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Teacher Observation, Feedback, and Support in the Time of COVID-19

GUIDANCE FOR VIRTUAL LEARNING

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SEPTEMBER 2020

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Introduction

Due to COVID-19, many states, districts, and schools are having to reconceptualize K–12 education and are balancing between ensuring the safety of students, staff members, and families, while also delivering high-quality learning experiences that ensure equitable outcomes for all students. To address these challenges, schools are selecting from a range of multiple learning environments, including in-person classes, hybrid models with part-time in-person and virtual, and virtual learning only. For many K–12 teachers, teaching in a virtual context is new. Few educator preparation programs prepare teachers to teach in a virtual environment (Archambault, 2011; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Dawley, Rice, & Hinck, 2010), and yet, more than ever, teachers will need professional development, support, and feedback on how to navigate the transition from in-person to virtual learning. One potential policy challenge in this context is how to evaluate and provide teachers feedback and support in a virtual learning environment. State education agencies (SEAs) sought to address this policy challenge by revising teacher evaluation policy during the 2019–20 academic year to lift requirements. However, given the new dynamics for the 2020–21 school year and the increased focus on virtual learning, SEAs are seeking new ways to support teachers with more relevant forms of feedback. Although virtual schools and online learning have been growing in the United States prepandemic (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2019; Evergreen Education Group, 2015), there is still limited research and examples of teacher evaluation and observations for virtual learning (Patrick & Powell, 2009). In addition, other aspects of teaching and learning will require greater priority in evaluation and feedback and support to teachers—specifically, a focus on social-emotional learning, relationship building, and student engagement.

This paper will provide SEAs with strategies to adapt educator evaluation and support system policies and practices to support virtual learning. The examples, ideas, and resources included herein come from virtual high schools in the United States and from postsecondary education. This paper will explore the standards and rubrics for virtual learning, the logistics for how school leaders can conduct virtual observations, the challenges with observing and providing feedback virtually, and resources for professional learning focused on virtual learning environments.

Three Ways to Leverage Teacher Evaluation and Professional Learning Systems to Strengthen Virtual Learning

Teacher evaluation systems and their frameworks were developed with the intention of providing teachers with feedback and support to help improve instructional practice. SEAs

can leverage these systems to provide teachers with the professional learning and support they will need in order to address the impacts of COVID-19, including potential student learning losses; provide additional social-emotional support to students; and adapt to teaching in virtual environments. Many states and districts will not modify their existing teacher evaluation policies and practices due to regulations or collective bargaining agreements, or feel it is not wise to do so for a temporary situation brought upon by the pandemic. However, SEAs can provide districts and schools with some additional guidance to help them leverage their existing evaluation systems to provide teachers much-needed support at this time. The following sections provide SEAs with strategies on how to leverage these systems to support teachers and how to adapt them for virtual environments.

Standards and Framework Review and Alignment

Teachers need support and feedback to successfully navigate the transition from in-person to virtual learning environments. SEAs should examine their existing teacher professional practice frameworks to ensure that the best practices for delivering virtual learning (e.g., using educational technology) are reflected and reinforced in the rubrics. Professional practice rubrics and frameworks are typically aligned to state teaching standards and describe the various components of high-quality teaching. Many of these elements would still be applicable for virtual or hybrid learning. However, these frameworks, the training around them, and examples shared with educators are based on in-person instruction in the classroom. In light of the changing context of instruction in 2020–21, teachers will need more guidance on how to adapt these practices in a virtual learning environment. For example, classroom management practices may look different in a digital learning context versus the classroom. During in-person instruction, teachers use classroom management strategies, such as verbal and nonverbal cues, to redirect disruptions. A teacher could modify these strategies for virtual instruction by using private chat features to remind students about behavior expectations or adjusting permissions within the online learning platform.

Strategy #1: States can start by examining their professional practice frameworks to determine which standards and/or indicators emphasize virtual learning best practices. One way to do this is to conduct a crosswalk of the framework and/or rubric with national online teaching standards. By analyzing existing frameworks, states can identify gaps, develop supplemental resources to bolster the areas of their frameworks that are missing around virtual learning, and provide targeted professional learning and support. Table 1 outlines some online teaching standards that SEA teams may consider.

Table 1. Description of Online Teaching Standards

Standards	Author	Date	Description
Standards for Quality Online Teaching	Southern Regional Education Board	2006	The standards include the following categories: academic preparation; content knowledge, skills, and temperament for instructional technology; and online teaching and learning methodology, management, knowledge, skills, and delivery. Each standard in these categories is accompanied by indicators.
National Standards for Quality Online Teaching	Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance and Quality Matters	2019	The standards are focused on professional responsibilities, digital pedagogy, community building, learner engagement, digital citizenship, diverse instruction, assessment and measurement, and instructional design. Each standard includes a set of indicators, and for every indicator there is an explanation and examples.

Strategy #2: Once an SEA has examined how its existing professional practice framework aligns with key online learning standards, states can consider any of the following approaches to adapt their frameworks:

1. **Identify specific standards or practices to be elevated for virtual learning.** States could prioritize observing and providing feedback and support on the "big ideas" of instruction or specific practices that will be essential for virtual learning. The crosswalk with national online learning standards will be a helpful tool to identify which practices to support for virtual learning. For example, the Network for Educator Effectiveness identifies specific indicators within their rubric to provide teachers with support and feedback on virtual learning (see pages 3–4).

2. **Prioritize specific indicators or practices to support during the COVID-19 pandemic.** Due to the stress and trauma of the pandemic, SEAs may want to prioritize social-emotional learning (SEL), student engagement, and relationships with students. These practices will be foundational for effective teaching and learning this year in order to address potential learning losses and trauma. Most frameworks include some SEL-related indicators, but states can compare their frameworks to national SEL standards, such as CASEL's core SEL competencies. By focusing on giving feedback and support to teachers on the indicators or practices that support SEL, student engagement, and relationships with students, it will help teachers effectively engage all students in virtual learning environments. For example, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education created guidance that highlights the priority indicators within their professional practice rubric, which includes guiding principles on the social-emotional well-being of students and educators, engaging students and families, and promoting culturally responsive teaching and learning.

3. **Develop considerations in virtual learning settings for each indicator or practice.** Due to regulations or legislative requirements, it may not be possible for an SEA to prioritize or focus on specific indicators and practices within its existing framework for evaluation purposes. However, states can develop guidance that can highlight how these standards and indicators will look like in virtual environments or how a teacher might modify the practice to apply in virtual or hybrid learning environments. The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching created such guidance that includes virtual learning strategies for each indicator within its rubric. Similarly, the Danielson Group created guidance for how to apply the practices in the Framework for Teaching that includes example virtual learning strategies.

4. **Refer to existing virtual schools' evaluation systems frameworks or resources for examples on how to modify and support teachers with virtual learning.** Many states have virtual schools that often must meet the state's requirements for evaluation systems but have modified existing rubrics or resources to address the unique knowledge and abilities needed for effective online instruction. States and districts could borrow from these resources to adapt their framework or develop supplemental guidance for schools on how to modify their existing framework and its application for virtual learning. For example, Idaho's iSucceed Virtual High School has a crosswalk of the Danielson Framework for Teaching with techniques for virtual learning and a teacher self-assessment that describes the practices for online learning.

Evidence Collection and Observation

Teachers deliver virtual learning experiences in various ways. Some teachers use *synchronous instruction*, which is delivered in real time with students using communication tools (i.e., Google Classroom or Zoom) and by integrating video, audio, and visual aids, such as a whiteboard or slides. This approach allows for greater student engagement, strengthens relationships, and enhances students' feelings of belonging, but technical problems can be a barrier to engagement (McBrien, Cheng, & Jones, 2009). Another approach is *asynchronous instruction* in which there is a delay between the presentation of content and the student response. Using this approach, a teacher may prerecord video lessons for students to watch at their own pace and use communication tools, such as e-mail or threaded discussions (Wicks, 2010; McBrien, Cheng, & Jones, 2009; Nortvig, Petersen, & Balle, 2018). This approach allows students to work at their own pace, provides accommodations, and lets learners digest and reflect on the content. However, some research suggests that a purely asynchronous approach is less effective in engaging students than synchronous approaches that combine both learning and student response (Nortvieg et al., 2018).

The delivery of virtual instruction can look different from classroom instruction; therefore, data collection and observations should reflect these differences. State leaders can create

guidance on how evaluators can collect evidence and conduct observations in virtual learning environments. Guidance can include:

- **Using recorded videos of teacher practice.** With both synchronous and asynchronous instruction, administrators and evaluators can observe recorded lessons, providing them greater flexibility on the time and length of the observation. The video can be used to provide feedback specific to their instruction and offers an opportunity for deeper reflection and explicit coaching. Having the ability to rewatch or rewind the recorded lesson also can help ensure greater accuracy when evaluating the teacher's performance.

- **Protecting student privacy.** If using recorded videos as evidence for synchronous instruction, SEAs will need to give districts and schools guidance on protecting student privacy, particularly if the learning management system (LMS) or platform records students' webcams. The guidance could include obtaining parental/guardian permission via a form and instructing teachers to take students off camera who do not have parental permission. If districts and schools cannot ensure student privacy or if regulation prevents the use of recorded videos, another approach would be to have school leaders observe the lesson live as instruction is occurring, replicating the in-person classroom observation experience.

- **Measuring student engagement.** It can be challenging to assess student and teacher interaction or engagement during virtual instruction, even in synchronous approaches (Kish, 2018). Students may not be on webcams or teachers may engage students outside of lessons at different times through phone calls, e-mail, discussion boards, or real-time chats (Dixson, 2010; Chigeza & Halbert, 2014). SEAs should encourage districts to collect evidence of student engagement by tracking engagement through the LMS or platform analytics. Many online platforms can provide data, such as time on the platform, time watching videos, number of videos accessed, number of login sessions per week, average length of session, number of discussion forum visits, and number of forum contributions (Chambers, Scala, & English, 2020).

Teacher Evaluation as an Asynchronous Experience in Virtual Settings

In a study of Ohio virtual schools, Kish (2018) found that most school leaders described their teacher evaluation process as an asynchronous experience. School leaders reviewed archived recorded lessons; class communication documentation, such as chat logs, discussion boards, e-mails, and phone logs; attendance rates; student performance data; student and parent surveys; and lessons (stored within the school's learning management system). School leaders interviewed shared that many aspects of a virtual teacher's instructional practice and performance are recorded and archived, providing a data-rich experience when evaluating teachers.

Feedback and Professional Learning

More than ever, teachers need high-quality, job-embedded professional learning to develop teaching practices for virtual environments and strategies to support students with potential learning loss and social-emotional well-being. A well-designed and -implemented teacher evaluation system can support professional learning by promoting a shared understanding of effective teaching, providing evidence-based feedback, and promoting collaboration (Coggshall, Rasmussen, Colton, Milton, & Jacques, 2012). SEAs can create guidance and resources on how districts and schools can provide feedback and professional learning focused on growing teachers' practice on virtual learning methods and supporting students' well-being. The guidance can include:

- **Developing a shared understanding of effective teaching in virtual environments.** The evaluation system itself can provide job-embedded professional learning opportunities for teachers to develop a shared understanding of the indicators within professional practice frameworks that support virtual learning. For example, if the evaluation process includes a teacher self-assessment, state leaders could update it to prioritize assessing teaching practices for virtual learning. State guidance should encourage that any goal setting, either through the professional development plan or student learning objectives, focus on improving two or three standards/indicators that emphasize virtual learning practices.

- **Providing evidence-based feedback and coaching.** Guidance on providing feedback will need to address the logistics of how evaluators or school leaders provide feedback virtually and what effective feedback practices look like within virtual settings. For the logistics, SEAs can recommend that all pre- or post-observation conferences and feedback occur over videoconferencing or in-person whenever possible. This will help build trust and transparency between the teacher and the evaluator or school leader. It is important that the feedback sessions are reflective and lead to shared meaning and understanding— this creates a situation where the feedback is learner-centered and more likely to improve practice (Coggshall et al., 2012). If there are any existing feedback guidance resources or sample reflective questions for evaluators, state leaders should update the materials for virtual learning. For example, the reflective questions an evaluator may ask could be on how the teacher adapted their teaching practices for virtual learning or how the teacher assessed student learning within the virtual environment. These sample reflective questions for evaluators or school leaders should be focused on the indicators and practices that were identified within the state or district's professional practice framework to prioritize. The Colorado Department of Education's website provides an example of guidance on providing feedback in virtual settings. Virtual learning also affords an opportunity for school leaders and instructional coaches to use videos as a coaching tool to show teachers their practice, ask reflective questions, and model best practices.

- **Creating structures to support teacher collaboration.** Virtual learning provides a unique opportunity for teachers to learn from one another more than ever. Typically, it can be challenging for grade-level or subject teams to observe one another's instruction as teams often have similar schedules. However, with virtual learning, teachers have greater flexibility to observe another teacher's synchronous instruction or share their prerecorded asynchronous instruction or other online learning tools, such as discussion boards, with their colleagues. School leaders could connect this practice and support as part of teachers' professional learning communities (PLCs). Teachers may identify a specific virtual instructional strategy as one of their PLC goals and can observe each other's practice and give feedback. Virtual instruction also allows for greater opportunities to have instructional practices modeled for teachers.

- **Providing professional development opportunities that aligns to feedback and evidence.** Based on the evidence and feedback from the evaluation process, teachers will need professional learning opportunities to strengthen their skills and knowledge. Like feedback and coaching, professional learning opportunities should focus on the same indicators identified that support virtual learning. SEAs should consider providing professional learning opportunities or resources specific to each indicator or area of their rubric modified to address virtual learning or any indicators that were prioritized. Some key areas to consider for professional learning opportunities include student engagement strategies, adapting curriculum and materials for virtual instruction, the use of online tools for virtual instruction, approaches to communicate with students and families, and strategies to build supportive learning environments in virtual spaces. Table 2 highlights some resources on professional learning for virtual learning.

- **Developing guidance and supports for school leaders and instructional coaches.** School leaders and instructional coaches will need guidance and support on how to provide teachers with high-quality feedback in virtual environments and on the skills and practices that support virtual learning. For example, school leaders and instructional coaches will need guidance or professional development on how to leverage videos as a coaching tool and how to support their use with teacher teams.

Table 2. Resources on Professional Learning for Online Learning

Standards	Author	Description
Professional Development for Virtual Schooling and Online Learning	NACOL	This paper discusses five common myths with supporting teachers of online learning, and outlines actions that schools can take to provide professional development to virtual teachers. It includes links to additional resources to support professional development and preservice teacher education, such as a table outlining the spectrum of professional preparation and development for the various virtual school roles.
Exploring Preparation and Support for K-12 Online Teachers	Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute	In this case study, virtual teachers were interviewed and shared what types of professional development and support they received and what additional support is needed to assist in their work. The teachers interviewed stated that professional learning communities (PLCs) were the most beneficial support.
Supporting Teacher Learning and Development During Remote Instruction	The Danielson Group	This guide outlines a timeline, a protocol, and suggested activities to support teachers who are learning to navigate digital learning. The guide may serve as a resource to work through during PLCs.
Georgia Virtual Learning Professional Learning	Georgia Virtual Professional Learning	This webpage highlights some example virtual professional learning courses available to teachers of Georgia Virtual School. The course topics include online support for special-need students, introduction to synchronous learning, effective online teaching, and SMART [Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-based] goals for educators.
Going Virtual! 2010: The Status of Professional Development and Unique Needs of K-12 Online Teachers	Boise State University and iNACOL	This study explored the status of professional development of K–12 online teachers and identified the unique needs of online teachers. Some of the professional development needs included foundational knowledge, facilitation strategies, technology tools, online course design, and digital etiquette.

Conclusion

Just like teachers are modifying their instructional practices for virtual instruction, states and districts will need to adapt their educator evaluation and support systems for virtual learning. This process includes examining the existing professional practice rubric for virtual learning practices, identifying what practices and indicators to prioritize or provide additional guidance, and rethinking some of the methodology to conduct observations and provide feedback. It will be important for SEAs to encourage districts to examine their existing collective bargaining agreements and regulations to understand what can be adapted for virtual settings. Although this crisis may pose a number of challenges, SEAs can use this time as an opportunity to support teachers as they adapt their instruction for virtual learning and meet the needs of students during this critical time.

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