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*May 1, 2020*

*To:* Governors' Offices  
*From:* Bill McBride, Executive Director  
*Re:* Supporting K12 and Postsecondary Virtual Learning Environments

**Summary**

This memo analyzes the need to expand access to and support around virtual learning methods as educational institutions move to online instruction. As schools, colleges, and universities across the country shutter for a few weeks, months, or until next semester due to COVID-19, many institutions are switching to virtual instruction and support services.

Though this is a helpful tool to keep education moving during the shut-down, there are some challenges that governors can address:

- Students and faculty may not have access to reliable broadband or equipment to access virtual learning;
- Faculty and students may not be familiar with technology or techniques to effectively teach and learn, particularly on complex issues; and
- Students need virtual options for on-campus resources for counseling, mental health, and other healthcare needs.

**Important Considerations When Switching to Online Learning Models**

Turning to online options to complete the semester or school year may not always be the best option for programs. For example, schools that have strong experiential learning or laboratory components may want to seek other options, such as lab hours with social distancing requirements, if their state's emergency and/or reopening status allows

States and institutions should communicate with each other and with their accreditors to ensure schools are complying with state level review requirements reciprocity. More information about these requirements can [be found here](#).

**Broadband and Equipment Access as a Key Input for Success**

Students need broadband and equipment access to complete courses and exams in order to attend courses necessary to graduate, and for postsecondary students, to keep their financial aid. For many rural residents or poor urban residents, access to broadband is difficult. Students depend on campus or library computer access as well; with campus and library closures, these students are placed at a fundamental disadvantage compared to their peers.

**Available Gubernatorial Levers to Address Broadband Access**

- **Partner with Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to provide broadband at free or reduced cost.** Several states have shared information about the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) "Keep America Connected" pledge, which asked ISPs to waive fees or penalties for lack of payment during the COVID-19 crisis. It also pushed for ISPs to open hotspots for use by the public. Some states ([New Mexico](#), [New Hampshire](#), [Indiana](#),

and [California](#)) are also sharing their own lists of ISPs that are supporting free or reduced-price internet in their states.

- **Create mobile hotspots in underserved areas.** [South Carolina](#) and [Arkansas](#) are equipping school buses with Wi-Fi routers and deploying them to low-income neighborhoods around the state where they serve as mobile hotspots. This is also happening at the local level in [Austin, TX](#); [La Joya, TX](#); and [Coachella Valley, CA](#). In [Illinois](#), education agencies partnered to create a Wi-Fi hotspot [map](#) to provide access to students who lack access to internet at home and [Georgia](#) has created a similar map. [California](#) also partnered with several different technology companies to roll out tens of thousands of mobile hotspots across the state.
- **Coordinate with institutions, nonprofits, and philanthropy to ensure students can access computers and tablets for free or at a reduced price.** In Washington, DC, Goodwill of Greater Washington has partnered with Dell Reconnect to recycle used computers in the region and resell them at reduced price. Governors may also work directly with state postsecondary institutions to relax emergency financing requirements so students can rent or buy laptops through their college or university. In [Georgia](#) and [Connecticut](#), the state decided invest in providing laptops for students while in [California](#), Google agreed to donate thousands of Chromebooks and hotspots to households across the state. These three examples are targeted at K-12 schools, but states could adopt a similar approach with regards to postsecondary institutions.
- **Develop long-term broadband connectivity in underserved areas.** States can take advantage of federal broadband programs, such as [Department of Agriculture grants for rural broadband](#). States have also invested in their own broadband development using a mix of state and federal funding. In Iowa, Governor Reynolds launched the Governor’s Empower Rural Iowa Initiative by executive order in 2018. In support of this initiative, three task forces traveled through rural Iowa and asked workers and business owners to share their rural broadband needs. As a result of this exploration, Governor Reynolds proposed legislation to create a fund, codified in state law, to support rural broadband development. In its recently completed legislative session, the [Arkansas](#) legislature created a grant program to deliver broadband to rural areas. This will supplement the governors Arkansas Rural Connect Broadband Grant program, which was announced in 2019 and which has begun [accepting](#) grant applications.

### **Sharing Information to Ensure Teaching and Learning Success**

Many educators are used to traditional teaching environments and may not be prepared to shift to online formats, which often include limited classroom participation and potential technical difficulties. Similarly, students may not learn well in a virtual space. Students with disabilities may be particularly vulnerable to these issues.

### **Available Gubernatorial Levers to Support Remote Teaching and Learning**

- **Create a centralized site for both faculty and student learning resources.** Governors can create a COVID-19 webpage that reaches a large audiences and that links to resources for faculty, staff, and students who need digital teaching or learning support. Students may need information about school closings, opportunities to access digital resources, or FAQs for troubleshooting digital learning software. States can provide that linkage. [Indiana](#) and [Delaware](#) have examples of sites that effectively serve this purpose. Further, faculty are already creating crowdsourced resources, including lesson plans and best practices for successful teaching. Some resources states can share include:
  - [Southern New Hampshire](#) University best practices on remote teaching.



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- [American Association of University Professors and American Federation of Teachers](#) guidance on remote work for faculty.
  - [COVID-19 Open Education Community and Contributed Resources](#) crowdsourced page provides real-time feedback from faculty (note: this is a Google Document that is consistently updated).
- **Provide the necessary supports for learners with disabilities.** The shift to virtual learning may disproportionately affect students with disabilities who need special accommodations for classroom success. These accommodations range from physical tools to augment motor skills to websites that include options for blind or deaf learners. Examples of necessary accommodations [can be found here](#). Governors can provide funding to institutions to provide accommodations to students with disabilities, per [federal law](#). States are at the forefront of providing these supports. For instance, [Texas](#) created a Committee for People with Disabilities, which is sharing guidance both for people with disabilities and about ways to accommodate their needs.
  - For more examples about ways states can support people with disabilities, please see the NGA white paper [States Expand Employment and Training Opportunities for People with Disabilities](#).
- **Waive GPA requirements for financial aid.** Some postsecondary students, particularly nontraditional students with competing priorities at home, may find it difficult to learn remotely. As such, during this time their GPAs may be negatively affected, which could limit their opportunities to access and retain financial aid. Governors may consider loosening GPA requirements for state financial aid programs until traditional learning recommences. [West Virginia](#) and [Missouri](#) both recently relaxed grade requirements for their state programs.

### Providing Digital Supports Beyond the Classroom

Students often depend on their schools for more than learning. Educational institutions can serve as a student’s main health care provider, source of housing, career counselor, or mental health professional. When considering the move to digital learning, states and institutions may also consider ways to keep other vital campus services going virtually. Governors can temporarily waive some licensing requirements to allow for telehealth, develop accommodations for students who need to remain on-campus, and review and update emergency plans to support student needs.

### Available Gubernatorial Levers to Support Digital School Services

- **Waive requirements to allow for more flexibility.** To allow students not on-campus to access virtual mental health counseling, consider temporarily waiving the requirements for in-state licensure of certain health professionals. [Check this resource](#) for a list of mental health practitioner examples from Arizona. In [Pennsylvania](#), the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center has shifted to telehealth, including investing in infrastructure so providers can work from home.
- **Make sure institutions can be flexible in serving students who need to stay in on-campus housing.** Some students are dependent on campuses as their main form of housing and food. The New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education released a [Guide for New Jersey Institutions of Higher Education](#) that urges institutions to consider the material hardships of students that may result from institution closures. They recommend that institutions discuss alternative plans and appropriate accommodations for students for whom campus is a primary residence.
- **Instruct institutions to evaluate emergency planning to be responsive to all student needs.** Colorado provided a [Planning for Institutions of Higher Education](#) document that instructs institutions to develop and/or review their emergency operations plans, and



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consider including guidance related to students who depend on housing and food services. Oklahoma's Office of Workforce Development is hosting a webinar to share how to support apprenticeship programs through online learning and training in response to the crisis.

*For questions or concerns related to the contents of this memo, please contact NGA staff:*

- Rachel Hirsch ([rhirsch@nga.org](mailto:rhirsch@nga.org); 202.920.7459)
- Amanda Winters ([awinters@nga.org](mailto:awinters@nga.org); 202.719.2872)



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