# Distance learning toolkit

Key practices to support
students who learn differently

National Center for Learning Disabilities

Understood

# Who we are

NCLD works to improve the lives of the 1 in 5 children and adults nationwide with learning and attention issues — by empowering parents and young adults, transforming schools, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. We're working to create a society in which every individual possesses the academic, social, and emotional skills needed to succeed in school, at work, and in life.

Understood is dedicated to growing and shaping a world where everyone who learns and thinks differently feels supported at home, at school, and at work; a world where people with all types of disabilities have the opportunity to enjoy meaningful careers; a world where more communities embrace differences. Because differences make the world worth exploring. Differences define who we are. Differences are our greatest strength.

# Acknowledgments

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# How to use this toolkit

As we prepare this guide, many schools have spent almost a year engaged in distance or hybrid learning because of the coronavirus pandemic. Distance learning has been a challenge for many educators, families, and students, including the 1 in 5 students who have learning differences.

Learning differences are lifelong challenges that impact skills like reading, writing, math, and focus. These challenges are caused by differences in how the brain processes information. Dyslexia and ADHD are examples of learning differences.

Students who struggle academically or who typically receive individual support in school are more likely to fall behind during distance learning, according to one survey. And research shows that students who also come from other underserved communities, including students of color and Emerging Bilinguals (also referred to as English language learners), have been particularly affected.

This toolkit is intended to help you, the classroom teacher, meet the needs of all students at this critical moment. We have revisited research from *Forward Together: Helping Educators Unlock the Power of Students Who Learn Differently*. The three key teacher mindsets and eight key teaching practices from that report are highly effective for all students, especially those who learn differently.

In late 2020, we consulted with Understood experts and members of the National Center for Learning Disabilities' Professional Advisory Board to learn how the mindsets and practices apply to distance learning. We're sharing those learnings with you here.

## In this toolkit, you will:

- Learn about the key teacher mindsets and effective teaching practices for students who learn differently

- Pinpoint common instructional challenges and focus on teaching practices to address those challenges

- Use learning activities to help you apply those practices in distance learning

- Understand how the practices support social-emotional learning (SEL) and racial equity

- Learn how to use assessments outside the classroom environment to gauge student progress

We know there are still many questions about distance learning as new research emerges and teachers like you adapt practices to the online classroom. For now, we hope you'll join us on a learning journey to best serve *all* students — no matter where they're learning from.

# Key teacher mindsets

Let's start by looking at teacher mindsets, which are the beliefs and attitudes that educators hold about their teaching practice and their students. In our research, there were three critical teacher mindsets that appear to have a positive influence on the learning and development of students who learn differently.

**Teacher Mindset 1:** Positive orientation toward inclusion

**Teacher Mindset 2:** Strong sense of self-efficacy

**Teacher Mindset 3:** Growth mindset

With the ever-changing demands of distance and hybrid learning, you may feel that your mindsets have shifted. You aren't alone.

Given the demands of distance learning, many educators are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and, in some cases, less effective at their practice. These feelings are not surprising. You may have had to learn how to use unfamiliar technology and new instructional skills for teaching remotely — in a short amount of time and with little support. You may have also found it more difficult to form relationships with students in the same ways as you would have in the past.

Still, these three teacher mindsets are just as important in distance learning as they were in the classroom. Read on to learn more about each mindset and how you can apply it in distance learning.

# From the classroom

" I have been teaching for 16 years and am not the most technologically savvy. I had anxiety around my ability to teach by remote learning before the school year began. But I remembered that solid teaching technique can transfer to any situation. Sticking to a basic formula of backwards planning with an objective, a crystal clear criteria for success, exemplars for student product and/or performance, and cycles of explicit instruction has really helped me assist students. I use a consistent weekly format for each day so students know exactly what type of lesson to expect. The content and activities change, but the general system does not. That seems to help my scholars who learn differently the most. I believe my adherence to simplicity has driven successful results. "

*— Julian Saavedra, high school history and social justice teacher in Philadelphia and Understood Teacher Fellow*

# Key teacher mindset:
# Positive orientation toward inclusion

## What it is

Teachers' belief that students with disabilities should be included and taught in general education classes.

> **I believe students with mild to moderate disabilities can — and should — be taught alongside their peers in general education settings.**

## Why it's important

When teachers have a positive orientation toward inclusion, they:

- Create a classroom environment where all students feel welcome and valued, making it easier for students to learn

- Take responsibility for teaching *all* of their students

- Include flexible options and supports to meet students' needs and strengths

- Hold high expectations for all students

## Application to distance learning

In some ways, you may find it easier to include all students during distance learning because technology gives you flexible options to support students' needs. For example, digital worksheets and texts are more accessible ([if formatted correctly](#)) than paper versions. Students can also work at their own pace when given asynchronous options and pre-recorded lessons. On the other hand, you may be struggling to monitor and promote engagement — both with and among your students. Or it may be hard to provide the same support you might in person.

**Boost your mindset about inclusion by learning more about your students' learning differences and what helps them learn. Ask yourself:**

- What are the annual goals in my students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)? In what specific areas are my students making progress or demonstrating strength in my class?

- What teaching practices or strategies have been useful to my students? What could I try next?

- What supports and accommodations are part of my students' IEPs? Which have been most effective and in what instances?

**How will you make note of what's working or not working?**

☐ Keep an observation log.

☐ Make a space for it in my lesson plan.

☐ Use an accommodations tracker.

☐ Other: _____

# Key teacher mindset:
# Strong sense of self-efficacy

## What it is

Teachers' belief in their own ability to effectively teach all students.

> **I feel that I can effectively teach my students with mild to moderate learning disabilities.**

## Why it's important

When teachers believe they can effectively teach students with learning differences, they:

- Have a positive orientation toward inclusion

- Spend extra time with students who are struggling

- Motivate students who are disengaged

- Don't criticize students for errors

## Application to distance learning

All the new demands of distance learning may leave you feeling that you're not as effective a teacher as you were before. Give yourself some credit — you're learning new skills on the fly. Focus on what's working well, how far you've come since distance learning started, and successes your students have had.

**Boost your feelings of self-efficacy by noticing one thing each day that went well with distance learning. Ask yourself:**

• Did a student who is usually absent show up for class after you reached out?

• Did you record a lesson on video for the first time?

• Did you personally connect with a student in a meaningful way?

• Did you find a new strategy you're excited to try?

• Did your students finally grasp that concept after you tried a new strategy?

**How will you make a routine of keeping track of one positive thing each day?**

☐  Write it in a journal.

☐  Share with a colleague.

☐  Post it on a sticky note near my computer.

☐  Other: _____

# Key teacher mindset:
# Growth mindset

## What it is

Teachers' belief that they can improve their teaching practices and that all students can learn with effective instruction and practice. Remember: We're talking about **your mindset as a teacher,** not your students' mindsets.

> **By learning new skills and trying new strategies, I can help all of my students learn.**

## Why it's important

Teachers with a growth mindset are more likely to:

- Use teaching strategies that lead to increased engagement

- Continuously reflect and improve on their teaching practices, seeking out additional training or new strategies to try

- Explicitly teach students problem-solving strategies

## Application to distance learning

Having a growth mindset can help you teach in a new and ever-changing environment. You can be a model for your students who are learning how to learn in a new environment, too. A growth mindset starts with the idea that mistakes are part of the learning process — and that we can always learn from our mistakes and improve.

During distance learning, you have had to learn a lot of new skills. You've likely made mistakes along the way. Remind yourself that this is part of the process. Then, take a deep breath and look for ways you can improve your teaching practice to reach all students.

**Think about how you can apply a growth mindset during distance learning. Ask yourself:**

• How will I reflect on my teaching practices to identify which strategies are working and which ones aren't working?

• How will I maintain high expectations for my students while providing them with the support they need?

**Which of these areas do you want to focus on?**

☐ Expect and allow for mistakes — from students and myself. Let students know that mistakes are a natural and necessary part of the learning process.

☐ Keep expectations high for all students. Focus on grade-level standards and pre-teach background knowledge that is needed to understand the concept or skill being taught.

☐ Create ways to meaningfully monitor student progress daily or weekly. Use the data to improve my teaching practices and provide additional supports where needed.

☐ When students are struggling or disengaged, look for new strategies by collaborating with colleagues and families or exploring new resources. (If you're reading this toolkit, you're doing just that!)

# Learning activity: Mindset review

🔍 **Think about the key teacher mindsets:**

- Positive orientation toward inclusion

- Strong sense of self-efficacy

- Growth mindset

**Which mindset do you feel is an area of strength for you during distance learning? Why?**

**Which mindset is an area of growth that you want to improve? What might change or improve as a result of your mindset shift?**

**Looking back at the mindset you'd like to improve, what action do you plan to take to help you?**

# Key teaching practices

Among the many teaching practices in the field, our research points to eight evidence-based, high-impact practices that benefit all students, particularly those who learn differently. These practices are most effective when used with schoolwide initiatives of high-quality instruction, early intervention, and targeted supports, like a multi-tier system of supports (MTSS) or response to intervention (RTI).

It's not easy to implement new practices in the classroom, so focus on trying just one to three at a time. To figure out which practices to try first, do the activity below.

**1.** Look at the chart on the next page. In the left column, circle three of the biggest challenges you're facing with distance learning.

**2.** Look across the row for each challenge. The key practices that can address that challenge are marked with an X. Circle those too.

**3.** Now look at your completed chart. Which practices apply most often to your challenges? Choose one to three practices to focus on and check your selections below.

☐ Explicit, systematic, and targeted instruction (go to page 17)

☐ Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (go to page 19)

☐ Strategy instruction (go to page 22)

☐ Positive behavior strategies (go to page 24)

☐ Flexible grouping (go to page 27)

☐ Collaboration with colleagues and families (go to page 30)

☐ Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (go to page 34)

☐ Evidence-based literacy and math instruction (go to page 37)

| | Explicit instruction | Universal Design for Learning | Strategy instruction | Positive behavior strategies | Flexible grouping | Collaboration with colleagues and families | Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching | Evidence-based literacy and math instruction |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Supporting students with understanding new content | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ |
| Differentiating instruction | ✕ | ✕ | | | ✕ | | | ✕ |
| Keeping students engaged | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ |
| Meeting your students' social and emotional needs | | | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | |
| Promoting positive behavior during online instruction | ✕ | | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | ✕ | | |
| Helping students work more independently and keep track of assignments and log-ins | ✕ | | ✕ | ✕ | | ✕ | | |
| Helping students navigate technology challenges | ✕ | | ✕ | | | ✕ | | |
| Collaborating effectively with families and colleagues | | | | | | ✕ | ✕ | |

# Key practice:
# Explicit, systematic, and targeted instruction

**Challenges this practice can address during distance learning**

- Supporting students with understanding new content

- Differentiating instruction

- Keeping students engaged

- Promoting positive behavior during online instruction

- Helping students work more independently and keep track of assignments and log-ins

- Helping students navigate technology challenges

**For more detailed information, visit u.org/ExplicitInstruction.**

## What it is

Teachers break down information into manageable chunks and present it in a crystal clear way. Students have opportunities to practice and receive timely feedback.

## How to do it

Explicit instruction in six steps:

1. Identify a clear, specific objective. In other words, what do you expect students to learn by the end of the lesson?

2. Break the skill, concept, or information into manageable, sequential chunks.

3. Model with clear explanations.

4. Verbalize the thinking process (think aloud).

5. Provide opportunities for guided and independent practice.

6. Give timely feedback and monitor progress.

## Application to distance learning

During distance learning, it's even more important to break down and explain information clearly. That's because students are in charge of their learning more than ever before. Plus, you may find it harder to monitor students' accuracy and understanding during independent work.

Try these tips for using explicit instruction during distance learning:

- [Record a short video](#) to explain directions or teach a lesson, concept, or skill. This allows students to rewatch sections as many times as needed.

- Explicitly teach students and their families how to use any technology needed for distance learning. Show them how to do tasks, like finding and submitting class assignments and turning the camera or microphone on and off.

- Give students clear timelines and task lists to help them manage their learning.

- Use explicit [strategy instruction](#) to help students develop time management and organization strategies.

- Ask students to respond and show their understanding throughout your lessons. It's important to use strategies that encourage *all* students to [actively participate](#). Consider using a mix of small group breakouts, [collaboration tools](#), polls, quizzes (like Kahoot or Poll Everywhere), or the reactions and chat features during a video call. Remember to explicitly teach students how to use the [digital tools](#).

## Why it works

When students are learning something new or are struggling, explicit instruction is essential. It also helps students [build the knowledge and skills](#) they need for discovery learning, higher-order thinking, and inquiry-based learning.

Students who learn differently often have a hard time making inferences or "filling in the gaps." They're also more likely to struggle with working memory, making it harder for them to hold on to information long enough to understand and use it. For example, they may have a hard time remembering multi-step directions. Explicit instruction reduces the demand on students' working memory by breaking down information into easy-to-follow steps or chunks. It also cues students to the most important information and can reduce unnecessary stress and anxiety that inhibits learning.

Using explicit instruction can also build student motivation and engagement because students receive timely feedback. Students know when they're successful, and they know right away when they need to correct a mistake or misunderstanding.

# Key practice:
# Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

**Challenges this practice can address during distance learning**

- Supporting students with understanding new content

- Keeping students engaged
- Differentiating instruction

**For more detailed information, visit u.org/UniversalDesignforLearning.**

## What it is

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework you can use to meet the needs of all learners. It removes barriers to learning and increases student engagement. UDL assumes that barriers to learning are in the design of the learning environment, not in the student.

## How to do it

Use these three main principles of UDL while designing lessons and assessments:

- *Engagement:* Increase student motivation and engagement, such as by giving choices or by explaining the relevance of an assignment.

- *Representation:* Provide information in more than one format, like text, audio, video, and hands-on.

- *Action and expression:* Give students more than one way to interact with the material and show what they've learned.

## Application to distance learning

Technology can provide multiple ways to represent, express, and engage with information. But without careful planning, it can also create barriers. Try these tips for using UDL during distance learning:

- Create regular ways to connect with students and get their feedback. What parts of your lesson design are working for them? When are they feeling most challenged?

- When possible, give students choices for how and when they engage in the work.

- Record lessons for students to watch as many times as needed.

- Make sure materials are accessible. Then, teach students and their families how to use accessibility features they might need. Focus on one or two digital platforms at a time and learn about the accessibility features like closed captioning or video transcripts.

- Plan your online lessons with UDL in mind. Use our UDL lesson design planner to guide your thinking.

- Make lessons and assignments relevant to current events, concerns, and interests in a way that is culturally responsive and age-appropriate.

## Why it works

All students benefit from having multiple ways to access and engage in learning. But it's essential for students who learn differently. UDL helps you think through and address the learning barriers students might be experiencing. You can address these barriers by changing your lesson design, classroom environment, or materials. For example, providing a video or audio file can help a student with dyslexia access the content for a science lesson.

UDL also increases engagement and motivation by leveraging students' interests and giving them meaningful choices. Students' strengths, needs, and interests may vary from one lesson to the next. UDL helps you anticipate this variability to meet students where they are, remove potential learning barriers, and provide support and scaffolding.

# From the classroom

"I lead professional development sessions at my school, teaching teachers how to use technology to support all learners, prompted by the Universal Design for Learning. In one of our sessions, teachers said that students were having trouble understanding feedback provided on assignments.

I asked them what they would do in the classroom to support such a student — English language learners, students with language processing difficulties, or students having trouble navigating the technology. They all said they provide verbal feedback to students. I modeled how to use a Chrome extension called Mote, which allows you to leave voice note comments on Google Docs. It's one small way to make feedback accessible to a wider range of students. Teachers walked away feeling confident that the skills that they have developed to support students in person can also be applied to the remote setting."

*— Shira Moskovitz, fifth-grade special education inclusion teacher in New York City and Understood Teacher Fellow*

# Key practice: Strategy instruction

⊘ **Challenges this practice can address during distance learning**

- Supporting students with understanding new content

- Keeping students engaged

- Meeting your students' social and emotional needs

- Promoting positive behavior during online instruction

- Helping students work more independently and keep track of assignments and log-ins

- Helping students navigate technology challenges

For more detailed information, visit **u.org/StrategyInstruction**.

## What it is

Strategy instruction is a teaching practice that shows students how to learn the content or skills they need to acquire. Cognitive strategies, like using graphic organizers, mnemonics, and flashcards, help students complete a task, achieve a goal, or develop a skill. Metacognitive strategies, like using checklists, self-assessments, and self-monitoring tools, help students think about their thinking and be more reflective and independent in their learning.

## How to do it

1. Identify where students are struggling and what cognitive or metacognitive strategy could help.

2. Connect the strategy to a class activity or assignment.

3. Explicitly and sequentially model the strategy. Explain why it can help them so they're motivated to learn the strategy.

4. Help students internalize the strategy through practice. Ask students to reflect on and assess their use of the strategy.

5. Support students' use of the strategy with reminders and feedback. Talk about ways to use the strategy in other subject areas or in general life tasks.

## Application to distance learning

During distance learning, students need to manage their learning more than ever. Strategy instruction can help students navigate this new learning environment. Work with families to help students develop strategies for how to:

- Keep track of log-in information for various platforms and apps

- Manage schedules and set reminders for classes, group work, and assignments

- Reduce distractions at home, if possible

- Use brain breaks, physical activity, or fidgets to increase focus

- Monitor their learning with checklists, goal trackers, self-questioning, and rubrics

## Why it works

Many students, especially those who learn differently, have a hard time figuring out how to tackle a problem and monitor their own learning. Students who struggle with reading often need to be explicitly taught self-questioning strategies to monitor and improve their comprehension. Similarly, in math, students need strategies for solving word problems. Students who struggle with focus and organization can benefit from learning strategies that help them keep track of assignments. Strategy instruction helps students develop long-term learning strategies that let them become more independent learners.

# Key practice:
# Positive behavior strategies

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**✑ Challenges this practice can address during distance learning**

- Keeping students engaged

- Meeting your students' social and emotional needs

- Promoting positive behavior during online instruction

- Helping students work more independently and keep track of assignments and log-ins

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**For more detailed information, visit u.org/PositiveBehaviorStrategies.**

## What it is

Positive behavior strategies start with the premise that behavior is a form of communication. Once you understand what a student is trying to communicate with you, you can find a strategy to respond to the student's needs. Examples of the strategies include respectful redirection, when-then sentences, and pre-correcting and prompting. These strategies help ensure that students know what's expected of them. They also give students opportunities to learn, practice, and be acknowledged for appropriate behaviors.

## How to do it

- Create a positive, supportive classroom environment.

- Post and define behavior expectations. Co-create expectations with your students to increase their buy-in and sense of community.

- Explicitly teach behavior expectations.

- Develop a comprehensive system that includes how you'll acknowledge and reinforce positive behavior. The system should also include how you'll collect data to find and address the causes of inappropriate behavior.

- Regularly reflect on and improve the strategies with students.

- Partner with families to share information, gather insights, and develop strategies.

## Application to distance learning

- Schedule regular [check-ins with students](#) and their families.

- [Explicitly teach](#) and review expectations and [routines for distance learning](#).

- Teach strategies and provide [flexible supports](#) for organization, planning, and self-regulation.

- Help students develop strategies for managing stress and anxiety. Consider using [brain breaks](#) during live lessons.

- Learn more about [trauma-informed teaching](#) and strategies for supporting [students' social and emotional needs](#).

## Why it works

Some students who learn differently may have trouble with social skills, self-regulation, or understanding expectations. Others act out due to frustration or to hide their academic challenges. Positive behavior strategies help uncover and address the reasons students are struggling to meet behavior expectations.

Positive behavior strategies can also increase student engagement, reduce inappropriate behaviors, and maximize learning time. In turn, the strategies can reduce the need for exclusionary disciplinary practices, like suspension and expulsion from school. That's important because students with disabilities are twice as likely to be suspended. And students who are suspended or expelled often fall behind, leading to a cycle of academic and behavior challenges.

# From the classroom

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Each day we have a SEL block. During that time, we teach different skills, allow scholars time to talk and to just be kids. We also allow space and opportunity for kids to develop their sense of self by identifying how they cope with challenges.

We present different strategies the scholars can use to take care of themselves. They have the autonomy to choose which strategies to put in their toolbox. We also practice these skills throughout the day.

If we notice that kids are a little off or it seems like they need a break, we provide that space for them. We also check in with scholars daily and often. We are not afraid to stop a lesson and just say 'what is wrong?' and allow them to express themselves.

"

— *Lakrisha Howard, first-grade inclusion teacher in Newark, New Jersey, and Understood Teacher Fellow*

# Key practice: Flexible grouping

**Challenges this practice can address during distance learning**

- Supporting students with understanding new content
- Differentiating instruction
- Keeping students engaged
- Meeting your students' social and emotional needs
- Promoting positive behavior during online instruction

For more detailed information, visit u.org/FlexibleGrouping.

## What it is

Teachers use a mix of heterogeneous groups (made up of varying skill levels) and homogeneous groups (made up of the same skill level) to help students achieve a learning goal. The groups change often based on the learning objective and students' needs or interests. The size of the groups can vary and include small groups of two or three students and larger groups of up to six students.

## How to do it

1. Use your learning objective to decide on the size of groups you'll need and whether to use heterogeneous or homogeneous groupings. Decide whether the groups will be teacher-led or student-led, and assigned or student-selected.

2. Review formal and informal data, including what you know about students' interests and strengths, to decide which students to group together. Consider having students self-assess their learning and choose a group based on their level of understanding.

3. Set guidelines and model how the members of each group should interact. Involve students in creating and revising guidelines to build buy-in.

4. Check for understanding to make sure students know what is expected of them.

5. Prompt students to reflect and share out what they learned in their groups. Use the principles of Universal Design for Learning to give students multiple ways of sharing feedback.

## Application to distance learning

Peer-to-peer interaction and small group instruction is an important part of learning. It also helps meet students' social and emotional needs. This is still true — if not more true — in a distance learning environment. But it might be more challenging because you can't supervise more than one group at a time. It can also cause more anxiety for some students. Try these tips to make flexible grouping work during distance learning:

- Decide which technology you will use for groups and practice using it beforehand.

- Create an inclusive environment by helping students build positive relationships with each other. You can use interactive brain breaks to make sure students get to know each other and become more comfortable working in small groups.

- Consider alternatives to video- or audio-based breakout rooms. Try text-based chats or collaborating on a shared document or platform.

- Give groups an icebreaker or team-building activity to open the conversation.

- When using breakout rooms, check in on each group. Partner with special education teachers and paraprofessionals who might be able to support the small groups. Make sure students know how to request help while in breakout rooms.

## Why it works

Flexible grouping helps address varying student needs while also promoting inclusion. All students have a chance to work with and learn from their peers in heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings. Students aren't pigeonholed or tracked into one permanent group or level. With structure and support, flexible grouping helps students build social skills and feel connected.

# From the classroom

"In my classroom, I assess or have students self-assess to determine the flexible groupings during independent work. In a virtual classroom setting, it's hard to 'read the room,' especially when some students have devices without cameras or don't feel comfortable turning their cameras on.

One way to address this issue is to have students self-assess. After each mini-lesson, I ask students to reflect on their understanding of the skill we learned. I offer three options: 1) I am confident that I understand this skill and can work independently; 2) I think I understand, and I want to try to work independently; and 3) I don't understand, and I need more help before I can try to work independently. I ask the students to hold up that many fingers or type their selection into the chat feature.

I then have three different breakout rooms. In breakout room 3, I re-teach the skill to students who need additional help. After that, I go to breakout room 2, where I check to see if students have any questions. Last, I pop into breakout room 1 to check work and potentially offer a challenge question to further their thinking."

*— Shira Moskovitz, fifth-grade special education inclusion teacher in New York City and Understood Teacher Fellow*

# Key practice:
# Collaboration with colleagues and families

⊘ **Challenges this practice can address during distance learning**

- Supporting students with understanding new content

- Keeping students engaged

- Meeting your students' social and emotional needs

- Promoting positive behavior during online instruction

- Helping students work more independently and keep track of assignments and log-ins

- Helping students navigate technology challenges

**For more detailed information, visit u.org/Collaboration.**

## What it is

Teachers collaborate with colleagues to problem-solve instructional or behavioral challenges, review student data, and plan upcoming lessons. They also collaborate with families for a coordinated approach to building on student strengths and addressing challenges.

## How to do it

Collaborating with colleagues

- Identify the colleagues you need to collaborate with and how often to work together.

- Build trust. Set norms for your work together to establish an open and honest space for collaboration.

- Schedule time. If your school has required time for collaboration or meetings, try to use those times.

- Be purposeful. Make sure everyone knows the goal of the meeting. (Are you reviewing data? Planning a lesson? Deciding how to provide accommodations?)

- Be supportive and collaborative. Your colleagues all bring different assets and perspectives to the table. Look for common ground and areas where you can improve your own practices.

## Collaborating with families

- Building a positive relationship with families starts with empathy and positive interactions. Contact families early in the school year to introduce yourself and communicate often. Let families know they are an essential part of the learning team and that you value their perspective.

- Ask families for their input and perspective — like asking what is most important to them in their child's education. You can use questionnaires to gather this information and get to know families and students better.

- Share learning goals and strategies that families can use at home.

- Talk with families about students' strengths and challenges. Share positive news about each student at least once or twice a month.

## Application to distance learning

A strong partnership between teachers, support staff, and families is essential during distance learning. While technology can be helpful in collaborating with each other, it can sometimes present barriers. Try these tips to foster collaboration during distance learning:

### Collaborating with colleagues during distance learning

- Learn more about co-teaching in a virtual environment.

- Work with paraprofessionals (if they are available). Share resources they can use to reinforce learning or support students during flexible small group breakouts.

- Collaborate with your school psychologist or counselor to support students socially and emotionally in a virtual environment.

- Join virtual teacher groups, like SPED & Remote Learning: Educators Connect on Facebook, to share resources and support.

## Collaborating with families during distance learning

- Explicitly teach families how to use the technology, like apps and learning platforms, and where to find class information. Consider recording a screencast [video](#) of how to use these tools.

- Ask families how and when they'd like to communicate. Each family's needs will be different, so it's important to build a communication plan together. Consider offering drop-in virtual office hours for families to ask questions.

## Why it works

Collaboration is essential for supporting students who learn differently. General education teachers, special education teachers, and other support professionals need to communicate about accommodations, services, and teaching strategies. Families can also provide valuable insights about accommodations and strategies that have worked (or not worked) in the past and what is happening at home.

[Research](#) shows that positive partnerships between schools and families can improve students' grades, attendance, persistence, and motivation. Students who learn differently often need more support from their families at home. By keeping families up to date on learning goals and strategies, families are better equipped to provide that support.

# From the classroom

" I have a paraprofessional, a co-teacher, and a learning specialist in my distance learning classroom. The key word is communication. We have weekly team meetings. Plus, I email them updates weekly, after each lesson, and before breaks. I check in with them, even if just for 30 seconds. This keeps us on the same page, and it makes them feel valued as well. "

*— Lakrisha Howard, first-grade inclusion teacher in Newark, New Jersey, and Understood Teacher Fellow*

# Key practice:
# Culturally and linguistically responsive training

**Challenges this practice can address during distance learning**

- Supporting students with understanding new content

- Keeping students engaged

- Meeting your students' social and emotional needs

- Collaborating effectively with families and colleagues

**For more detailed information, visit u.org/CulturallyResponsiveTeaching.**

## What it is

Teachers consistently draw meaningful connections between what students learn in school and their cultures, languages, and life experiences. Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching is not a one-off activity. It's embedded in every aspect of teaching, from the content being taught to the way it is taught.

## How to do it

- Build positive relationships with your students and their families. These relationships can help you avoid assumptions by understanding a family's unique experiences and perspectives.

- Identify students' assets: strengths, interests, experiences, background knowledge, cultural values, language skills, and communication norms.

- Create a supportive and welcoming classroom environment.

- Examine the curriculum and your teaching practices to increase rigor, diversify perspectives, and make content relevant to students' experiences.

- Continue your own learning about your students, their cultures, and culturally and linguistically responsive teaching.

## Application to distance learning

- Use online team-building activities where students share about themselves and their families. Give options so that students can decide what they're comfortable sharing.

- Plan lessons and projects around topics that are relevant to your students' interests and cultures. Prepare for handling sensitive conversations about discrimination, racism, and oppression.

- Provide visual or audio supports. Consider recording lessons so that Emerging Bilinguals can watch at their own pace.

- Help students get access to technology or other services their family needs. Be prepared to provide materials like printouts and books that can be used when technology is unavailable.

- Ask families when and how they prefer to communicate. Get to know what language resources are available for families of Emerging Bilinguals.

## Why it works

Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching can help teachers address assumptions or implicit biases they might unintentionally hold, particularly about marginalized communities like students of color and Emerging Bilinguals. This practice leverages students' assets to create rigorous, student-centered instruction that sustains home and community practices.

Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching also helps to level the playing field for student learning. It's easier for students to learn new information when they have prior experience or knowledge of a topic. On top of that, culturally and linguistically responsive teaching gives all students the chance to learn about different cultures and languages. These rich and diverse experiences promote empathy, respect for differences, and a sense of community for all students.

# From the classroom

" I make sure to provide space for students to be themselves. We share aspects of our lives together, and it feels like a daily conversation as opposed to a lecture.

Things were going relatively well for the first few months of school. Then Walter Wallace Jr. was shot in West Philadelphia. Many of my students live in close proximity to the crime scene. Some of them live on the same block as the Wallace family. So many of them were impacted by the subsequent riots and looting. All of those feelings of anxiety, anger, and hopelessness my students have faced in the past came right back.

All of the pre-work of creating an environment of trust came in handy when students joined class the next day. Instead of shying away from difficult conversations, I chose to address it head-on. We first reminded each other of our norms and agreements for classroom conversations. We then checked in on each other and then told stories of what we were all feeling and experiencing. Many of the students said that they felt better because they had a place to talk. If I hadn't previously established a classroom culture of trust and openness, then none of those conversations would have happened. "

*— Julian Saavedra, high school history and social justice teacher in Philadelphia and Understood Teacher Fellow*

# Key practice:
# Evidence-based literacy and math instruction

**Challenges this practice can address during distance learning**

- Supporting students with understanding new content

- Differentiating instruction

- Keeping students engaged during virtual lessons

> For more detailed information, visit **u.org/EvidenceBasedLiteracy** and **u.org/EvidenceBasedMath**.

## What it is

Teachers use literacy and math curricula and teaching strategies that are informed by research. This includes both what to teach (the content) and how to teach it (the delivery).

## How to do it

*All subjects*

- Pre-teach any background knowledge, vocabulary, or skills students need for each lesson.

- Teach content in an explicit, systematic, and cumulative way. Each concept or skill should build on the last.

- Use interactive strategies that engage all students in the learning.

- Give students opportunities to work together and learn from each other.

*Literacy*

No matter what grade level you teach, give students opportunities to:

- Learn vocabulary and practice oral language skills

- Write about what they read

- Build reading fluency and sight word recognition

- Learn and practice comprehension strategies

For beginning readers or struggling readers, make sure your curriculum includes explicit instruction in how to decode (or sound out) words. This is often called structured literacy.

- Phonology (sounds of spoken words)

- Orthography (sound-symbol correspondence)

- Syllables (parts of a word)

- Morphology (base words and affixes)

- Syntax (grammar)

- Semantics (meaning)

*Math*

Use these evidence-based strategies for teaching math at any grade level:

- **Visual representations (often used in an instructional approach called concrete-representational-abstract, or CRA):** Use hands-on manipulatives (concrete) and drawings or graphic organizers (representational) to help students understand abstract math concepts and procedures.

- **Schema-based instruction:** Help students identify problem types in word problems.

- **Build fluency:** Give opportunities for daily practice on math facts and foundational skills.

## Application to distance learning

- Prioritize the most essential components of the curriculum.

- Provide scaffolded support and the background information that students need to access grade-level standards.

- Use synchronous lessons to apply the learning through discussion or activities, check for understanding, give targeted instruction, and build relationships.

- Use small flexible groups to provide targeted instruction and opportunities for peer interaction. Prompt students to share their thinking with you and with each other.

- Provide asynchronous options. Asynchronous lessons allow students the chance to both preview and review on their own time for more repetition and understanding.

- Give students active learning activities, like guided notes and quizzes, to promote focus and retention of information during asynchronous learning.

- If possible, send manipulatives home for students to use. Otherwise, have students use virtual manipulatives, common household items, or manipulatives cut from paper.

- Give more opportunities for practice and repetition by sending home tips for how families can support student learning.

- Learn additional strategies for using technology to teach reading and math online.

- Continually adapt instruction based on formal and informal assessments.

## Why it works

*Literacy*

The Simple View of Reading says that reading is the product of understanding oral language and being able to decode words. Learning to decode (or sound out) words doesn't happen naturally like learning to talk. Students have to be explicitly taught how to read. This includes teaching them how to connect sounds to letters and identify sounds within words. Explicit, structured literacy instruction is beneficial for all students, but it's *essential* for students with dyslexia.

Comprehensive literacy instruction should also include strategies that help with comprehension. Many students, especially those with learning differences, will also need explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, like predicting, self-questioning, and retelling. Developing student vocabulary, oral language, reading fluency, and writing are all important.

*Math*

Students who have dyscalculia or trouble with math may have a hard time understanding abstract math concepts or recognizing patterns. Others might have a hard time understanding word problems or remembering multi-step directions.

Breaking concepts down into parts and using visual representations can help all students, especially Emerging Bilinguals and those with dyscalculia. Schema-based instruction can also help by explicitly teaching students patterns in math problems and how to find them. Building fluency with facts and computations makes all tasks in math much easier.

# Learning activity: Put the practices into action

Now that you know the key practices that best support students who learn differently, make a plan to implement one to three of these practices. Which of the practices do you think will be most beneficial to your students right now?

- ☐ Explicit, systematic, and targeted instruction
- ☐ Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
- ☐ Strategy instruction
- ☐ Positive behavior strategies
- ☐ Flexible grouping
- ☐ Collaboration with colleagues and families
- ☐ Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching
- ☐ Evidence-based literacy and math instruction

## Step 1: Prep.

- How can I integrate this practice into my lesson plan or teaching?

- What technology and materials will I need, and how do I plan to use them?

- How will I involve colleagues and families and communicate with them about what I am doing?

- Which students do I anticipate will especially benefit from this practice?

- What outcome am I hoping to achieve? How will I know if it was effective?

## Step 2: Try it.

- How will I capture how it's going, such as by collecting feedback or keeping a journal?

- Which colleagues can I collaborate with to provide me with feedback?

**Step 3: Reflect.**

- What went well?

- What can I change for next time?

- What data did I collect? What observable student behaviors did I see?

- Did I achieve the desired outcome?

**Step 4: Celebrate your progress.**

- How will I show myself appreciation for trying something new for my students during this challenging time?

- How will I share my process and/or progress with colleagues or families?

# Assessments during distance learning

Assessments are important tools for monitoring student learning, providing students with feedback, and informing your teaching. But how do you assess student progress outside of the classroom environment? Follow the steps below to effectively implement a variety of assessments, including frequent informal assessments that are ungraded or that have very little

**Step 1: Identify the type and frequency of assessments. Make sure the assessment matches the learning objective.**

- Some informal assessments (sometimes called formative assessments) take less than a minute to give you a snapshot of student learning. Others may take more time but can lead to more insights. Make sure to use a variety of informal assessments. Examples:

  - Polls, exit tickets, and other digital tools
  - Portfolios of student work
  - Observations of students during class discussions or check-ins
  - Student videos or writing tasks
  - Standardized progress monitoring tools

- Traditional assessment formats like quizzes and tests may be difficult to monitor during distance learning. Consider alternative formats and include flexible supports and choices when possible, using Universal Design for Learning principles. For example:

  - Performance-based tasks, like projects or papers
  - Oral responses, like having students give presentations or record themselves talking through their answers to test questions
  - Higher-order questions that ask students to use or explain what they learned

- Think through equity issues before setting time limits on assessments. Students' home learning environments may be distracting. Technology and internet connectivity issues can also create barriers.

## Step 2: Communicate the purpose of the assessment(s) to families.

- Explain the purpose of the assessment or measure. For example, "This will help me see your child's areas of strength and areas of struggle. I'll use that information to tailor instruction and fill in any learning gaps."

- Make sure families understand the importance of collecting accurate data. Tell them when it's OK to help their child on a task — and when it's not.

## Step 3: Use the data.

- Set aside time to review any data you collect. For example, if you collect exit tickets at the end of a lesson, review them before planning the next lesson.

- Give students timely feedback.

- Decide how you will fill in learning gaps or tailor instruction. Consider flexible learning groups.

- Communicate with families about the data and how learning needs will be met.

# Additional resources

## The Promise and Peril of Education Technology

In this report from NCLD, read about educational technology issues before, during, and after the coronavirus pandemic. Learn how schools can innovate their use of ed tech.

## Design for the Margins First

The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) offers ideas to design for and prioritize the needs of students with disabilities.

## Disproportionate Discipline and COVID-19: A Call for Change

From NCLD and NCSECS, learn how marginalized students are experiencing inequities in discipline due to the coronavirus pandemic.

## How Designing Accessible Curriculum for All Can Help Make Online Learning More Equitable

Learn how Universal Design for Learning can ensure that marginalized students aren't further disadvantaged by online learning in this article from KQED.

## How We Move Forward: Practicing Three Inclusive, Anti-Racist Mindsets for Reopening Schools

Special education experts describe three critical commitments they are using to design inclusive, anti-racist learning environments in this resource from Getting Smart.

## Case Study: Growth Mindset and Mindfulness at a Distance

The Educating All Learners Alliance features Juliana Urtubey and co-teacher Jessica Penrod, who make the case for growth mindset and mindfulness in distance learning.

## Preparing to Reopen: Six Principles That Put Equity at the Core

In this article from Getting Smart, special education experts describe guiding principles to ensure that equity, empathy, and the needs of students with disabilities are prioritized.