Supporting Educators and Learning in the Era of COVID-19

What is the issue?

Due to public health measures aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19, schools across our state have closed their doors. During this time, we know Missouri educators will work hard to support the needs of our diverse student population while they are not in school. Our vision to improve lives through education and mission to provide access to educational opportunities will be challenged by

- unequal access to technology;
- issues around digital rights, safety and privacy;
- diverse emotional responses to home lives and the pandemic;
- learners' household and community responsibilities;
- access to healthy, safe and supportive learning environments;
- connection to peers and adults to support learning and sense-making; and
- equity in access and meaningful participation for diverse learners and their families, including emerging multilingual students, students receiving special education services and students in poverty.

As leaders contemplate decisions during school closures, they should be mindful of a few key considerations.

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) supports Missouri schools and educators in their implementation of locally determined curricula. This reference is intended for local educators and decision-makers who are navigating rapid changes in their districts. **It recognizes that solutions will not be – nor should be – "school as usual," simply delivered in a virtual environment**, nor will every solution meet every school and district need. Instead, this resource was developed by educators in Curriculum & Assessment at DESE to provide **immediate support** for encouraging student learning during these unique circumstances.

Things to Consider

The physical and emotional well-being of students, educators, families and communities are the priority at this time. The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting our communities. Health and healing during this crisis should be prioritized. An initial reaction may be to "fill the day" with academic activities, but educational leaders should consider how they can focus on supporting meaningful, purposeful learning while prioritizing social-emotional and health needs, including the need for social connectedness during a time of isolation. Lead by example in supporting healthy behaviors for themselves and one another.

Leveraging the assets of home-based learning, rather than trying to re-create school, can provide meaningful learning experiences that connect to students' home lives, interests and identities. Trying to support school-like learning in a home setting may frustrate teachers, students and families. Educators should consider how to support student agency to pursue relevant learning via resources that are available at home and with meaningful family engagement as possible. While public or outdoor learning spaces may be an asset, suggestions for being outside should attend to current social distancing guidance.

Learning for all students will be better served by attending to equity and access than trying to adhere to a particular, pre-defined scope and sequence. Educators should prioritize learning that is meaningful, responsive to the needs of the situation and place based and does not reinforce inequities. Transitioning a primarily face-to-face learning environment to a home learning environment will entail challenges to teacher, student and family time and resources. The goal at this time should not be that students are "caught up," that content is "covered" or that tasks are "checked off" of a list. During this time, attempting to accomplish a previously planned scope and sequence is not likely or advisable.

Quantity does not replace quality. A common short-term response is to compile lists of resources and activities that can be used at home. Vendors and non-profits have extended many offers for free materials. One unintended consequence is creating more work for teachers and families to sift through resources of varying quality. Recommendations should serve a purpose that advances learning goals and does not promote "busy-work."

What makes sense in this context may not be best practices under normal circumstances.[1] One tension to navigate is that the available options for learning during sudden school closures might not be consistent with best practices for teaching and learning. Leaders should work to make the best of difficult circumstances and be clear about how recommendations during school closures compare to teaching and learning in the classroom.

Efforts must adapt as this situation unfolds. It is still unclear in many states how long schools will remain closed—in some states, closures are already planned through the end of the school year. Current thinking is largely focused on planning for two- to three-week school closures, and solutions during a short closure may need to be revisited if closures extend further into the school year.

Given the wide range of opportunities learners will have, grading of work should be approached with caution. Many students will not have consistent access to digital devices or the internet at home, or they may have to share devices with others in the household. Visiting public spaces to complete technology-based assignments may not be an option due to closures and social distancing guidelines. Further, students may have competing demands on their time. Learning at home should be valued as an opportunity to extend student thinking. Grading of work that requires resources that are not available to all students can deepen inequities.

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[1]This might include consideration of resources that do not meet all quality expectations for instructional materials, suggesting activities that are not part of a coherent learning arc, or suggesting that in the short term the most equitable approach might be to allow for students to pause explicit content-specific learning while figuring out how to attend to diverse needs and contexts.

Features of Supportive Resources

In unique circumstances, when learning environments are disrupted, it is important to recognize shifts in the teaching and learning experience. When making specific instructional decisions, consider how materials or approaches you are suggesting can be used to

- support flexible scheduling and limited technology access;
- engage students in meaningful activities, investigations and/or sense-making;
- encourage students to engage in activities that already happen in their homes with materials that families already have (especially so families do not need to purchase additional supplies);
- help students make explicit connections to their interests and identities;
- invite family members to be a partner in students' learning;
- provide students with choices for how they engage, what they investigate or how they demonstrate learning;
- support students in self-reflection related to content and process to support their learning;
- exercise sensitivity when referencing the current pandemic as a possible phenomenon to investigate; and
- encourage, support and facilitate first-language family participation in the learning.

Applying these ideas may change expectations for teaching and learning, as outlined in the table below.

Learning should look **less** like…	Learning should look **more** like…
An attempt to re-create school at home • assuming a strict "school day" schedule • requiring special materials (e.g., lab or materials not commonly found at home) • pacing with the planned scope and sequence • assigning readings to stay "caught up" • assigning packets of worksheets and busy-work • expecting that all learning experiences happen virtually	**Flexible goals and structures for learning** • extended time for learning and reflection • use of commonly available materials • purposeful selection of learning targets • opportunities for students to explore their interests • meaningful, manageable tasks and projects • opportunities to learn without the use of devices or the internet
Teacher-centered instruction • virtual lectures/classes that all students synchronously attend • teachers delivering information and assignments • teacher instruction and feedback as the primary mode of facilitating learning	**Purposeful teacher-student interactions** • optional opportunities to connect with teachers and peers virtually and at a variety of times • teachers providing coaching, feedback and encouragement • encouragement for students to engage in learning and reflection with their families and communities • encouragement for self-reflection on what students learn and how they learn it
Assignments to "get through" content • emphasizing memorizing content or "checking off" tasks on lists • asking students to solve contrived or hypothetical problems or complete design projects that value form over function • trying to cover content through a volume of activities or skipping from topic to topic	**Authentic learning in the home setting** • connecting questions and problems to household activities such as cooking, fixing things or gardening • asking students to identify relevant problems in their lives and engage in design cycles to address them • allowing students to deeply explore phenomena or problems of interest through investigation to build understanding and practice over time

Attending to Equity

Ensure that learning recommendations are not limited by access to technology. Student learning should not be solely dependent on access to devices and the Internet. Encourage approaches that can be pursued without technology and/or asynchronously to set students up for success.

Recognize that students and family members may be available to play different roles in learning when at home. Students and families may need to juggle home, caretaking, school and work responsibilities. Consider a menu of options for learning experiences that allow for different types and levels of engagement.

Students in poverty and students in special populations may be especially vulnerable during this time. Families in poverty may be experiencing several of the considerations described above, along with additional concerns including regular access to meals, utilities, health services or shelter. Undocumented students and students receiving special education services may face particular challenges in accessing resources that they need. Encourage educators in your district to prioritize the physical, mental and emotional well-being of all students.

Learning recommendations should leverage student interest, identity and agency. Equitable learning experiences should be both responsive to the current need as well as meaningful to the learners experiencing them.

Student home languages should be valued as an asset to learning. Take steps to bridge the gap in access to bilingual and native language resources that support learning for students and their families.

Actions to Take

- Make resources easily available to educators in your district. Share high-quality examples of district supports and guidance, educational resources and/or learning experiences that attend to learning while foregrounding equity.

- Help educators in your district consider priorities and trade-offs related to teaching and learning during this time. Rather than providing a list of every available resource and activity, help educators make purposeful, equitable decisions about how they leverage those resources to support students' home learning, e.g. shorter, more tailored resource lists; recommendations for how educators might use resources, rather than just the resources themselves; and a list of priorities/look-fors that can support the most effective teaching and learning at this time.

- Help students and families support home-based learning. Spotlight resources that engage student interest and identity, invite families to be part of student learning, support student agency in learning, engage students in coherent experiences and prioritize meaningful learning opportunities in the absence of technology.

- Share resources and strategies as part of your immediate moves to support learners, as well as strategies to explore in the event that school closures extend beyond two to three weeks.

- For schools and districts where technology access is more available to students or is offered as an option, encourage its use to engage in social support and sense-making, not just to access materials and information.

- Extend compassion to those around you during high-stress times, including yourself. Be mindful of the unseen personal lives of your colleagues and networks, as well as the factors that enter personal and professional decision-making of which you may be unaware.