"At-Home" Teaching and Learning in PreK-3rd Grade

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PreK-12 school districts across the country are leaping into uncharted territory to support students and families as teaching and learning shifts to being at home. Our aim is to provide guidance specifically focused on the early grades (PreK-3rd grade)[1] since we know this is a unique developmental period that requires differentiated support from the upper grades, especially during this transition to at-home e-learning.

Below, we focus on two fundamentals that should guide work across the PreK-3rd grade continuum: child development and equity. These suggestions may resonate with district administrators, elementary principals, primary grade teachers, and families.

At this time, we are not compiling or curating a list of the countless websites, educational apps, activities, livestreams, and other virtual resources that are flooding inboxes and social media sites.

We intend to continue to update and refine this document over the next days and weeks. We also welcome feedback and suggestions at pthru3@ucdenver.edu.

Fundamental #1: Lean on Child Development

PreK-3rd grade children are in a unique developmental stage, and the kinds of opportunities and environments that support their learning will not change during a pandemic. As educators develop resources and materials to send home, it is helpful to remember a few key principles from child development that apply to children in early learning and the early grades.

- **Focus on Relationships and Social-Emotional Development**
  Relationships are particularly important to children in the primary grades. Children flourish when they feel supported, safe, and have close emotional attachments to adults who are important in their lives. These are stressful times for everyone, so creating ways for teachers and families to provide calm, reassuring interactions is important. Relationships are always important, even when children are home practicing social distancing. The most important use for technology should be as a means to encourage interactions -- between children and adults, and among children.

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[1] This document focuses on the PreK-3rd grade age range because our primary audience for this document is school districts and elementary schools. We believe that children birth-to-age-5 also need special supports during these extraordinary times. Other national organizations are actively creating guidance for 0-5; we provide links to some of these compilations at the end of this document.

School of Education & Human Development
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO DENVER

1380 Lawrence Street, #629
Denver, CO 80204
www.nationalp-3center.org

- *Strategies for PreK-3rd Grade Administrators and Teachers*
  - Encourage active (instead of passive) use of technology at home. This can be done by providing families with suggestions such as:
    - Talking to their child about the on-line content before the child engages, and suggest things to watch for or pay attention to;
    - Viewing content and interacting with their child in the moment (e.g., asking child to tell you what this means in their own words, why they think it's important, predict what might happen next when reading or watching);
    - Helping children learn more about the content by connecting it to things they already know, things he or she is interested in and/or to things in the outside world. Engage children in drawing pictures about the content.
  - Chat either by phone or video with 2-3 students each day. Use this time to engage in conversation; check in on what they are doing and how they are feeling; and to provide personal, specific feedback to students on assignments or work products.
  - Encourage students to send you photos of what they have been doing at home.
  - Use technology to engage students with one another -- either do a "whole class" meeting once a week, pair up students to check in with one another, and/or assign collaborative, small group work that will require children to be in virtual touch, but not close physical contact, with one another. This can occur through video chats, phone conversations, and/or old-fashioned letter writing.
  - Encourage activities that promote "helping" behaviors (adults and children ALL feel better when they feel like they're contributing to others' well-being). This could mean encouraging creative ways for children to help with household chores; drawing pictures, taking photos, or writing jokes or letters to send to friends and relatives.
  - Scaffold ways for children to talk about their emotions and mental states. This could mean encouraging discussion -- about books or movies or other assignments -- that include prompts such as, "How do you think that made that character feel?" "How would you feel if that happened to you?"
  - Create online office hours a few times a week and at different times of the day (morning, afternoon, evening) to be available for students if they have questions or need support.

- **Emphasize Active, Experiential Learning**
  Children in this age range learn best when they are active and engaged. While take-home worksheets may seem like a logical default option, strive to provide a range of suggestions that are creative, experiential, and keep children in motion! Physical activity is essential for children's

concentration, learning, and interactions with others. Under the circumstances, keep social distancing in mind. As much as possible, limit the amount of passive screen time.

- ○ *Strategies for PreK-3rd Grade Administrators and Teachers*
  - ■ Create and assign experiences -- that last an hour or stretch over a multi-day period -- that get children to touch, move, listen, explore, and engage.
  - ■ Don't fret too much about direct instruction in specific subject areas. The early grades are when children are increasing mastery in every area of their development and learning. They're reading, writing, exploring, problem-solving, and undertaking experiments every day.
  - ■ Focus on integrated learning that sparks children's natural curiosity and investigation. Children during this age range learn best when experiences are integrated and experiential. Suggested assignments might include:
    - ● Take daily walks around the neighborhood to document the changing environment as Spring emerges. Get children to draw (or photograph) the changes they're seeing.
    - ● Encourage imaginative and dramatic play -- ask children to design and create their own grocery store or classroom or other culturally relevant place.
    - ● Let children build and create -- with blocks, Legos, cardboard boxes, not-too-heavy furniture. They're developing math and spatial skills!
  - ■ Suggest a variety of schedules and options to families so they can best structure their day, while maintaining flexibility and minimizing feelings of guilt that they're not "doing it right." Emphasize active learning experiences more than adherence to rigid daily schedules. Children's time at home is not going to look like or be structured like their "regular" school days. There is a big difference between managing a classroom of 20-30 students and a living room with 1-3 children. While, yes, routines are useful, families are also juggling many competing, stressful circumstances.

Fundamental #2: Keep Equity Front-and-Center

During the best of times, young children are particularly vulnerable to issues of inequity. As teaching and learning move to children's homes, attention to the widely variable contexts in which children live is even more important. These are extraordinarily stressful times for all families.

"*For the millions of parents who were already struggling with low-wage work, lack of affordable child care, and meeting their family's basic needs from paycheck to paycheck, the stresses are increasing exponentially. When unstable housing, food insecurity, social isolation, limited access to medical care, the burdens of racism, and fears related to immigration status are added, the toxic overload of adversities can also lead to increasing rates of substance abuse, family violence, and untreated mental health problems*" ([Center on the Developing Child](#), 2020).

These are hard issues for schools to mitigate during normal circumstances. We cannot expect miraculous answers to appear now; yet we can stay ever-attentive and responsive to the diversity of family contexts.

- **Recognize Families' Variable Access to E-Learning Options**

  Families have different access to internet connectivity altogether, much less high-speed WiFi. Similarly, families have different access to mobile devices (e.g., smart phones, tablets, laptops with video capability). In some instances, there may be NO devices available; in other instances, families may be sharing just one device among multiple children (and adults). Support for at-home learning will differ from student to student. For example, some students might have parents or caregivers that can devote significant amounts of time to support student learning, others will not.

  - *Strategies for PreK-3rd Grade Teachers*
    - Be mindful and realistic with your expectations for how and when students complete assignments that require access to on-line resources. Keep schedules very flexible and provide students with the option to complete assignments across a week's time rather than daily.
    - Keep lessons/activities for students to 25-30 minute chunks of time. Be mindful that if families have multiple children and possibly one device, they will need to coordinate on-line class time.
    - Many parents and caregivers are still working and juggling "at-home learning" with their own work schedules and space. Be thoughtful as this may influence whether students can get online and/or if they have access to technology.
    - If necessary, offer paper packets for students and families who don't have access to technology by allowing them to pick up packets in designated locations within the community.

  - *Strategies for PreK-3rd Grade Administrators*
    - Repurpose school buses as Wi-Fi Hotspots. Park them in neighborhoods that lack broadband access.
    - Comcast is offering free internet to new customers for two months through their Internet Essentials program. This is an internet program at a reduced cost for families with low incomes. https://www.internetessentials.com/
    - School devices could be deployed to parents who don't have devices at home by creating a lending library system.

- **Provide Supports to Families Experiencing Stress**

  Schools often serve as a hub for families, providing information and referrals to a variety of community-based services and programs. During the first weeks of shut-down, many school districts around the country have focused, first, on ensuring children continue to have access to school breakfasts, lunches, snacks, and (sometimes) dinner. Some families will also need access

to resources related to emergency child care, health care, mental health support, housing/homelessness, and domestic violence.

- *Strategies for PreK-3rd Grade Administrators and Teachers*
    - Build from what you already know -- expand and extend programs and strategies that are put in place during summer breaks (e.g., "grab-and-go" meals at select school sites; using school buses to deliver to neighborhoods, apartment complexes, and housing areas).
    - Engage student support staff (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, interventionists, paras) to contact and support students and families who are not engaged in remote learning experiences.
    - For some students who have experienced trauma, being away from school and out of their daily routine may lead to various levels of anxiety. School mental health staff should build in a plan to check-in and support students and families who may need it. When there is already knowledge of children's difficult life circumstances, plans should be proactive – meant to protect and ward off problems – rather than reactive after they occur.
    - Strive to keep your district and school websites up-to-date with links to additional resources in the community.
    - For those families who do have e-learning access, consider virtual meetings with them, too (either as individual families, or as clusters of families). Use these conversations to ask them what kinds of support would be most helpful.

- **Consider the Unique Needs of English Language Learners (ELLs)**
As schools continue to develop and refine their supports during these uncertain times, it is critical to keep in mind the unique needs of English Language Learners and their families. It is important that schools look for ways to partner with families. Remember the strengths that multilingual families have and work from this asset-based lens when offering support.

    - *Strategies for PreK-3rd Grade Administrators and Teachers*
        - Have ELL instructors, family liaisons, or even school-community partners reach out early and often to ELLs and their families. Listen for stress or concerns, so additional support can be offered to the family if needed.
        - Provide all essential information regarding COVID-19 to families in their native language through whatever channels you provide parent communication (e.g., phone calls, texts, website, newsletters).
        - Ensure that students and families are provided with visuals, videos, etc. on prevention steps like hand washing, what to do if you are sick, and social distancing.
        - Additional online resources
            - Colorin Colorado website
              https://www.colorincolorado.org/coronavirus-ell

- California Dept. of Ed K-12 resources
  https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/distancelearning.asp
- Resources to support Dual Language Learners
  https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/appendix1.asp
- Lessons learned from the field
  https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/appendix2.asp

- **Consider the Unique Needs of Students with IEPs**
  As schools and teachers strive to continue instruction for students, consideration should also be provided for students with individualized education plans (IEPs). The U.S. Department of Education has provided clear guidance that students with IEPs should continue to receive support during remote instruction. The provision of free and appropriate public education (FAPE) may include, as appropriate, special education services offered through distance instruction.

  > *"To be clear: ensuring compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),† Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act should not prevent any school from offering educational programs through distance instruction."* (USDOE, OCR, OSERS Communication, March 21, 2020)

  - *Strategies for PreK-3rd Grade Administrators and Teachers*
    - Students with disabilities should have equal access to the same opportunities as the general student population.
    - To the greatest extent possible, students should be provided with special education and related services as identified in their IEP.
    - If possible, IEP teams could meet virtually while schools are closed. Any assessments or observations that require face-to-face meeting should, whenever possible, be avoided in accordance with public health guidelines.
    - For assessments or observations that may take place while schools are closed, schools may continue to administer them with parent or legal guardian consent.
    - Supplemental Fact Sheet from USDOE, OCR, OSERS issued 3/21/2020

- **Support Teachers** with Different Comfort/Ability to Work in Digital World
  Teachers are being asked to be super heroes, pivoting to fully on-line learning, with no notice and with a range of professional experience and learning related to e-learning. Some teachers have great comfort in the e-learning space; others do not. And, teachers themselves are dealing with stressful circumstances in their own families and communities. It is best to start simple and keep it manageable. Allow teachers to learn from successes and failures.

  - *Strategies for PreK-3rd Grade Administrators and Teachers*
    - Plan time for teachers to engage with one another to develop lesson plans and share strategies, resources, successes, failures, identifying students who are not engaging in remote learning options, etc.

- ■ Support teachers to set boundaries. They are working harder than ever, under ever-changing stressful conditions. With e-learning, it is easy to follow-up with students at all hours. Encourage teachers to keep a regular and predictable schedule for themselves and to practice self-care. This is going to be a marathon, not a sprint.

Resources for 0-5/Early Care and Education (ECE) Programs:
- Child Care Aware Resources (good ones for providers and parents): https://info.childcareaware.org/coronavirus-updates
- Head Start Resources: https://www.nhsa.org/coronavirus/resources-1
- Zero to Three Resources: https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3210-tips-for-families-coronavirus
- NAEYC Resources: https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/covid-19

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