: https://www.hollyclark.org/
- Ed Surge: https://www.edsurge.com/

The remainder of the content is summarized from our experiences running programming that helps children connect, feel seen, and engage.

### How is the resource organized?

The resource is divided into the following key steps to help you organize and plan for your virtual experiences:

STEP ONE: Establish a digital home base
STEP TWO: Make it feel safe
STEP THREE: Establish virtual routines, rituals and systems
STEP FOUR: Make it fun
STEP FIVE: Make wellness checks a part of your routine
STEP SIX: Help them connect
STEP SEVEN: Develop a virtual classroom management system
STEP EIGHT: Plan your lessons and homework assignments
STEP NINE: Adapt to Virtual Assessment
STEP TEN: Get parents on board
STEP ELEVEN: Improve distance learning for students with IEPs
STEP TWELVE: Consider the barriers that stop students from attending

## STEP ONE: Establish a digital home base

It is vital to have a digital home base for your students. This can be a district-provided learning management system like Canvas or Google Classrooms, or it can be a self-created class website. There are a few things to keep in mind as you select and/or get familiar with your digital home-base.

### 1. Pick ONE platform:

You need a single digital platform that your students can always visit for the most recent and up-to-date information. It can be tempting to jump around between all the cool edtech applications out there—especially as so many of them are offering free services right now—but simplicity and familiarity are invaluable. Students (and parents) need to feel comfortable going to the same place to access the same tools. The farther away you are from your students, the more important it is to cultivate stability and practice norms.

### 2. Choose your online teaching platform wisely

The site of your online teaching needs to be:

- **Accessible:** Is it easy for students and parents to use at home?
- **Equitable:** Does it include printable activities for students without reliable internet or device access?
- **Communicative:** Does it allow students to talk directly to you as well as to their peers? This might be via a live chat or a discussion board.
- **Monitorable:** Does it allow you to stay informed of student activity and progress? Does it provide automated reporting?
- **Sustainable:** Is it something you can picture using for 8 months straight? Your online teaching platform needs to be a realistic long-term solution that doesn't burn you out with undue amounts of time and effort.

### 3. What online teaching tools are out there?

There are a huge number of online teaching tools to select from. Here's a brief overview:

- **Learning Management Systems (LMS):** your school might be using one of these already, such as Blackboard or Moodle. They form a convenient base or 'homepage' for all your learning content.
- **Curriculum-aligned online programs** such as Mathletics or Readiwriter Spelling. A great option for homework, assignments and individual student practice due to their automated reporting.
- **Cloud-based software** such as Google Classrooms or Microsoft OneNote. These are perfect for real-time communication and collaboration.

### 4. Most importantly:

You may have a great tool that you are excited about using – but it isn't valuable unless your students can easily navigate it. Do some test runs on your selected platform with a student-view in mind. Log in from a phone, from an iPad, from a tablet – see how easy/challenging it is to navigate. Once you've picked it, create a few fun scavenger type assignments that students can do with your support to get to know that on-line system.

## STEP TWO: Make it feel safe

We have always known kids really enjoy the social interaction they have at school, and for some kids, this social connection fuels learning. But today's health crisis has forced us to interact with students online exclusively, and we now realize that we might be doing this a bit longer than we had anticipated.

For many students, this new reality disrupts their routines and lives. It can be unsettling. They miss the human connection they have with you and their classmates. For this reason, teachers need to connect with students in ways that are less stressful and more fun.

> *"If I could offer teachers some advice about how to make virtual school work, it would be this: don't worry about the curriculum during the first few weeks. Just worry about making the class feel safe and fun. Help us get to know each other. Help us feel like your virtual class is a place where we are welcome and wanted and accepted. That will make a huge difference for the rest of the year."*
>
> - Middle school student

For so many students, virtual school feels scary and unknown. Taking the first few weeks to really establish safety, systems, expectations and connections, can make a huge difference for anxious students. Take time to play icebreakers, to help students get to know one-another and to get to know you, and to establish rules and expectations that students understand and feel good about.

### 1. No assignments. No learning outcome. Just human connection:

When reconnecting, teachers want to create an activity that:

- Is a completely positive experience for kids
- Is light and non-stressful
- Leaves students feeling uplifted and happy
- Gives them a chance to connect with classmates

### 2. Establish rules together:

Teachers often involve their students in the creation of the classroom rules and expectations during the first few days of the school. There is usually a process of collecting and combining all

of the students' ideas until the class revises and agrees to a list of classroom rules and expectations. You can do this in virtual classrooms as well. However, it's important that you come to this discussion with your classroom rules and expectations must-haves before the students arrive and participate in this activity.

Consider expectations like these for virtual classroom environments:

- Log onto the classroom platform on time.
- Clear workspace free of distractions like toys and games.
- Log off all other website tabs, games, put away all other technology.
- Dress in day clothes and not pyjamas.
- No eating or drinking during instruction.
- Find a quiet space at home where family members, pets, and other things cannot distract you.

| ***STUDENT REWARD PROGRAM*** | |
|---|---|
| *Student shows up ready to learn on time* | *10 points* |
| *Student shows up late, but ready to learn* | *5 points* |
| *Student lets teacher know that they are unable to attend* | *3 points* |
| *Student engages in virtual classroom activities* | *5 points* |
| *Student puts effort into completing assignments* | *10 points* |

- *Sample virtual class points program*

**NOTE**: Some of these new rules and expectations are inevitably going to be a challenge for everyone but could be additionally difficult for any students with neurodevelopmental, developmental and cognitive disabilities. It is really important that students are informed and involved in creating the rewards (these can be set for individuals and/or for your team) for following the rules as well as the repercussions for breaking them. Here is a great example of how this can look:

**Sample Rewards (individualized and class)**

If you follow all the virtual classroom rules for a day, you will earn 5 stars (25 stars means a chance to make morning announcements)

If we all follow the rules, we all get 5 extra minutes to play "Deal or No Deal" at the end of class on Friday.

**Desired behaviours demonstrated** = continuing to participate

- **1st instance of undesired behaviour** = 1 reminder/modeling and 1st warning
- **2nd instance of undesired behaviour** = 2nd reminder and 2nd warning
- **3rd instance of undesired behaviour** = removal from class for the day and a conversation with your parents/guardians about repercussions

## STEP THREE: Establish virtual routines, rituals and systems

Teachers spend weeks teaching, practicing, and cementing routines and systems in the classroom until they become seamless. For virtual classrooms, routines and systems will look very different but practice is still necessary.

### 1. New skills students need for your systems to work:

Setting up your virtual classroom for success means teaching students (and providing the opportunity to practice) a whole host of new skills. Here are just a few that students will need to learn in your first week of virtual school:

- Muting and unmuting
- How to share ideas online
- How to show they want to speak
- Where to type or share responses
- When to log on and off
- How to problem solve when they have technology issues
- What materials are needed at home and when in the lesson to use them
- Timelines for out of class assignment submission

### 2. Rituals that students can count on make a big difference:

When you teach in brick-and-mortar classrooms, there are many rituals that help make school "feel" like school and that bring structure, reliability and fun to students' school experiences. In virtual school, rituals matter even more. Consider the following:

- What are some fun ways you can start each virtual lesson?
- What are rituals you can use to end each lesson?
- How and when will announcements take place? Can students present them?
- How and when could "show and tell" add value?
- How will you pick your "Star of the day", "Star of the Week", or other classroom awards?
- What are some of the traditions that students look forward to most? (i.e. speech competitions, art shows, talent shows, graduation ceremonies). How can you help students feel both confident and excited that these traditions will exist within their school experience?

***Show and Tell: Stuffed Animal Day***

Some of the most successful virtual programmers we know started each day with one of the following:

- ***Two truths and a lie***: Each day a different student is invited to share two truths and a lie and the rest of the students need to guess which is the lie;

- ***Silly Question of the day:*** Start the day off with a silly question and ask students to share their answers and explain why. Here are some fun examples:
    - "Who would win in a fight a hotdog or a taco?"
    - "What is the worst smell in the world?"
    - "If you could, what two animals would you combine?"
    - "If you could be Prime Minister for a day, what would you do?"
    - "If you could be the principal of your school, what is the first rule you would make or change?"
    - "What's a more important invention: a cell phone or an oven?"
- ***Special Show and Tell:*** On Fridays, give students 5 mins to look around their home for something that has meaning to them and if they feel comfortable, invite them to share it with the rest of the class once everyone has returned.
- ***Noodle Doodle:*** At the beginning of each week, ask students to grab a book, paper and a pen or pencil. Then instruct them to place the piece of paper on top of the book and then hold the book/paper on top of their head. Students should be holding the book/paper with one hand and the pencil/pen in the other. Now describe step by step how to draw an image (ideally one that is linked to the lesson or theme of the week) to your students. For example, if you were describing a smiley face you would say…" Draw a large circle… now two dots for eyes… and draw a smiling mouth inside the circle…". Students will try to draw this all while the paper is on top of their head and can't see! See who got the closest to the actual image at the end of 5 mins.

- ***Award Time:*** Finish each week or month or term with a fun awards ceremony. Help students feel recognized for the hard work they are putting into virtual learning.

## STEP FOUR: Make it fun

The trial run of virtual school that started last March included many ups and downs for teachers and students. Those downs included low attendance in virtual schooling and challenging on-line learning experiences for many students. The term "zoom-fatigue" was born during these times and is often used to explain a lack of participation among students in virtual classrooms. Our experience this summer, running virtual camp, taught us many things – among them, children will attend (even when the weather is beautiful and there are plenty of external attractions) if you make the experience fun. Some educators are already masters of integrated learning that involves themes and laughter and gamification. For those that are new to it, this is a great time to learn how to make learning fun – because fun is one of the best retention tools you have.

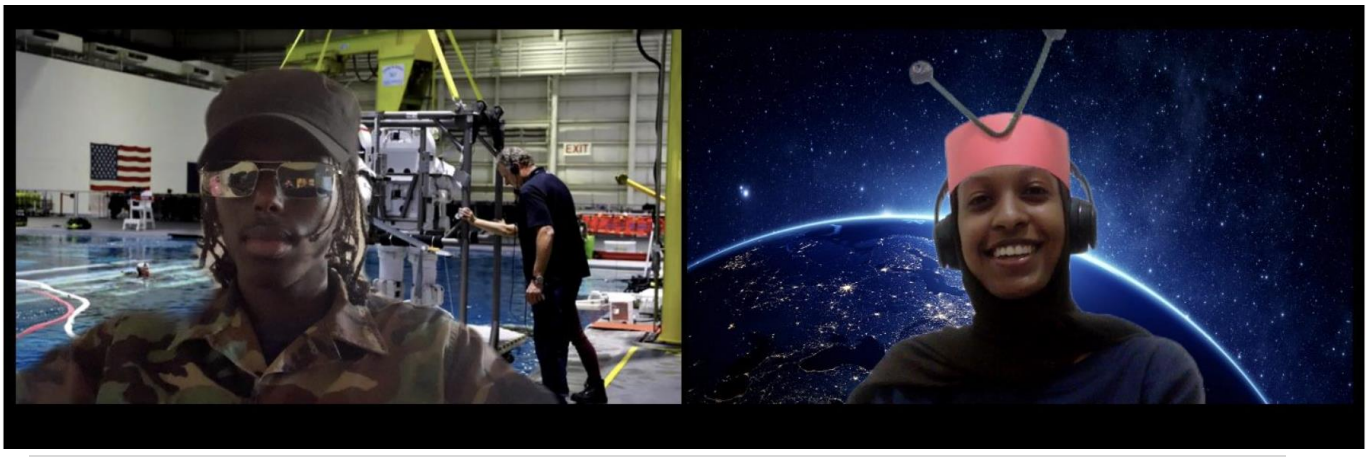
Below we have listed some of our favourite strategies that will keep your virtual classrooms fun, funny, motivating and engaging.

### 1. Costumes, costumes, and more costumes:

Gather your silliest items of apparel, your old Halloween costumes or dig deep into your dress up box. Pick out the wackiest pieces you can find and create a character to play on screen. Students respond so well to costumes and characters! Have them dress up too and watch the laughs it brings. They do not need any fancy items to participate. This is a great chance to demonstrate integrated learning at its finest.

### 2. Themes are FUN:

Theme days, weeks or months are a great way to add excitement to virtual classrooms. Remember that all of the fun themes that your school traditionally puts on for the entire student body no longer exist for virtual students. It's up to you, as their teacher, to find ways to bring that magic to the virtual classroom. They also give students something to look forward to and help bring out everyone's joyful nature! Try having a wacky hair day, or a theme week they can dress up for! Superheroes need to use inquiry to understand the concerns of the people they protect, use math to crack codes, use writing skills to send letters to their evil opponents, and use science skills to concoct new potions to save the planet. Creating themes that can be integrated across multiple subjects makes virtual school feel fun and brings an opportunity for students to engage in classroom activities that make them laugh (at a time when laughter is in short supply). For a list of fun themes, refer to ***Appendix A.***



## 3. Let students participate in friendly competition:

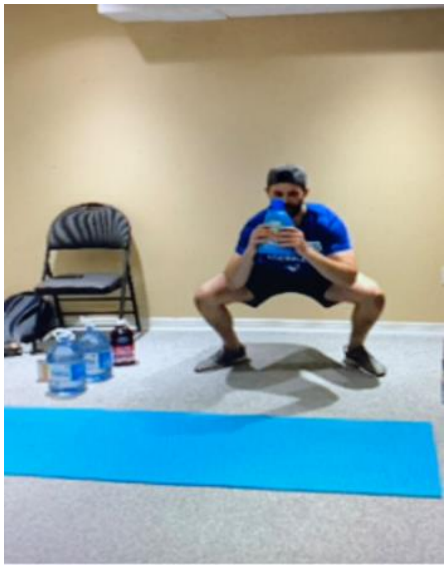
Students love competing and working in teams. Giving them activities that requires them to work in teams and race against their peers can often heighten their focus and channel their energy. Here are a few great examples of easy competitive activities to try:

- ✓ **Scattergories (played in break-out rooms):** Just like the board game, provide students with the categories (i.e. First name, food, vehicle, tv show, city, etc.). Next, divide students into break-out groups and message them the letter they need to work through (i.e. "R", Rachel, ravioli, Range Rover, Ride, Rotterdam) within a time limit (2 minutes). Bring all groups back to share their lists. 1 point for every word that no other team got.
- ✓ **Game shows like Family Feud, Deal or No Deal:** You can find a lot of different and fun tools to make your Game Shows look and feel real here: https://www.lifewire.com/free-powerpoint-games-for-teachers-1358169. Game Shows are a great way to review key learnings at the end of a lesson as well.
- ✓ **Name that Tune:** Make sure everyone has a blank piece of paper and pen and get them to number 1-10 on the page. Have 10 popular kid-friendly songs cued up and be ready to play a recognizable 10 second snippet. Make sure you share your audio on Zoom and begin playing the songs in succession. Tell the students to write down what they think the title of the song is and who it's by. Emphasize that they should not yell out the answer but write it down. Once you have gone through the 10 songs, go through the students' lists and see who got the most correct!
- ✓ **Virtual Musical Chairs:** You play music while everyone remains seated. When the music stops, you give an instruction that each person must follow. For example, "grab a fork from the kitchen" …each person has to do the instruction as fast as they can and then hurry back to their seat. The fastest person to complete the instructions and make it back to their seat wins a point each round.
- ✓ **Reverse Charades:** One person is "it" while everyone else acts out a word. You can get the word to the large group by privately messaging everyone individually, OR by writing it down and showing it on your screen while the person who is "it" closes their eyes. Then, once they have guessed, you move to the next person. The way to make this competitive would be to time how long it takes each person individually to guess OR, put people onto teams. If team A's representative doesn't guess within a minute, then the turn switches to team B. If team A does guess before a minute is up, then their team gets to go again.

## 4. Get students moving:

Remember your students are stuck inside and probably have been for a LONG time. The few hours they spend with you every week have the potential to be one of the week's highlights.

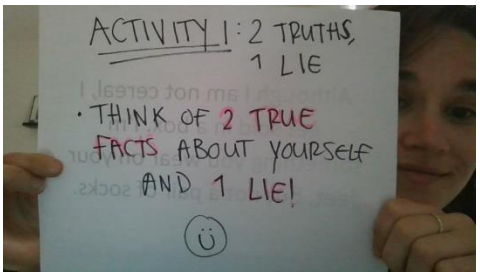
Try to get them moving at least once a virtual class to help them release some of that pent-up energy and to help break up the pace of your virtual classroom instruction. There are a lots of ways to do this that don't look and feel like a work-out video. Here are a few great examples:



- ✓ **Scavenger Hunt:** Students will work together as teams to locate an item around their home and bring it back to show the group the fastest. Whoever is able to bring back the correct item the fastest scores a point for their team. The first team to score the predetermined number of points wins!
- ✓ **Quick Grab:** Have the group decide on an object that they all have at home that they can use as a target (a ball, socks, keys, a bottle). You will call out a set of instructions for the group to follow. e.g. touch your head, run in a circle, touch you elbow, do jumping jacks. Then, when you yell the object's name (i.e. "Ball!"), each student has to grab it as fast as they can. The first person to grab the object and show it on the screen wins a point.

**Clap Count:** Ask each student to grab a rolled up pair of socks. Challenge them to throw the socks in the air repeatedly and clap twice between each throw. Once they've gotten the hang of it, challenge them to see how many times they can throw and catch their ball (with two claps between) within a minute. Start the timer and celebrate their hard work and concentration.

### 5. Keep explanations and activities short and concise:



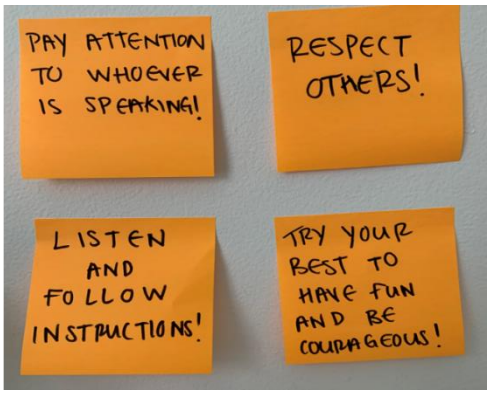

When facilitating online you want to keep things moving and get ahead of any lull time. Always be ready to change things up or drop an activity that isn't working. On the flip side, when an activity is taking off make sure you end it at its peak. This way you leave students excited to play it again in the future. In order to keep students engaged and not lose them to boredom or distractions, it's important to keep your explanations clear and concise. Do a visual check in to see if they understand (thumbs up or down) and answer any questions. Try writing your directions down on a piece of paper and holding them up to the screen for visual learners to follow.

### 6. Doing demonstrations and giving examples is KEY:

Processing information given to you virtually can take a lot longer than in person. Make sure you build in time to demonstrate what you are asking

students to do, especially if it is an activity that involved multiple people doing something simultaneously.

### 7. Keep it simple:




While using features like screen sharing, PowerPoint, or YouTube may be tempting when working online, we suggest you keep their use to a minimum. We have found that students are most engaged when you base your classes around activities that promote personal connection and the ability to see each other on screen. When introducing ground rules or directives for an activity, try going the 'old fashion way' and write them out on a sticky note, piece of paper or whiteboard. When you hold them up to the screen you are sure to get a laugh when all the students lean up extra close to the screen to read them!

## STEP FIVE: Make wellness checks a part of your routine

For many students who are attending virtual schooling, they have limited to no opportunities to connect with caring adults outside of the adults they live with. This means that you, as their teacher, have a unique opportunity as one of the only external adults who can check on their well-being. There are many easy and creative activities you can use to do wellness checks that allow students to tell you how they are feeling and coping. Here are a few:

- Ask students to think about how they have been feeling over the past few days. Challenge them to think about their mood, attitude, energy and experiences. Then challenge them to:
    - **Mood Animals:** think of an animal that best describes those feelings and experiences. Give them a few minutes to sketch it.
    - **My Week in a Movie:** think of a movie title that would best describe their week.
    - **Mood Monster:** Draw a monster that exemplifies their last few days.

Once they've completed their drawings, invite all of them to hold their image/movie titles up to their screen at the same time and ask a few students to elaborate on the animal they chose (i.e. "Tamika, it looks like you drew a sloth – tell us why you chose a sloth today"). This will allow you to get a broad view on how some of your students are coping outside of class and provide you with insights into who you might want to follow-up with.

## STEP SIX: Help them connect

Loneliness and isolation have been common themes for students throughout COVID-19. Mental health concerns have been on the rise, and are major concerns for students who have limited social networks and are spending epic amounts of time alone. This can have profoundly negative impacts on student well-being as well as their ability to learn. Creating virtual classrooms that help students connect with each other feel connected to you, a trusted adult, can be a game-changer.

> *"I feel like I'm not learning anything because all I'm being asked to do is go onto Google Classroom, look at the assignments and finish them by a certain due date. So it's like I'm teaching myself rather than being taught."*
>
> - Student

### 1. Introduce assignments that require student collaboration:

Students who are stuck at home are craving chances to connect with their peers. Try using your platform to separate students into pairs or small teams to allow for some much-needed peer interaction. Get them to come up with funny team names, secret handshakes, or uniforms. Give them short-term and longer-term group assignments that allow them to share stories, connect and laugh together (as well as fulfill curriculum requirements)! Here are some strategies to help increase communication and collaboration within your virtual classroom:

> *"What I miss the most is the human interaction. Just talking to your friends, listening to them reasoning out their answers. Why they thought this interpretation for something was this and not something else. The constant push of the teachers looking at your work, pushing your ideas. That's all important."*
>
> - Student

- **Pair work:** Use the breakout room function to assign students to pairs or small groups to complete a task or a product. Incorporating collaborative activities during virtual class meet-ups enhances instruction the same way it does when teaching in person. Collaborative activities that can be conducted via breakout rooms include storytelling, turn and talk, learning stations or centers, workshops, jigsaws, think pair share, and feedback protocols like critical friends and gallery walk.
- **Discussion boards and forums:** These are effective online teaching tools, but you could also set up an 'off-topic' board for students to post about whatever is on their mind.
- **Live chat:** Chats allow you to bring the real-time discussions of the classroom into online teaching. Make sure you set some guidelines to ensure everyone is heard.
- **Zoom/Skype:** Setting up a Zoom/Skype lesson will show your students that their peers are only a few clicks away. They can use these platforms in their own time too.
- **Schedule a weekly show and tell:** This could be done via video or it could be a simple message with a photo. It's a great strategy to keep your students connected and feeling close to each other.
- **Peer review activities:** When your students share work online, have their peers comment on it. It sends a message of support and community.

Mastering working in groups virtually will take some practice before most students become pros, but the experience will keep them engaged relatively quickly in enhancing their communication and problem-solving skills.

### 2. Take the time to REALLY notice students:

Let students know you see them, you care about them and you are proud of them. For many students, you may be the only caring adult they see (beyond their immediate family) for weeks at a time. This means that your acknowledgement of them matters now more than ever.

### 3. Integrate individual touchpoints into your weekly schedule:

What your students will miss the most is the human connection that is cultivated in your classroom. The little interactions you have with them in the hallways, before and after class or during breaks in lessons, are irreplaceable. While it can be tempting to focus on content in your distance learning assignments and instructional videos, what matters more is creating structures for personalized touchpoints with your students.

You can create these touchpoints through any medium you like: emails, video messages, phone calls, messages through your learning management system, comments on shared documents, etc. Create a structure and stick to it. Your students will see your investment and know that you care about them.

It's important to bear in mind that cultivating an engaging distance- learning experience is hard. It takes time and an incredible amount of patience. If you are new to the experience, you're probably going to feel like a first-year teacher again. That's OK! Tackle the challenges step by step, keep your students updated on your progress, and stay positive. You can do this!

> *"Really hard to feel like a good teacher in the last few weeks. As we got back to learning, with a lot of uncertainty, the first thing I did was ask all my students what questions they had (note: not 'do you have any questions') and how they were feeling. Responses flooded in."*
>
> - *Educator*

You might be separated but your students still need their teacher. Here are some strategies for keeping the bond alive and well in online teaching:

- **Upload a daily 'welcome to class' video:** You can explain the plan for the day's learning while staying connected. It only needs to be a minute long, but never underestimate the value of making yourself visible.
- **Record individual student feedback:** Your voice will make your feedback all the more personable and meaningful.
- **Check-in with students who go AWOL:** Online teaching can make it easy for students to slip through the cracks. If you notice that a student hasn't been participating, contact them directly to see if you can help.
- **Share your own experiences:** Some self-disclosure will make your students feel all the more connected to you. Introduce them to your pets, share a story from your week, or show them a hobby that keeps you busy at home.

- **Keep the tone personable:** Be warm and enthusiastic when you're writing to your students. Keep things vibrant with GIFs and emojis so that they get a sense of your voice and personality.
- **Schedule bi-weekly one-on-one calls with your students:** These can be read-alongs, check-ins, or a chance for your students to do a show-and-tell assignment with you. These one-on-one opportunities are key to understanding how each student is doing, and nurturing a strong relationship with them.

## STEP STEVEN: Develop a virtual classroom management system

For many teachers, student behavior can be a significant concern. It may even be our number one concern. It's hard enough to manage disruptions when our students are in the same room. How can we maintain order and create a supportive learning environment when we can't even see them?

Online classroom management isn't impossible. In some ways, online classroom management is easier than managing a live classroom. But it does require a different approach than traditional classroom management.

When teaching online, we must learn to do without many of the classroom management strategies we've become accustomed to. No stern glances. No flicking lights on and off. No detentions. The first step is to forget about all the things we can't do online. Instead, think about **what is possible**. And take advantage of the opportunities that online instruction presents.

To teach effectively online, we need to see ourselves as leaders, rather than managers. Traditional classroom management focuses on getting students to follow directions en masse. 'Everyone in their seats. All eyes on me. I'm waiting for silence.' There's nothing wrong with asking students to follow directions. It's common sense. You can't teach a room full of students who are running around and shouting. The problem is that it's easy to overuse these management strategies.

Students need to understand the reasons behind our directions. And they need to feel that they have a voice in creating classroom norms. Demanding compliance without buy-in reduces intrinsic motivation (our internal desire to do well). And the more we rely on extrinsic motivators (rewards and punishments), the more we erode students' intrinsic motivation.

Every veteran educator has experienced the diminishing impact of classroom management tricks. They work well at the beginning of the year, but by January you need newer and better tricks to keep students orderly and attentive.

When teaching online, we need to make the transition to student ownership much more quickly. We don't have the power to send students to the office or take away recess. And if we're unable to motivate our students, they may not even show up for class. Or they'll tune in just to tune out.

This doesn't mean that online learning is a free-for-all. Online classroom management is a delicate balance. We need to set the tone for what the new normal will look like. But at the same time, we need to be flexible.

Understand that students are willing participants. Respond to their needs and interests. Change things up when they get bored or frustrated.

These nine tips will help you avoid some of the most common sources of frustration when teaching online, and ensure you get the most from your students.

### 1. Test the technology beforehand:

Nothing will derail your online lesson faster than fumbling with your slideshow or your video conference. It's tempting to try out every new app that comes along. But the most effective online teachers don't get distracted by the shiniest new app. They focus on learning a few tools really well.

### 2. Involve students in establishing norms:

Set your rules and expectations ahead of time. As mentioned in STEP ONE of this guide, setting up these rules with your students at the onset is integral to classroom management. Once they are clear on these, be sure to lead by example by following the established norms in terms of dress code, polite language, no distractions, etc. Students will always notice if you are the one who isn't following the rules, which can lead to issues with discipline.

### 3. Emphasize engagement:

In a traditional classroom, engagement is a "nice to have." We would like to engage our students. But if it's a choice between engagement and order, or engagement and standards, engagement loses out.

When teaching online, the priorities flip. If we can't engage our students, they may stop showing up. And if they stop showing up, we may never get them back.

Students working online have access to endless sources of information. They don't need a teacher to explain something for 45 minutes. Keep whole-group sessions short, no longer than 10 or 20 minutes. Use this time to prepare students for a hands-on activity. More on how to plan engaging online lessons here.

Let students know that you're there for them, make a few announcements, and send them off to complete their activities. Students learn more through activities and problem-solving than they do by absorbing information.

This is true even in an in-person classroom. But it's especially true during online learning. If we can engage our students in our lessons, online classroom management almost takes care of itself.

## 4. Create Connections with Small-Group Sessions:

Students, like all of us, are starved for personal connections right now. Whole class meetings can help create a sense of normalcy. But it's hard to have meaningful online conversations with 30 people.

Make sure to schedule some time with small groups of students. They don't even need to be lessons per se. Get to know your students. Encourage them, and listen to their frustrations about learning online. Maybe even share your own (with a positive spin).

If you have a homeroom, make sure to have a 1-on-1 session with each student at least once a month. Students will need extra encouragement during these difficult times. And they will need to set their own goals to stay motivated. Have them write down their online learning goals, and have them reflect on their progress throughout the process. When shifting ownership to students, they also need room to fail. If a student misses a deadline, our instinct is to step in and take back control. Instead, try to avoid judgment.

If you're not comfortable chatting with students privately, include their parents. You might also consider providing weekly office hours, where students and parents can drop in to ask questions.

Just don't turn the online experience into a correspondence course. Students need human connection now more than ever. The human element will make your students more motivated. And their motivation will reduce disruptive behavior during whole group lessons.

## 5. Create a Positive, Engaging Environment

> *"I wish [they] would be a little more understanding of the fact that home environments are so different for every student."*
>
> \- Student

Virtual classrooms require you to depend more on positive individual and whole class management because they cannot rely heavily on the non-verbal cues to manage individual student behaviours. Management is seamless when students are engaged and excited to be learning. When students are bored or disengaged because the classroom feels robotic or lackluster, teachers will have to use more management techniques. Plan for an engaging class opening with songs, show and tell, talking, sharing, and culture building which will also help students get their wiggles and ideas out to then focus on the content after the opening. Plan ways in which students can practice and do the cognitive work themselves or with partners virtually so they are not just watching you talk for a long period of time without doing mental work.

## 6. Engage students who are unable or unwilling to turn on their video:

Many students may be unable to join your classrooms with video on (for a variety of reasons). For many people, the default is to teach to the students you can see. However, students without video capabilities need your focus and attention as much (if not more) than those who you can see. To engage these students effectively, it takes additional focus and energy. The top three tips for doing this include:

- Engage them using their NAME the same as you would if their camera is off
- Unmute their microphone and engage with CALL-BACKS
- Encourage them verbally – often

**NOTE:** At Jays Care, to prepare for the summer, we asked staff to lead mock-sessions for their peers. Supervisors would join these sessions to observe and participate, with their cameras off. This gave staff the chance to work on their skills for engaging camera-free participants and supervisors a chance to offer advice for how to better engage them.

> *"Online school has been a stressful process for many of my friends and me. I live in an area where internet access and WiFi are hard to get and, as a result, I'm not only stressed about school but I'm often anxious that I will not be able to join and maintain access to online classes and assignments."*
>
> *- student*

## 7. Reduce or eliminate common virtual frustrations:

For many students, learning in an on-line environment is not only difficult, it is also stressful. Some students may struggle to hear or understand instructions over virtual platforms. Making small adjustments like using "Closed Captioning" can make a world of difference for your students. Other frustrations that are commonly cited by students include:

- Having essential functions (like video and chat functions) disabled by educators;
- Not understanding assignments but having nowhere, no time, and no organized opportunity to get additional clarification and support from your teacher;
- Participating in classes by phone that are designed by teachers for students to engage using computers. For example, lessons that assume all students can see all other students at the same time (when many can only see three other students due to the size of their device);
- Participating in classes that provide no room or space for students to share their ideas and opinions;
- Working hard on an assignment and realizing that your teacher isn't looking at or grading assignments;

## 8. Make your virtual classroom inclusive:

In order to make your virtual classroom a place where all students can thrive, integrate the following inclusive practices:

| Use Visuals | Examples include: |
|---|---|
| | • Writing out or drawing instructions to show on screen.<br>• Demonstrating the activity.<br>• Showing equipment needed alongside describing it.<br>• Use Closed Captioning (feature is automated in Google Slides) |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Use Simple Language & Instructions** | **Examples include:**<br>• Speak slowly and clearly.<br>• Break instructions into simple steps.<br>• Keep sentences short. |
| **Demonstrate Variations of Play** | **Examples include:**<br>• If the activity requires standing, can it be adapted to also be played seated?<br>• If the game requires typing or writing to answer a question, can players also shout out/speak the answer? |
| **Use Inclusive Language** | **Examples include:**<br>• **'If you're able**… jump up and down'.<br>• **'Move'** instead of 'run' or 'walk'.<br>• **'Everybody', 'folks', individual names, etc.** instead of 'guys', 'you guys', 'boys and girls' etc. |

## 9. Create a reward system that motivates students:

An easy way to encourage students to attend virtual school and bring their best self to the classroom, is through a behaviour rewards program. Most brick and mortar classrooms have these. Whether students are working collectively to earn a class pizza party or an ice cream sundae bar – the tracking of points and the anticipation of rewards tends to be a great motivational tool to keep students on track. Developing a virtual reward system that works for your students is key to classroom management. Here are some fun examples of virtual rewards that work:

| **Incentive** |
|---|
| **INDIVIDUAL REWARD** |
| Advance Peek at an Upcoming Assignment |
| Answer only Even or Odd Problems on an Assignment |
| Be a Class DJ at a Digital Dance Party |
| Miniature Art Set Delivered to Your Home |
| Choose a Tik Tok Dance that the Class Can Participate in Together |
| Choose a Virtual Field Trip |
| Choose a Book to be read to the Class |
| Wear Your Favourite Colour Day – Student's Choice |
| Choose Your Teacher's Hair Style |
| **GROUP REWARDS** |
| Class Lego Building Challenge |
| Class Play-Doh Sculpture Challenge |
| Class Dance Party |

## STEP EIGHT: Plan your lessons and homework assignments

Educators are always striving to maximize learning opportunities. To make your online assignments easier for all students to access, follow these tips.

### 1. Be consistent in how you post your content and share information:

Does your school have a learning management system? If so, use that to post your document. Other easy-to-use distribution platforms: Email (school platform preferred), Google Classroom (school account needed), and Edmodo (free). Consider posting or sharing a Google Doc so you can update it as needed. Be consistent—use the same approach each time you post or share information.

### 2. Create a regular timeline for providing information and activities:

Will you post/share information the same time each day? Or, for older students, maybe every other day or once a week? Whatever you decide, it should remain unchanged to build comfort and routine.

### 3. Use a consistent layout for sharing tasks and activities:

Put objectives at the top or bottom—use the same place for every task list. Number your actions, like a checklist. Keep your structure the same each time you share, with content in the same place, readings, actions, etc.

### 4. Offer multiple means of representation:

Just like in a classroom, all students will not learn the same way online. Plan for this by offering options to access content. Find ways to incorporate images, video, and audio in addition to reading. Example: Add narration to a PowerPoint or Google Slides using tools like Screencast-O-Matic, Jing, or VoiceThread (limited free use).

### 5. Remember to use multiple means of action and expression.

Offer different ways for students to show what they know, other than formal writing. Video or audio can be great options. Consider how discussions can take place online, using tools such as Google Docs, Backchannel, or Flipgrid.

### 6. Introduce new tools in low-stakes ways:

“Low stakes” means a grade is not attached and the content should be light. Example: Before having students use video on a graded task, have them practice recording a video by using it to introduce themselves to the class.

### 7. Provide a structured drop-in option for help, questions, and support:

Knowing you’re there can ease your students’ anxiety. Consider chatting via text or video for these interactions. Decide if you want to offer a sign-up option or hold scheduled “office hour” times each day/week. For younger children, more contact with you may be comforting.

## 8. Create a flexible timetable

Set different days for different subjects, or even different instructional strategies. You might upload a video lesson on Monday, set individual activities for Tuesday and then regroup for a discussion on Wednesday.

Remember: different families will have different home schedules. Keep it flexible instead of trying to replicate a regular school day.

## 9. Set weekly goals and targets

Encourage your students to set goals for each week. This might be:

- writing a new chapter of a story
- setting a new personal best with a practice activity
- achieving a certificate or reaching a new level in a gamified program
- producing a journal entry that reflects on their week's learning.

## 10. Engage with students daily:

Take the time to connect each day by providing feedback, uploading some new resources, or even just sending a hello message. Your continued presence will encourage students to log on each day.

## 11. Remember that simplicity is key:

Every teacher knows what it's like to explain new instructions to their students. It usually starts with a whole group walk-through, followed by an endless stream of questions from students to clarify next steps. While this process can be frustrating at times, students can always rely on each other and the teacher in the room when they're stuck.

One of the challenges of virtual learning is that you and your students are no longer in the same room to collectively tackle misconceptions. Instead, the large bulk of learning time is inevitably going to be driven by tasks that require a high level of self-direction.

As a result, simplicity is key. It is critical to design distance learning experiences that have very clear instructions and utilize only one or two resources. It's also best, when possible, to provide resources like readings as PDFs that students can always access.

Keep in mind that simple structures can still require rigorous work: Tasks with few instructions often lead to the greatest amount of higher-order thinking, as students figure out what to do within defined parameters. Distance learning should push educators to think about how they can be leaner and more concise with their delivery of new information.

> *"My approach has been to give students work to do at the beginning of the week, but acknowledge that when they may be able to engage with that work — due to family life, mental health, increased work hours, etc — may be at different times during the week, so there are no strict deadlines or due dates."*
>
> - *Educator*

## 12. Prioritize longer, student-driven assignments:

Efficiency is key when designing distance learning experiences. Planning is going to take more time and require a high level of attention to detail. You will not be able to correct mistakes on the fly or suddenly pivot when kids are disengaged.

To effectively manage your time and sanity, you will want to prioritize longer, student-driven assignments and tasks that buy you time to keep planning future units—and that get your students off the computer. Focus on building toward long-term projects where students have autonomy and a clear set of checkpoints and deadlines that need to be met. When possible, create opportunities for students to discuss what they're learning with their families and include an element of student choice to really build engagement.

## 13. Get creative about ways that students can demonstrate their learning

Challenge your students to complete assignments using a variety of mediums that keep learning fun and interesting. Here are some examples:

- **Videos:** A first-grade class had a homework assignment where students needed to describe a pet. One boy's mother video-recorded him while he used descriptive language to introduce the audience to his two cats. Students can also write and perform plays, or create and cook recipes and conduct interviews, and submit these assignments through video.
- **Workbooks and drawing:** Consider ways for students to complete some assignments on paper, taking a picture of their completed work, and uploading the photo to submit the task.
- **Book creation:** Challenge students to create written or digital books about the learning journey and share them with classmates and allow students to create interactive notebooks
- **Powerpoint creation:** Ask students to create slideshows that teach their peers about a topic
- **Movie trailer creation:** Instead of asking students to write a book report, challenge them to create a movie trailer using video functions and/or iPhone movie trailer functions about the book
- **Food experience:** Ask students to create a sandwich that is a metaphor for their experience of something (i.e. their experience of COVID). Invite students to present their sandwich and explain each layer to the class.

## STEP NINE: Adapt to Virtual Assessment

> *"As students, we just want patience and understanding so that we can focus on taking care of ourselves and our families as well."*
>
> - *Student*

There are lots of ways to assess student learning virtually. Here are some great examples:

### 1. Find sustainable modes of formative assessment:

You don't need to mark an endless series of worksheets each week in order to make a professional judgement of student progress. Task your students with building a fort out of household items, patterning objects or creating a model out of Lego. Learning will evidence itself in what they produce, without you creating extra work for yourself.

Contributions to online discussion also provide insight into student learning. Coordinate an activity on an LMS discussion board or forum and take note of your students' responses. Are they misinformed, hesitant or piggybacking on others' comments? If so, it might be time for a follow up.

Encourage self-assessment and reflection: Create a simple survey or questionnaire encouraging students to reflect on their own learning after a task. Google Forms is a useful tool for this. Ask your students to:

- Identify three things they learned over the course of a task
- Identify three challenges that they experienced
- Describe the strategies they used to overcome challenges
- Identify areas that they are still unsure of
- Write down questions that remain
- Write three specific initiatives that they will use to tackle any areas of difficulty.

Model productive answers to these questions first. Show students what it looks like to think critically about their own learning and identify gaps in understanding.

Reflection of this type provides a much richer means of assessing student learning than simply looking at a finished product. It also builds metacognitive awareness which can be extended to high-order activities – such as having students explain their approach to mathematics problem.

### 2. Engage with parents

Involve parents in the assessment process. It might be as simple as taking photos or videos of their child's work which they can then share with you. They could even mark their child's work if you provide an answer key.

This won't necessarily translate to skewed results. Given the situation, most parents are earnestly trying to support their child however they can. Trust they will let their child learn independently until you see evidence to the contrary.

Now is also a good time to communicate to parents the importance of fair and honest assessment. This understanding will serve them equally well when their child returns to school.

## STEP TEN: Get parents on board

Parents play a vital role in online teaching. They can be the motivators, monitors, and aides for your students while you are on the other side of the screen. But you have to actively involve them first. Let them know what to expect from the online teaching period, and tell them how they can help.

Send home a parent support package (See a sample in ***Appendix B***). In this you can include:

- an overview of what content will be covered during the online teaching period
- a list of clear strategies that parents can use to support learning at home
- login details and access information for any online teaching tools being used.

Most parents will do what they can, but keep your expectations realistic. It helps to think of parents as assistants, as opposed to classroom teachers in their own right.

Keep them updated on their child's progress too. You will leave them feeling confident that their child's learning is still on track, even if the classroom has been swapped for the kitchen table.

Here are five ways teachers can coach parents through at-home learning during school closures so that everyone feels more ready to return to the classroom whenever school resumes.

### 1. Praise Parents

Many elementary educators are familiar with this phrase, and now is a great time to embrace this as a mantra. Due to their unique work and childcare situations, families are facing different challenges at home. The relative feasibility of at-home learning varies greatly amongst families at schools, and within districts. Some parents feel overwhelmed that remote learning is too much and are already opting out; others are frustrated that the programming is not enough. On both sides of that spectrum, many feel pressured to do what they are "supposed" to be doing – whether required or not. As parents fail to meet their own expectations struggling to juggle their work with schooling their children, feelings of inadequacy abound.

In your communications to families, lead with empathy by acknowledging that work and school will both be compromised at this time. Remind them that whatever they are doing – it's enough. Recognize their efforts. Praise them for trying. Most importantly, reassure them that you and your colleagues will meet their kids wherever they're at, whenever we return to school.

### 2. Manage Expectations

As parents discuss and compare their experiences, schools and teachers are fielding a lot of questions—and armchair quarterbacking—about the rationales behind different approaches to remote learning. Parents might fear missing out, or lack insight into what is developmentally appropriate for their child. Some expect online learning to mimic the actual school day. Right

now, teachers and administrators are essential to helping families recognize where their focus should be for daily and weekly accomplishments.

Even for parents who may have reviewed remote learning guidelines themselves, not all have the context to process how this should shape their at-home learning environments. By explaining to families how your program suits your students' attention spans, accommodates their digital literacy, and addresses their comfort-level with the intimacy of video conferencing — as well as addressing your grade-level content standards and desired learning outcomes — you can help them set reasonable expectations for their children, and themselves, when participating in it.

## 3. Help Families Get Organized

With many parents attending class virtually with their children, elementary teachers are essentially running dual-audience online courses. When posting content, consider ways parents can teach their children how to get organized to learn more independently.

First, avoid inbox overload by streamlining communications so that everything can be accessed in one place — such as the homepage of your website or Learning Management System (LMS) platform (e.g. Google Classroom, Canvas, etc). This helps busy parents easily find what they need and train their children to login and navigate it themselves.

Next, let parents know how you will be communicating with them throughout school closures, and then keep those updates consistent to build a routine. For instance, perhaps you send a Sunday night newsletter to prepare families for the learning week ahead. Remind parents in each newsletter where, when, and how to access the learning materials and activities for that week. Address what you've done thus far, and what's up next. Consider keeping an activity feed or newsfeed on your LMS page populated with these updates, archived so that parents and students can easily catch up on what they might have missed.

Lastly, consider the technical feasibility of your assignments. Start by synchronizing assignments automatically with a calendar so that parents can easily manage deadlines. Activities that require extra parent involvement — such as taking photos, videos, scanning, uploading, or printing — are easier to manage when they can be processed as a batch and turned in on a flexible deadline. Asynchronous projects with flexible or long-term deadlines give families further leeway in scheduling their remote learning windows.

## 4. Emphasize Everyday Learning Opportunities

Many parents are feeling anxious about their kids "falling behind" academically. Others may not realize that their kids are missing out on social and emotional learning, as well as the development of executive functioning skills that enable them to be stronger students as they mature.

Help parents recognize opportunities for everyday learning such as incorporating scientific inquiry, engineering design thinking, art and math into your household routine: cooking, cleaning, exercise, play, and taking mindful walks around the neighbourhood.

Additionally, now's a great time to help familiarize parents with the concept of executive function so they can recognize the tools they need to help their children develop to succeed as remote learners. By creating lessons around executive function skills that incorporate social and emotional learning goals, teachers can emphasize to parents the importance of fostering this learning at home through everyday life lessons. Some ways to implement these skills at home include sharing with a sibling, helping with housework, empathizing with the needs of others and exploring creative problem-solving.

### 5. Empower Parents as Partners

Essentially, teachers are now handing off the learning facilitation to parents — most of whom don't really know their children as students. If you can share insights into the type of learners their kids are, and what you've observed about their classroom engagement, you'll help parents troubleshoot how to engage their children in this new setting.

Furthermore, while many parents may know the content you're teaching, they might not know how to help their children learn it at home. Teachers can support parents as tutors by modeling how to teach through pre-recorded video or small group video conferences. To empower parents as facilitators for self-directed, independent learning, consider giving parents a list of content standards for the year, learning outcomes, and basic lesson plans with tips for implementation. This can be a great way to help parents structure STEAM projects that require a more hands-on approach in a fashion that suits their family.

Parents can also practice their tutoring and teaching skills running small group sessions for enrichment and community-building. Leverage this partnership to help kids stay socially connected at this time.

Empower parents as partners in this process by helping them find the right balance of online versus offline engagement for their children. With empathy for their unique situations, helping parents recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to remote learning, and working with them to manage it for their children as best as you can, you can help parents feel validated in their concerns and well-supported in facilitating their child's education at this difficult time for everyone. See **Appendix B** for a sample ***Parent Guide for Distance Learning.***

## STEP ELEVEN: Improve distance learning for students with IEPs

Distance learning isn't easy for most students, but it is particularly difficult for those with learning differences that require individualized education programs (IEPs). Below are the best practices collected from more than 90 educators and therapists who have been working in virtual classrooms with students with IEP's.

### 1. Parent Engagement

Parents with children diagnosed with disabilities are an essential part of the IEP team, now more than ever. Here are a few strategies for parent engagement:

- **Initial remote IEP meeting:** Meeting with the parents to go over the IEP is critical. Present Levels of Educational Performance A (PLEP A) outlines accommodations that are useful in the classroom; such accommodations could include frequent breaks, flexible seating, sensory tools, fidgets to focus, reduced distractions, motor breaks, and chewing gum while working independently. Educators note the benefits of working with parents to replicate some of these accommodations at home.

- **Weekly check-ins:** Once a mutual understanding among the IEP team is recognized and replications of accommodations are established, a weekly check-in has been useful in modifying the accommodation needs.

- **Goal setting:** Pick an IEP objective or two each week to focus on with your students. Having too many goals, assignments, and expectations has led to failure and diminished student motivation.

- **Service delivery participation:** Occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech and language therapists shared that the most significant benefit to providing services remotely is parent involvement. Many are re-creating services to involve fun activities that parents can participate in while the therapist is watching virtually and making suggestions. The benefits have increased the reinforcement of IEP goals and parent engagement at home.

> *"Parents seem to be more invested as they take part in their child's programming," said Aimee Johnson, an occupational therapist in Auburn, New Hampshire. "It's a perfect opportunity for parent education and collaboration. Parents can see the skills their children are working on and can carry them over more effectively."*

### 2. Synchronous Strategies

To help your students with IEP's succeed, it is important to increase engagement during live, virtual, synchronous meetings. Here are some ideas for how to do that:

- **Mixing up preferred and non-preferred activities:** IEP goals and objectives may not be the student's preferred virtual learning activity. Mixing preferred and non-preferred activities

increases engagement. Individually tailoring the preferred activities to each student's interests has led to an increase in productivity.

*For example, create Popsicle sticks with specific activities. Each Popsicle stick has either an activity to address an IEP objective or a preferred activity such as "Do a cartwheel" or "Show me your pet." During each virtual meeting, the educator blindly chooses a Popsicle stick until all of the activities are done. When you add some fun, students are more willing to do the non-preferred activities. There are also websites to replicate this, such as Wheel Decide.*

- **Virtual book clubs:** Create book clubs based on students' reading levels and similar IEP goals. Treat the book clubs as a social event and suggest that students come to these meetings with snacks. Have students dress in character or act out parts while engaging in comprehension activities in addition to working on yearly IEP goals.

- **Start virtual meetings with a fun, engaging activity:** Start each virtual meeting with an engaging event to motivate students to join before starting academics. For example, on Mondays have students wear a costume, on Tuesdays schedule a household scavenger hunt, on Wednesdays allow students to bring their favorite stuffed animal to class. Such activities have students looking forward to attending, boost engagement, and tend to increase participation.

### 3. Asynchronous Strategies

Support your students with IEP's by engaging them during independent, asynchronous assignments and activities. Here are some ways to do this:

- **Visuals, routines, schedules:** Provide students with daily visual schedules, and educate them on the use of timers to promote independence. Any deviations from the routine can create an opportunity to lose students and can cause frustration. Keep the day predictable.

  *"I create individualized weekly schedules for my students," said Kelli Alessandro, a special education teacher in Methuen, Massachusetts. "Included in these schedules are their assignments and expectations with links to documents, websites, or other materials in a centrally located document. These schedules assist the students and caregivers with pacing, planning, organization, and task completion, among other functional skills."*

- **Movement breaks:** Within the schedule, built-in movement breaks have been useful. Replicating the school's sensory paths with a DIY sensory motor path or creating one outside on a sidewalk or driveway with chalk is an excellent way to incorporate multiple movement breaks within the day.

- **Recorded videos:** When providing students with asynchronous learning programs, recorded video instructions for students and parents to refer to have helped to reinforce IEP goals.

- **Accept all completed work:** Students come from different environments, and not all students have equal access to computers and tablets. Learning what works best for the

family and accepting completed work through various methods, such as electronic media, picture texts, and paper copies, has increased the frequency of completed work.

### 4. Be Yourself

In addition to everything listed above, one of the greatest keys to success when supporting students with IEP's is your ability to have fun, act silly, and create a supportive environment in which to learn. When your students look back on the months of remote learning, they won't remember the incredible math lesson you spent hours preparing. They will remember the relationship you established with them. They will remember the silly hats you wore, the fun games you played, and the way you made them forget the scary realities of the world. Your students will remember you and your ability to make them feel safe and happy through this horrible global pandemic.

## STEP TWELVE: Consider the barriers that stop students from attending

Now that you have a plan in place, take some time to review some of the reasons why so many students didn't attend virtual learning in the Spring. What on this list do you have control over? How can help your students with the things within your control?

- **No access** - Some students are living in homes that may not have access to Wi-Fi or limited access at best. Many of those students may not have a "device" to use for schoolwork. Yes, schools hand out devices to students, which is extremely helpful, but not all families are experts with devices and Wi-Fi.
- **No Grade Incentive** - Many school districts in many provinces have gone to a no grading policy because they don't want to punish students who cannot attend all classes or hand in all of their work due to equity of access to virtual learning. The interesting thing happening here is that there are students who find that the incentive for showing up is not there, so they no longer need to attend the class. Is there a way that we can use a no grading policy to our advantage? Can we continue to provide students with the flexibility to do project-based learning around topics they find interesting to get a sense of their interests and creativity?
- **Taking care of their siblings** - If parents or caregivers are still working because they are essential workers, it is possible that our students are caregiving for their siblings and helping those siblings do their classwork ... or keeping siblings from tearing things apart. These students may attend only half of the classes they are "required" to attend.
- **Bed but No Bedroom** - Not everyone has a bedroom to themselves. In fact, I work in many schools where multiple families live in the same apartment or house. If there isn't a quiet space where they are able to focus, perhaps it may be easier not to connect with their teacher at all.
- **Student - Teacher Relationships** - Some students are not connecting because they felt invisible while they were in the physical classroom, so they feel that they will not be missed

in the virtual one. Additionally, some students just didn't find their teachers very engaging in person, so they aren't really concerned about engaging with those particular teachers online.

## Appendix A: Themes, Themes, Themes

When selecting a theme (from the list below or if you create your own), there are some considerations for how to sell the theme to your students and transform your virtual classroom, ie. What is your storyline? And how can you adapt all lessons and activities to reflect the theme?

1. Adventureland
2. Alice in Wonderland (Down the Rabbit Hole)
3. All Ball
4. Amazing Race
5. Ancient Egypt
6. Animal Planet
7. Anything Goes
8. Around the World in 80 Days
9. Artful Antics
10. Atlantis
11. Barnyard Palooza
12. Baseball
13. Best of the Best
14. Birds
15. Book
16. Bug's Life
17. "Camp _____'s Got Talent"
18. Canada
19. Celebration of Nations
20. Challenge Week
21. Christmas in July
22. Construction
23. Creative Campers
24. Cruise Ship
25. CSI
26. Desert Oasis
27. Dinosaurs
28. Disco Days
29. Disney
30. Emergency Services
31. Exploration
32. Fairy Tales
33. Famous Artists
34. Fear Factor
35. Fiesta
36. Fun and Fitness
37. Futuristic Fun
38. Game Show Mania
39. Getting Dirty
40. Girl Power
41. Go Green
42. Gold Rush
43. Greek Greatness
44. Happy Potter
45. Hawaiian
46. Hockey
47. Holidays
48. Hollywood
49. I Love the 80's
50. Imagination Station
51. Inventor's Workshop
52. Island Explorer
53. Knights and Princesses
54. Leadership
55. Multi- Challenge
56. Mad Science
57. Mission Impossible
51. Moving' and Grooving'
52. Movies
53. Music Makers
54. Myths and Legends
55. Netflix
56. Olympics
57. Ooey Gooey
58. Outback!
59. Outside the Box
60. Party in the USA
61. Penguins and Polar Bears
62. Performing Arts
63. Pirates
64. Raiders of the Lost Artifact
65. Rainforest Adventure
66. Renaissance
67. Reptiles and Amphibians
68. Rockstar's
69. Roller-coaster Adventure
70. Safari
71. Secret Agent
72. Spa and Relaxation
73. Space is the Place
74. Splish Splash
75. Sports Extravaganza
76. Stars and Stripes
77. Storytellers
78. Superheroes
79. Surf Safari
80. Survivor
81. Symphony of the 5 Senses
82. Teddy Bear Adventures
83. The "Magic" of Camp
84. Retro (50's, 60's, 70's, 80's, 90's)
85. The Mighty Jungle
86. The No-Theme Week
87. Time Travelers
88. To the Extreme
89. Treasure Hunters
90. Tropical Paradise
91. Soccer
92. St. Patties Day
93. Under the Sea
94. Urban Adventures
95. Vikings
96. Comedy
97. We Are Family (Teamwork)
98. Where the Wild Things Are
99. Wild West
100. Wind and Sea
101. Wizards
102. Workout Fitness
103. (Your Province) Adventures
104. Yoga
105. ????? (Mystery Week)

## Appendix B: Parent guide for distance learning

**Distance Learning Tips**

The guidance below can help us all make the best of new and sometimes unfamiliar distance learning environments. It can help you be ready for some of the more practical aspects of learning from home.

**1. Establish routines and expectations**

It is important to develop good habits from the start. Create a flexible routine and talk about how it's working over time. Chunk your days into predictable segments. Help students get up, get dressed and ready to learn at a reasonable time. Everybody make your bed! Keep normal bedtime routines, including normal rules for digital devices. Adjust schedules to meet everyone's needs but don't default to staying up late and sleeping in (However, a 'duvet day' now and then can be a treat).

**2. Choose a good place to learn**

Your family's regular learning space for occasional homework might not work for extended periods. Set up a physical location that's dedicated to school-focused activities. Make sure it is quiet, free from distractions and has a good internet connection. Make sure an adult monitors online learning. Keep doors open, and practice good digital safety. Our teachers, counsellors and safeguarding teams will do the same.

**3. Stay in touch**

Teachers will mainly be communicating regularly through our online platforms and virtual learning environments. Make sure everyone knows how to find the help they need to be successful. Stay in contact with classroom and support teachers, school leaders and counsellors but understand it may take a day or two for us to respond. If you have concerns, let someone know.

**4. Help students 'own' their learning**

No one expects parents to be full-time teachers or to be educational or content experts. Provide support and encouragement, and expect your children to do their part. Struggling is allowed and encouraged! Don't help too much. Becoming independent takes lots of practice. At ACS, your child usually engages with others students and any number of adults hundreds of times each day. Many of these social interactions will continue from a distance, but they will be different. You cannot replace them all, and that's OK.

**5. Begin and end the day by checking-in**

In the morning, you might ask:

- What classes/subject do you have today?
- Do you have any assessments?
- How will you spend your time?
- What resources do you need?

- What can I do to help?

At the end of the day you might ask:

- How far did you get in your learning tasks today?
- What did you discover? What was hard?
- What could we do to make tomorrow better?

These brief grounding conversations matter. Checking in students to process instructions they received from their teachers, and it helps them organise themselves and set priorities – older students too. Not all students thrive in distance learning; some struggle with too much independence or lack of structure. These check-in routines can help avoid later challenges and disappointments. They help students develop self-management and executive functioning that are essential skills for life. Parents are good life coaches.

**6. Establish times for quiet and reflection**

For families with children of different ages, and parents who may also be unexpectedly working from home more often, it's good to build in some time for peace and quiet. Siblings may need to work in different rooms to avoid distraction. Many families will need to negotiate access to devices, priorities for wi-fi bandwidth and schedules throughout the day. Noise-cancelling headphones are an idea. And one day a week is already planned for independent, low-stress learning. Reading is fundamental.

**7. Encourage physical activity and exercise**

Living and working at home, we will all need some room to let off steam. Moving (independently and together as a family) is vital to health, wellbeing, and readiness for learning. It's a great opportunity to practice exercising 'alone together' with digital workouts and online instructors. Set new fitness goals and plan hands-on, life-ready activities that keep hands busy, feet moving, and minds engaged. You may want to think about how your children can pitch in more around the house with chores or other responsibilities. Now's a good time to think about increasing personal responsibility and pitching in.

**8. Manage stress and make the most of an unusual situation**

We are going through a time of major upheaval to our normal routines and ways of life, and there's a great deal of anxiety in the world right now. Emotions may be running high, and children may be worried or fearful. Parents may be stressed as well and children are often keenly aware of trouble. Children benefit when they get age-appropriate factual information and ongoing reassurance from trusted adults. We have put in place layers of support for ACS students, so please don't hesitate to contact your child's teacher, school leader or support team if you need assistance or advice. In these circumstances, it's often possible to reframe challenges as opportunities: for spending time together, discovering new ideas and interests, investing energy and attention in activities that often get pushed aside by everyday tasks and responsibilities. Experts advise that it's a good idea to slow down, find beauty, enjoy unexpected benefits, and express gratitude by helping others. The strength of ACS's community will help see us through.

**9. Monitor time on-screen and online**

Distance learning does not mean staring at computer screens seven and half hours every day. Teachers will aim to build in variety, but it will require some trial and error before everyone finds balance between online and close-space offline learning experiences. Work together to find ways to prevent 'down time' from becoming just more 'screen time'.

**10. Connect safely with friends, and be kind**

The initial excitement of school being closed will fade quickly when students start missing their friends, classmates, and teachers. Help your children maintain contact with friends through social media and other online technologies. But monitor your child's social media use. Remind your child to be polite, respectful and appropriate in their communications, and to follow school guidelines in their interactions with others. Report unkindness and other problems so that everyone maintains healthy relationships and positive interactions.

**WHAT 'DISTANCE' REALLY MEANS**

**For teachers:**

The acute awareness that it is impossible to replicate the intricate world of the classroom, the vital social interactions taking place as children learn to be part of a wider world, the careful honing of individual programmes for each child, so that their learning matches their personal trajectory

**For parents:**

The anxiety of receiving online learning guidance, multiple resources (which although of the highest online quality, can never match the detailed and responsive learning that takes place in the school) managing their children's responses, trying to give feedback and missing the ongoing dialogue with teachers, not to mention managing 'working from home'.

## Appendix C: Check-list for Educators

**Planning**

- What guidelines, infrastructure, and support are available from your school or district? Will technology be used to support distance learning? What accommodations are available for students who don't have access to a computer, smartphone, or internet at home?
- What platform will you use to communicate with students and what is your communication plan? How comfortable are you with this platform? Do you know how to get tech support?
- Will your teaching be synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination of both? With small groups of students or a whole class? How will you balance on-screen and off-screen learning time?
- How often do you plan to post work—daily, weekly, or at another cadence? Is there a suggested daily schedule for students?
- When will you schedule time to prepare materials and assess student work?
- What is your contingency plan if you are unable to facilitate online or need to be absent from "school"?

**Communication**

- Will you consider using email, text messages, chat, office hours, or another medium so you can communicate with students 1:1? Do you have up-to-date contact information for your students?
- Will you also communicate with parents and caregivers about how they can support students' learning?

**Continuity**

- What elements of your classroom and curriculum do you want to stay the same? Understanding that distance learning is more complex and time-consuming for both teachers and students, what curriculum, content, and skills will you prioritize and what will you let go of?

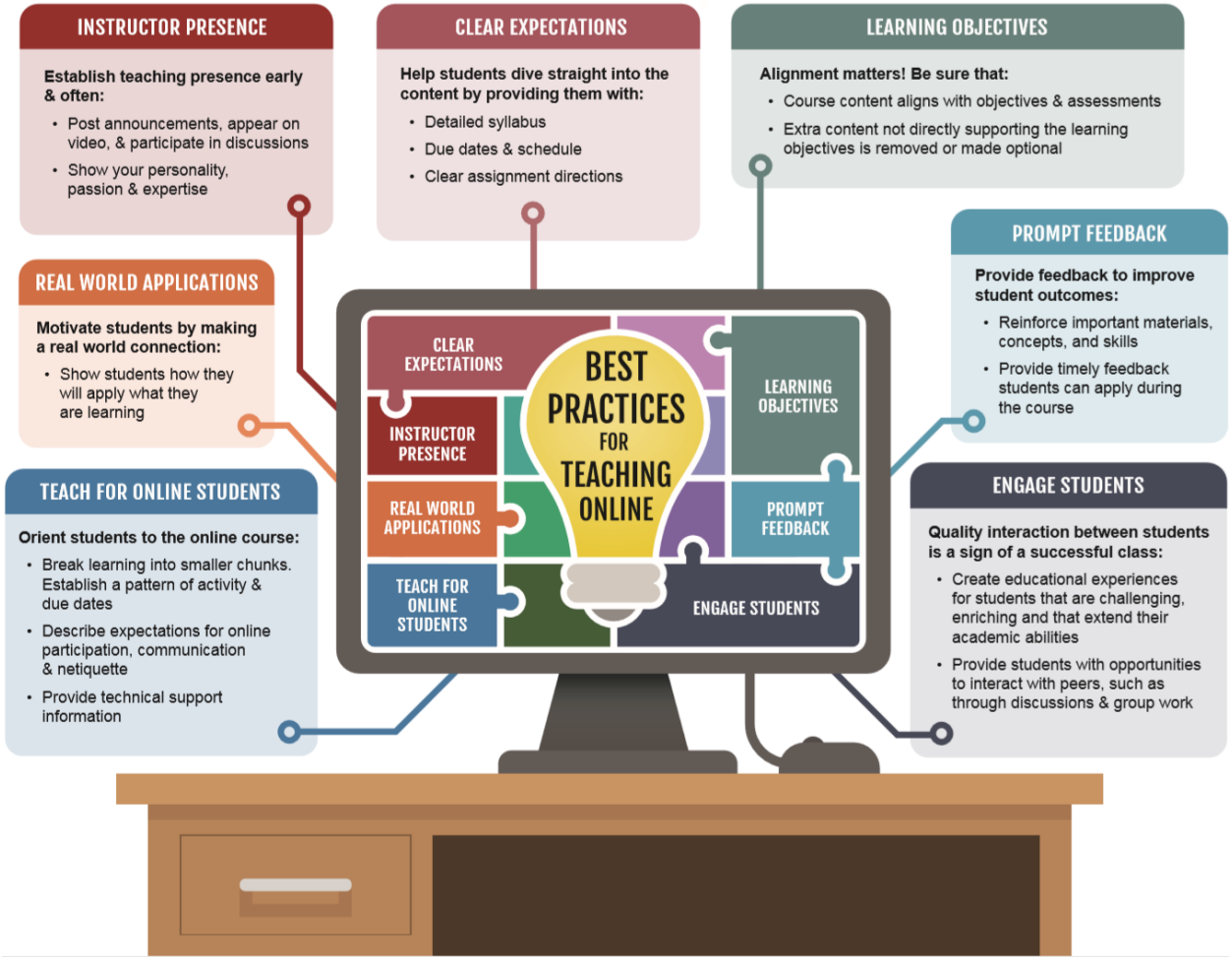
**Connection**

- What routines, strategies, and tools can help your students feel connected to you and to each other?
- What role can video, images, or social media play in helping your class feel connected to each other, to other classes in your school or community, or to schools around the world?
- How can you stay connected to colleagues and maintain a professional support system?

**Care**

- How can you practice self-care as you navigate your professional responsibilities?
- What boundaries might you set around working hours and communication windows?
- What form of stress relief can you schedule into each day: e.g., exercise, outdoor time, journaling, mindfulness, or any activity that helps you feel good?

## Appendix D: Visual Check-list for Educators



## Appendix E: A Letter to Educators Teaching Online for the First Time

*By Reshan Richards (Columnist) and Stephen J. Valentine (Columnist), Mar 13, 2020*
*This article is part of the guide Navigating Uncertain Times: How Schools Can Cope With Coronavirus.*

Dear Teachers,

Last week, the two of us had a conversation about school leaders who would be leading and making decisions related to the spread of COVID-19. That conversation turned into a set of guidelines that we published first with Global Online Academy and later with EdSurge.

We have tried to be clear about our intent to share our thinking, since some schools have very different priorities than the ones we have been projecting. To be clear, some school leaders serve children who depend on their institutions for safety, food and other basic human needs. Those children and their needs should always be the priorities of the schools that serve them—not some online version of education.

We are continuing to share, therefore, because we are also observing schools preparing or acting upon school closure plans for one reason or another. And once those plans are in place, teachers are often being asked to perform their responsibilities in a new way. We're thinking about those teachers (about you) who are beginning, or are mid-flight in, some new journey. We're not debating the merits of that journey for now—just acknowledging and looking to support the people who will be teaching online if their schools decide to go that route.

Simply put, if you're asked to teach online, we encourage you to find ways to be present for your students. Your presence is all that many of them have ever needed, and this does not change if you are teaching from your living room or local library.

The job of an online teacher is the job of an offline teacher is the job of a teacher.

When you teach online for the first time, the first thing you'll miss is the chatter of your physical classroom. Or maybe the hushed breath, ever so subtle, when you enter the class and change the dynamics, the air pressure even. No, you'll miss most the quicksilver comedy, the way words twist into grins and spill out as jokes. You probably wouldn't think that you would miss the smell or the slouches or the occasional snuck-in naps...

But you will.

You'll miss looking at all of your students at once, the sound of them laughing all at once, the way it feels when understanding cracks open and a yawn becomes an "ah" becomes an "aha."

So when you're asked to teach online—against your will, as many of us may soon be—we would first say: hold on to all of that subtle input, the stuff that helps you know a class is alive and thriving. Then, from the first time you send an email to the class or enter an online forum with a class, look for it. Listen for it. Acknowledge it. Enjoy it.

In the first online course we designed and taught together, one of us had never taught in a strictly online environment before, and the other had only designed asynchronous online learning experiences (i.e., self-paced experiences with very little instructor engagement).

As we started to plan our teaching, we fell into old habits. We organized and sequenced our materials. Then we created phases of learning that would build on top of each other and ultimately create what we hoped was a coherent experience, an experience that would raise the understanding and skill level of everybody involved, including the teachers.

Once we understood the what (the curriculum), we started to think about the how (the connection). This is where things got interesting, and quickly. We were not ever going to be in the same room with our students. We had not ever met most of them. They were relying on us.

And we were expected to deliver instruction. Whatever that means.

“To deliver instruction” is an awful phrase when you’re teaching face-to-face. It can be even more nefarious when you’re teaching online because the online world is built to hold and move information. You can share reams of text and bucket loads of data. You can record lectures. And more lectures. You can stack links on links on links, embedding hypertexts in between.

At first, when you’re beginning to teach online, please don’t do all of these things. Please resist the easy affordances of the online world. Instead, try to connect.

The job of an online teacher is the job of an offline teacher is the job of a teacher. Connect to people and help them to feel connected to you and to the dimension of the world you are leading them to experience. Connect your students to one another in a way that enables them not only to learn content from one another, but also to catch life experiences from one another—to shape one another in the way that only peers can. It’s that simple … and it’s that complex.

We’re getting a little lost, on purpose, so let’s think back to your original, in-person class (you know, the one in Room 13 or Lab B) and what you’ll miss about it.

Your presence is all that many of them have ever needed, and this does not change if you are teaching from your living room or local library.

If you were walking into that classroom and you suddenly had lost your voice, but you had to stay, you would figure out ways to connect with the people in front of you, right? And if you were walking into that classroom and you suddenly lost your ability to see what is in front of you, you would find ways to connect with the students in the room. Online teaching is similar to those scenarios in that you lose certain attributes that you may normally take for granted. But you have to be in the room and you have to continue.

Figuring out your first few go-to moves can help. Maybe you’ll use a video conference, a digital whiteboard, a collaborative document peppered with comments, or email in order to connect. Great teachers of the past have used chalkboard and chalk, water and wine, or circular tables and folding chairs: elemental resources that prove that it doesn’t really matter what you use to teach, so long as you understand how you’re trying to connect (or at the very least, that you’re trying to connect).

Having that deep motivation will help you with what typically comes next: frustration. Things won’t work the way you want them to. You’ll find yourself Googling “how do I ...?” or emailing a colleague and asking for help. If you start to feel a sense of frustration, though, take heart: that’s how you

know you're teaching online. That's how you know that you haven't lost the desire to teach—and learn—in the first place.

We don't want to minimize the challenge. But we also want to acknowledge that thinking about tools, bells and whistles is less important than acknowledging that, once you start, wherever you start, you'll build capacity just like you have, and had to, in a face-to-face classroom. At first, the tools you choose will be all that you think about. You'll only see them as you bump up against their limitations.

Soon, though, you'll only see your students. Their personalities will return. Some formerly silent or quiet students may share their voices. Some formerly disengaged students may jump out as leaders.

You'll find new things to do—things you couldn't do offline. Students will show you their learning in ways they wouldn't or couldn't offline. Students will take risks in their learning that they would never take if they were in a physical room with one another. You'll be able to assess in new ways, ways that may help you provide better feedback.

We know we're saying these things as if there aren't dozens of steps embedded in each of them. But we think that if you're willing to ask questions along the way, if you're willing to Google and search things and watch videos and educate yourself as you're going, you'll pick up the thread of your former teaching.

When you are in a physical classroom and you are teaching history or math, part of the action stems from the history and the math, and part of the action (okay, most of the action) stems from the socializing, the communication, and what kids are picking up from each other and from you—which has nothing to do with your subject. (Sorry if you didn't know that!)

The same holds true for online environments. By being in these spaces with students and asserting your unique voice as a teacher, you are actually doing the work, even if you are not presenting it perfectly.

What's more, when you are back offline, when you walk into your old brick-and-mortar classroom, one last surprise awaits. You might keep some of what you found in the online wilderness. You might use collaborative documents in new ways. You might find new ways to access student voice … or allow students to show their thinking in ways that they—and you—never could have imagined.

— SV & RR

*Stephen J. Valentine (@sjvalentine) is Assistant Head, Upper School and Director of Academic Leadership at Montclair Kimberley Academy in New Jersey.*
*Dr. Reshan Richards (@reshanrichards) is Director of Studies at New Canaan Country School in Connecticut, and co-founder of Explain Everything Inc. He also serves on GOA's board.*