



**PREPARING FOR INFECTIOUS DISEASE: DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENSURE THE CONTINUITY OF TEACHING AND
LEARNING FOR SCHOOLS (K-12)
DURING EXTENDED STUDENT ABSENCE OR SCHOOL DISMISSAL**

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) wishes to remind states, districts, schools, students, staff, families, and guardians as well as communities about the importance of:

- 1. addressing the prevention of infectious disease in schools, including the seasonal flu, viral meningitis, enterovirus, and Ebola; and*
- 2. ensuring the continuity of teaching and learning in the event of student absences or school dismissals.*

The purpose of this document, therefore, is to provide recommendations to help schools maintain the continuity of teaching and learning for: 1) individuals or small groups of students who are out of school for extended periods; and 2) large groups of students and staff disrupted by school dismissals or large numbers of faculty absences.

These recommendations present points for education stakeholders to consider as they plan for and improve their ability to provide continuous learning, ranging from take-home assignments to online learning initiatives. This document offers key questions for states, districts, school leaders, teachers, parents, and students to think through as they prepare for continuity of teaching and learning, and provides information on resource opportunities and best practices.

There are a number of reasons why students may be absent from school for extended periods. For example, a student may have a chronic health issue or illness for an extended period of time. Using seasonal influenza as another example, a district may pursue *selective* dismissals of students at high risk of flu complications (i.e., to prevent the spread of flu to vulnerable communities), *reactive* dismissals (when a significant proportion of students in school have a documented fever), or *preemptive* dismissals (to proactively decrease the spread of flu). Whatever the reason and regardless of the duration of such interruptions, all education stakeholders should consider the effects of significant absences on student achievement and establish plans in advance that not only ensure health and safety, but also maintain a continuity of learning.

Options to get the material to students who are at home

ED is mindful that available resources will play a part in determining how each school creates its continuity of teaching and learning plan. This framework offers several options for consideration when preparing in advance, all aimed at helping districts, schools, and teachers plan and execute distance learning with whatever resources they have or are able to obtain. The strategies outlined below range from sending copies of assignments home to students to web-based distance learning course work. Specifically, they include:

- **Hard copy packets:** Textbooks, packets or portions from textbooks, photocopies of reference materials, curricula, and assignments can be prepared in advance for distribution to affected students;
- **Online materials or other content:** Digital copies of textbooks, reference materials, assignments, and audiovisual learning supports can be made available on the Internet using online learning platforms and websites;
- **Teacher check-ins and tutorials:** A variety of technologies (telephone, e-mail, web conferencing) can be used to facilitate one-on-one interaction between students and teachers, counselors, and other appointed adults (e.g., tutors) during prolonged absences or dismissals;
- **Recorded class meetings:** Using audio or video technology, recorded class meetings can be given to some or all absent students via podcasts, live or on-demand television, DVD, captioned closed-circuit or public access television, or online;
- **Live class meetings:** Schools can use available tools such as conference calling or webinars, online courses, or virtual schools with two-way interaction between the teacher and students;
- **Other student supports:** Schools can use any of the above methods to promote non-classroom priorities, such as college and other counseling support, including student loan preparation (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) or study groups that are enabled through web-based tools.

Considerations for ensuring continuity of learning

The following five guiding questions will help districts and schools develop learning continuity strategies and action plans:

1. How will affected parties communicate during short-term or prolonged absences or during school-wide dismissals?
2. How will students understand and access available academic resources and other supports from home?
3. What equipment and other resources are available or need to be acquired to enable school and district learning continuity plans?
4. What additional training or experience is required to prepare all parties to respond appropriately when needed?
5. How will the district or school ensure access to all materials, including for students with disabilities?

A decision table attached to these recommendations (Appendix A) includes detailed questions that schools, districts, and states can use to inventory instructional content and available technology; evaluate educator, student, and parent readiness to participate successfully in distance learning; and evaluate state and district operating plans to support various distance learning options.

Potential resources and partnerships to close the gaps

Some states, districts, and schools have some or all of the resources and capabilities to fully develop and implement their continuity of teaching and learning plans; however, most will require additional planning and support to ensure these strategies are effective across all schools and student populations. To assist in these efforts, ED has assembled helpful examples from prior state and district responses to similar circumstances (see Appendix A). State and local education agencies can assess their capacities now to increase the accessibility of resources in a variety of forms to all affected parties. These tools and resources may include:

- **Comprehensive learning continuity planning and implementation support:** Guidance regarding how to develop and implement a systematic plan, including technology resources to ensure that all students, including students with disabilities, can learn in a variety of environments;
- **Physical instructional resources:** Publishers' and other instructional material can be made available in hard copy to students unable to physically attend school;
- **Digital instructional resources:** Publishers' and other instructional material can be made available digitally so that it can be shared via e-mail and through other web-based tools or transformed into additional, accessible formats (e.g., braille);
- **Organization and distribution of digital content:** Technology that offers tools and systems to share not only instructional content, but also teaching and learning experiences via the Internet;
- **Phone conferencing:** Conference calls to allow teachers to interact with multiple students simultaneously using the telephone;
- **Webinar support:** Web-based technology that allows teachers not only to interact with multiple students on a conference call, but also to simultaneously show students instructional tools such as literature passages or math solutions on a shared Internet site;
- **Online courses and virtual classrooms:** Electronic learning communities where students and teachers interact in real time using web-based tools;
- **Virtual server capacity:** Working with service providers to enable safe and redundant storage and delivery of larger amounts of instructional content using the Internet.

By reflecting on how existing tools may be used to develop effective distance learning strategies and accessing new resource opportunities, state and local education agencies as well as schools can work to sustain student attainment and achievement during prolonged absences or school dismissals.

Appendix A: Continuity of Teaching and Learning – Decision Table

Instructional delivery options	Considerations	Resource Opportunities and Examples**
<p>General planning to ensure continuity of teaching and learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are distribution plans in place to ensure student access to resources in the event of sudden absences or school dismissal? • Are contact information records for students, parents, guardians, and all staff (e-mail addresses, physical addresses, phone numbers, including mobile, etc.) on file, and do teachers have access to that information to check in with absent students regarding academic progress? Are policies regarding privacy and sharing of personal information in place and clear to all parties? • How can schools and districts leverage distance learning resources from other sources, including current vendors, community colleges and universities, and online sources of open content? • Are policies in place for awarding credit for courses in the event of sustained distance learning (e.g., credit without seat time, credit if 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ED’s Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center (accessible at http://rems.ed.gov) supports the development of high-quality school emergency operations plans (EOPs), building capacity in preparedness. The REMS TA Center provides training and technical assistance addressing school emergency management, including continuity planning and infectious disease control. • Los Angeles County Office of Education: Continuity of Instruction Resources: http://www.laschooltoolkit.com/gp_hh_5.html • Standards for online programs in schools: http://www.inacol.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/NACOL-Standards-Quality-Online-Programs.pdf

	<p>courses are taken online from a commercial provider or from another district)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are defined staffing plans in place to support distance learning in the event of small or large student or faculty absences? • Will staff be permitted to return to school to use school-based equipment and resources? 	
Hard copy packets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are adequate resources or agreements in place to support copying and distributing learning packets and materials for students to use at home for up to 12 weeks if necessary? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical instructional resources presented by the Federal Registry for Educational Excellence (FREE) including teaching and learning resources from dozens of federal agencies accessible at http://free.ed.gov

* All hyperlinks and URLs were accessed in November 2014.

** The tools and resources identified in this document are not intended as endorsements, and are merely offered as examples that you may take into account in your own continuity of learning planning efforts.