

# **Support Every Student:** Lessons from Five Charter Schools on Effective Special Education During the Pandemic

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December 2020

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## Introduction

As schools closed to control the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, overnight, students with disabilities lost supports and services essential to their academic, physical, and emotional development. Students, teachers, and parents saw the weaknesses in our special education system on full display.

The return to school this fall meant a return to remote learning for many students across the country. CRPE's [review of district reopening plans](#) found few school systems made more than minor mention of special education. Some schools are prioritizing students with disabilities for in-person support, but that alone will not address the huge gaps in services these students have faced since last spring, and may not be viable in some communities where the virus continues to spread out of control.

**Schools must make students with disabilities a priority and set up systems and structures to ensure they are not left behind again.**

Schools must make students with disabilities a priority and set up systems and structures to ensure they are not left behind again. In this brief and accompanying case studies of five charter schools, we offer lessons on how those structures allowed these schools to pivot quickly to remote learning.

CRPE sought to rapidly collect and share stories of how schools responded to the school closures to identify models and strategies aimed at improving learning opportunities for students with disabilities. We contacted a group of charter schools that we had [previously profiled](#) because students with disabilities outperformed expectations on standardized academic assessments. We surveyed ten of these schools (see inset, *What We Did*) and conducted in-depth case studies with five of them to understand how they responded to the needs of students with disabilities in remote settings.

The schools in our study are all charter schools that had already, to varying degrees, used their flexibility to rethink fundamental structures of schooling—like age-based grades, physical classrooms, and staff assignments. The structures

**Relying on their pre-pandemic strengths, these schools found they could keep most of their students with disabilities supported, engaged, and learning.**

they created often allowed them to deliver more flexible or individualized support to all students, including those with identified disabilities. Relying on their pre-pandemic strengths, these schools found they could keep most of their students with disabilities supported, engaged, and learning.

But even these schools struggled to prepare and support their educators to address new needs that arose. The shift to remote learning made it harder to complete new special education evaluations, ensure students had access to the least restrictive learning environment, and, critically, sustain the already difficult work of providing individualized support to students with disabilities.

Still, by committing to individualized problem-solving and treating parents as full partners, these schools found ways to support students with disabilities effectively under crisis conditions. School leadership teams helped make this possible by including a strong voice from special educators in decision-making, committing additional resources to sustain student engagement, and intentionally prioritizing educators' collaboration—both with each other and with parents.

As schools face the prospect of months of continued remote learning and pandemic-related disruptions, these systems and practices, which proved critical to supporting students with disabilities, will be essential to supporting all students as schools contend with student disengagement, learning losses, and the profound social, emotional, and mental health toll of the pandemic.

## Key Organizational Attributes Drove Rapid Responses

We found that, in the absence of state and federal policies and guidance, these five schools responded quickly to meet the needs of students with disabilities during remote learning last spring.

**These are strategies that other schools can implement this academic year—it is not too late.**

All of these schools told us they wanted to do more last spring but, given the limited planning time, they did what they felt was right—always keeping students at the core of their decision-making and planning. Below is a summary of the key strategies these schools used to ensure the needs of students with disabilities were not an afterthought. These are strategies that other schools can implement this academic year—it is not too late.

### *Teachers worked to find individualized solutions for unique student needs*

The schools we studied cultivated an organization-wide commitment to problem-solving tailored to the needs of individual students. They reinforced these organizational cultures with widely used protocols designed to help schools accommodate different student needs. This helped them ensure students with disabilities were not left behind when schools made a rapid transition to remote learning. It also provided a foundation for individualized support that helped them meet a wide range of new student needs that arose during the pandemic.

**Schoolwide systems designed to help schools identify and accommodate needs in place before the pandemic helped them respond to students' needs.**

At Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., a special educator set up a video call with one student and kept it open most of the day so the student could feel like he had more accountability and support. Similarly, City Charter High School in Pittsburgh set daily schedules for some students with disabilities to help them manage independent

learning. For one student, different teachers came to his Google Meet room every 30 minutes to work with him so that he didn't have to navigate various links for support.

Schoolwide systems designed to help schools identify and accommodate needs in place before the pandemic helped them respond to students' needs. Audeo Charter School in San Diego has a social-emotional program called RISE (Resilience in Students and Education), a training program for students that is part of its Multi-Tiered System of Support. This year the school created a RISE training series for families and students on topics related to the pandemic and the new challenges it created. Silver Oak Montessori High School in Hayward, California, used its existing Response to Intervention (RTI) systems to identify students who needed additional mental health accommodations caused by the stresses of the pandemic.

### *Strong relationships with students and their families helped schools maintain communication and coordination*

Individualized problem-solving during remote learning requires strong parent partnerships to work. Last spring, these schools streamlined and increased communication to compensate for

the inability to see students and families in person. Teachers in these five schools checked in regularly with families using texts, emails, and phone calls, which helped increase student and family engagement. Parents told us they knew who to call for help, and that staff readily stepped in to solve problems with internet connectivity and any other barriers to learning.

Teachers at these schools were intentional about who communicated with students and what that communication looked like. For example, instead of multiple teachers reaching out to students, schools tried to consolidate communication to a single point of contact. This required increased collaboration between all members of the team responsible for a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). Although it was not legally required, these schools prioritized virtual IEP meetings with students and families, which helped establish communication about students’ needs and learning goals.

Students with disabilities especially benefited from teachers who already knew them well, creating a safe environment to address social-emotional challenges during closures. And teachers could more easily make modifications or accommodations to the remote learning experience that allowed students to participate alongside their peers.

### ***General and special educators helped meet student needs through continued collaboration***

The schools we studied prioritized and protected time for teachers and staff to collaborate and maintain collegial relationships during school closures. Staff maintained grade-level and content-specific team meetings—all held virtually.

These schools built special educator and general educator collaboration time into their schedules, and educators used that time to identify and solve individual and collective student needs. We heard examples of special and general educators sharing data, developing modified and accommodated curriculum, and together finding other ways to ensure a positive experience for students with disabilities and their families. One special educator told us:

We [general educator and educational specialist] figure out what needs to be done for each student together, and then kind of divide and conquer.

Silver Oak took an innovative approach by adopting Slack, a communication platform typically used by businesses. Slack allows users to send individual and group private messages, as well as topic-specific discussion “channels” accessible to everyone in an organization. Silver Oak kept the entire staff in the loop on various issues by creating channels for attendance, student behavior, response to intervention, special education, and mental health.

A school leader described a typical discussion in which one educator posted on Slack that a student hadn’t been logging on to virtual classes. A counselor or administrator would spot the message, act on it, and promptly reply: ‘Just called mom, mom’s on it. [The student] should be in your class any minute.’ The leader continued:

Boom, the kid’s in the class. I will tell you that when we’re back on campus full-time, all of us, we’re going to still use Slack.

### ***Special education leaders are included in schoolwide decisions and crisis planning***

Schools can often overlook the needs of students with disabilities, especially in times of crisis. Our previous study found that having a special education representative on the school leadership team ensures the needs of students with disabilities are central in schoolwide decisions—and that schoolwide practices are flexible enough to accommodate students with diverse needs.

This leadership structure helped ensure all five schools we studied prioritized the needs of students with disabilities since the pandemic struck last spring. Special education leaders were in a position to remind other top administrators of their legal and moral obligations to provide services that allow students with disabilities to access instruction—something that fell by the wayside in schools across the country after the pandemic hit.

This leadership voice can also elevate the concerns of students and their families—from confusion about how best to access remote classes to the implications of requiring all students to remain on video at all times. Special education leaders in cabinet-level positions help schools plan for students on the margins, and this, in turn, helps ensure schools deliver remote learning experiences that accommodate a wider range of student needs. As schools continue to adapt their plans this school year, and more uncertainty arises, special education leaders must be at the table.

**This leadership structure helped ensure all five schools we studied prioritized the needs of students with disabilities since the pandemic struck last spring.**

### ***Schools devoted resources to sustain student engagement***

These schools prioritized student engagement and devoted staff time to ensure students stayed connected. Silver Oak and Renaissance Arts Academy in Los Angeles, for instance, reached out to families as soon as they noticed the student disengaging in learning or not logged into class. A school leader explained:

The attendance coordinator . . . would call parents saying, ‘Your child’s not in school,’ or, ‘Your child’s not in the math class this morning,’ whatever. She’ll call for every one of those three periods if she needs to. Boy, did we get parents involved in a big way, really, really fast.

This same strategy also worked for ensuring that students with disabilities attended their sessions with service providers and even teacher office hours. School staff felt the attendance coordinator role was critical to their success last spring.

At City Charter High School, staff struggled to engage a handful of students. A school administrator went to students’ houses to strategize with students and their families about how to address barriers to engagement. This action clearly resonated. The administrator mentioned:

[The students] didn’t act like they wanted me there, but later on I heard from other kids that they Snapchatted that I was at their house.

Some schools used data to prioritize which students needed more support to stay engaged. For example, Audeo used a shared spreadsheet that tracked teachers’ communication with students and families, logins to Edgenuity, and assignment completion.

These schools used a combination of strategies to ensure student engagement did not slip. Data-driven methods were used to identify student needs and to track engagement, and then these data were used as a way to ensure that communications with students were targeted and meaningful.

Using human touch to build meaningful connections to students who no longer see their classmates or teachers every day is critical to sustaining engagement and student learning through the disruptions of the pandemic. These schools saw this situational awareness as a critical prerequisite to any effort to solve problems at the root of individual students’ disengagement and learning loss.

## Now, More Than Ever, Individualized Problem-Solving Must Be a Priority

If schools are neglecting students with disabilities during this crisis, or failing to meet their educational needs, it's likely other students are falling through the cracks, too.

One approach that has become common in schools this fall, prioritizing students with disabilities for building access, may address some narrow problems—for example, the need to deliver legally mandated special education services. But it won't put students with disabilities on a truly level playing field with their peers. And it won't address the mounting challenges of student disengagement, learning loss, or social and emotional needs. These challenges loom for all students—though perhaps more acutely for students with disabilities—and threaten to grow worse as the pandemic wears on if they are not addressed.

Meeting the educational needs of all students in this crisis will require schools to embrace a deeper, organization-wide commitment to individualized problem-solving that can be sustained whether learning happens in-person, remotely, or in some combination. This commitment must rest on a foundation of strong communication with parents—who now more than ever are essential partners in the learning process—and effective collaboration among teachers, including special and general educators. It must start from the top leadership at a school, and be reinforced by systems, practices, and schoolwide cultural norms.

**Rather than abandoning practices designed to help students on the margins, districts are strengthening those practices and applying them more broadly.**

Some school districts have embraced systems and practices associated with special education—like individual learning and accommodation plans—and applied them to all students. Rather than abandoning practices designed to help students on the margins, they are strengthening those practices and applying them more broadly.

We would be naive to expect schools to develop effective educator collaboration or strong, trusting relationships with parents overnight. But the experience of the schools we studied here illustrates that these organizational features have never been more vital, and suggests specific practices that are worth every school taking the first step to try.

All schools should:

- Expand existing protocols for identifying students in need of support (like Response to Intervention) to make sure all students' individual academic and mental health needs are met.
- Prioritize or increase general and special educator collaboration time to enable effective planning and problem-solving.
- Ensure leaders responsible for special education have a voice in schoolwide decision-making.
- Be intentional about nurturing and sustaining relationships. Build out or strengthen advisory programs, increase check-ins with students and parents, and streamline student communication between IEP team members with the student experience in mind.
- Prioritize communication with families—and tailor communication approaches to families' needs and preferences.

Students with disabilities must be a priority—not an afterthought—as schools weather continued disruptions to their normal operations during the pandemic. Prioritizing students with disabilities will ultimately benefit all students.

## What We Did

As part of a past [study](#) of promising practices in special education in charter schools, we identified a sample of schools that displayed strong school-to-family relationships, problem-solving capacity, and an inclusion-oriented mindset facilitated by flexible learning environments. These principles seem critical for responding to school building closures due to the pandemic.

At the beginning of May 2020, we surveyed 15 schools that had the most promising special education practices about their approach to remote learning. Of the 15 schools, 10 responded with paragraph-style answers to our open-ended survey. The data from these surveys were put in a matrix for cross-case analysis. We then identified five of the schools that had pivoted to remote learning while maintaining their previous practices and innovating to find new ones. For these five cases, we conducted interviews with a school administrator, special education director, general education teacher, and parent of a student with a disability. The goal of this work was to rapidly collect and share these voices and stories with others in the field who are seeking models and strategies to address the challenges they face in hopes of improving learning opportunities for students with disabilities when schools reopen.

## Acknowledgments

This report was made possible by the generous support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Foundation. We could not have written this report without the time and candor of the staff and parents at Audeo Charter School, Capital City Public Charter School, City Charter High School, Renaissance Arts Academy, and Silver Oak Montessori High School, who shared their perspectives with us. While this analysis draws upon the help of many people, fault for any errors or omissions rests with the authors alone.

## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S Department of Education.

## About the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools

To increase our collective understanding of the challenges, identify viable solutions, and ensure effective charter school practices that justify the trust of parents and students with disabilities, the charter sector needs a credible entity that will be a reliable resource for key stakeholders; both in the charter sector and the special education advocacy community. We created The National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (the Center) to fill the current void and proactively seek to foster innovations that will benefit both charter and traditional public schools. In creating the Center, our goal is to advocate for students with disabilities to ensure that if they are interested in attending charter schools, they are able to access and thrive in schools designed to enable all students to succeed.



# Audeo Charter School: Building on an Existing Personalized Learning Model

Lanya McKittrick

## Audeo Charter School

*The pandemic forces a school designed to foster student independence to take individualized support and family collaboration to the next level.*

### Key Lessons:

- Even schools designed to support individual students, form strong partnerships with parents, and enable independent learning before the pandemic needed to strengthen those practices to help students and families navigate the disruption wrought by COVID-19.
- Holding virtual IEP meetings for all of their students with disabilities helped schools create a foundation for communication, collaboration, and goal-setting—even though it turned out not to be required by law.
- Creating new systems to train parents to better assist their children at home helped remote learning efforts succeed.

Even before the coronavirus forced the closure of schools nationwide, students at Audeo Charter School could complete much of their coursework from home.

Students and their families work with teachers to build individualized learning programs, which Audeo refers to as Pathways Personalized Education Plans (PPEP). The plans identify each student's long-term academic and career goals and map out classes and other learning experiences they will need to reach those goals.

Students with disabilities have both a PPEP and an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Both are seen as living documents that are revised constantly. The PPEP process is at the core of Audeo's model, and a key to student success.

Audeo offers a full middle and high school curriculum online in Edgenuity, as well as in more traditional book and paper lessons for students who do not have access to technology at home.

The school's approach to serving students with disabilities is full inclusion. It uses an independent study model: students attend a learning center two to four days a week to meet with teachers and interact with their peers. Students with IEPs receive additional support from an educational specialist (special educator). But all students spend much of their time learning independently.

The flexibility of Audeo’s model has been a boon for students with disabilities and others who struggled in traditional schools. Based in San Diego and part of the Altus Schools charter school network, Audeo has attracted 434 students in grades K-12, 23 percent of whom have IEPs.

Audeo’s teachers were used to supporting students individually and treating parents as full partners. As a result, when schools closed suddenly last March, the school already had systems in place that helped support remote learning. But the school also discovered that in-person interactions were critical to its method of supporting students, which meant there were some growing pains as the school made the leap to fully remote learning. Audeo’s special education director noted:

Parents were reporting they don’t know how to get their kids support with the adjustment, and they’re very concerned about ‘Is my kid still on track? Are they going to be able to graduate?’ They are really concerned around the academic piece.

Strong family support, collaboration, and a social-emotional learning program, along with mobilizing existing training programs and the intentional use of data helped Audeo stay open to innovation and learning, and served the school well as it prepared for fall.

## Transitioning to Remote Learning Using Personalization

Audeo closed on March 16 after Governor Gavin Newsom’s statewide order. Teachers spent the first week getting tools into every student’s hands, including technology and internet access. They surveyed families about barriers to learning, such as food or other social services needs. Audeo relied on their team of existing social workers, a core part of Audeo’s special education team. Social workers provided targeted direct support to students in their caseloads to ensure continuity of learning. Social workers were asking students, “Do you have food? Are you able to see a doctor? Do you have health concerns? Would you like to speak with our nurse?”

Audeo’s special education team spent their first week establishing contact with families. In the second week they focused on intensive follow up with families they’d been unable to reach. Teams of teachers working together mapped out a comprehensive remote learning plan for each student, seen as an extension to that student’s PPEP. Teachers reached out to every family with a student with a disability to see how they were doing and what they needed. They also took the time to update every student’s IEP to make sure each of these students would have the right support system in place during remote learning.

The federal government later issued guidance that these IEP updates were not legally required, but teachers at Audeo were glad they did them. The process provided them the opportunity to connect with every family and ensure all the adults who worked with each student were on the same page.

During the first few weeks following closures, the special education team did intensive work around finding best practices—all 33 network case managers shared successes and failures and then created a remote learning specific framework. Audeo’s special education director said:

We just set an intention that we were going to try new things, we are going to be vulnerable, we were going to learn from all of our mistakes, and we are going to celebrate successes, and that our whole purpose was to experiment so that best practices could bubble up.

## Making Students with Disabilities a Priority

The school’s educators stuck to their guiding principle: “Do our very best for each student.” As the special education director told us:

One thing we did learn, and we had to really stay focused on, is back to the start of our conversation, we cannot add pressure to students and families. We have to stay oriented around everyone’s well-being and focusing on the kid first, building rapport. We had to build trust around a new mode of delivery. Communication has been more important than ever.

Audeo remained committed to continuity of services and supports for students with disabilities, even while receiving conflicting messaging and guidance from local, state, and federal agencies.

As the school transitioned to remote learning, education services and supports followed the same guidelines as they did before closures. Students with disabilities who needed additional support received virtual tutoring sessions individually or in groups. Audeo teachers used the Microsoft Teams breakout group features to help facilitate small-group instruction and work. Educational specialists held office hours each day, and they had tightly structured check-in meetings with the students they were responsible for supporting.

If a student needed assistive technology, the team made it a priority to get it right away, and the school provided other required services, such as speech and occupational therapy, through teletherapy. To make sure they could access curriculum and services remotely, students with disabilities received priority in the network’s technology distribution plan, receiving nearly 30 percent of the devices schools distributed to families.

Before the pandemic, students typically visited Audeo’s learning centers for in-person support several times per week. When in-person support was no longer possible, teachers had to provide extra support for independent learning, such as providing students with explicit schedules of daily activities for those who needed more structure.

## Key Components to Success

### *Taking family support to the next level*

One major constant for Audeo—before and after the pandemic—was a heavy emphasis on supporting families’ involvement in their children’s learning. The school continually surveys and checks in with parents about their needs. Many parents have asked for academic counseling because they want to make sure their child stays on track.

Audeo’s charter school network created a parent training series that covers topics such as health, cyber safety, and mental well-being.

Audeo is also intentionally finding ways to empower families with students with disabilities and English language learners by helping them access technology and learn how to use it, which then allows them to participate in virtual IEP meetings, and helps them work with teachers to ensure the curriculum is accessible.

### *Blurred lines and teacher collaboration*

General and special education teachers work together closely at Audeo and provide a positive co-teaching environment for students.

As one of Audeo’s educational specialists told us:

Together we make a plan for each student. We [general educator and educational specialist] figure out what needs to be done for each student together, and then kind of divide and conquer.

We heard of several examples of strong collaboration that blurred the lines between special and general education: group texts between general educators, educational specialists, and students that kept everyone on the same page; virtual mock interviews (as part of transition planning) with both general educators and educational specialists participating; and general educators popping into virtual sessions for specialized instruction.

### ***Mobilizing existing training programs to focus on remote learning***

Audeo mobilized its existing teacher training programs to focus on remote learning and the specific needs of students and teachers during the crisis.

The school’s network added new, pandemic-specific offerings to its existing suite of educator training programs, known as Altus University. For example, the network added first-responder training for teachers, knowing they now have an entirely new view into students’ lives at home—and teachers need to know how to look for signs of risk factors or child abuse. Another program provides training on supporting students and their families when everyone is experiencing collective trauma.

Audeo also holds weekly training on different technology tools, and on increasing student engagement in virtual classrooms. For special educators, it offers training on how to implement accommodations and modifications in a virtual setting, and strategies for how to hold an IEP meeting virtually.

### ***Inclusion of social-emotional learning***

Audeo recognizes the importance of social-emotional learning—especially during these uncertain times—having launched a program called RISE (Resilience in Students in Education). RISE consists of interactive live broadcast lessons (which are also recorded) that align to social-emotional learning standards. The goal is to help students acknowledge feelings of anxiety or depression, and develop healthy coping skills and ways to express themselves. RISE is optional for some students and mandatory for others, based upon a tiered system of support.

### ***Effective collection and use of data***

Audeo had systems in place before the pandemic to collect and use data on student engagement and communication. They have found that these data collection systems are even more important now, as public health concerns complicate home visits by teachers, learning center visits by students, and other staples of Audeo’s model. Using a spreadsheet, the special education team tracks contact with families: preferred method of communication, preferences for remote learning (some families opted out initially), barriers getting in the way of engagement, and dates of contact. They actively use this data to determine intervention and family engagement efforts.

Audeo students are not able to meet in person at resource centers, but participation is tracked by teachers. This is accomplished by intentional use of data. If a student is attending online, teachers check daily progress by how many virtual sessions students attend, and their engagement in Edgenuity. If a student is doing paper assignments, they are required to check in throughout the day with their teachers. All of this is tracked and shared among the Audeo team.

Audeo also tracks data for regression. They used March 2020 as a baseline and tracked progress until the end of the term. These indicators allow IEP teams to identify when more intensive interventions might be needed. These data have also been useful in IEP teams to help determine if more specialized instruction might be justified.

## Implications for Fall

As a year-long program, Audeo Charter School did not have the luxury of being able to devote the summer to fall planning. However, Audeo's blended learning model lent itself well to being able to move completely remote last spring.

Audeo has existing organizational systems in place that emphasized collaboration with parents and individualized support for students, and blurred lines between special and general education. These attributes, combined with a willingness to try new things and intentionally learn from them, will serve them well into the new school year.

Many school systems around the country are developing blended learning models for this academic year. Audeo's individualized, blended learning model has been shown to serve students with disabilities well. Audeo was able to quickly pivot from blending learning to fully remote learning and, should it be necessary to pivot again this year, Audeo will be ready.

# Capital City Public Charter School: Centering the Student Experience by Leveraging Pre-Existing Structures

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## Capital City Public Charter School

*A school leveraged its pre-existing student-centered systems to quickly implement remote learning with minor disruption.*

### Key Lessons:

- Relying on existing strong systems to flex to a new learning environment can make the transition to remote learning easier.
- Collaborating with students and families can bring unique insights into how to individualize for the new learning environment.
- Creating streamlined communication systems for students and their families—especially for students with disabilities—can reduce student frustration and increase engagement.
- Bolstering social-emotional supports using advisory groups can allow schools to attend to students' nonacademic needs.

Capital City Public Charter School, in Washington D.C., takes pride in its academic program and its commitment to inclusion. Administrators worried about how they would maintain both when schools closed last spring. Many of their students rely heavily on the learning and mental health support they receive in school, which would be difficult to provide remotely.

Last spring, Capital City drew heavily on its prior practices around the strong culture of collaboration—and its relationships with parents—to transition its special education supports and services to the remote setting without delay.

When a team of our researchers visited Capital City in fall 2018, we noted the school's commitment to sustaining a culture of empathy for students. Everyone at the school has a shared set of core beliefs that focuses on inclusive practices (e.g., universal design for learning), collaboration and communication, and essential mindsets (e.g., all teachers educate all students).

Leaders and staff alike consider how decisions will affect or be perceived by students. This student-centered approach was at the core of their planning and execution of remote learning.

Soon, along with schools across the nation, administrators realized that closures would likely last through the end of the year and that they needed a plan that featured higher academic expectations and a balance of live and asynchronous learning. To develop this longer-term plan, pre-existing instructional teams collaborated and grouped students based on common needs (e.g., students in need of extended time for concept mastery or who needed instruction on foundational or extension concepts).

Teachers found that student engagement increased as more students gained access to devices and teachers offered more live instruction.

Teachers prioritized communication with students and families about their needs both in and out of school. After just a few weeks, however, students with disabilities and their families reported feeling overwhelmed with communication. Each teacher was sending a separate email, sometimes daily, with the work expectations for their class. These disparate communications were difficult for students to navigate, leading to anxiety and decreased engagement.

Capital City met these challenges by first viewing the schooling experience through the eyes of their students and then relying on their long-standing problem-solving systems and structures to make adjustments to their model. By staying true to systematic problem-solving, educators and leaders developed strategies that any school should keep in mind as they continue to navigate special education during the pandemic.

### **Streamlined Communication to Students and Parents through a Central Messaging System**

Capital City staff collaboratively identified the challenge created by a flood of communications to students from multiple teachers. Tapping the expertise of their technology leader, they created a new system of combining assignments for each class into one weekly email to students and their families, complete with links to their location for completion. This streamlined communication, reduced student frustration, and increased engagement.

Communication was especially important for juniors and seniors who had their post-graduation plans change due to the pandemic. Capital City's special education transition coordinator developed a simple framework to help juniors and seniors work through their anxiety and worries. Students would discuss their postsecondary plans, how the shutdown may affect them, and what they thought they needed to overcome any potential negative effects.

### **Enhanced Social and Emotional Support by Leveraging Advisory Groups and Attending to Nonacademic Needs**

As the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic set in, Capital City enhanced social-emotional supports for students and implemented broader wellness check-ins with families. The school's advisory groups, which met daily/weekly to help groups of students navigate the challenges of high school and plan for what came after, took on a new level of importance during the switch to remote learning. Capital City leveraged its existing advisory structure to increase opportunities for students to share how they were feeling and what their needs were.

Understanding that families were faced with competing priorities in an already complex situation, the Capital City team worked to find solutions for any concern expressed by parents or by the students themselves. The school connected families with community-based services

like mental health supports, reduced workloads for students who were feeling overwhelmed, and created a process for helping families who had sick or working caregivers.

The school flexed its model as much as possible to fit the realities of students and families' lives. Staff shifted their office hours to accommodate families' personal and work schedules, and teachers created flexible synchronous instruction blocks to most efficiently meet families' scheduling needs.

## **Bolstered Communication and Collaboration with Parents and Students**

Capital City values collaboration. During the pandemic, school staff quickly realized that they needed to increase communication and collaboration with parents and students. Students with disabilities and their parents were involved in educational and programmatic decisions early and often—allowing them to give educators insight into how shifts in instructional practices and the use of technology would affect them.

Capital City prioritized collaboration between grade-level and instructional leadership teams around flexible grouping for students based on various sources of data. Co-planning between general and special educators continued, and teachers were empowered to personalize instruction to meet the needs of individual students and families.

Capital City treated students as indispensable sources of information, asking them to provide frequent feedback on their learning. The school also tapped speech therapists and other special education service providers to help students with real-world needs, such as coping with the switch to online learning, and planning for interviews for postsecondary transition needs.

This enhanced collaboration between staff, students, and families—with the students and their needs always at the center—remained central to Capital City's preparations for fall and its efforts to improve remote learning programming.

## **Conclusion**

Capital City's transition to remote learning depended on its existing systems that gave life to its core values. The school kept the student experience at the center of its decision-making during the pandemic and used their established structures to quickly respond to student and family needs.

Student-centered systems are the bedrock of Capital City's program; the pandemic has reaffirmed this approach. Advisory check-ins and relationships with families were critical to sustaining student engagement, and will serve as the basis for any future remote learning the school provides.

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# City Charter High School: Balancing Structure and Flexibility for Students with Disabilities

Betheny Gross, Sivan Tuchman

## City Charter High School

*A school that runs on student-teacher relationships seeks a balance between strong structures and flexible student support to sustain instruction during closures.*

### Key Lessons:

- Remote learning disrupted the seamless collaboration that allowed schools to blur the lines between special and general education, but norms and practices—like a tendency for general education teachers to drop in on special educators’ office hours, and both types of teachers producing video lessons so students would continue to see them as teachers—helped mitigate the disruption.
- Individualized problem-solving that ranged from home visits to office hours—in which teachers would drop in on a student, rather than the reverse—proved necessary to sustain engagement with some students during remote learning.
- Practices such as clear communication, engagement tracking, and routines designed to support teacher collaboration helped schools sustain their core principles.

City Charter High School in Pittsburgh, PA, develops students’ independence and self advocacy. Teachers work in interdisciplinary teams with cohorts of students as they pass from 9th to 12th grade. Each grade-level teacher team “loops” with the same students through these four years. Teachers help students develop independence by regularly engaging them in interdisciplinary projects and providing constantly tailored support in the form of subtle or firm nudges and help, as needed.

As students progress through high school, they find they have increasing discretion over their learning. City High’s model offers long term-relationships between students and teachers, flexibility, and individualized support. This particularly benefits the school’s students with disabilities, who make up more than 20 percent of the school’s population.

The COVID-19 closures last spring uprooted the school’s model. To accommodate student, family, and teacher schedules, school leaders opted for asynchronous learning: teachers would deliver instruction via recorded videos and assign work for students to complete on their own schedules. This meant that many of the touchstones teachers relied on to ensure that students, particularly students with disabilities, stayed on track—frequent check-ins throughout the day, quick one-on-one sidebar help sessions, in-the-moment accommodations or modifications to

provide better access to content, or quick consults with fellow teachers to strategize—no longer existed. One teacher noted:

“[Normally] we would pull them one-on-one, or pull them into a small group physically . . . say, ‘Hey, let’s take 10 or 15 minutes and work together one-on-one or in this small group.’ And we can’t do that now.”

Succeeding in the asynchronous virtual experience would depend on finding new ways to support students. City High teachers and leaders found that a combination of clear expectations and communication about learning systems, routines to monitor student engagement and connect teachers, empowering learning support teachers to be creative and flexible, and a team-wide commitment to support students with disabilities meant that learning and—critically—learning support continued through the pandemic closure.

## The Sudden Loss of Face-to-Face and Live Interaction

Pennsylvania’s governor closed the state’s schools as City High neared the end of its second trimester before its spring break. City High extended the break by one week to give teachers time to rework their curriculum and lessons. The school relaunched with a fully asynchronous approach but with several specific expectations about engagement and instruction.

When they reopened, City High required students to check in daily with their advisors between 10:00 a.m. and noon via text, e-mail, phone call, or Google Meet. Teachers checked in or worked with students on assignments from 10:00 a.m. to noon, and scheduled two-hour blocks of office hours between 1:00 and 7:00 p.m.

Each day between Monday and Thursday, teachers provided lessons and materials to students through Google Classroom. Each lesson included a short video (up to 10 minutes in length) describing the day’s work and an assignment that took students about 30 minutes to complete. In total, students received about four hours of work to complete each day. Teachers expected students to turn in their work for feedback and grading, though they gave students until the end of day on Thursday to complete the week’s assignments for full credit. Students could then use Friday to make up for any incomplete work, but would lose some credit due to lateness.

Every student at City High already had a school-issued laptop and experience with Google Classroom, which made the transition to online delivery easier. City High staff systematized how staff members labeled lessons and materials in Google Classroom to make it as simple as possible for students and parents to access lessons. Teachers also uploaded modified assignments to Google Classroom, which offers seamless delivery of these assignments to the intended students. City High had also recently conducted a week-long experiment with fully remote instruction, so teachers had some idea of who would struggle in the environment.

Despite these advantages, teachers worried about how to support their students, particularly students with disabilities, in an asynchronous remote environment over the longer term. One teacher explained that so much of what made City High work for students with disabilities is that learning support teachers (teachers with special education backgrounds) is working one-on-one with students all day long. General education teachers and learning support teachers constantly observe students as they work and fluidly pull them aside individually or in groups to quickly address issues as they surface. Learning support teachers are embedded with the general education teachers and they constantly share their observations and discuss strategies to help students. How would all of this spontaneous engagement and support be replaced in the asynchronous environment?

## Teachers Support Students at Home by Being Both Structured and Loose

City High teachers and leaders, while acknowledging that last spring's efforts were far from perfect, showed that they could continue to support students with disabilities by providing them with structure but being flexible about what that structure would be, and by prioritizing communication with students, parents, and among teachers. Here are the core elements of their approach.

### *Clearly communicate expectations to teachers, students, and parents and sustain communication over time*

To ensure as much consistency as possible in the learning experiences in the remote setting, City High leaders provided teachers with very clear guidelines for what schooling should look like. The Distance Learning Guide for Teachers outlined the expectations for student and teacher check ins (when and how they should happen, and how to log them), the structure of material provided to students daily (a short video and a 30 minute assignment), how assignments would be graded and final grades would be assigned, and how administrators would observe instruction during this time. School leaders and teachers then communicated these expectations to students and parents, making it clear to students how teachers expected them to communicate with them and what work they expected them to do during the closures.

Teachers, who had always stayed in close contact with parents, maintained constant communication with parents about their child's engagement and progress. One parent we spoke with described daily communication with her child's learning support teacher. She noted:

[The teachers] were able to arrange in Google Classroom that I get a report every day, so if [my son] hasn't turned something in, it shows up at like 5:00 and I can say, '[Son], you know this isn't done.' . . . That's been really helpful to me to know exactly.

For students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP), progress reports and IEP meetings continued. Small modifications to IEPs were managed over the phone. Per the school's plan for special education during closure, students continued to receive modified curriculum and support, including virtual office hours, supplemental videos and activities in classes, progress monitoring via multiple methods as indicated by the student's IEP, and related services provided virtually in live sessions, pre-recorded sessions, group activities, or supplemental material. The school completed evaluations that were underway prior to the school closures but did not start new evaluations during the closure.

### *Establish systems to track student engagement and submitted work*

Based on the one-week remote learning experiment City High conducted earlier in the year, leaders and teachers knew that some students would struggle to stay engaged in the remote learning setting. To stay proactive on engagement, school leaders required all students to check in with their advisory teacher every morning via email, phone, or text. Advisors, who are teachers, logged and submitted these check-ins daily.

Additionally, school leaders asked teachers to review and record work submitted by students daily if possible, prioritizing students with disabilities, as well as other students the teaching team had identified as needing additional support. The administration consulted teacher grade books daily and updated information in the parent portal so parents and students had daily information on work submitted.

By constantly tracking student engagement and work submitted, administrators and teachers could quickly identify any students who were struggling in the remote setting. This prompted a call home from teachers or administrators. In a few cases, administrators even made a home visit to check on students. One administrator said:

I did go to a couple students' houses, and they didn't act like they wanted me there but later on I heard from other kids that they Snapchatted that I was at their house.

### ***Maintain routines that support collaboration among teachers***

City High teachers work as an interdisciplinary team, looping with their students through their entire high school experience. This structure has led to close and long-lasting working relationships among teachers that are reinforced through co-lesson planning, co-teaching, and weekly team collaboration time. Prior to the closures, teachers described their teamwork as a highly rehearsed dance with each member of the team able to anticipate what each other would be doing in class as they work with students.

Though the leaders knew that co-lesson planning and co-teaching might need to look different in the asynchronous setting, they were also clear that teams should maintain all of these elements of collaboration throughout the closures. Teachers worked together to restructure lessons for the shorter format and more independent engagement of students. Though teachers would no longer be in the same classroom co-teaching, teachers continued co-teaching by trading off responsibility for providing videos to students. Teachers also maintained their weekly meetings to discuss specific concerns with the curriculum or individual students, devise strategies to address these concerns, and assign specific individuals to implement the strategies. These weekly meetings provided learning support teachers an opportunity to discuss any issues rising among the students with disabilities and seek assistance and support from the rest of the team in resolving the issues.

The existing relationships among teachers certainly helped the team to stay connected and coordinated, but maintaining expectations and routines for collaboration ensured that City High teams would productively leverage these working relationships throughout the closures.

### ***Empower learning support teachers to be creative and flexible with structures***

City High leaders and teachers have always valued and supported creative problem-solving to support students with disabilities; they knew that this commitment would be essential as students adjusted to the asynchronous model. Rather than insisting on blind adherence to the structures laid out in the Distance Learning Guide, leaders empowered learning support teachers to reconfigure structures so that they worked for their students. One parent we spoke with explained that her son struggled to sustain momentum without direct supervision from his teachers. He had failed to complete his assignments and was not attending teachers' office hours. To get him back on track, his mother and the learning support teacher decided that, instead of expecting him to attend a teacher's office hours, he would hold "study hours" that his teachers would drop into. He would be expected to be online and logged into a Google Meet virtual session for two hours every day and working on assignments according to a schedule. His teachers would then drop into the virtual session to check what he was working on and provide any needed assistance. This simple flip in the structure got the student back on course and, according to his mother, he is getting better grades than ever.

## Core Principles Carve a Path through Disruption

The deft balance of structure and flexibility is not new to discussions of how to support students with disabilities. When schools were physically open, City High teachers achieved this balance by coming to know their students well and constantly observing and reflexively responding to their needs in the moment. The shift to a remote asynchronous model made it much harder, if not impossible, for teachers to respond to students as they had before but, as it turns out, it did not eliminate the opportunity to respond. By finding ways to live out their core principles of communication, collaboration, and flexibility amid structure, they were able to navigate the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 closures. City High teachers and leaders candidly reported that despite their best efforts, they still could not engage every student last spring—and this worried them. But, at the same time, they also saw new unexpected successes. As one teacher noted:

For all of the kids that I worry about who aren't getting support, there are so many who are doing really good work without a lot. Teachers are all a little bit egotistical but it's nice to see that it's not all about 'me helping you get this.' These kids are doing [the work] on their own, and they're doing a really good job. And it's not because my two-minute video was that spectacular. It's because they're really taking ownership over their learning.

The strategies City High adopted and outlined above—though used in the context of a fully asynchronous model—can apply across a range of remote and semi-remote models, are well within reach of all schools, and can be a useful guide to any school hoping to better support both students and teachers during this academic year.

# Renaissance Arts Academy: Letting the Ensemble Sing Online

Sean Gill, Lanya McKittrick

## Renaissance Arts Academy

*A performing arts school built from the ground up around “ensemble learning” that blurs divisions between grades, subjects, and of course, special and general education, finds ways to hold the ensemble together even when teachers and students are not able to learn together in the same building.*

### Key Lessons:

- An all-hands-on-deck approach was necessary to keep students engaged, with diligent follow-up to connect with students who weren’t visible during video lessons.
- Online learning can be structured to reinforce schools’ most important values, including those of collaboration, frequent feedback, and inclusivity.
- Prioritizing real-time interaction, and making it available to students even during independent work time, can help sustain communication and engagement during remote learning.

COVID-19 required many schools to dramatically reinvent themselves as a virtual program overnight, but this was perhaps no more evident than at Renaissance Arts Academy (RenArts) charter school in Los Angeles. The school’s physical campus has no traditional classrooms and few internal walls. Teachers guide kindergarten through 12th grade students in flexible pods and constructed performance spaces inside a remodeled auto garage. This unique use of physical space by a performing arts-focused school enabled nearly seamless collaboration among adults, and treated students with disabilities as full members of the ensemble.

When CRPE researchers first visited the campus in December 2018, ensemble learning unfolded immediately before our eyes. About half the students sat in multi-age groups. Advisors (teachers) led small groups or supported students as they worked together on assignments in humanities or “smath” (science/math). We would have been hard-pressed to quickly identify students receiving special education services—not because the school neglected them, but because advisors mostly provided these supports alongside general instruction and never separated them from other students. Their curriculum was created entirely by staff, but rooted in many classics—students in sixth grade read “Frankenstein.” The school’s cofounder compared ensemble learning to a large, lively family conversation at the dining table:

You don't shunt the kids away even if they don't understand everything that's being discussed. Not knowing everything is part of learning, and the best way to learn is to learn together.

At one point during our visit, we observed an advisor coach a child: "It's okay if you don't understand all the questions. Do as much as you can."

A large curtain divided the school space. The other half of the student body that we could not see rehearsed for a performance later that evening. They choreographed dance routines and practiced tricky passages on their violins, cellos, and basses. Putting on the semi-annual performances was a whole-school effort; each student had a part in the show. When we sat in on the show later that evening, we saw their dances referenced the classics they were reading, as well as modern events. String players wove together orchestral pieces and modern music, walking on stage while playing with the precision of a marching band. Multi-age collaborations were in evidence here, too. At one point, high schoolers helped usher in kindergartners dressed as red "minions" to sing a Nat King Cole standard: *V is very, very extraordinary*.

The question RenArts leaders had to confront suddenly last spring was how to sustain an extraordinary, ensemble approach to learning when they were forced to leave their physical building behind.

### **The ensemble continued to perform even when face-to-face instruction was not possible**

RenArts students achieve great outcomes. Nearly all of them graduate and go to college. For students with disabilities it's a positive outlier, with some of the strongest state test scores in [CRPE's recent nationwide study of special education in charter schools](#). But RenArts deployed no course exams, no graded assignments, no formal academic tracking, and little in the way of self-contained student work to get them there. Staff previously told us they worked long days, but they didn't bring work home, and were rarely at school when students weren't. Would remote learning force them to adopt more traditional structures? Could seamless collaboration continue when each child and adult was at home behind their own screen?

RenArts pivoted quickly to remote learning. Following the lead of the Los Angeles Unified School District and the county's recommendation, RenArts ceased on-site instruction at the end of the school day on March 13th. To maximize program cohesion, RenArts moved up its spring break to coincide with the first two weeks of the school closure. This allowed the faculty team to plan for the transition of RenArts' integrated, multi-age programs to an online platform, including time to distribute laptops to families that needed them, ensure that every family had an internet connection, prepare and troubleshoot Google Classroom technical interface to accommodate increased usage and more robust instructional demands, and prepare the faculty team to facilitate learning experiences in an online environment. Instruction for all grades from transitional kindergarten through 12th resumed on March 30th.

Before the closure, we did not notice technology playing a prominent role in ensemble learning, but teachers used a bespoke online platform to collaborate and to support students, including those with disabilities. They used the internal system to trade notes on individual students and their needs.

Technology that was already in place was a starting point for their shift to remote learning. RenArts leaders told us they made Chromebooks and Google Classroom work for them last

spring. They called every home to ensure students had needed technology, and called each morning to every student who hadn't yet logged in. They turned off Google Classroom's grading features that looked like traditional schooling, but embraced the way the technology could bring everyone together. Staff met early each morning online and then began the day.

A strong culture of collaboration had always helped RenArts with students with disabilities and continued to do so during the pandemic. The school does not pull students with disabilities out of class for special education services, and the staff does not have a separate special education team. The seamless nature of the school means adults wear many hats. The school psychologist, for example, also teaches humanities, and a lead math teacher (an astrophysicist) has a special education credential; both of these lead administrators teach. During the transition to online learning, school staff made over 450 phone calls to modify or adapt Individualized Education Programs (IEP). They adapted the Google platform to provide as many supports as they could, without removing those students from the larger sessions. A student with severe speech apraxia had two open "channels," including one with the interpreter so they could participate in online sessions. Other students entered written responses into Google Docs that special education advisors could read before small-group discussions.

An educational advisor told us:

It took a little while to figure out how to [master] multiple advisors in a[n online] room with multiple scholars, students working at different places in their own work. [Technology allowed us to have] fluid conversations where all advisors are aware of [students with disabilities'] work and of the supports that they need, perhaps even better than they had practiced before.

Before the pandemic, the performing arts activities helped students with disabilities feel included, often letting them shine. Although RenArts could not mount its year-end show in person, it found a way to provide opportunity for students to practice and perform in a virtual setting. Where students once learned the art of live dance theatre, they embraced the opportunity to stage, shoot, and edit themselves in digital movies. They figured out workarounds to play violins synchronously, fiddling with microphone setups and adjusting expectations on how well it might sound. The "dinner table" lessons were even more inclusive online. Educators noticed occasional "stowaways" tuning in—siblings of their students who enjoyed the lessons and conversations too. Families felt supported just as they had before.

In this new and uncertain school year, RenArts students face challenges adapting to hybrid schedules, maintaining physical distancing in a large open space, and creating relationships with advisors they will not meet in person. Another semester without the capstone of a live show will feel like a big loss—but RenArts arts students seem likely to succeed. An advisor, also a parent, told us:

The positive shift and adjustment in the students and the staff to continue to provide a collaborative learning experience for everyone has been great to see.

What lessons can schools learn as they work through this new school year? First, RenArts took an all-hands-on-deck approach to ensure family and student engagement. This was in part already embedded in the school's culture, but it did not require a huge technological lift, just some coordination and diligence. RenArts relied on simple phone calls to make sure families had what they needed, that IEPs could be modified, and to remind wayward students to sign in when they weren't seen on video. Second, RenArts used the new capabilities of an online platform to reinforce its most important values, including those of collaboration, frequent feedback, and inclusivity. The school prioritized real-time interaction and made it available even when students were working independently. The ensemble held together, even though the



# Silver Oak Montessori High School: Quickly Responding to New Student Needs as They Arise

Sivan Tuchman

## Silver Oak Montessori High School

*A school built to foster independent learning adapts its Response to Intervention approach to ensure it meets all students' needs during remote learning.*

### Key Lessons:

- Attempts to re-create a traditional, seven-hour school day during remote learning quickly proved overwhelming to both students and teachers. A schedule with more flexible time proved more amenable.
- When the special education director holds a leadership role with meaningful sway over schoolwide decision-making, schools are more likely to prioritize the needs of students with disabilities—and, in so doing, adopt practices that help them meet the individual needs of all students.
- Finding other adults who could pitch in to help make contact with students and identify their needs helped schools communicate with as many families as possible to understand their needs during remote learning.

Silver Oak Montessori High School in Hayward, California, creates an inclusive and individualized educational environment that is highly responsive to student needs, which factors into the school's success educating students with disabilities.

The school's model revolves around the Montessori philosophy. At Silver Oak, this means that all lessons and materials are individualized for students so that they can independently direct their learning. Projects give students this independence along with choice over how they demonstrate their learning. Additionally, students spend a substantial amount of time working in pairs and groups so that they build important communication and collaboration skills. Silver Oak built structures that reinforce this model, support teacher collaboration, and enable staff to respond to the individual needs of struggling students.

These supportive structures make it possible for Silver Oak to hold all students to high expectations in an environment that fully includes students with disabilities. They also helped the faculty and administration to sustain the spirit of the school even as remote learning dramatically shifted what teaching and learning looked like.

Though Silver Oak students are accustomed to working independently on self-directed projects, as in the Montessori tradition, teachers support and facilitate students in their learning. Remote learning challenged teachers to find new ways to meet the needs of each student when they weren't in the same room, even as the learning needs of both general and special education students changed and—for some—grew.

Strong collaborative structures embedded in the faculty culture and reinforced through the school's robust Response to Intervention (RTI) system helped ensure that special education, general education, or student well-being and academics operated in separate silos. This kept decision-makers at the school in tune with their students' full range of needs as they started remote learning, and tackled various challenges that arose along the way.

### **Transitioning to Remote Montessori without Losing its Essence**

Like most schools in the United States, Silver Oak officially closed for in-person instruction as of March 16, 2020. School leadership asked teachers who felt comfortable doing so to come in that day to plan for remote learning. To ease the transition to remote learning, they chose to maintain their regular full-day schedule of classes. School staff and families quickly realized that it was not practical for everyone to be on screens for so many hours and decided to change their remote learning model after the final two weeks of the quarter.

Silver Oak normally schedules classes in two-hour blocks so teachers can teach content, as well as give students time to work on projects independently or in groups. To lessen the time students and teachers spent in front of computer screens, school leadership had students attend all their classes during a one-hour block each morning. Students were expected to use their afternoons for independent work on projects. Teachers were available for two-hour blocks of office hours for students who need extra support. Students who were identified by teachers as needing extra help were also asked to attend office hours.

Each teacher at Silver Oak used Google Classroom before the pandemic and continued to use it as their primary online learning management system during remote learning. Students and parents were able to access all educational materials and communicate with teachers through the platform. Students with disabilities continued to receive accommodated or modified assignments through Google Classroom—the same way they did before remote learning.

But the transition wasn't totally seamless. Teachers had to alter their curricula because they couldn't expect students to work on group projects the way they did during in-person classes. The digital media teacher had to find new programs that were compatible on Chromebooks since they no longer had access to their school computer lab. While students already had substantial choice over what to focus projects on before the pandemic, this teacher decided to allow students even more freedom to choose their projects so that they would stay motivated during such a difficult time.

Students and teachers at Silver Oak formed strong relationships throughout the school year; it's clear that moving to remote learning would make it difficult for them to maintain these relationships. One reason this didn't happen was because Silver Oak's attendance coordinator held students accountable for attending live classes by calling home if students didn't attend a class. The attendance coordinator was also responsible for helping families get internet connectivity.

Silver Oak’s investment in making sure students were able to—and actually attend—live classes helped staff keep in touch with students in a way that mirrored their in-person experience. When asked what she was most proud of during remote instruction, Silver Oak’s special education director said:

Still connecting with the students on the level that I would have at school. I don’t feel like doing it over Zoom kind of lessens any of the rapport, the relationship that I had with my students.

Even though Silver Oak was able to navigate many of the challenges that arose during the transition to remote learning, they had to contend with balancing high academic expectations for students with the reality of the emotional toll of the pandemic, as well as the fact that many students simply couldn’t get through the same amount of work during the quarter. These same challenges continue to exist in the new school year. Silver Oak’s strategy for addressing them may offer some possible solutions for other schools.

## Response to Intervention Structures Are Expanded to Meet New Needs

Silver Oak used RTI to effectively respond to the new student needs that arose during remote learning. RTI is most often used to identify students struggling academically before they begin to fail. Structures for RTI vary across schools, but they most often revolve around strategic data collection to determine which students need additional support, at what level, and then how they progress once they receive those interventions. Staff that are part of the RTI team meet regularly to track student progress. Silver Oak’s RTI team—made up of the director of special education, the principal, the vice principal, the school counselor, and a mental health specialist—functioned in a structured and efficient way before the pandemic hit, which helped them to pivot to meet new student needs quickly.

### *Maintaining structures to respond to new needs*

Keeping important structures like the RTI team meetings in place was essential for Silver Oak. The school staff didn’t let the chaos of school closures stop them from continuing to meet as teams to troubleshoot the challenges that arose with the closure. The RTI team continued meeting as soon as students went to remote learning. The inclusion of the diverse voices in the team helped school leadership quickly understand the challenges students were facing, and helped inform critical decisions, including the choice to cut back on live teaching.

Silver Oak’s director of special education said:

From [the mental health specialist’s] RTI input in terms of like the mental health . . . and the counselor, too, coming from that perspective and seeing those mental health students who needed accommodations, seeing that having two hours logged in to the classes, so from 8:45 to 4:00 was not sustainable.

Just getting that feedback helped the school leaders decide to change the way classes were structured for the last quarter of school. Both continuing to meet regularly and maintaining the full RTI team with school leadership during closure made it possible for the team to collaborate around concerns and for leadership to respond quickly.

### *Meeting the Needs of a Larger Population Served by the RTI Team*

One of the most important steps that Silver Oak’s RTI team took was identifying students who were struggling with mental health during stay-at-home orders. Schoolwide, staff members

tracked which students not previously in RTI expressed new mental health needs that impacted their ability to access classes and complete assignments. The RTI team set up a system that provided specific accommodations for this group of students. For some, this meant a reduction in classwork required. Others simply needed permission to keep their video off during live instruction. Students and advisors had conversations about what they specifically needed to be successful, which always included meetings with a mental health specialist.

To meet the increased needs, mental health specialists also took on new tasks. The special education director told us:

The mental health specialist [was] meeting once a week with the students, two or more, and also working with them on academics. She doesn't typically work with them on tracking their grades and doing all of that. So they're taking on that task, too, along with the counselor, and having tutoring hours with the kids. . . . So definitely everyone [was] kind of putting all of their energy in any way, any capacity as possible to help the kids.

In this way, the RTI team took an open approach to meeting students' diverse needs. Rather than seeing mental health services as strictly including emotional issues, they looked at the intersection between emotional issues and academics. This approach to serving students who struggled—sometimes for the first time—during school closure helped reduce the pressure and anxiety resulting from remote learning while also supporting their academic progress.

### ***Creating new RTI structures for the remote learning***

The RTI team and entire school staff also recognized that mental health specialists may not be the right people to address the needs of each struggling student. Silver Oak knew relationships were essential, so staff made sure to identify the adult who had the strongest rapport with each student. Then, these adults checked in regularly with these students. A student's dedicated contact could be their academic advisor, the special education director, or a school counselor. The special education director told us:

It's kind of like that village approach. We're just going to all kind of see how we're going to be able to help the kid. If you're not going to be able to touch base with them today, okay, then you can touch base with them another day. So we have where it's like, okay, this might be your caseload. . . . but it's not a solid line. It's going to waiver.

The RTI team recognized that it needed to stay flexible to the needs of students, especially those with mental health needs, as more students required support. If they hadn't been willing to consider all the members of the school staff who could support the mental health needs of their students and function as case managers, fewer students would have received meaningful support. The mental health specialist could never have called everyone on their own.

Silver Oak also began using the business collaboration software Slack to help staff members communicate more efficiently about students—similar to how they would have in person. Slack allows users to privately message each other individually, in small groups, or publicly through “channels,” which are often created by topic. Silver Oak created channels for attendance, special education, Zoom problems, grade levels, RTI, and behavioral issues. This created a virtual forum for the ad hoc problem-solving that staff would normally perform throughout the school day in short meetings or classroom and hallway conversations. Silver Oak's openness to using this new tool to replace communication inside the school building continues to benefit them in the new school year as they look for longer-term solutions to replicating their in-person model for remote learning.

## What Does This Mean for the New School Year?

Many schools have a process for RTI—whether they call it a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) or student study team (SSTs). They are simply structures for diverse staff members to monitor student progress and intervene based on individual needs. Maintaining structures like RTI during remote learning helps ensure that students who struggle with this form of instruction get what they need from their school.

### *Stay true to the RTI structures*

The RTI structures Silver Oak had in place before the pandemic were not unique. A diverse team that included school leadership met regularly to make data-informed decisions about interventions for students. What they did differently than many other schools was that they did not stop meeting when school physically closed. They continued to include both their principal and vice principal in their RTI team meetings, despite all the chaos and warring priorities. RTI is particularly important during the shift to remote or hybrid learning because each student will respond differently to remote instruction than they did in traditional instruction. The RTI process and team involves looking at data and determining interventions, which will continue to be essential throughout the new school year.

### *Be open to tech solutions to keep structures and communication strong*

With the new needs that are arising for different students than those who previously struggled, schools should be open to finding new ways to meet these needs. Silver Oak staff were able to use Slack to communicate with one another efficiently about challenges and solve problems. They were also willing to give accommodations to students who struggled during the pandemic. School leaders couldn't have predicted the types of needs or the number of students who would struggle, but they were willing to develop a new procedure for how to support them rather than continuing to expect them to meet all the demands of their remote program.

Many teachers are learning to navigate the many new platforms that schools have chosen for the new school year. It's unlikely that these programs will meet all the needs that arise in the coming months. School leaders must be ready to assess their online tools regularly to determine where gaps exist in what they are providing teachers, students, and their families. They may need to create new documents to track student needs, or invest in another app. It may be impossible to predict everything students will need, but it's not impossible to have a process in place to find these needs and respond to them with new tools.

### *Letting RTI be flexible to meet changing needs*

The 2020-21 school year likely looks different as it starts in the fall than it will by May. Silver Oak allowed their RTI structures to meet the new student needs that arose when they shifted from full in-person instruction to remote learning. As the pandemic continues, schools that started the year with remote learning will hopefully be able to eventually provide full in-person instruction again. Hybrid options and sudden changes from in-person to remote are also highly probable during the next school year. Each of these shifts, along with changing economic and social concerns, will impact students' academic, social, and emotional needs. RTI provides a structure for schools to continuously analyze data around these student needs and respond to them appropriately. Schools can use their diverse RTI team to monitor interventions used for individual students and use data to determine whether those interventions help them continue to make progress.

RTI is not the solution to all the challenges that can arise during remote learning. Instead, it is a structure that gives direction to schools on how to make sure students aren't left behind as their educational landscape continues to shift over the current school year.