

PROMISING PRACTICES
AND STRATEGIES IN
**REMOTE
LEARNING:
LESSONS
FROM THE
FIELD**



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In Spring 2020, in San Francisco as in most of the United States, youth programs rapidly transitioned to remote learning as schools and community centers were abruptly forced to close their doors as a result of COVID-19. Many programs rapidly shifted to offering everything from enrichment and tutoring to GED and test prep programming in a virtual environment. Program providers, staff, youth, and parents were thrust into uncharted territory with limited experience or evidence to help inform new ways of working, learning, partnering, and interacting—all while dealing with greater societal health and economic crises. Looking ahead, uncertainties about state and local policies on re-opening and stringent safety guidance recommendations means program providers must plan for scenarios that will likely continue to include remote learning, at least to some extent.

This brief, prepared by Policy Studies Associates (PSA) for the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth & Their Families (DCYF), aims to provide youth program providers with a roadmap for designing, implementing, and assessing remote learning experiences. This brief presents lessons learned and recommendations based on promising early experiences reported by grantees funded by DCYF's Educational Supports Service Area, as well as reports from the national education and afterschool fields during the Spring 2020 transition to remote youth programming.

The brief is divided into four priorities for the design and delivery of programs in the current environment: 1) creating a safe online environment for learning, 2) fostering relationships, 3) getting creative with content and delivery of instruction and 4) assessing participation and quality. A table of additional resources, selected based on ease of accessibility and adaptability for youth programs, is included as an appendix. Many local agencies, including DCYF, are also offering training and technical assistance for remote learning and youth programming.

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PRIORITY ONE

CREATE A SAFE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING

Accessibility, health, and safety are always priorities for the physical setting of youth programs. These should also be the first considerations in a remote program environment. Providers must ensure that families have access to the remote learning opportunities offered and create a safe and positive environment conducive to learning.

Get staff and families connected. Both program staff and families may need assistance accessing broadband internet and devices. Schools and local communities are pulling together to find ways to get families connected to support student learning during the school day. Nevertheless, gaps in service persist. Community-based organizations may be able to help:

- » **Survey staff and families** to identify the technology needs in the homes of your staff members and the youth you serve.
- » **If possible, take advantage of funding flexibilities** that allow you to pool grant funding to and leverage funds to purchase internet service and devices for youth and families.
- » **Work with city agencies or local service providers** to see if there are discounts or grants for internet service and devices that you can obtain on behalf of families.

Plan for privacy and online safety considerations. Programs should consider strategies for maintaining the privacy of staff, youth participants, and their families. Whatever learning and meeting platforms programs use to connect with youth, staff should understand the privacy terms and receive training in using the security features to ensure that online conversations and content remain private. Consider:

- » **Ensure parent permission** to post any pictures or video of youth under 18 online and to record live learning sessions where other people in the home may be present or in the background.
- » **Review/refine existing policies and procedures for a virtual environment.** For example, review staff-to-student ratios and supervision: How will your program ensure that remote program delivery has the support needed to run smoothly and effectively if there are interruptions, lots of background noise, or technical problems? In San Francisco, the Chinatown YMCA instituted protocols for online learning that includes a minimum of three staff in every virtual classroom: one facilitator leading the

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activity, a moderator who supports Q&A questions and controls the virtual environment, and a staffer to provide tech support. There are also guidelines for peer interaction, such as no private chatting during sessions. Programs may need to consider adjusting staffing structures to support new roles, ratios, and capacities.

- » **Think through policies for responding to situations involving other family members in the background.** How should staff handle situations they may witness in the home or interactions with other family members? One program provider shared, “We now have a window into student’s home... How might we be engaged with anyone else who comes into the frame, whether it’s a sibling, or a parent, or a grandparent, to really honor students in everything that we do?”
- » **Remember to follow mandated reporting requirements.** As you remain mindful of and respectful of your virtual presence in the homes of youth, remember that mandated reporting requirements continue to remain in effect.

Empower staff, youth, and families to work together to create optimal learning environments at home. Staff and families may need support learning new tools and adjusting to new structures and routines. Consider the following strategies:

- » **Provide training to staff, families, and youth on using online tools and resources.** Staff, youth, and families may have little or no prior experience with technology-based learning platforms, video chat platforms, or other learning applications and websites. Basic training on online safety, protecting personal information, and program tutorials should be offered and can often be found online for free.
- » **Communicate with staff, families, and youth to determine the best time and duration for programming to accommodate new routines and needs.** Time on screen can be fatiguing, particularly for young children. The program may need to be shortened and/or include a combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities. Share strategies with families and youth about finding a quiet, comfortable place to participate from home—or provide youth with alternatives if they are not comfortable using video platforms online. Use of virtual backgrounds in video conferencing platforms such as Zoom may be a strategy to decrease distractions and increase youth comfort. Free kid-friendly backgrounds can be downloaded online from sites including [SavoringtheGood.com](https://www.savoringthegood.com) and [andnextcomesl.com](https://www.andnextcomesl.com).
- » **Select tools and platforms familiar to staff and youth.** Allow staff flexibility to use tools with which they are familiar. These staff members can be a resource for training other staff, youth, and families. Alternatively, programs that partner with schools could use the same tools and platforms as partner schools. Talk to your school partners about the possibility of gaining access to school online resources and tools to facilitate homework help, tutoring, and collaboration during the school day. For example, the San Francisco Success Centers have transferred curriculum to the Canvas Learning Management System used by school partners. Program staff can easily provide homework help and tutoring in “office hours”, as well as provide direct support to students while they are in class.



PRIORITY TWO FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS

Isolation can lead to loneliness, feelings of depression, and increased anxiety. A [June 2020 survey of teens ages 13-19 conducted by America's Promise Alliance](#) found that over a quarter of teens said that they are losing more sleep, feeling more unhappy or depressed, feeling under constant strain, or losing confidence in themselves; almost one-quarter report feeling disconnected from their school communities, adults, and classmates. These feelings were especially prevalent among Latinx and Asian American teens, and teens whose parents are immigrants. Even in the best of situations, children and youth benefit from having positive relationships with peers, mentors, and caring adults other than their parents. Youth programs should continue prioritizing relationships, even in remote learning environments, to build a sense of belonging and ensure that children and youth feel safe and secure.

Foster staff-to-youth relationships. Programs should work with staff to develop strategies to create and maintain bonds virtually.

- » **Build on existing relationships.** When possible, keep youth matched with staff they are already familiar with to build on established connections.
- » **Keep the lines of communication open.** Survey older youth to determine their preferred methods of communication and outreach. Reach out to older youth regularly to send them updates, get input on programming that would best support them, and to just keep in touch and let them know someone is there for support. Understood.org has research-based articles with tips for [Supporting Students Socially and Emotionally During Distance Learning](#) and includes [links to mindfulness apps for kids](#).

Provide regular opportunities for youth-to-youth interaction. Online chat and meeting platforms like Zoom and Google Classroom provide opportunities to engage youth. Staff will need to get creative about fostering interaction online and encouraging youth to participate.

- » **Offer small group interaction incorporating trauma-informed social-emotional learning (SEL) practices.** Provide space for youth to share what they are going through and incorporate wellness and mindfulness activities into your meetings. For instance, the Breakthrough San Francisco program offers Friday Zoom meetings with youth with a focus on SEL. Youth get an opportunity to talk about

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things they are grateful for and what they are learning and experiencing through the COVID-19 disruptions, and have weekly visits from past staff members.

- » **Provide youth with a variety of virtual methods for interaction.** Some youth may be comfortable talking on video chat platforms while others may prefer to stay off camera and use the chat function. Some might prefer to listen to peers in online video chat platforms, but provide their own input asynchronously using apps like Flipgrid, Nearpod, Padlet, or Poll Everywhere. Still others might prefer to write down thoughts or draw a picture and email it or post a picture of their work. Staff should learn and practice with a variety of strategies that will reach youth where they are at and keep them engaged with staff and their peers.

Staff-parent relationships. Parents and caregivers are playing a new role as partners in learning and program delivery. Now more than ever, parent outreach and engagement are paramount in the successful transition to remote learning. Programs, particularly for younger youth, will need to effectively communicate with parents and caregivers about program offerings to help youth access programming and participate successfully.

- » **Staff should have a direct line of communication with parents and caregivers.** Be flexible based on what works best for families (e.g., phone, email, text, video chat) and be prepared to use a variety of strategies. Track preferred methods of communication to facilitate outreach and track your outreach efforts to see what's working. Programs we spoke with mentioned using Remind, WhatsApp or Hustle for sending blast texts to families in addition to personalized, individual texts. The Remind app also includes a translation feature.
- » **Check in regularly to get feedback on how things are going.** What support do parents and caregivers need to support their children's participation? How can the program adapt to meet the needs? Making the program simple enough for young youth to participate on their own with minimal assistance or materials will help.
- » **Know parents' preferred language.** Try to identify someone on staff who can accommodate the language needs of families by providing translation. Some texting and online services may be available to provide translation for you to ease the burden on multilingual staff.
- » **Provide support and resources to families.** Families may experience increased demand for support if a family member loses a job or gets sick. Consider what services are available to adult caregivers through your organization. How can you restructure your organization or partner with other programs to connect caregivers to supports and services in job placement, health care, childcare, and food access? For example, DCYF grantees such as Breakthrough San Francisco and Booker T. Washington Community Service Center have shifted staff around across departments to meet the highest priority needs among the youth and families they serve.

Support your staff: Find ways to celebrate staff and foster their self-care. Just as youth and families need support, providers should also remain aware of the toll the current environment may be taking on staff. It is critical to take time for staff to process, grieve, and heal from the impacts of the health, economic, education, and social justice crises facing their communities. This is to have an opportunity to deepen organizational community and commit to staff as they serve and connect with youth and families throughout the community.



PRIORITY THREE

GET CREATIVE WITH CONTENT AND DELIVERY OF INSTRUCTION

The best of youth programming engages children in learning and makes connections to school and life. With some adaptation and creativity, programs can offer a wide variety of enrichment, recreation, arts, sports, life skills, and STEM and literacy activities remotely.

Adapt existing programming to a virtual environment. Start with what you know and let staff get creative about how they can best translate their skills to a remote setting. Whether that is recording videos of activity demonstrations synchronously or asynchronously, hosting video chats with groups of youth, offering “office hours” for youth to seek homework help or just “hang out,” or conducting check-in calls to stay connected.

Chinatown YMCA

Live Virtual Programming and On-Demand Videos

In Spring 2020, the Chinatown YMCA provided open access to on-demand STEAM activities on YouTube and offered 45-60 minute virtual learning classes via Zoom. The program sent out email and text blasts to families to let them know about the schedule of classes for the week, also posted on their website. Classes were led by staff and were free. Youth could join any activity that met their age range and interests. Among a diverse offering, activities included: family Zumba, STEM demonstrations on how to make bubbles, Pre-K read aloud, Spanish story time, and mindfulness for 3rd-5th grade.

Booker T. Washington Community Service Center

Digital Classroom

Daily between 3:00-5:00 p.m., the Booker T. Washington Academic Supports program offered educational videos for participants during San Francisco’s school closures. Programming was created by staff program specialists and partner organizations such as the National Parks Conservancy and Street Soccer USA. The program also submitted videos to KTVU and SF Loves Learning Channel to share enrichment content more widely with the community. Staff went into the program space at staggered times to film their videos. Videos included 10-20 minute learning activities youth can do at home, such as cooking, science experiments, and fitness. Emails were sent to families daily, and, for security purposes, parents had to express interest to receive the link to the video. The program director shared the videos during the program time, and asked youth questions to gauge learning at the end of the video.

When we talked about recording videos, a lot of [staff] were like, “No, I’m camera shy. I don’t really want to do this. I can do the back end.” But once you do it yourself, and then you can tell them, “It’s really not that scary.” You just have to take that first step with everything. All these uncertainties out there, you get really scared about what you don’t know, but then the moment that you actually try it out and then you find out that it is not that scary.

–Chinatown YMCA

Collaborate with schools to integrate program supports into school-day and summer school learning.

Programs that partner with schools to offer academic support programs are using this opportunity to strengthen collaboration with the school day. If schools adopt a hybrid or virtual learning model, youth programs may have an opportunity to partner with schools to offer services for students to fill gaps in learning time.

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- » The Richmond District Neighborhood Center Educational Supports program has paraprofessionals from the school's English Language Learner department on its program staff, making it easier to connect with those youth and provide dual-role support. The program hopes to deepen the relationship with the school by collaborating in other classrooms as well.
- » The 826 Valencia After-School Literacy Program works with students in grades 3-5 during the school-day by scheduling times with teachers to set up breakout rooms during virtual school instruction. In the breakout rooms, program staff provide individualized support and offer tutoring during staff "office hours".

Meet the diverse needs of learners. Sitting still in front of a computer for sustained periods of time may not be a reasonable expectation for some students. Language barriers can also be a challenge. Be sure to incorporate a variety of strategies to teach content and engage diverse learners. Keep synchronous programming short. Include opportunities for movement with music, art, fitness activities, or dance. Moving programs online allows staff to incorporate visuals, music, and content that may already be translated into multiple languages, or record your own video activities in multiple languages.

Adapt staff competencies to a virtual environment. Staff should continue to provide hands-on learning in an engaging way to youth, including providing opportunities for youth voice and choice and ensuring all youth are participating. These traditional staff competencies still apply. However, best practices in digital learning instructional strategies, such as those from ***Empowering Afterschool Professionals for Digital Learning*** (National Afterschool Association, 2019), can also be integrated into staff strategies and training:

- » **Use technology for exploring and creating.** Youth can produce videos to showcase art projects or performances. Older youth can explore college and career opportunities from home. Consider looking for webinar opportunities open to the public from local colleges and employers, or invite guest speakers to your virtual program.
- » **Use engaging and relevant digital content.** If staff are short on ideas, high quality, enriching content can be accessed for free online and incorporated into a lesson.
- » **Encourage higher order thinking through tech-embedded instruction.** Use online media to encourage reading, writing and critical thinking. For example, have students read articles on a topic of their choosing and write about it. Have them critique the source. Did it provide informative, relevant, and accurate information? How do they know? Have them share what they learned in a discussion or write to a legislator advocating for an issue related to their topic.
- » **Balance the role of instructor and technology in guided learning.** Encourage staff to incorporate online resources and content into programming, but balance that with staff-to-youth and youth-to-youth interaction.
- » **Promote digital citizenship and responsibility.** Teach youth to explore online content responsibly and engage with others with respect.
- » **Empower students to safely navigate digital learning platforms.** As youth deepen online exploration of learning resource, be sure to teach them how to protect their identify and personal information.

PRIORITY FOUR

THINK ABOUT ASSESSING PARTICIPATION AND QUALITY

Once programs adjust to delivering engaging content and relationship-building in a safe, virtual environment, providers may be able to take a breath and take stock of accomplishments and areas for growth. Consider: What structures, content, and instructional strategies are working well and what needs improvement? Programs can assess quality of the virtual environment and think about ways to deepen learning, challenge youth, increase collaboration, youth leadership, and analytic thinking. Assessment strategies might include:

Have staff track participation to see who is engaging and who is not. What activities are well attended and where are youth dropping off? Make adjustments to program offerings based on interest and engagement.

Strategize ways to reconnect with students who are not participating regularly. Are there ways the program can try to reach disengaged youth with non-virtual alternatives? Do families have needs that are preventing youth from participating (e.g., older youth working or taking care of younger siblings.)

Have supervisors “observe” program activities. Supervisors can “drop in” to virtual program activities to observe and later provide feedback on topics such content delivery, facilitation, and youth engagement.

Survey youth to rate the quality, usefulness, and satisfaction with program offerings. Ask youth for input on what could be improved and/or ideas for new activities.



CONTENT RESOURCES

[Smithsonian Learning Lab](#)

[Distance Learning Resources](#)

- Pre-packaged collections of lessons, activities, and resources in Pre-K-12 English language arts (ELA), math, social studies, science, and Spanish.

[Khan Academy](#)

- Free learning resources in arts and humanities, college and career prep, ELA, math, science, computer science, economics, and test prep.

[National Geographic Kids](#)

- Explore science and nature with quizzes, games, experiments, videos, and articles.

[PBS Learning Lab](#)

- Pre-K-12 lessons, videos, and activities in ELA, math, science, and social studies (in English and Spanish)

[ReadWriteThink Parent and Afterschool Resources](#)

- Fun, engaging activities that teach reading, writing and critical thinking for grades K-12 and ELLs.

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND ONLINE SAFETY

[Common Sense Media](#)

- Free curriculum on topics including: media balance, privacy and security, cyberbullying, and media literacy.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELL)

[Colorin Colorado](#)

- Bilingual resources and guidance for working virtually with ELL and immigrant youth.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR TEACHING ONLINE

[The State Educational Technology](#)

[Directors Association Teacher Resources](#)

- Free resources, courses, tools, and tutorials for teaching online.

[Online Teaching Made Simple](#)

- Blog articles on transitioning to online instruction, including tips for managing behavior and engaging kids.

[Edublogger Resources for Teaching](#)

[Online due to School Closures](#)

- A collection of resources, tools, and tips for teaching online, including tips on recording videos and finding free books for kids online.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

[CASEL CARES: SEL Resources During COVID-19](#)

- Resources, strategies, tools, and articles to support SEL learning remotely.

[Common Sense Media Social and Emotional Learning](#)

- Tools and resources for teaching empathy, integrity, courage, humility, teamwork and curiosity.

[Your Life Your Voice from Boys Town](#)

- Tips and tools for youth on coping and resiliency skills, including resources specific to COVID-19.

[Understood.org Tools for Educators](#)

- Useful strategies, tools, and resources for parents and educators to help students thrive.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

[Digital Promise's Resources for](#)

[Supporting Learners with Disabilities](#)

- A searchable database of distance learning resources and tools to support students with a variety of special learning needs.

TRANSLATION

[Microsoft Translator App](#)

- This free app from Microsoft offers translation of text and real time text speech.

[Microsoft 365 Translate feature](#)

- Office 365 supports translation of Word, Excel, OneNote, and PowerPoint. A translator for Outlook can also be downloaded for free from the Office store.

VIRTUAL PROGRAM DESIGN FOR SUMMER CAMP

[American Camp Association](#)

- Resources, guidance, and tools for creating a safe, engaging online summer camp experience. See also [this guide](#) to creating a virtual summer camp.