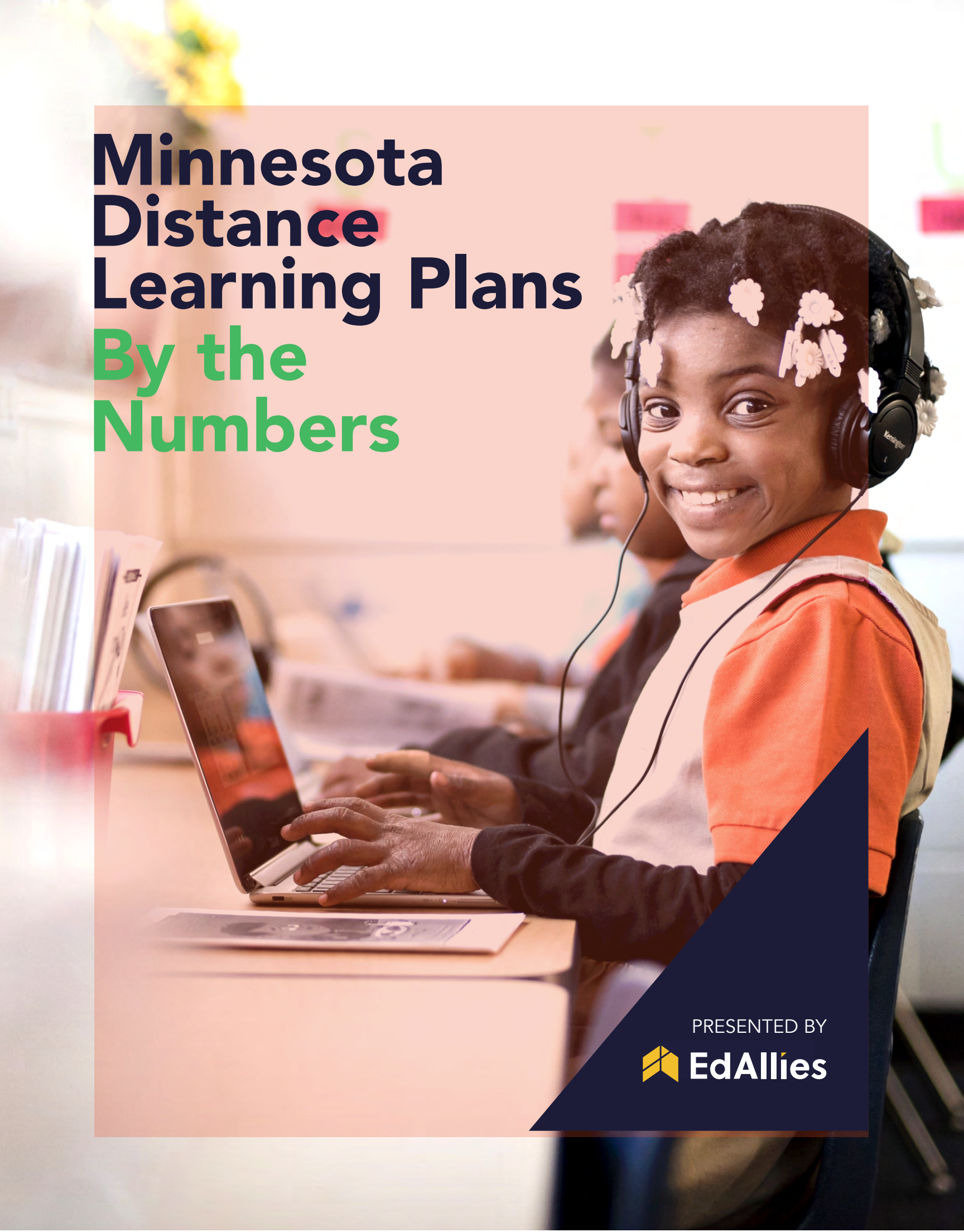


Minnesota Distance Learning Plans By the Numbers



PRESENTED BY



Introduction

School closures due to COVID-19 and the sudden shift to distance learning have taken a huge toll on Minnesota's education system, with historically underserved student populations being disproportionately impacted.¹ Gaps in internet and device access, varying levels of student participation, a lack of support and services for students with special needs and English Learners, and worries about mental health and social-emotional learning have left families and educators concerned about how all of this will impact readiness for the fall and student learning long-term.

To understand how Minnesota schools approached the new reality under COVID-19 and to elevate needs and best practices as we plan for the fall, EdAllies analyzed the distance learning plans of 61 Minnesota districts and 30 charter schools—honing in on those with the largest low-income student population.² We found some promising practices and innovations, but many areas for significant improvement as the state moves out of immediate crisis mode and into a new year that will likely weave in at least some distance learning.

We hope our findings help families, policymakers, students, and educators get a better understanding of what we should replicate and where we should demand additional planning and innovation, specifically looking at:

- Meeting the needs of students with special needs and English Learners (ELs),
- Ensuring internet and device access for students,
- Fostering strong relationships,
- Providing continuity and rigor in learning,
- Supporting social-emotional needs and mental health, and more.

Making Plans Accessible

All of the districts we analyzed had their distance learning plan posted on their website, but only some took additional steps to make the contents accessible and actionable for families. About 60% described some type of support—like how-to videos, FAQs, checklists, phone calls—to help parents as they transition to and implement distance learning in their home. Only 24% translated their plans into languages other than English, which creates accessibility barriers for families whose first language is not English.

Recommendation: Districts must ensure their plans are translated into languages that reflect the communities they serve and provide meaningful, accessible guidance to help families understand key elements of the plan and expectations.



Getting Internet and Devices to Students

In Minnesota, 17% of students—particularly low-income and rural—did not have access to the internet when COVID-19 hit.³ 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.⁴ Even without guaranteed supplemental funding, 44% of districts aimed to ensure all students received a device like an iPad or Chromebook, with another 18% providing a device for some grade bands.

With regard to helping families secure internet access, 13% of plans indicated they would help families secure a hotspot, but 41% only provided a list of free or affordable internet options for families (which not all families were ultimately able to access).

About a fourth of the plans did not address internet or device access at all. And, in some cases, districts did not even implement online plans, instead relying on packets and other resources.

Recommendation: It's likely that students will take part in at least some distance learning in the coming year, whether as part of a hybrid model, temporary school closures, or the need for full-time distance learning. Ensuring internet and device access should be a top priority before school resumes so that no student falls through the cracks or falls behind in learning due to preventable technical barriers.

1. Educators for Excellence. (May 2020). "Voices from the (Virtual) Classroom." Educators for Excellence; University of Southern California Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research. (April 2020). "Understanding the Coronavirus Study." USC.

2. In total, the districts we reviewed serve 566,303 students—about two-thirds of Minnesota public school enrollment.

3. Callaghan, P. (March 20, 2020). "What internet providers are doing to keep Minnesotans online during the pandemic." MinnPost.

4. Rauf, D. (April 1, 2020). "Coronavirus Squeezes Supply of Chromebook, iPads, and Other Digital Learning Devices." Education Week.

5. Kuhfeld, M. & Tarasawa, B. (April 2020). "The COVID-19 Slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement." Collaborative for Student Growth.

6. Gross, B. & Opalka, A. (June 2020). "Too Many Schools Leave Learning to Chance During the Pandemic." Center for Reinventing Public Education.

Serving Students with Special Needs and English Learners

After conducting an informal community survey and reflecting on conversations with students, families, and educators, concerns about ensuring that students with special needs and ELs receive appropriate services and accommodations emerged as a top theme. Most districts built specific plans for these student groups, with 84% explaining how they would serve students with special needs and 66% describing how they would support ELs.

However, there was a wide variation in the amount of detail that the plans gave about the supports they would provide. Some districts offered only general language, while others provided more detail. For example, [Rochester Public School District](#) specified that EL teachers would host weekly conferences with EL students on their caseloads, have ongoing conversations with families, use certain technology to support EL students, and have standards for collaborating with general education teachers.

Recommendation: Districts must build clear plans to ensure that students receive the services that they are entitled to as well as how they will work with families to communicate accommodations. Districts should give these students priority access to any in-person services, with tailored plans for both in-person and distance learning services and supports.



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.⁵ This spring, as districts rapidly adapted to distance learning and responded to the pressure facing families, only one in three districts across the country expected teachers to provide instruction, track student engagement, or monitor academic progress.⁶ The numbers aren't much better in Minnesota. Moving into a new school year, this approach will no longer be tenable, and it will be critical to look to the districts that developed and implemented strong approaches for distance learning.

Teaching New Content: Overall, just 36% of distance learning plans indicated that students would be taught new content. With schools closing in March, students lost nearly three months of in-person instruction and, in many cases, completely missed out on the new content and standards that would have been covered. This will have a significant impact on student preparedness for the fall.

Recommendation: Going into a new academic year, every district should be explicit in how they are going to teach new academic content during distance learning, including when it is intermittent due to sudden school closure. Districts should also address how they will assess student learning needs (for example, gaps in standards from the previous year) and how they will do targeted interventions for students who need support while also maintaining rigor.

Live Instruction and Office Hours: Teaching content in real-time leads to enhanced learning, student-centered instruction, and more timely formative feedback. However, we found that only 23% of distance learning plans specified that students would have access to live—or 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.”⁷ Others, like [Minneapolis Public Schools](#), made videos required, but with an option for schools to produce live, standards-based instruction or asynchronous daily content.⁸

Given the unique circumstances of each district and family, it’s understandable that live instruction may not always be an option—particularly when offered on an emergency, universal basis. In lieu of live instruction, some districts offered office hours so students could ask questions and get one-on-one support, but this was only named in 41% of plans.

Recommendation: Going into the fall, every district should have a clear plan for live connections, during both planned and sporadic instances of distance learning. Plans should also offer dedicated time for teachers to meet with students individually to address specific needs and questions that would otherwise be addressed more organically in a classroom setting.

7. New Millennium Distance Learning Plan, Accessed June 5, 2020.

8. Minneapolis Public School District Distance Learning Plan. Accessed May 20, 2020.



9. Lake, R. & Olson, L. (July 2020). "Learning as We Go: Principles for Effective Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic." Center for Reinventing Public Education.

10. Hopkins Public School District Distance Learning Plan. Accessed May 20, 2020.

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. Many districts began addressing this in the spring, with about 60% of plans indicating they would provide access to mental health services and about half specifying that students would have access to counselors. Now that schools have been closed for several months, coupled with the additional trauma many students have faced in the wake of George Floyd's murder, social-emotional needs should be a top priority once students return.

Recommendations: Districts should make guidance counselors, social workers, and other mental health supports accessible for students, and should also provide training for teachers on how they can foster and develop relationships with their students while maintaining rigor. Districts should also consider looping teachers—that is, assigning the same teacher to the same group of students for two consecutive grades—in order to provide students with some stability.

Tracking Academic Progress

Feedback on Assignments: Only 42% of districts specified whether students would receive 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 were staying on track 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.

Recommendation: Going into the fall, schools must adopt a much more robust and thoughtful approach to feedback and assessment so that students and their families can understand how they are progressing and what supports they need. Furthermore, given that standardized assessments were canceled this spring, districts should administer some type of diagnostic testing so they can identify the needs of students and then provide the appropriate support; national leaders have already weighed in on how to use assessments and what to avoid.⁹

Grading Policies: In early May, MDE issued guidance on grading and assessment for distance learning. That said, only 40% of districts reported their grading policy, with varying degrees of specificity. Also, many districts adopted different grading systems for elementary, middle, and high school students. This was the case for Hopkins Public School district's grading policy:

- **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.¹⁰

Recommendation: In the fall, schools should work to move back to stronger, schoolwide policies. Spring policies were adapted, in part, to sudden stressors and barriers facing students, families, and educators. Going into the fall, districts should develop strong plans for addressing these barriers to fully implement academic programming and enable more meaningful feedback for students and families.



Planning for Fall

Our review of spring distance learning plans reveals significant gaps in academic programming and expectations, student support, teacher-student relationships, and more. Some of these gaps highlight the importance of in-person learning for student success, but others are a reflection of crisis operations. Districts are still facing unprecedented challenges going into the fall, but it is clear that in most cases, the spring distance learning plans will be insufficient to carry students successfully through a full school year.

With incredibly high stakes for long-term student outcomes—particularly for historically underserved students—districts should spend the next two months collaborating with students, families, and educators to build strong plans for 2020-21 that place students at the center and account for evolving public health guidance. Meanwhile, state and federal policymakers must step up to the plate, hearing and addressing the unique, urgent needs that will have to be met to carry our students through the pandemic.

Distance Learning Plan Database

For more detail, visit our distance learning plan database where you can find specifics on each district's plan, broken down across 17 specific questions. Find the database at bit.ly/DistanceLearningMN.



Our Mission

EdAllies partners with schools, families, and communities to ensure that every young Minnesotan has access to a rigorous and engaging education. We advance policies that put underserved students first, remove barriers facing successful schools and programs, and foster an inclusive conversation about what's possible for students.

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