The Massachusetts Teachers Association Guide to
Remote Learning Recommendations During COVID-19 School Closures
March 31, 2020

The MTA and the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts (AFT-MA) worked closely with the DESE to ensure that the department's guidelines on remote learning reflect the principles and priorities of our members. This document will serve as our guide — AFT-MA might issue its own guidance to its members — to locals in helping them understand what was intended in the Remote Learning Recommendation language that the MTA agreed to.

	DESE Guidance on Remote Learning 3.26.20 (Letter from Commissioner Riley)	MTA Comments/Interpretation
1.	Following the Governor's announcement that schools will remain closed and not re-open before May 4, 2020, we are issuing additional guidance regarding district and school remote learning plans. Throughout the initial weeks of this crisis, our educational community has prioritized the health, safety, and wellness of students, families, educators, and staff. At the same time, districts and schools across the Commonwealth have been operating with various remote learning models for their students, with significant variation from one to the next.	Superintendents became concerned that the lack of guidance from the DESE regarding appropriate remote learning allowed districts to create a wide variation of models. Subsequently, superintendents were fielding many complaints about why their districts were not doing what other districts were. This paragraph reinforces MTA's principle that the well-being of students, families and educators – social, emotional and physical health – is our first and top priority. At our urging, the language includes families and educators to reinforce the reality of how difficult this situation is for everyone.
2.	With the extension of this closure, we believe students, families, educators, and staff in all communities will benefit from the clarity of state-wide recommendations as they continue to support their students during this crisis. In developing these recommendations, DESE consulted with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts, the Massachusetts PTA, other parent groups, and student groups.	MTA leadership and staff worked with the DESE to ensure that MTA's principles of remote learning in the current situation were incorporated into the document.

3.	Below, we have developed a short set of guiding principles for our priorities as an educational community in the coming weeks, as well as specific recommendations regarding remote learning.	The specific language of this guidance has changed significantly since the first draft of this document. However, like any document, it is subject to interpretation. This MTA document explains the interpretation that the MTA believes is intended by this guidance, based on its work with the DESE.
4.	Remote learning cannot replace students' experiences in school communities with their teachers, administrators, and support staff. All of the students and educators with whom I have spoken this week sorely miss learning in person as part of a community. That said, we must all pull together – parents and caregivers, students, the community, and of course our educators and staff – to help students continue their learning over this extended period.	All stakeholders agreed that remote learning is not a substitute for regular classroom learning. This principle recognizes the importance of the social and emotional components of learning and provides the foundation for why districts should not require educators to attempt to replicate a classroom experience using online tools only. It also establishes the obligation for **all** of those involved in public education to try to support student learning in this situation.
5.	Please note that the guidance below is a set of *recommendations* and does not constitute a requirement for any district or school. We encourage districts and schools to view the remote learning guidance below as **a baseline or starting point,** which they can modify in collaboration with local stakeholders to fit their unique contexts, capacities and needs. We expect that you will customize our recommendations for individual districts and schools and for individual students within them.	This section makes it clear that this document does not specify a set of requirements, but recommendations. The word, "baseline" is defined as a "starting point." It is not a minimum. The language clearly states that districts will modify the guidance based on their own situations.
6.	We will continue to issue guidance to support districts and schools in their implementation of remote learning, including specific recommendations related to students with disabilities, English learners, and high school students. We will also send a letter to families that reflects the content in this memo.	The letter to families was issued on 3/30/20; it is similar to the guidance document.
7.	I understand that superintendents, principals, educators and other school staff, and families are working hard to support students during these difficult times and are responding to evolving conditions with remarkable care, flexibility, and creativity. Thank you for your tireless work on behalf of our students.	The guidance describes the "remarkable care, flexibility and creativity" that educators are bringing to their work at this time. The work going forward will require the same.
	Jeffrey C. Riley	
	Commissioner of Elementary & Secondary Education	

	I. Guiding Principles: Supporting Student Learning and Holistic Needs	MTA Comments/Interpretation
8.	**Districts and schools must continue to focus on the holistic needs of the educational community:**	Focusing on the holistic needs of students, families and educators is the first guiding principle.
9.	• **The safety and well-being of students, families, and staff has been and must continue to be our top priority as an educational community.** We are focused not only on physical health, safety and nutrition, but also on social-emotional and mental health needs, which could intensify during this time.	The safety and well-being of students, families and staff must be the **top priority**. Key elements are not just academic learning, but overall well-being, along with concern for staff as well as students and families.
10.	• **This crisis disproportionately affects our most vulnerable students in terms of their physical and mental health and also academically. Equity needs to be a top consideration in local planning efforts, especially as districts and schools make plans to manage an extended closure**. To support these efforts, DESE will issue further guidance on how best to support special populations, including students with disabilities and English learners.	Equity is the major problem in providing learning opportunities for students in remote locations. Connectivity is a prerequisite, and while there are a number of ways to connect, technology makes this much easier. However, access to technology is not equitable.
11.	• **Maintaining connections between school staff and students is paramount, particularly for the most vulnerable members of our school communities.** These connections will provide natural conduits to guide districts and schools in addressing students' specific needs.	Making connections between school and students is the first step. Districts should be keeping track of how many students and families have been contacted, how many have online connectivity, and how many students are regularly engaged with educators. This information is needed in order to make adjustments in the remote learning approach and to plan for the reopening of schools.
12.	**At this time, districts and schools must also work to adopt a remote learning model:**	As specified below, **remote learning is not online learning**. This section does not mean that districts must adopt an online learning model. **While it is likely that the approach a district adopts will use some online technology, it is not recommended that students and teachers be engaged online for a specified period each day.**
13.	• **Nothing can replace the in-person schooling experience, and we should not expect that remote learning can replicate the traditional school day.**	The first point is that remote learning **cannot** and **should not** try to replicate a traditional school day – in both content and schedule. As specified below, students, educators and families need substantial flexibility to access and participate in learning opportunities remotely.
14.	• **At the same time, with school closures now extended, districts, schools, and communities have an obligation to engage students in meaningful and productive learning**	This section indicates that we agree that districts, schools and communities accept the need to provide "meaningful and

	opportunities through an appropriately structured educational program.	productive learning opportunities" for students, but in an appropriate way. **We were intentional in selecting the word "districts."** The statement does not put the obligation on educators, but rather on districts, to provide support to engage as many students as possible in learning opportunities. Districts should be considering the capacity of the entire district and its employees to assist in this effort, i.e., teachers, specialized instructional support personnel, paraeducators, etc.
15.	• **Remote learning is not synonymous with online learning. Remote learning can take place in a multitude of ways**, including by helping students engage with resources in their everyday lives and in the natural world around them. Remote learning also provides unique opportunities to further engage students in the arts or interdisciplinary work. Finally, we must be conscious of the effects of increased screen time and seek balance between learning through technology and remote learning that happens offline to support students' curiosity and understanding.	The key principle is that remote learning is defined broadly – learning that occurs in a space outside the traditional classroom where the teacher does not reside. It could be assisted by technology or not; technology can present issues of excessive screen time and privacy, and should be balanced with activities that do not involve technology.

	II. Specific Guidance on Developing and Implementing Remote Learning	**MTA Comments/Interpretation**
	Planning for and implementing a remote learning model:	
16.	• **If districts/schools have not already developed a remote learning model, they should take time to engage in a thoughtful planning period** with local stakeholders in order to launch in early April. This planning should include an assessment of the district's or school's capacity and resources to support a remote learning model.	This point emphasizes the need to take a thoughtful approach that involves stakeholders, and it supports the existence of a joint planning committee to design and adjust the plan. It establishes the need for an assessment of the district's capacity and resources. The district should consider questions such as how Education Support Professionals can assist in the remote learning process, what is needed to address equity issues, how a staff member's illness or need to care for family members will be addressed, and how clear expectations for staff, students and families will be identified, communicated and adjusted. Other policy issues – content and grading, for example – will also need to be considered. It sets early April as the starting point for an extended school closure learning plan.
17.	• **Some districts and schools have already implemented remote learning plans, particularly those that have previously developed capacity to shift learning to a**	Locals should take this time to re-evaluate which practices have been effective so far –

	remote model. We strongly encourage all districts and schools to consider the recommendations in this guidance document, but ultimately, we recognize that individual districts and schools maintain local authority to design their remote learning models as they see fit**.	for example, technology tools, providing school supplies for students, etc.
18.	• **Above all, we recognize that districts, schools, and teachers are best positioned to develop plans to meet their students' needs, and that these needs may change over the course of this extended closure.**	Educators and their unions must be centrally involved in the planning process and decisions around remote learning throughout this crisis. A top-down approach in this situation will not work.
	Recommended remote learning model:	This is one of the more difficult sections. The language is important.
19.	• **We recommend that districts support students to engage in meaningful and productive learning for <u>approximately half the length of a regular school day.</u> We expect this learning to take place via a combination of educator directed learning and student self-directed learning.**	We were intentional in choosing the words "*districts support students to engage in*" and "*educator-directed*" versus "*educator-delivered.*" This statement is intended to provide a guideline for how much time students should be involved in learning activities over a period of time, not necessarily for a set period of time every day. The learning activities are intended to be educator-directed (not delivered) or student self-directed – for example, completing assignments and interacting occasionally with educators. Educator-directed means that ideas/activities are provided by educators, but it does not require structured, direct instruction. **In no way is it recommended that educators are available online to deliver instruction for a particular period of time each day according to a set schedule.**
20.	• **We strongly recommend that districts and schools focus on reinforcing skills already taught this school year and applying and deepening these skills.** We recognize that in some cases, teachers and students may wish to continue with new material, particularly at the high school level. In these cases, districts should consider equity of access and support for all students.	The strong recommendation is that schools do not move forward with the curriculum, rather that they work on engaging students with deeper learning around knowledge and skills presented previously. Equity issues are a major concern with moving forward when some students, based on access, support and circumstances, will be guaranteed to be left behind. Further, some educators will be better able than others to use technology resources to advance the curriculum. The language acknowledges that in some places, districts will want to advance the curriculum. However, it makes the point that equity issues must be considered in any decision to do so.

21.	• **The individual student experience will vary** depending on student age, individual and family needs, access and capacity for remote learning (including access to technology and internet), and the ongoing health of students, families, and staff.	This language states that flexibility is necessary for staff, students and families, given the different needs and capacities that will exist to participate in productive and meaningful learning opportunities provided by the district.
	Definition and scope of remote learning:	
22.	• **Remote learning can encompass a wide variety of learning opportunities.** While technology can be a supportive tool, districts and schools should also consider ways that student learning can continue offline. This could include exploring the natural world, activities to support students' local communities (with appropriate social distancing) and engaging hands-on projects and artistic creations that stem from students' own passions and experiences.[1]	Broad definition of remote learning makes it clear that learning opportunities other than those available online should be incorporated.
	• **Examples of remote learning tools include large group video or audio conference calls, 1:1 phone or video calls, email, work packets, projects, reading lists, online learning platforms, and other resources to effectively engage with students.** These tools could be used to deliver lessons, provide individual student support, provide resources (including instructional material and student assignments), connect students to each other and the teacher, and provide feedback on student work. Districts and schools should ensure all online learning platforms meet confidentiality and student privacy standards.	Further specifies what remote learning could include beyond online approaches. Alternatives to online activities are critical if equitable opportunities are to be provided.
	Components of a remote learning schedule:	
23.	• We recommend the following routine and structure for remote learning, recognizing the need for flexibility for individual districts and individual students within them:	Most students need a routine; the list below is a possible framework.
24.	1. **Opportunity to connect with one or more educators multiple times per week.** For students who are at higher risk of learning loss, such as students with disabilities or English learners, we recommend that educators provide additional connection opportunities.	Connection with educators is the most important component of learning; establishing connection as the foundation of remote learning is the first step that districts should take. This does not mean that the classroom teacher must communicate with students every day.
25.	2. **Access to multiple hours per day of academic content directed by educators**, which should focus on reinforcing skills already taught this school year and applying and deepening those skills.	See #19. The sentence says the academic content should be directed by educators, not delivered by educators. Educators should be in charge of the content of student learning activities. However, they do not need to be directly involved in delivering every aspect of it, particularly in a remote learning setting. The intention of this section is to provide a way to gauge how much learning activity

[1] https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/16/remember-online-learning-isnt-the-only-way.html

			students need to do. This could include the visual or media arts, music, etc. Further, the sentence emphasizes that the academic content should be reinforcing and deepening what students have learned, not presenting new material.
26.		3. **Time each day for physical activity** based on recommendations from educators.	Student physical health is a component of what should be incorporated into learning opportunities.
27.		4. **Additional daily time for enrichment activities such as the arts** (dance, media arts, music, theater, visual arts).	Arts activities are a component of what should be incorporated into learning opportunities.
		Feedback on student work and grading:	
28.		• **To the extent practicable, teachers should provide feedback on student work completed at home. That said, if districts and schools have not already implemented policies regarding credit-bearing courses (determining credit for academic work at home), we strongly recommend that academic content be graded as "credit/no credit"** so as to incentivize continuous learning while acknowledging the challenging situation we face. Non-credit bearing courses, such as those for elementary and middle school students, could incorporate other incentives to keep students motivated to continue their learning.	Learning involves communication between the educator and the student, and feedback is one way to accomplish that. This does not "require" designations of credit/no credit or pass/fail for all of the work a student is doing. If a district insists on some designation, this is the most that should be done. The equity issues of grading work or assigning credit are large. (see next bullet) It also acknowledges that some believe students will not engage in work that "does not count."
29.		• Before moving forward with any determinations of "no credit," we strongly urge districts and schools to consider whether the students have had equitable access to learning opportunities during this closure, keeping in mind the variety of technology, health, disability and language challenges that could occur.	This statement reminds districts that assigning grades, credit or even pass/fail without recognizing that access to these opportunities is not equitable is unfair. Districts need to have discussions about these policies as part of their planning process.
30.	We are grateful for educators' continued dedication to their students and for caregivers who have embraced the challenges of helping students learn at home. We are all juggling unusual responsibilities. Although remote learning is new and challenging, we believe that students will benefit both from engaging with their caring school community and from continuing to learn.		