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## 5 Best Practices to Ensure Student and Teacher Engagement Online

## Actively Learn™

### RESEARCH **BRIEF**

## Introduction

For many schools across the country, the transition to remote learning in March 2020 was abrupt and rocky. Teachers scrambled to figure out how to deliver instruction, signing up for a wide variety of tools and sharing ideas on message boards. District and school leaders weighed the need to be flexible with grades and online participation against the desire to provide clear expectations and engage students in high-quality learning.

Now, given that remote learning may well continue into the fall, either balanced with intermittent classroom attendance or entirely at home, school and district leaders need to carefully examine best practices for successful online learning and shore up their plans for next year. This report summarizes the most recent research, surveys, and advice from educational experts to outline the best criteria for administrators to use when making their curricular decisions for next year.

According to the research, the top 5 ingredients of successful remote instruction are:

1. Visible Student Engagement
2. Continuity of Core Instruction
3. Implementation and Sharing of District-created Resources
4. Timely Student Feedback
5. Easy-to-use Tools and Resources

Recent research and survey data have consistently found these five aspects of remote instruction to play a defining role in the development of effective plans for remote learning. Our analysis of teacher and student usage of Actively Learn confirms that when districts had the tools and systems in place to implement these practices, students remained engaged in learning and teachers retained their ability to stay connected to students' learning.

## Sample and Methodology

This study analyzed teacher and student usage data from the Actively Learn platform for two time periods, April 2019 and April 2020. The April 2019 users are teachers who have accessed Actively Learn through its free and paid subscriptions and had, on average, been using Actively Learn for 7.7 months. The April 2020 users are teachers who have primarily accessed Actively Learn through its free and paid subscriptions as well, but had only been using Actively Learn, on average, for 3.5 months. All teachers had access to Prime features during April 2020 as part of Actively Learn's commitment to support all educators who were forced to unexpectedly close schools during the coronavirus pandemic. Premium features include access to student data, unlimited uploads, and differentiated instructional supports. Teachers came from all 50 states and districts ranging from very small (2,500 students or less) to very large (10,000 students and more).

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## Visible Student Engagement

The greatest challenge to remote learning has been a lack of student participation. A Common Sense Media survey from early April of this year revealed that almost one in four teens connected with their teachers less than once a week during the school closures, and 41% hadn't attended an online or virtual class since in-person school was canceled. The New York Times found that in some schools, teachers reported that fewer than half of their students were participating in online learning.

**3X as many students were using Actively Learn in April of 2020 than in April of 2019**

Engagement is critical at all times, but especially when students are learning from home as teachers cannot directly observe their reactions and have discussions about the class content.

This is a vital part of understanding whether or not students are relating to the lesson and finding deeper meaning. An EdWeek survey of over 900 teachers from early May, states that over 70% of teachers feel that students' engagement with their coursework is lower than it had been prior to the school closures.

Despite these statistics, some teachers have implemented strategies to engage their students and deepen their participation beyond what was expected during a typical school year. An analysis of students' usage of Actively Learn before and after school closures demonstrates impressive results.

- ✓ 91% of students who were using Actively Learn during the month before schools closed remained active after the shutdown
- ✓ Students who started using Actively Learn for the first time after schools closed completed 4X as many assignments, answered 24% more questions, spent 16% more time reading, and wrote 10% more words per short-answer response compared to students using the platform during the same time period last year.

*"Wow!* Loving @activelylearn for distance learning. My students are seeing their answers alongside others and requesting revision of their work. The polls also help my students feel part of a classroom instead of completing assignments in isolation. *Fantastic!"*

https://twitter.com/erin_earnshaw status/

## Continuity of Core Instruction

Since early March, remote learning has shifted the way teachers use online resources. Prior to the shutdown, digital tools were typically seen as supplemental resources, not as a core part of the curriculum. A RAND study from before schools closed this year found that a majority of teachers used digital tools to supplement "other comprehensive curriculum materials." In a remote learning environment, digital tools are more than a supplemental resource; teachers need to use these tools to deliver their core instruction and further their learning goals.

Usage patterns on the Actively Learn platform suggest that teachers were in fact looking to continue their core instruction during remote learning—and they did, making use of the Actively Learn catalog's wide variety of texts and videos for middle and high school ELA, science, and social studies. In April 2020, teachers on Actively Learn assigned core fiction, including short stories, full-length novels, drama, and poetry, as well as textbook sections for social studies and science. The most popular videos assigned during March and April 2020 were related to core content topics. "William Shakespeare in a Nutshell" and "Theme" topped the list ahead of supplementary videos related to the coronavirus.

**Percentage of Assignments**

| SUMMARY | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **April 2019** | **April 2020** |
| News and related articles | 40.07% | 36.78% |
| Core fiction | 25.27% | 27.23% |
| Textbook sections | 25.65% | 21.46% |
| Videos | 5.13% | 12.17% |

**Mr. Vasey's World History classes are using "Actively Learn." It utilizes interactive readings and videos that allow him to track student progress. He was able to import all of his classes from Google Classroom, and they're able to pick up right where they left off in class with the lead up to WWII. Mr. Vasey has an instructor screen that shows all of his classes and their assignments for the week to help him keep everything straight.**
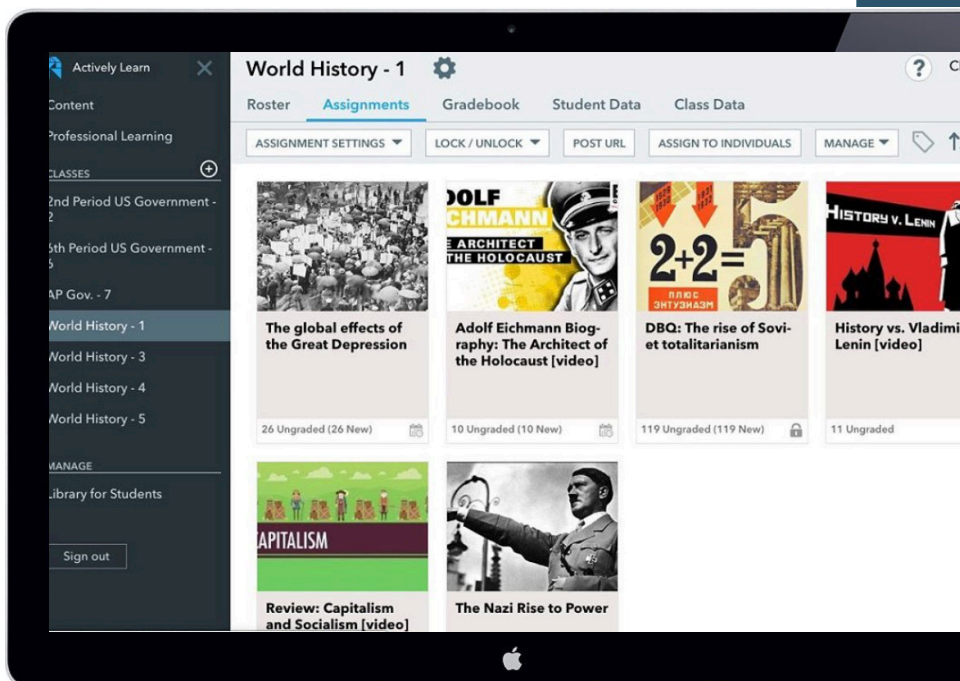
# Implementation and Sharing of District-created Resources

Districts varied widely in their response to the 2020 shutdown. Some provided schools and teachers with the flexibility to determine their own priorities and approaches to remote learning, while others established clear priorities and provided teachers with centralized resources. In assessing the successes and failures of remote learning, a May 2020 report from the Center on Reinventing Public Education states, "This crisis has shown that districts that set strong, systemwide expectations have been better equipped to keep more students learning consistently during the pandemic than those that did not." The success stories of districts who developed comprehensive, centralized plans for instruction, like Miami-Dade, Florida and Boulder Valley, Colorado, will likely influence more districts to take a similar leadership approach in the fall.

Actively Learn usage data during the shutdown confirms the usefulness of centralized resources during remote learning. Actively Learn's District Library enables curriculum leaders to bring in their own customized assignments (either from the Actively Learn Catalog or from web or Google Drive uploads) and share them across buildings. These assignments reflect not only the reading or video content that curricular leaders want teachers to use, but also include embedded instruction that aligns to instructional priorities. In April 2020, usage of the District Library tripled as curriculum leaders encouraged teachers to take advantage of the assignments they had created to support their scope and sequence. Some districts were already in the habit of using their District Library to share curated assignments, making the transition to remote learning smooth for educators who already had the resources they needed to support their instruction.



*District partners share interactive digital assignments customized to their scope and sequence via their District Library.*
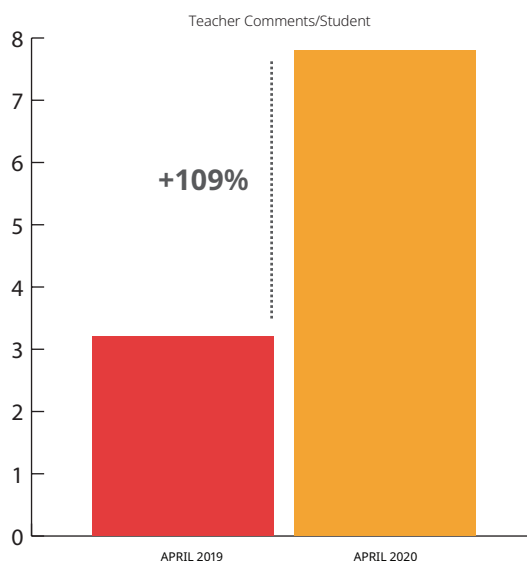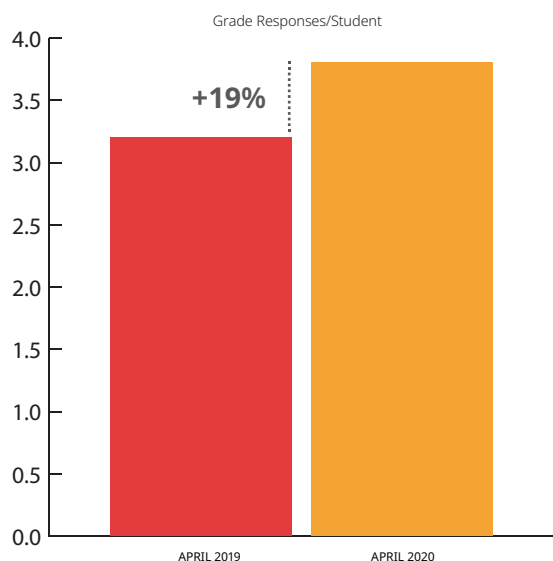
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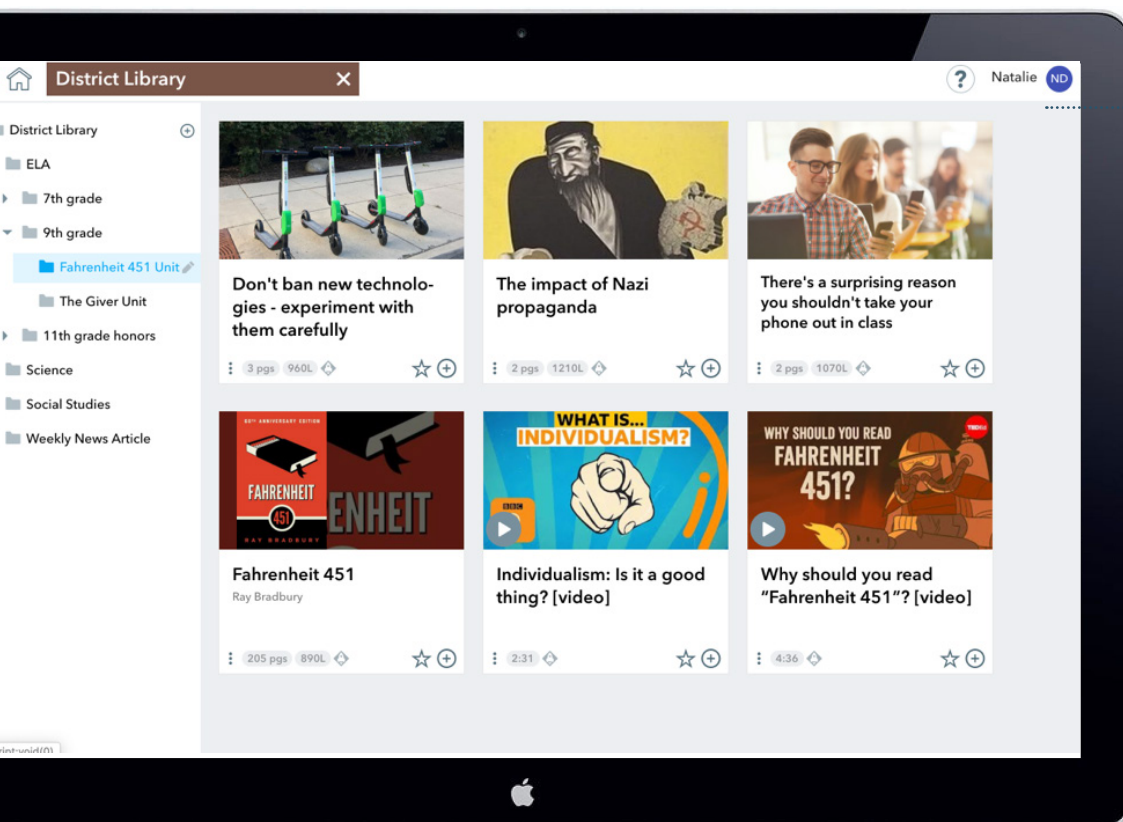
# Timely Student Feedback

In his synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses of educational practices and interventions, John Hattie lists teacher feedback as one of the top 10 influences on achievement, and notes that the effect size of feedback is nearly twice the average of all other schooling practices. Feedback is a means of both improving student work and motivating learning, and it can be especially difficult to implement in a remote learning context.

For teachers who rely on paper packets to deliver remote instruction, feedback entails a process of uploading photographs of student work and emailing them or posting them to an LMS. It's a cumbersome process, and one that may have influenced the decision of many districts to abandon grading requirements altogether during the shutdown.

Yet the usage data in Actively Learn suggests that grading and feedback were critical during remote learning in April 2020. In a time when grades and participation became optional for many students, teachers on Actively Learn were grading more student responses and providing more written feedback. In fact, the average student in Actively Learn received double the rate of teacher comments on short-answer questions during the shutdown relative to April 2019. In the absence of daily in-person interaction, the digital platform provided an opportunity for teachers to interact with students, provide feedback on their writing and ensure that their work felt meaningful.



Grade Responses/Student — APRIL 2019, APRIL 2020: +19%

Teacher Comments/Student — APRIL 2019, APRIL 2020: +109%

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# Easy-to-Use Tools and Resources

In a remote learning scenario, teachers do not have access to in-person professional development. The ability for teachers to get started quickly on their own matters more than ever, so much so that EdReports recently updated their evaluation criteria to emphasize usability. It's not uncommon for products to promise a robust array of benefits but then fail to deliver them when the majority of users cannot figure out how to navigate the new tools.

Actively Learn monitors usability and makes ongoing improvements to ensure that it's easy for new teachers to get started. Despite more than a sevenfold year-over-year increase in new teacher sign-ups in March and April 2020, Actively Learn's activation rates more than doubled. Out of all teachers who signed up and assigned a text or video to students in April of 2020, 40% had active students within one day of the teacher signing up, and 75% had active students within the first week of the teacher signing up. That means that for 40% of teachers, it took less than one day to find an assignment, set up classes, roster students, and get students to engage with the assignment by reading and answering questions.

One significant consideration for usability is integrations with existing learning management systems. Students (and in many cases, their parents) should not be asked to manage logins for a variety of new tools, and assignments should be centralized so that students can see their assignments' due dates in one place. In March and April 2020, 83% of all the teachers and students who signed up for Actively Learn created accounts through an integration with Google Classroom, Schoology, Clever, or Canvas. This enabled teachers to quickly sync their rosters and post assignments directly to their LMS.

Finally, no matter how user-friendly a tool is, many teachers will run into questions. In March and April 2020, without the help of colleagues or an easy way to get a hold of the school's technology support, teachers needed to rely on the support teams of the tools they use. For teachers who reached out to the Actively Learn support team via email or in-app messaging during the closure, the median response time was 6 minutes and 56 seconds. Having a live expert promptly answer questions was a significant benefit to teachers who were new to the platform.

# Conclusion

Educators have experienced a steep learning curve during the shutdown. They have experimented with various approaches to delivering instruction, tested countless online learning products, and figured out ways to communicate with students and parents. But, the time to experiment is now over. When the new school year begins, students will need reliable instruction that helps them meet grade-level standards and make up for the learning loss they've experienced during the spring. They need online tools that provide them equitable access to rigorous grade-level instruction and engage them whether they are at home or in the classroom.

School and district leaders will be well-served to keep these best practices in mind when determining how to effectively support teachers and students next fall. As our research shows, the key factors in successful online learning include visible engagement for students, continuity of instruction that aligns to scope and sequence, a way for districts to centralize and share their resources, a way to provide feedback to students, ease of use for teachers who may be figuring out new tools on their own, and integrations into existing learning management systems. These key criteria should drive decision-making for curriculum next year, and they are critical to advance student learning regardless of whether learning takes place in the classroom or online.

**About Achieve3000**

Achieve3000 delivers a comprehensive suite of digital solutions that significantly accelerate literacy and deepen learning across the content areas. Using personalized and differentiated solutions, Achieve3000 provides equity for remote and on-site instruction, enabling educators to help all students achieve accelerated growth. For more than four million students in grades PreK-12, Achieve3000 improves high-stakes test performance and drives college and career readiness.