



Making the Switch to Remote Learning: Your District's Guide to Preparing K-12 Students for Future Success

By Kate McKenzie





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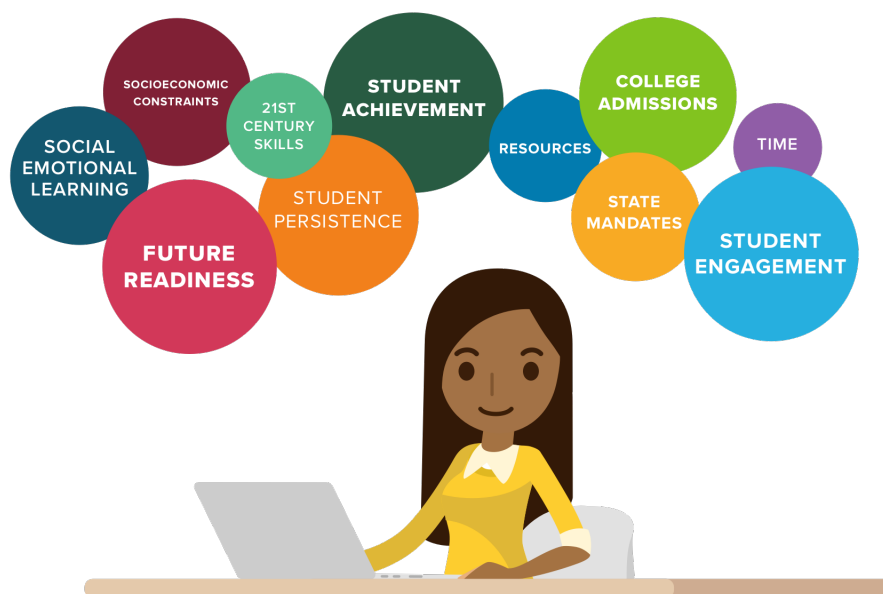
Introduction

Introduction

In the past few months, school district leaders, counselors, and teachers have had to face an unprecedented challenge. Since the spread of the novel coronavirus, leading to worldwide school closures, educators have been forced to adapt quickly and turn towards remote learning to maintain continuity.

The quick succession of decisions with regard to social distancing left many districts in a panic; how would all students' academic and social emotional needs be met virtually? More specifically, it begged the question of **how schools could prepare students with future ready skills, such as critical-thinking, creativity, and emotional awareness, as well as continuing to assist them in finding colleges and careers, in a remote setting.**

It hasn't been easy for students either. For the past months, students have been feeling an odd mix of uncertainty and monotony. Unfortunately, this period of ambiguity has a blurry end date, which means that educators need to be proactive when adjusting to the needs and mentalities of students. Similar to traditional school year expectations, educators are being tasked with helping kids shift their current mindsets from hopelessness to optimism.



Introduction

This is exactly why, now more than ever, it's essential for students to feel excited and motivated to continue their education. At a time when society feels powerless and paralyzed, and people are trying to [gain a sense of control over their lives](#), educators can provide a semblance of normalcy by having students look ahead. By focusing on their future, as well as future readiness skills, **students can divert their attention from the chaotic outside world to an organized, personalized plan that empowers them to be prepared for their anticipated college or career.**

This e-book will help educators build and maintain a robust online learning experience for students. Keeping [future readiness](#) in mind, **the following pages delve into expert-backed advice on creating a remote curriculum, engaging students, tracking their success and helping them plan for college and career success. There's also a section on how to help students build social-emotional skills** -- which are critical to help them navigate these uncertain times, and prepare them for the future world of work.

You'll also learn how two districts have tackled these issues with case studies that showcase how using comprehensive online programming can help educators and families feel at ease when transitioning to and navigating new learning waters.



Making the Switch to Remote Learning: What Educators Should Know

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Districts across the continent are announcing the continuation of social distancing for the rest of the school year. For educators, that means embracing a profession that is drastically different than the one they signed up for. **Teaching is relationship-centered, but now educators are spending hours a day talking to their screens instead of interacting with students.** Even for schools that rely heavily on technology, educators are struggling to support students and reestablish virtual learning norms. In this time of uncertainty, these unprecedented challenges are overwhelming for everyone.

Instead of focusing on the ambiguity, it is time for educators to lean into comprehensive programming and create extensions of their typical and habitual practices. Since effective distance learning can be difficult to accomplish, districts new to online instruction can learn from the experiences of virtual schools already in operation.

Xello sat down and talked to two experts in the field of virtual learning: **Lindsey Howe (Virtual Educator at Michigan Great Lakes Virtual Academy)** and **Russell Driesen (Curriculum Manager at Florida Virtual School)**. Here's what they had to say about making the switch to remote instruction.

Keep it Simple:

There's a reason that the common advice of "keep it simple" never goes out of style. Simple works, and right now teachers need to reestablish the school norm without reinventing the wheel.

Instead of trying out a variety of new platforms, [figure out the best tool for your school and district](#) and then educate others on how to use it before looking into additional ones.

Driesen also urges teachers to use this time to back up and review materials that have been previously taught.



Making the Switch to Remote Learning: What Educators Should Know

“If [teachers] introduce new material at this point, the challenge of having to absorb new material in a new environment is going to be stressful for students,” he says.

By considering what students can handle, teachers are inadvertently extending the olive branch to families and adjusting to their needs during this time of crisis.

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— Russell Driesen, Curriculum Manager at Florida Virtual School

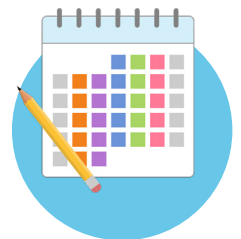


Establish a Consistent Schedule:

Schools and classrooms run on schedules, and kids, although they may not admit it, crave structure and predictability. In fact, consistent routines are not only comforting to students and families, but can also support prosocial behaviors and prevent challenging ones from arising.

By making and sticking to a routine, kids will regain some feeling of control -- a feeling that many people are searching for. It's crucial to set standards for what the online classroom will look, sound, and feel like.

It is never too late to revisit classroom expectations, since in normal times, teachers often reevaluate which procedures to practice and revise.



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The virtual classroom is no different, and every student should feel heard, respected, and supported within that digital space.

Creating routines and boundaries will help solidify these sought-after feelings and enhance academic, social, and emotional learning.

Communicate with Parents:

It's essential for school districts to proactively communicate with parents. However, the hard part is finding that "sweet spot" of sharing information in a capacity that makes families feel supported and not overwhelmed.

On that note, Howe and Driesen recommend that communications be sent through one contact so parents aren't receiving multiple emails regarding various schedules and structures.

Russell recommends teachers reach out to students or their parents directly through phone or text messaging, rather than solely relying on email. Howe also emphasizes the importance of **sharing suggested learning schedules with parents so that they can organize their time to help their children with schoolwork as well as complete their own jobs remotely.**

While many districts handed out devices for kids and families to use for distance learning, there are still low income families that may have trouble accessing the internet. Districts should consider mailing or dropping off paper curriculum for those particular students.



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Master Tech Tools to Help Make Virtual Learning Easier:

There are a variety of tools that can be used to deliver curriculum online. The following are the top websites and apps that Howe and Driesen suggest for delivering virtual instruction and connecting with students:



[Zoom](#): Provides educators with a platform to hold classes virtually & interact with students using its video and audio functionality.

[Google Forms](#): Survey administration app that is included in the Google Drive Office Suite.

[Padlet](#): A live and interactive document that allows users to post in real time.

[Flipgrid](#): Grids are the meeting place for any learning community to discuss topics via video recordings.

[Xello](#): Future readiness program that helps build self-knowledge, personalized plans, and critical life skills.

[Google Voice](#): An online telephone service that provides call forwarding and voicemail services, voice, and text messaging.

[Remind](#): A two-way messaging service that keeps phone numbers anonymous.

[Classkick](#): Free app in which teachers track students' progress as they work at their own pace.

[Screencast-O-Matic](#): A screencasting and video editing software tool.

[Course/Unit Hyperdoc](#): A document containing one shortened link with which students can access a lesson that contains instructions, links, tasks, and innovative guides to thinking.

Making the Switch to Remote Learning: What Educators Should Know

Track Student Engagement:

Even though most districts have suspended high-stakes testing this school year, educators should still use data to guide their practices. However, **the numbers aren't necessarily about performance or grades, but rather interactions, logins, and participation.**

Tools such as Padlet, Google Forms, and Xello are helpful in tracking student engagement metrics with the click of a button. Reviewing this type of data can help teachers solve problems cross-curricularly, as well as note repetitive absences and reach out with a wellness check.

Some key questions to ask in order to gauge student engagement should be:

- Are students logging in?
- Are students responding?
- Are students submitting assignments?



Make an Effort to Connect with Students:

Educators need to push their old academic expectations aside and meet kids where they are. That includes devoting time to focus on relationships, [establishing strategies for maintaining relationships virtually](#), and allowing kids downtime to interact with missed peers.

Howe advises educators to make an extra effort to connect with students virtually.



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“In a virtual setting, you’re going to quickly learn that the connection you make with students is going to drive everything,” she says.

Educators can offer class meeting times, small group instruction, one-on-one check ins, or virtual office hours to help students feel supported and regain a sense of normalcy.

Another way to respect kids’ emotional needs is to pivot from correction to praise. In normal circumstances, the desired positive to corrective ratio is 3:1. **Educators should consider only identifying student successes in virtual meetings in order to model positive interactions.**

Additionally, this will prompt other learners to behaviorally and academically follow suit. Intentionally recognizing the positive will in turn build a more productive, motivational, and supportive online community for all students.

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– Lindsey Howe, Virtual Educator at Michigan Great Lakes Virtual Academy





Why Focus on Future Planning During Uncertain Times?

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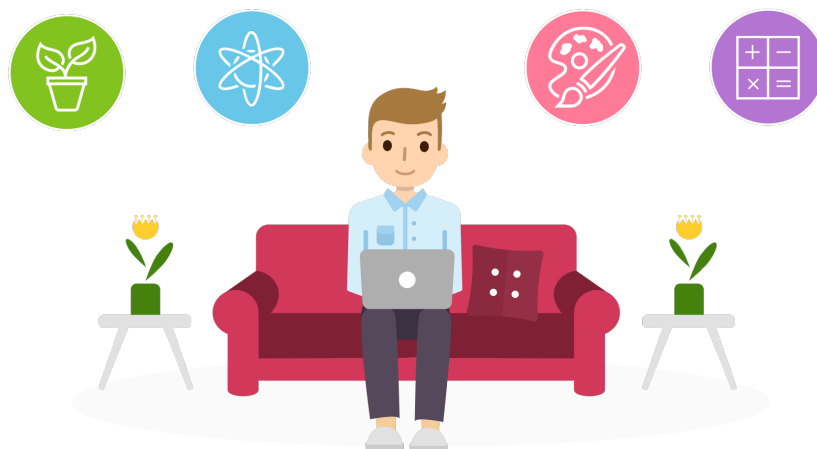
Once educators set up a digital curriculum and communicate expectations with families, they are then faced with another tough decision: What standards should they prioritize when it comes to remote instruction? While STEM and language arts are critical subjects, **districts should also consider the value of and prioritize the instruction of future readiness skills.**

School plays a crucial role in developing a person's sense of self, which is why when many adults become nostalgic, they don't focus on what equations they studied in school, but the life lessons learned throughout their academic experience. It's also why many parents like their children to take harder classes; **it's not the material that is necessarily important, but the work ethic and executive functioning skills practiced along the way.**

These examples, in the same sense, are teaching future readiness: they are helping students become equipped with the knowledge, skills, and insights to make informed decisions and build actionable plans for their future.

Now, more than ever, students need to be thinking about the road ahead and how they're going to get there. In metaphorical terms, that future road may not look the same as it has in previous years — or even be there after social distancing ends.

Focusing on future planning helps every student take control of who they'll be and what they'll become, giving them the confidence to take that next step towards their successful future.





How to Engage Students Remotely with Future Planning

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We've established that it's important for educators to stress that, while things may be unsettling now, students can still take definitive steps to plan for their future. But can this be done remotely? The short answer is, yes.

Kids are not limited to preparing for college or their career within the confines of their classroom or the normal school year. Below are some tips to help engage students remotely and assist them with future readiness.

Create a Digital Curriculum

The first step towards engaging students remotely with future planning is to create a digital curriculum. Educational experts recommend that instead of researching what online programs can be added to students' remote learning experience, [districts should first focus on curriculum](#).

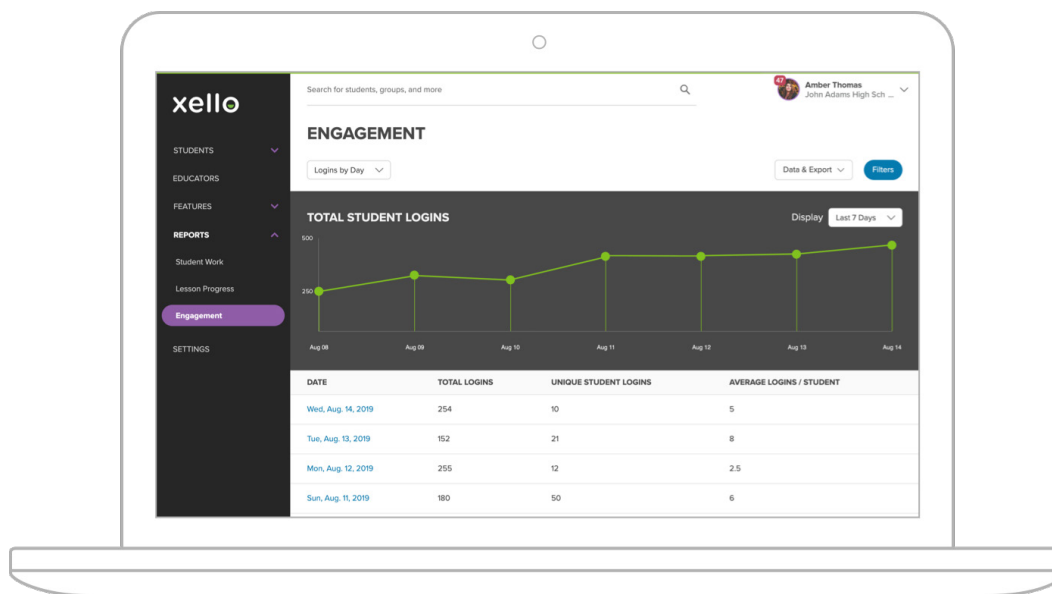
There are a lot of engaging educational programs available, but schools should consider how this work directly aligns to [state](#), district, and national learning standards. **By first focusing on a goal, such as teaching future ready skills, districts can then supplement lessons with engaging, easy-to-access online platforms that complement learning needs and district mandates.**

These comprehensive programs that provide rigour and vertical alignment, as well as the ability to engage students and track that engagement, are vital to remote learning initiatives.

One such program is Xello, a comprehensive K-12 program that provides [thoughtful, age-appropriate lessons](#) and the ability to [create assignments](#) that build critical thinking skills and prepare students for college and career readiness. **The interactive educator dashboard gives teachers full access to assign these lessons and activities to different groups of students, taking the guess-work out for learners and parents alike.** Student needs are vastly different, and Xello provides needed flexibility for teachers to

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differentiate their lessons, whether it stems from individualized education plans or simply grade level accommodations.



Xello Educator Dashboard

After creating a digital curriculum, it is imperative that the information be communicated with families. Walking parents through log-in procedures, online learning expectations, and student data safety are all important aspects to cover when addressing needs and concerns. When doing so, educators should check to see if their chosen online platform already has a written guide, overview, or letter to share, [just like this one](#).

Choose Future Readiness Platforms that are Accessible on Multiple Devices

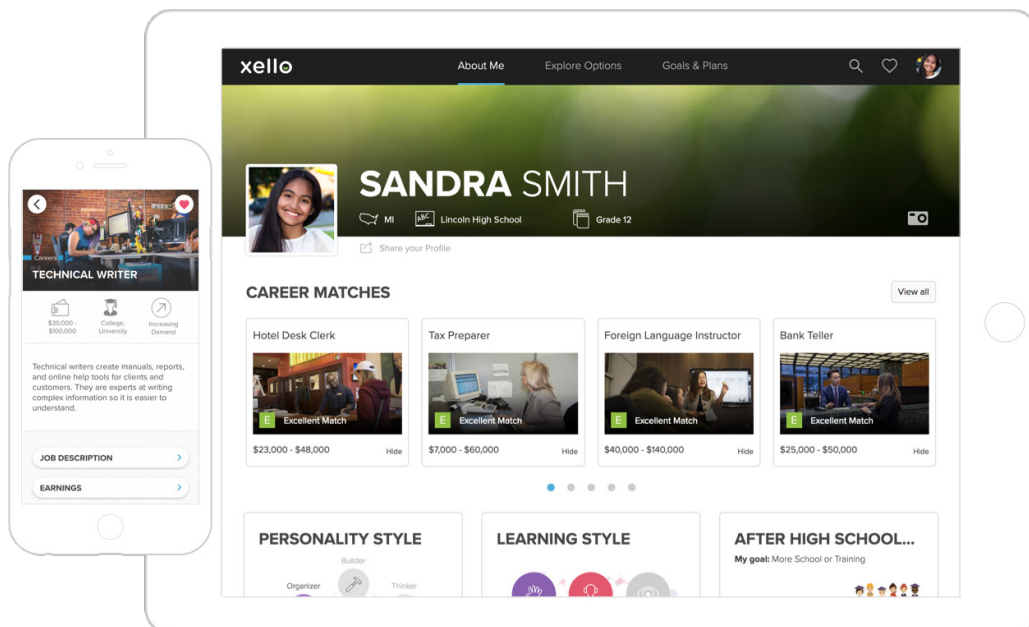
Many families are juggling multiple schedules, not to mention multiple devices, and working with a limited amount of time and space. For a lot of students, it's not that they're refusing to do their assignments, but simply can't due to reasons outside of their control.

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Parents may be using the family laptop to continue their own work from home, and kids may therefore be left to use a tablet or smartphone to access online curriculum.

Therefore, **districts should consider adopting programs that are compatible across various online interfaces.** Doing so provides flexibility for students to extend their learning beyond the classroom and explore their future options anywhere and anytime.

Xello is one such program that has designed a desktop, tablet, and [mobile browser experience](#). The program is ready and waiting for them whenever and wherever inspiration or curiosity strikes — making learning more timely, shareable and relevant.



Xello Career Profile and Student Dashboard - on Mobile and Tablet

How to Engage Students Remotely with Future Planning

Track Students' Progress and Engagement From Home

Many educators rely on formative assessments throughout the day to gauge student comprehension. This immediate feedback helps teachers modify instruction and craft future lessons based on students' performance. **Now that students are working from home, it's important now more than ever to know which kids are engaged with the online curriculum.**

The reasons for tracking engagement extend past students meeting learning standards, although it will be helpful to look at this data when planning the start of the next school year. This information also allows teachers, school counselors, and psychologists to identify which families may be struggling — academically, emotionally, or financially — and provide necessary resources to reduce barriers to learning.

Therefore, districts should invest in programming that automatically runs engagement reports to provide daily information on student learning progress. However, “engagement reports” mean different things to different companies, so it's important to compare what kind of data is at your disposal. Educators should consider platforms that offer [a variety of data](#) trackers, such as log-in reports, progress summaries, and work completion, to get a full sense of when and how students are interacting with their online studies.

As good educators know, data is just the beginning. Educators can use this information to help guide conversations about future planning, either with kids in classroom meetings, individually during one-on-one check-ins, or with parents as scheduled communication.

Progress reports are also beneficial when connecting with students who are not moving forward in their learning. **District leads can use the automated reports to analyze virtual learning outcomes and determine career planning and college preparation learning goals to meet [state mandates](#).**

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Support Students Interested in Remotely Exploring College Options

Even though high school students cannot currently visit college campuses, that doesn't mean their search or application to their dream school needs to be on hold. While most universities are not delaying admission decisions for current high school seniors, their interactions with prospective students now looks a lot different than in the past.

Many schools have been providing virtual tours, chances to shadow online classes, and additional chats with admission counselors. [Some college representatives even argue](#) that **this new experience expands opportunities and creates equity for students who may not have considered certain colleges due to the additional expenses and time needed for campus visits.**

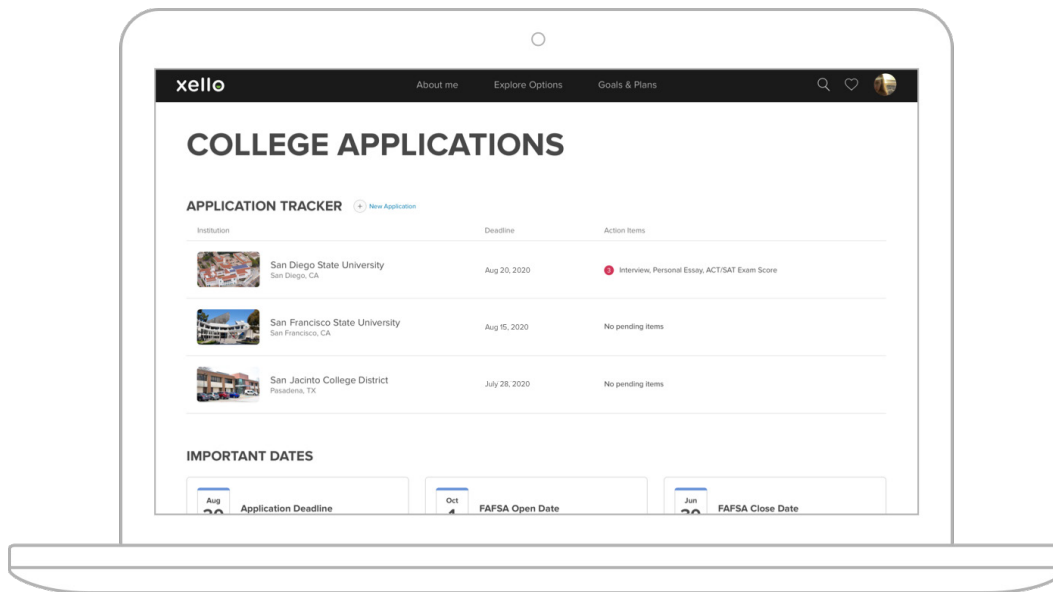
School counselors should continue to guide students once they've been accepted into college. Many families' financial situations have changed within the past month, and encouraging students to communicate these changes to prospective schools may lead to an adjustment in their financial aid.

Additionally, students can use [this helpful tool](#) to compare and analyze offers and costs of different colleges before making a final decision.

If researching options on their own, students can use online programs, such as Xello, to continue their planning remotely. Using their custom Xello profile, students are able to search, filter, and match with colleges and careers that align to their goals. Students can also continue to request letters of recommendation and transcript submissions [right inside the tool](#).

This streamlined digital process is helpful for students, counselors, and colleges alike, and creates a centralized hub where students can track and monitor deadlines and the progress of their requests. Being able to use this future-readiness tool still allows the process to be exciting and personalized instead of a missed opportunity.

How to Engage Students Remotely with Future Planning



Xello Application Tracker for College Applications

Nevertheless, it would be remiss to not acknowledge that, while educators and families are being flexible and making the best of the current situation, [our society is collectively grieving](#).

Now, more than ever, students need to establish and refine their resiliency skills. Luckily, these concepts can be woven into online instruction for consistent practice, ideally leading to a more optimistic outlook post-pandemic and into the future.



Leaning on Virtual Programming to Build Students' Social Emotional Skills

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For the past three decades, schools have shifted their view of education from being solely academic-focused to one that provides experiences for academic, social, and emotional growth. Investing in the whole child helps build various future ready skills so that kids can work towards being functional, successful adults.

Many professionals in the social emotional field rely on [The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) for high-quality, evidence-based resources regarding social emotional learning (SEL). **CASEL defines SEL as the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.**

Most districts argue the extreme importance for the implementation of SEL in schools. In fact, teachers are intentional about embedding the application of these skills into their daily practices.

They recognize students' needs and strengths when developing their classroom routines, student work groups, differentiated assignments, and even brain breaks. This consciousness of SEL implementation directly leads to the maturation of future ready skills; **what employer doesn't want applicants to possess self-awareness, recognize ethical norms, and establish healthy relationships?**



Leaning on Virtual Programming to Build Students' Social Emotional Skills

The problem now, of course, is that learning is not taking place within brick-and-mortar walls. Kids are not interacting with one another in person, and teachers cannot monitor their students' social and emotional progress throughout the day.

Due to the fact that most of the world is learning remotely, and also feeling additional stressors and discomfort, teachers must instruct with a [trauma-informed approach](#), **lean on virtual programming, and educate families on familiar expectations and routines to continue growth of SEL skills.**

While there are currently a lot of resources floating around the internet about self-care and coping strategies, educators should pause before adding these into lessons or sharing with parents. An overflowing email inbox -- no matter how fantastic the content -- can quickly become a wall of words to the recipient. **Districts want to comfort kids and meet them where they are, and therefore need to remember that SEL is a process and takes time and practice.**

One way to ensure the continued development of students' social emotional skills is to trust programming that's already been utilized throughout the school year. Integrating familiar programming into a virtual curriculum is an even better option for overwhelmed parents; it is one less website on which they have to help their children navigate or remember a password. Future readiness programs that take developmental skills into consideration, can help guide students to:

- Begin understanding their skills and interests.
- Learn to collaborate and communicate with their peers.
- Build critical thinking and productivity skills.
- Make the connection between interests and career pathways.
- Encourage curiosity and build a positive attitude towards learning.

Executive functioning skills are important mental competencies that allow the brain to plan, organize, multi-task, and focus. While these skills are clearly important in the

Leaning on Virtual Programming to Build Students' Social Emotional Skills

workplace, they also help children succeed in and outside of school. **Executive functioning skills are needed now more than ever due to remote learning, family stressors, and home schedules continuously changing during these uncertain times.**

Educators, specifically counselors, should try to lean on virtual programs that keep SEL and executive functioning skills at the forefront and align with the American School Counselor Association's Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success. Xello, for example, is one such program that has [intentionally aligned its components and lessons to every single one of these standards](#) that allows for academic, social-emotional, and career development success.

Educators need to remember that while students may not be receiving all of the in-person lessons and support they once did, they can still practice and develop necessary skills for the future. By leaning on virtual programs that prioritize the development of SEL and executive functioning skills, educators can prepare students to face the future with resilience.

And if you don't have virtual programs in place, you can look into [incorporating some of these practices in your virtual classrooms](#) to ensure you're helping students' develop critical social emotional skills during these tough times.



Real World Implementation: How Two Districts Are Using Xello in Their Remote Learning Curriculum to Promote Future Readiness

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Since school buildings across North America are closed to accommodate the need for social distancing, districts are now [faced with the challenge of keeping students academically engaged](#).

Minimizing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, while keeping the educational “lights on,” requires innovation, ingenuity, and technology. Despite the challenges, some districts are thriving.

We spoke to two educational leaders who quickly found their stride as everything changed. Remote learning, including lessons focused on college and career readiness, is in progress in their districts. Here are their stories.

Frisco Independent School District: Texas

On Monday, March 9, 2020, Texas reported one of the first cases of coronavirus in the United States. The patient resided in the Frisco Independent School District, located in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Once hearing the news, Dr. Stephanie Cook, Managing Director of Guidance and Counseling, along with other administrators, began quickly anticipating what would come next.



Within the next two days, they decided to close the 73 campuses that serve 63,000 students in the area. By that Thursday, Cook had wrapped her head around a virtual learning plan. And for the next four days, she dug deep to figure out how to help everyone “completely change their mindset and paradigm about counseling, learn technology at a moment’s notice, and build the infrastructure for a virtual school counseling program that would support [all] students.”

That, of course, was banking on the idea that students had access to technology. To ensure equity for students, **the district handed out more than 4,000 devices -- including Chromebooks, laptops, and tablets --**

Real World Implementation: How Two Districts Are Using Xello in Their Remote Learning Curriculum to Promote Future Readiness

on which virtual learning can be conducted. Six internet service providers in the district are providing 360 days of free access—which correspond with the number of days left in the school year. For students who still have barriers to connectivity, Wi-Fi is available from school parking lots so social distancing can be maintained as long as possible.

We know that having college and career lessons will help students think beyond right now. We'll be looking at how we can use Xello to reorient to what life will be like after coronavirus. It will help contextualize what students are experiencing. For high school students in particular, it's developmentally appropriate to stay focused on long-term goals.

– Dr. Stephanie Cook, Managing Director of Guidance and Counseling at FISD



Cook's strategy was to break down the complexity of virtual learning; the goal was to make it simple enough to understand, yet comprehensive and sophisticated in its design. She used [ASCA's outline](#) as a foundation and started with educating counselors on how to set up a virtual office. The next step was making sure teachers had the resources they needed to conduct virtual learning. This included reminding educators and families about age-appropriate online programs already in use in the district.

Since Xello had already been implemented throughout Frisco ISD the past two years, it was a no-brainer to include it in their new virtual curriculum. Students are now being encouraged to revisit their profile in Xello, explore independently, or complete grade-appropriate lessons from home.

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“We know that having college and career lessons will help students think beyond right now. We’ll be looking at how we can use Xello to reorient to what life will be like after coronavirus. It will help contextualize what students are experiencing. For high school students in particular, it’s developmentally appropriate to stay focused on long-term goals,” says Cook.

Chesaning Union High School: Michigan

In September, the Saginaw Intermediate School District in Michigan rolled out future readiness software to help students explore college and career options. This was just one part of their robust programming to help students become future ready. Along with online exploration, eligible 11th and 12th grade students can job shadow in the community for one of their trimester courses. Part of the job shadowing process includes logging into Xello to explore options before identifying an appropriate workplace.



Xello’s a great platform because it has everything you need. It’s just how you steer the group of students, depending on their grade level, and what’s appropriate for them to be thinking about at this point in their education.

– Erica Birkmeier, Career Navigator and College and Career Advisor at Chesaning Union High School



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Of course, when COVID-19 hit and Chesaning Union High School closed its doors, Career Navigator and College and Career Advisor, Erica Birkmeier, had to quickly consider how she could help ensure that the 500 students would continue to prepare for the future — even when they weren't in the physical classroom.

Now that kids are at home, Birkmeier is using Google Classroom to communicate with students about logging into and exploring Xello. For juniors, she's recommending college and career exploration so they can consider making a plan for what they want to do when they graduate. "They can explore colleges or skilled trade opportunities," says Birkmeier.

In an effort to streamline future ready skills, Birkmeier is looking into grade-appropriate activities for the younger students at Chesaning.

"Xello's a great platform because it has everything you need. It's just how you steer the group of students, depending on their grade level, and what's appropriate for them to be thinking about at this point in their education," she says.

Chesaning High also has its course schedule loaded into Xello so that students can begin considering what classes they are interested in taking for the next school year.

"I'm really intrigued by the educational development plan portion of it," Birkmeier states. "I think this is a good chance for kids to start making a master plan."



Conclusion

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While the school year might not be ending as planned, educators can still continue to connect and build relationships with their students, as well as provide organic learning experiences to create curious and inventive thinkers. By being flexible with their content and putting community needs first, educators can build a solid rapport with families that will be remembered far after COVID-19 has passed.

Lastly, **districts should be intentional in their practices as they shift from traditional classrooms to remote learning.** A comprehensive online curriculum is one that supports future planning; adopting this mindset will help students establish a strong sense of self, practice necessary SEL competencies, and continue to mold their own future from the comfort of their own home. If schools want their students to feel empowered and in control of their future, now is the time to practice what they preach and lean into teaching these future readiness skills.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate McKenzie is a school counselor and former English teacher from Cincinnati, Ohio. As an educator who's been in the classroom for years, Kate is committed to exploring the many facets of lifelong learning & believes that building skills at a young age helps prepare students for future academic & social-emotional success.



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