



Remote instruction for students with visual impairments: Tips from schools in Florida, Texas

Learn how two public schools for students with visual impairments are teaching remotely to ensure that students have equal access to their education while at home.

□ **Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired.** "We use Google Classroom as our learning management system, accessible with screen readers," said Sara Merritt, principal of short-term programs at TSBVI. TSBVI has been working with Google Classroom for a few years, so some teachers were already fully familiar with the platform, she said.

Teachers contacted the students in their classes to set up a schedule of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, Merritt said. Students have a mandatory number of sessions via Zoom or Google Classroom each day, along with activities to complete during the times when online sessions aren't taking place.

For example, a student might start the day with morning group exercises and then a review of all the activities for the day. Then, he will meet up with the teacher and the rest of the class at intervals throughout the day but will also have time to work on his own. Staff are available online all day for students who have questions or need assistance. "We have tech support on campus available remotely for people having difficulties," Merritt said.

Maintaining student attention has presented some challenges, Merritt said. For a student with a cognitive disability or a visual and/or hearing impairment, online instruction is not ideal because it might not be engaging enough for the student to maintain attention, she said. But they have been surprised by how many of their students have benefitted from remote learning, she said.

For example, a teacher or teaching assistant may be using sign language in Zoom for a student with deaf-blindness. The student might be watching the person signing on one screen while the teacher lectures on another.

"It's not to say that it's better than in person," Merritt said, "but [we've been able to] engage and connect and build relationships online, even with students we just met," Merritt said.

□ **Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind.** The Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind is offering both in-person classes five days a week as well as an innovative learning environment for families that don't feel comfortable having their children attending school on campus, said Tracie Snow, FSBD administrator of instructional services. "In [the] ILE, students follow the same courses and have the same teacher assigned as they would if they were attending on

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campus," Snow said. "We want our students to be able to come onto campus when they feel safe to do so. We are trying to be as flexible as possible to accommodate needs and desires."

Students both in the classroom and at home will use Microsoft Teams, Snow said. There will be a camera on the teacher so students can log in and see him. They will also use smartboards, or interactive whiteboards, so that students can see an image of what the teacher is doing on the whiteboard in the classroom on their personal devices. Any devices or assistive technology that students learning at home will need is to be mailed to them.

Teachers will use Google Classroom as the main platform to access assignments, materials, schedules, grades, and to ask for technological and academic help, Snow said. "We used it in [the] spring and summer on campus," she said. "We know it's accessible to students with low vision using a screen reader. We do have on our horizon looking at what Teams can offer in a classroom environment, but because we haven't piloted it, we want to start with what is known." It's a platform students are already comfortable with, she said.

Lessons will occur via synchronous learning for the most part, Snow said. The difference between in-person classes and ILE classes will be in the types of activities students do. For example, during an in-person horticulture class, the teacher might do a modeling with different plant cuttings to show how to propagate them through water and dirt. Teachers will create an alternate activity for students at home to be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding, such as having the students record themselves on Flipgrid retelling the steps required for creating a new plant through a plant cutting, creating a digital step-by-step how-to guide, or writing a multiple choice quiz covering the required steps, Snow said.

"We've had lots of training for UDL," Snow said, referring to universal design for learning. "This will take that up a level and is a great opportunity for teachers to dig into those standards and not provide a traditional activity they've always done. As soon as a child is able to come back, we don't want them to miss a beat."

October 2, 2020

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