

Spotlight: Planning for Diverse Learners

Creating plans for re-entry that maximize accessibility for diverse learners

As districts plan for the 2020-21 school year, which may include virtual instruction, in-person instruction, or a combination or intermittent periods of virtual and in-person instruction, district leaders continue to be thoughtful in how they are supporting and empowering school teams and specialized educators in serving all students, especially students with diverse needs, in each learning modality. Specialized teachers who serve diverse learners, such as students with individual education plans, 504 plans, and any students who receive specialized services from a special education or English learner teacher, face a significant challenge in adapting to meet a diverse set of student needs in an unpredictable and changing environment. Therefore, educators need guidance from district leaders but also flexibility to adapt to meet the unique needs of the students and families they serve. Furthermore, educators need opportunities to learn about evolving best practices and network with peers. The guiding questions and ideas to consider highlighted on the following pages are intended to support district leaders in planning how to assist teachers and their school leaders in meeting the diverse set of needs for all learners.

This spotlight was created as a partnership between the National Institute on Excellence in Teaching (NIET) and the Diverse Learners Cooperative (DLC).

ABOUT THE DIVERSE LEARNERS COOPERATIVE

Teachers of students with disabilities and English learners are often one of a few in their schools, lack access to adequate support and development opportunities, and as a result, experience high rates of burnout. The Diverse Learners Cooperative (DLC) is a nonprofit organization that connects teachers and leaders with professional learning, resources, and networks that propel best practice for diverse learners and increase teacher retention. The DLC lives out this mission through its Teacher Leader Fellowship, New Teacher Cohorts, and variety of practice-based professional development, as well as engaging in school partnerships focused on equipping and empowering teams to meet diverse learner needs.

In order to support schools and districts, the DLC has created a roadmap for equitable reentry, which includes a series of resources to help school and district leaders prioritize diverse learners in their plans for the 2020-21 school year. These resources are available at: <https://www.dlresourcecenter.com/>.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) is a public nonprofit with 20 years of experience in advancing evidence-based practices through job-embedded professional development. NIET's vision is that every student in America is taught by an excellent teacher and supported by effective leaders every year. NIET believes intentional, sustained, and high-quality investments in educators directly result in success for all students and are essential to eliminating equity gaps. As a result, NIET is committed to raising achievement levels for all students by focusing on the most powerful lever for change—teachers and the leadership that supports them.

During this unprecedented period of time, NIET has created and released a series of resources, including this spotlight, to be used as guides for leaders as they design their plan for 2020-21. These resources are available at: <https://bit.ly/20-21-Planning-BrochurePage>.

Guiding Questions

The guiding questions in this document are intended to aid district and school leaders as they plan for a return to school for 2020-2021. Specifically, these questions will point to how district teams can understand student needs, identify barriers to instruction and support, and create solutions that work for all learners. Designing strategies that increase accessibility for students with disabilities and English language learners is necessary, and it often benefits all students. Districts and schools are encouraged to work closely with frontline educators and affected families to optimize planning for re-entry across various scenarios and settings.

IDENTIFYING, TRACKING AND MONITORING STUDENT NEEDS

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How will the district identify student needs at the beginning of the school year and then ongoing throughout the school year?2. How will the district track and monitor student needs, identify trends, and utilize this information to inform additional supports, trainings, and resources for teachers in educating students with diverse needs?3. How will the district plan to continue to identify, track, and monitor student needs across learning environments and during transitions between environments?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify the domains for which to capture information about student needs, particularly areas which may be greatly impacted by the pandemic. These domains should include: physical needs, mental and behavioral health, core academics, foundational academic skills, language proficiency, and communication access.• Identify specific areas within each domain for which to collect data. For example:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical needs: access to safe space to learn, access to food, access to technology needed to learn• Mental and behavioral health: emotional well-being, access to supportive adults, access to supportive peers, access to therapeutic service providers• Core academics: measures of unfinished learning that support current grade-level learning• Foundational academic skills: basic reading skills including phonemic awareness, phonics, and reading fluency; basic math skills including number sense and calculation; data collected should reflect student needs in IEP and support the instructional team in developing appropriately ambitious goals• Language proficiency: basic interpersonal communication skills (social language), academic language skills; consider measures across reading, writing, listening, and speaking domains• Communication access: need for assistive technology or other communication strategies to promote independence across various learning scenarios• Review data and reflect on the district's experience identifying and tracking the needs of students during spring closures. Identify:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Needs students exhibited during the spring closures and what needs may continue into reopening.• Areas of strength and areas for improvement in the district's procedures, processes, and tools for assessing needs in each domain.• Review and update (as needed) any assessments and guidance available to educators. Consider:

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessments should include measures across domains, including and beyond academics. • Assessments may include initial diagnostics and calendared benchmarks, as well as frequent progress monitoring measures. • Guidance for administering assessments in different learning scenarios (e.g., virtual instruction, socially distanced, scheduled at school in individual or small groups, etc.) should be included and/or alternative options highlighted. • Establish guidance for school teams regarding data that can be collected before and after school returns to understand students' needs and inform/refine plans. Identify: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now, before school starts: What information can the school team collect now to inform the plan to reopen? Consider collecting information from prior grade level team, new grade level team, families, and the students themselves. • Looking ahead to school returns: What information can be collected upon school return that will in turn have the most impact on aligned planning and student success? Name assessments in each learning modality that will be used that provide the right information from which to plan, when and how frequently students should be assessed, and which students should be assessed. • Establish recommendations for school teams around collaborative and consistent communication with families in their home language(s) to gather information about student needs and input on instructional models. • Identify regular time periods for when new data will be collected, when data will be examined, and who will be responsible for collecting and examining data and determining next steps at the district and school level based on the findings. • Review, refine, and/or develop a tool to track information regarding student needs succinctly and purposefully across learning modalities and during transitions between learning modalities. Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storing and presenting data by domain to understand school/group trends and by student to more fully grasp the interplay of needs. • Setting dates by which to collect various types of data, as well as dates when team members will analyze the data and use it to make next step plans. This will likely involve different team members across a variety of planning conversations. • Using information from regular data analysis meetings to assess teacher gaps in supporting diverse learners. As key priorities are established for student needs, monitor teachers' comfort at addressing these needs through the use of regular surveys. Use this data to inform responsive trainings and/or resources for teachers to better address diverse learner needs.

IDENTIFYING BARRIERS FOR CONTINUITY OF LEARNING IN DIFFERENT LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

For each of four reopening scenarios (all in-person learning, all remote learning, a combination of remote and in-person learning, intermittent remote and in-person learning), what challenges arise in serving students with diverse needs in each learning environment?

SCENARIO 1: ALL STUDENTS IN PHYSICAL BUILDINGS (ALL IN-PERSON LEARNING)

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What challenges arise due to physical distancing protocols? 2. Which students are most affected by the implementation of physical distancing protocols? 3. As updates for Tier 1 instruction are being made, how can Tier 1 be modified to be more inclusive? What guidance will need to be in place to support decisions around when remediation and RTI are appropriate in different learning environments? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop recommendations and guidance for school teams and teachers regarding class scheduling, seating arrangements, and delivering small group instruction while minimizing movement of students and staff across classrooms. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign students requiring special education and/or EL teacher service to a limited number of classes. • Strategically seat students to allow for smooth transition to small groups within the classroom as needed. • Prioritize and ensure that all students requiring special education services continue to have access to their least restrictive environment, including access to typically developing peers in small and large groups. • Provide access to peers for English learners as English language models are particularly important for language learners. • Discuss and prioritize least restrictive environments and access to peers in all conversations regarding scheduling and service changes for students with diverse needs. • Identify tools and strategies to provide accommodations that students can access independently. For example, rather than a teacher reading aloud an assignment or assessment to an individual, requiring the need for close proximity, provide an audio recording that the student can play and pause as needed. • Create and share parameters for delivering proximity strategies and/or physical prompting for students to ensure appropriate and safe support. Encourage and provide alternative options, articulate the parameters in which such strategies can be used for meeting individual student needs, and identify any precautions that should be used when delivering such supports. • Develop expectations for staff and students regarding the use of masks at school that accounts for the needs of diverse learners and identify strategies for responding to anticipated challenges for specific students. Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impact on students with hearing impairments and those learning English as another language, who may rely on lip reading and facial cues to access communication.

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impact on students with sensory or behavioral challenges. • Use of social stories, classroom visuals, positive reinforcement, safe breaks, and other strategies to support students, especially students with sensory or behavioral challenges, in maintaining safety protocols. • Communicate with families of diverse learners now about distance learning experiences and needs that may affect return to school. Inquire about any calming or soothing strategies families used successfully while the student was engaged in remote learning. If possible, encourage teachers to replicate those strategies to ease transitions. • While school may have returned to in-person instruction, not all students may be able to return with consistency due to individual health concerns. Encourage school-based IEP teams to communicate with families to plan for individual circumstances.

SCENARIO 2: SOME STUDENTS IN PHYSICAL BUILDINGS WITH SOME VIRTUAL (HYBRID IN-PERSON & REMOTE LEARNING)

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All guiding questions under Scenario 1 and Scenario 3 2. What challenges arise due to some students engaging in in-person learning while other students engage in virtual learning? 3. Which students are most affected by the implementation of multiple learning modality? 4. As updates for Tier 1 instruction are being made, how can Tier 1 be modified to be more inclusive? What guidance will need to be in place to support decisions around when remediation and RTI are appropriate in different learning environments? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All ideas under Scenario 1 and Scenario 3 • If families and students are provided opportunities to select between different learning modality, create and share clear guidance around how students with specialized needs will be served in each scenario and the expectations for parents in supporting students. Identify: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations for families in supporting and/or facilitating instruction and provision of services for students, especially during remote learning. • Tools and channels that will be used to provide specialized services during in-person social distanced and virtual instruction (e.g., technology platforms, devices, etc.) • Sample schedules for when specialized services will be provided in different scenarios. • If the district is utilizing alternative schedules in which students spend part of their time in in-person learning and part of their time in remote learning, analyze how different schedules will impact various groups of learners when developing and finalizing schedules. Considerations should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Least restrictive environments: How will decisions about the setting for instruction maintain the least restrictive environment for each student? • Access to peers: How can prioritizing students with disabilities or English learners

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
	<p>for certain hybrid schedules with in-person instruction maximize access to typically developing peers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing: How can school teams leverage team member expertise to optimize in continuity of learning and support across environments? Identify a point person for each student to ensure consistency and clear lines of communication across in-person and remote settings. • Instructional prioritization: Prioritize instruction or application of new knowledge that requires in person interaction for the time students are in the building. • Transitions: Some students will have difficulty transitioning between learning settings. How can school teams minimize transitions and time to acclimate through transitions? Consider incorporating familiar routines, instructional materials, and technology usage across settings. • Develop methods of progress monitoring that can be utilized across settings, ideally forms of data that can be collected and tracked digitally. Calendar cadence of meetings to regularly examine this data and make decisions based on findings.

SCENARIO 3: ALL STUDENTS VIRTUAL (ALL REMOTE LEARNING)

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What challenges arise due to virtual instruction? 2. Which students are most affected by the implementation of virtual learning? 3. As updates for Tier 1 instruction are being made, how can Tier 1 be modified to be more inclusive? What guidance will need to be in place to support decisions around when remediation/RTI are appropriate in different learning environments? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide guidance and/or recommendations to school-based teams on reviewing and translating specialized services (i.e., special education services, English learner services, etc.) to be delivered remotely. Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will need to access specialized services via remote channels, but these services may not be a one-for-one translation of in-person service delivery minutes. • Anchoring discussions around updating individual student plans around the students' learning goals and needs and how to best serve those needs remotely, versus how to best translate a particular in-person service or strategy. • Proactively involving families, students, and the IEP team in decisions regarding how students will continue to be served during virtual learning. • Identifying how and when decisions will be documented in collaborative documents such as the IEP, ILP, or contingency learning plans. • Identify and share a variety of options to provide specialized service (including IEP and EL services) while prioritizing balance and consistency of student and teacher daily schedules. Consider providing information on best practices for when different

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
	<p>options may be appropriate and ensure teachers identify which student IEP goal is being addressed by each instructional technique they use. These methods may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synchronous learning opportunities such as class morning meetings, small group instruction, or 1:1 lessons • Asynchronous learning opportunities such as online instructional platforms, pre-recorded mini-lessons, self-correcting academic activities (printed or picked-up/delivered to students, including manipulatives the student may need); ensure teacher and student training on use of these online instructional platforms • Parent-supported activities such as incorporating IEP goals, academic content, or daily living skills into home routines (e.g., preparing a meal, completing chores) • Social activities that provide access to a range of peers, including access to school synchronous activities (morning announcements with principal, virtual dance party) or specially planned opportunities (video lunch bunch with peers, neighborhood socially distanced meet-ups). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide parameters and share best practices for offering intervention in the virtual setting. Parameters should include expectations regarding scheduling and delivery of interventions/supplementary instruction while best practices should provide guidance around how certain intervention protocols or programs might be adapted or shifted to be delivered in a virtual setting. • When identifying technology solutions (platforms, devices, software, etc.), identify and understand the diversity of student needs and identify a technology strategy that is flexible in meeting a variety of needs and prioritizes addressing privacy-related concerns. Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When selecting computer-based intervention platforms, prioritize options that provide students with immediate feedback, appropriate accommodations, and meaningful data on student progress. • When selecting student-used technology, consider what devices might provide the most access for different students (i.e., consider if a touch-screen tablet may provide increased access for some students in lieu of a laptop computer). • Utilize platforms that are HIPAA/FERPA compliant and that center on participant safety. • Identify functionality and strategies that maintain privacy in group instruction by using breakout rooms, turning off videos, or providing 1:1 service as necessary. • Identify expectations and procedures to support students in accessing needed materials they would normally access at school. Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investing in and/or providing teachers time to create additional instructional materials to be kept at home (e.g., math manipulatives, sound cards, laminated PECS cards, assistive technology or communication devices).

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying safe ways for families to collect the materials from their student's school or centralized location. Identify a common scheduling template to ensure collaboration between schools, providers of related services (i.e., telehealth/telemedicine), and families to identify times that are best for service. Identify a common planning template with a consistent lesson format for teachers to use with students each day. For example, create and utilize a PowerPoint lesson template that teachers can update with the day's lesson but has consistent elements for students to follow daily.

SCENARIO 4: INTERMITTENT VIRTUAL AND IN-PERSON LEARNING

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> All guiding questions under Scenario 1, Scenario 2, and Scenario 3 What challenges arise due to intermittent periods of virtual learning? Which students are most affected by intermittent transitions to remote learning? As updates for Tier 1 instruction are being made, how can Tier 1 be modified to be more inclusive? What guidance will need to be in place to support decisions around when remediation/RTI are appropriate in different learning environments? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All ideas under Scenario 1, Scenario 2, and Scenario 3. Set expectations for all schools to develop a family check-in protocol ahead of school closures. Check-in protocols should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identification of team members who are prepared to initiate and oversee this protocol upon closure to minimize time students and families are out of contact. Identification of a central point person (i.e., teacher, school leader) to reach out to each student and/or family Procedure for tracking outreach and escalating to school leaders if teachers are unable to teach a student and/or family. Be informed by information collected during school closures regarding difficult-to-reach families. Identify strategies to leverage during in-person instruction to establish strong communication channels, especially with families and students who were difficult to reach during previous school closures. Provide technology to use in person from the start of the year and encourage school leaders and teachers to incorporate potential virtual learning platforms into the school setting. This will increase student familiarity with procedures should school need to transition to virtual instruction. Establish expectations for students to bring to school and take home certain instructional materials every day.

DEVELOPING STRATEGIES AND BUILDING EDUCATOR CAPACITY TO MEET NEEDS OF DIVERSE LEARNERS

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can the district build educator capacity to meet the needs of diverse learners in different learning environments? 2. How can the district invest in technology that supports educators in teaching students with diverse needs in in-person, physically-distanced learning and virtual learning? 3. How can the district create opportunities for collaboration between general education and specialized teachers to collectively meet the needs of all students? 4. What protocols will the district have in place to respond quickly and with clarity in implementing IEP, 504, and EL guidance that is released throughout the school year? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Message that diverse learners are a priority for leaders and highlight the need to develop skills to serve them across all school teams. • Provide and encourage all educators to participate in regular professional learning that incorporate strategies for serving diverse learners. Areas of focus for professional learning should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best practices for use of <i>virtual learning tools</i>. District trainings may focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting teachers in leveraging new tools during in-person and virtual instruction. • Supporting teachers in building student and family capacity to use new tools. • Instructional strategies across <i>service methods</i>, particularly in virtual setting (i.e., co-teaching, small group intervention, 1:1 instruction). District trainings may focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on the characteristics and “look fors” for high-quality, inclusive classroom instruction and intervention in each learning scenario. This training could include the district’s vision and exemplars that support teachers in implementing quality instruction and intervention. • Training on methods should emphasize the use of multiple ways for students to access, express, and engage in learning across different learning scenarios. • Training for school leaders and teacher leaders on strategies for identifying and addressing areas of unfinished learning among students while avoiding overwhelming current intervention systems. This training could include incorporating daily intervention blocks for all students, using the intervention blocks to build up foundational skills needed to access grade-level learning, selecting interventions and methods that support positive skill development toward core curriculum success, monitoring progress frequently in order to remain responsive to individual student needs, and adjusting triggers between tiers to reflect current context and need for time to recoup learning. • <i>Social-emotional skills and strategies</i>. Students will need time to process their experiences surrounding the health crisis, intermittent learning, and challenges that come with growing up in this climate. District trainings could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for school-based teams to be able to respond to students in crisis, including identifying crisis response teams, proactive safety measures, and the use of non-violent physical restraint. These trainings should focus on specific strategies in maintaining staff safety through the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) during in-person instruction and supportive de-escalation strategies.

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on developing and implementing individualized behavior support plans, with emphasis on proactive classroom procedures that may mitigate challenges. For example, school teams may provide spaces or means for students to self-isolate in the classroom (noise-cancelling headphones or sensory breaks) or create other opportunities to “recharge” if they become overstimulated during in-person instruction. • Training on supporting students who have difficulty with transitions by anticipating and addressing these needs from the beginning to avoid significant time to acclimate and decrease regression for students prone to experience it. • Build teacher capacity to <i>design IEPs</i> and individual student growth goals in new and evolving learning environments. District trainings could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on frameworks designed to guide need-aligned and consistent decisions about selecting service methods and delivery times. • Training for school teams on developing learning units and lessons that align with IEP goals, promote independence, and support generalization between home and school settings. • Build skills and strategies to <i>communicate with families early and often</i>. District trainings could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training on collaborating with families to determine a learning schedule that works for them and their children, developing visual schedules and using choice boards or menus to promote flexibility in how learning goals are accomplished, and providing social stories about school being online and what that means for communicating with the teacher. • Training on how to tap into lived experiences of students, home language(s), and strengths of families by incorporating learning into home routines. Thematic units and project-based learning may increase accessibility. Frequent communication about the student’s academic progress and concerns will allow for adjustments to be made. • Training on identifying methods to equip families with strategies to support behavior, social, and emotional progress, especially those that support students through transitions to remote learning platforms or protocols. • Training to support teachers in developing school opening procedures that incorporate additional time to build relationships and rapport with students and families. • Training on available resources for interacting and communicating with families such as translation services to translate resources into the home language(s) of families.

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and update (as necessary) onboarding and induction processes to support special education and English learner teachers in getting to know their teammates, school systems, and curriculum resources, especially in socially distanced and virtual settings. Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assigning role-similar peer mentors • Providing regular access to administration and instructional coaches • Establishing a cadence of collecting regular input from these new teachers • Set expectations for school leaders to schedule intentional times for staff collaboration, especially between core content and specialized support teachers, and to preserve these times during each potential learning scenario. As new needs arise in this setting, it will be essential to keep open lines of communication, discuss possible responses, and implement solutions with urgency. • Establish communities of practice specifically for specialized teachers in which specialized teachers can learn about new best practices and engage in networks with one another across the district or regionally to continue to grow instruction, especially in new and evolving learning environments. • Provide access to ongoing coaching opportunities for specialized teachers across all scenarios of reopening to accompany available professional learning opportunities. • Develop a communication framework for disseminating clear guidance as it changes throughout the year. Identify roles and responsibilities of team members at all levels of the organization that relate to ensuring diverse learners have access to quality educational opportunities. Calendar regular meetings to discuss latest guidance, current data, and plans to respond. • Investigate investment in educator-used technology that clarifies the learning process for students. This could include quality microphones or cameras that transmit sounds and visuals clearly or student management systems with user-friendly interfaces and ways to centralize tasks in one platform. • Identify and share strategies for utilizing and building the capacity of paraprofessionals to support students in meeting their learning outcomes. Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Including paraprofessionals in applicable professional learning opportunities. • Assigning paraprofessionals to serve specific students during in-person and virtual instruction. • Identifying mentor teachers to provide coaching and support for paraprofessionals • Identify systems, procedures, and expectations for transferring knowledge of students from one grade level or teaching team to the next ahead of school reopening. Consider encouraging school leaders to hold space for teams to unpack information and dedicate team resources to planning to support specific groups or individual students.

Guiding Questions	Ideas to Consider
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Investigate and weigh the impact of maintaining consistency of staff serving groups of students, particularly through looping practices and/or assigning paraprofessionals to students or groups of students they are familiar with serving.• Continue to reference federal and state guidance as it becomes available. Modifications for how meetings should be conducted, decisions documented, and services provided will continue to evolve over this season. In a space of uncertainty, prioritize communication with families, deepening understanding of student needs, providing IEP/ILP aligned service, and documenting these decisions.