LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Meeting the COVID-19 Challenges to Literacy Instruction

A Focus on Equity-Centered Strategies

Educators at all levels around the world were forced to rethink schooling with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The increased potential for illness and loss of life of students and school personnel caused educators to make a rapid transition to remote learning. Currently, schools have attempted to accommodate families by providing remote, face-to-face, and/or hybrid options. In some large school districts, 50% of students in K–12 have been engaged in remote instruction. The impact of online instruction for students and the quality of work required of them has varied greatly, with glaring disparities across schools and their students. The most disparities have occurred between the poorest and wealthiest schools.

Decades of research have associated high incidence of economic disadvantage with lower achievement in schools worldwide, with evidence of long-standing inequities in policies, practices, learning opportunities, and resources impacting the performance of diverse students living in historically underserved areas. These inequities have become more sharply defined during the pandemic. Consistent with the International Literacy Association's (ILA) goal of equity in literacy instruction for all children, there remains a long-standing need to address the disparity of learning opportunities for our most vulnerable students.

The students who struggle in virtual learning environments are not unlike the students who struggle in all face-to-face classroom settings. They are not a homogeneous group; rather, they vary in understandings, skills, and strategies that they have developed and those they need to acquire to be successful in literacy. They are found across all grade levels in urban and rural communities, economically disadvantaged and more affluent school settings, and across all forms of diversity (e.g., socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, linguistic). A significant number of students who struggle with literacy are individuals whose learning challenges are exacerbated by racial and ethnic disparities in health care, inequities in access to digital tools, and limited home support for learning because of families and caregivers' inability to help them or to work remotely. In this brief, we identify five challenges students are facing and make recommendations for addressing these challenges.

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Limited or No Digital Access

Across school districts in the United States, the need for remote learning support continues, with some students engaged in virtual learning full time and others learning in hybrid formats. And although community partners and philanthropic donors continue to work with school districts to provide digital devices such as laptops, mobile Wi-Fi hotspots, and lower cost high-speed internet access, the need is greater than the supply. Reports have estimated that even with attempts to counter the inequities, at least 9 million students in the U.S. lack access to the internet.

In response, teachers early on went through cycles of preparing packets of materials including books that were delivered to neighborhood drop-off locations. Both families and teachers were dissatisfied because there was little guidance for completing the work and there were few attempts to differentiate expectations on the basis of students' performance. In addition, this practice is expensive, with indicators that schools cannot sustain this effort throughout a school year.

How Might We Meet This Challenge?

- Advance digital equity by advocating for increased government and philanthropic educational funding.
- Repurpose available funds to ensure that every student has at least one digital tool and high-speed Wi-Fi not only in homes where such access is unaffordable but also for students living in homeless shelters or emergency or transitional housing.
- Immerse students across the grades in multiple and continuous reading and writing opportunities.
- Collaborate with district partners and nonprofit and community organizations to support book drops in neighborhoods
- Ensure that books provided at distribution centers are selected both to support instructional goals and student interests and to make connections to students' diverse ethnic and linguistic histories.
- Place books in essential locations (e.g. grocery stores, laundromats, pharmacies, barbershops, beauty salons) that families frequent.
- Make connections to these resources as assignments are created and book talks are held (e.g., through phone calls).

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- Have remote learning teachers move to a few selected neighborhood sites for several hours two to three days a week, following pandemic-related guidelines, instead of broadcasting from their schools.
- Have school librarians choose a quiet area in a laundromat or similar community locations to meet with families and their young children to demonstrate read-aloud activities or writing activities that can be completed at home, following pandemic guidelines.

Transitions to Teaching and Learning Remotely

Educators and students face multiple challenges as they make the transition to new forms of instruction. Educators must simultaneously manage the newly learned systems that are often complicated and multifaceted and address instructional goals and plans.

Similarly, students are facing requirements that are new and may be difficult to navigate. Some students and their families may not have developed the minimal skills required to succeed within online learning environments. Expectations are high for succeeding as independent learners who can manage their time and their assignments, absent from the classroom where there is teacher guidance and support. Distractions are common not only during independent learning times but also when group lessons are long and focused heavily on teacher talk.

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How Might We Meet This Challenge?

- Partner with colleagues to practice and advance knowledge and comfort with new forms of digital instruction.
- Verify that students can use the digital tools provided for them (e.g., calls with students and the families and caregivers of young learners, encouraging home support when possible).
- Establish consistent blocks of instructional time (e.g., whole-group and small-group weekly instruction, biweekly individual conferences) and time management strategies for completing independent work.

- Collaborate with other teachers to provide the greatest resources and instructional time for those with the greatest needs (e.g., one-to-one online instruction, after-school in-person tutoring, student-directed projects, strategies for time management).
- Avoid worrying about what students might have missed when schools were closed or the temptation to reduce instruction to a skill-only emphasis; instead, stay the course with a balanced and comprehensive approach to support students' literacy development.
- Draw attention to the advantages of digital learning, emphasizing enrichment instead of remediation, instead of playing catch up.
- Implement a broad array of participatory structures (e.g., live video chats or think-pair-share activities within breakout rooms on online meeting platforms) to enrich student learning while inviting interest and engagement.
- Advance student knowledge and participation with multimodal text genres (video/digital expository and narrative texts) and modes of presenting reactions and understandings (e.g., drawings, diary entries, student-generated short videos produced on mobile phones or computers).
- Engage young students in interactive read alouds on Zoom and provide additional read-aloud materials (e.g., video/audio recordings, high quality televised read aloud programs) followed by student phone calls.
- Preview and recommend selected televised and/or online informational programs for older students, providing access to content that is conceptually relevant to the school curriculum and instructional goals.
- Schedule follow-up phone calls, online chat groups, and online small-group instruction forums to engage students' use of personal knowledge, strategic thinking, and text comprehension.

Engaging Anxious and Disinterested Students

The pandemic increased many students' feelings of isolation during virtual or remote and hybrid learning formats. When returning to school, many students may sense a loss of connection

with peers and teachers. Especially with remote and hybrid learning formats, instruction has shifted primarily to a transmission model, limiting students' active role in learning.

Student engagement is linked exponentially to student progress. Lack of engagement is associated with poor performance and may ultimately lead to students dropping out of school. Engagement must be cognitive through both the instruction teachers provide and the opportunities available for student collaboration. Promoting student engagement is fundamental to ensuring that all students have the right to read.

How Might We Meet This Challenge?

- Provide instruction that addresses students' strengths and needs.
- Conduct student and family interviews to determine reasons for student disengagement.
- Use formative assessments such as interest inventories, reading attitude surveys, and face-to-face or virtual conferences to reengage students and assess ongoing work.
- Provide instruction that involves knowledge building and collaborative student inquiry.
- Engage students in project-based learning centered on community issues associated with COVID-19 or issues of social justice.
- Use polling and commenting tools to gauge students' thinking prior to small-group work, discussions, and writing.
- Encourage students to develop multimodal texts (e.g., drawings, arts and crafts projects, character analyses charts, digital texts) to demonstrate what they are learning.
- Set aside time for daily independent reading of texts that correspond to students' interests, questions about the world around them, and heroes and heroines who have persevered in difficult times.
- Support independent and teacher-facilitated writing to provide students with agency and a way to address their social and emotional needs.

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Focus on Culturally Responsive Teaching

Implementing culturally responsive teaching during the pandemic was not as easily accomplished as envisioned. Access to printed multicultural materials relevant to the lives and experiences of the students, their families, and communities was impacted negatively by several factors including students' difficulties in accessing school online book portals and the closure of public libraries. Teachers' expectations for gains in learning by students in the most vulnerable economic and social circumstances were influenced by concerns related to lack of access to learning tools and limited teacher scaffolding and support. The potential discrepancies between the literacy demands of schools in finding time to read aloud to their students, monitor students' work, and complete homework assignments and those health issues associated with COVID-19 within families and communities were perceived as potential obstacles to virtual instruction.

How Might We Meet This Challenge?

- Seek multiple opportunities to learn about not only students' cultural backgrounds and social-emotional needs but also the challenges and traumas (e.g., health risks, school closures, economic losses) faced by students and their families because of COVID-19.
- Incorporate print, digital, and/or audio resources and materials into the curriculum that focus on issues that students and their families face.
- Encourage students to develop and share information about their lives through personal narratives and multimedia projects.
- Work with community agencies in underresourced areas to provide multicultural books to students through the use of bookmobiles or book drops.
- Promote students' agency by providing them with opportunities to create identity texts that communicate their intelligence and language talents.
- Use multiple genres of culturally relevant texts to focus on issues of social justice that have become increasingly more pronounced during the time of COVID-19.

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- Include cultural referents such as pieces of art, video clips, and/or musical selections along with informational texts in print and digital formats in instruction.
- Engage students in critical reading discussions and writing opportunities in response to authentic local, national, and global issues.
- Partner with families and caregivers and community leaders to develop multilingual and multicultural neighborhood stories (as told via drawings, writings, songs, etc.) that hold shared meanings for students (e.g., important celebrations, historical events) and build upon their funds of knowledge.

Inequitable Opportunities to Promote Student and Family Relationships

We have learned from decades of research that teachers' relationships with students and their families are strongly linked to students' sense of belonging and positive beliefs about their competence to succeed in school. Positive teacher–student and family relationships are essential to students' academic success and social-emotional growth and development. Yet teachers report that their greatest concern is an inability to maintain these relationships within hybrid or remote learning contexts.

Maintaining these relationships is especially challenging within economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in which both financial and time constraints have been magnified during the pandemic. Families and caregivers may be working from home and have time limitations around supporting their children's learning. Some families, unable to pay their phone bills, may have lost that contact with schools. Others may be moving in with relatives to offset financial struggles or may be moving to shelters where access may be nonexistent or inconsistent. Older students may be taking care of siblings while parents work or may be taking on part-time jobs to help defray the families' financial difficulties. Times when students and families are available for teacher calls may vary greatly across any day.

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How Might We Meet This Challenge?

- Initiate two-way conversations with students and their families, asking them how they are coping with changes.

- Maintain frequent contacts with students who are learning remotely and their families (e.g., with daily morning check-ins, sending messages and greetings via phone calls or video platforms, sending notes through the mail system with stamped envelopes for return mail).

- Display caring in all possible ways by building and maintaining successful teacher–student and family relationships while promoting student achievement (e.g., invite participation of students and their families, conveying respect and a desire to learn about them, their communities, and their lives out of school).

- Invite family members to collaborate with you in planning and implementing selected lessons (e.g., a relative demonstrating a science experiment, bilingual parents reading texts in languages other than English).

- Use what is learned about students and their families within instruction (e.g., banners on the screen with interests associated with students, explicit connections between students' histories and histories when discussing texts, inviting students' choice of topics and questions to pursue when making assignments).

- Offer support for the well-being of the family, as needed, by making connections to locations where social services are available and may include access to book programs, school supplies, or food donations and meals that are being served in the community.

- Connect to school liaisons or neighborhood community leaders to provide support for bilingual families or families expressing additional needs, such as counseling and health needs.

- Call on neighborhood leaders or school liaisons to canvass neighborhoods to locate students and families when phone contacts or online sessions are not successful.

Invite family members to collaborate with you in planning and implementing selected lessons.

We Cannot Fail Our Students

A common mantra during the pandemic is "We are all in this together." The "new normal," however, is not serving the needs of a significant portion of our students; instead, it is rooted in inequities that are the same as the old normal. We can and must do more to eliminate inequities in literacy instruction. Let this be our collective call to action in pursuit of equity for the students who need us the most.

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The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 128 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit **literacyworldwide.org**.

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