



Distance Learning Survival Guide

kajeet[®]

Tips for educators as they tackle both virtual learning and blended learning initiatives for the 2020-21 school year.

Table of Contents

Page 3	Set Reasonable Expectations
Page 4	Establish a Routine
Page 5	Encourage Students to Create a Learning Space
Page 6	Manage LTE Data Usage
Page 7	Do a Test-Run of New Apps and Websites
Page 8	Address CyberAwareness and CyberSecurity
Page 9	Make Screen Time Count
Page 11	Think of Unique Ways to Keep Students Motivated
Page 12	Prioritize Independent Student Assignments
Page 13	Lean on Other Educators
Page 14	Practice (and Preach) Self-Care
Page 16	Conclusion
Page 17	Resources

Intro

In the second half of the 2019-2020 school year, educators quickly realized that distance learning is [quite different](#) from classroom or face-to-face instruction. Without a teacher providing guidance in a classroom setting, many students might struggle to begin their work, stay on task, or get the pointed help that they need along the way. Distance learning can be even more challenging for those who need additional attention and resources, such as [students with disabilities](#) or ELL students.

These typical challenges notwithstanding, online distance learning does offer some [opportunities for enhanced learning](#). In addition to enabling a continuity in education at home, [research](#) has shown that the anonymity of distance learning can lead to better student participation. Students learning online can also follow [individualized learning styles](#) and paths, which can increase student engagement.

Success with distance learning means equipping students with Internet access and mobile devices, and training teachers on conducting lessons in virtual environments. Equally important is supporting parents with the right resources and tools.

In this guide, we will provide some tips for educators as they tackle distance learning and blended learning initiatives for the 2020-2021 school year.

1

Set Reasonable Expectations

It's tempting to expect distance learning to mimic traditional learning—and to get frustrated when it doesn't. The reality is that distance learning comes with a unique set of variables that can affect each student differently. The best strategy is to adjust your expectations about what can be managed during this period, especially if you or your students are new to learning remotely.

It's not just expectations about how much of the curriculum can be covered during an extended period of distance learning that need adjusting; it's also expectations about student participation, motivation, and accomplishment.

Many students—especially those who have never been homeschooled—will need time to adjust to completing all their schoolwork at home. Some may miss interacting with their peers in person, while others may welcome the opportunity to work independently and without the typical distractions of a classroom.



Schools, on their part, may need to manage expectations when it [comes to grading](#).

Talk through your expectations with students and parents when starting out with distance learning and find out about theirs. The earlier the conversation happens, the less likely there will be for misunderstandings and frustrations down the road.

2 Establish a Routine

It might feel easier to simply take things as they come during periods of distance learning, after all — it might be a new adventure and you're often learning as you go. But just like the structure provided in the classroom, having a structure around your entire day or even your lessons — and encouraging parents to put structures in place for their children — is critical to your success and that of your students.

Routines give children a sense of comfort and control, which is important in helping them deal with the disruption to their usual daily patterns. They also offer similar benefits to educators.



Photo by Julia M Cameron from Pexels

A proper routine can help you maintain a clear boundary between work time and personal time. A good way to bring more predictability to your days is by finding the right personal balance between synchronous (occurring in real time) and asynchronous (occurring without real-time interaction) learning.

Although synchronous delivery might be great for facilitating social connections among peers, delivering instructions asynchronously can help you manage your time better by minimizing student disruptions and classroom management challenges that can surface in a virtual environment. It can also give your students more flexibility around when to access lessons.

When advising parents and students on establishing routines, remember that any schedule they create should include times for instruction, breaks, meals, and leisure activities.

3 Encourage Students to Create a Learning Space

A dedicated learning space will help students further differentiate between school and non-school time, as well as manage any anxiety they may be feeling about being absent from their usual school environment. It will also help children concentrate on schoolwork and have all their supplies ready for use during study times.



Encourage students, with the help of their parents, to create usable workspaces around dining tables, in kitchens, family rooms, kids' bedrooms, or anywhere else in the house that's quiet and can accommodate a comfortable writing surface and chair.

There's a lot more to creating a learning space than simply making room, however.

Here are some tips from [Waterford.org](https://www.waterford.org) and [Global Educator Institute](https://www.global-educator-institute.com) when it comes to creating a learning space at home for students:

- 1. Lighting:** Studies find that more natural light (or lighting that mimicked natural sunlight), the greater the students' school attendance, achievement, and overall health.
- 2. Supplies:** The space should have all of the tools needed for learning easily accessible - such as chargers, writing utensils, and notebooks.
- 3. Personalization:** When students help to create their own learning space it makes them more likely to use it and care for it. The space should play into their interests and encourage them to learn and stay motivated.

4 Manage LTE Data Usage

Data usage is bound to skyrocket during distance learning, when students complete most of or all their schoolwork virtually.

Kajeet's [previous study of data usage](#) from tens of thousands of students across more than 375 school districts in 41 states, including Washington, D.C, showed that an average usage of 1.57 GB per student per month on its Education Broadband™ program.



When schools transitioned to distance learning in March 2020, average data usage increased. On average, we found that students using filtered Kajeet devices used about 2GB of data monthly for distance learning.

However, depending on the type of instruction students are engaging with, students' data needs will fluctuate. Data pooling is the most efficient and effective way to manage students' LTE consumption.

Here are some suggestions to keep data usage more manageable for students using LTE devices at home to access their distance learning materials:

- 1. Record Lessons:** Streaming videos live eats up a ton of data. Try recording lessons and have students watch them later.
- 2. Keep File Sizes Small:** Since distance learning relies heavily on videos and robust content, it is important to keep file sizes low.
- 3. Use Web Filters:** Only allow access to educational sites and blocks access to sites and apps that require a lot of data, such as Netflix and Spotify.
- 4. Pool and Share Data:** Get a data plan that allows data from all devices to be pooled and shared. Students using higher amounts of data can utilize unused data from students using lower amounts of data.

5

Do a Test-Run of New Apps and Websites

New apps and technologies are wonderful, but don't start using one without trying it out first. For one, glitches happen all the time. Plus, it may not quite work the way you envisioned. Taking a new technology for a test run allows you to reuse it if it works or ditch it if it doesn't.

Thankfully, many ed tech companies allow for free or limited time access when you can try out the app or website and see how it can fit within your curriculum. Trying out a tech tool, especially with a small number of students, is a useful way to learn what students are drawn to and what they do not like. Your students may also be able to suggest ways for you to deploy the app better.

While new technology is exciting, you'll want to introduce them carefully to make sure that the time, money, storage, data, and other costs associated with their use are well worth the investment. Tools such as [CatchOn](#) can provide valuable insights into all of the apps that are downloaded on school-issued devices. Seeing which apps are being used, which are not being used, and which are being used without district approval can ensure you are keeping students and staff safe, while keeping costs low.



6

Address Cyber Awareness and Cyber Security

Now is a good time to make sure that you and your students know and practice good cyber habits. Not only will it boost your security online, it'll make the distance learning experience more pleasant for everyone.

One of the best ways to begin your e-learning program is by putting your students through a digital citizenship course. [Commonsense.org](https://www.common Sense.org) explains digital citizenship, one of the key attributes of cyber awareness, as the safe and responsible use of technology, while the [NEO blog](#) outlines 9 elements to digital citizenship, including digital access, digital literacy, digital etiquette, and digital security.

Keeping students safe online is even more important while they're distance learning. For one, they're online for much longer periods during the day when you combine the time spent on school activities with time spent on entertainment and connection. As a result, they're more exposed to unsafe content and online predators looking to take advantage of any vulnerabilities in their environment or network.

Cyber security is a broad topic that needs to be taken up at the district level, with education-specific technologies and the right training for educators to prevent cyber threats and attacks in their many forms.

Student Data Privacy

Federal laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), and the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) were all created to protect children. Each of these laws have various provisions pertaining to student records or student online activities that schools should abide by, even when activities they mandate occur outside school buildings.

In sum, schools should be aware of—and inform parents about—how new technologies they use are collecting and using student data.

7

Make Screen Time Count

Screen time guidelines were initially developed in the 1990s to help parents regulate the amount of time their children spent watching television. Since then, exposures to screens via tablets, desktops, mobile devices, gaming systems, and smartphones have increased sharply, making guidelines on screen time even more important to parents.

With the rise of virtual learning, parents' anxieties about their children's exposure to screens have only increased. Much of this is also because children learning remotely rely on screens for schoolwork as well as for entertainment and connecting with family and friends, thus increasing the length of time they spend looking at screens overall.

The American Pediatrics Association has relaxed its screen time guidelines, urging parents to care more that their children are getting enough sleep and connecting with others than about how much time they are spending on screens. That perspective is not necessarily new: the Academy's post on [media tips for children](#), published in 2018, gives guidance on managing screen time for children in ways that enhance their overall development.



Here are some ways to help make sure that students spend quality time on screens:

Don't assume that more apps and online activities mean more learning is taking place. Bombarding children with apps or increasing the length of time spent online will not necessarily improve their learning. Take the time to make sure that the online resources you use and offer to students are educational and highly impactful.

Another way to make screen time count is to make provision for students to do without it for certain periods during a lesson, or to supplement their work on screen with periods of writing on paper, to give their eyes a break.

Incorporating a variety of activities and assignments into your daily lessons can also help balance screen time. Such activities can include:



Independent Reading

Pick a new book or re-read a favorite.



Explore New Interests

Learn a new skill, language, game, instrument, or recipe.



Exercise

Get moving, get some fresh air — most importantly take a break from the screen.



Create

Draw a picture, write a short story, build with Legos, or make a video.

Limiting screen time is not just beneficial for students but for educators and parents as well. For educators, teaching via live video while gauging student engagement, answering questions, and managing technical difficulties can be a lot to juggle. Pre-recorded videos and assignments delivered asynchronously can be just as effective for students.

Some schools have chosen to distribute printed packets, which are not just useful for families without Internet access. Even in an ideal distance learning scenario, writing and printed materials still have a role to play in helping to reinforce concepts and advance learning.

8

Think of Unique Ways to Keep Students Motivated

Distance learning, especially online, opens up new possibilities for creativity, which can also be important in keeping students engaged. One way to excite students is to have them play games. Whether it's a fun activity to kick off a lesson or a challenge that pits teams against each other, it doesn't take much to convince children to take time out for play.



Photo by Julia M Cameron from Pexels

Online learning is also a fantastic backdrop for [gamification](#), an educational approach that motivates students by infusing game elements in learning environments.

Introduce gamification through a quiz on [Kahoot](#) or place “tokens” students can collect as they complete their lessons.

Another great way to keep students engaged is to offer a reward when they finish an assignment or reach a milestone. [This blog](#) identifies small, accessible, but fun rewards that teachers or parents can give students, such as creating their own online stickers which students can earn, letting them play a round of an online game, or simply playing tic-tac-toe together as a break from the lesson.

On the [non-digital side of things](#), now is a good time to incorporate elements of life skills such as cooking, cleaning, and gardening into your lessons.

9

Prioritize Independent Student Assignments

While school provides structure and helps them channel their energies into preassigned tasks, learning outside of a typical school environment may enable a return to a less structured form of exploration.

From picking up objects around the house that could inspire a study of colors and textures, to projects that uncover how and where things are made, exploring could yield a lot of potential research projects. Creating assignments around TV or news shows is another way to encourage students to develop an assignment around a topic of their choosing.

Older students can delve deeper into their passions or try to find new ones. They could also focus on assignments that have real-world implications, or find out more about potential career paths. Whatever type of assignments you choose, guiding students as they explore different passions may be a worthwhile way to boost their engagement during online learning.



“To effectively manage your time and sanity, you will want to prioritize longer, student-driven assignments and tasks that buy you time to keep planning future units—and that get your students off the computer. Focus on building toward long-term projects where students have autonomy and a clear set of checkpoints and deadlines that need to be met.”

Kareem Farah, Edutopia

10

Lean on Other Educators

No one understands the rigors of remote teaching like [other educators](#). While everyone's circumstance is different, your fellow educators will be all too familiar with the high and lows of adapting to distance learning. They could point you to the right resources, reducing the time you spend reinventing the wheel or coming up with a novel solution to a common problem. Don't be afraid to reach out to others in your district, neighboring districts, and beyond.



Maybe you attended a webinar where a district leader spoke about their program and you wanted to learn more. Or, you read a story in your local newspaper about a school district's distance learning plan and you had some additional questions. Connect with these educators on LinkedIn or reach out via email.

You can also consider forming or joining virtual support groups with educators and parents from your local communities, or join a group online. You can also follow educators online via blogs or social media.

Here are a few of our favorite educator blogs:

[The Innovative Educator](#): Lisa Nielsen writes for and speaks to audiences across the globe about the future of education, but she is best known for her award-winning blog.

[The Ed Tech Round Up](#): Dr. Michael Karlin discusses the challenges of technology integration. You'll find technology news, reviews, lessons, app ideas, and more.

[The Techie Teacher](#): Julie Smith, a former elementary school and instructional technology resource teacher, shares fun and engaging ideas for implementing ed tech.

11

Practice (and Preach) Self-Care

You may find that [maintaining certain self-care practices](#) are a must for you and your students during distance learning, especially if it's taking place under socially challenging circumstances.

The first practice to emphasize is exercise. You may be able to include even a little physical activity at the start or end of your lesson to vary the tempo a bit and give your students a welcome change of pace. When you can, encourage parents to find ways of incorporating physical activity into the day to give students time away from screens.

Next, think of ways to protect the students in your virtual classroom from digital eye strain. Increased exposure to screens from television, mobile devices, electronic game, computers, and smart phones puts everyone at greater risk for developing digital eye strains. Here are some tips for [creating an “eye-friendly” virtual classroom](#), according to Connection Academy.

Social Emotional Learning

[Social and emotional learning \(SEL\) strategies](#) should form an integral part of any curriculum. CASEL has put together a comprehensive guide featuring [practical SEL strategies](#) for educators.



Here is a quick preview of some SEL activities that can be incorporated into lesson plans:

1. Open each class with a welcoming inclusion activity, routine, or ritual that builds community and connects to the work ahead.
2. Embed engaging strategies, including brain breaks to anchor thinking and learning, throughout the lesson.
3. Ensure every experience has a positive closing activity, such as reflecting on the lesson or identifying next steps.

Distance Learning in Difficult Times

Distance learning during times of upheaval can be especially traumatizing for students, who often miss the social connections their schools provide. Look for ways to infuse SEL strategies into your lessons by giving students time to reflect on their emotions and providing empathy and support whenever possible.

Here are a few tips from [EdSurge](#):

- Create a space for students to share their emotions, ideally as part of a consistent routine. We've seen a [quick daily check-in](#) work well; other ideas include regular journaling, video reflections, or live check-ins via phone or video.
- Pay attention to student responses and the tone of written work. Look for trends and shifts, and provide timely feedback to make sure students don't get lost due to a time lag.
- Identify students who are entirely disengaged and creatively communicate with them or their caretakers to better understand their situation. Instead of focusing on truancy or academic work, consider checking in with them on their emotional well-being to start. [Here are prompts to try.](#)
- Check out one of the many free resources available to engage students in SEL practices. We especially like the guides from the [National Association of School Psychologists](#), [CASEL](#), and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Mental Health

Whatever the reason for distance learning, it's important to make sure that children are coping well without the social support of their peers in a school environment. If necessary, have discussions about mental health with distance learners and keep an eye out for signs of stress or mental fatigue.

Signs of stress in children and teens do vary, even among those in the same household. According to the CDC, a young child under stress might exhibit signs such as excessive crying or irritation, while an older child or teen might "act out" or have difficulty with attention or concentration. The CDC lists other signs of stress to watch for in children and teens as well as ways to cope as a family, which include taking breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, and making time for activities you enjoy.

In Conclusion

For educators who work predominantly in the classroom, distance learning is an opportunity to approach teaching from a different perspective.

Whether you're new to distance learning or experienced in teaching students remotely, it is helpful to think about what works for you and your students and what doesn't. Compile your lessons learned and be ready to share them with a wider audience in your school or elsewhere, as your experiences could help inform the next cycle of your school's distance learning plan.

As you make your notes, keep in mind that the context surrounding distance learning will require different coping strategies. Distance learning for a student during a prolonged hospitalization will be different from distance learning during snow days, for instance. For this reason, it's a good idea to stay encouraged and prioritize actions that will increase the chances of success for you and your students.



Resources



This collection of distance learning resources from Common Sense Media, National PTA, and more helps parents and educators be 'learning superheroes' as they support students who are learning at home.



Offers in-depth, interactive learning resources for students in upper elementary and middle school. There's also a K-3 version, as well as versions in French and Spanish.



CASEL's resource page contains guidelines for educators, parents, and caregivers to support social and emotional learning for children.



ClassDojo

Communicate with your students and their families using this free classroom platform. They are also offering materials and resources specific to distance learning.



This virtual learning platform provides editable activities and resources for K-12, based on core curriculum concepts in math, science, ELA, social studies, health, and coding.



Offers free, printable worksheets that educators and parents can use for distance learning. Worksheets span different subject areas and grade levels.

edutopia

A wealth of info for educators, the articles on the site are organized by topic that include online learning and technology integration.



Launched by Facebook in partnership with UNESCO IITE, and ISTE, it provides digital literacy lessons and resources for youth, parents, and educators.

Kahoot!

Kahoot! is an online platform for creating, sharing and playing learning games or trivia quizzes in minutes.



Khan Academy

This excellent online platform offers free, dynamic instructional videos for nearly every grade level and subject area.



Members of this group are educators who contribute content, share ideas, get educated on the latest in ed news, including remote learning.



A free collection of the best online learning experiences for kids curated by the editors at Common Sense.