Online Learning
Innovation Implementation Guide

Background and Purpose

This document is intended for school leaders, teachers, and others interested in developing and implementing an online education program for their local context. It summarizes lessons learned from the design and implementation of eight schools implementing Online Learning pilots.[1] Each of these pilots was responsive to their school's specific needs, but they shared some common features, including:

- **Greater Student Agency Over When, What, and How They Learn** – Online Learning programs offer students more control over many aspects of their learning, including their pace, content, and modality. Many programs offer students a wider ranges of courses to choose from than would be available in person. In many cases, students can take some courses online and others in-person at the school, and also participate in school activities even as they complete all or some of their coursework online.

- **Tailored Support from a Dedicated Educator** – Even as Online Learning programs empower students to make more choices about their learning, they also provide additional support structures to help students navigate these choices. This support often takes the form of a staff member dedicated to online students, whose role encompasses the duties of a guidance counselor, teacher, and case manager—sometimes called a remote learning specialist.

- **An Emphasis on Student Wellness** – Online Learning programs often establish systems and structures to support students physical, mental, and emotional well-being. These include intentional efforts to build a supportive culture and promote camaraderie, including dedicated spaces for online students to meet together in person, field trips, and community service activities. Online programs also often offer regular check-ins between students, teachers, parents, and counselors.

> "My daughter loves being able to go at her own pace. She feels a great sense of accomplishment ... she is more ready for the real world when she graduates as she has been 100% responsible for her own success the last 2 years"
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> – Parent, Brewer

Noble Virtual Middle School students participate in service activities.

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[1] These pilots were supported by the Maine Department of Education's Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program, which was funded by a $17 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Rethink K–12 Education program.

Key Takeaways from Multiple Pathways Pilots

The tips below are intended to give school leaders ideas to consider when developing an Online Learning program for their own school. These key takeaways are based on an external evaluation of the Online Learning pilots supported by the Maine Department of Education's Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program, and can be adapted based on the local needs, opportunities, policies, and cultures of individual schools.

1 **Administrative support and engagement is vital, especially around setting policies for graduation requirements, teacher licensing, and activity eligibility.** Administrative buy-in is critical to the success of Online Learning programs, specifically in areas related to setting policies about credits that can be earned in online courses and credits that are considered for on-time graduation as well as designing the program to address diverse student needs and determining eligibility for extra- and co-curricular activities. Administrative support is also integral for sustaining the program specifically in areas related to identifying funding sources to continue to bear the costs for licenses and other infrastructure needed to run the program and marketing the program to a specific student pool (e.g., students considered as chronically absent or students in the district's homeschooling network). Administrative buy-in also brings with it support from other school staff. Although the remote learning specialist is tasked with providing individualized support, having the support of other school staff would help increase the chances that students' learning and social-emotional needs are being addressed.

2 **Students in online education programs benefit from the intentional creation of opportunities to foster a sense of belonging and community.** Many Online Learning pilots created avenues for participating students to connect with each other, including opportunities for in-person interactions, in a concerted effort to establish and foster a shared culture for students to develop a sense of community and belonging. Some strategies for building and maintain this shared culture include:

a. **Establishing a dedicated space for students to meet in-person.** Some Online Learning pilots offered regularly scheduled in-person days for students. During these times, students could check in with their remote learning specialist, meet with their counselor or any school staff, or simply use the space to connect with their peers in the program. For some pilots, this dedicated space took the form of a classroom, while another pilot—regional school unit (RSU) 60 Noble—constructed a yurt for students in their Online Learning program.

> "I love the fact Online Learning gives me independence and I feel like it is helping me with my work ethic and my motivation to do different things on my own. Overall, I love doing classes online and it has changed my high school experience for the better."
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> – Student, Brewer

b. **Embedding enriching in-person activities (e.g., field trips) in online learning.** Online Learning programs included in-person activities, such as field trips and community service. By offering these activities, programs allow for a safe space where students can develop their social relationships with their peers instructors. All RREV pilots incorporated these in-person activities into their Online Learning programs.

c. **Including student perspectives in the strategic vision of the program.** Pilots benefitted from a participatory approach in which student voices informed the creation of the program's mission statement, expectations, and other shared goals. In the RSU 60 (Noble) FLEX program, students developed a shared vision, mission, and goals for Be Well Connected, the wellness program at Noble Virtual Middle School.

3 **Personalized academic and wellness support can help students maximize the benefits of Online Learning.** Students in Online Learning programs have greater flexibility to choose their courses and move at their own pace. Many Online Learning pilots assign a staff member to provide individualized support to students, often in multifaceted ways encompassing the responsibilities of a teacher, school counselor or social worker, and guidance counselor. This individualized support from the remote learning specialist involves the creation of tailored educational plans with input from students as they set goals and identify required courses; monitoring student progress on these plans; conducting regular check-ins with students about their academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs; and establishing relationships with students and their families. In RSU 25 (Bucksport), the role of the remote learning specialist focused on being able to provide the appropriate level of academic and social and emotional support and scaffolds to students, especially since they had access to a team of specialists (e.g., guidance counselor, special educator, etc.) to support their role. RSU 60 (Noble) identified a social worker in addition to their remote learning specialist to support students' social and emotional well-being (e.g., those who have encountered bullying) through development and management of behavior plans and provision of services to students and their families with the goal of fostering a sense of belonging. Students told evaluators that this individualized support gave them confidence to use the flexibility afforded by Online Learning to try new or more challenging courses than they otherwise would.

4 **Online Learning programs are well-suited for students who struggle with in-person learning and students who have strong executive functioning skills.** Online Learning pilots found that their model worked best with two types of students. The first type of student was one who had physical, mental, or emotional challenges with in-person learning. In many cases, these were students who realized during the COVID-19 pandemic that remote learning was easier for them, especially when it ameliorated social anxiety, bullying, or physical health problems that interfered with their learning when they attended school in person. For these students, reducing the pressure to physically attend school helped them focus on their schoolwork, especially when their online programs had support structures to help them. The Noble Flex and school administrative unit (SAU) Brewer Public Schools Nu programs are examples of Online Learning pilots with such support structures. Another category of students who benefitted from online education were those who had strong self-regulated and executive functioning skills as well as academic performance. These students were more engaged with online courses because they had more options and could engage in faster-paced learning. RSU 25 (Bucksport) opened up their remote learning pathway to include these types of students. These students could exercise autonomy over their own learning experiences. These two categories of student profiles might, but do not necessarily, overlap.

5 **Families and teachers should be clearly told about greater expectations for working together to support students and hold them accountable.** Building and maintaining partnerships with families of participating students is crucial to the success of online learning. Because learning in these settings is mainly self-paced and in some cases asynchronous, traditional methods of oversight that typically occur in the classroom (e.g., instructor may not be able to check if the student is engaging with the coursework) may not be applicable. Online Learning programs should clearly communicate with families their role as accountability partners for their child's learning. This includes setting expectations for parents/guardians that their child's participation in the program may require more from them where families are encouraged to proactively monitor and communicate with instructors about their child's progress. For example, Online Learning programs such as those at RSU 25 (Bucksport), RSU 60 (Noble), and SAU Brewer ask parents to verify that their student is engaging with the course material—particularly in asynchronous courses—and to participate in regular individual meetings with teachers about their student's process.

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Interior of the yurt built at RSU 60 (Noble) as a place for FLEX students to gather.

6 **Schools with Online Learning programs should consider developing a plan to prepare students for returning to in-person instruction.** Programs are either designed to offer students an alternate pathway where they could continue their schooling or are designed with the goal of helping students return to in-person schooling. If students may have to return to in-person learning, as in the case of an Online Learning program serving middle school students who are making the transition to in-person high school, programs can benefit from having a plan in place to prepare students to return to in-person learning. Some strategies include increasing awareness through discussions on the increased academic expectations in high school, equipping students with the academic and social-emotional skills necessary to be successful in high school, and offering enriching, positive in-person experiences (e.g., field trips). The goal for RSU 71 (Belfast) Area High School's LION summer semester was for students to successfully transition to in-person schooling. Strategies to prepare students for this transition include completing courses in the summer semester so that when students return to in-person schooling they are on-track for graduation and on par with their peers—thus reducing stress. Students also continued to check in with the LION Semester instructor throughout the school year where discussion centered on monitoring academic progress. The LION Semester instructor also leveraged relationships with the families of LION Semester students through regular communication to ensure a successful transition to in-person schooling.