

Promising Practices for Addressing Common Challenges:

Remote Instruction Practices

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) launched a national survey in late January 2021 to gather insights on public school district experiences in the 2020–21 school year, including how districts continued to adapt to the persistent and evolving challenges of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May and June 2021, AIR interviewed a sample of leaders in districts that responded to the survey to learn more about the challenges and promising practices they described in their survey responses, with a focus on innovative practices from which other districts can learn or that they can replicate in their own context. This brief summarizes findings related to student engagement and instruction from these interviews with district leaders. For more findings, check out the project web page at <https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-educations-response-covid-19>.

In 2020–21, many districts had to decide how they would deliver instruction remotely. This brief includes profiles of the challenges and promising practices related to **remote instruction practices** for four districts across the United States:

- Cascade School District, Washington
- J. O. Combs Unified School District, Arizona
- Concho Elementary School District No. 6, Arizona
- Newport School District, Arkansas



Washington



Town



Medium Size



Medium Poverty



Hybrid

Cascade School District

Redefining Student Engagement

The Challenge

Most secondary students in Cascade School District had remote instruction at the beginning of the 2020–21 school year, with schools offering in-person instruction for small groups of students who were struggling academically or who had special needs. Staff began connecting with secondary students more systematically to ensure they were prepared to learn remotely, including delivering devices and conducting home visits. After several weeks of this increased outreach, staff noticed that a subset of secondary students—particularly those who previously had been active in athletics or other extracurricular activities—were showing low engagement in class. Staff also learned more about the social-emotional distress these students were experiencing. According to Superintendent Tracey Beckendorf-Edou, “By actually going into the homes and talking to kids and finding out what was going on in their lives, we could really tell just how that sense of isolation was impacting some of our students.” Cascade School District started hybrid instruction, a blend of in-person and remote instruction, in October 2021.

Promising Practices

Cascade School District made a few small changes to ensure they were supporting all students who were learning remotely. Staff made a pledge to “interact with every child, every day” and redefined attendance during remote instruction, requiring two-way communication with students rather than just logging in. Staff also started allowing students with low engagement to have in-person instruction in small groups; staff shared that this dramatically increased these students’ engagement in school. The district also offered support to help close learning gaps that may have occurred when students were disengaged in the previous semester. According to Dr. Beckendorf-Edou, “We really, really learned how [much] it mattered to have in-person connections during the pandemic.”



Arizona



Suburban



Medium Size



Low Poverty



Hybrid

J. O. Combs Unified School District

Providing Instructional Continuity Through Remote Teaching Platforms

The Challenge

J. O. Combs Unified School District had challenges with student attrition during the 2020–21 school year. Many students—especially new kindergarten students and at-risk students—who had elected to attend remotely disappeared. For example, Superintendent Gregory Wyman shared that many older, at-risk students who chose remote instruction “just refused to engage, refused to turn in assignments, no matter how many times we reached out to them.” Staff knew they needed to ensure that remote instruction was as effective and engaging as possible for those who chose that option.

Promising Practices

In the summer of 2020, staff focused on developing a system that would allow teachers to use the same lessons for both in-person and remote students. Staff also wanted to ensure that teachers would not have an increased workload in attempting to teach students both in person and remotely. As a result, the district began using a remote teaching platform that enabled teachers to teach live lessons for students both in person and remotely, and then save lessons and materials for students to access asynchronously later. This system also allowed students who transitioned between in-person and remote instruction mid-semester to have continuity in their teacher, classroom, and learning overall. The district also began using learning management systems across all grade levels, which helped strengthen remote instruction and better inform families at home. According to Superintendent Wyman, “Our parents can see, ‘This is what my child’s learning in school. This is wonderful.’”



Arizona



Rural



Small Size



High Poverty



Primarily In Person

Concho Elementary School District No. 6

Providing Low-Tech Remote Instruction

The Challenge

As a small rural district, Concho Elementary School District No. 6 anticipated that remote learning would be a challenge for many of their students and families in spring 2020 and would continue to be a challenge for those learning remotely during the 2020–21 school year. Many families in the community had neither internet access at home nor the devices needed for remote learning.

Promising Practices

At the start of the pandemic, Concho Elementary staff first ensured that all students had access to laptops, even if they did not have internet access. Next, staff developed a process that allowed students to participate in remote instruction without internet access. Every Monday, buses delivered flash drives and paper packets to students’ homes; every Friday, buses returned to pick up the completed packets and the flash drives to be reloaded with new lessons. The district increased paraprofessionals’ staffing time so they could ride with the bus driver, complete the deliveries and pickups, and be available to talk with families or students if needed. The district also set up a “homework hotline” through which families and students could ask teachers questions, either live or through recorded messages. According to Superintendent David Embrey, parents would call to ask questions such as, “I don’t know how to help my student understand this concept. Can you help me understand how to teach them?” Because the district was able to find creative ways to offer remote instruction, they were also able to bring special education students (who make up about 25% of their student population) into schools for in-person instruction, interventions, and therapies that would have been challenging and/or ineffective to provide remotely.



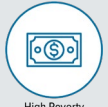
Arkansas



Rural



Medium Size



High Poverty



Primarily In Person

Newport School District

Incentivizing Engagement Through Extracurriculars

The Challenge

Newport School District anticipated that student engagement might be a challenge during remote instruction; therefore, the district worked hard over summer 2020 to develop a remote instruction plan. This plan included gathering parent and student feedback before finalizing decisions and allowing families to choose whether to go remote or stay in person. The district also created a handbook that outlined everything staff, parents, and students needed to know about virtual instruction in one place. During the first semester, staff noticed that many of the students who were struggling with remote instruction (e.g., making lower grades than usual) were those who were passionate about athletics or other extracurricular activities. Staff realized that these struggling students were in need of increased engagement and support.

Promising Practices

Newport School District focused on providing additional supports and maintaining high expectations of students involved in athletics and extracurricular activities. The district created an athletic advisory system modeled after college programs, in which academic advisors tracked student athletes' grades, provided struggling student athletes with tutoring, and blocked students from participating in athletics if they did not improve their grades over the school year. The local school board also passed a policy requiring any remote students who were earning below a "C" in the first semester of 2020–21 to return to in-person learning during the second semester. Newport School District chose to use the athletic advisory approach because they wanted to use athletic participation as an incentive to do well in school, whether the student was learning remotely or in person; also, they wanted to ensure that their student athletes were prepared for postsecondary expectations. According to Superintendent Brett Bunch, "It's tough because parents look at you and say, 'Well, my child, he could go play in college.' Well, no, he can't if he doesn't have the grades."

So far, the athletic advisory system has been effective: Most students who previously had been struggling improved their grades and increased their engagement with the support of the athletic advisory system. In addition, all 12th-grade students in the district successfully graduated at the end of the year. In the 2020–21 school year, only 11th- and 12th-grade students participated in the athletic advisory system, but Newport School District plans to eventually expand the program to 9th- and 10th-grade students across all extracurricular activities (not just athletics).

For more information on the Public Education's Response to COVID-19 project findings and publications, please visit the project web page at <https://www.air.org/project/national-survey-public-educations-response-covid-19>.

Demographic Icon Definitions

Geographic Region. Based on regional divisions determined by the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.).

Locale. Based on four locale categories (city, suburb, town, and rural) determined by the U.S. Department of Education (2019).

Size. Based on district enrollment data provided by the U.S. Department of Education (2019). Small = < 1,000 students; Medium = 1,000 to < 10,000 students; Large = 10,000 or more students.

Poverty. Based on child poverty data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau (2019). Low = < 10% of children; Medium = 10% to < 20% of children; High = 20% or more of children.



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