



## Oak Meadow

K-12 CURRICULUM AND DISTANCE LEARNING

### Tips for setting up temporary distance learning at your school:

#### Mindset:

1. Don't panic. Take a moment to recognize that although putting a system in place for distance learning may seem daunting, or less effective than what you are used to as a brick-and-mortar school, this is temporary. Try to let any defenses you might have go, and enter into the mindset that this is a way of meeting your students' needs during this unprecedented moment in time.
2. Distance learning is different and takes time to master well. Try to approach this with the spirit of a learner and adventurer, and be open to doing things differently.

#### Nuts and Bolts:

1. Online/distance learning does not need to be expensive; there are many inexpensive or even free software solutions that can meet your needs. For example, Google's G Suite (which you are likely already using) provides a reliable system for the exchange of student work at a distance. One can also use Google Classroom as an effective mechanism for managing a distance classroom--this platform allows you to assign, review, and grade student work using Google Docs. Similarly, Zoom. us offers users a low cost but highly effective video conferencing solution with which it is possible to host a real-time distance classroom.
2. Transitioning to a distance learning model will take some time and planning. While we do not know if schools will be forced to close for the ongoing Covid-19 situation, you should at a minimum hold a meeting amongst key administrators to outline some major decisions and planning you would need to undertake.
3. Consider your budget as there will be startup costs.
4. You will have technology snafus — just roll with it. Anyone who has ever presented at a conference knows that tech can sometimes be an issue and disrupt the flow of a teaching situation. Being prepared to proactively mediate these challenges will reduce student and teacher stress.

## First Steps:

1. Make a plan and start soon. That sounds obvious, but don't underestimate the challenge ahead of you. Trying to implement distance learning without a strong clear plan will end in chaos.
2. A vital first step is to define what your distance learning school will look like. Will you hold synchronous classes that would correspond to a normal school day, or will you adopt an asynchronous approach in which students will have limited or even no direct contact with teachers? Or will you have a hybrid approach in which students have some synchronous schooling and some asynchronous. Whatever you choose, making a clear decision and sticking with it is important. All else will follow this first step.
  - a. Factors you may weigh in making this choice are:
    - i. Size of your student population and size of your individual classes
    - ii. The number of teachers you employ
    - iii. Access to adequate technology (computers and software solutions) for teachers and students
    - iv. Your curriculum and the modality with which you assess your students
    - v. The amount of time you have to prepare
    - vi. Your budget
    - vii. The strength of your relationship with your families/parents
    - viii. Training needs for staff and families
3. Once you have decided what sort of distance learning you will pursue, the next most important step is for administrators and faculty to determine the policies and procedures by which you will run your distance learning program. This may be new terrain for everyone involved — people will need to know what their roles and expectations are, and how they will be enforced. Make these policies clear and binding for administrators, teachers, students and families. Keep it as simple as possible.
  - a. Some of the questions and factors you will want to consider are:
    - i. When does your school day take place?
    - ii. How will you translate your in-person curricular experience into a distance one? More on this below.
    - iii. How will you take and enforce attendance?
    - iv. How, and how often, will your teacher be available, and will they come into the school building or work from home?
    - v. Who will be your point technology person to troubleshoot issues like wifi connection, lost student work, communications, emails, etc.?
    - vi. What learning platform or software solutions will you use (it must be uniform for all teachers and students)?
    - vii. What training will you provide your teachers and students/families? How will you make it available?

- viii. Will your current learning management system suffice, or will you need new tools to assist you?
  - ix. Who will be the lead on communications among teachers, students, families. Issues will come up, and it will be important to know who can provide clear and correct advice/information.
  - x. Do you need to provide training about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate online communications?
4. Connecting with parents is crucial. Parents will have many questions and concerns, and holding a parent meeting (in-person and via video call) to support them is very important. You might also consider having weekly open zoom hours for meeting with parents.
    - a. Before you host such a meeting, have a robust plan of action in place that you can unveil.
    - b. Collect parent questions and concerns ahead of time and address them in a controlled logical progression.
  5. Good coordination among faculty is crucial. Working as a team to troubleshoot this adventure will make the entire experience run more smoothly. Look to appoint some faculty champions who can help the admin coordinate and train.

## Teaching and learning

1. Teaching at a distance is different. Trying to approach a distant learning situation with the same techniques and strategies that work for an in-person class will not work well. For example, when addressing a group of students at a distance via video conference call, it can be hard to gauge how what you have said is understood—there is not the immediate feedback that one gets when face to face with students (you can't even be sure students heard you correctly, or at all, given the challenges with microphones, connection speed, ambient noise, and various distractions students may have at home). This is especially challenging when giving a complex assignment and made more complicated by the fact that students may be hesitant to ask clarifying questions at a distance. A way of addressing such a challenge, among others, could be to use recorded screencast recordings of the teacher explaining the assignment—something the students can watch asynchronously as many times as they need. Screencast-O-Matic provides a good free service: <https://screencast-o-matic.com/>
2. Contrary to what is commonly believed about online schooling, distance learning often requires more time and is more complicated than in-person schooling. There is a lot of behind the scene coordination that must take place to make an effective program work.
  - a. Some of the factors you may need to consider:
    - i. If you decide to use a video platform, what will you use and what computer technology do your teachers and students need? What might you need to purchase?
      1. We have found [www.zoom.us](http://www.zoom.us) very effective. If your teachers are broadcasting from a classroom, and moving about the room/using the chalkboard, you may also consider using SWIVL <https://www.swivl.com/>

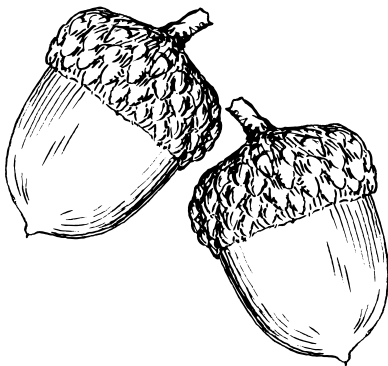
2. How will you administer multiple zoom (or other platform) accounts, and how will you make sure students know how to login to different classes?
- ii. When will your classes take place, and how do you create this schedule?
- iii. If holding synchronous online courses, what will your class sizes be?
  1. In an online classroom it is difficult for a teacher to teach and facilitate conversation with more than 15 students, especially if students ask questions via the chat function.
- iv. What platform/system will you use to reliably and verifiably deliver student assignments, grade and return work?
- v. How will you efficiently track student work/progress?
  1. If you do not have a robust LMS like Schoology or Canvas, then a no cost solution could be Google Classroom:  
[https://edu.google.com/products/classroom/?modal\\_active=none](https://edu.google.com/products/classroom/?modal_active=none)
- vi. What is the prep time for teachers to manage a successful online course?
  1. These courses will require significant effort on the part of your teachers as they will have to re-tool how they engage students
    - a. If you have no experience doing online teaching, we highly recommend bringing in online practitioners for a day or two of training.
- vii. Will teachers work from home or the school?
  1. When will they hold office hours?
  2. How will you monitor their progress?
  3. What is the mechanism for teacher feedback and troubleshooting of challenges?
- viii. What type of training will you provide students and families
  1. Use of technology
    - a. Submitting homework
    - b. Communicating (email, video, chat, blog, group-board)
    - c. Tech specs and troubleshooting connection issues
    - d. Distractions
  2. How to be a distance student
    - a. Time management
    - b. Asking questions
    - c. Connecting with peers
    - d. How to be a part of an online discussion
    - e. Academic honesty
  3. How to be a distance parent
    - a. Creating a home work space
    - b. Monitoring/supporting student progress
    - c. Caregiving when noone is home

- ix. How will you modify your curriculum for delivery at a distance?
    - 1. How do you teach math when you are no longer face to face to demonstrate solutions? For that matter, for any course, how do you explain something when you are not face to face
    - 2. How to hold an effective online discussion
    - 3. How much work is too much work, and how much is too little
    - 4. What tech solutions allow you to do realtime diagrams, drawings, charts, etc, to help illustrate a point as you might on a chalkboard?
    - 5. There will likely be a transition to a great deal more writing on the part of students; how will you navigate many, many emails asking the same question and retain a sense of individualization?
  - x. How will you make sure courses across disciplines and among teachers will be similar in look and feel and easy to navigate by students?
  - xi. Will each faculty have their own webpage? Google classroom site? Or other modality for their course? Who will develop these?
  - xii. How can you use this as an opportunity to innovate what you normally do as a school, integrating vital new technological capacities?
  - xiii. How will you prepare your teachers to teach effectively at a distance?
    - 1. This includes everything from HOW to teach well when looking at a computer screen to what you should wear and what sort of background you should have behind you (if working at home).
3. Being a distance student is different. Try to imagine what this change will be like for your students. Gone is the closeness of friends, of easily getting together for group projects, study sessions, conversations and discussions. Gone is their ability to meet with teachers after class for extra help, or to ask a follow up question. Everything now will be mediated by a computer screen and time management and the vagaries of internet connection. Students may or may not function well in an online environment so being prepared around some of their challenges is important. Additionally, when not in school, some students may be tempted to do other things than school work so managing student motivation and attendance can become an issue--it is easy to fall behind, especially with asynchronous distance learning models.
- a. Some things you might consider:
- i. Holding a focus group with students to understand their fears and what they will find challenging
  - ii. How to engage students so they do not feel isolated. Could you create things like a virtual lunchroom, or study halls? How about group email forums - for grades and/or classes)
  - iii. Clarity around expectations for submitting work: what format should be used and how should it be organized so the teacher can make sense of what a student has submitted. Imagine receiving a final paper assignment as 15 one-page pdf files out of order per student per a class of 20 students--mayhem.

- iv. In what format will a student receive feedback, and how can you be sure they understand what you have communicated. Expect to do a lot more writing to explain or help students understand a concept. Doing screencasts can be useful.
- v. What are the expectations for class participation (group or individually)
- vi. Will you have office hours for teachers, and how will students understand how to contact a teacher?
- vii. Will you be offering student support services (school counselor role); if so, how?
- viii. If a student falls behind in work, or does not show up to virtual class, what will you do?
- ix. Offering some general rules around video chats (use of video or just audio, what are they wearing, what is in the background, background noise, etc.)

## Bringing in Outside Help:

If you must move to a distance learning model, and have no experience working in this modality, we recommend you bring in outside help to start you on your journey. A little proactive orientation can empower you to build a strong program (temporary or otherwise).



## About Oak Meadow

Since 1975, Oak Meadow has provided flexible, progressive education for independent learners. Today, Oak Meadow is used by thousands of families all over the world.

Oak Meadow's K-12 curriculum can be used independently or by enrolling in our distance learning school for teacher support. Oak Meadow is an accredited homeschool program and was the first distance learning school to earn accreditation in NEASC's prestigious 130-year history. To learn more, please visit [oakmeadow.com](http://oakmeadow.com).