

## Working Toward Equity as We Move to Distance Learning

Regardless of the instructional delivery platform, a commitment to educational equity begins with understanding the factors that contribute to inequities through our educational systems. It should come as no surprise that in a distance learning platform, adult engagement is no less important for student success than it is in face-to-face settings<sup>1</sup>, especially for students who are more dependent upon teachers and schooling for academic success<sup>2</sup>. Students who require a high-degree of teacher interaction in order to be successful are sometimes referred to as “teacher dependent”, and they are disproportionately culturally and linguistically diverse or have experienced conditions that undermine their capacity for self-determination and self-efficacy<sup>3</sup> such as poverty or abuse.

In her 2006 review of *Distance Education in the K-12 Context*, Kerry Lynn Rice cites several predictors of student success with distance learning<sup>4</sup>:

1. Achievement and self-esteem beliefs: students’ beliefs about locus of control and self-efficacy are important because of the degree of self-motivation necessary to complete work in an online environment.
2. Responsibility and risk taking: degree of individual initiative and assumption of responsibility for one’s actions.
3. Technology skills and access: how skilled students are in using technology and access to the technology.
4. Organization and self-regulation: study skills and the necessity to approach tasks in an organized way.

Rice’s research should not be interpreted to mean that success is limited to the skills and dispositions students do or do not possess. Rather, it highlights the importance of utilizing adult engagement with students to help build the skills and dispositions they need to optimize the distance learning experience and increase the potential for equitable experiences and outcomes.

### What Can Make a Difference?

Teacher-dependent students are more likely to persevere, and therefore be successful, if they are able to maintain positive and supportive interactions with their teachers. Therefore, we should design distance learning and use technology to prominently feature supportive and effective adult

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<sup>1</sup> Serrani, B.A., & Vasquez, III, E. (2012). Research and practice in distance education for K-12 students with disabilities. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 33-42.

<sup>2</sup> Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin.

<sup>3</sup> Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids’ brains and what schools can do about it*. Alexandria: ASCD.

<sup>4</sup> Rice, K. L. (2006). A comprehensive look at distance education in the K-12 context. *Journal of Research in Technology Education*, v38 n4 p425-448



engagement with students. These guidelines promote practices intended to advance such engagement:

**1. Generate trust to create a safe environment and encourage risk-taking**

Zaretta Hammond<sup>5</sup> writes about the importance of social-emotional connection in creating a safe space for learning. In light of the disruption to routine and possible hardship that families are experiencing, it is important to overcome the “distance” part of distance learning:

- Connecting personally with students can help provide the guidance they need to take responsibility for work completion. Personal connections can encourage students to take risks as they encounter new learning challenges. Consider reaching out in multiple formats, perhaps calling on the phone or sending a postcard, in addition to email and text.
- Use “[Trust Generators](#)” to help teachers discover ways to build meaningful relationships with students and increase the potential for adult engagement, even at a distance.

**2. Remember, technology is a tool, it’s not the goal**

Not every student participating in distance learning has access to the technology that has become the instructional delivery mechanism for many districts.

- Take stock—who has what device? Knowing what’s available for each student can shape how you deliver concern, assurance, support and wise feedback.
- Identifying alternate methods of communicating with students who are not in the digital classroom is critical—adult engagement with students makes a difference!
- If you are running a Google classroom, check-out this link to access [Google technology support for teachers to increase engagement](#)

**3. Create a classroom culture for success**

Cornelius Minor<sup>6</sup> highlights the importance of knowing your students deeply and considering the unique and varied ways in which they demonstrate success:

- Create a classroom culture for distance learning that acknowledges the challenges students face while working at home, whether they are accessing content digitally or in a packet. [Making a list](#) of the students you worry about the most will help you think about your role in acknowledging and removing potential barriers.
- Students who depend upon the teacher to provide cues for how to begin a task, or who need high-level scaffolds to complete a task benefit from [clear success criteria and feedback](#) that helps them organize their approach to the task at hand.

**4. Use wise feedback to positively impact student self-efficacy beliefs**

Yeager et al use the term “wise feedback” to describe practices that “lessen the perceived role of bias in explanations of criticism by conveying to students that they will be neither treated or judged in light of a negative stereotype but instead will be respected as an individual.”<sup>7</sup> Their study showed the positive effect of prefacing feedback with these 19 words: “*I’m giving you these comments because I have very high expectations, and I know that you can reach them.*” The explanation is that this communicates:

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<sup>5</sup> (Hammond, Z. 2015)

<sup>6</sup> Minor, C. (2019). *We got this. Equity, access and the quest to be who our students need us to be.* Portsmouth: Heinemann.

<sup>7</sup> Yeager et al. (2014). Breaking the cycle of mistrust: Wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide. *Journal of Experimental Psychology.*, 143(2).

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- High expectations for the student rather than providing false praise which can diminish trust and reinforce a limiting self-belief.
  - Faith that the student has the potential to meet these high standards
  - Substantive and actionable information to meet the standard that is being demanded
  - Digital platforms are inherently impersonal and dispassionate. Take pro-active steps to ensure that students understand that feedback supports high achievement and is not an indicator that they are not capable.

#### **5. Leverage community resources**

As you continue to consider the needs of your most dependent learners, think about convening a broader team of support from your school community. Working with school and district leadership can help make you aware of additional support, in the form of staff or community members, who may be available to help you connect with students and “up” the adult engagement for distance learners. To read more about the ways that teachers are innovating with distance learning and incorporating culturally responsive practices, [read this article from \*Teaching Tolerance\*](#).

### **Commit to Working Toward Equity**

The structures that create barriers to equitable access, experiences and outcomes for all students are standing features in our society that cast a long and devastating shadow. It is often the case that in the face of extraordinary circumstances these structures come to light, and the inequities that our most vulnerable students face are exposed, causing a sense of urgency and a surge of compassion. A commitment to equity does not live in the extremities, it lives in our daily practice. Let us practice this urgency and compassion every day we deliver instruction, whether in person or from a distance, and commit to working toward equity.