



Special Report

Virtual Learning—New Reality, New Opportunity

6 Best Practices to Better Support Teachers and Students
Through Digital Curriculum

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Virtual Learning—New Reality, New Opportunity

Prior to Spring 2020, many schools had some form of virtual learning in place—often as a short-term solution to school shutdowns caused by issues like inclement weather. Others offered virtual learning as an alternative learning program for select students.

But then the pandemic hit, schools closed for six or more months, and those short-term virtual learning plans had to become long-term solutions to see all students through the school year. And while this overnight transition from in-person to online instruction was challenging, it did create the opportunity for districts to test drive the virtual learning plans that, for the most part, were only on paper. Educators quickly learned what worked and where there were areas for improvement. While adjusting to all-virtual learning may have been a challenge, it also presented opportunities to approach instruction in a different way, especially when paired with a strong digital curriculum.

With virtual learning becoming more and more commonplace in today's schools, it's important to regularly evaluate and improve upon your plan to ensure that students continue to receive high-quality instruction and keep progressing toward academic goals. In this special report from Apex Learning, review steps you can take to continually evaluate and strengthen your virtual learning plan.

Virtual Learning Success Story

Read how Greenville ISD in Texas minimized learning loss through school closures with a strong virtual learning plan. [Read their story.](#)

The Value of Virtual Learning

Virtual learning is not the same as classroom instruction, but that does not make it inferior or less effective. When districts were forced to shift to virtual learning models during the 2020 pandemic, many teachers realized that students don't need to be in the school building to learn. And, in fact, virtual learning with digital curriculum afforded them opportunities that didn't exist within the walls of their physical classrooms.

As you look for ways to improve upon your virtual learning plan, your goal should not be to replicate the classroom experience via a video conferencing platform like Zoom. Instead, look for ways to maximize the benefits of digital curriculum to make virtual learning accessible and effective for all students, providing the structure of synchronous learning as well as the flexibility for students to choose their own time, place, path, and pace for learning.

5 Benefits to Virtual Learning

- **Student and Staff Safety:** In-school instruction may be a health risk for students who are immunocompromised or live with individuals who are at risk. The option to learn virtually is critical to providing these students with access to high-quality instruction in an environment that is safest for them.
- **Student Retention:** In the [Deloitte 2020 Back-to-School survey](#), two in three (66%) K-12 parents said they were anxious about sending their children back to school. Many parents may seek—and select—alternative options outside of the district if virtual learning isn't offered. With lower enrollment comes loss of critical funding.
- **Teacher Retention:** After the Spring 2020 school closures, many teachers reconsidered their professions. In a [survey of 1,200 educators conducted by Teachers Pay Teachers](#), 47% said they considered making a major job-related change, from retiring to leaving the classroom for a new career. Virtual learning allows teachers to continue teaching in an environment they're comfortable with. It also broadens the talent pool for hiring.
- **Minimize Budget Constraints:** It can cost quite a bit of money to make changes to buildings and classrooms to comply with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidelines for virus mitigation. Virtual learning can reduce these costs.
- **Innovate, Improve, and Expand Student Services:** Students with significant learning gaps can benefit from virtual learning in many ways. Digital curriculum can provide an individualized learning experience, allowing students to learn at their own pace and in their own way. Built-in scaffolds and supports make grade-level content more accessible. Virtual learning also allows districts to offer additional courses, like Advanced Placement (AP) and electives, that would not normally be available due to teacher shortages, budget constraints, or insufficient student demand.

Introduction: 6 Best Practices in Virtual Learning

#1: Build Buy-In

The success of a virtual learning program relies on buy-in and support from those delivering online instruction: teachers. It can be difficult for educators to embrace a different way of teaching. However, that transition can be a lot easier when teachers understand best practices for virtual learning and are given the resources, like a strong digital curriculum, to make virtual learning an enriching, engaging, and effective experience for students.

Help teachers understand the opportunities that digital curriculum creates for them and their students. Make virtual learning a priority in your professional development plan, offering teachers additional training to master the skills and strategies necessary for teaching students online. Workshops might revolve around best practices for using Zoom or Microsoft teams. Or professional learning communities could focus on sharing successes in accommodating students with disabilities or special learning needs.

The Apex Approach

Apex Learning offers professional development services to help build your teachers' skills and competencies in online instruction. Our experienced consultants bring two decades of virtual learning expertise and best practices to everything from planning to implementation to evaluation in order to ensure ongoing success. We can also provide targeted professional development on key online learning topics including:

- Data-driven online instruction and intervention
- Ensuring academic integrity in virtual learning environments
- Parent involvement

#2: Ensure That All Students Are Learning

One of the biggest challenges of virtual learning is knowing whether students are learning at the pace required to meet grade-level learning standards—or learning at all! Technology has created many opportunities in education, but it has also introduced many distractions. And when students are learning online, especially asynchronously, traditional attendance tracking can be a challenge.

As you work to improve upon your virtual learning plan, introduce ways teachers can track student progress toward learning goals. Even better, offer a solution that allows them to share that information out to key stakeholders, including parents, as a way to hold students accountable. Having this data can give everyone peace of mind that learning is happening and that students are progressing against standards.

22% of teachers said they didn't take attendance at all during distance learning classes in Spring 2020.

Source: [Educators for Excellence](#)

The Apex Approach

Apex Learning digital curriculum is designed to create transparency throughout the virtual learning experience. Even when they're separated from students by miles, teachers can see how students are progressing toward learning goals and track progress and performance against standards in real time.

Thanks to this data, teachers are able to implement individualized instruction quickly, giving students the targeted support they need exactly when they need it. They can fill skill gaps where needed, targeting the specific areas in which a student needs extra work and focus, and keep students moving forward in other areas.

#3: Build in Flexibility and Efficiency

One of the biggest benefits of virtual learning is that, for some families, it is the most convenient and accommodating option for receiving a high-quality education. Providing a fully virtual learning program can help ensure that families stay in your district if they are considering alternative education options.

Some of the best insights into the effectiveness of your virtual learning plan may come from the teachers and families who use it every day. Survey these stakeholders regularly to learn more about their experiences with virtual learning and where they see opportunities for improvement. From there, work to make the virtual learning experience as flexible and efficient as possible. This might involve everything from enhancing your digital curriculum to improving communication with families learning virtually.

The Apex Approach

Our digital curriculum flexes to meet your specific needs at any point throughout the school year. Whether you're working with a fully virtual, hybrid, or in-classroom learning model, Apex Learning transitions quickly and easily to eliminate downtime that could lead to learning loss.

Apex Learning digital curriculum is designed with virtual learning in mind and has built-in supports that allow students to continue learning independently when they lack direct access to teachers. For example, Apex Learning Courses:

- Include everything students need to be prepared for the next class, from direct instruction to practice to assessment.
- Offer support and scaffolds right when students need them.
- Engage and motivate students through active learning.
- Offer guiding feedback that goes beyond “correct” and “wrong” so students can learn from their practice.

#4: Strengthen Teacher-Student Relationships

A number of factors influence student achievement. However, numerous studies support the fact that among school-related factors, teachers have the biggest impact on student success. Positive teacher-student relationships can increase student engagement while decreasing issues of attendance, disruptive behaviors, or disengagement.

Virtual school may lack the day-to-day interaction that takes place in the classroom, but it is not impossible for teachers to create strong, open, and caring relationships with their students—relationships that help students achieve to their fullest potential. There are a number of simple steps teachers can take to strengthen their relationships with students, starting with:

- Creating weekly, one-on-one virtual video check-ins with students.
- Asking students and families for feedback about ways to improve the virtual learning experience.
- Establishing set “office hours” where students can call, text, video chat, or instant message teachers with questions and concerns.

Virtual Learning Success Story

[In this on-demand webinar](#), explore the innovative practices that Pueblo City Schools in Colorado employs to stay closely connected with students in their online and hybrid programs.

The Apex Approach

Students' social and emotional well-being has a significant impact on academic success. Students must feel safe and secure in order to learn to their full potential. Just as students' academic skills must be taught and nurtured, so must their social and emotional skills.

Apex Learning offers [Suite360™](#), a social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum for K-12 students, staff, and parents designed to help students manage emotions, improve decision making, and engage in learning. Carefully sequenced virtual lessons that are aligned with CASEL standards and relevant to today's students support character development, behavioral intervention and restorative practices, and mental health and well-being.

#5: Expand and Enhance Learning Opportunities

In the early days of implementing your virtual learning plan, you probably focused most on delivering core instruction to minimize learning loss. As your teachers and students get more experience working in online learning environments, think about ways to improve upon curriculum delivery. Consider:

- **Increasing Engagement:** Brainstorm ways to make virtual instruction more active. When learning is active, as opposed to passive pre-recorded video lectures, students stay engaged longer and are more motivated to work independently.
- **Increasing Differentiation:** Introduce scaffolded instruction and improve access to student data so teachers can see where students are in their learning and plan targeted interventions that address their specific needs and skill levels.
- **Increasing Course Options:** Beyond core curriculum, introduce options for AP, elective, and remedial courses for both high-achieving students and those who are struggling.

86% of teachers said student engagement was a somewhat to very serious obstacle to the effective implementation of virtual learning during the 2020 pandemic.

Source: [Educators for Excellence](#)

The Apex Approach

Passive instruction is problematic in any learning environment—but it is particularly detrimental to virtual learning. When learning online, students must be engaged in order to stay motivated to learn.

[Apex Learning Courses](#) personalize learning for every student, allowing them to learn in their own way and at their own pace. Every Course is designed with scaffolding that builds on prior knowledge and presents content in a way that supports individual learning styles to simultaneously build confidence and skills. Activities within the curriculum are rigorous yet engaging and include interactive tools that encourage students to “learn by doing.” Along with foundations and core subjects, Courses also include honors, AP, electives, and more to support every level of learner.

For students who are behind and need help getting back on grade level, [Apex Learning Tutorials](#) allow teachers to offer targeted remediation to fill learning gaps. Tutorials personalize learning for students struggling with specific skills by reteaching grade-level concepts and reinforcing those skills so that they’re strong before students move on to the next lesson. As students practice and master skills, teachers can check in on their work with real-time insight into their performance and progress toward content mastery.

#6: Find a Partner You Can Rely On

If you are struggling to improve your virtual learning plan, look for a partner that is responsive and has the expertise to help you quickly adjust your plan when needed. In addition, they should offer standards-aligned curriculum that delivers personalized learning and is backed by actionable data. Providers that offer digital curriculum must be willing to work with you to meet a common goal: Help students succeed and reach their full potential whether they're learning in school or at home.

When evaluating digital curriculum providers, follow these criteria from Jean Sharp, Chief Academic Officer for Apex Learning:



Jean Sharp
Chief Academic Officer

- Flexibility to deliver instruction virtually, at school, or in a hybrid environment.

"Digital learning providers must anticipate and respond to the changing needs of schools and support their continuity of learning plans in order for schools to quickly, reliably, and seamlessly adjust the delivery of instruction whenever school buildings need to be closed."

- Intentional design that mirrors exceptional instruction and pedagogy.

"Designing instruction that intentionally presents frequent checks for understanding, provides instructional supports and scaffolds that activate prior knowledge and help students make sense of text, and incorporates active learning strategies to ensure students are engaged with content is key."

- Built-in support and professional development to ensure digital curriculum meets program goals.

"Digital learning providers have been supporting teachers with successful transitions to online learning for years."

- Knowledge around best practices for virtual learning—and a willingness to share.

"Sharing what works helps schools scale digital learning for success."

Virtual Learning Story

When Big Rapids Public Schools in Michigan found that the quality and support from their digital curriculum provider was inadequate, they turned to Apex Learning. [Read their story.](#)

Virtual Learning Solutions and Support

For more and more districts, virtual learning has become the new reality—one that presents new opportunities. Apex has over two decades of experience providing virtual learning to thousands of districts and millions of students.

We can help you build a strong virtual learning plan that supports teachers and meets the needs of every student. We do so with a focus on three things essential to virtual learning:

- Flexibility to transition curriculum and instruction between all-virtual, on-campus, and hybrid learning environments as smoothly and as seamlessly as possible.
- Course options to support individual needs, whether that's for core courses or electives, or for students who are in special education or accelerated courses.
- Services and support to partner with you and guide you through best practices for virtual learning.

Contact Apex to learn more about support for virtual, hybrid, and in-classroom learning and to schedule a consultation.



where opportunity thrives™

An industry leader with deep expertise in digital curriculum, Apex Learning works closely with school districts across the country to implement proven solutions that increase on-time graduation rates and create opportunities for student success in school and beyond. The company is driven by the understanding that supporting the needs of all students—from struggling to accelerated—strengthens schools and creates stronger communities, brighter futures, and a more equitable world. Apex Learning is accredited by AdvancEd and its courses are approved for National Collegiate Athletic Association eligibility. Apex Learning, where opportunity thrives. For more information, visit <http://www.apexlearning.com>.

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