

WHAT WE LEARNED:

Adult Education's Response to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning

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Overview

COVID-19 Emergency Remote Teaching & Learning

In March 2020, efforts to slow the pace of the COVID-19 pandemic led to community-wide closures and a rapid pivot to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) for students from pre-K to graduate school. In the field of adult education, a subset of states had infrastructure to support distance, online, or blended learning efforts for adults with foundational skill needs, but existing policies and practices proved insufficient to truly scale these efforts. An urgent need to build capacity of programs and staff to serve their communities produced a groundswell of effort across the diverse landscape of adult education providers. While teachers, administrators, and local staff undertook that effort, state staff and national organizations recognized the need to capture the learnings from the spring of 2020 as a means to ready adult education for the challenges ahead.

It is critical to differentiate between a planned and executed distance education and the rapid triage efforts of spring 2020 to immediately move largely in person classes to remote platforms. However, there are learnings from the field's emergency response and ongoing evolution of efforts that can support future policy and practice.

Learning from the Efforts

Recently, the EdTech Center @ World Education convened researchers leading eight studies on adult education's response to COVID-19 in a Technical Working Group (TWG) where they analyzed their collective research efforts. This brief does not attempt to represent all of the findings of the studies which are listed in Appendix A. It does attempt to represent the shared themes captured during a series of synthesis meetings and related activities, including:

- the role of leadership;
- the quantity and quality of professional development;
- strategies for engaging learners together with supporting access to devices, connectivity, and resources;
- partnership opportunities;
- policy and practice challenges; and
- the learning that is guiding planning for fall 2020 and beyond.

Role of Leadership

In a crisis, leadership or lack thereof becomes blindingly clear. Federal adult education funds (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act [WIOA] Title II: Adult Education and Family Literacy Act [AEFLA]) flow from the US Department of Education Office of Career Technical and Adult Education (OCTAE) to state agencies (e.g., state departments of education, or labor, or higher education) and then out through competitive grants to local grantees (e.g., local education agencies, community colleges, community based organizations). Unsurprisingly, states that supported or even required local programs to implement distance education initiatives prior to the pandemic were able to move more quickly and deftly to fully remote learning than those without existing policy and practices.

State Leadership

Texas is one example of a strong and rapid response in the adult education sector. The Texas Workforce Commission has required all of its grantees to operate some level of distance education programming since 2014. On March 10, when the Texas state adult education director returned from a federal adult education meeting in New York City to quarantine in his San Antonio home, his team

- initiated a needs survey to all core providers, subcontractors, and special operations team within days;
- stood up a “Pandemic Update” with instructional resources and guidance and encouragement (“This situation might be tough, but so are Texans”) within 24 hours;
- posted policy and practice FAQs within a week, starting at 6 and growing to 52 pages and counting; and
- hosted 28 informational webinars serving 2857 participants over the first 6 weeks.

Texas adult education providers were not surprised. A long established collaborative leadership model was ready to meet the crisis. The local programs trusted that sharing their challenges would spur action, the state agency provided transparent and on-going guidance, and the professional development organization supporting the state office kept the communication flowing. This, of course, is a best-case scenario, and there is a great need to support leadership development for state adult education staff.

Federal Leadership

There were local providers in many states who received little to no guidance for many weeks into the crisis, as their state offices waited for federal guidance. The federal OCTAE guidance came in the form of three program memos which gave comfort on performance accountability sanctions, noting that sanctions were never possible as the WIOA statistical adjustment model is not set to be fully operational until fall 2021; reiterated standing policy on distance education optional reporting; and developed new policy on ‘provisional placement’ to ease enrollment and performance accountability angst. OCTAE’s Division of Adult Education and Literacy leadership also took the unusual step of presenting this guidance via an open forum hosted by the Coalition for Adult Basic Education (COABE).

What we learned about **leadership**:

- Make distance education a requirement of all AEFLA providers and support their efforts.
- Grow the capacity of adult education leaders to provide flexibility underpinned with clear definitions and processes.
- Provide solid policy and guidance and communicate it continually and through a variety of channels beyond hierarchical structures.
- Overcome cultural bias (e.g., English language students can’t do distance learning.)
- Secure funding to build capacity for distance education, including devices and connectivity for staff and students.

Professional Development

State Level

Spring 2020 was a time of greatly accelerated professional learning for adult educators. While state leaders wrestled with guidance and reporting, state adult education staff primarily relied on agencies and organizations that provide supplemental professional development services to their local program practitioners. In California, the Outreach and Technical Assistance Network (OTAN) staff offered over 200 webinars with tens of thousands of attendees. OTAN also tapped into talent in the field and invited local program teachers to provide webinars for their peers. During spring 2020, OTAN saw a shift in the types and duration of professional learning required. Initially, many teachers seemed to think of distance education as only synchronous, real-time teaching online. They immediately sought tools to change the medium of instruction. As such, interest in online meeting platforms like Zoom and WebEx and instant text messaging like WhatsApp prevailed.

In an impressively compressed timeframe, adult education professional development expanded into tools to support asynchronous instruction to accommodate learners who could not join set class schedules and to organize learning events (e.g., Wakelet, Google Sites or Classroom, and Learning Management Systems). Texas offered a daily webinar in order to be as accessible as possible to all practitioners and is now coming behind this initial wave of statewide professional development with a long-term support plan. In other states, practitioners made use of the many local, state, and national professional development offerings from organizations like the EdTech Center @ World Education, ProLiteracy, and COABE; however, the needs for professional development outpaced time and resources available for it, particularly in the area of using technology to support instruction.

As the reality of the crisis timeline became evident and more guidance was provided from leadership on not only wrapping up the school year but also continuing to enroll and serve students remotely into the future, professional development sessions on remote outreach, intake, and assessment grew. Educators began to ask for serialized training, recognizing their need to stack their own professional development with opportunities to implement and address new challenges to be met. Distance education “office hours” and coaching sessions also proved to be a successful strategy with practitioners receiving one-on-one support from a technology mentor.

At a system level, OTAN saw increased interest among adult educators in Moodle course design and how to use Canvas, the statewide community college platform, which would prepare adult learners to transition to the California Community College system. In New Hampshire, adult education leaders joined a statewide K-20 solution, creating content in a shared platform to build adult learners’ capacity to support their children’s K12 learning and their own ability to transition to postsecondary education.

National Level

At the national level, World Education’s EdTech Center initiated weekly distance education strategy sessions beginning March 20, 2020. EdTech Center and ProLiteracy continue to

support these national strategy sessions. These sessions feature practitioners from around the country, sharing strategies during lightning talks and then utilizing virtual breakout rooms for highly engaged conversation. Continued follow-up discussions are supported on the OCTAE LINCS Integrating Technology community forum. Importantly, the EdTech Center used its deep expertise in supporting state distance education initiatives through the Innovating Distance Education in Adult Learning (IDEAL) Consortium to not only provide professional learning for teachers but also for administrators. The EdTech Center's IDEAL Consortium leaders revised seminal policy and process guides into briefs to fit the immediate context, including their Ready, Set, Go: Steps to Rapidly Start Distance Learning. Two other national organizations, ProLiteracy and COABE, each hosted webinars reaching thousands of practitioners. Additionally, over 3200 adult educators virtually participated in adult education's largest annual conference as COABE 2020 went online in July with 337 workshops and an option to view sessions for up to six months which has yielded more than 1.3 million page views and 21,000+ public conversations to date.

What we learned about **professional development**:

- A vast amount of professional learning was offered in spring 2020 but we have little understanding of its impact, beyond anecdotal feedback provided by participants.
- Rapid evolution of professional development from simple tools to sophisticated learning management systems and how to strategically use them to support instruction took place as teachers gained skills and access to digital tools.
- Policy and guidance helped shape professional development topics.
- Supporting distance education platform capacity and alignment with local education partners can position adult education as integral to a K20 learning system.

Learner Experiences

A June 2020 survey of adult *learners'* experiences reveals that the primary distance education tools used during the spring of 2020 were videoconferencing software on computers and smartphones. A third of the respondents had used Google classroom to organize learning and nearly a quarter had used an online course. As with teachers, the learners' comfort level with remote learning rapidly increased and a future preference for a blend of in-person and online learning was clearly articulated.

Lack of Tools

The other studies showed that a pre-pandemic lack of investment in classroom-based technology left many staff and students without digital skills or devices. Most of the participants surveyed or interviewed reported that their programs used non-internet based learning resources during spring 2020 in their emergency remote teaching. Phone calls and text messaging were primary technologies for many teachers who connected individually to support learners academically and emotionally. Both teachers and learners reported lack of broadband access, and programs struggled to initiate lending programs

with what technology resources were on hand. The majority of federally funded adult education programs operate within local educational agencies (i.e. school districts) a few of which provided some access to school bus hot spots, but even these programs were largely left out as school districts made decisions to offer tablets or laptops to their K12 student population. Many programs sought to connect learners with local low or no-cost options for connectivity and devices.

Staying Connected

Overall, adult education attendance hours dropped precipitously in spring 2020, not unlike in K-12 school districts. Beyond technology access issues, adult learners had other issues requiring their attention: coping with stress, health issues, caring for children and other family responsibilities, and work or unemployment concerns. In fact, many staff had these same issues. For those learners who remained connected, many did have a positive experience with distance education, and some programs reported learners who returned because they were able to study remotely. In some cases, teachers reported smaller but more engaged learner cohorts.

What we learned about **learner experiences**:

- Adult education learner and staff access to devices and reliable internet plus lack of skills for distance education were the primary barriers to implementation and persistence.
- Learners and staff who committed to distance instruction quickly gained skills and confidence for remote learning.
- Non-academic needs took precedence over learning during the pandemic.
- Low tech solutions can be effective for remaining connected.
- Despite lower expectations by teachers, English language learners were among those students who persisted, especially when they had access to a cohort.

Partnerships

Community Partners

Much the same way that programs mandating distance education pre-pandemic were in a better position to pivot to remote learning, programs that had formed and cultivated strong partnerships as part of their overall structure were more able to lean on those partners during spring 2020. For example, California's Adult Education consortia structure requires regional planning and implementation with local partners receiving federal, state, or county funds for adult learning, including public benefits programs like Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF/CalWorks) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment & Training (SNAP E&T/CalFresh). California practitioners report partnering with their workforce development system to support unemployment insurance applicants; with public benefits for food and mental health services; and with local education agencies in support of remote learning.

Partnering with Colleagues

Studies identified a widespread absence of needed partners for the aforementioned access to devices and connectivity as well as access to programs' own facilities when renting classrooms. On the other hand, survey results did indicate that previously isolated practitioners formed strong partnerships through virtual platforms that enabled them to support one another through sharing information, strategies, and experiences in distance instruction.

What we learned about **partnerships**:

- Established partnerships proved valuable foundations for pivoting to new levels of support for learners.
- Nascent partnerships were largely put on hold, except when they were for very immediate crisis needs (e.g., food banks and access to COVID-19 testing).
- Peer-to-peer partnerships proved valuable for support and learning in the midst of the crisis.

Challenges

Reporting

As in every sector, education struggled mightily with the shut-down orders, but some of adult education's challenges seem unique to the system. First and foremost is the federal reporting mechanism, the National Reporting System (NRS), that asks – on Table 1 – for all adult education participants to be sorted by education level as derived by pre-test scores on one of just two (for native English speakers) or three (for non-native English speakers) approved, standardized assessments. While this is not a mandate in the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title II funds that govern adult education nationally, it is such a universal practice as to have nearly paralyzed the adult education system's ability to enroll new participants or show progress with existing learners during emergency remote teaching and learning.

The most critical NRS reporting table – Table 4 which is used for states' negotiated performance target reporting to OCTAE – documents post-test score gains for participants. Even as OCTAE guidance reassured states that failing to meet performance measure targets would not result in sanctions, a tremendous amount of energy went into establishing remote testing capabilities with the primary test makers, with largely unsatisfactory results. OCTAE then established a new policy of 'provisional placement' allowing teachers to use their expertise to place a participant into an established educational function level. For participants (i.e., adult learner with 12 or more contact hours) seeking a high school diploma or equivalency, states that use standardized tests (e.g. GED, HiSET) only were also stymied until test publishers constructed remote capabilities. While these capabilities do now exist for the major tests, adult education programs have found the implementation of a fully remote testing procedure to be untenable to operate within adult education's cost structure. One

adult charter school in the DC area, estimated that to remotely pretest every learner before the start of fall classes would take 38 full time staff members working for three solid weeks.

The NRS performance reporting structure helps explain the lack of investment in flexible adult education distance education models which are not fully delivered at a distance (such as blended learning), because of the need to pre and post test, and are only optionally reported on the NRS with participants either being a distance education learner or a non-distance education learner (i.e., reported on one of two NRS tables – 4 or 4C). While interest has been growing and is now certainly at its highest point for establishing statewide distance education policy and reporting processes, this lack of pre-pandemic preparedness presented a steep uphill climb as many adult educators had little to no experience teaching remotely and adult education administrators did not have policies or guidance in place for the most basic aspects of remote enrollment, placement, and assessment.

Integrated Education & Training

Another challenge was in implementing Integrated Education & Training (IET) models. These intentionally designed integrations of adult education, workforce preparation, and workforce training are a new WIOA Title II mandate and have been a priority for many states. Remote learning in workforce training which often requires hands-on skill tests, clinical experiences, or demonstrated mastery brings yet another level of challenge. Many workforce training providers were unable to continue their work remotely or needed even more time and resources to make the shift to virtual reality or other expensive technology-enhanced modes of accomplishing skill training. This left their adult education partners without an integral part of their IET program.

Mindsets

Finally, the collective research revealed challenging mindsets among some providers as to what type of adult education participant could and should learn in a virtual setting. State staff reported needing to convince educators that all adults can be distance education learners with the right tools and supports.

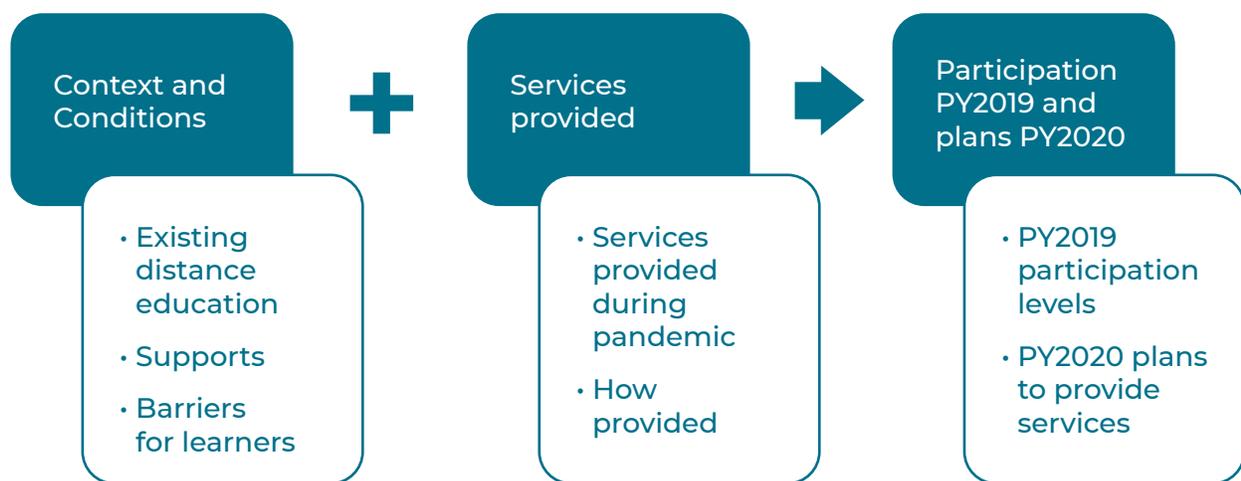
What we learned about **challenges**:

- Though there are pockets of innovative programs and educators, for the most part adult education providers have predominantly limited experience with distance education.
- Pre and post testing remotely is highly resource intensive.
- Program accountability, as generally practiced, prioritizes in-person models of program implementation.
- Some program models, like IET, were designed for hands-on skill training and require more sophisticated technology tools (e.g., virtual reality) to be offered remotely.
- Staff mindsets about which learners might succeed with distance learning limits equitable access to it.

Looking to the Future

Participants in these studies either volunteered to complete a survey or were recruited to an interview based on a convenience sample. However, The EdTech Center survey was completed by nearly 800 respondents, and the American Institutes for Research did complete a statistical analysis on the data. Preliminary statistical analysis supports a correlation between learner participation and a number of variables including capacity building through providing professional development for teachers and planning for future distance education provision. Also the proportion of services moved to distance positively associated with the proportion of English language learners participating, meaning, if you build it, they will come.

Additional statistical analyses will follow, driven by this logic model.



Distance Education Provides Flexibility

The perils of interrupted education are front of mind for many parents and educators as we enter fall 2020. The field of adult education was built to mitigate the impacts of interrupted education. An adult education student is predominantly a person who has been failed by a system – whether they started school in the United States as a child but did not graduate or gain the skills needed for economic and educational advancement or they lacked access to continuous learning due to resettlement or immigration. So while adult educators, like all educators, anticipate the day when they can physically welcome learners to their classrooms, teachers and administrators have learned to value the continuity of service that can be provided through flexible distance education options.

Despite all the challenges, emergency remote teaching and learning did extend opportunities by creating more flexible options for students to learn in their own time and without the requirement of on-site attendance. Some learners returned to programs during spring 2020 now that transportation and childcare were no longer barriers. And while adult education as a system struggles to currently assess skill gains remotely, evidence from Texas' mandate to have distance education options has shown that when distance education is



able to complement in person services through hybrid or blended learning approaches, students have higher learning gains than even those students learning only face to face.

Distance Education Is Here to Stay

The majority of adult education programs participating in the collective research anticipate permanently providing distance education options. Programs recognize that to accomplish this equitably, there will need to be ongoing contextualized professional development for staff, far more equitable access to devices and connectivity for staff and students, and a much deeper understanding of effective blended learning strategies. There will also need to be supportive policies and guidance by leaders and their partners that value the professional learning accomplished by staff.

As important, adult educators need a performance accountability system that values the many skills - digital and others - gained by learners who commit to adding ongoing education to their already adult-heavy responsibilities of family, work, and community. Perhaps a silver lining from COVID-19 will be our greater attention to the interconnected nature of our communities and a commitment to providing the resources and attention needed to ensure interrupted learning is addressed with high quality, evidenced-based strategies long into the future.

Appendix

Technical Working Group Members & Studies

Organization	Coalition on Adult Basic Education – COABE www.coabe.org
Name	Sharon Bonney
Study	<p>When COVID-19 hit, the impact could be felt in many ways on the field of adult education. We heard repeatedly from our more than 28,000 active members that they were working incredible hours to move their programs online and were struggling with enrollment and student retention. In April 2020, COABE launched a survey in an effort to hear directly from the field. The greatest findings included naming specific tools and resources that were helpful to the field as well as naming the greatest issues plaguing our programs during these times. When the survey closed a month later 1,419 responses had been collected. The bulk of the survey was completed by teachers and administrators from programs operating out of school districts or community colleges. The findings focused on helpful tools (Zoom and Google were at the top of the list), concerns plaguing our members (lack of funding to adequately address the issue, lower student enrollment and retention, lack of IT support, and lack of leadership) as well as strategies that are currently being employed and suggestions for the future). Findings were shared with OCTAE, legislators, funders, and with our members.</p> <p>At the national office, COABE also felt the effects of COVID-19 as our entire operation shifted gears to deliver what would have been an in person conference for 2,500 to a virtual conference for more than 3,200 attendees. We also pivoted our in person Capitol Hill Day to Advocacy April which resulted in 109 visits with legislators and more than 10,000 emails being sent during the month of April 2020.</p> <p>We simultaneously ran multiple webinars per week from March - May 2020 that served more than 32,000 collective registrants.</p>

Appendix

Technical Working Group Members & Studies

Organization	Jen Vanek, Ph.D., EdTech Center@World Education Stephanie Cronen, Ph.D., American Institutes for Research
Name	EdTech Center@World Education American Institutes for Research
Study	The EdTech Center, with technical support from AIR and informed by volunteers from the Evidence Based Adult Basic Education System (E-BAES) initiative and the Open Door Collective, drafted and disseminated a survey of adult basic skills instructors and program administrators. The goal of the survey was to better understand the shifts that programs made in order to provide instruction remotely during the pandemic. Survey questions probed how instructors and programs serving adult basic skills and ESOL learners adjusted their instruction strategies, resources, and communication. Nearly 800 respondents completed the survey.
Organization	Newsome Associates www.newsomeassociates.com
Name	David J. Rosen, Ed.D.
Study	The June, 2020 “Adult Learner Survey: Transitioning to Remote/Virtual/ Online Learning during the U.S. COVID-19 Pandemic” conducted by David J. Rosen, Ed.D, President of Newsome Associates, used a convenience sample of 1,064 adult basic skills (including ESL) learners from 43 states, and was fairly representative of the diversity in our field who were comfortable completing an online survey, which decidedly is NOT representative of all adult basic skills learners. Highlighted findings include that: 1) half the respondents at the outset were not comfortable doing online learning but, weeks later, by the time they took the survey, 70% said that they were comfortable; 2) half said they preferred having both online and in-person teaching; and 3) lack of reliable Internet and computers at home were issues of concern for a third of respondents.

Appendix

Technical Working Group Members & Studies

Organization	Outreach and Technical Assistance Center – OTAN www.otan.us
Name	OTAN
Study	<p>Called to action by State Department of Education to support the AE field</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ EdTech integration webinars ■ DL/BL teaching strategies and tools ■ Granular explanation of reporting instructional hours (NRS definition of DL) ■ Offered 200 webinars to the field between 3/17-6/30 with a registration of 17,000+ ■ Collaborative efforts with our sister leadership projects (CASAS, CALPRO (AIR)) ■ Creation of “OTAN Office Hours” for just-in-time tech support on all edtech tools
Organization	ProLiteracy www.proliteracy.org
Name	Michele Diecuch
Study	<p>ProLiteracy’s “Adult Literacy Program COVID-19 Survey” was conducted in May 2020 in an effort to determine how ProLiteracy’s members and publishing customers were responding to the pandemic. Responses were received from 391 practitioners from organizations that provide AE, literacy, and ELL. Some key findings include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 84% of programs are providing some degree of service through distance learning. 2) The two largest hurdles for students in participating in distance learning were lack of or limited access to a) broadband or WiFi and b) digital devices (laptop, tablet, smartphone). 3) In addition to connectivity, a predominant need for both practitioners and students was training on using digital learning content or devices (58% of practitioners; 74% of students). ProLiteracy’s blog on the survey: https://www.proliteracy.org/Blogs/Article/564/COVID-19-and-its-Impact-on-Adult-Literacy-Programs <p>In addition to this survey, ProLiteracy held two meetings with approximately 25 member programs (each). Discussion feedback was congruent with survey findings. Most programs are seeking hybrid or blended learning solutions for continuing instruction.</p>

Appendix

Technical Working Group Members & Studies

Organization	Rutgers University https://gse.rutgers.edu/alisa_belzer Research Allies for Lifelong Learning www.researchallies.org
Name	Alisa Belzer, Ph.D. Margaret Patterson, Ph.D.
Study	<p>“COVID-19 Rapid Response Report from the Field” is E-BAES’ first project, gathering and compiling data on how the field of adult education is responding to the coronavirus pandemic. Two complementary inquiries were implemented, one drawing on interviews and the other on surveys. A diverse pool of 49 practitioners (e.g., administrators, instructional leaders, and teachers) and state staff from 20 states participated in interviews conducted between late April and the third week in May. Survey responses were collected from 773 teachers, tutors, and program administrators in June. Findings in this paper are meant to inform the field and offer useful innovative suggestions that peers can share with each other.</p> <p>https://proliteracy.org/Portals/0/pdf/Research/COVID-19/COVID-19-Report.pdf?ver=2020-07-31-090141-130</p>

Appendix

Technical Working Group Members & Studies

Organization	Texas Workforce Commission Adult Education & Literacy https://www.twc.texas.gov/programs/adult-education-literacy-program-overview
Name	Lori Slayton
Study	<p>AEL's COVID-19 Impact Survey was issued to all AEL Providers in Texas in an effort to gauge how we could best assist 'the field' amidst the Pandemic. As a result of the 177 responses received, we found we could best assist by providing;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(a) Training on Remote Instruction(b) Additional funding for technology resources (licenses, software)(c) Open Communications and resource sharing <p>As a measure of COVID-19 rapid response, we:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Provided high quality and abundance of professional development, a cadre of training on 'going remote' in various stages and a variety of products – with 28 webinars in a six-week period serving more than 5,000 individuals2. Secured \$2 million in funding from our Commission for the immediate purchase of technology items, including banks of 'loaner' laptops, hotspots and tablets, DL software licenses, other tech related items for students and for instructors.3. Posted a new website for both AEL providers and students to provide policy and guidance and to proliferate technical assistance, leadership messaging and a broad list of available resources. <p>While Texas' efforts were successful, with all providers facilitating remote instruction within just a few weeks, we believe that our historical implementation of distance learning as a program requirement played a significant role in that success. Another element of our success was having strong leadership in place whose motto was 'serve the students, we'll worry about the rest later on.'</p>

Acknowledgments

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