



# Back to School Support Guide

An Educator's Guide to  
Starting the Year During  
COVID-19



# Introduction:

With COVID-19 not going anywhere fast, we're heading back to school with no more certainty than when we left at the end of last year.

Whether we're teaching from home or in the classroom, all we can be sure of is that the new school year will come with learning to recover, students to support, and a growing sense that teaching might never be the same again.

But there are steps we can take to make it easier for our students and ourselves.

This Back to School Support Guide will take you through them.

## We'll cover how to:

- ✓ Support social and emotional well-being
- ✓ Help students reflect and set goals for the year ahead
- ✓ Plan for curriculum catch-up
- ✓ Use the skills and insights you learned from remote teaching for better practice

# Supporting student social and emotional well-being

With our students surrounded by the turmoil of COVID-19, their social and emotional well-being should be our first priority when they first return to school.

Only once we've ensured students are happy and healthy can we get down to academic business.

Here's what you can do to start the year with well-being in mind.



## Create a welcoming classroom

Whether it's a physical or digital one, take the time to make your classroom a welcoming space for your new students.

**If you're returning to school after so many months, take the opportunity to make some positive additions to the learning space such as:**

- Putting up posters or art prints to liven up blank walls
- Bringing in some plants. These have proven positive effects in both adult and child workspaces, and your students can take responsibility for their maintenance
- Decorating the walls with student work. This promotes student ownership of the space
- Using a classroom decoration kit to make the space even more vibrant and dynamic.

**If you're moving back online, you can create a welcoming digital space by:**

- Uploading a "welcome to class" video in which you introduce yourself
- Making sure the platform is student-friendly, easy to navigate, and pre-loaded with the course materials they need to get started
- Giving students a virtual tour of the lms or class platforms you are using
- Using images, gifs, and emojis to brighten up the space and give it a human touch.

## Break the ice and get to know each other

Starting the year on such uncertain terms might have everyone feeling anxious, but you're all in it together. That's why it's important to break the ice on Day One so everyone can get to know each other.

You can still do an engaging icebreaker online.

**Here are six ideas:**

### Online Classroom Icebreakers

- 1 Post a response to an icebreaker question (e.g. "What shows have you been binge-watching during the break?")
- 2 Share a photo of something from home.
- 3 Post two truths and a lie about yourself, then let others guess which is true.
- 4 Pick your favorite between two things (e.g. are you a dog or cat person?) and explain your choice.
- 5 Run a non-academic Kahoot quiz with fun questions (e.g. "The best thing about learning at home is...")
- 6 If you have breakout rooms, split students into random groups and task them with finding something all members of the group have in common. They can then report back to the rest of the class.

It might take some time online, but that's OK. Letting everyone get comfortable with one another will start the year on a positive note after so much uncertainty. Don't forget to join in and introduce yourself too!

## Talking about the crisis

Naturally, COVID-19 is probably going to surface as a subject of discussion. Don't shut it down – curiosity and anxiety are to be expected – but discuss it in an age-appropriate way without inciting fear or panic.

Let your students lead the discussion with their own questions so they get the answers they want, but watch for physical cues and lighten the mood if your students show signs of distress.

## Celebrate ongoing learning

After having been removed from “normal” learning for so long, we can expect students to feel some anxiety surrounding learning loss and the pressure to jump straight into a new grade.

Celebrating the progress that has been made during the shutdown will give your students the confidence to get back into learning. Have them share a new skill, fact, or hobby they’ve picked up while away from school – or even teach a mini-lesson to a small group of peers.

## Monitor students at risk

For some students, COVID-19 will have had deeper social and emotional consequences. Monitor any students who:

- Complain of illness to avoid work or school attendance
- Isolate themselves from peers
- Display extreme or regressive actions (e.G. Crying, noisy attention-seeking, refusal to cooperate)
- Seem apathetic or lethargic in a way that is out of character
- Avoid emotionally engaging with others (e.G. Lack of eye contact, nonresponsiveness).

Depending on the severity of the behavior you might delicately broach the issue in private, or refer them to your school’s psychologist or student support team.

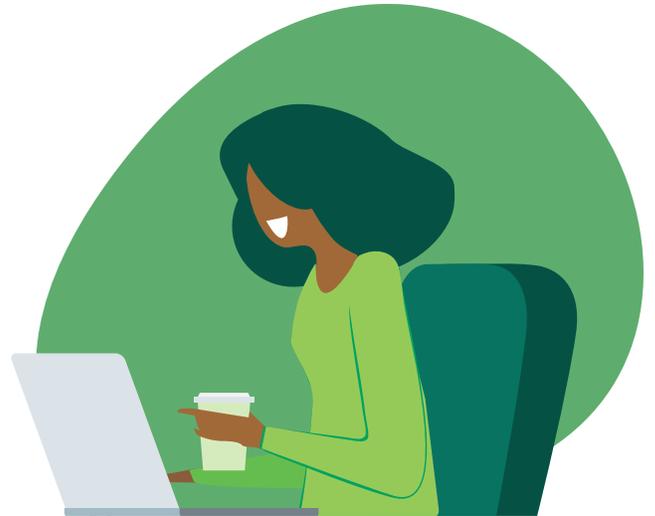
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# Looking after yourself

With working conditions changing everyday but expectations remaining high, teachers have never been more at risk of burning out.

But if we don't take care of our own well-being, our students lose out, too.

Here's what you can do to make this year easier, so you've got the strength to go the distance.



## Work with parents

Make sure you keep parents in the loop, especially if your students are learning at home. They'll be able to provide support on their end and advise you of how students are faring when you can't be there in person.

### To do this, make sure you:

- ✓ Brief parents on the plan for home learning by making relevant curriculum documents or semester plans accessible
- ✓ Provide clear, parent-friendly strategies parents can use to support home learning where needed (see this list for ideas)
- ✓ Introduce parents to any online systems or tools their child will be using for home learning

## Share resources and knowledge with colleagues

This will lessen the amount of material you have to create from scratch when you're already working harder than ever. Create a shared drive or cloud space where you can pool activities, resources, and links to online tools for home learners.

If you're teaching from home, considering scheduling regular staff catch-ups on Skype or Zoom to share successes and failures, too. Besides getting actionable tips, you'll also be keeping in touch during what can be an isolating time.

## Put boundaries around your time

This one is especially relevant for teachers working at home. Because when your digital classroom is only a few clicks away and the parent emails never cease, regular school hours can quickly become a thing of the past.

Stick to realistic working hours and be transparent about them with parents and students. Your students will learn more effectively with the predictability of set teaching times and parents will have the benefit of your full attention during the working day.

Resist the urge to cram your off-hours full of planning and prepping, too. Use the time to stay connected, exercise, do things you enjoy, and unwind without thinking about teaching. You'll be better placed to jump back into it the next day with fresh eyes.

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## Playing Curriculum Catch-Up

Returning to learning means returning to normal. However, there's no denying that students will need some catching up after their time away from school. Take the following steps to get them up to speed.



## Using formative assessment to determine required learning

The first step is to figure out exactly where your students stand academically after so much disruption.

Formative assessment is the best way to get a sense of their progress. Just make sure you keep it low stakes, so students don't feel the pressure of being tested the moment they reenter the classroom.

**Here are four suggestions:**

### ✓ Quizzes

An online quiz platform such as Kahoot can provide an engaging means of low-stakes assessment. Just make sure the pace of it doesn't leave any students behind.

### ✓ Self-assessment rubrics

Students can use a rubric to self-assess the extent of their learning. Break the learning into individual criteria and then have students identify their level of confidence on a range from "very confident" to "I need some help with this concept"

### ✓ EdTech programs

EdTech programs offer low-stakes, engaging activities that give automatic feedback on student learning. For example, you could set an activity for the whole class on Readwriter Spelling or Mathletics and then use the data to split students into differentiated groups.

### ✓ One-on-one interviews

These can be time-consuming, but they will provide you with a deep insight into what learning has occurred at home. Keep the tone light and use open-ended questions that give students choice and agency (e.g. instead of asking "what don't you understand?", try "which areas do you want me to help you with?").

Whichever formative assessment method(s) you choose, make sure you take note of gaps in the learning to inform your planning. It's also another opportunity to celebrate the learning that has occurred and kickstart the return to school on a positive note.

## Be flexible and prioritize the core learning

You now need to adapt any existing plans to account for the gaps and lapses in your students' learning. Depending on the extent of these gaps, you may need to make some areas a priority over others.

Plan in reverse to tackle these priorities. Start from the end learning goal (often this is displayed as a final product – such as a summative assessment) and then create a flexible plan for each unit of class time that gets you there.

Remember to account for more time than you think you will need. Replace some of the time that would be spent on introducing new content and teacher-led instruction with self-paced practice opportunities, catch-up classes, and Q&A sessions.

## Use lean teaching practices for maximum efficiency

Adopt a **lean teaching** approach for maximum learning efficiency. This means cutting down on busywork and unnecessary tasks that do not contribute to the core goal of student learning.

Consider the following examples:

	Inefficient	Efficient
Feedback	Produce handwritten feedback for every student on a weekly formative assessment task and trust students to compile it	Having Have students write a weekly reflection on their learning in a designated learning journal. They think about their learning more deeply, compile evidence of learning in one easily accessible spot, and you can use it as a source of formative assessment.
Lesson planning	Preparing Prepare a teacher-led instructional component for every lesson with new PowerPoints, introductory sets,, and resources.	Designate Designate certain classes as practice sessions where students can seek help and work at their own pace with self-guided resources. They benefit from more time to consolidate content, and you don't spend as much time planning.
Resource creation	Grappling Grapple with complex software to generate documents when you already know what you want them to look like.	Produce Produce the document freehand with original graphic elements. You save time, and students will be engaged by a resource that shows true teacher creativity and imagination (regardless of your artistic skills).

	Inefficient	Efficient
<b>Technology usage</b>	Uploading Upload working files for your students online, then replacing replace them with an updated version each time they are edited.	Use cloud-based documents (e.g. Word Online, Google Docs) that update automatically, so students can always access the latest version via a single link.
<b>Homework</b>	Setting paper-based homework that adds to your existing marking load.	Setting homework via an EdTech program with automated marking and data recording.
<b>Assessment</b>	Setting regular summative assessments with small grade-weightings.	Set Longer project-based tasks with a higher grade-weighting. Supplement these with plenty of formative check-ins along the way to stay informed of student progress.
<b>Resource management</b>	Create Each individual teacher creates their own resources and saves them in a personal file.	Create shared All resources are shared, so you don't have to constantly reinvent your instructional material.

## Set SMART goals for the learning ahead

Make sure you return reflections to students so they can use them to generate meaningful goals for the next phase of their learning. This will provide a welcome sense of structure and purpose following the disorientation of recent months

### Use the SMART framework for goal setting, which stands for

- **Specific:** the goal is clearly defined
- **Measurable:** students can quantify or measure the outcome to determine if success has been achieved
- **Attainable:** the goal is realistic
- **Relevant:** the goal contributes to overall student learning and progress
- **Timely:** there is a set time period in which the goal is to be achieved.

Most students will start with an open-ended goal (e.g. “I want to be better in mathematics”). Use this as a starting point and model how to add the nuance and context that makes it SMART. For example, the above goal might be adapted as follows:

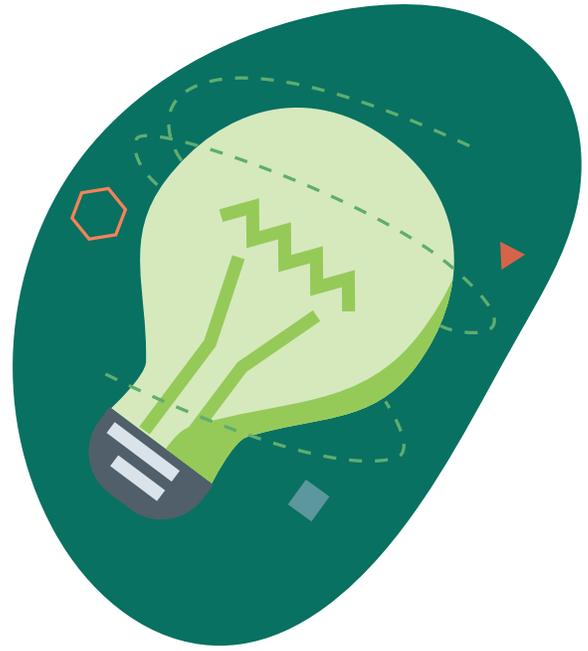
“This term I am going to develop a better understanding of fractions so that I perform better in mathematics assessments. I will do this by completing all the Mathematics lessons on fractions over the next four weeks and asking my teacher for help whenever I need it.”

The *attainable* aspect of the goal is vital at a time when students might feel unrealistic obligations to catch up overnight, so encourage your students to keep it realistic.

# Learning from the Experience

As you look back on the original transition to distance learning - think about what worked, what failed, and what knowledge you can use to start this school year.

While you progress through the new school year, take time to assess what is working and not working and make changes as needed.



## Reflection Questions

### Instructional strategies



- Did any of your students benefit from the increased autonomy and independence that came with home learning? Perhaps this opportunity could be extended to them more often in class.
- Did the online environment make any activities (e.g. group work, collaboration, differentiated instruction) any easier to manage? If so, this could be incorporated into your classroom instruction.
- How did your students respond to more diverse modes of instruction (e.g. video, text, sound, multimedia)? Did you notice any increase or decrease in engagement?

### Technology usage



- What EdTech tools worked and why?
- How could you integrate these with regular classroom instruction? For example, you might use them to set homework and formative assessments and track student results.
- Have you discovered any capabilities of your LMS that you weren't aware of previously? How could you get the most out of these?
- What have you learned about your students' technological capabilities? Are they as 'digitally native' as you thought, or are there soft skills they need to develop?

### Student relationships



- What strategies were most effective in keeping you connected to students while you were apart?
- How might you apply these for stronger relationships in the classroom?
- How did the online environment change the way your students communicated with each other? Perhaps it allowed quiet students to find their voice, or prompted more considered and thoughtful communication?

### Parent relationships



- How did parents respond to having a more active role in their child's learning?
- Could their involvement be harnessed in the future to better support classroom learning?
- What communication strategies were effective for keeping parents informed during this time? How might you use these in the future?

These considerations will ensure you don't emerge from this challenging period empty-handed. Instead, you'll have invaluable knowledge that you can leverage for more modern and effective practice.

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