



EDUCATION

EMPOWERMENT

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MEAF BRIEF

Volume I: Issue I

September 2020

Distance Learning Strategies to Include & Empower Youth with Disabilities

As a result of the novel coronavirus pandemic, many schools in the U.S. are continuing with 100% distance learning or hybrid (some in-person and some face-to-face) instruction as classes resume this fall. As a funder focused on empowering youth with disabilities to lead productive lives, the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation (MEAF) convened a meeting of a dozen of its grantees on August 11, 2020. The organization leaders, representing the education, nonprofit and business sectors, offered their observations, lessons learned and inclusion strategies to consider as we embark on another year of teaching students at a distance.

Inclusive Quality Education

Students with disabilities are entitled to inclusive, quality education under the law:

- The 1975 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures students with a disability are provided a Free Appropriate Public Education that is tailored to their individual needs.
- The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public.
- Many school districts are making exceptions to 100% distance education and are allowing face-to-face instruction for students with disabilities. While school districts should be applauded for working to ensure students with disabilities receive the support they need, some students are immunocompromised and vulnerable to Covid-19, which may put their health at risk.
- Many parents with means are turning to homeschooling, neighborhood pod models, and private schools to meet educational and childcare needs for their children. Since there is a higher incidence of disability among families with lower socio-economic means, these alternative education models may not be available to many students with disabilities.

Students' Ability to Adapt

How have students adapted to remote learning?

- Some parents reported that some students, who underperformed in school, blossomed while learning at home. However, many students with disabilities did not receive the supports and accessible technology needed to succeed in a virtual education environment.
- A vocational training program for youth with autism, reported that 2nd and 3rd year students adapted quickly to online instruction; however, 1st year students struggled, as they did not have the benefit of socialization and behavioral supports that in-person instruction provides.
- A school for the blind noted that teaching blind, deafblind, and low-vision students is very individualized, so they are offering hybrid instruction. This model allows for in-person education for deafblind students with dual sensory loss, who communicate through touch.
- Virtual learning has helped level the playing field for many students; however, it has created larger divides for those who do not have access to technology or the support system or expertise for instruction at home.



Virtual Education Lessons Learned

A number of promising practices were identified as organizations developed virtual programs this summer:

Duration of Instruction

- Limit the duration of synchronized learning. A maximum of 2.5 hours with interactive activities (like breakouts) for young adults worked well. Shorter duration, 1.5 hours, for younger ages.
- A vocational training program moved to 50% asynchronous learning for young adults, helping them develop their independence, initiative and time management skills, which will be useful as they prepare to enter the workforce.

Class Size

- Small teacher to student ratios were ideal. 1:5 with the ability to do 1:1 breakouts for individualized instruction, behavioral supports, etc. worked well.
- Whether online or in-person, the ability to do individualized instruction based on need is key.

Social Engagement/Team Building

- Building in social engagement activities and team building exercises, intermixed with academic instruction, is crucial to build interest and community. Ideas include:
 - Develop a student-only private Facebook group to facilitate peer to peer mentoring.
 - Have people get to know each other with icebreakers and online profiles.
 - Celebrate success and recognize excellence with recognition and awards.
 - Send participants virtual gift cards, such as Omincodes, to have a virtual meal together.
 - Develop a theme for the class to build interest and have fun.
 - Use Improv to illustrate instruction.

Conclusion

While face-to-face instruction is preferable, there are benefits to virtual education. To protect the health of instructors and students with disabilities during the pandemic, the development of effective, accessible virtual educational strategies needs to continue. Effective teaching, in either face-to-face or online environments, needs to include a mix of academic and experiential education, small teacher to student ratios, with socialization and team building opportunities built into the curriculum. Neighborhood educational pods is a trend that is likely to continue beyond the pandemic, providing both a need and an opportunity for an increase in accessible, online curriculum. There are effective vocational training options that are offered that prepare young people with disabilities for careers in the digital world, as well as opportunities in essential businesses.

Effective Instruction

- Different learning platforms have different limitations, for example, Zoom does not have CART capabilities in breakout rooms.
- Offer “technology instruction” for students to learn how to use the platforms effectively, and ensure accessibility features are available.
- Suggest adapting student codes of conduct for online instruction.
- The curriculum must be well planned for meaningful academic and social engagement.
- Vocational training programs that have an experiential job component, like an internship, need to work with placement sites well in advance to create a meaningful virtual experience.

Benefits Discovered with Online Instruction

In implementing their virtual programming, several benefits were identified:

- Virtual Learning can allow more choice. For example, if students are working on a STEM skill, they can select a project that interests them from a menu of choices.
- Moving from brick and mortar to virtual instruction allowed many organizations to expand the geographic locations, age range, and the numbers of participants they can serve, often at a lower cost/participant.
- The development of neighborhood learning pods increases the need for virtual educational resources. They also create new market opportunities for organizations to serve.
- Schools can partner with nonprofits to provide experiential vocational training opportunities, for example, students with disabilities can be placed in virtual job training programs or in an on-site training with essential businesses.

Noted Education & Employment Resources

ASL Literacy Activities

- [Gallaudet University – Visual Language and Visual Learning, Motion Light Lab](#)
 - Motion Light Lab has developed interactive ASL-English bilingual storybook apps, offering young visual learners unique and interactive reading experiences in ASL and English with animated illustrations.

Down syndrome Virtual Programming

- [GiGi's Playhouse, Inc.](#)
 - GiGi's, which works to change the way the world views Down syndrome and to send a global message of acceptance for all, has developed virtual programs.



Inclusion Training

- [Kids Included Together](#)
 - A center of excellence on disability inclusion, Kids Included Together specializes in providing leadership, best practices, training and support to people and organizations who serve children
- [The Nora Project](#)
 - Offers a suite of programs that teach empathy, inclusive beliefs and behaviors, disability awareness, storytelling, accessibility and innovation, and advocacy.
- [University of New Hampshire – Institute on Disability, Inclusive Communities Project](#)
 - Leverages the power of documentary films, like INTELLIGENT LIVES, by Dan Habib to promote greater acceptance and inclusion of people with disabilities.



Secondary Education

- [Dreams for Schools](#)
 - Offers “Coding at Home” resources that makes STEM approachable and accessible so all students become critical thinkers, creative leaders, and technologists of tomorrow.
- [Perkins School for the Blind](#)
 - Offers prepares children and young adults who are blind, deafblind, and have multiple disabilities, with the education, confidence, and skills they need to realize their potential.
- [Project LIFE](#) and [Project SEARCH](#)
 - Project LIFE is a multi-year transition program that combines education with authentic work experiences to prepare students with disabilities for Project SEARCH training leading to competitive employment.
- [Science Buddies](#)
 - Science Buddies empowers K-12 students, parents, and teachers to quickly and easily find free project ideas and help in all areas of science.



Vocational Training & Employment

- [Bridges from School to Work](#)
 - Bridges unlocks the potential of young people, transforming lives through the power of a job, by matching the interests and abilities of young people to the needs of employers in 12 major U.S. cities.
- [E-Stewards ADVANCE+](#)
 - ADVANCE+ is an e-Stewards initiative, started at [Blue Star Recyclers](#), focused on providing jobs for individuals with autism and other disabilities in the electronics recycling industry.
- [Exceptional Minds Design Studio](#)
 - An autism education organization that provides technical instruction in the digital arts through its three-year Professional Training Academy, currently offered virtually.
- [Perkins School for the Blind](#)
 - Offers college readiness and career transition programs for blind and visually impaired young adults through its Career Launch and College Success programs, currently offered virtually.

Distance Learning Strategy Meeting Participants

American Association of People with Disabilities

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About MEAF

The Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation (MEAF), based in the Washington, DC area, was established in 1991 by Mitsubishi Electric Corporation and the Mitsubishi Electric U.S. companies, which produce, sell and distribute a wide range of consumer, industrial, commercial and professional electronics products. The Foundation has contributed more than \$17 million to organizations that are empowering young people with disabilities to lead more inclusive and productive lives. To learn more, visit www.MEAF.org.



Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation is helping to work toward achieving the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals.

