

Recommendations for Home Learning Materials

Early Education Distance Learning in California Schools



Acknowledgements

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Summary



The Center for District Innovation And Leadership for Early Education provides recommendations for school districts across California to support distance learning in early education, including children in Preschool, Kindergarten, and Transitional Kindergarten. These recommendations focus around the provision of home learning materials kits as well as access to technology and supports for parents and caregivers.

www.cdfoundation.org/cde_programs/dialee/

Introduction



School districts across California are preparing for the 2020-2021 school year in an uncertain and unprecedented time. As district leaders plan for the new school year, uncertainty remains about what “school” will look like for students in preschool through high school, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – will students and teachers come back to in-person instruction? Will distance learning remain in place? Will some combination of the two be implemented, with considerations for group size, social distancing, sanitization, and other factors? Even if schools are open, will families feel comfortable sending their children?

School districts are faced with both ensuring the health and safety of their students and staff while also ensuring that learning for all

students continues and longtime efforts to mitigate the achievement and opportunity gap do not go undone. These challenges will be faced with reduced funding and increased expenses.

This paper begins to address some of these challenges, with recommendations specific to early learning, including Preschool, Transitional Kindergarten, and Kindergarten. The structure of early learning—which includes sharing of furniture and materials, and the necessary proximity of teachers to children (through close supervision and hands-on support) and children to children (as learning is primarily through play)—makes considerations for returning back to school difficult.

Implementing distance learning for these young children is equally challenging. Unlike students in higher grades, these young children cannot be expected to work independently or navigate electronic resources. Further, parents and caregivers of young children often do not have the materials, preparation time, or knowledge to provide engaging and enriching activities to adequately support their child's development at home.

Adding to the complexity of planning for early learning programming during this time of social distancing, is the key learning domain in the early years of social-emotional development. One of the greatest benefits of preschool, TK, and Kindergarten is the social interaction children experience, while learning how to share with others, relate to others, and express themselves while part of a group. This important aspect of early education programs is based on the classroom structure of children physically coming together.

It should also be acknowledged that distance learning presents a number of challenges for families. Parents and caregivers have been required to quickly pivot their routines to now, not only manage their children's at home learning, but also provide supervision

during the day, when they also need to be working, looking for work, or handling all the other tasks of managing their family and household. Many parents and caregivers need the distance learning structure to keep children somewhat occupied while they tend to their many other responsibilities. A group of district early education leaders, e.g., **DIAL EE Fellows**, met and identified developmentally appropriate distance learning materials for the youngest learners enrolled in school districts.



Background

The ***District Innovation And Leadership for Early Education (DIAL EE)*** Initiative utilizes content experts, data, research, and a continuous improvement process to assist school districts with aligning early education and K-12 systems to improve outcomes for all children, preschool through 5th grade. ***DIAL EE*** has three goals:

1. Breakdown isolation to generate and share insight and innovation by creating a learning network among district early education leaders.
2. Develop leaders to strengthen public education systems by coaching and supporting early education leaders to test and implement innovative solutions to improve the preschool teaching and learning and alignment of frameworks and practices across grade levels (PreK-3rd /5th grade).
3. Inform local policies and practices through the development of early education leaders to participate, advocate, and lead internal policy discussion.

DIAL EE Fellows

DIAL EE Fellows were recruited from the approximate 300 school districts with California State Preschool Program (CSPP) funding. The current participating districts receive at least \$1 million or more in CSPP funding and serve a high number of vulnerable students. The districts are located across the state. The participants—***DIAL EE Fellows***—administer most or a significant part of the district's early education work. The team members are:

Central California:

- ***Wendy Hernandez***, Supervisor, Preschool and PreK – 3rd Grade Literacy, Central Unified School District, Fresno County

Northern California:

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DIAL EE Districts

The tables on pages 7 and 8 provide a snapshot of the children served in early learning programs in the DIAL EE participating districts.

Table 1: DIAL EE Districts, Student Enrollment¹

District	CSPP Contract Amount	PreK Program	Enrollment			% K English Only Enrollment	% Free/Reduced Meals (17-18)
			PreK	TK	K		
Berkeley (Alameda County)	\$3,153,060	Part day Full day	450 ²	120	552	78%	31%
Central (Fresno County)	\$1,073,264	Part day	220	450	1,920	72%	70%
El Rancho (LA County)	\$2,221,669	Part day	360	177	528	54%	72%
Oakland (Alameda County)	\$12,175,510	Part day Full day	1,567	652	3,209	46%	74%
Oxnard (Ventura County)	\$1,493,175	Part day	374	275	1,577	30%	86%
Pasadena (LA County)	\$4,439,845	Part day Full day	644	150	850	59%	62%
Pittsburg (Contra Costa County)	\$2,055,184	Part day	472	159	752	48%	71%

Table 2: DIAL EE Districts, Race and Ethnicity of Students³

District	Total Students	African American	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Filipino	Hispanic or Latino	Pacific Islander	White	Two or More Races	Not Reported
Berkeley	9,844	13.0%	0.1%	7.2 %	0.9%	22.2%	0.1%	41.2%	15.1%	0.1%
Central ⁴	16,286	9.0%	0.5%	15.0%	1.0%	57.0%	0.2%	15.0%	1.6%	0.0%
El Rancho	8,228	0.4%	0.0%	0.5%	0.4%	97.2%	0.0%	1.1%	0.3%	0.0%
Oakland	49,588	22.4%	0.3%	11.8%	0.9%	47.1%	0.9%	10.3%	4.3%	2.1%
Oxnard	15,730	0.9%	0.1%	0.8%	1.2%	93.0%	0.1%	3.2%	0.7%	0.0%
Pasadena	17,427	11.5%	0.2%	5.3%	1.8%	58.0%	0.1%	19.0%	3.6%	0.5%
Pittsburg	11,367	16.0%	0.3%	3.1%	4.8%	64.7%	1.3%	5.1%	4.5%	0.2%

Context



The difficult task of planning for the 2020-2021 school year amid a global pandemic must be put into the broader context of multifold national crises. Converging and interrelated issues have significant effects on families and children. These include the overall effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing requirements, the resulting economic downturn, and civil unrest in response to ongoing racial injustice in law enforcement and beyond.

As a result of the stay at home orders and social distancing requirements put in place to mitigate the pandemic, our country

faces the most serious economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The impacts are already widespread, and most economists agree we haven't seen the worst yet and predict a long recovery. The majority of children served by school district early learning programs are those most impacted by this economic downturn. A survey conducted by The Education Trust during April 2020 of parents of children ages birth to five, found that 19% of families are impacted by unemployment or temporary loss of work, and 39% are not confident they will be able to continue to pay for basic expenses. White families are 1.5 times more

likely to feel confident. Twelve percent of parents are skipping or reducing meals for their child(ren), while 36% are skipping/reducing their own meals. These numbers are higher for Latinos and non-English speaking families.⁵ In addition to the stress families are already feeling related to their financial security, many may soon face housing insecurity, as the moratorium on evictions for renters affected by COVID-19, put in place by Governor Newsom, ends.

Additionally, the State budget for education is certain to be reduced in the coming year and beyond. Specific to early education, funds recently made available for raising the quality of state-funded programs have already been decreased for the 2020-2021 school year, and we now wait to see how slots and reimbursement rates will be affected by the governor's final budget. The Advancement Project California has made a number of recommendations to California's state leaders to embrace racial equity and ensure systematic infrastructure investments in the public education system that is inclusive of early care and education and K-12, as the state works to rebuild and create stronger, more resilient communities in response to the pandemic as well as the current focus on

racial justice issues. These include:

1. Support and endorse California Schools and Communities First Initiative to mitigate education budget cuts
2. Hold Local Control Funding Formula (LCCF) supplemental and concentration funds constant for students most impacted by the pandemic
3. Create an Office of Equity within the California Department of Education to address the needs of students hit hardest by the pandemic
4. Utilize an equity-based formula to allocate funds to early learners and K-12 students most impacted by the pandemic
5. Engage parents and students in distance learning best practices
6. Create whole family wellness hubs to provide children and families a holistic approach to education, health, and wellness
7. Increase access to WiFi and technology for low-income communities and communities of color to address the digital
8. Professional development to redress historic inequities and address learning loss due to the pandemic⁶



School leaders have been focusing on issues of race, social justice, and equity for a long time, but the current environment of civil unrest and broad debate presents an opportunity to reconsider current strategies and focus the work. Further, with the increased awareness of and attention to the depth of the issues of racism and injustice, new opportunities and resources may be available to schools in terms of private funds and community organization collaborations.

As with all of us, our children have been living through these crises, and their mental health is affected. Their families are under significant stress; any or all of the components of a family's wellbeing—economic sustainability, physical health, and mental health are undoubtedly impacted by the current environment. As children are home, they are feeling—and in some cases, bearing—the stress of their families. While not being physically at school (or parks, playgroups, their cousins' houses, etc.) they are missing necessary opportunities to develop their own social skills and emotional

literacy; they also are not seen by those who may notice signs of abuse, neglect, or trauma.

The survey conducted by The Education Trust found that 73% of parents polled are worried about their family's mental health, and 23% are worried about the impact of substance abuse and domestic violence, as a result of the coronavirus crisis. Non-English speakers and of parents of children with disabilities reported higher numbers, 31% and 33% respectively.⁷

In addition to these compounding issues, it should not be forgotten that families continue to face the crisis of an anti-immigration stance by the current president and administration, including detention, deportation, and separation of families by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Although the media coverage and activism that was widespread only a year ago has died down and shifted focus, these threats are still real for families across California. All of these issues sets the conditions for the upcoming school year.



Solution



As for what school will look like, three scenarios are identified for fall 2020: all students return to school in fall; schools remain shuttered and distance learning continues for all students; or a hybrid model will be implemented.

Regardless of which scenario a district employs to begin the school year, each will need to be prepared for distance learning, either for students staying at home full-time or part of the time. Even if schools do bring all students back on day one—a scenario which seems unlikely, given the current guidance around spacing and group size

requirements⁸—districts should expect that a spike in cases may warrant temporary closures and students that have specific symptoms, which may or may not actually be related to COVID-19, will likely be sent home until symptoms are cleared or a test shows negative. These students will need to have access to continued learning at home.

Distance learning for early education is not intended to replicate or cover the regular instructional day of an in-school program. For example, a typical three-hour preschool program would translate to a 30 minute to one hour “instructional” day of distance

learning. This difference is due the fact that a typical preschool day includes time for meals, transitions, handwashing, and children using the bathroom, all of which take up time for a group of children but are not included in the instructional day at home.

Which scenario is implemented will be dictated by both guidelines from the State as well as individual districts' decisions. One example of the factors that will be considered are new preschool requirements from Community Care Licensing currently indicate a reduction in group size to 10 children.

If California schools will continue to implement some form of distance learning for part or all of the 2020-2021 school year, we

recommend districts prepare and distribute home learning materials kits for Preschool, TK, and Kindergarten students. These play-n-learn kits are intended to support the lesson plans prepared by teachers and provide materials that are engaging, enriching, and encourage active, hands-on learning. Teachers will develop their lesson plans around the materials provided, which can be issued to families in a specific sequence. Parents and caregivers would be provided with guidance and support to show how to use the materials with their children, in the context of lesson plans or activity ideas. Home learning materials kits are intended to be relevant to early learning programs across California school districts, regardless of curriculum used.

Parent Perspective

"I am a mother of a four-year-old boy that currently attends a center in the Bay Area. When Coronavirus hit and the stay in placed order happened, I immediately decided that my son would continue to learn at home. I already understood that there was already a limited daily curriculum for my son's age group, but I definitely did not want corona to be the reason he was not ready for Kindergarten when that time came. I have always been a believer that children need to learn at school, but learning should continue at home. With that being said I had already had some tools to start my distance learning while the school board figured this out.

I started my days at home with my son by first trying to establish a routine similar to the one he had at school. I later realized that the only thing that would be routine with his days would be nap time. The average time I was able to get my son to sit down and focus to learn would be about 45 minutes and that would be with an incentive to earn marbles for play time. We also took walks and did child exercises I found on YouTube for him. These things were all good, but the routine would become boring and it would become more challenging to keep him focused on it.

In total, I am able to get about 45 minutes of focused learning in with him in the morning and about 45 minutes during the afternoon. I also use the day to reiterate some of the things we went over during focused learning. I have also subscribed to ABC mouse so that he gets the idea of distance learning."

- Anonymous Parent

This is the next step in an evolving process, which school leaders had to hastily begin in March 2020 when the school closures first began. Teachers initially sent home instructional “packets” with activities that utilized materials typically already found in the home. Teachers also convened small groups virtually, via smartphones, laptops, or local television stations. In some cases, hands-on materials (home learning kits) were later added, and those materials were then aligned with the instructional packets. A number of lessons have been learned thus far: individual home learning kits are more expensive than classroom materials; both home learning kits and classroom materials will be needed if a hybrid model is implemented in fall 2020; families need materials that children can access and use with minimal support from parents and caregivers; and parents and caregivers need support to understand what to do to support their children’s distance learning.

Parent Perspective

“The amount of time and effort required by a parent or caregiver to support a student during six hours of instruction adversely impacts the students with parent(s)/caregivers that work during school hours, low income families that can’t afford the devices and services to support distant learning, and students that require additional supports to succeed. This creates inequity in access to quality education for some of the most vulnerable students and presents a barrier to school-work-life balance.”

- *Anonymous parent*

Recommendations

DIAL EE puts forth three concrete recommendations to support school districts to implement distance learning.

1. Provide home learning kits of hands-on materials to students

Materials support teachers' learning plans and distance learning activities and address a variety of learning domains, including language and literacy, mathematics and science, arts, physical development (fine motor and gross motor), and social-emotional development. Example materials include:

- Children's books – include high quality, age appropriate books, enabling teachers to extend lessons and activities
- Magnetic letters and numbers
- Manipulatives and fine motor materials, such as beads and yarn, building blocks, modeling clay
- Games and puzzles
- Tools, such as magnifying glasses, measuring cups, and rulers
- Art and writing supplies, such as white boards and markers, pencils, scissors, crayons, construction paper, paint supplies, pipe cleaners, googly eyes, glue, pom poms,
- Gross motor materials, such as balls and jump ropes

Figure 1: Early Education Play-N-Learn Kit Examples



Materials will be generally the same across the grade levels, with developmentally appropriate transitions for TK and K students (e.g., lined paper or composition books, manipulatives requiring more precision, etc.)

The funds available for individual kits will be determined on a per-student basis, based on the total budget available for instructional materials for a classroom. Figure 1, on previous page, and Table 3 below, do not include an exhaustive list of all materials possible to provide in home learning materials kits; this listing is a recommended example that may be adapted by school districts.

Table 3: Cost Per Child

Play-N-Learn kit cost breakdown	Cost per child
Kit 1 (basic school supplies)	\$6.91
Kit 2 (manipulatives, play, arts and crafts)	\$66.55
Kit 3 (books)	\$9.00
Total cost	\$100.46

It should be noted that a number of educational items offered at affordable prices are currently low or out of stock across multiple vendors, due to increasing demand during social distancing school closures as well as the typical increase in demand as school start to purchase in bulk for the new school year. Options to mitigate the shortage in supplies include forming a collaborative among school districts to:

- Partner with manufacturers to produce items for play-n-learn kits
 - Pros: direct production of items and more control in quality based on budget; manufacturers may be able to directly package play-n-learn kits
 - Cons: large learning curve; necessity to identify reputable manufacturers; manufacturers will require lead time for production
- Partner with distributor or a few distributors to purchase play-n-learn kit items
 - Pros: distributors able to purchase in bulk and have knowledge about sourcing items; bulk orders usually cost lower per unit; distributors may be able to package kits
 - Cons: distributors may require time to source items if not already in warehouses
- Purchase from vendors and distributors as play-n-learn kits are available
 - Pros: will not require lead time for production or sourcing
 - Cons: higher cost per item means less children can be served; will require working with multiple vendors and distributors to make purchases, track shipments, and store materials; need to coordinate packaging of play-n-learn kits; vendors do not always decrease unit price for bulk orders



2. Ensure technology is integrated with developmentally appropriate instruction.

Schools will use technology to provide access to lessons plans, activities, and resources for students and parents and caregivers. Electronic devices, such as tablets or laptops, are not recommended for preschool students. Current research indicates that preschoolers should have no to minimal screen time during this critical time of brain development.⁹ **DIAL EE** convened a group of school district early education administrators who are already implementing distance learning for their students, and it was unanimously agreed that devices for students are not recommended nor necessary for preschoolers. Instead, all communication and resources, including lesson plans, links, and apps, will be accessible to parents/ and caregivers via smartphone. Additionally, if teachers convene virtual meetings with children (e.g., via Zoom), smartphones can provide this access. Instead of using limited funding for the provision of electronic devices, resources will be available for high-quality home learning kits.

Parents/caregivers will be supported to ensure they do have access to a smartphone and the internet. Districts will identify how they will work with families to ensure their access. Solutions may include:

- Provide a smart phone to parents and caregivers who do not already have regular use of one
- Provide a “hot spot” or other means of internet access to those in need
- Provide for sufficient cell phone plans to those in need

This recommendation is in line with Advancement Project California's budget recommendation to increase access to Wi-Fi and other technology for low-income communities and communities of color to address the digital divide revealed by the pandemic.

Parents and caregivers will also be supported by teachers to ensure they are able to use the resources provided electronically with the hands-on materials provided to connect their children to the learning activities. The point is to ensure that every child has some type of tool to support their access to learning. If individual districts do select to provide a device for children's individual use, tablets are suggested over laptops, such as Chromebooks, due to the ease of use for this age group.

Although we also recommend against providing electronic devices for TK and K students, we realize that district-adopted curricula and assessments may require that students do have access to their own electronic devices. Thus, it should be up to individual districts to make this determination. We do recommend that even if a tablet or laptop is provided to and used by TK and K students, their parents/caregivers are still provided the support and resources to in turn support their children and that the amount of expected daily screen time is limited for these students.

Paper copies of lesson plans and other resource should be made available as an option for all families, in addition to electronic access. These can be distributed via mail, at meal program pick-up locations, or other logistically appropriate means.

3. Support for parents/caregivers must be part of any distance learning process.

For any distance learning program for young children to be successful, parents/caregivers must be supported, as they will be bearing a large part of the task. As described above, home learning materials kits will not just be issued to families, but they will be provided with guidance and resources to scaffold the parent/caregiver to in general support the child. These supports may include written or live virtual overviews provided by teachers or links to videos or other examples of lessons being carried out and how materials can be used in a variety of ways to support the learning theme. Scaffolding can be provided to support reading with children in engaging ways and to extend the content to connected learning activities.

Additionally, parents and caregivers will need support with children's social/emotional development. Materials in the home learning kits will include those geared for this, such as books and social-emotional solutions kits. Parents/caregivers will need guidance from teachers to know how to use the materials

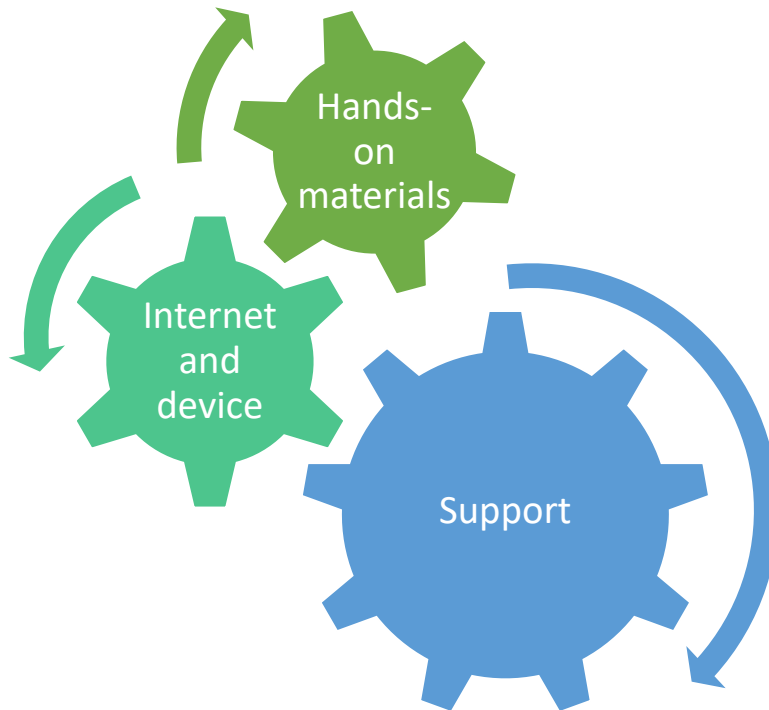
effectively and how to support their children in general in this area. As teachers do every day, any additional or differentiated supports for children with special needs will continue to be implemented, in partnership with families. Any precautions or considerations concerning materials in the home learning kits will be communicated with individual children's parents/caregivers, as appropriate.

To realize this recommendation, we further support budget recommendations made by Advancement Project California, including: create an office of equity within the California Department of Education to address the needs of students hardest hit by the pandemic, to ensure districts have the systemic supports to address the needs of historically disadvantaged students; engaging parents and students in distance learning best practices; whole family wellness hubs, which support a caregiver's ability to provide adequate care; and professional development to redress historic inequities and address learning loss due to the pandemic, including professional development for teachers to better support parents/caregivers during stressful times.



Conclusion

Figure 2: Early Education Distance Learning Basics



Based on the direct experience of convened early education administrators implementing distance learning programs during the spring of the 2019-2020 school year along with input from teachers and learnings from conversations with parents/caregivers, specific recommendations for providing materials, access to resources, and support for families are set forth here.

Endnotes

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