



# Opportunities in the Midst of COVID-19: Innovative Ways States are Using this Moment to Rethink Education

July 2020

## Introduction

The rapid spread of COVID-19 forced states to make complex and sudden decisions to temporarily shutter schools mid-year, leaving educators to teach remotely. This unexpected shift was abrupt and oftentimes messy but launched a national conversation about what it will take to make remote learning a viable and affordable educational option for every student.

When schools closed, educators quickly had to learn how to teach in an online classroom and find new ways to reach every student, including English learners, students with special needs and students without devices or little or no access to the Internet. Families had to take on the role of co-teacher, using downloadable materials, district-delivered packets, content and lesson plans available online or assembled on their own. The result: a new level of collaboration and partnership emerged to help students feel safe, supported and able to learn.

As the 2020-21 school year begins, questions remain about how to integrate remote learning most effectively. In anticipation of another unpredictable year, state and district leaders are working closely with teachers, families and other stakeholders to map out a plan that meets the needs of *all* learners, and in many cases, using remote and blended learning as a primary strategy. Some states have already announced plans to start the 2020-21 school year in a remote-only format, others are expected to adopt a hybrid or blended model to allow learning to occur in the classroom on some days and at home on others, and some states say they plan to fully reopen and will offer a remote option for families who opt to keep their children home.

*“Our goal is to have teachers feel **increased comfort with teaching in a blended learning environment**, and increased competency in delivering instruction in a remote setting. We want parents to feel their **students are supported and continuing to learn, grow and thrive even during the pandemic.**”*

— David Frank,  
Executive Director NYSED Charter School Office

Remote learning in general is not a new concept, but what is new is widespread implementation across a district or state. The U.S. Department of Education’s Rethink K-12 Education Models Discretionary Grant Program gave states an incentive to accelerate their plans to scale up remote learning options, plan out professional development modules and create a new system—either virtual or in person—designed to best meet *everyone’s* needs. On July 30 USED announced that 11 states (Louisiana, Tennessee, Rhode Island, Texas, Iowa, Georgia, South Carolina, New York, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Maine) were selected and will receive awards of between \$6.8 million and \$20 million in grant funding over the next three years.

*Education First worked closely with nine states (AR, FL, LA, MA, NM, NY, OH, RI and TX) to support the development of their Rethink K12 Education Models grant applications, and this paper offers an overview of their most innovative, research-based strategies. The examples included in this paper are intended to spur and inform state-level conversations as leaders in education work to reconcile questions about how to redesign their own systems, and how, when, and if to adopt a remote learning*

### About the Rethink K12 Education Models Discretionary Grant

The U.S. Department of Education launched the Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Discretionary Grant Program in April 2020. The program was designed to spur new thinking among states for how education could be redesigned around the needs of every student. States were eligible to compete for a total of more than \$180 million by developing plans to incorporate remote learning, flexible K-12 models and postsecondary tools to aid economic recovery. State education agencies could apply for funds in one of three priority areas:

- **Priority 1: Microgrants for families**, to ensure they have access to the technology and educational services they need to advance learning
- **Priority 2: Statewide virtual learning and course access programs**, so that students will always be able to access a full range of subjects, even those not taught in the traditional or assigned setting
- **Priority 3: New, field-initiated models** for providing remote education not yet imagined, to ensure that every child is learning and preparing for successful careers and lives

A total of [39 states](#) submitted applications (6 for Priority 1, 14 for Priority 2, and 19 for Priority 3). Eleven states were selected: Louisiana, Tennessee, Rhode Island, Texas, Iowa, Georgia, South Carolina, New York, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Maine. In all states will receive \$180,662,496 in grant funding over the next three years. The average grant size is \$16,423,863.

*model. See the Appendix for an overview of state plans.*

### **Accessing Instructional Materials and Virtual Learning**

When schools closed in spring 2020, equity gaps that already impacted at-risk students were exacerbated in part due to lack of access to consistent instruction and high-quality content. States are now planning specific approaches to bring better content and access to high quality materials to Black and Latinx children, students in poverty, English learners and students with learning differences.

These inequities are what prompted many state leaders to focus their plans on three areas necessary to support educators and parents through an anticipated shift to remote and/or blended learning throughout the 2020-21 school year and beyond: (1) Create access to high-quality instructional materials in K12 mathematics and English; (2) Maintain and accelerate a consistent focus on early literacy; and (3) Support and address the needs of special populations of students. To make any part of this possible, state plans reinforced the urgency of developing and providing access to quality professional learning for educators and the need to provide guided tools and supports for parents.

Each state approached the challenge of shifting to a remote and/or blended or hybrid learning model in a unique way. Some built on their assets and proposed taking promising ideas to scale. **Florida**, for example, framed its plan around the development of an innovation incubator focused on studying the Florida Virtual School and local innovative school models—especially digital platforms—to identify and expand exemplar blended learning and online learning models.

Others used this opportunity to focus on addressing the basic inequities that could otherwise hold students back from success in a system made reliant on technology. **New Mexico**, for example, built its plan around the development of a statewide Learning Management System pre-loaded with high quality instructional content to ensure that educators across the state have consistent and ready access to quality content and data.

1. **Find ways to create consistent access to high-quality instructional materials in K12 mathematics and English.**

Several states highlighted the need to have quality content and materials available for districts to easily access remotely in order to provide every student with a rigorous and rich learning experience either in school or at home. This priority is coupled with the need for aligned professional development to ensure educators know how to leverage the content and tools and support for caregivers who may need to do some or all of the delivery at home.

- **Louisiana** will require vendors to provide high-quality instructional supports and tutoring that are aligned to high quality instructional materials as indicated by a rigorous review of Instructional Materials using [rubrics](#) to determine the degree of alignment with state content standards.
- **Massachusetts** plans to partner with curriculum publishers who are rated highly by either [EdReports](#) or the state, provide core instructional materials in ELA, math and science, and have a delivery platform for both remote and in-person instruction. Additionally, Massachusetts plans to support its strongest teachers in creating a resource bank of Deeper Learning Tasks that would be available to educators statewide.
- **New Mexico** plans to offer all students high-quality instructional materials through a state-wide Learning Management System. The state will partner with curriculum organizations and districts to build a robust library of high-quality and culturally relevant instructional materials in English Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, Science and other subject areas.
- **Rhode Island** plans to expand the existing Advanced Course Network to provide K12 students with high-quality instructional materials, including developing core content classes for elementary students for the first time. The Advanced Course Network strives for equity by using a lottery system that privileges students living in poverty, students with learning differences and English learners. High-quality instructional materials will be determined through a partnership with EdReports.
- **Texas** is developing [Texas Home Learning 3.0](#), a high-quality virtual course program that will be accessible to all students in the state. The Texas Education Agency is working to

**What is an Online Learning Platform?**

A Learning Management System is an online platform that houses and organizes courses and other educational content, a vehicle for communication between teachers and students, as well as a system for tracking student progress and engaging and informing parents about student learning. Several states focused their plans around the development of a statewide online learning platform, while others envisioned systems that could bolster and accelerate existing local or regional systems with new content, systems and data.

- **New Mexico** outlined their plan to build a state-wide Learning Management System pre-populated with high-quality instructional materials and complete with a state-wide purchased local student information system.
- **Texas** proposed to improve Texas Home Learning 3.0. It would include a curated set of high-quality instructional materials, progress monitoring tools and a linked learning management system designed to ensure successful delivery of remote/hybrid instruction.



make available optional, free tools for every school system in Texas to support grade level remote instruction in PK-12th grade in subjects including English, math, science and social studies.

2. **Maintain and accelerate a consistent focus on early literacy and develop tools and strategies necessary to reach young learners remotely.** A number of states underscored the increased need to maintain and build their focus on literacy in early education for students, particularly those who have fallen behind since schools were closed. States considered how to keep early literacy at the center of their strategic planning process, how to ensure that all students have access to high quality content and materials to support their continued development, and how to support oral language in the youngest learners.
  - **Arkansas** emphasized the need to provide students, families and educators with statewide access to an online and televised high-quality reading curriculum with a focus on word recognition, phonics and phonemic recognition. Educators and content experts plan to develop a K8 scope and sequence that addresses phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension appropriate for each grade level.
  - **Louisiana** will provide funding through microgrants for parents to meet the educational needs of their children in the early grades (Pre-K to 3rd grade) through increased access to high-quality instructional supports, tutoring, and by providing the devices and internet connectivity needed to access those services.
  
3. **Support and address the needs of special populations of students.** The shift to remote learning was particularly difficult for students with learning differences, English learners and other special populations. Many struggled with learning remotely, and technology and language barriers made basic communication with students and their families a daily challenge. Several states developed strategies to address these inequities through investments in technology and training and mapped out strategies to establish pathways to strengthen tools and support for parents.
  - **Arkansas** plans to establish and bring to scale an educational model for blended and remote learning that includes digital modules and supports with additional interventions and scaffolds for English learners, students with disabilities and other students in need of support. Students, teachers and families will be able to access the content, assignments and resources—both online and offline—on a state-procured Learning Management System.
  - **Massachusetts** plans to develop a coaching program to support the parents of English learners. They plan to provide guidance for families to support learning at home by providing family workshops and written materials available in multiple languages.
  - **Texas** plans to support its more than 1.1 million English learners by augmenting coursework accessible for all students and making tools available for remote dyslexia instruction and speech therapy.

**States that applied for the USED’s Rethink K-12 Education Models Discretionary Grant Program had to build their plan’s around one of three “Absolute Priorities.”** This chart provides an overview of the

themes in some of the states that received support from Education First. See Appendix I for a summary of each state’s plan.

		Stakeholder Engagement	Continuous Improvement	Professional Development	Early Literacy	High Quality Instructional Materials	Online Learning Platform	Special Populations
<b>Priority 1: Microgrants for families</b> , to ensure they have access to necessary technology and educational services.	LA	X			X	X	X	X
<b>Priority 2: Statewide virtual learning and course access programs</b> , so that students will always be able to access a full range of subjects, even those not taught in the traditional or assigned setting.	NM		X	X		X	X	X
	RI	X		X		X	X	
	TX			X		X	X	X
<b>Priority 3: New, field-initiated models</b> for providing remote education not yet imagined, to ensure that every child is learning and preparing for successful careers and lives.	AR	X		X	X	X	X	X
	FL	X	X	X		X	X	
	MA	X		X		X		X
	NY			X				
	OH	X	X	X			X	X

Deeply ingrained in these three strategy areas is **professional development**, which many states prioritized as a key lever. State teams agreed that both experienced and new-to-the-profession teachers will need ongoing support and guidance to implement shifts in strategy and curriculum and to learn to use new tools and technology. Among the states that listed professional development as a primary outcome of the grant:

- **New York** plans to develop and launch the Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments program, which would build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to facilitate blended/remote instruction when needed.
- **Florida** plans to include a non-college-credit credential online professional development program for educators meant to address key issues in teaching and learning in the post-pandemic era, including topics in distance and blended learning ecosystems and robust online and digital learning models.

**What comes next**

COVID-19 has forced states to deeply examine the strengths and inherent flaws in their existing systems and structures and to confront the reality that remote learning of some form will likely need to be a core part of public education for the foreseeable future. The process of developing these plans

has prompted insightful, thoughtful discussions among state leaders about how a new system more reliant on technology could evolve to effectively meet the needs of every learner, particularly those most vulnerable.

Developing this vision was just the beginning. When grants are awarded, recipient states will need to begin the hard work of putting their innovative plans into action. The U.S. Department of Education has indicated that they will award up to 14 grants, meaning most states will be turned away. That said, state leaders stressed the inherent value of the thinking and the stakeholder engagement required to develop these plans to reimagine their public school systems. Several indicated that—with or without federal resources—they hope to move forward on certain elements of their plans.

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*“Districts are so anxious and eager for access to remote learning support. **We need to respond to that urgency.**”*

*— Heather Peske  
Massachusetts Senior Associate Commissioner for Instructional Support*

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## APPENDIX 1: State Application Overviews

The summaries below represent an overview of the state plans that were developed with support from Education First, as well as the winning state plans. In all, [39 states](#) applied for the Rethink Education grants and [11 were selected](#).

### States Supported by Education First

#### **Arkansas (Absolute Priority 3)**

The Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education proposed a differentiated approach to create, develop, implement and scale an educational model for blended and remote learning. Students, teachers and families will be able to access the content, assignments and resources—both online and offline—using a state-procured Learning Management System. One stand out example: They emphasized the need to provide students, families and educators with statewide access to high-quality reading curriculum with a focus on word recognition, phonics and phonemic recognition. Educators and content experts will develop a K8 scope and sequence that addresses phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension appropriate for each grade level.

#### **Florida (Absolute Priority 3)**

The Florida Department of Education proposed launching an innovation incubator at the University of South Florida, where local educational innovations could be studied, enhanced and scaled with a single vision focused on eradicating achievement gaps for all student sub-groups. The work will follow a research-practice partnership model, where participating schools that are deploying field-initiated innovations are studied by a team of university researchers to examine trends, student progress, teacher practices, school leadership and other facets of the participating schools. The goal of this review will be to identify improved outcomes and strategies for replication that can be scaled up for use at other schools. The Florida Virtual School will be a major partner in this incubator, as they consider developing an artificial intelligence integration. This could ultimately result in an upgrade to their current platform and have the potential of serving more than 2 million students.

#### **\*SELECTED\* Louisiana (Absolutely Priority 1)**

**Grant award: \$16,999,992**

The Louisiana Department of Education proposed providing microgrants for high-quality remote instructional supports, virtual tutoring and the devices/internet connectivity needed for those services. The focus was to support parents to meet the educational needs of their children in the early grades (PreK to 3rd grade). They plan to create an online portal for families to use microgrants to pay for high-quality remote early literacy learning and ensure that the portal includes multiple, high-quality, Louisiana-based providers with strong plans for partnering with parents and LEAs. Louisiana would provide priority access to their online portal to the most disadvantaged students, including priority access to students and parents in struggling schools (as defined by ESSA), and ensure providers work closely with LEAs to support student learning and partner with parents.

#### **Massachusetts (Absolute Priority 3)**



The Massachusetts' Department of Elementary and Secondary Education proposed providing widespread virtual access to high-quality curriculum materials for teachers, students and families through three field-initiated strategies: They plan to provide effective and engaging highly-rated virtual K8 Math, ELA and science curriculum materials for students, collect deeper learning tasks, expand access to virtual AP courses and create a program that provides supplemental math instruction to 9th graders. They plan to provide guidance for families to support learning at home by providing family workshops and print materials available in multiple languages, with a focus on supporting English Learner parents. They plan to provide curriculum-aligned professional development for educators to navigate a hybrid school year. The plan will be targeted on students of color, economically disadvantaged students, English learners and students with disabilities.

### **New Mexico (Absolute Priority 2)**

The New Mexico Public Education Department proposed developing a statewide virtual learning and course access program that improves student outcomes regardless of racial or ethnic background, socioeconomic status, disability, primary home language, prior early childhood experiences or geography. The platform will contain culturally responsive, linguistically responsive, high-quality instructional materials. Materials will be adaptable and accessible to students with disabilities and English Learners. They plan to conduct continuous improvement cycles related to remote learning through supporting the purchase of necessary business analytics. They also plan to provide a robust professional learning infrastructure focused on how to use high-quality instructional materials and support social-emotional learning in hybrid/remote environments. Parent and community engagement and supports are central to the plan; the PED will engage stakeholders to gather feedback through virtual meetings and need assessments.

### **\*SELECTED\* New York (Absolute Priority 3)**

**Grant award: \$19,986,089**

The New York State Department of Education proposed developing and launching the Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments program in partnership with educators across the state. The program is designed to first address the immediate and urgent learning needs of New York's most vulnerable students and, through teachers and educational leaders, give the parents and guardians of these students the tools necessary to support their student's learning needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will be done by building upon existing effective practices and further developing capacity-building resources, and training to facilitate remote/hybrid instruction. The program is designed to build the capacity of educators to implement effective practices in the remote/hybrid teaching environments that may be utilized at various points during the period of this grant to ensure continuity of learning.

### **Ohio (Absolute Priority 3)**

Ohio is proposing to develop the RemotEDx Platform, a marketplace that allows educators and schools to exchange ideas, integrate concepts and transform offerings by connecting them to innovative student-learning and remote learning exemplars and supports. The project includes formal feedback loops across Ohio's education community to ensure continuous improvement. Ohio plans to instate a number of systems and supports to this project, including a network and coordinating council that oversees the marketplace to inform policies, practices and partnerships; a support squad that

facilitates model selection and provides support professional learning supports; and connectivity champions who help schools ensure students have access to technology and internet. Ohio's plan invites educators and schools using their RemotEDx platform to participate in a peer-to-peer learning network meant to inform policy and practice, create coherence and share and scale best practices.

**\*SELECTED\* Rhode Island (Absolute Priority 2)**

**Grant award: \$10,898,643**

Rhode Island proposed offering K12 students expanded access to high quality virtual curricula by developing, providing and expanding remote course choices resulting in college credit or an industry-recognized credential and by adding virtual K12 high-quality instructional materials to the existing Advanced Course Network. Student Counselor Advisor and Parent and Student Ambassador programs will ensure that information spreads. Rhode Island also plans to enhance the requisite technology platforms to equitably serve students. The Advanced Course Network strives for equity by using a lottery system that privileges students living in poverty, students with IEPs and English learners. Rhode Island plans to provide professional development aligned to the high-quality curriculum using a train-the-trainer approach in which cohorts of teacher fellows train and support their colleagues.

**\*SELECTED\* Texas (Absolute Priority 2)**

**Grant award: \$19,978,625**

Texas proposed developing Texas Home Learning 3.0, a high-quality virtual course program that will be accessible to all students in the state. They plan to make available optional, free tools for every school system in Texas to support grade level remote instruction in PK-12th grade in subjects including English, math, science and social studies. Additionally, tools will be available for remote dyslexia instruction and remote speech therapy. These tools will include: software to facilitate remote learning; curricular materials aligned to the Texas state standards, designed to work asynchronously, and with quality components intended to narrow achievement gaps; progress monitoring diagnostics; and professional development, planning resources and operational delivery support for LEA leaders to help deploy these tools.

**Other Grant Recipients**

**Georgia (Absolute Priority 2)**

**Grant award: \$18,594,304**

Georgia plans to expand access to the Georgia Virtual School by improving the infrastructure and ensuring interoperability so that students can earn Comprehensive Learner Records. The state plans to enhance leadership and educator professional learning to support engagement and personalized learning.

**Iowa (Absolute Priority 2)**

**Grant award: \$17,681,016**

Iowa plans to establish Iowa e-Learning Central (ILC). Governed by a leadership team, the ILC will support a statewide virtual learning environment with equitable access to high-quality course programs, develop foundational content and empower Iowa educators to develop content, serve as a

central area for families to access resources and provide input, and evaluate project progress and performance using a state-wide continuous improvement system.

**Maine (Absolute Priority 3)**

**Grant award: \$16,958,613**

Maine plans to generate innovative and equitable remote learning models by developing a group of "Education Engineers" who will design remote learning prototype models. Pilot schools will test, hone, and revise those models. To accomplish this, the state plans to partner with higher education institutions to make research and development, innovation engineering, and design processes courses available to educators. The state also plans to provide workshops, encourage pilot school participation through resources and microgrants, leverage existing state programs, offer an open-course, online community of proactive, and iteratively assess progress.

**North Carolina (Absolute Priority 3)**

**Grant award: \$17,632,125**

**North Carolina** plans to implement a statewide blended instructional model that is designed to support the most rural and economically disadvantaged communities in the state. The model rests on building teacher capacity through a high-quality professional development certification process, providing new standards-aligned virtual content focused on K8, offering mobile/accessible learning resources and technical assistance for parents, and prioritizing online and offline learning options.

**South Carolina (Absolute Priority 3)**

**Grant award: \$15,049,608**

**South Carolina** plans to increase availability of remote learning resources to students and teachers who lack broadband access, improve education resources by developing high-quality content, increase teacher experience with remote learning technology, and improve communication between families, teachers, and schools to support remote learning. They plan to accomplish that by acquiring and developing digital content, deploying datacasting and associated trainings, expanding the South Carolina Remote Learning Web Portal, and developing VirtualED courses.

**South Dakota (Absolute Priority 3)**

**Grant award: \$6,883,481**

**South Dakota** plans to provide professional development and empower families to make informed choices on online or in-person learning. They plan to provide training so every school has an educator with an online teaching certification, provide educators with professional development in remote learning, create a Rethinking Education Colloquium of 30 schools interested in pursuing new course options in personalized, competency-based education, help pre-service teachers build capacity to reach in remote/hybrid settings, and expand communication channels and resources for families to understand the learning options available to their students.

**Tennessee (Absolute Priority 1)**

**Grant award: \$20,000,000**

**Tennessee** proposed Connected Literacy: Engaging Parents as Partners whose goal was to remediate and accelerate literacy development through parent choice by providing vital early grade literacy support for their youngest students (grades 1-3) most impacted by the COVID-19 school closures. This initiative would offer microgrants to families to access instruction and tutoring grounded in Tennessee’s Foundational Skills Curriculum. Families would select a partner from TDOE-approved providers for remote summer, after-school and weekend learning supports, along with the technology, access and supplemental instructional materials needed for students to be successful. They plan to have a parent liaison at the Department who will support communications with parents

## APPENDIX 2: Partners and Coaches

Education First worked closely with leaders in the field to support states throughout the development of their grant application. These leaders provided guidance at a virtual workshop, offered individual state coaching and/or served as a critical friend during the final plan review. We are grateful for their expertise and insight.

- [Sandra Alberti](#), Student Achievement Partners
- [Daniel Assisi](#), Copernicus Coaching and Consulting
- [Nicole Assisi](#), Copernicus Coaching and Consulting
- [Harold Asturias](#), Center for Mathematics Excellence and Equity, UC Berkeley
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- [Beth Holland](#), The Learning Accelerator; Consortium for School Networking
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- [Tanji Reed Marshall](#), *The Education Trust*
- [Brett Shiel](#), *Independent Consultant*
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*Special thanks to the Education First team members who contributed to this project and to the creation of this publication, including Grace Beard, Adam Brumer, Zalika Coleman, Cristina Diaz-Torres, Sophie Lippincott Ferrer, Rashidah Lopez-Morgan, Margo Roen, Kenny Smith, Amanda Thornton and Emily Weiss.*