



Department of
Education

CLP Implementation Review

An Analysis of CLP Implementation in Houston County Schools

Tennessee Department of Education | July 2021



Executive Overview

The COVID-19 health pandemic has been unlike any other time and has significantly shifted education in Tennessee and the nation. As noted in the department's [Reopening Schools: Overview Guide for LEAs](#), the pandemic elevated known gaps, and created a sense of urgency for a child-centered strategy. This has been especially true for our youngest learners, those with existing achievement gaps, those in rural communities, and those who need additional school-based services.

On June 22, 2020, the Tennessee State Board of Education promulgated the Continuous Learning Plan (CLP) Emergency Rule 0520-01-17 and Policy 3.210. Based on that rule and policy, the Tennessee Department of Education produced a template and rubric on June 26, 2020. Districts submitted CLP plans and implemented those plans throughout the 2020-21 school year.

As a part of the emergency rule, the department is required to submit a mid-year report and an annual report on CLP implementation. To collect data for the mid-year report, the department administered a survey to districts, and did so again in May for the end-of-year report. In addition, the department conducted implementation reviews with selected districts from April-June to inform the end-of-year report to better tell the story of CLP implementation in districts during the 2020-21 school year.

The department saw this as an opportunity to tell the unique stories of districts and how they stepped up to face unprecedented challenges and overcame those challenges, as well as to highlight the challenges that still exist. The department contracted with external researchers to conduct these reviews. As part of the review process, the researchers collected and reviewed artifacts, conducted focus groups with district staff, leaders, teachers, and parents, and produced the following report that highlights all of the hard work Houston County did this year, and captures some of the successes and challenges experienced.

CLP Implementation Review Process

The department contracted with Karin Gegenheimer to create this case study applying a mixed methods case study approach that included analyzing CLPs, artifacts, and interviews with district leaders, teachers, and parents. The researcher first reviewed the district's original CLP. She then reviewed additional artifacts submitted by Houston County to better understand what occurred in practice as the district worked to implement the CLP and respond to challenges. Then, the researcher conducted interviews with district leaders, teachers, and parents. Finally, the researcher analyzed all information gathered to draft the following case study that tells the story of implementation for Houston County Schools, highlights their successes, and articulates their unique challenges.

District Selection

The department used a purposive sampling technique to generate a diverse sample of districts for review that could provide the best potential information on successes as well as challenges. In order to get a cross section of districts statewide with varying CLP experiences, the department identified districts who appeared most often in the bottom 10% (11 districts) and the top 10% (19 districts) of the following data points:

- Percent of students in full-time remote learning
- Percent of students with disabilities in full-time remote learning
- Percent of economically disadvantaged students in full-time remote learning
- Percent of K-2 students in full-time remote learning
- Percent of teachers who have missed more than 10 percent of instructional days
- Size of ESSER 1.0 allocation
- Percent of ESSER 1.0 funds remaining

Houston County Schools was selected using this criteria.

CLP Implementation

Model of Remote Learning

Houston County Schools began the school year in a full-time remote, or virtual, learning program with the intention of bringing students by grade-level to in-person learning as county-level COVID-19 case numbers dropped. Indeed, during week five, elementary grades began a staggered return to in-person learning (where instructional days switched between in-person and remote learning), and by week six, all elementary students were given the option for in-person instruction. Week six also began the staggered process for middle and high school grades to return in-person, and by week seven, all schools had returned to a fully in-person model of instruction with a family option for full-time remote learning. The district has remained in this model of remote learning for the duration of the school year.

Teachers provided both synchronous and asynchronous instruction in virtual learning. Many teachers offered live synchronous classes that they then recorded for students to access asynchronously, while other teachers used asynchronous instruction as their primary mode of instruction. For instance, first grade teachers recorded all their lessons and uploaded the asynchronous recordings to the learning management system such that students accessed the entire school day asynchronously. In cases where internet access prevented students from being able to access the learning management system, teachers created paper packets for students to complete. Families were able to pick up and drop off paper materials in designated teacher bins outside the main school building. As of April 2021, ten or fewer students were accessing remote learning via paper packets.

The number of students enrolled in full-time remote learning declined over the course of the school year. At the end of the fall semester, 33 percent of students were enrolled in full-time remote instruction, including 31 percent of students with disabilities, zero percent of English Learners, and 24 percent of students in grades K-2. By April 2021, the percent of all students enrolled in full-time remote instruction had dropped to 22 percent, with 19 percent of students with disabilities enrolled, zero percent of English Learners, and 11 percent of students in grades K-2.

When students needed to quarantine due to COVID-19, they received remote instruction for the duration of their quarantine, either through the learning management system or through paper packets. Teachers worked individually with students when they returned from quarantine to address any skills gaps that developed while they were out of the building. Across the district, approximately 41 to 60 percent of students have been quarantined at least once over the course of the school year.

Teacher Preparation and Instruction

The district employed SchoolsPLP and Google Classroom as their primary learning management systems. Many teachers found SchoolsPLP difficult to navigate (as did many students and families) and thus opted to use only Google Classroom. The district also provided several different supplemental learning platforms, including MasteryConnect, Case21, Study Island, Freckle Math, Screencastify, Accelerated Reader, and Accelerated Math. The district also used Clever, which allowed students to sign on to different platforms through a single sign-on link.

Teachers appreciated the variety and flexibility of the different learning platforms that were available to them. At times, however, they also felt overwhelmed because they received little guidance on how to best incorporate the various platforms into their instruction. Yet, over time and through trial and error, teachers were able to identify the platforms they liked and created a system of technology that worked best for them and their students. "As we had to do [virtual learning] more, we found new tools and new things that helped us... You discover different things that work, which things are easier and which things are more difficult," one teacher explained. Though many teachers experienced a considerable learning curve as they began to work with technology, they became more comfortable and efficient as the school year progressed.

Teachers used the same instructional materials for both in-person and virtual learning. For many teachers, their curriculum already included digital components, as did their assessment materials. Other teachers adapted their instructional materials to the virtual environment. For example, one teacher would frequently create Google Slides that outlined tasks for students to complete as they worked on their independent reading assignments.

Houston County Schools provided several different trainings and supports for teachers in remote learning. The district spent the first two weeks of in-service training focused on how to teach virtually. The main goals of this training included (1) preparing for remote instruction; (2) navigating the learning management system, SchoolsPLP; and (3) learning new health protocols and COVID-19 mitigation strategies. To prepare for remote instruction, many teachers made test student accounts through which they were able to view the student interface on Google Classroom. This allowed them to practice how they would instruct students to access and submit assignments in virtual learning.

Over the course of the school year, teachers relied on collaboration and communication to grow and develop their virtual instruction. Teachers who were familiar with certain platforms often held virtual trainings that were open to all teachers in the district. Some teachers created how-to videos for various technology platforms and posted the videos online for other teachers to view. Teacher collaboration proved to be particularly important, as many teachers felt that their in-service professional development was insufficient to prepare them for remote learning. The novelty of remote learning – for both teachers and the district as a whole – caused many teachers to feel lost and unprepared. Yet as they continued to gain experience and learn from one another, they saw improvements in their instruction.

Student Engagement and Academic Support

Teachers used various instructional strategies to support student engagement in remote learning. Many teachers found success with activities structured around building classroom community and culture. For example, teachers – especially those in the younger grades – held synchronous morning meetings during which they would read books and sing songs with the class. Teachers made intentional efforts to replicate what a typical in-person morning meeting would look like. To accommodate students who were not able to participate in synchronous instruction, teachers recorded the morning meetings and uploaded them to the learning management system for students to access asynchronously. Many teachers set aside time for informal social activities, like “show and tell.” During instructional minutes, teachers used interactive activities to promote engagement and participation, such as partner work and group projects, as well as video-based instruction.

To support students’ academic progress, teachers held office hours once a day during which virtual students were able to meet individually with teachers to ask questions about assignments or material covered in class. Office hours served as informal tutoring opportunities for students. In addition, when teachers or administrators observed that students were not showing adequate academic progress, they provided one-on-one or small group instruction to address the learning gaps.

The district also held an academic summer camp in June 2021 that was open to all students in kindergarten through grade 5, with a separate session specifically for middle school students. Summer camp instruction primarily covered math and reading standards, and was open to all students. The district made intentional efforts to target and recruit students who had experienced the largest learning losses over the course of the year, though they also reached out to students who would benefit from the social aspect and structure of an additional four weeks of school. As of April 2021, there were approximately 200 students enrolled in the Summer Camp.

Students who received response to intervention (RTI) services continued to receive these services via synchronous and asynchronous instruction. In general, students who qualified for any specialized intervention received their services virtually in a separate intervention class.

Students with disabilities continued to receive all required accommodations outlined in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Teacher aides logged into synchronous class sessions daily to modify instruction and assignments for students. If students could not attend synchronous instruction, teacher aides called the students to talk them through the lesson as they were accessing it themselves either online or on paper packets. In addition, teacher aides offered one-on-one virtual support to students who needed it; these sessions typically occurred twice a week. As the district reopened to fully in-person learning, students who remained in full-time remote learning had the option of coming to the school building to receive in-person services. Those who opted to remain fully virtual received all services through teletherapy.

Students who are English Learners received the required amount of services outlined in their Individual Learning Plan (ILP). There are two English Learner students enrolled in the district, both of whom moved to fully in-person learning as it was available. During remote instruction, English Learner teachers provided direct instruction synchronously and asynchronously, and communicated regularly with families to provide additional support on an as-needed basis.

Academically, district staff reported that average trends in student progress do not show substantial differences between virtual and in-person students. While administrators have raised concerns regarding the authenticity of student data due to outside assistance, end-of-course data at the high school level (for which all assessments were administered in person), show no substantive differences between in-person and virtual students.

Technology

Although Houston County Schools was not a one-to-one district for devices at the beginning of the year, they used funding from ESSER to purchase enough devices to reach a one-to-one student to device ratio.

Due to shipment delays with the vendor, they did not receive all devices until October. As devices became available, the district prioritized device distribution to students from vulnerable populations, including economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities, as well as students in credit-bearing courses.

Internet access posed a challenge to remote learning. Many families within the district do not have internet and live in areas where internet access – and even cell phone service – is not available. In attempts to provide all students with internet connectivity, the district opened WiFi within each school building to allow families to come to the school to use internet. They also established several outdoor wireless access points throughout the community, which allowed families to access internet without having to enter a building. While many students made use of the various hot spot locations, many others opted to receive remote instruction via paper packets that they could pick up and drop off at the school building.

The district also upgraded its internet bandwidth in each school building to allow for synchronous instruction to occur simultaneously across all teachers within a given school. However, teachers noted frequent inconsistencies in internet access, which were disruptive to virtual learning. Teachers and students would often get disconnected from the internet during synchronous class sessions, and sometimes the disconnections would last for several periods or the entire school day.

Attendance

Houston County Schools employed the same attendance policy and truancy plan for both virtual and in-person students. The district tracked virtual attendance in the following ways:

- Completion of teacher-created attendance activity;
- attendance of synchronous lessons;
- phone contact with school staff during normal school hours;
- assignment completion within agreed upon timeframe; and
- other virtual formats initiated by the school system.

The district created multiple forms of attendance tracking to cater to families' individual needs. However, teachers and district administrators found that the various forms of attendance made it challenging to keep track of absenteeism across the district. Attendance was often marked inconsistently across schools, and these small inconsistencies prevented teachers and administrators from being able to identify and reach out to students who needed additional attendance support.

The district utilized School Resource Officers (SRO) for attendance support. Through district-led efforts, SROs often made home visits to conduct wellness checks on students with whom the district could not

make contact. These included students who lived in remote areas and who were accessing remote instruction via paper packets, as well as students who had internet but had not logged on for several consecutive days and with whom the school or district could not make contact.

In response to observed attendance issues, the district revised its virtual learning contract after the first semester to reflect greater accountability for students and families. In the updated contract, families who were unable to maintain academic and attendance requirements were required to move their children into in-person learning unless they had an approved medical condition. Teachers noted that several students who were struggling with attendance and academics returned to in-person learning in response to the revised contract. Over the course of the year, eight percent of students enrolled in full-time remote learning missed ten percent or more instructional days.

Monitoring

Houston County Schools held monthly meetings with district and school administrators to monitor CLP implementation. They also reviewed school-level student data to identify and address any issues regarding virtual instruction. For example, the district monitored student engagement via student usage reports, where they observed the percent of students who were actively logging in to various technology platforms. The district's small size also facilitated informal monitoring. Teachers and administrators often had close relationships with students and their families, which helped monitor student progress and provide individualized support to ensure success for all virtual students.

Biggest Successes

Houston County School's biggest successes in remote learning included: (1) increasing technology proficiency; (2) providing effective instruction for some students; and (3) providing student support through educational assistants and SROs.

Students, families, teachers, and staff have become more proficient in technology over the course of remote learning. Though many admitted that the learning was not easy, increased technological proficiency has had great benefits in terms of instructional delivery, communication, and collaboration. Even as teachers move into in-person learning, they will be able to incorporate interactive technology platforms as supplemental instruction to boost student engagement this school year. Technology has also facilitated more frequent communication and collaboration between district staff and families. For instance, virtual communication has resulted in greater rates of family participation in meetings, including IEP and attendance mediation meetings. Students have also gained a high degree of computer literacy that will benefit them throughout their academic careers and beyond.

Teachers and district administrators also noted that for some students, virtual learning was an effective mode of instruction. Some students who have typically struggled in in-person learning excelled in the virtual environment. Teachers' use of technology gave students multiple channels through which to ask for teacher assistance, which they continued to take advantage of even after coming back to in-person learning. Some students preferred to communicate with teachers through technology platforms instead of in-person because they felt safer asking questions in the virtual environment. "I feel like it's helped our students be more comfortable in finding a way where they can quietly ask questions and get the help they need without bringing attention to themselves," one district staff member mentioned. Students have appreciated the anonymity of the virtual environment when it comes to asking for teacher support.

Houston County Schools has also made effective use of educational assistants and SROs to support student learning in virtual instruction. The district shifted the responsibilities of education assistants to provide more direct support to virtual learners. Through district-led efforts, they were responsible for making daily contact with individual students as well as conducting general welfare checks on an as-needed basis. In addition, the district hired two additional SROs through an SRO grant that they received this year. SROs have conducted wellness checks, delivered materials to and from students' homes, and provided transportation for students who were receiving one-on-one services or taking assessments at a school building. Educational assistants and SROs have greatly contributed to the district's ability to provide high-quality remote instruction for all students.

Biggest Challenges

Houston County School's biggest challenges in remote learning included: (1) training teachers to deliver remote instruction; (2) supporting student engagement; and (3) providing both in-person and remote instruction.

The district experienced challenges training teachers to provide virtual instruction. Due to the district's small size, they do not employ an academic coach or instructional coach who would have been responsible for training teachers to deliver virtual instruction. As a result, teachers learned how to deliver virtual instruction largely on their own time. In addition, teachers perceived that their in-service training did not adequately prepare them for full-time remote instruction, as there was not enough time to cover all aspects of remote instruction, including how to navigate the learning platform and how to adapt instructional materials to the virtual setting. One teacher commented, "if we were required to do virtual and in-class again, I would definitely want some kind of professional development in designing a virtual lesson, like a good virtual lesson that would be interactive, and how to make that as highly successful as possible." Many other teachers echoed this sentiment, stating that they would have liked additional training on how to design lessons specifically for virtual learning.

In addition, teachers faced challenges with student engagement. Many students did not participate during synchronous lessons and did not submit assignments. In fact, according to 2021 Tennessee Educator Survey data, 76 percent of teachers highlighted missed instructional time as a major concern during remote learning. When asked about challenges with student engagement and loss of instruction, one teacher commented, “our kids were so disengaged that we stopped doing Zoom meetings because either we only had one or two [students], or we could tell that they’re on their phones, or they wouldn’t turn their cameras on.” Teachers struggled to make contact with students who were regularly absent from synchronous instruction and who had several missing assignments. Teachers reflected that the lack of accountability for student engagement posed a significant barrier to effective instruction, and they often felt discouraged and frustrated with their perceived inability to support students in virtual learning.

Last, teachers and district staff noted that it was difficult for teachers to simultaneously provide both in-person and virtual learning. When the district switched to the hybrid model of remote instruction, teachers struggled to balance the needs of both in-person and virtual learners and felt that they did not have enough time to provide adequate and individualized instruction for all students. Many teachers expressed that they would have liked virtual and in-person learning to be split between teachers, such that there were designated in-person teachers and designated virtual teachers. For many, teaching in-person and virtual students was overwhelming and seemingly ineffective.