

# Minnesota Distance Learning Plans By the Numbers

To understand how Minnesota schools managed the shift to distance learning, EdAllies analyzed the distance learning plans of 61 Minnesota districts and 30 charter schools—honing in on those with the largest low-income student populations. We found promising innovations in some districts, but insufficient student support in others—highlighting the need for growth before any form of distance or hybrid learning resumes in the fall. We hope our findings help families, policymakers, students, and educators to get a better understanding of how Minnesota schools are:

- Meeting the needs of students with special needs and English Learners;
- Ensuring internet and device access;
- Building and maintaining relationships with students;
- Providing continuity and rigor in learning;
- Supporting social-emotional needs and mental health; and more.

## TRANSPARENCY & FAMILY SUPPORT

All of the schools and districts we analyzed had a distance learning plan posted on their website. Of those, 60% offered family resources—like how-to videos, FAQs, checklists, phone calls—to help them transition to and implement distance learning in their home. However, only 24% of plans were translated into languages other than English, which creates accessibility barriers for families whose first language is not English.

## INTERNET & DEVICE ACCESS

In Minnesota, 17% of students—particularly low-income and rural—did not have access to the internet when COVID-19 hit. Large numbers of students either do not have a device or live in a household that doesn't have enough devices for all of their children. Despite limited funding support and the recent CARES Act distributions, districts have worked to close these gaps. Overall, 44% of districts aimed to ensure access to a device like an iPad or Chromebook for all students, and 18% sought to ensure this for some grade bands.

With regard to helping families secure internet access, 13% of plans indicated they would help families secure a hotspot, and 41% provided a list of free or affordable internet options for families.

About a fourth of the plans did not address internet or device access at all, with some districts lacking online plans altogether, instead relying on packets and other resources. Going into the new school year, ensuring access to devices, internet, and some level of online instruction and programming will be critical.

## STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS & ENGLISH LEARNERS

It's important for distance learning plans to address the unique barriers facing students with special needs and English Learners (ELs) during distance learning. This was a strong point of the plans, with 84% explaining how they would meet the needs of their students with special needs, and 66% describing how they would support ELs.

However, there was a wide variation in the amount of detail about the supports they would provide. A strong example comes from the Rochester Public School District, describing weekly conferences with EL teachers and their students, ongoing conversations with families, specific technology to support EL students, and a plan for collaboration with general education teachers.

## SUPPORTING ACADEMIC GROWTH

Recent projections indicate that students, and particularly those most traditionally underserved, are going to experience drastic learning loss in math and reading related to COVID-19 school closures. But, only one in

three districts across the country expects their teachers to provide instruction, track student engagement, or monitor academic progress.

**Teaching New Content:** Ensuring that students learn new content, while also working to retain what they had already been taught, is critical to keeping students on track. Only about one-third of distance learning plans indicated that students would be taught new content, which may result in significant academic hurdles this fall.

**Live Instruction and Office Hours:** Teaching content in real-time leads to enhanced learning opportunities, student-centered instruction, and the opportunity to provide timely and formative feedback. However, only 23% of distance learning plans specified that students would have access to live, synchronous instruction. Some, like [New Millennium Charter School](#), indicated that they would use live instruction based on student-centered goals: to “effectively meet scholars’ unique learning needs, including the need for differentiated and 1:1 instruction.” Others, like [Minneapolis Public Schools](#), made videos required, but with an option for schools to produce live, standards-based instruction or asynchronous daily content.

Given the unique circumstances of educators and families, it’s understandable that live instruction may not always be an option. However, in lieu of live instruction, districts should offer students office hours so students can ask questions and get one-on-one support. However, only 41% of plans indicated that their teachers would have dedicated office hours.

### MEETING STUDENTS’ SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Minnesota students have faced disruption in many areas of their lives. It’s vital that, in addition to supporting students academically, schools are also addressing the social-emotional and mental health needs of their students. This was a stronger aspect of distance learning plans, with 63% indicating they would provide access to mental health services and 54% specifying that students would have access to counselors.

### TRACKING ACADEMIC PROGRESS

**Feedback on Assignments:** Tracking student progress by collecting assignments and assessing students’ progress toward academic benchmarks or grading their work would have been the best way to measure whether students are learning during distance learning. With the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments waived for the year, it might also have been the only way for families, students, and educators to understand the gaps in student learning that may emerge before the fall. However, only 42% of districts specified whether students would receive feedback on assignments.

**Grading Policies:** In early May, MDE issued guidance on grading and assessment for distance learning, including recommendations for which grading option districts should choose. Only 40% of district plans reported their grading policy, with varying degrees of specificity. Many districts adopted different grading systems for elementary, middle, and high school students. In [Hopkins Public School district](#), for example:

- Elementary: “Information about student progress will be shared with instructors in the next grade level to provide instructional guidance for the 2020-21 school year.”
- Middle: “For courses that currently report letter grades, students can opt for their classes to either maintain the current grading scale (A, B, C, D, NC) or choose a Pass or No Credit option.”
- High: “Students, families, and teachers can opt for any of their classes to either maintain the current grading scale (A, B, C, D, NC) or choose a Pass or No Credit. During the 2020-21 school year, it will be critical to implement strong systems for evaluating student progress and their mastery of state standards. Diagnostic testing in the fall, as well as a return to MCA testing in the spring, will be essential to understand student needs—and where our system should continue to respond and adjust—in the wake of COVID-19.”