POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are informed by the research conducted and data analyzed for this project as well as an examination of relevant news and research from across Mississippi and the country. These recommendations reflect the evolution of the circumstances surrounding virtual and digital[1] learning in Mississippi from the onset of this study in April 2021 through its conclusion in September 2022. During that time period, improved conditions eliminated the need for full-time virtual learning for health and safety purposes. Now, the question facing Mississippi policymakers is whether and how elements of digital learning can support some students' academic acceleration following the pandemic's disruptions, as well as the state's vision to provide a "world-class educational system that gives students the knowledge and skills to be successful in college and in the workforce, and to flourish as parents and citizens."[i]

Themes for Policymakers

This study surfaced several key themes policymakers should consider when examining options for virtual and digital learning and the future of education in Mississippi post-pandemic:

- **A need to focus on students most impacted according to available evidence:** Available data show that the pandemic affected academic progress for students from low-income families most of all. In addition, certain cohorts and groups of students have faced unique challenges – such as students entering second grade in 2022 who have never had a "normal" school year, high schoolers who may have been working full-time jobs during virtual learning, students who have dropped out altogether, etc. Policies designed to help students recover from the tumult of school closures must benefit students most in need and strategies must be tailored to particular student circumstances.

- **The need and potential for cross-sector collaboration:** Mississippi Connects is a strong example of state leaders from all sectors (government, education, business, technology, philanthropy, advocacy) coming together to provide equitable access to technology supports quickly. This example illustrates that such an effort can be successfully executed in Mississippi around a common goal and provides a model for future collaborative activities.

- **The importance of effective communication and dissemination of information:** Resources, programs, and other supports – including instructional and mental health supports – must be shared through multiple channels (state and district vehicles, websites, social media, news media) and with strategic consideration of a variety of audiences (educators, students, families, community-based support providers, leaders). Descriptive guidance, including specific examples of best practices from leading districts, is important and help is needed to improve communications in lower performing districts.

- **The critical role of high-quality curriculum and training:** Proven curriculum and aligned educator training is the foundation of any effective instructional strategy – in person or virtual. Cohort models and the expansion and coordination of existing groups (MDE Teacher/Principal/Student Advisory Councils, Digital Learning Coaches) can extend the reach of quality instruction.

- **Identification of ongoing funding to support education technology and other innovations:** Technology in education, used appropriately in in-person as well as remote settings, is here to stay; districts will need continued support for devices and connectivity (especially considering the rate of technological advances), as well as educator and family training and support.

- **Support for continued and coordinated data collection and research:** The impacts of the pandemic on education will be felt for many years to come and the investment of resources and time for educational technology should be studied. Consistent, comparable data collection and sharing will help district and state leaders make informed decisions about future efforts.

Recommendations

State Advisory Task Force and
Regional Acceleration Hubs

Provide coordinated state and regional partnerships to broaden awareness of and support for education recovery.

- Building on the success of the coordinated effort to execute Mississippi Connects, the existence of several statewide and regional cohorts, and the need for continued collaboration around pandemic recovery, the state could:

  1. Create a State Advisory Task Force to Advance Education. This could include students, families, educators, and local and state leaders, drawing from existing groups such as MDE Advisory Councils, Digital Learning Coaches, Technical Advisory Committee, and others. The group could be convened quarterly to examine data on acceleration efforts and identify implications for state and district actions. The group could also lead efforts to explore sustainability of funding for evidence-based best practices. ESSER funding could be used to support the short-term planning and collaboration required to identify sustainable, long-term funding (such as federal ESEA, IDEA, Perkins, and WIOA funds) for education technology and training.

  ‣ This Task Force should be established as quickly as possible (ideally during the 2022-2023 school year) and be convened at least through 2025-2026 to study the impact of all COVID relief funding efforts. At the end of that time, the group should consider whether additional convenings are necessary.

  ‣ The group should make meetings as convenient

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1   Virtual learning refers to students accessing instruction remotely outside of the school environment (without any in-person school or teacher access); digital learning refers to the use of education technology platforms, tools, and resources in any environment (at home, in school buildings, or any combination thereof).

and accessible as possible for a range of diverse participants spanning all major regions of the state, utilizing virtual meetings during late afternoon/early evening hours as needed for educators, students, and families. Training may be necessary to ensure all participants can access and understand relevant data and other meeting materials.

2. Create Regional Acceleration Hubs for collaboration across organizations by geographical locations. This would allow for coordination of resources from existing community organizations, government, philanthropy, advocacy, business, and other groups and extend the reach of services. Hubs could be led by representatives of these organizations who could help to match local needs with regional offerings. This could allow the state to extend the reach of existing efforts such as the Digital Learning Coaches, who are already serving regional areas, opportunities like the state Regional Family Literacy Nights,[ii] and growing efforts to support telehealth, virtual and digital learning options, and other needs. One leader from each Regional Acceleration Hub could participate in the Task Force recommended above. Existing Mississippi Regional Education Service Agencies[iii] could be leveraged and/or expanded to support these efforts.

   ‣ These Hubs should be organized with input from the Task Force described above, with the goal to have them in place by Summer 2023 and to operate through at least 2025-2026.

   ‣ Hub leaders should meet to problem solve, share resources and best practices, and collaborate to ensure that groups of students that need resources receive them. Representatives should ideally come to the group with problems of practice and specific needs that they need help and input in order to address.

Digital Learning

Pursue a state-level strategy for high-quality digital learning that goes beyond a pandemic response and provides equitable access to technology to prepare all students in Mississippi for a successful future.

• **Programming and Access:** The state has already invested considerable resources into digital learning and should work to ensure that the best innovations from those investments produce ongoing public education opportunities for students and families. There is evidence from across the country that some students who choose a full-time virtual education option, under the right conditions and when that option is of high quality, can be successful. However, this research project has not yielded enough evidence to recommend that a particular existing full-time option should be scaled in Mississippi. Because each district was able to determine its own pandemic response for the 2020-2021 school year, and could propose a virtual option for state approval in 2021-2022 and beyond, virtual options have varied widely. That said, this study has yielded information on what has – and

could – go well. Through at least 2025-2026, the state should consider the following, while continuing to gather evidence on program effectiveness to inform future decisions:

1. Continue to support all districts in their efforts to leverage elements of digital learning that are proving successful in accelerating student learning and preparing students for college and career.

   ‣ The state should widely communicate state-led efforts such as the Digital Learning Coaches[iv] and Digital Learning Instruction Guide[v] to share best practices, tools, and training opportunities that expand quality opportunities to more students.

   ‣ The state should host and share a list of approved district-run virtual learning programs so that other districts can access and learn from successful models.

   ‣ The state should require all districts to maintain an up-to-date emergency response plan for virtual learning with clear communications mechanisms for educators, students, and families. This plan could be submitted to MDE each summer in advance of the next school year and could communicate important information such as the district's online learning platform, programs, and tools so that the state can provide support as needed. The plan could be placed in effect during times of health and safety or weather emergencies to ensure as much continuity in learning as possible. In return, the state could host a clearinghouse of best practices from these district emergency response plans for other districts to access and learn from.

2. Continue to review and approve district-run, full-time virtual options such as the Gulfport Virtual Academy[vi] on a yearly basis.

   ‣ Conditions for state approval should include (but not be limited to):

      ▪ Evidence of demand for this option adequate to necessitate the staffing and other support described below.

      ▪ Participant screening criteria to communicate expectations and realities of the learning environment and set students up for success.

      ▪ Ongoing data collection and review of virtual student engagement (attendance, enrollment) and learning outcomes to understand the efficacy of this offering, including analysis of all relevant subgroup populations.

      ▪ Support to ensure participating families consistently have adequate devices and connectivity, including working with the new state broadband office and/or other state or local organizations supporting internet access, as well as district support for families in navigating learning platforms.

      ▪ A plan for students with special needs or accommodations in virtual environments.

- Dedicated staff for virtual instruction.
- Clear expectations for attendance, balance between synchronous and asynchronous instruction, grading, and student and teacher schedules (e.g., how much time a day are they online, how much time is dedicated to homework, extracurricular activities, professional development, teacher interventions).
- Clarity on how often and the means by which teachers and families have regular check-ins and how parents can reach teachers individually, as well as any necessary training for families to support virtual instruction.
- High-quality virtual curriculum and training that includes a focus on social and emotional learning (SEL).
- An assessment policy that allows for real-time education data but mitigates the potential for cheating (see page 3).
- A vision for program sustainability that is responsive to changing conditions and allows for adaptations.

‣ The state should explore ways to expand virtual learning options for students in districts without an approved program.
- Gulfport Virtual Academy has instituted a tuition process whereby families of students in certain surrounding counties may apply to participate in the virtual program.[vii] State leaders could leverage the State Advisory Task Force and Regional Acceleration Hubs to share knowledge of strong virtual programs and expand opportunities to students in surrounding areas. The state should help to subsidize access for families in need through grant and/or philanthropic funding streams or other sources.

‣ Depending on the results of the efforts above over the next few years, the Task Force could consider plans to initiative development of a full-time state-run virtual learning option, either through a state-affiliated nonprofit or a vendor through an RFP process.
- To inform this process, the state must gather reliable data about the demand for virtual learning across the state to create a solid understanding of which families in which regions seek this option, and why. Further, it is important to understand the impact of virtual learning on student outcomes to better understand conditions for success.
- The Task Force should consider how district enrollment and accountability would work for students opting into a state virtual learning program.

3. Continue and consider expanding "a la carte" access to virtual and digital programming for courses students can't access otherwise through their school district.

‣ The state could expand its review and vetting of online courses[viii] and programs like the MSU-RCU offerings[ix] and UM High School,[x] and extend these opportunities to more students given new investments in technology via Regional Acceleration Hubs.
‣ From an equity perspective, the state should collect and analyze data about access to and uptake with online courses to identify gaps and any relevant interventions to ensure all students can benefit from quality options (as recommended in the Mississippi First Future of Schools Policy Vision).[xi]

- **Staffing:** This study yielded concrete feedback about staffing models for virtual and digital learning. The state should support efforts to:

  1. Avoid having teachers simultaneously instruct both in-person students (i.e., in a classroom) and students participating remotely in a virtual program. Instead, virtual options should be staffed with dedicated educators who specialize in and focus on virtual instruction. Where program size necessitates, a dedicated administrator should oversee virtual learning programs.
     ‣ In the case of extended absences (including for medical issues) and/or quarantines for individual students, the state should continue to allow flexibility for teachers to instruct their students virtually for a limited period of times until they return to the classroom.

- **High-Quality Curriculum & Training:** Mississippi is leading the country with its investment in high-quality instructional materials. The state should expand upon this effort to support digital learning in several ways.

  1. Highlight high-quality digital materials within Mississippi Instructional Materials Matter.[xii] This robust resource could elevate high-quality practices for a virtual environment in addition to those it already identifies.
  2. Expand and promote targeted professional learning opportunities for teachers to support their mastery in using high-quality content across multiple instructional delivery methods. The MDE Office of Professional Development provides access to synchronous and asynchronous training opportunities. All districts can access these sessions, with priority and specialized sessions and coaching provided to those most in need. Mississippi Connects offers a Professional Development and Resources Hub[xiii] specifically focused on technology and digital learning. These resources can be connected to the Materials Matter site and shared via Regional Acceleration Hubs.
  3. Building upon the Mississippi State Plan for ESSER Funds,[xiv] prioritize adapting SEL curriculum to virtual environments. The SEL standards,[xv] accompanying professional development, and associated resources[xvi] should complement other vetted high-quality digital materials.

- **Assessment:** The integrity of academic assessments

may be compromised if all are administered remotely. Virtual programs should implement policies that allow for "spot checking" student assessment results to identify outliers. Mississippi[xvii] used an in-person approach for state assessments in spring of 2021, even for virtual students. This practice illustrates that districts can bring virtual students to an in-person setting. In the future, this exercise can also be applied to other, more formative assessments. The state could:

1. Require that assessments for virtual students occur in-person periodically. For example, a virtual program administering formative assessments could require each student to complete them inside a school building under supervision at least twice per year. Timing could be staggered for the entire population of students so that only a small percentage of virtual students are in the building on any given week or month.

2. Leverage local community organizations to provide additional options for families uncomfortable with testing in a school facility.

3. Consult with health officials on plans for in-person testing as long as the pandemic or other public health concerns are present.

Learning Acceleration

Focus on the continued academic advancement of all students through supports that meet individual needs.

- The significant disruptions to education caused by COVID will have lasting effects on student progress, and acceleration efforts will be necessary for the foreseeable future. The state should continue to invest in programs that support students most impacted by pandemic disruptions as they work to overcome those learning challenges. Through at least 2025-2026, the state could:

1. Continue to provide and communicate access to vetted tutoring and credit recovery programs with subsidized costs for low-income families. This effort could include in-person and virtual options to expand the reach of quality programs and instructors, and Mississippi has already invested in programs that could be expanded and/or repli- cated. A focus on the early grades will be critical to address missed literacy instruction.

    ‣ MiSsion Acceleration[xviii] is a tutoring pilot pro- gram funded by a GEER grant. The Mississippi Teacher Corps Virtual Summer School/Credit Recovery[xix] provided a virtual option in Summer 2020 and virtual and in-person opportunities in Summer 2021, with the added benefit of offering training for teachers in critical needs districts. In February 2022, MDE announced the invest- ment of state COVID relief funding into several acceleration programs, such as web-based high dosage tutoring.[xx]

2. Continue to invest in the state's successful coach- ing programs, which have recently expanded to include Digital Learning Coaches and Math Coaches, to provide additional supports to

teachers, students, and families in the areas of greatest need for learning acceleration.[xxi] Extend training opportunities to parents and families on how to facilitate effective homework strategies and utilization of digital resources.

3. Provide guidance and/or resources to before- and after-school child care providers and other commu- nity support organizations to better equip them to support homework and learning outside of school.

4. Maintain appropriate technology, connectivity, and training supports for these programs through Mississippi Connects through the following:

    ‣ Focus on Digital Citizenship education and training for students and teachers.

    ‣ Focus on training all educators regarding the digital learning best practices included in the MDE Digital Learning Instructional Guide.[vi]

5. Continue and expand data collection efforts to understand which groups of students are most in need of support, including looking at trends by instructional delivery method, geography, demography, etc.

District, Educator, and Family Support for Technology

Ensure adequate and ongoing infrastructure and training for the use of technology in education.

- Mississippi has made tremendous progress in closing the digital divide and bringing education technology to students and families. However, more and ongoing efforts are needed to realize the full potential of this work – especially supporting district infrastructure and home connectivity. The state could:

1. Continue to support district use of learning man- agement systems (LMSs). One of the limitations with rolling out Mississippi Connects for the 2020- 2021 school year had to do with districts using old or insufficient LMSs. Districts using these LMSs have done so likely because of scarcity of resources (time or funding) or lack of IT or education technol- ogy expertise locally. Other limitations were caused by inconsistent educator expertise and training and a lack of reliable data on technology use in schools. State supports could include:

    ‣ Providing a list of independently reviewed, highly-rated LMS options according to trans- parent criteria (virtual learning platform, access to telehealth, etc.). Recent research shows a majority of districts in Mississippi using one of four LMS platforms – Google Classroom, Canvas, Schoology, or Microsoft Teams.[xxii]

    ‣ Negotiating contracts as the purchasing agent for LMS agreements with high-quality, frequent- ly-used LMSs to ease the process and reduce costs for districts.

    ‣ Requiring that districts move to a vetted LMS by a certain time or apply for a waiver or exception.

    ‣ Hiring state-level experts who can help with dis- trict LMS implementation when districts indicate that they do not have the capacity in house.

2. Expand upon successes and further the reach of effective education technology efforts statewide. State supports could include:

  ‣ Continued training on the use of technology accessibility tools.

  ‣ Adding guidance and best practices around professional learning opportunities, virtual home-school conferences, and other family supports to expand access.

  ‣ Conducting a program evaluation study on the impact of the Mississippi Connects Digital Learning Coaches[xxiii] program and other digital learning resources and supports such as cohort coaching, the Digital Teacher Academy, instructional technologies, and digital learning resources.

  ‣ Continue and expand a consistent statewide data system for tracking the use of devices and reliability of internet connectivity in districts and homes (where virtual learning is extended to home).

  ‣ Adding a navigator component to family engagement efforts where adult mentors/guides are assigned to students and families to assist with effectively using technology to support education.

  ‣ Developing a statewide plan to ensure device replacement for technology purchased during the pandemic. The statewide plan needs to address funding for technology device purchases and other programming supports.

  ‣ Negotiating contracts with vetted, high-quality, widely used education technology tools similar to the recommendation for LMSs above to ease the process and reduce costs for districts.

3. Create an intergovernmental working group of leaders from relevant state agencies focused on internet access to share data, resources, and strategies with families.

  ‣ In 2022, the new Broadband Expansion and Accessibility of Mississippi (BEAM) legislation was enacted, creating a state office focused on broadband infrastructure.[xxiv] This office is now coordinating efforts under the Department of Finance and Administration and has started facilitating funding and grant opportunities for internet access. The BEAM office could lead the working group to coordinate strategies with other state agencies (MDE, Mississippi Department of Information Technology Services, Mississippi Public Service Commission).

Ongoing Research to Drive Data-Informed Strategies

Continue to document and analyze the impact of the pandemic on student learning and identify evidence-based interventions.

• To fully understand the impacts of several years of disrupted learning, ongoing and consistent data collection and analysis are needed. Given the likelihood for long-term impacts on student progress, it is necessary to establish consistent measures and research tactics to learn as much as possible and inform course corrections over time. The state should:

  1. Create a longitudinal study of PK-12 student cohorts comparing annual progress through at least 2026. Where possible, include factors such as the district instructional delivery model (virtual, in-person, hybrid), use of state-vetted high-quality instructional materials, access to Digital Learning Coaches, etc. This will necessitate identifying consistent reporting methods and infrastructure to ensure comparable data across districts.

• Ensure disaggregation of data by all available subgroups, and tailor supports to groups with the greatest need for acceleration. Consider including a study of earlier academic outcomes of students who dropped out during the pandemic to determine whether any trends could be addressed through proactive strategies (for example, do early reading scores of eventual drop-outs point toward a need for more interventions in the early grades?).

  2. Study the effectiveness of state-approved virtual instruction programs, including conditions for success, enrollment and participation (including chronic absenteeism) by student population, and student outcomes.

  3. Measure student usage of digital applications and their impact on student success through BrightBytes EdTech Impact and expand this analysis statewide.

  4. Include qualitative research to examine specific districts and their instructional approaches over time to dig more deeply into emerging data trends, especially relative to disproportionate impacts on specific subgroup populations (i.e., if student outcomes are better for districts using a certain instructional model, acceleration strategy, or curriculum, why? If a subgroup of students significantly underperformed relative to peers, why?).

  5. Make as much disaggregated data publicly available as possible so that independent entities can do their own analyses and use the information to make strategic decisions.

  6. Tap the recommended State Advisory Task Force to Advance Education to collectively examine the data and its implications for state and district actions and to inform any needs for updating data collection.

ENDNOTES

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