In mid-March, the nation’s education community — school administrators, teachers, students and parents — began a crash course in e-learning. For state legislators, too, there have been important lessons to learn about their schools’ rollout of this alternative to face-to-face instruction, as well as many policy issues to consider about the potential fallout.

One likely consequence, for example, is a lag in student achievement, says Georgia Heyward, a research analyst at the Center on Reinventing Public Education, which has created a database detailing and comparing the e-learning plans of school districts across the country.

“I think a learning slide should be expected,” she says. “Early on, we have been seeing very few school districts that offer live instruction, where you have a [professionally trained] teacher guiding the students rather than a harried parent. “And you have very few districts doing progress monitoring of students.”

That learning slide also may be unevenly distributed. Early on, anecdotal evidence pointed to disparities in the richness of the e-learning plans being developed and implemented by school districts.

According to Heyward, the most comprehensive plans — ones that include meaningful teacher feedback and interactions with students and parents, to complement the delivery of curriculum and instruction — were much more likely to be in place in resource-rich districts.

“What is this going to mean in rural areas where students are somewhat behind, or in areas where the schools serve large shares of minorities where families don’t have a political voice?” she asks. “In the absence of any type of state direction, you’re going to have really, really inequitable responses.”

**How Two Midwest states addressed e-learning in 2017, 2019 laws**

Before March, and the COVID-19 pandemic that led states to close school buildings, e-learning was an educational tool unfamiliar to many teachers, students and parents. And it was largely seen by states as a way to allow schools to provide an instructional day when snow or other inclement weather made travel unsafe.

COVID-19 has presented a new reality: Weeks and months of instruction having to be delivered not face-to-face, but through distant learning. This is likely to lead legislators to re-examine their state laws and regulations on e-learning (many states did not have any laws at all), including how to help districts create effective
plans and ensure all students’ and teachers’ needs are being met.

Illinois and Minnesota already had statutes in place prior to 2020, including language that established certain e-learning standards. Under Illinois’ law, which was passed last year (SB 28 [2]), regional superintendents of education must review a school district’s e-learning plan to ensure that it:

- meets the specific needs of special-education students and English-language learners;
- makes non-electronic materials available to students who do not have access to the necessary technology; and
- has five clock hours of instruction or school work.

Under Minnesota’s 2017 law (HF 2 [3]), districts must deliver accessible digital instruction for students with special needs, make accommodations for families without internet access, and guarantee that teachers can be reached by telephone or online during the school day.

**Early, decisive action by states helped districts implement e-learning plans**

Heyward says the importance of states’ role in e-learning became clear early on as schools began to close due to the coronavirus outbreak, and she points to Kansas as one of the nation’s early leaders. “It had a very strong and clear directive and set very clear expectations for districts to have a distance-learning plan,” she says, noting Kansas’ quick decision to close buildings for the rest of the school year and get districts prepared for the instructional alternative.

Kansas immediately convened a group of school administrators and teachers, known as the Continuous Learning Task Force [4], to help districts implement e-learning plans. By mid-March, the task force’s recommendations already had been released. In the province of Ontario, the Ministry of Education established a centralized online resource known as Learn at Home, where a mix of quality math and literacy resources are made available for use by schools, teachers and students. (These resources were created by Ontario-certified educators.)

Heyward singles out [Ontario’s Learn at Home] [5] as the kind of resource that a province or state can provide to improve e-learning instruction. Another potential model for states, she says, is the work being done in Colorado to identify each school district’s challenges related to e-learning. “That information needs to be collected so states can differentiate their responses,” Heyward says, noting that some districts require more guidance and resources than others.

As of early April, of the 82 U.S. school districts reviewed in the Center on Reinventing Public Education’s database, only 13 percent were providing some kind of progress monitoring in which teachers were expected to review student work and provide feedback. Those findings, Heyward says, underscore how much progress must be made in the area of e-learning. However, she also points to the resourcefulness shown by many local schools and districts — quickly delivering training for educators, for example, or distributing electronic devices to students in need.

One continuing obstacle for some districts is the gap in broadband access. As of 2017, close to 10 percent of K-12 students living in rural areas did not have access to any kind of broadband (fixed or mobile). Twenty percent of students living in poverty lacked access. “This has really brought up the need for expanded broadband in the states,” Heyward says.

By: