Effective Teaching Practices for Successful Virtual Learning

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, educators have been called on to create virtual learning environments almost overnight. Although this online approach to learning has existed in one form or another since the 1990s, today's educators never imagined such a massive expansion into the virtual education space in such a short period of time. Teachers who have taught online for years and scholars who have studied this approach to teaching and learning have a great deal of insight to offer. This interactive literature review is designed to highlight many of these insights. It is organized according to the following areas:

I. **Provide a Clear Structure, Logical Organization, and a System of Support**
A well-organized virtual learning environment builds familiarity, predictability, and support. It also motivates students to engage in learning and provides a clear pathway to success.

II. **Inspire Student Engagement**
Many engaging, evidence-based instructional strategies used effectively in traditional classrooms will work for virtual learning as well. Engaging students requires deliberate and thoughtful planning, pacing, delivery, and feedback.

III. **Implement Social and Emotional Learning**
Social-emotional learning (SEL) is as critical in virtual learning as it is in face-to-face instruction. Yet now, perhaps more than ever, students need to feel a sense of support, connection, and safety as they learn virtually.

IV. **Prioritize Educator Well-Being**
When educators focus on self-care, they are better able to contribute to the well-being of their students and the overall health of the school community.

I. Provide a Clear Structure, Logical Organization, and a System of Support

Main Idea	Additional Information	Resources

A well-organized virtual learning environment builds familiarity, predictability, and support. It also motivates students to engage in learning, providing a clear pathway to success.	• One challenge of distance learning for many students involves the distractions of a home setting vs. a more structured classroom. As a result, many students **struggle with their executive function or attention-regulation skills** that makes it difficult for them to
	    o Sustain attention,
	    o Keep goals and information in mind,
	    o Resist distraction,
	    o Tolerate frustration, and
	    o Reflect on the past and plan for the future (Zelazo, et al., 2016, p. 1).
	
	• Because of the many distractions that students in a distance learning setting may experience, it is imperative that the **online learning environment is very clear and highly organized**. An online learning environment and a face-to-face approach to learning should blend. An organized virtual learning environment provides a **predictable and consistent structure** that can be strengthened by an easily accessible learning management system (LMS).
	
	• Include the following **components in your virtual learning environment**:
	    o **Specify class routines, protocols, and guidelines.** Itemize class requirements and procedures.
	    o **Clarify communication pathways** between the teacher, students, and parents. Use more than one means of communication, not only email but texts, too, if possible.
	    o **Provide a clear, consistent daily schedule.** Clearly itemize both synchronous and asynchronous learning (additional information included in the next section).
	    o **Post office hours** or meeting times so that students and parents can sign-up to meet with the teacher one-on-one.
	    o **Organize the course content into logical chunks**:
	        ▪ **Build a cohesive unit of study** that is standards-based. Provide a clear overview of how
		Managing Online Teaching
		
		Teacher Collaboration
		
		Learner Support Services
		
		NEIT Rubric for Online Learning
		
		Cool Tools 4 Schools
		
		Communicating Effectively
		
		Best Practices in Teaching
		
		Digital Citizenship
		
		Possible Daily Schedules Suggested for Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning

I. Provide a Clear Structure, Logical Organization, and a System of Support		
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	the unit is organized.
	
	    ▪ Provide a **logical learning progression for the unit** supported by a **weekly calendar** and learning goals. Include a schedule of the learning experiences, resources, assignments, due dates, assessments, and rubrics for that week. Provide options for choice of content, process, and product whenever possible. Add enrichment opportunities when appropriate.
	    ▪ **Create and post a daily schedule** containing engaging lessons with learning goals for the day, clear directions (in English and in Spanish), resources, and assignments leveled to accommodate each student's needs.
	    ▪ Provide clear directions, examples, and rubrics for more **complex projects** contained within the unit. Allow student choice within the project. Make it problem/solution oriented if possible with real-world applicability and a showcase for sharing learning with an audience.
	  o **Include technology support** that is user friendly and enhances the learning experience. Note the following examples:
	    ▪ Google Classroom (online classroom)
	    ▪ Seesaw (communication, electronic portfolios)
	    ▪ Loom (video recording tool, messaging)
	    ▪ Edmodo (communication/collaboration management)
	    ▪ Flipgrid (video discussion platform)
	    ▪ Zoom (video collaboration platform)
	
	● Many school systems are grappling with the ideal structure of a virtual school day that balances synchronous and asynchronous learning. **Synchronous learning** occurs virtually in real time and replicates the actions in a regular classroom. It is the least disruptive approach because it most closely resembles the scheduling and structure to which most students are accustomed. Video tools such as Zoom or Google Meets make synchronous virtual learning possible. **Asynchronous learning** allows convenient and flexible access where
		[Synchronous and Asynchronous Time](#)

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	students can determine the time, place, and pace where learning occurs. This can be an online or offline learning experience that extends and supports skills and concepts that occurred during synchronous learning.
	o **Synchronous learning experiences** can include
	   ▪ **Community building** activities that emphasize social and emotional learning experiences;
	   ▪ **Whole group lessons** that teach foundational knowledge, introduce new concepts, and provide opportunities for students to interact in class discussions;
	   ▪ **Breakout session opportunities** where students can engage in small group activities; collaborate on a project, or provide peer teaching and feedback; and
	   ▪ **Celebrations or learning showcases** where students have an opportunity either individually or in small groups to present their projects or exhibitions to an audience.
	o **Asynchronous learning experiences** can include
	   ▪ Opportunities to **learn or practice new skills and content** or create a project for presentation (e.g., video, slide show, animation, podcast, etc.);
	   ▪ **Personalized learning activities** that not only provide students with a choice about what and how they will study but also as the opportunity to both explore topics and use their voices to share their new learning;
	   ▪ Assigned **research projects** that allow students to solidify gained or new knowledge and skills and may be interdisciplinary and presented in a variety of ways; and
	   ▪ Reflection or metacognition time that allows for feedback, self-assessment and revision.
	
	● When organizing the virtual learning environment, see the structure through a **student's viewpoint**: "Think through the process of a student entering the online classroom and moving through each of the required discussions, activities, readings, videos, and assignments. By stepping into the student's shoes we can create a map of the 'student journey.' Often this journey is best visualized as a flow chart or other graphic chart" (Cross & Pollk, 2018, p. 2). Collect feedback from students and parents about the ease of navigation, the	

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	clarity of learning expectations, the accessibility of the resources, the organization of the learning progressions. ● **Plan a student and parent orientation. Introducing students and parents to the expectations, requirements, and support available** to them in the learning environment is essential. " An **orientation** should: (a) give students a sense of what it is like to be a distance or online learner; (b) offer tips for being successful in an online learning environment; (c) define technical requirements and prerequisite skills; and (d) describe the steps to access online courses – preferably providing opportunities to practice accessing and navigating through a course" (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003, p.8). ● Whenever possible, **coordinating the structure of the learning environment with other teachers** will create more uniformity for students with multiple teachers. For families who have more than one child participating in online learning, uniformity across classes and grades is also very helpful for students and their parents who may be supporting their learning. ● Specific time for **teacher collaboration** should also be included in daily schedules allowing teachers to better support one another's professional learning by sharing what is working in the virtual learning environment and what can be improved. This is a new approach to learning for many educators throughout the United States. They will need time to support and learn from one another so that they feel connected and not isolated from the school and professional community. ● **Clear communication provides support** for students and their families and is critical to a smoothly flowing virtual program. Consider the following suggestions: o **Use a variety of methods** to reach all families. Consider text messages, phone calls, emails, newsletters, social media, articles in local newspapers, and postcards sent to home addresses.	

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	○ As in traditional learning environments, it is important to **use communication opportunities beyond conveying information** primarily focused on the underperformance of students. Use the virtual learning experience to reconnect with students and families to make positive connections, particularly if a student or family has struggled to stay connected with the school (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020). ○ **Effective communication means being active in all parts of the environment**: Communicate to motivate; communicate to engage students and establish credibility. Focus on students vs. content, always helping students feel like they have a caring teacher who is a real person (Dipietro, 2010). ● Provide support by building relationships with students and parents and between students and their peers. Build a positive classroom culture thorough meaningful peer interactions in small group work, by partnering on projects, and through relational activities that help students get to know one another. It may also be necessary to develop digital citizenship lessons.	

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II. Inspire Student Engagement

Main Ideas	Additional Information	Resources
Many engaging, evidence-based instructional strategies used effectively in traditional classrooms will work for virtual learning as well. Engaging students requires deliberate and thoughtful planning, pacing, delivery, and feedback.	• Building an engaging classroom community in the virtual learning environment requires regular **use of effective communication and instructional practices** including the following: o Logging in to the learning platform at a scheduled time every school day, o Developing synchronous learning activities, o Providing timely feedback, o Establishing office hours for additional support, o Holding regular class meetings, o Keeping track of student participation, o Developing learning activities that require small group or teamwork, and o Monitoring student interactions (Dipietro, 2010). • **Organize content and assignments with consistency.** Learning how to use a virtual platform will be less challenging for students if documents, modules, class meeting links, etc. are all labeled with clarity and organized in a consistent way that makes them easy to access. Consider including dates in titles to help students find materials more easily. • **Strengthen evidence-of-learning practices.** Student growth numbers will likely be greatly varied since the spring shut down – some will be further behind than they would typically be, others will have stayed on track, some may even be further ahead. An increase in exit tickets, quizzes, review games, reflective responses, and other checks for understanding throughout lessons will help teachers know how well students are understanding the material so that they can better engage students in learning. • **Differentiate instruction.** Differentiation is a hallmark of engagement, and it is especially important in virtual learning to better engage all students, including those with special needs or 504 plans and those who excel.	Instructional Strategies for Virtual Learning: A Companion Tool to the NIET Teaching Standards Rubric Guidelines for Providing Feedback Strategies for Online Learning Exit Tickets: Gaining Understanding on What Your Students Know Providing Differentiated Instruction by Giving Students Choice Educating All Learners (Sensational Special Ed Resources)

II. Inspire Student Engagement		
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	Varying delivery of information and providing choices or menus for content, process, and product helps students better engage in and take ownership of their learning. Consider using the following practices as you differentiate instruction: o **Provide written *and* oral instructions** for learning activities as well as **explicit models** for the expected product. o **Show videos** of demonstrations to provide visual instruction. **Provide links to videos** that instruct and demonstrate for students to review again on their own. Always **use closed captioning** for videos to enhance language development and encourage better comprehension of the video content. o **Allow students choice** in how they demonstrate an understanding of concepts. For example, encourage them to create a Google Slide presentation, write a speech, film a commercial, design an awareness campaign, make a pamphlet, conduct a mini-experiment, create a storyboard, write a short story, create a game, etc. Employ the following practices to support differentiated student output: ▪ **Provide grading rubrics or checklists** with project and assignment descriptions so students have access to the assessment criteria. ▪ **Chunk larger projects or assignments** into smaller steps so students can work toward shorter deadlines. ▪ **Utilize peer review practices** for projects and assignments before students submit them. ▪ Encourage students to **create products to present to the whole class** or even a wider audience. ▪ **Conference with students** individually or in groups to check for progress on lengthy assignments.	How Online Learning Can Meet the Needs of Gifted Students Guidelines and Resources for Learning Through Inquiry

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	● **Utilize problem-based learning.** Problem-based learning (PBL) is a teaching method that asks students to tackle real-world problems that are meaningful and relevant. This teaching method is a powerful means to prompt learning and encourage critical thinking and can be applied to the virtual learning process. Note some of the common components of PBL: 　o　Personalized instruction, 　o　Collaboration, 　o　Student choice, 　o　Real-world expertise and experience, 　o　Multiple reading and writing genres, 　o　Role-playing, 　o　Real audiences for students to showcase their work, and 　o　Authentic assessments. ● **Ask thoughtful questions in virtual discussions.** The power of well-planned and well-timed questions in engaging students is remarkable. Chat forums or discussion boards will not only provide insight into how well students are understanding the material but also help them better connect to what they are studying. In virtual learning, the utilization of discussion boards in response to well-designed questions is critical for student engagement. Consider the following suggestions: 　o　Questions need to be high-quality and varied, written out ahead of time, reflect lesson objectives and standards being taught, and help students connect in meaningful and relevant ways to the content. 　o　Provide positive feedback to students' posts as well as using students' responses in follow up discussions to help motivate students to participate. 　o　Give students the opportunity and tools to generate their own questions about content.	Guidelines for Problem Based Learning How to Make PBL a Reality in a Distance Learning Environment What the Heck Is Project-Based Learning? Personalized Learning and Competency-Based Instruction Guidelines and Resources for Learning Through Inquiry 6 Strategies for Differentiating Instruction in a PBL Classroom and Other PBL Articles

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	Expand social interaction to support virtual learning. Thoughtful pairings and smaller groups demand more engagement in virtual learning. Pace lessons so that students have ample time to interact and work together. Consider the following suggestions to make small group work more effective: **Implement small group work.** Most virtual learning platforms allow for **smaller grouping or breakout rooms** for students to gather virtually and work together. As often as is reasonable, design lessons so that students can work in smaller groups with one another while being kept accountable for their work as a group. While working in groups, consider having students work on a Google doc so you can monitor and comment on their progress. **Create and post clear norms and expectations** for both small group and whole-group discussion and interaction. Review and reinforce these norms and expectations before engaging in whole or small group discussions. For example, encourage students to keep their cameras on during a discussion, to listen to one another, to provide positive feedback, and to respectfully disagree. - Students may benefit from sentence starters for engaging in group discussions. For example: "I understand that perspective, but have you thought about this…?" "That is one way to look at it...I see it more like this…" "I hear what you are saying… others might think about it this way…" "I agree with you. I also think…" "That is a really interesting perspective. I think about it this way…" - Make certain that **students understand their roles in small group interactions**—i.e recorder, time keeper, facilitator, reporter, etc. Review the specific expectations and norms for small groups with students before they get to work.	[Guidelines for Student Collaboration](#)

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III. Implement Social and Emotional Learning

Main Ideas	Additional Information	Resources
Social-emotional learning (SEL) is as critical in virtual learning as it is in face-to-face instruction. Yet now, perhaps more than ever, students need to feel a sense of support, connection, and safety as they learn virtually.	• **Create conducive environments** that employ consistent routines and norms that promote inclusion, equity, and a sense of safety for students. 　o **Establish a class charter**, with student input, detailing norms that will create a safe and supportive learning environment. For example, "We each participate in the daily check in, we listen to each other when someone is talking, we keep our cameras on during our class meeting," etc. 　o **Implement a daily [virtual crew](#)** consisting of a check-in that both celebrates the joyful day to day moments and serves as a time where we learn, talk, and think about what is going on in the world and how we feel about it. Students may respond in a chat format or in a live discussion depending on how the crew is delivered. 　o **Host a timed morning check-in** each day (e.g., every day from 8:00 a.m. to 8:10 a.m.) to talk about what is expected for the class or the day and remind students about the norms. You may also want to encourage students to greet each other, ask any questions about content or assignments, rate their level of stress, etc. If the class is just getting started it might be a good idea to utilize some sort of virtual ice breaker activity, where students get to know each other a few peers at a time in the first few weeks. 　　▪ Note that **for secondary students** with several classes each school day, the **socio-emotional check-in in each class period may need to be shorter**, or only happen a few times a week after the first week or so, but it is an important practice to sustain in a meaningful way. Secondary students, in particular, may face increased stress levels with virtual learning and these check-ins can provide insight for teachers to make adjustments and support students effectively. 　　▪ **Model for students what the naming and processing of emotions looks like** and sounds like in a check-in. Doing so will normalize the practice and help students feel comfortable doing the same.	[Leveraging SEL as You Prepare to Reopen and Renew](#) from CASEL [Roadmap for Reopening Schools](#) from CASEL [Resources for Educating the Whole Child (Social and Emotional Learning)](#) [SEL support and resources for K-12 curriculum](#) from Newsela [Icebreaker ideas for students learning remotely](#) [Newsela for kid friendly current events](#)

III. Implement Social and Emotional Learning		
Main Ideas	**Additional Information**	**Resources**

	• **Employ consistency** in daily scheduling across grades and classes, in virtual platforms and communication tools, in the way content and direct instruction is delivered, etc. That consistency gives students confidence and comfort in knowing what to expect and will reduce their stress level.
	
	• **Utilize teachable moments** to recognize and reinforce social and emotional skills. Consider the following suggestions:
	   o **Discuss age-appropriate current events** and how social and emotional topics or skills connect to what is happening in the world. Students can participate in these discussions at any age. For example, for secondary students the following question may lead to a thoughtful discussion: "According to this article, why did losing Kobe Bryant feel like losing a friend or relative for so many fans?" This learning task can promote close reading skills and other literacy skills while focusing on a socio-emotional topic that would likely be meaningful for many students.
	   o **Incorporate thoughtful discussion prompts** in response to podcasts, films, or reading assignments that help students engage in meaningful conversations with each other or their families. For example, questions that encourage students to be empathetic help them connect with characters or people in a text or story and enhance their understanding of content or character development. I.e. "How do you think Esperanza is feeling about her new situation? What words in the text show you how she is feeling? What did she say that tells you how she is feeling? When have you felt this way about something? What happened? How did you cope with it? How did your response compare to Esperanza's?"
	
	• **Increase self and social awareness** by practicing gratitude and taking mental breaks.
	   o **Use literature, journaling, reflection, mindfulness,** and more in age-appropriate doses to help students increase their awareness of how they and their peers think and feel about things and, most especially, what they are grateful for in their lives.
		The Imagine Neighborhood: Emotional Intelligence Podcast
		
		SEL Discussion Questions for Use with Any Film That Is a Work of Fiction
		
		Thanks! A Strengths-Based Gratitude Curriculum for Tweens and Teens
		
		Get Moving from Wide Open School
		
		#PlayAtHome with Playworks
		
		7 Ways to Maintain Relationships During Your School Closure

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	o **Encourage play and movement** in whatever ways seem reasonable for students at home and with each other. Play virtual learning games together, have a show and tell, learn a dance as a class, etc.
	
	o **Utilize mindfulness practices** regularly with your class to help students stay calm and increase focus. Simple breathing techniques can go a long way in calming stressed out or distracted students.
	
	● **Provide explicit instruction** for learning tasks and projects virtually. These instructions can be synchronous or asynchronous, but there should be a way that students can ask questions in real time. Consider providing the instruction live while recording it and posting it so students can review the lesson again later. Doing so will create a safety net for students who worry about missing something or asking questions in front of the group. Consider the following suggestions:
	    o **Students need clear and direct instruction to minimize confusion and address their questions about content or learning activities**. Access to the teacher and the group multiple times a day for elementary students and during each class period for secondary students will be vital to the socio-emotional health of students as they engage in virtual learning.
	    o **Class meetings, discussion time, group work, and presentations** should be subsets of the direct and explicit instruction. Having these practices in place will lead to a greater sense of belonging and attachment to others in the virtual learning environment.
	
	● **Build strong relationships with students** and encourage them to build relationships with one another. It is important that they feel connected and supported. Consider the following suggestions:
	    o Make certain to **schedule individual conferencing or office hours time with students**, especially when they are working on projects or writing assignments. This one-on-one time need not be lengthy, but should be purposeful in both supporting students in learning and strengthening
		[For Educators: Relationship Mapping Strategy (New Version!)](#)
		
		[A Guide for Supporting Remote Student Book Clubs](#)
		
		[Journaling as a Social Emotional Learning Practice | Social Emotional Learning Curriculum | SEL Lesson Plans](#)
		
		[Using Mindfulness in the Classroom](#)

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III. Implement Social and Emotional Learning		
Main Ideas	Additional Information	Resources
	relationships with them.	

Additional Information continued:

- o **Manage and keep track of student groupings** and note students who seem to regularly work alone or who are quiet in virtual groups. Avoid letting students choose groups, but rather group students together thoughtfully.
- o **Pay special attention to the needs of students who may be particularly vulnerable**, who lack confidence, who come from challenging family situations, who are alone a lot, etc. Consider using relationship mapping tools to link students to supportive adults at school as well as encourage pairings with kind and engaging peers.
- o **Create remote book clubs** where students are expected to engage in thoughtful and meaningful discussions with their peers. Such interaction can bolster positive peer relationships and connections. Provide discussion questions and set norms for the group that are inclusive, equitable, supportive, and encouraging.

- **Develop and sustain strong relationships with families and stakeholders.** Reach out and connect with parents, guardians, and community stakeholders. Seek their input and support for their students and invite them to participate in meaningful ways in your school and classroom. Consider surveying families and students by asking the following questions:
  - o "What has your experience been like since school has been closed?
  - o What is on your mind as you think about next school year?
  - o What are your biggest hopes or worries?
  - o What has our school done well during the past months, and what could we have done better?
  - o How might you like to contribute as we prepare to transition to a new school year?
  - o What will help you learn this upcoming year?
  - o What can we do to make school feel even more like a community that cares for you?" (CASEL, 2020a, p. 5).

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IV. Prioritize Educator Well-Being

Main Ideas	Additional Information	Resources

When educators focus on self-care, they are better able to contribute to the well-being of their students and the overall health of the school community.	• Just as in face-to-face instruction**, positive relationships between students and teachers** is also of primary importance in virtual classrooms. "There is now a strong body of evidence (e.g. Hattie, 2009; Roorda et al., 2011) that confirms the value of **positive teacher-student relationships for [student] learning and behavior**. The quality of relationships in a school [virtual and brick and mortar], however, also impacts on teachers' well-being and their ability to cope well with the many and varied stresses that are the hallmarks of the profession…" (Roffey, 2012, p.1).
	
	• Evidence indicates that successful teacher well-being interventions include:
	  o **Mindfulness** practices to manage stress;
	  o **Growth mindset** for solving problems;
	  o **Self-care practices**, including exercise and sleep, to restore health and a positive mindset;
	  o **Reflection strategies** for insight into professional practice;
	  o **Collaboration opportunities** to build a supportive community; and
	  o **Celebration of achievements** and successes to feel valued.
	
	• Well-being is important for teachers at all levels of experience. Jennifer Gonzalez, from the website *Cult of Pedagogy*, describes an essential rule for new teachers. **Surround yourself with good people who have positive energy**. She calls this the "Marigold Effect". This practice is also critical for the well-being of virtual teachers (Gonzalez, 2013).
	
	• Consider the following effective strategies to enhance educator well-being:
	  o **Set your intention** to start the day. This could be a written reflection indicating you intend to demonstrate patience or you thoughtfully intend to be focused on listening to others.
		[Two Sides to the Same Coin](#)
		
		[Secondary Trauma](#)
		
		[Tap In / Tap Out Video](#)
		
		[Find Your Marigold](#)
		
		[Self-Care for Educators Newsletter](#)
		
		[Cult of Pedagogy](#)
		
		[Self-Care Strategies](#)
		
		[Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy](#)
		
		[Funds of Knowledge](#)
		
		[Place-Based Learning](#)

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	IV. Prioritize Educator Well-Being	
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	o **Take a few breaths** when you are stressed. Pause and breathe before acting. o In a quiet moment say a couple of words or phrases to **describe how you're feeling**. o **Nurture compassion for self and others** and seek opportunities to demonstrate kindness. o **Participate in a gratitude circle** where expressions of gratitude are both given and received. (Nankin, 2020). • When teachers **prioritize self-care**, they are contributing to the well-being of their students and overall health of the school community. Remember these actions: o Take opportunities to talk with coworkers. o Stay connected with text messages or have lunch with a buddy. o Ask for assistance when needed. o Team up with a colleague and work on something of high interest to you. o Reward yourself. • Colleagues need to be given time during their professional day to **take care of one another** providing social and emotional support and engaging in authentic dialogue with empathy, honesty, and generosity. A sense of well-being occurs when people feel connected and cared for. • **Move from a deficit mindset to an asset-based approach**. Rather than focusing on *distance, remote,* or *virtual* learning, concentrate on the wonderful opportunity to be in comfortable surroundings with family, pets, and the comforts of home. Apply what we know about culturally sustaining pedagogy, place-based learning, or funds of knowledge. Guide students to embrace learning at home by sharing their culture, studying their immediate environment, inviting a friend or family member to a class meeting. Connect curriculum to students and teachers lived experience in their immediate environment. A heightened sense of well-being is enjoyed by all when we are authentic and accepting of one another.	

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