

## Supporting Quarantined Learning in K-12 Schools

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Schools and districts around the world continue to grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Disruptions to schooling are predicted to continue into 2022-23 and beyond, with news outlets forecasting surges this summer and winter (Sarisoehn, 2022). During the 2020-2021 school year, there was a significant increase in absences, and even chronic absenteeism, as schools and students shifted between in-person, hybrid, and remote learning options (Chang et al., 2021). After a year of disruption, many districts looked forward to the 2021-2022 school year as a time to recover and return to in-person instruction. Unfortunately, many have found this year to be just as, if not more, challenging as the last. As the number of cases continues to periodically spike and community outbreaks persist, schools have felt the impact. Mandatory quarantining, school closures, and other continued effects related to COVID-19 have led to a 2.9 percentage point decrease in the student attendance rate for all Connecticut students thus far in the 2021-2022 school year as compared to 2019-2020, and 1.0 percentage point decline from the 2020-2021 school year (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE], 2022). Additionally, the chronic absenteeism rate rose from 12.2% during the 2019-20 school year to 23.8% thus far in 2021-2022 (CSDE, 2022). This reality has left many school and district leaders searching for answers on how to best support students. This brief considers what options are available to schools during this complex time. Drawing on research on best practices to address extended absences generally, as well as research specifically related to the pandemic, this brief offers suggestions for effectively navigating this issue.

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## Current Response

The reality and persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates continued quarantining despite the hopefulness expressed in many district re-opening plans. This has caused many schools and districts to pivot to support student learning at home during the 2021-2022 school year. A review of the research and publicly available district re-opening documents reveals a variety of strategies to address instances of continued quarantine or distance learning. One solution has been to send packets home for students. Some schools have decided to post assignments online via virtual platforms. Many districts have opted to employ these fully asynchronous strategies. Other districts attempt to integrate synchronous learning options via virtual learning systems or video conferencing platforms. This has proven challenging however, as teachers report that simultaneously teaching in person and virtually is not sustainable.

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## Learning From Exemplary Planning

Some districts started the 2021-2022 school year with what appeared to be a robust plan for quarantined learning. *Education Week* reports that the Arlington Heights School District 25 in Illinois developed a Quarantine Academy to address absences and the continued need for a remote option (Schwartz, 2021). After speaking with a representative from the district, author Sarah Schwartz shares that they created groups by grade-level (early childhood, K-2, 3-5, and 6-8) and then designated one teacher to offer synchronous instruction to each group. One special education teacher supported all of the groups and special classes; such as physical education, art, and music occurred asynchronously. The Quarantine Academy option was to be offered year round, with students opting in as needed. Districts may review available resources and staffing to try and implement some version of a sustained option such as Quarantine Academy.

The Groton Public Schools district in Connecticut also appears to have a plan for increased absences due to emergency school closures and whole class quarantining. Their re-opening plan states: “If an entire class is quarantined or emergency school closures, the teacher will move to synchronous remote instruction for the entire class.” They also state: “An assigned building substitute will provide mini lessons that can be accessed by quarantined remote learners on Zoom (or other livestreaming technology). Students will also receive communications and assignments through the LMS [Learning Management System], supported by their building substitute teacher, a tutor, interventionist, and/or their teacher.” Similar to the plan from the Arlington district, the Groton Public Schools district has designated staff that will focus on and prioritize remote learning. Where applicable and feasible, other districts might consider this option as it alleviates the need for teachers to offer concurrent instruction for students in person and at home. This sort of standing option ensures a consistent response as the number of cases and outbreaks fluctuate.

# A New Way Forward: Creating a Permanent Plan

Whether a district can designate staff to attend to quarantined learning or not, the COVID-19 pandemic has signaled the need for a permanent and prepared response to this sort of disruption. Some have even characterized the pandemic as an opportunity to reimagine how schools operate. If this is true, developing strong systems will help provide support for students with extended absences or interrupted schooling unrelated to COVID-19. As district leaders and policymakers move to develop systems to address quarantined learning they should consider the following five areas:

## Standard and Curriculum Prioritization

Are there parts of the curriculum that are well suited for remote learning? Consider which standards, lessons, activities and objectives lend themselves to learning at home. These topics and resources can then be archived. Such work can be prioritized during times of extended absence for an individual student or a group of quarantined students. For example, in the subject of early literacy, teachers and curriculum developers might designate specific word study activities or lessons well suited for the home environment. They can create step-by-step tutorials for students and parents, and leverage this opportunity to quite literally make meaningful connections in the home. For example, a lesson could focus on labeling and comparing household items (Chen & Greenwood, 2021). When creating these plans it is also important to determine how to be culturally relevant and build on students' and parents' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). Some educators in the medical field are already beginning to reenvision curriculum for remote learning. For example, at the post-secondary level, educators have begun to create 14-day "Quarantine Curriculum" (Ross, 2020). The curriculum is designed to cover foundational concepts on one topic, in this case neuroscience, with a mix of self-study and interactive components. Students have access to instructional recordings, assessments and opportunities for feedback. As more of these types of resources are created, they may be available across districts, states, and beyond. Superintendents can also build trust by meaningfully engaging board members in their shared work rather than using them as a rubber stamp of approval. For example, the use of thoughtfully designed standing committees can help develop structure, and work sessions for budget planning can maximize input (Eadie, 2019). In this way, individual strengths can be capitalized on, and the interdependent relationship between superintendent and school board can be supported.

## Reallocation of Staff

Is it someone's job to ensure that quarantined students are receiving adequate instruction? When possible, districts should consider designating a staff member or multiple staff members to focus on remote learning or supporting students with extended absences. This might look like one teacher per grade level, content area, or school (depending on staffing constraints). In Connecticut, the Manchester Public School district coupled their 2020-2021 re-opening plan with the creation of a new position, a Remote Learning Coordinator and facilitated staffing shifts to appoint a former principal in this strategic role. As the effects of COVID-19 persist so too will the need for new roles and responsibilities such as this one. School and district leaders might also think strategically about pooling quarantined students across schools to provide instruction from designated staff. This may look like a district-wide "Quarantine Academy" or a set of teachers designated by the state to create "Quarantine Curriculum," recorded lessons, and offer synchronous learning/feedback.

## Accessibility/Availability

Can all students access what schools are able to offer during quarantine? In May 2020, the Connecticut State Department of Education reported that approximately 8% or 40,000 school-aged children in the state did not have access to technology/devices deemed necessary for learning (Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology, 2020). The state addressed this digital divide with the \$43.5 million Everybody Learns Initiative, which provided 50,000 laptops, internet access in 60,000 homes, and 200 new public hotspots (State of Connecticut, Office of Governor Ned Lamont, 2020). Districts should ensure that all students have been able to access these and other ongoing technology supports offered by the state. If technology issues persist, or as maintenance and repair issues arise, districts may consider non-digital options such as paper packets or even public television as recommended by some state departments (Reich et al., 2020). Additionally, districts should consider how to deliver content as equitably as possible. That is, the goal is not simply accessibility, but also usability and inclusivity (Lowenthal et al., 2020). Lowenthal and colleagues (2020) urge educators to provide auditory content along with visuals, offer transcript access, use text that is accessible for screen-reading technology, and employ multiple means of engagement, assessment, and representation. Importantly, all plans for remote learning should consider the benefits and challenges of remote or quarantined learning for vulnerable populations, and frame solutions with equity at the center (Woulfin & Jones, 2022).

## Can all student access what schools are able to offer during quarantine?

Finally, districts should consider students' non-academic needs that may go unmet when they are quarantining. For example, districts should attend to students' nutritional and mental health needs, in addition to their learning needs, when drafting quarantined learning plans (Reich et al., 2020). Some districts have attended to food insecurity by offering and coordinating food delivery and pickup options (Martin & Sorenson, 2020). Education research scholars have suggested that educational leaders create of a task force charged with developing systems and guidelines to support K-12 students' social and emotional learning (Varghese & Natsuaki, 2021). They also encourage educators to be intentional about checking in with students regarding feelings of worry or anxiety, particularly around technology usage and remote learning (Morgan, 2020).

## Staff Development

How do districts and schools support educators as they navigate this new terrain? Teachers have demonstrated dedication and resilience in the face of unimaginable changes. Many have expressed the desire for increased opportunities to learn about various platforms, instructional strategies, differentiation techniques, and tools for relationship building in a remote context (Akojie, Laroche, & Schumacher, 2022). Teachers need professional development that addresses each of these needs. Administrators should consider training options that encourage teachers to reimagine traditional instruction. For example, offering a session on a strategy such as flipped teaching, where teachers teach in reverse by having students preview content such as study materials and pre-

recorded mini lessons ahead of synchronous in class time (Tretinjak, 2018). This sort of modification to traditional instruction and planning could help educators and students be more amenable to disruption. Pre-recorded mini-lesson videos from a student's teacher can be especially helpful as they provide a sense of consistency and familiarity during uncertain times (Anderson, 2020; Morgan, 2020). Teachers also need explicit and sustained instruction on the platform or Learning Management System (LMS) adopted by their district. Pre-pandemic, scholars highlighted the centrality of teachers in the shift towards increased technology in schools. Now more than ever it is critical that district leaders and policymakers recognize and support teachers in their role as facilitators of educational technology (Rocio, 2021), and use resources and standards provided by organizations such as the International Society for Technology in Education (Morgan, 2020). Teacher preparation programs will also need to address teachers' readiness for hybrid and remote learning (Cahapay & Anoba, 2020).

## Feedback and Data-Analysis Systems

How can districts keep track of absences and get feedback on the state of quarantined learning? Districts should implement systems to gather data related to quarantined learning. They should strategically collect, track, compile, and share data on who is missing school. Trends from such analyses might prove helpful as districts seek solutions. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted racially and ethnically minoritized students (Jones, 2021), as well as students from lower income households, students with disabilities, and English learners (CSDE, 2022). With the increased risk for student absence brought on by COVID-19 and remote or quarantined learning (Chang, 2021), it is critical for districts to develop systems to identify and support their most vulnerable populations. Districts might also consider creating a system to solicit information related to student preferences regarding the usefulness and accessibility of various online tools and practices (Lima et al., 2020). They could also gather information from parents and guardians to gauge their preparedness and satisfaction with quarantined offerings (OECD, 2020). Additionally, such a system should also allow teachers to give feedback on the state of quarantine learning at their school, with space to share successes and communicate their existing needs. Scholars examining the COVID-19 pandemic from different angles all agree that communication is crucial during this time. Districts could brainstorm how to use feedback systems as a pathway to maintain open communication between schools, students, and families.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated new possibilities and solidified the need for a thoughtful plan for continued student learning in the face of disruption. There is an opportunity to reimagine how schools are organized and how curriculum and instruction are designed. Student absenteeism has always been an issue worth addressing (Koppenhaver, 2006), and perhaps new learning from the COVID-19 pandemic will help the educational community better understand how to serve students who miss school for a variety of reasons. The more districts create and compile content, and refine policies, procedures, and new roles for quarantined learning, the more opportunities there will be for interdistrict information sharing, support, and collaboration.

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## Author Biography

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Britney Jones will join Trinity College as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Educational Studies in Fall 2022. She earned a Bachelor's degree and a Master of Arts in Teaching degree from Brown University, and received her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership: Learning, Leadership, and Education Policy at the University of Connecticut in May 2022. Her dissertation research examines science teachers' sociopolitical consciousness and how they understand Culturally Relevant Pedagogy/Culturally Relevant Science Teaching. Her most recent journal publications are "Preservice science teachers' sociopolitical consciousness" and "Within the walls of the classroom: How science teachers' instruction can develop students' sociopolitical consciousness" both in *Science Education* (2022). She previously taught fourth grade students for four years in Brooklyn, N.Y., and served as a teacher leader/ curriculum developer.