



Reimagining the Possibilities

**Teaching, Learning,
and Community Building
in 2020–21**



Connecticut State Department of Education

In October 2020, the CSDE Academic and Performance Offices invited representatives from twenty districts to share their stories about how they adapted and applied different learning models to address local needs and the unique situations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were selected based on past achievements including Schools of Distinction, National Blue Ribbon Schools, and those with a strong record of academic growth. Information was gathered through two virtual sessions organized by grade level (elementary/middle school session and a high school session).



Organizing Themes

Educators Forecasted Technology Needs in Spring 2020

Learning Model Implementation Prompts Staffing and Instructional Choices

- The Learning Model Structure Looks Different Across Districts
- Learning Models Drive Staffing Decisions
- Shifts in Practice: Balancing In-Person and Remote Learners
- A “Just Right” Approach to Synchronous vs. Asynchronous

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Educators Forecasted Technology Needs in Spring 2020

Many of the participating districts used the spring 2020 emergency remote instruction experience to predict technology needs for the 2020–21 school year. These districts acted quickly, and were ultimately successful in securing cameras for classrooms and additional devices for teachers and students in advance of the new school year.

Representatives from East Hartford shared that teachers at International Baccalaureate (IB) Academy were particularly proactive. The educators anticipated an atypical fall and through early requests submitted to Central Office, they secured technology to allow for livestreaming instruction in 2020–21.

Waterbury is one district that was unable to immediately access technology for all students, so they prioritized remote learners for equipment distribution and provided technology to others after the start of the school year.



Learning Model Implementation Prompts Staffing and Instructional Choices

The Learning Model Structure Looks Different Across Districts

Greenwich is an example of a district that created a separate elementary school of over 500 students that serves exclusively students who are learning remotely. The district reports that this approach is working well for them, the families are pleased, and the students are “thriving.”

Other districts have some teachers who instruct remote learners in particular grades. Meriden (K–5) and Newington (K–2) have this arrangement in grade bands while Coventry varies the practice by grade.

In many of the middle and high schools interviewed, students learning remotely (either full-time or as part of a hybrid schedule) participate in classes via livestream with students who are attending in person.

Learning Models Drive Staffing Decisions

In terms of the virtual elementary school in Greenwich, principals of the 11 elementary schools across the district assumed oversight of different parts of the virtual school. The school has 30 remote teachers of which about one third are new hires.

In Derby, coaches provide instruction in math and English language arts to students who are learning remotely. Those students join their in-person peers virtually for other parts of the day.

Shifts in Practice: Balancing In-Person and Remote Learners

Middle school teachers in Waterford had grown accustomed to launching right into the learning when class starts. Now, with some students attending in-person and others learning remotely, a slower start is necessary to ensure that everyone is connected and ready to learn. “Patience and understanding are going a long way right now.”

High school teachers at E.O. Smith are adapting and getting creative. They were reassured by the administration and told, “Do what you do right.” A mathematics teacher leveraged the technology to gain insight into student thinking. The teacher asked students to record themselves working through a problem. This transparency allows the teacher to most effectively support the student and their learning.

Plymouth is working to improve online collaboration among students. Students know how to collaborate in-person. They are accustomed to assuming traditional roles in groups and carry out those responsibilities effectively. Now, they are establishing new routines for a virtual environment.

A “Just Right” Approach to Synchronous vs. Asynchronous

In Waterford, “all students livestream into all core classes every day for full instruction.”

In October, Waterbury high schools were offering in-person, half-day instruction with remote learners participating in the livestream. The afternoon was reserved for office hours and asynchronous activities.

Portions of every class are livestreamed for Guilford High School students. Many teachers in this district and others prefer synchronous instruction, but the educators are encouraged to seek an age-appropriate balance.

Naugatuck has all students regardless of learning model in Google Meet simultaneously to allow better interaction between students attending virtually and in-person.

In Region 17, in the early grades, small group instruction is synchronous, but whole group instruction is video based. Grades 6–12 is primarily synchronous; teachers are empowered to make decisions regarding the appropriate balance.



Creating a Community Across Learning Contexts

Remote students in Derby join classmates in morning meetings and whole group social emotional learning (SEL) instruction.

Naugatuck uses a daily advisory period “as a way to connect our students...” They are working with the students on “how to be social and have healthy social interactions when you can’t be together.”

Waterford requires that all students regardless of learning model participate in the daily live core instruction either in-person or virtually. This approach was selected as a way to establish a sense of community and to ensure smoother transitions from in-person or hybrid to fully remote if and when necessary. During their first short-term switch to fully remote, students in Waterford reported that keeping up with the learning was easy.



Effectively Reaching All Learners is a Priority

Some districts, including Norwich, prioritized in-person learning for students with disabilities and English learners. Bolton took a slightly different approach. They identified their learners with the greatest needs based on engagement during the spring. These students attend in-person four days each week. The district made individual decisions based on need rather than program status or disability.

“Students need classroom connections.” In Norwich, for students learning remotely there is an expectation that cameras should be on. When a student leaves the camera off, social workers in Norwich follow up with students to learn more about why the student is not connecting with their teacher and their peers.

In Plymouth, staff are going to homes of distance learners and talking with families about the support they need from the district to ensure their children’s success.



Leveraging Technology to Improve Teaching and Learning

The participants highlighted a variety of tools they have adopted or expanded the use of to improve remote instruction.

Naugatuck recommended [Pear Deck](#). It allows teachers to provide “instant real-time

feedback” and integrates with Google Slides, which is used throughout the district. Pear Deck promotes student engagement and social learning, which is key since “learning is a social act.”

Waterford and Waterbury identified [Kami](#) as a valuable tool “especially for annotation and targeted feedback.” Kami is user-friendly for teachers and students and integrates with popular programs such as Google Classroom, Schoology, and Canvas.

Norwich uses [Ellevation](#) to establish formal learning plans for English learners. The plans are similar to Individualized Education Programs for students with disabilities. The plans are a way to document student need and progress, allowing for effective coordination across all staff members supporting the child.



Teachers Teaching Teachers

Districts shared ways they are “lightening the load” for teachers. In Newington, school representatives serve on a district committee organized by content area, including social and emotional learning. They are supporting the teachers by assisting with planning and recommending resources. Plymouth pooled elementary teachers to design distance learning materials for specific content areas.

For the first time, Waterbury has a formal professional learning calendar with a [menu of options](#), allowing for greater choice. “Dedicated power users” have stepped up to train other teachers and administrators.

Coventry recognized the complexity of teaching in-person and remote students simultaneously. They identified willing “tech savvy” teachers to focus on the remote instruction.



Evidence of Creative Problem Solving Across Districts

Cheshire looked beyond their district borders for a staffing solution designed to serve their students’ learning needs while accommodating staff requests. “Cheshire only had 15 percent (of students) elect remote initially, so there was not enough demand to justify a teacher dedicated to remote learning. We had some teachers concerned about teaching in person. Rather than have them take a leave, we traded teachers with Meriden. They needed remote teachers, and we needed in person.”

Given the importance of cohorting as a mitigation strategy, middle school students in Waterford remain in a single classroom for the majority of the day and the teachers come to them. Administrators knew their teachers would need a place to work when not teaching. They identified a swing space in the building to create a corporate-like workspace for teachers who then go out to teach classes. They have desks and coffee makers, filing cabinets, etc.

Greenwich is striving to create an experience for their remote students that is as rich as the in-person experience. This year they are developing virtual field trips for their students.



Parents as Partners

All districts recognized the importance of providing clear and consistent information to parents and engaging families in new ways.

Waterbury created videos at the campus level to explain expectations. Initially, there was a lot of “misinformation out there” that they had to work against. They have directed families to go to the school website for updated and accurate information. To further streamline information for families, the district developed a set of common practices including daily teacher “office hours” for every school. This coordinated approach has made messaging more effective.

Plymouth created instructional videos for parents. Primary grade teachers created videos modeling how parents can help their children appropriately. These have been well received and quite successful. Other videos were designed to help parents navigate the necessary technology. For example, there is a video explaining the key differences between PowerSchool and Google Classroom.

Norwalk administrators have painted a picture of what teachers are trying to do. Parents are urged to consider the fact that teachers need space to do their work. When issues arise with parents, the administration responds swiftly using a personal approach with the family.

Since Greenwich added an elementary school for students who are learning remotely, they have added a distance learning parent representative to the PTA. This representative meets weekly with the administration.



Routines for Students and Families Support Learning

In a time of such uncertainty, districts are setting clear expectations and promoting routines. To this end, East Hartford created a structured schedule for students. This was shared with parents along with this request: Make sure you have a quiet/professional work space. “At home learning days are learning days.”

Bolton scheduled dedicated parent time on Wednesdays to increase and improve communication. “The relationship of the teachers to parents has been more important than ever.”

Other districts share written information with families through direct communication and by posting online.

- Waterford published [distance learning/hybrid expectations](#) before the start of the year.
- Cheshire created a set of [reminders](#) for remote families.
- Coventry has a part of their website focused on [Family and Student Supports](#).
- Derby established [Remote Learning Guidelines](#) for parents, teachers, and students.



In a Sea of Priorities, Attention to Staff Wellness is Critical

Without exception, districts expressed concern for the well-being of their staff. Administrators explained how everyone is working harder than they ever have before, yet so many teachers are feeling ineffective.

In Plymouth, the administration's mantra for teachers is "We have to get to June. You need to be forgiving with yourself because we need to get to June, and we need to get there with everyone."

Guilford is "getting good at identifying students who need support." However, they "need to do something directed at teachers." "I see and feel the stress. They are struggling to take care of themselves." The message has been, "You need to take care of yourself if you are going to be here for students."

The Norwalk PTA has acknowledged the stress assumed by teachers and other staff. In response, the PTA has shifted its focus this year to wellness for adults.

Given the circumstances of 2020–21, New Canaan developed and offered self-care professional learning for teachers. Similarly, Bolton is thinking through ways they can carve out time for teachers to do something fun when they resume in-person professional learning together.



Lessons Learned through Experience and Expertise

The conversations with district partners can be summarized with the following takeaway points.

- Remain flexible.
- Honor routines and traditions, yet layer in new learning.
- Leverage digital tools that have the greatest impact on engagement, collaboration, and demonstration of learning.
- Design a learning model that meets the unique needs of your district.
- Don't forget your staff — ensure they are forgiving of themselves.
- Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

The points above are important reminders. They are not necessarily all novel ideas or new concepts. However, the manner in which our districts are rethinking and applying the ideas in their local contexts is contributing to their success. The effectiveness of these practices is not limited to current conditions; these are strategies to be implemented for the long-term.

Superintendent Ruffin of Waterbury Public Schools stated it best, "What we are learning right now will propel us into a future we couldn't have imagined. We are going to stop our antiquated practices. We are going to be able to move forward."

Thank You to Our District Partners

Bolton

Sara Malinoski, Director of Instructional Technology and Curriculum

Cheshire

Jeffrey Solan,
Superintendent

Kelly Grillo, Principal,
Norton Elementary School

Coventry

David Petrone,
Superintendent

Michele Mullaly, Director of Teaching and Learning

Jennifer DeRagon,
Principal, George Hersey
Robertson School

Derby

Aimee Misset, Principal,
Irving School

East Hartford

Nathan Quesnel,
Superintendent

Ann Marie Mancini,
Deputy Superintendent

Greenwich

Toni Jones, Superintendent

Marc D'Amico, Director of Curriculum K–8 and Head of Leadership K–5

Guilford

Julie Chaffe, Principal,
Guilford High School

Mike Regan, Principal,
E.C. Adams Middle School

Meriden

Daniel Crispino, Director of School Leadership

Andrew Hutchinson,
Lead Administrator for
Distance Learning

Middletown

Jennifer Cannata,
Principal, Moody School

Montville

Laurie Pallin,
Superintendent

Naugatuck

Caroline Messenger,
Director of Curriculum

New Canaan

Jill Correnty, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Newington

Maureen Brummett,
Superintendent

Wendy Crouse,
Assistant Superintendent

Jason Smith, Principal,
Anna M. Reynolds School

Norwalk

Theresa Rangel, Principal
Tracey Magnet School

Norwich

Kristen Stringfellow,
Superintendent

Plymouth

Kathleen Mozak-Pezza,
Director of Curriculum and Instruction

Angela Suffridge, Principal,
Eli Terry Jr. Middle School

Region 17

Heather Rigatti,
Curriculum Coordinator

Region 19

Lou DeLoreto, Principal,
E.O. Smith High School

Waterbury

Verna Ruffin,
Superintendent

Janice Epperson,
Assistant Superintendent

Darren Schwartz,
Chief Academic Officer

Waterford

Tom Giard, Superintendent

Craig Powers,
Assistant Superintendent

James Sachs, Principal,
Clark Lane Middle School

CSDE Contacts and Resources

[Academic Office Staff Directory](#)

[Performance Office Staff Directory](#)

[COVID-19 Resources for Families and Educators](#)

[CT Learning Hub](#)