

State Education Agency Considerations

for CARES Act Funding as Related to Digital Learning

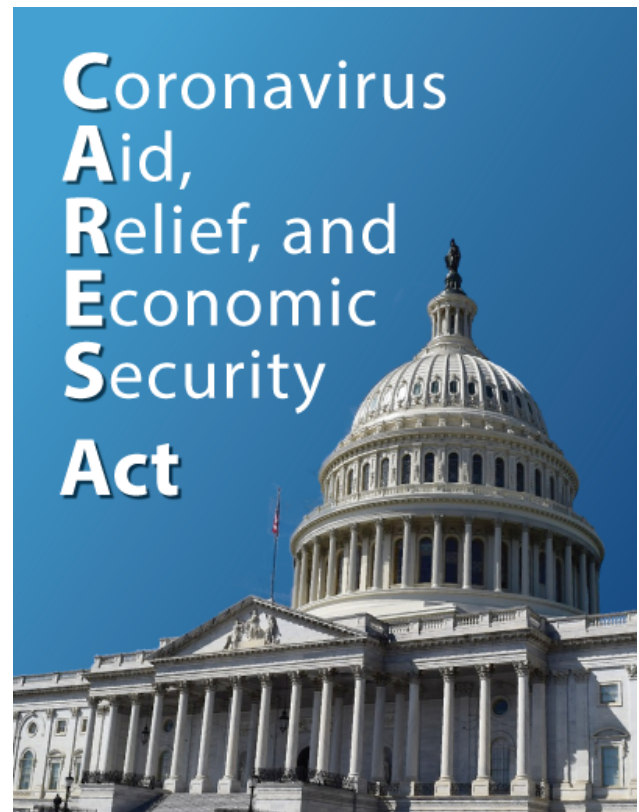
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Executive Summary

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, signed into law on March 27, provides flexible funding for states

to respond to the COVID-19 emergency in K-12 schools. CARES Act funds allow state and district funds to be spent on resources such as technology tools, professional development for educators, sanitation of buildings, and broadband access for students and teachers. Overall, these funds provide an opportunity for state educational agencies (SEAs), eligible local educational agencies (LEAs), and schools to develop digital learning plans and processes to support remote learning for emergency situations as well as long term digital learning opportunities. With planning, policies and practices, state leaders can demonstrate to districts and schools a commitment to quality digital learning opportunities which also support the personalized needs of all learners. SETDA has developed this document to provide a resource for state leaders regarding considerations for expenditures.



CARES Act Funding Overview

- [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund](#) **\$13.5 billion:** This grant is distributed to states based on their share of ESEA Title I-A funds. State education agencies will then distribute at least 90% of funds to school districts and public charter schools based on their share of Title I-A funds.
- [Governor's Emergency Relief Fund](#) **\$3 Billion:** The grants permit Governors to provide additional assistance to the educational entities that are most significantly impacted by the emergency.
- [Rethinking K-12 Education Models \(REM\) grant program](#) **\$180 million:** These grants provides support to help States leverage the power of entrepreneurship to create new educational opportunities and pathways that help citizens return to work, small businesses recover, and new entrepreneurs thrive.

A more comprehensive overview of the CARES Act support for education is available via the [eLearning Coalition's Funding Page](#).

Background and Definitions

[SETDA](#), the principal membership association representing U.S. state and territorial digital learning leaders for the last 19 years, is best suited to provide this guidance, intended to assist state and local leaders in ensuring continuity of learning through the effective use of technology. This work is framed through the [eLearning Coalition](#), launched in March 2020, to provide the opportunity to spark innovation around eLearning related to the COVID-19 virus, inevitable inclement weather and other disruptive events.

Beyond COVID-19

In addition to preparation for any future disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and to support continued instruction during inclement weather or eLearning Days during teacher professional development days, schools and districts need to continue to support the development of high-quality digital learning opportunities for all students both on and off-campus. The thoughtful integration of technology provides students personalized pathways to engage in content and creative ways to demonstrate evidence of their learning. With mobile devices, collaborative digital tools, interactive virtual reality, and access to primary resources, today's students can experience learning that

truly meets their individual needs and interests and schools can provide equitable instruction for all learners. Well-planned and supported comprehensive digital learning opportunities can support educational opportunities both on-campus and off-campus.

Online Learning Definitions

- **Blended Learning:** Generally, refers to the combination of digital content or tools with a more traditional, face-to-face classroom setting. Schools that use a learning management system and have established digital modes of communication even for their on-campus interaction fall into this category and will have a much easier transition to eLearning.
- **Digital Learning:** Broadly refers to any learning powered by technology, regardless of whether it occurs inside or outside of the classroom. Within the scope of digital learning are fully online courses, blended learning, as well as more traditional pedagogical practices that employ digital content or interactions. Digital learning has a tremendous capacity to empower educators who are willing to provide their students with equitable opportunities, and individualized instruction. Digital learning enables a freedom and flexibility of learning. Where traditional learning has expected students to learn together, in the same way and at the same pace; digital solutions allow learning to take place outside the bounds of the classroom, as well as the time constraints of the school day or year.
- **eLearning:** At times, synonymous with virtual learning, where all instruction is delivered online. In practice, eLearning was the name adopted by many states who implemented stay-home digital learning when schools were closed for inclement weather. These practices required district preparedness as well as teacher training and leaned on an established culture of blended learning in the district.
- **Remote Learning:** Leaders have adopted the term for the emergency measures taken during COVID-19 closures. Some solutions have included digital measures, but where access is lacking, this may include paper packets. Remote learning also distinguishes itself from eLearning because of the prolonged period of instruction without the benefit of a return to the classroom.

Statewide Considerations for eLearning

As states rallied in March 2020 to support remote learning for students across the country, 13 states had policies and practices in place to support learning days off-campus, several other states had statewide digital learning initiatives to support device access and digital content however, the majority of states were not prepared to support remote learning. Even states with eLearning Day policies for inclement weather or professional development days, had to adjust policies and practices to support long term efforts.

Importance of State Leadership

To support equitable opportunities for students across a state, state agencies have the ability to demonstrate leadership and provide resources to ensure that all students regardless of location, race, language, special needs or socio-economic barriers have access to quality digital learning experiences. School districts, especially small districts, do not always have the capacity to develop plans, make purchases and provide professional learning in the same way that large or even medium-size districts can. With guidance, policies and modeling, state education agencies can demonstrate a commitment to digital learning on and off-campus. States can support such processes with some or all of the following:

- Enacting state digital learning plans that include SEA leadership for implementation
- Encouraging district digital learning plans
- Defining personalized learning
- Giving guidance around the implementation of digital instructional materials
- Developing digital learning standards for students

SEA Comprehensive Planning

State Plans

The reality of inequities in educator, student, and staff readiness to implement digital learning became clear during the COVID-19 outbreak. Short and long term state digital learning plans can provide recommendations for state action that support K-12 schools as they fully transition to digital age learning. State plans can also provide districts with resources to ensure that local digital learning plans align with and support instructional best practices, are implemented by highly skilled teachers, and lead to personalized learning experiences for all students. ([adapted from the North Carolina Digital Learning Plan](#)). [32 states](#) indicated that they have digital learning plans. In addition, multiple states have also had eLearning plans in place prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Access state plans on SETDA's [eLearning Coalition State Plans page](#). States should be sure to develop on-going digital learning plans that include details regarding short and long term remote learning. Plans should be updated annually.

SEA Leadership Staff for Digital Learning

Each state agency should have leadership to support the implementation of digital learning and this should include, at minimum, an SEA primary digital learning leader and support staff to carry forward innovative educational learning opportunities both on and off-campus. SEA staff leadership can provide:

- Technical assistance for SEA leaders to understand and implement digital learning
- Coordination of cross-agency support for digital learning
- A support network for LEA digital learning implementation
- Ensure support for all learners including special education students and second language learners.

State Spending Considerations

When considering expenditures states may consider statewide contracts or state master contracts to support districts and to provide more cost effective implementation of digital tools, resources and/or professional development. In addition, districts should consider multi-district or regional consortia to potentially drive down costs. Some items that may be considered for statewide, state master contracts and/or consortia purchasing may include:

- Digital devices, hotspots and/or monthly access fees
- Learning management systems, content management systems, resource repositories
- Support to implement data standards
- Digital content
- Professional learning opportunities

Evaluation for Impact

States and districts made every effort to support students and families during a rapid response to provide digital learning in the wake of COVID-19. The CARES Act funding provides the opportunity to gather state, district and school exemplars and also lessons learned. SEAs can provide technical assistance to those districts that were unable to engage in digital learning as they had hoped so that each is best prepared to implement digital learning and to support students during any future disruptions in learning.

Competency-Based Considerations

As digital learning provides personalized learning opportunities, SEAs may consider leveraging CARES Act funding to explore or implement competency based learning. Strong implementation also requires policies, pedagogy, structures, and culture that support every student in developing essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions. To learn more about competency based learning access the [What is Competency Based Education?](#) document.

Additional Planning Resources:

- [eLearning Coalition - State Plans](#)
- [Transformative Digital Learning: A Guide to Implementation](#)

Equitable Access to Devices and Broadband On-Campus and Off-Campus

The COVID-19 outbreak brought to light the inequities in broadband and device access both on and off-campus. Addressing digital equity for all students continues to be a challenge and stakeholders must work to ensure not only equitable access to broadband and devices in class, as well as away from campus. Every child, regardless of background, race or economic status deserves equitable access to personalized, student-centered learning experiences to prepare for living and working in the digital age.

State Leadership for On-Campus Access

States demonstrate leadership for broadband access through legislation, initiatives, partnerships, statewide broadband networks, regional networks, and/or statewide purchasing consortia to facilitate reliable, cost-effective internet access for districts. No one state has the same policies or practices, yet all are providing leadership. With reliable high-speed broadband access, teachers can utilize digital tools and applications to cultivate student-centered, personalized learning. In the recent blog post from Education Elements, "How Can Personalized Learning Support Educational Equity," Noah Dougherty states that "personalized learning can be a powerful tool for educators seeking to provide equitable outcomes for students" and that "the equity lens can become a driving purpose behind personalized learning." Personalized learning experiences enable students to collaborate with their teachers and take ownership of their learning opportunities through flexibility and choice. Further, as discussed in the article, Pursue Digital Equity Through Access and Opportunity – All Means All, access to high-speed broadband and devices does not necessarily ensure engaging interactions with technology and changes in pedagogy. In many schools, teachers are still using technology to simply replace paper documents for drill and practice. The article points out that this is more prevalent for low-income, non-white students.

***Please note:** Although the recommendations below include potential support for hotspots and devices, as of April 2020, there is a supply shortage. States potentially have the opportunity to work with the private sector to coordinate purchases and

dissemination which could potentially expedite the process for districts. This also provides support for districts, especially small districts that have minimal staff capacity.

Off-Campus Access

With the advent of COVID-19, nearly all public and private school buildings have closed and the homework gap is rapidly becoming an education gap for millions of minority, low-income and rural students. With libraries closed and stay-at-home orders in place in most states and cities, students cannot avail themselves of free Wi-Fi opportunities and may have no ability to go online at all. Further, only 1 out of 4 school districts currently offer loaner Wi-Fi hotspots, meaning that the vast majority of the nation's students cannot rely on schools right now to provide home connectivity. Some school districts were forced to provide printed packets of independent work, send home textbooks and perhaps provide telephone office hours so that students without technology were not at a disadvantage.

With more than 70 percent of educators assigning homework that requires the internet (outside of the COVID-19 crisis), many low-income and rural students are at an educational and technological disadvantage even before the COVID-19 outbreak.

The numbers on the homework gap run well into the millions: Pew Research in 2018 indicated that 15% of K-12 students were victims of the homework gap. With the number of K-12 public and private students at 56.6 million, that means that roughly 8.5 million students lack home Internet access. The Joint Economic Committee Democrats report (2017) suggests the number of unconnected students at home is even higher – 12 million students. The homework gap afflicts minority households disproportionately. According to Pew Research, 25% of all black households with school-age children and 23% of all Hispanic households with school-age children lacked high speed Internet access. Only 10% of white households with school-age children lacked high speed Internet access – a significant gap. Additionally, 11% of black teens and 18% of Hispanic teens do not have a computer at home. By contrast, 9% of white teens do not have a home computer. The homework gap hits low-income families particularly hard. According to Pew, more than one-third of households with school-age children that earn less than \$30,000 lacked high-speed Internet access. Only 6% of families with school-age children earning \$75,000 or more lacked high-speed Internet access. The differences are similar for teen home computers, with one-quarter of families earning

less than \$30,000 lacking computer access at home and only 4% of families earning more than \$75,000 lacking home computers. Rural students face significant homework gap challenges. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center report, 37% of rural Americans have no home broadband Internet access. They trail urban residents by 12 points and suburban residents by 16 points. Rural Americans are also less likely to have a tablet or laptop/computer than urban and suburban residents. In Mississippi, which serves 235,000 rural students, the Census Bureau reports that one-fifth of Mississippi households do not have a computer and nearly one-third lack high-speed Internet access. According to the FCC, half of the residents of the Mississippi Delta have no access to the Internet.

Device Access

State education agencies can leverage CARES Act (and/or state funding) to help ensure device access for all students. Multiple states have grant programs supporting device access to school districts. In addition, [Pennsylvania and Texas launched emergency responses to COVID-19](#). States have the opportunity to provide leadership in the selection and deployment of devices by developing guidance and sharing best practices with districts.

Schools and districts vary in their approach to deployment of devices depending on budget considerations and needs assessments. Identifying the most appropriate new devices can be challenging, but it is a critical element of the planning process. There are multiple options available including tablets, laptops, cloud based devices, eReaders and smartphones. Because technology is continually evolving, it is important for leaders to keep abreast of the field. Key considerations for leaders include:

- Assessing the professional learning needs for teachers for implementation of digital learning instruction.
- Assessing the student readiness for the implementation of digital learning instruction of all students including those with learning disabilities, assistive technology needs, and language barriers.
- Analyzing the impact of the various device options and the number of planned devices on the networks, broadband and Wi-Fi systems.

- Comparing the direct device costs and costs for digital applications and resources.
- Considering the costs for deployment, tech support and refreshing devices. (Tech support can be extremely costly and is on-going. Many districts may find that including tech support in the device contract is more cost effective.)
- Bundling filtering into device purchases which may save the school or district both direct funding and staff time.
- Considering the costs for deployment, including student and parent trainings and acceptable use policy implementation.

BYOD Considerations

States can also provide guidance on Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) or Bring Your Own Technology (BYOT) implementation. Some schools allow students to bring personal technology devices to school for educational purposes under the direction of teachers and administrators. These BYOD/BYOT programs provide district-owned devices to students who do not have access to a personal device. While BYOD can ease budget pressures by relying to some degree on not having to purchase devices for every student, each school will still need to plan to purchase devices for the students who cannot afford them. In addition, BYOD programs with various devices from home can raise concerns regarding network security and classroom management of a variety of devices with different operating systems. Tech support can also become more complicated. If a student-owned device has technical problems, the tech support staff may not have the necessary background knowledge of the device and operating system to easily solve the problem. Policies for tech support should clearly spell out whether or not the district will support student-owned devices. Some districts define what types of devices they will support, and parents rely on those policies to inform purchasing decisions for their children.

Essential Elements

In addition to the hardware costs for broadband and device access, states should provide guidance to ensure student data privacy, cybersecurity and tech support.

- **Student Data Privacy:** When acquiring digital applications and resources, considerations related to student data privacy are essential. As the collection and

shared access to data increases, states recognize the need to have a clear understanding of data privacy, confidentiality and security practices related to uses of student data, and to provide guidance to districts when needed. States and districts should be certain that policies are in place regarding who has access to student data and review third party agreements for compliance around use, protection and destruction of student personally identifiable data. The Data Quality Campaign (DQC) encourages states to engage with the community to build trust around the value of education data to improve learning. The [U.S. Department of Education established the Protecting Student Privacy](#) website providing technical assistance to help districts and schools use best practices in their use and management of student information.

- **Network Security:** Network security monitoring, management and communication are fundamental components of network design. In a digital learning environment, any time the network is compromised results in a disruption of teaching and learning. As more schools move towards the utilization of digital instructional materials and applications, it is critical to maintain a reliable, robust network and states can provide leadership through tech support, guidance on best practice and support in the event of an attack. Incident response plans and mitigation are critical because no network is 100 percent secure. The most important components of the incident and mitigation plan are preparation, communications and restoration. ENA developed the [Network Security Recommendations Checklist](#) as a resource for districts to diagnose their defenses and preparedness in the following key area: cybersecurity, risk management and data privacy.
- **Tech Support:** When purchasing devices or broadband access, tech support. Tech support can be extremely costly and is on-going. Many districts may find that including tech support in the device contract is more cost effective. In addition, filtering tools can also be bundled into device purchases which may save the school or district both direct funding and staff time.

Additional Broadband Resources:

- [State K-12 Education Broadband Leadership \(Report and Map\)](#)
- [Broadband Imperative Reports](#)
- State K12 Broadband Case Studies: [Kentucky](#), [Minnesota](#), [Connecticut](#)

State Leadership for Professional Learning

Statewide Online Professional Learning

Sustainable professional learning models geared specifically to support teachers in student centered, digital learning environments can positively impact the teaching and learning experiences. The implementation of quality professional learning opportunities also helps to ensure equity. Equity is not limited to access to devices and broadband (see access section but also the quality of implementation of the technology and quality resources. Schools need to be sure to define what tools are available and how to leverage such technology will be critical. One of the most important components in the transformation to digital learning is ensuring that educators have adequate training to effectively implement digital tools and applications. However, educators need to understand not only how to use digital tools and resources, but also they need professional learning opportunities on how to select and implement high-quality digital instructional materials. Areas to consider in support of digital learning include digital literacy, remote learning pedagogy and accessibility. This professional development could be coordinated by the state agency or via a state master contract. [Leverage National Online Teaching Standards](#) In addition to teachers, administrators and digital learning coaches will also need professional development.

Professional Learning Events

In conjunction with on-going online professional learning opportunities, SEAs should consider supporting online and/or in-person events to support digital learning implementation.

Online Communities of Practice

Online, face-to-face and hybrid models of communities of practice provide educators, administrators and coaches with the ability to connect with colleagues both asynchronously and in real-time to share resources, successes and challenges. Teachers and administrators benefit from the ongoing support available through these communities as they grow and expand to support the diverse needs of educators. Communities may connect teachers of similar content areas or grade levels statewide. Communities of practice differ from educators' online courses, online courses are more

structured, typically requiring specific content and activities within a specific time period.

Pre-service Teachers

As states develop digital learning plans for on-going digital learning opportunities, considerations for teacher certification and recertification as related to digital literacy and digital learning implementation may be considered.

Parent Support and Guidance

When students are expected to learn from home, parents need training on how they can best support digital learning, to understand the value of digital learning and technical assistance on the use of technologies. States can support districts by providing statewide hotlines or office hours to provide technical assistance.

Additional Professional Learning Resources:

- [Professional Learning Dashboard](#)
- [eLearning Coalition - Teacher Resources](#)

Digital Instructional Materials:

State Leadership for the Selection and Implementation of Quality Content

One of the fundamental elements for a successful shift to the utilization of digital instructional materials and tools is state leadership. With policies and practices, state leaders can demonstrate to districts and schools a commitment to digital learning. With policies and practices, state leaders can demonstrate to districts and schools a commitment to the utilization of digital instructional materials and resources to support personalized learning where the student is the center of the learning experience. Effective planning is essential when selecting quality instructional materials aligned to standards, whether a state reviews resources as a service to districts or districts conduct the review, adoption and implementation process on their own, all states can provide leadership. Developing a process for the selection and implementation of quality instructional materials is more important than ever with the growing number of available digital resources for both core courses and supplemental materials. [Multiple states provide some type of review process or guidance](#) that includes digital instructional materials.

Digital Considerations

When selecting instructional materials, districts, schools and teachers should consider digital tools and resources that focus on the active use of technology that enables learning through creation, production and problem solving. Passive uses of technology such as apps that mimic worksheets or flashcards simply substitute analog tools and do not necessarily enhance learning opportunities because they are digital. Learn more: <https://qualitycontent.setda.org/planning/#technology-considerations>

Apps and Supplemental Materials

SEAs may consider providing state master contracts or statewide access for evidence based, supplemental online resources such as interactive apps or simulation tools to support reinforcement and student engagement.

Accessibility for All Learners

With the imminent shift from print to digital, education leaders must proactively consider the accessibility of digital resources for all students, including students with disabilities. To both comply with legislation and optimize teaching and learning opportunities for every student, states and districts should develop policies and best practices that ensure the provision of accessible materials and technologies. Digital materials and technologies are accessible when students with and without disabilities can use them in an equally integrated and equally effective manner, and with substantially equivalent ease of use. Accessible materials are designed or enhanced in a way that makes them usable by the widest possible range of learner variability, regardless of format (print, digital, graphical, audio, video). Accessible technologies are usable by students with a wide range of abilities and disabilities and are directly usable without assistive technology (AT) or usable with it (accessibletech.org). Students with disabilities use a range of AT for communicating, perceiving information, and physically interacting with materials and technologies. States and districts also have the responsibility of communicating accessibility requirements to publishers and technology developers. The [National AEM Center](#) provides best practices for communicating digital accessibility requirements in procurement policies and guidelines. Currently, 30 states have a definition for accessible educational materials either based in state statute or the federal definition and 29 states have a definition for accessible technologies. States can

support the coordination of SEA and LEA guidelines for accessibility. Also, states can facilitate the collaboration of SEA digital learning and accessibility leaders and encourage that LEAs seek technical assistance in support of special education students.

Curation:

After instructional materials are approved, states, the vetted materials need to be curated. Key considerations include options for packaging the content and hosting the instructional materials content. Instructional materials should be packaged so that they are easily accessible for teachers; useful to teachers; and searchable by content area, standard or grade. States and districts may choose multiple options for hosting instructional materials including state digital repository; state hosted or state master contract content management system; state hosted or state master contract learning management system; or a vendor platform.

- **Resource Repositories:** After instructional materials are approved, states, districts and schools must curate those vetted materials so that they are easily searched and located by educators and students. States and districts may choose multiple options for hosting instructional materials including a state digital resource repository or a statewide content management system. The benefit of a resource repository is that teachers can be confident that the materials are high quality in support of impacting student learning. Repositories may include both copyrighted and openly licensed materials and may be either purchased or free. In some cases, states require state credentials for access even if the resources are free. Some states manage their own repositories, other states partner with other education stakeholders or contract out for these services. Currently, [27 states support resource repositories.](#)
- **Content and Learning Management Systems:** When considering digital instructional materials, in addition to the quality standards for print materials, leaders need to ensure that the materials will be easily and seamlessly accessible for all learners. After instructional materials are selected, the materials need to be curated. Instructional materials should be packaged so that they are easily accessible for teachers; useful to teachers; and searchable by content area, standard or grade. States should consider state hosted/state master contract content management system or state hosted/state master contract learning management system. [12 states host or have a state master contract](#) for a content management system and [13 states have a state hosted or state master contract](#) for a learning management system.

Technical Considerations

- **Interoperability - State Leadership for Data Standards Adoption:** State leadership is essential for developing interoperable solutions that support the best future state where student data will be seamlessly incorporated by all stakeholders to support the ultimate goal of student success. As states and districts explore and adopt new resources and content, this is a time to consider data standards and how each tool/resource can work together. Interoperability begins with the procurement process, providing an opportunity for states and districts to include data standards requirements in requests for proposals. Ideally, data from multiple products such as a learning management system, a student information system and learning object repositories will be aligned to the same common data standards. Without interoperability, districts may incur significant costs and staff time trying to integrate systems that are not interoperable. More recently, in SETDA's 2018 State Education Leadership Interoperability: Leveraging Data for Academic Excellence publication, state academic and interoperability goals focus on improving student success; personalizing instruction; improving data collection and reporting; safeguarding data security and privacy; ensuring portability of student data; and improving states' ability to assess efficacy of education technology products. <https://www.setda.org/priorities/interoperability/projectnessie/>
- **Single Sign-On Considerations:** A single sign-on (SSO) system allows users to enter their credentials once (typically a username and password) to gain access to multiple systems. This allows organizations to provide seamless environments for their users across all their platforms as well as, in some cases, services provided by third parties. [Learn More](#) K12 systems should consider single sign-on systems to support student privacy, ensure that teachers and students are accessing the tools and resources provided and to simplify the process to access resources.

Additional Resources for Digital Materials

- [eLearning Coalition - Content & Lessons](#)
- [Navigating the Digital Shift Report 2019](#)
- [Digital Instructional Materials Acquisition Policies for States](#)
- [Guide to Quality Instructional Materials](#)
- [State K12 Instructional Materials Leadership Trends Snapshot](#)
- [K12 Instructional Materials Dashboard](#)

Well-being Support

Digital tools and resources can support the well-being of students and families by providing digital content, guidance and interactive applications to support families.

- **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Support - Educators and Families:** As the Coronavirus spreads and schools, families and students are impacted by social distancing measures and/or sickness, students, parents and teachers alike will need support to adjust to the changes, potential anxiety and other mental health issues. States should consider investing in SEL support services and professional learning opportunities for educators to help support students. Support and educational opportunities for parents and students via online tools and resources. Resources and additional background information is available online. <https://insidesel.com/2020/03/12/covid-19/> Common Sense Education has [reviewed SEL apps](#) available for students.
- **Technology Considerations:** As students shift to digital learning and families are self isolating there are considerations that parents should be provided related to screen time to help ensure the health and well being of students. A variety of organizations have provided guidance related to screen time including [UCLA Health](#), [Common Sense](#) and [Project Tomorrow](#). States and districts may consider investing in parent resources and trainings related to screen time.
- **Parental Support:** Parents struggle to support digital learning full time and also need to be educated regarding expectations and safety and security measures when their students are learning online. States and districts can support parents by providing online tools and resources regarding student data privacy and student expectations for learning at home.

Additional Well-being Resources

- [Parental Guide Student Data Privacy](#)
- [Future of Privacy Forum Parent Guide](#)