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Boost your School's Emergency Preparedness with Practical Tech Tools

How can schools ensure comprehensive emergency preparedness, including the ability to serve both on-campus and remote students via a hybrid instruction model when standard in-person learning is not possible? COVID-19 was an awakening moment on such issues. It catalyzed a rapid shift away from face-to-face interactions, with almost 60,000 K-12 institutions shutting their doors in spring 2020.[1]

However, the typical Plan B for subsequently transitioning to virtual classrooms did not enable a smooth end to the school year.

Both teachers and students will struggle to adapt to these types of scenarios without a proper plan in place. Possible complicating issues range from insufficient experience in virtual classrooms to lack of internet access. As one Brooklyn teacher told The Wall Street Journal not long after the initial wave of

closures, there was also an incorrect assumption that students would be able to easily transition from being "digital consumers" to "digital learners."[2]

There is a lot to be learned from the initial K-12 COVID-19 pandemic response that can help an administration better their current and future education disaster preparedness. It has become apparent that proper planning for emergencies hinges on supporting a blend of in-class and remote instruction. It has been a necessity for COVID-19 response, given vulnerable populations and social distancing-related space constraints. In addition, proper adherence to public health guidance and adequate staff training are essential. Building a robust emergency response plan can be further strengthened by integrating practical technology solutions into planning, simplifying the configuration of safer, more flexible learning environments.

1 https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html
2 https://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-coronavirus-remote-learning-lockdown-tech-11591375078

Understanding and Addressing the Challenges of Hybrid Instruction

Ensuring high-quality education during a state of emergency requires a concerted effort, to say the least. Even the most effective option - i.e., a hybrid instruction model - requires the simultaneous delivery of an accessible, consistent and engaging experience for remote learners, and a clean, safe environment for their on-campus counterparts.

Consistency of tools is paramount here, since instructors and students could be frequently asked to shift between virtual and in-person classrooms. The right technologies should be easy to set up and use from anywhere, enabling everyone to focus on learning as much as possible despite lingering challenges. Let's look at how some practical tech tools address the biggest challenges of a hybrid instruction model.
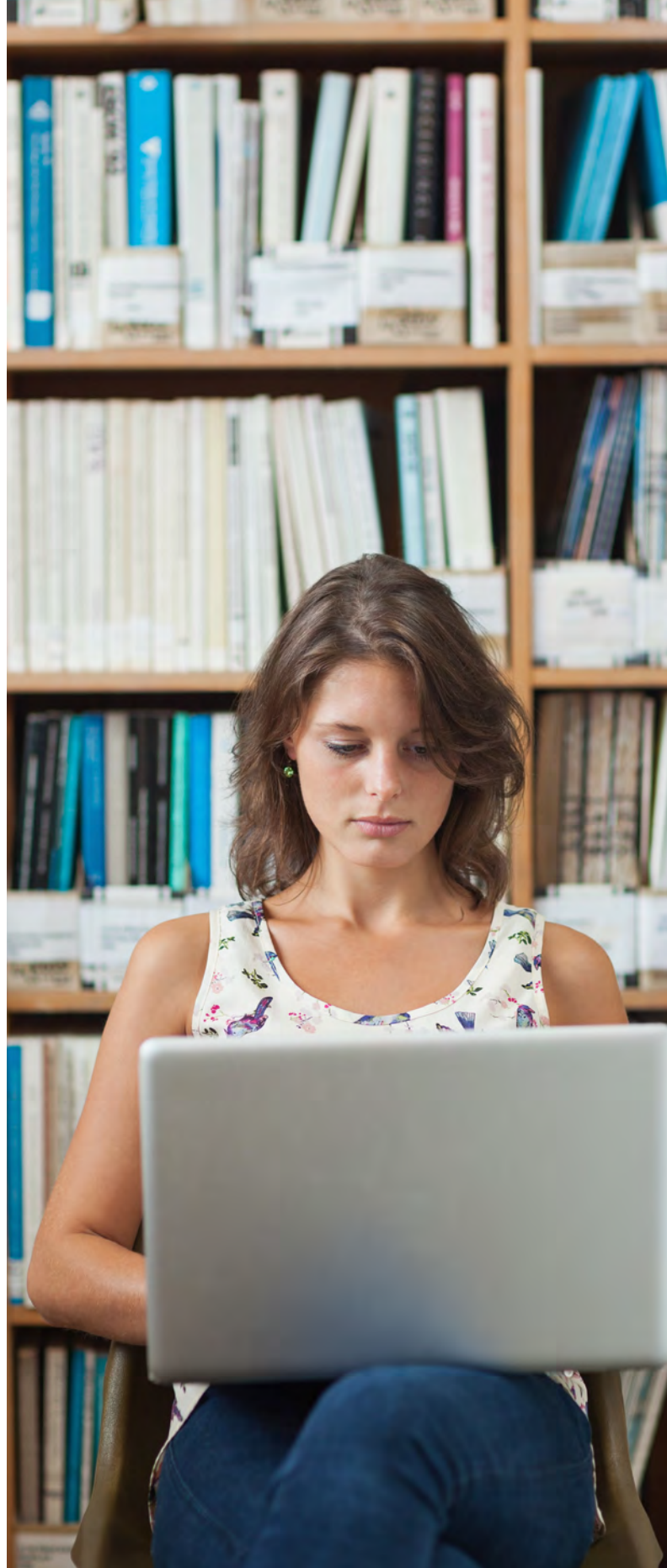
Challenge #1: Student Participation and Engagement

For K-12, distance learning is associated with much higher absenteeism than in-person instruction. Los Angeles schools saw approximately one-third of their students fall out of contact with teachers from March 2020 through the end of that school year.[3]

Elsewhere, in lower-income urban, as well as rural areas, limitations on network access and speeds have greatly hindered virtual transitions.

Wide-scale, full-time remote learning enablement has yet to mature, highlighting deficiencies that need to be addressed before participation and engagement reach acceptable levels.

The L.A. Unified School District's distribution of computers to students and its financial support for internet plans, which helped thousands of students stay connected even while remote, show the outlines of a sustainable way forward.

Integrating additional essential supporting technologies into response plans can further assist:

Headsets for enhanced focus: A USB headset reduces background noise - which can otherwise drain productivity - and enable increased focus during online meetings.[4]

Chromebooks™ for versatility: As students and teachers move across locations, Chromebooks offer broad app support, while compatible accessories like mice and video dongles offer versatile connectivity options.

Ergonomic accessories: Ergonomic stands, rests, and peripherals enable optimal body positioning, increasing comfort and thus engagement.

Balancing functionality, portability and ergonomic comfort across all of this hardware is particularly important for hybrid learning environments that are subjected to substantial device wear and tear. Accordingly, Kensington prioritizes durability and build quality for this rough-and-tumble reality.

3 https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-03-30/coronavirus-los-angeles-schools-15000-high-school-students-absent
4 https://www.tlnt.com/when-alls-not-quiet-on-the-office-front-everyone-suffers/

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Challenge #2: Teacher Workstations and Setups

Hybrid learning, with its mix of classroom-based and remote education, puts pressure on teachers to deliver consistent instruction regardless of location. A lesson led from a makeshift home office may have to cover the same material as one conducted, under different circumstances, in a room with a large chalkboard, projector and school-provided device and internet.

In this context, video conferencing in particular has become a pivotal technology, as it provides the closest approximation of being in a shared physical space with others. But it requires a proper setup. Simply roughing it with a laptop or tablet from the couch will likely yield disappointing results, due to choppy audio and a less-than-ideal-ergonomic workspace.

Additional monitors, docking stations, headsets, and laptop stands can help close the gap between full-fledged classrooms and home teaching environments. Many institutions have already formulated policies for how teachers should conduct video conferences, issuing rules on minimizing noise and featuring a presentable background when on camera.[5]

Enabling teachers to setup a remote workspace is key to success:

External Displays: Boost productivity substantially by increasing screen real estate and thus ability to run multiple applications at once.

Feature-Rich Docks: Connect to monitors, mice, keyboards and headsets, so that teachers can expand their workflows, whether they're at school or home.

Headsets with Inline Mic: Support a higher-quality, more focused experience when using popular video solutions like Zoom™, Microsoft Teams™ and Cisco Webex™.

Laptop Stands: Position front-facing cameras into optimal positions for prolonged viewing, e.g. when leading a video lecture.

5   https://www.westonschools.org/blog/2020/04/01/letter-regarding-expectations-guidelines-for-student-parent-use-of-video-conferencing/

Challenge #3:
Device Fleets and
Equipment Sanitization

Shared devices and peripherals will remain important to on-campus instruction. However, they may be paired with more one-to-one deployments of technology during emergencies, for reasons ranging from easier sanitization, to improved portability for students moving between classroom-based and virtual learning environments.

Indeed, one-to-one deployments can help ensure that every student has access to a reliable device, while curbing the health risks of sharing a device or accessory. For example, student-owned cases, clearly marked with each student's name and not shared with anyone else, can protect devices across locations. Many school districts have a long way to go before it becomes feasible for them to provide devices and accessories to everyone, though.

In June 2020, the California Department of Education estimated a shortfall of 765,000 devices, or more than ten times the number it had already distributed at that time.[6] This is why solutions like carts will remain important and require close attention and care.

If one-to-one models are not financially or logistically practical, another alternative is to store devices in a secure charging cabinet and to frequently sanitize them. This approach requires ongoing vigilance and due diligence to ensure sufficient cleaning as part of a wider commitment to keeping classrooms safe while enabling access to devices.

6   https://calmatters.org/education/2020/07/california-digital-divide-distance-learning/

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A Roadmap for Student and Teacher Resiliency

Overall, schools need a thoroughly vetted and strong roadmap to ensure any disruption to education due to an emergency is kept to a minimum. Systematic guidance is crucial, since a DIY model in which every teacher and student is mostly on their own has already proven not to work.

Due to the COVIC-19 pandemic, school districts across the U.S. produced in-depth, public-facing documents describing their intentions for on-site and remote learning — examples can be found here, here and here.

Although approaches vary depending on the number of students a school serves along with the budget and physical space it must operate within, some of the ideas being broadly pursued so far include:

- **Mixed synchronous and asynchronous instruction:** Fully online students may divide their weeks between synchronous sessions with the rest of the class (e.g., via video link and chat) and asynchronous ones on their own.

- **Precise teacher workday structure and support system:** Educators may be allotted a specific number of hours for face-to-face, synchronous online learning and the rest of their time for asynchronous tasks including providing feedback, lesson planning and attending administrative meetings. Moreover, a support system may be set up so that a teacher can get assistance with tasks like reaching an unresponsive student.

- **Applicable heath protocols and social distancing:** In situations like pandemics or more localized outbreaks, in-person instruction will only be possible with a combination of health measures that reduce the number of students in a classroom at any time and curb the risks of contaminated surfaces and devices.

  Regular cleaning of laptops, tablets and other equipment using medical grade-solutions, along with social distancing and smaller classrooms, will be central to a safe experience.

Enacting these general plans requires particular technologies and best practices. Let's examine the practical tech tools that can enable productive and engaging workspaces both in schools and in homes.

Chromebooks and Accessories

Chromebooks have been fixtures of educational environments for years and should continue to be useful in hybrid learning environments, thanks to their price point and highly portable designs, as well as their deep integration with cloud-based services like Google Drive™, which allow for consistent access from anywhere. Google-certified Works with Chromebook accessories like mice and video adapters make these devices versatile and dependable in and outside of the classroom.

Headsets with Mics and Stands

USB headsets are ideal because they have a more durable connector than the classic analog 3.5 mm headphone jack and can easily be plugged into multi-port devices or docks. With an inline microphone, they also pair well with a laptop or tablet stand. This combination allows for an ergonomic setup, conducive to comfortable and productive online meetings while remote.

> *"If a teacher has 10 students in the classroom and 10 at home, we need to think about if we need a stand for their iPad, and if they need a headset and microphone so they can be on a [Microsoft] Teams meeting."*

Dave Termunde
CTO at Arbor Park School District 145, Oak Forest, Illinois.

Docking Stations and Additional Monitors

Docking stations expand USB functionality so that teachers can access more ports than are built into their primary devices. Mice, keyboards, storage drives and more can all be conveniently connected to a dock that functions as a sort of workspace-in-a-box and is easy to set up from anywhere. Multi-monitor and Ethernet support also allow for more productive setups for teachers engaged in complex tasks such as lesson planning, document editing or video conferencing sessions.

Internet Enhancements

Ensuring reliable internet connectivity for every student and instructor is one of the core challenges of hybrid learning models. Financial support from schools is key, but there are other measures that can help at the margins, too. Using an Ethernet connection when possible, via either a dock or an adapter, allows for more consistent connectivity for demanding applications like video and voice during synchronous instruction. Giving teachers equipment budgets for in-home Wi-Fi upgrades, like a newer router model or mesh system, may also be advisable. Upgrading network connectivity in this way is an important component of a broader strategy for consistently staying ahead of emergencies.

"[Implementing technology] is a whole ongoing sustainability issue, Districts need to think about the long term, not what's a Band-Aid now, but what the long-term plan will be."

Dave Termunde
CTO at Arbor Park School District 145, Oak Forest, Illinois.

Staying Prepared for a Challenging Future

Ensuring proper emergency preparedness can seem like an overwhelming project. By itself, the sheer number of different technologies to consider, implement and manage can be daunting. But ultimately, it is safer to evaluate every viable option rather than skip over one only to need it later on.

The concepts and technology solutions covered in this white paper provide a broad and representative cross-section of what may be needed for successful hybrid instruction in the years ahead. Consider the following checklist as a starting point when thinking about possible tech upgrades to support remote and limited on-site learning:

- ☐ Remote instruction policy with expectations and guidelines for teachers and students.
- ☐ A blend of synchronous and asynchronous online learning sessions each week.
- ☐ Chromebook, iPad® and/or other device deployments and support.
- ☐ One-to-one device protocols, or systematic cleaning of any shared devices.
- ☐ Computing peripherals to best enable remote teaching and remote learning engagement.
- ☐ Health protocols for in-person classes, including social distancing and reduced schedules.
- ☐ Rules for video conferences in particular - what platform to use, proper etiquette, etc.
- ☐ Financial and technical support for consistent internet access across environments.

Kensington can assist your school as it prepares and responds to emergencies. Whether you are new to supporting hybrid learning models or optimizing an existing model for success, our experienced team is here to help you craft technology solutions that meet the needs of your staff and students whatever the scenario.

Find out more about how we deliver flexible tools for today's classrooms by visiting our education solutions page.

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