

National Association of State Boards of Education

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## ➔ Remote Learning in Early Childhood

By Winona Hao

**Although many districts and teachers have struggled to provide online learning, those who serve young children were perhaps least prepared. And although nearly all states have developed guidance and resources to support students and families since the pandemic started,<sup>1</sup> they often lack an effective remote learning model for preK-3 that is rooted in child development theories and practices.<sup>2</sup>**

Only nine states require districts to give special consideration to the unique needs of remote learning for preK-3 students.<sup>3</sup>

The pandemic caused huge learning loss to children of all ages, in academics and social-emotional learning.<sup>4</sup> Of all the age groups, youngest learners likely suffered the most from distance learning challenges because they learn best from effective human interaction, hands-on exploration, and all kinds of sensory and physical activities.<sup>5</sup> They should not be expected to attend to math or reading instruction in front of a computer or television screen for typical in-person class lengths. They need music, arts, movement, and hands-on projects to stimulate learning. They also have social and emotional needs—understanding and managing emotions, showing empathy, establishing healthy relationships, setting positive goals, and making responsible decisions—that require sustained adult interaction and engagement with peers. Yet during the pandemic, most inevitably will be increasing their screen time if they are to keep learning.

The early years are critical for setting a trajectory toward lifelong learning, and what happens in preK-3 affects high school grad-

uation rates and levels of academic achievement.<sup>6</sup> If online learning is not designed with early childhood in mind, many children will not be able to build the strong foundation they need and will fail to establish the structure and routines that learning requires. States should provide more guidance and resources for young learners, and they should help districts and schools find creative, innovative ways to maximize the potential of technology to spark young minds.

Designing an effective early childhood education (ECE) program requires an understanding of child development. Delivering a play-based, fun learning experience that keeps children engaged is the key to success. The developmental nature of preK-3 requires online learning to be short in length, with a combination of visual and interactive activities, physical movement, music, games, and art projects.<sup>7</sup> To make distance learning more attractive to young children, states should encourage innovative strategies such as sending weekly art materials, project instructions, or books to children's homes that engage children in play-based activities.

### PREPARING EDUCATORS AND FAMILIES

With schools shut down and parents now functioning as teachers or teacher aides, states and districts should engage families when developing a model for early remote learning. They should seek out a viable solution to communicate with parents and help them in their new in-home teaching roles. States and local districts should guide schools on how to provide one-on-one online or phone meetings to determine needs and challenges faced by families. Amid an influx of open education resource links that parents receive, educators can point them to sites that fit their unique needs and schedules.

Many educators lack training on how to transition knowledge and curriculum to an online platform. However, some states already had online learning systems in place before the pandemic started. The **Utah State Board of Education** adopted an education technology strategy in 2018 that includes a robust endorsement for technology on teachers' licenses at all grade levels including K-3.<sup>8</sup>

### SEEKING EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

States should seek best practices from other states to strategize and plan. Remote learning requires infrastructure and resources that many state education agencies do not have the capacity to support. However, states can seek partnerships with the private sector to refine their infrastructure and move the needle for student learning.

**Colorado** works with the Public Broadcasting Network (PBS) to air lessons on television. The "Colorado Classroom: Read with Me at Home" initiative includes four consecutive half-hour literacy segments, each tailored to students in K-3 grade levels. Colorado teachers lead the lessons. This initiative aims to close the digital divide and prevent learning loss.<sup>9</sup>

Khan Academy Kids, an educational program for young children ages 2-7, recently developed a free tool for teachers that is aligned with the Head Start Early Learning Standards and kindergarten and first-grade Common Core Standards. It includes thousands of activities for use on mobile or tablet devices that delve deep into topics ranging from math to motor development.

The **Oklahoma State Board of Education** unanimously approved an order that implemented distance learning for all grades, including a unique partnership with the Oklahoma Educational Television Authority to broadcast programming tailored to the Oklahoma Academic Standards. They specifically developed guidelines for preK-K and 1-2 to distinguish the unique learning needs for the youngest children.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1. ECE Learning Characteristics**

Birth to 3 years old	PreK-K	Grades 1-2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn best in small blocks of time with repetitive activities.</li> <li>Observing things, watching faces.</li> <li>Listening to sounds and voices.</li> <li>Touching textures.</li> <li>Experimenting with objects.</li> <li>Stimulating all the senses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn best in small blocks of time with repetitive activities.</li> <li>Active exploration of their environment in child-initiated activities and in teacher/adult-initiated activities.</li> <li>Choices based on their own interests can increase learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are becoming more confident and independent.</li> <li>Self-discovery and independent exploration can increase learning.</li> <li>Literacy skills play a key role in their learning and development.</li> </ul>

Source: Illinois State Board of Education.

during the current crisis, state boards have the opportunity to establish an enduring, resilient, and equitable system that can provide strong foundations for early learning in years to come.

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## NOTES

1 Joseph Hedger, "Continued Learning during COVID-19," *Policy Update* 27, no. 3 (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, May 2020).

2 Chip Donohue et al., "Distance Learning and Early Childhood Education" (Head Start: Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, May 2020).

3 The states are Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Texas, and Virginia.

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6 W. Steven Barnett, *Lives in the Balance: Age-27 Benefit-Cost Analysis of the High Scope Perry Preschool Program* (Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 1997).

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8 Valerie Norville, "Utah Banks on Statewide Approach to Adopting Education Technology," *State Innovations* 24, no. 2 (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, June 2019).

9 Ann Schimke, "Colorado Teachers Will Lead Literacy Lessons on Public Television," *Chalkbeat Colorado* (May 2020).

10 Oklahoma State Department of Education, "Early Childhood Distance Learning PK-K" (Oklahoma City, OK, March 2020), <https://sde.ok.gov/covid19-instruction-support>; OSDE, "Distance Learning Grades 1-2" (Oklahoma City, OK, March 2020).

11 Illinois State Board of Education, "Remote Learning Recommendations during COVID-19 Emergency" (Springfield, IL, March 2020), <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/RL-Recommendations-3-27-20.pdf>.

12 Winona Hao, "The Role of State Boards in Improving Early Childhood Education," *Education Leaders Report* 4, no. 1 (January 2018).

13 Marcy Whitebook, Deborah Phillips, and Carollee Howes, "Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 Years after the National Child Care Staffing Study" (Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2014).

14 Andrew Joseph, "Coronavirus Spread Could Last into Next Year, but Impact Could Be Blunted, CDC Official Says" (Boston: STAT, March 2020).

## ADDRESSING ATTENTION SPANS

The Illinois state board developed detailed guidelines that highlight the learning characteristics and suggested content for birth to age 3, preK-K, and grades 1-2 and adapted recommendations from the National P-3 Center to meet their students' needs (see figure).

They also suggested instruction time and recommended lengths for students in each grade level. Prekindergarten students should spend three to five minutes on an individual activity, while engaging in no less than 20 minutes of total instruction time each day and no more than 60 minutes, according to the chart. Kindergarten students should spend no less than 30 minutes and no more than 90 minutes per day, and for students in grades 1-2, no less than 45 minutes and no more than 90 minutes.<sup>11</sup> After nearly three months of implementation, the Illinois State Board of Education is updating the recommendation based on lessons learned.

## ROLE OF STATE BOARDS

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have ECE learning standards or guidelines that lay foundations and set goals for what children ought to know and be able to do at each critical stage in their first years. Sixteen state boards of education have the authority to develop, adopt, and revise the learning standards.<sup>12</sup>

State boards should review these standards and create remote learning guidelines for young learners that reflect learning goals, identify missing elements, and fill the gaps with resources and partnership opportunities. Doing so will clear a route for districts' preparation of ECE teachers and students for virtual early learning during the pandemic, and it will provide a go-to resource for future emergencies.

State boards without direct authority over these policy areas can ask questions and convene stakeholders in a task force to ensure that the early childhood voice is represented in distance learning and reopening planning. Since collaboration is vital for establishing innovative remote early learning models, state boards can lead the initiative by connecting with business partners to expand digital infrastructure capacities and increase screen-based interactive activities for young learners.

States need strategies to address inequities that arise as schools seek to support families who lack high-speed internet or remote learning devices. States should learn about families' unique needs. For example, if working situations prevent parents from assisting their young children in remote learning, states may provide one-on-one learning opportunities to ensure that their children are learning.

States also need to recognize that teachers face challenges at home. ECE teachers already faced financial hardships before the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> Not every teacher has access to high-speed internet or a tablet that they can use to work from home.

State boards can develop policies to support the ECE workforce and strengthen educators' online teaching skills. They can encourage school districts to survey the workforce's digital literacy and create a professional development plan for remote early learning. States should ensure teachers have the necessary resources before engaging in simple and manageable digital training.

Health experts suggest that the pandemic will likely extend through 2021,<sup>14</sup> and schools have been asked to prepare not only for 2020–21 but for future emergencies. By preparing teachers to serve young students better

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