

The Valuable Role of Edtech Coaches during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A National Survey

Mahsa Bakhshaei, John Seylar, Pati Ruiz, and Mai Chou Vang



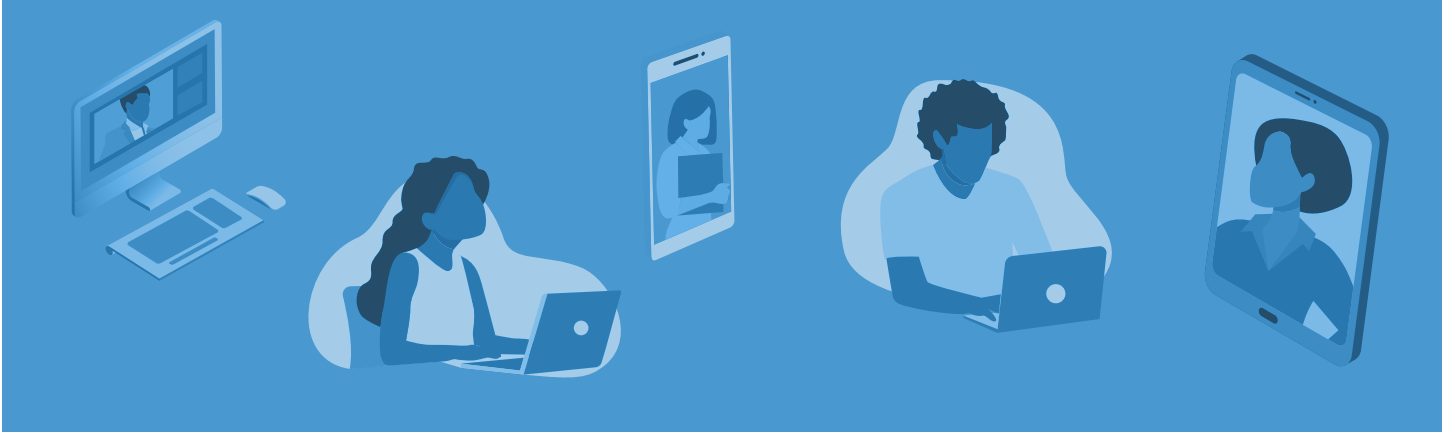


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Executive Summary

The recent coronavirus pandemic has challenged schools and districts around the world to keep students engaged in learning while staying at home and using technology in new ways. In response, many schools and districts have turned to their instructional technology coaches for support. Given the effective impact coaching can have on powerful teaching and learning, we intended to understand the role that instructional technology coaches played in the transition to online and home-based instruction.

This report presents findings from a survey administered to instructional technology coaches in the United States. Survey results show that administrators and, to a higher degree, teachers, valued the role of instructional technology coaches more during the pandemic than they did prior to school closures. By using their expertise in meaningful use of technology in teaching and learning, instructional technology coaches significantly facilitated the transition of their school and/or district community to online instruction. They supported administrators in designing useful learning continuity plans, teachers in minimizing teaching disruption, and families in fostering a home environment that supports remote learning.

After this school year, instructional technology coaches are well-positioned to continue supporting remote instruction and the powerful use of technology in their community. They are prepared to support teacher collaboration, provide digital teacher professional development, communicate teachers' online instruction challenges to district personnel, and help create lessons and activities to improve student engagement in distance learning. With the continued uncertainty of health risks and extension of remote learning, instructional technology coaches plan to rely more than ever on technology to provide virtual deep coaching to tackle instructional challenges of individual teachers. To continue to do their job well, instructional technology coaches reported that they particularly need their administrators' support in designing pre-service professional development sessions, providing digital deep coaching, and helping teachers design more equitable online lessons.

Introduction

Due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, districts are intensively searching for ways to teach children who might be home during all or some of the 2020–2021 school year. Moving instruction online and preparing teachers to use technology in remote teaching has been a massive undertaking. Multiple surveys conducted before the pandemic (for example, [PwC's 2018 survey about technology in U.S. schools](#)) reported that many teachers in the United States do not have enough experience, resources, or training to use technology in the most effective ways. Teachers who serve low-income schools have particularly weak preparation in how to use technology.

As districts look for ways to minimize disruption to children's learning, instructional technology coaches (edtech coaches) can be valuable assets. Over the last decade, edtech coaches in many schools and districts have helped teachers integrate technology tools and strategies into their teaching in meaningful ways that improve teachers' instructional practices and advance their students' engagement and learning. In a typical coach-teacher relationship, technology coaches collaborate with teachers regularly and continuously over multiple weeks to provide them with personalized support to tackle their specific teaching challenges through use of technology (what we name "deep coaching").

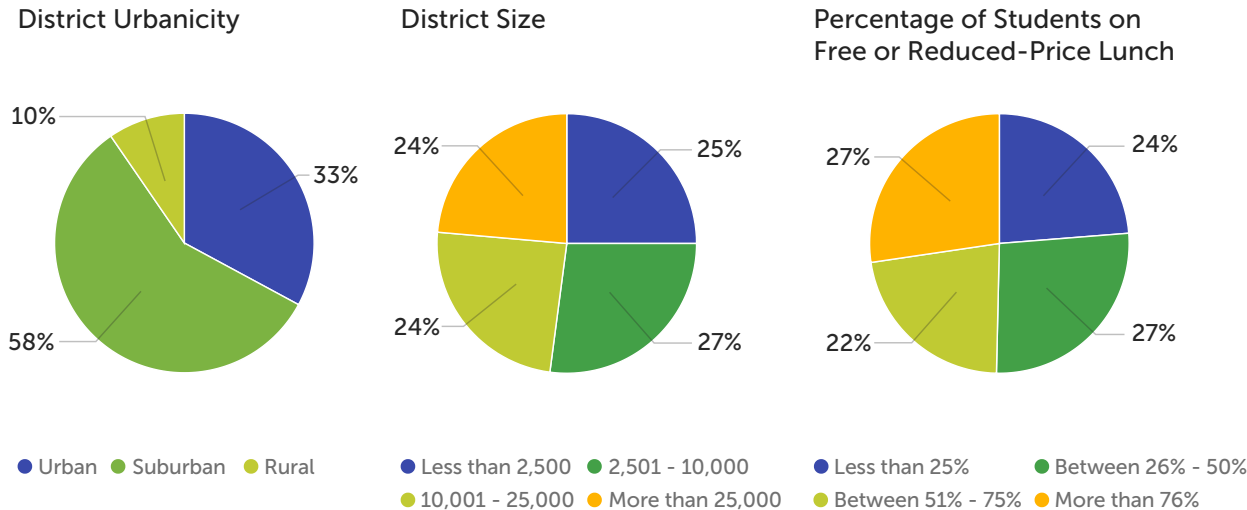
[Our research on the Dynamic Learning Project pilot coaching program](#) shows that by harnessing the power of instructional technology coaches, districts can help educators tackle challenges around using technology. In fact, our study shows that teachers who worked with edtech coaches, compared to their peers who didn't, both used technology more frequently in their classrooms and also felt more confident in their ability to use technology to engage students in developing the skills they need to succeed in work and life. These teachers also reported more often that their students' technology use had a positive impact on overall student engagement and learning.

Digital Promise administered a national online survey to edtech coaches in May and June 2020. The purpose of the survey was to learn about the contributions of edtech coaches during the unprecedented times of school closures, and to provide district and school leaders with insights on the value of edtech coaches in moving instruction online in effective ways. From the survey findings, we have identified reasons for school and district leaders to harness the power of edtech coaches in delivering instruction online.

Respondent Profile

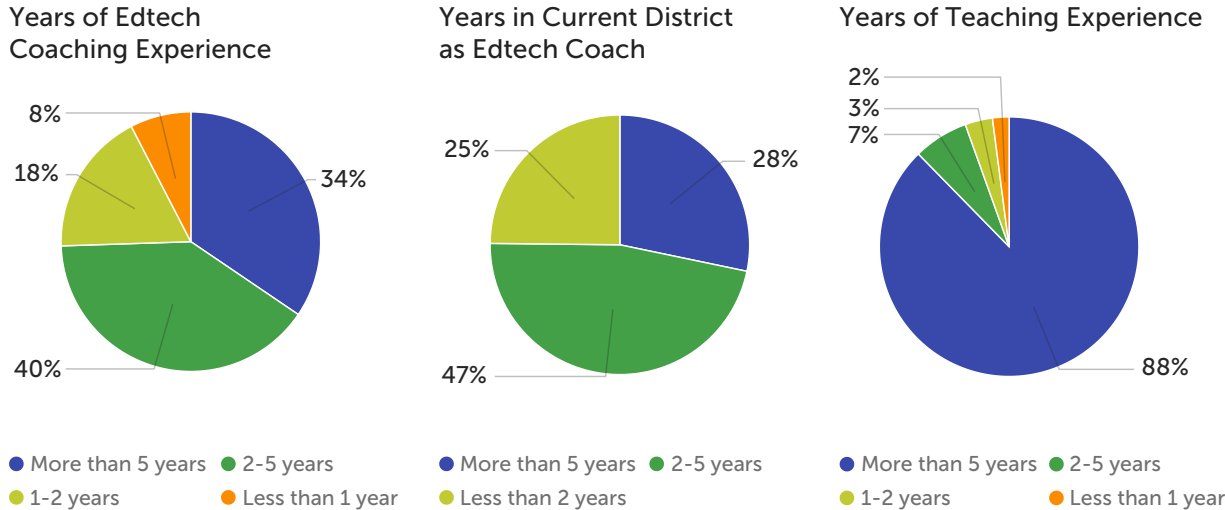
In total, we received survey responses from 148 in-service coaches who identified as “edtech coaches.” Respondents were located in 31 states—mainly from Texas, California, Pennsylvania, and Washington. The overwhelming majority of respondents work in public school districts. As shown in Figure 1, respondents were mostly from suburban school districts (57 percent), followed by urban (33 percent) and rural (10 percent), which is representative of [district urbanicity in the United States](#). Respondents were almost equally distributed across districts of different sizes and socioeconomic status.

Figure 1 District Urbanicity, Size, and Percentage of Students on Free or Reduced-Price Lunch



Approximately three-quarters of respondents have been working as edtech coaches in their current district and in the area of technology coaching for at least two years (Figure 2). Additionally, a majority (88 percent) of respondents have more than five years of teaching experience.

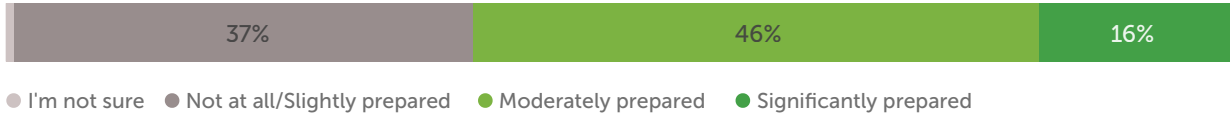
Figure 2 Years in Current District as Edtech Coach, Years of Coaching Experience, and Years of Teaching Experience



District Contexts

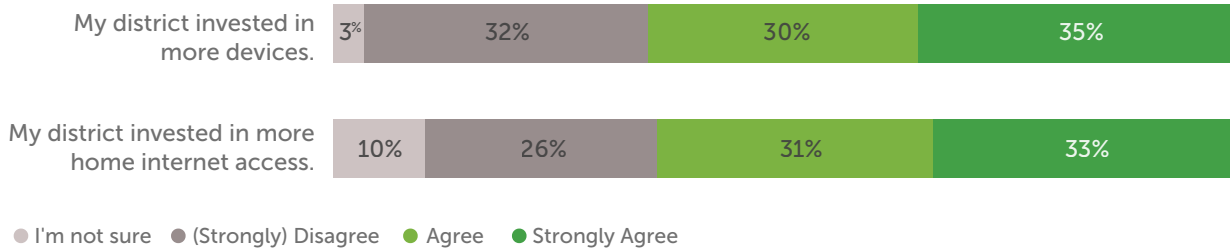
According to our analysis, 62 percent of respondents reported that teachers in their district were moderately or significantly prepared to teach in an online environment in the wake of school closures (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Teachers' Readiness to Teach in an Online Environment



Approximately two-thirds of edtech coaches agreed or strongly agreed that their community/district invested in more devices (65 percent) and home internet access (64 percent) to allow students and teachers to participate in remote learning because of school closures (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Community/District Investment in Devices and Home Internet



Findings

To learn about edtech coaches' contributions in facilitating the transition to remote instruction, we asked coaches about three facets of their experience during this time. First, we asked them to describe the roles they played in service to their administrators, teachers, families and students. Then, we asked about the challenges they encountered and how they might expect their role to change in the future. Finally, we explored the learnings that edtech coaches gleaned from their experiences supporting schools and families during school closure.

Edtech Coaches' Role in the Transition to Remote Instruction

Our survey findings indicate that during school closures in the 2019–2020 school year, edtech coaches played a key role as their school(s) and district moved to online instruction. They provided different forms of support to different stakeholders, including district and school leaders, teachers, non-teaching staff, and families, helping make the unplanned transition a more positive experience for everyone.

Support to District/School Leaders

Edtech coaches provided significant support to their school/district administrators in planning and ensuring learning continuity during school closures. As Figure 5 shows, a majority of respondent coaches reported that they significantly supported their school/district leaders by providing teacher professional development (PD) opportunities on the use of technology tools (77 percent) and effective practices and strategies (63 percent) for transitioning to online learning. A majority of respondents (75 percent) also reported that they significantly supported their school/district leaders by identifying, implementing, or expanding robust use of a learning management system (LMS) (e.g., Google Classroom, Schoology, Canvas) or use of other tools (e.g., ShowMe, Screencastify) to organize online/blended instruction.

Additionally, as indicated in Figure 5, approximately half of respondents significantly supported their school/district leaders by providing learning resources and expectations about curriculum, lessons, and activities (57 percent), and creating a plan for digital learning (49 percent). About one-third (35 percent) of

I am on the district committee for adopting and implementing Zoom accounts for teachers, so [I] provide the instructional lens to the technical team. This isn't directly supporting teachers, but will support them with the configuration of the tool suited to instructional purpose.

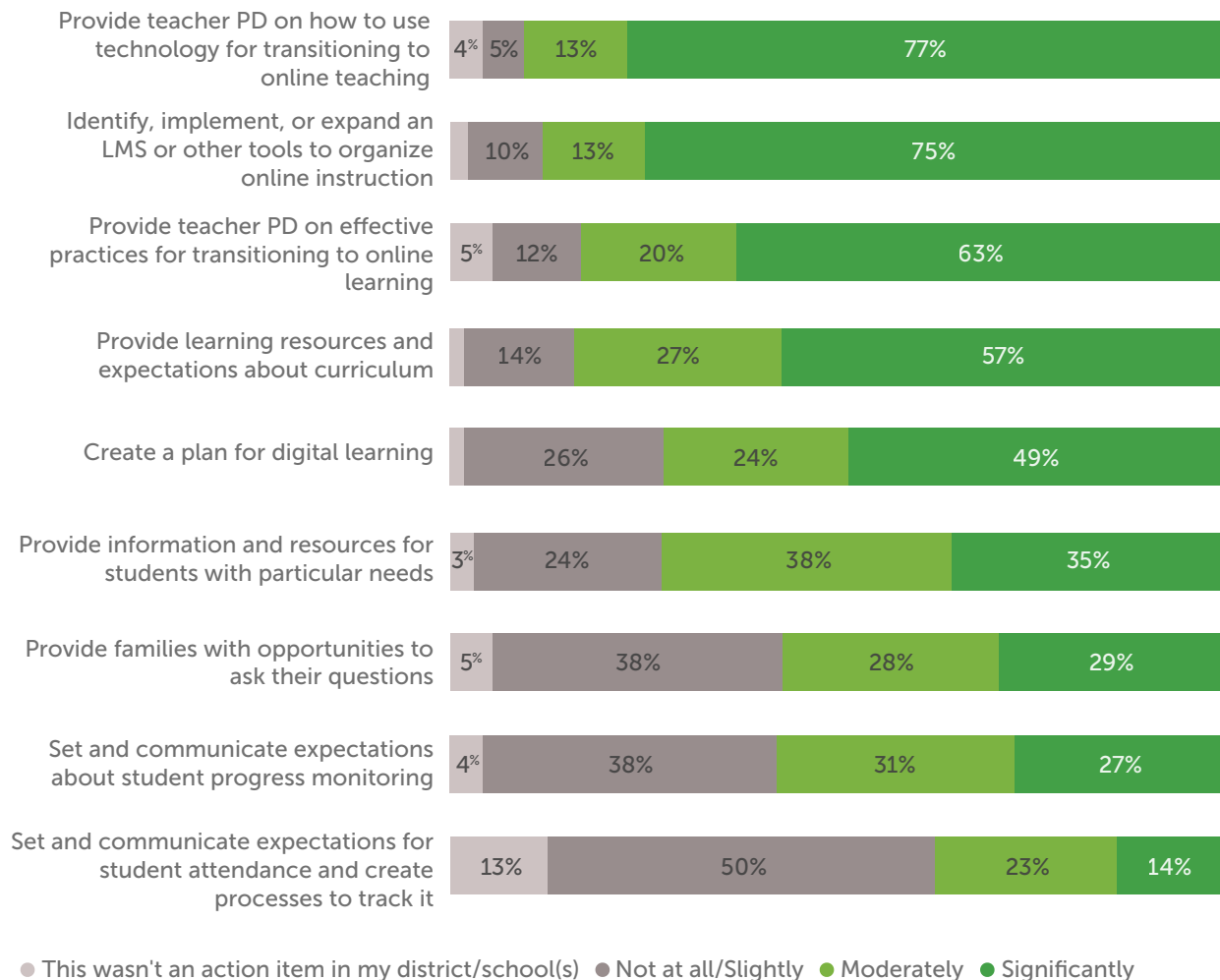
- Coach from an urban district in Washington

coaches also had a significant role in providing information and resources for supporting

students with particular needs (e.g., English learners, students with disabilities), providing families with opportunities to ask questions related to homeschooling (29 percent), and setting/communicating expectations about student progress monitoring (27 percent). In open-ended responses, some coaches reported that they also advised administrators on strategies to lower teachers' stress and foster home environments for remote learning.

I was in regular talks with the principals about what to recommend to their parents to foster a better home environment for their students.
 - Coach at a private school in California

Figure 5 Edtech Coaches' Support to District/School Leaders



Support to Teachers

The massive shift to remote learning precipitated changes in edtech coaches' daily work with teachers. Rather than mostly providing typical one-to-one structured support to a select group of teachers (i.e., deep coaching) as they once had, coaches found themselves with new and immediate challenges of a bigger group of teachers, often creating different opportunities to promptly respond to teacher challenges as they emerged.

Extent of Support to Teachers

During school closures, only 41 percent of edtech coaches provided deep coaching to their individual teachers at the same rate as or more than before COVID-19 (Figure 6). Coaches reported that they had to stop or reduce deep coaching in order to direct their attention to more teachers and diversified areas of need. In fact, **most edtech coaches reported that during the school closures, they continued to support the same teachers as before, in addition to supporting new teachers with whom they had not worked prior to school closures.**

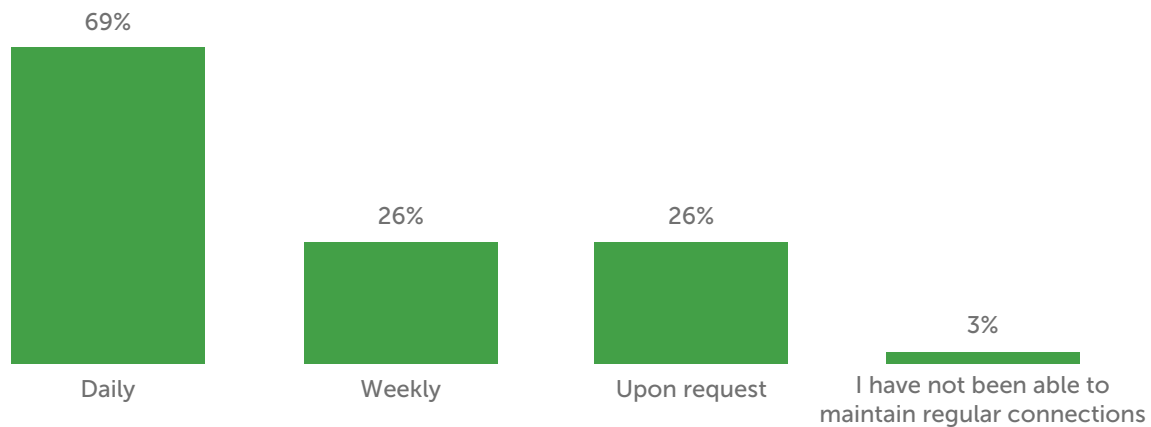
Even more so now, people book me constantly for my help and support. I don't have time to spend multiple hours with one teacher. I can give them only short spurts of my time due to the high demand. So, this plan of individual coaching really doesn't look the same anymore.
- Coach from suburban district in New Jersey

Figure 6 Deep Coaching after School Closures



While most coaches were not able to continue their deep coaching efforts as frequently as before, **they connected with their teachers on a daily basis during school closures** (Figure 7). Open-ended responses indicate that coaches typically connected with teachers daily, especially when schools first closed. This likely reflects the many challenges and questions teachers had about moving learning online that required coaches' attention. In addition to daily or weekly meetings with teachers, many coaches held additional meetings upon teacher request. Figure 8 suggests that coaches stayed available to help teachers **during and outside of normal school hours more often than before COVID-19.**

Figure 7 Frequency of Coach-Teacher Connections

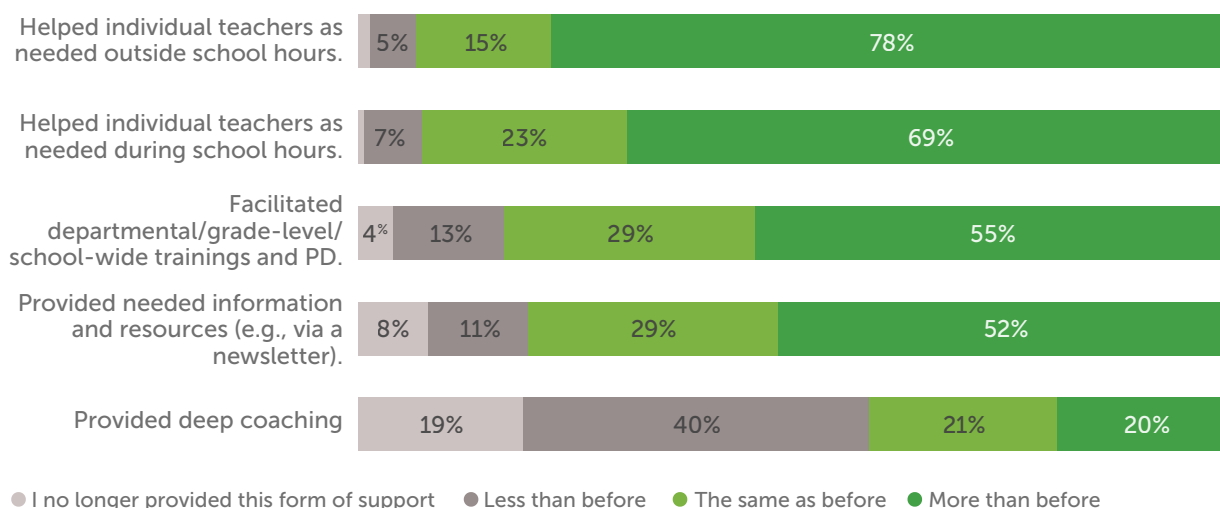


* Note: The percentages do not add to 100% because coaches were encouraged to select any or all frequencies at which they connected with their teachers during school closures.

According to our data (Figure 8), half of coaches **facilitated departmental, grade-level, or school-wide PD and training (e.g., question-and-answer sessions and webinars) more than they did before closures** (55 percent) and provided needed information and resources via a newsletter or other forms of communication, such as a website (52 percent). Some coaches reported in open-ended responses that they created other learning resources for teachers, including new professional learning communities (e.g., Facebook group for all staff) where teachers could ask each other questions, and a learning library of PD topics that teachers could access if they weren't able to work with the coach due to scheduling conflicts.

I daily updated a website of resources [and] weekly sent a newsletter highlighting issues, apps, ideas, [and] questions/solutions. I was available daily by request and supported individual teacher queries/needs.
- Coach from a suburban district in Pennsylvania

Figure 8 Change in Mechanisms through which Coaches Supported Teachers

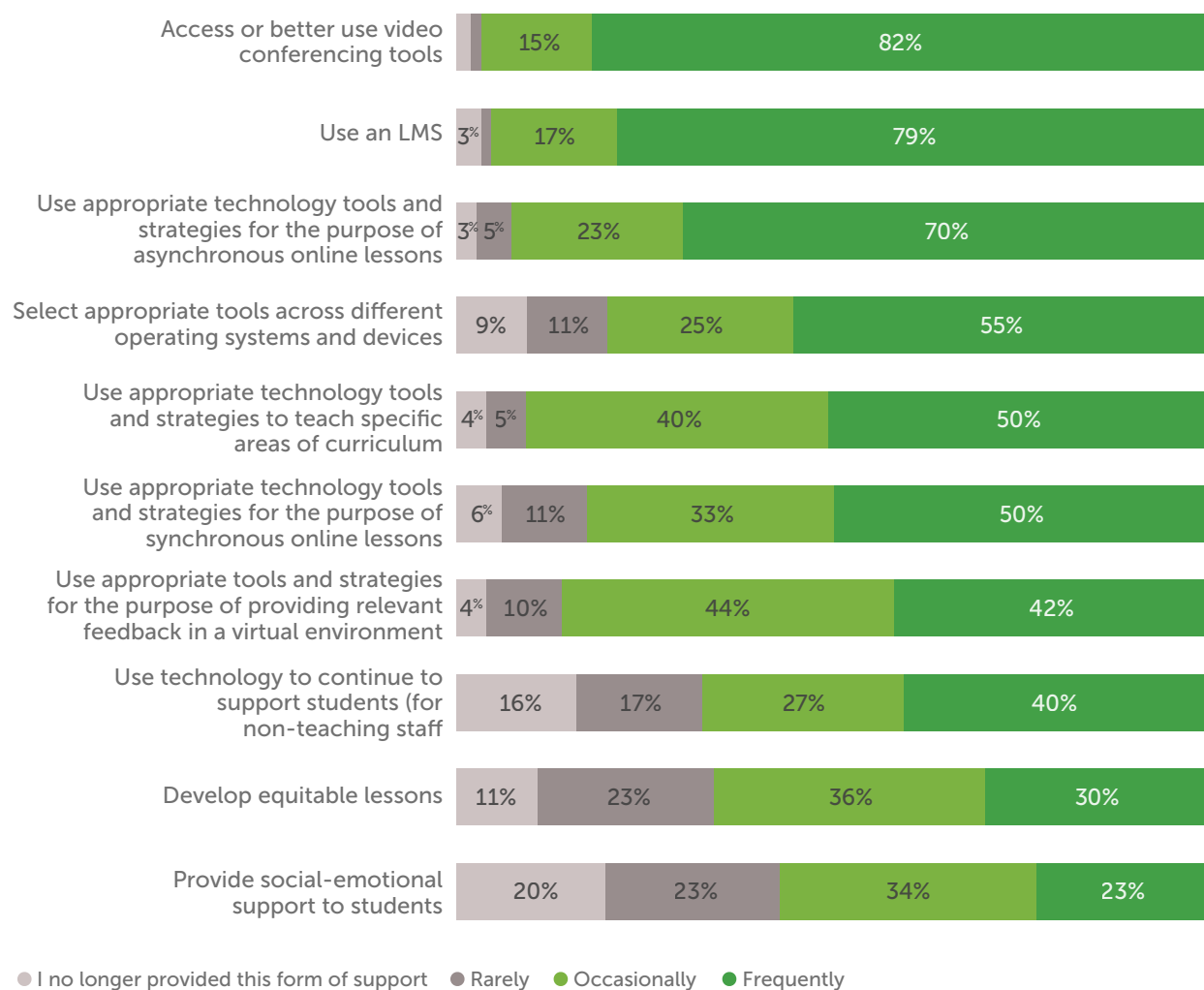


Areas of Support to Teachers

By adjusting the timing and form of their interactions with teachers, coaches adapted their support to reflect the new challenges brought about by school closures. Coaches also adapted the content and areas of their support to help teachers better adapt their practice to the realities of remote learning. As Figure 9 shows, a majority (82 percent) of edtech coaches reported that **they frequently helped teachers access or better utilize video conferencing tools**, such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, and Microsoft Teams. They also **frequently trained teachers and/or students on how to use an LMS or other tools for online/blended learning** (79 percent), and **helped teachers use appropriate technology tools and strategies to teach asynchronous online lessons** (70 percent).

Moreover, approximately half of coaches frequently helped their teachers select appropriate tools across different operating systems (e.g., iOS, Android) and devices (e.g., desktop, Chromebook, iPad, mobile devices) (55 percent), as well as use appropriate technology tools and strategies to teach specific areas of the curriculum (50 percent) and facilitate synchronous online lessons (50 percent).

Figure 9 Edtech Coaches' Areas of Support to Teachers



Furthermore, about 40 percent of coaches reported that they frequently supported their teachers in using appropriate tools and strategies to provide meaningful and relevant feedback virtually. Many other coaches (40 percent) extended their support to non-teaching staff (e.g., counselors, nurses, paraprofessionals), helping them use technology to continue to support students.

Some edtech coaches went beyond technology-related support and frequently helped teachers develop lessons with equity and inclusivity in mind (e.g., lessons for English language learners or students with disabilities) and provide social-emotional support to students (e.g., managing stress, developing self-regulation). Open-ended responses indicate that coaches also provided teachers with social-emotional support by helping them overcome the stress and frustration experienced daily during school closures.

I assisted them with selecting assistive technology for their students. Sometimes I was just there to lend an ear so they could talk about their frustrations when the internet was slow or they were confused about something.
- Coach at a private school in Pennsylvania

Support to Families

During these unsettling times, edtech coaches extended their support not only to educators but also to families who were figuring out how to navigate at-home learning. Edtech coaches supported families in three main ways: they assisted with the use of technology, provided information around appropriate home environments for learning, and served as a liaison between families and the school/district.

According to Figure 10, more than 60 percent of respondent coaches reported that they frequently or occasionally helped families with IT tasks (e.g., accessing the internet, distributing and/or using devices) directly or indirectly and trained families on how to use an online platform or LMS to support online/blended instructional activities.

Nearly half (46 percent) of coaches frequently or occasionally shared best practices for fostering a home environment that supports remote learning with families, such as a remote learning schedule for parents to use with students or best practices around online student safety and responsibility. Open-ended responses indicate that many coaches played an important role in connecting families and the district/school during distance learning.

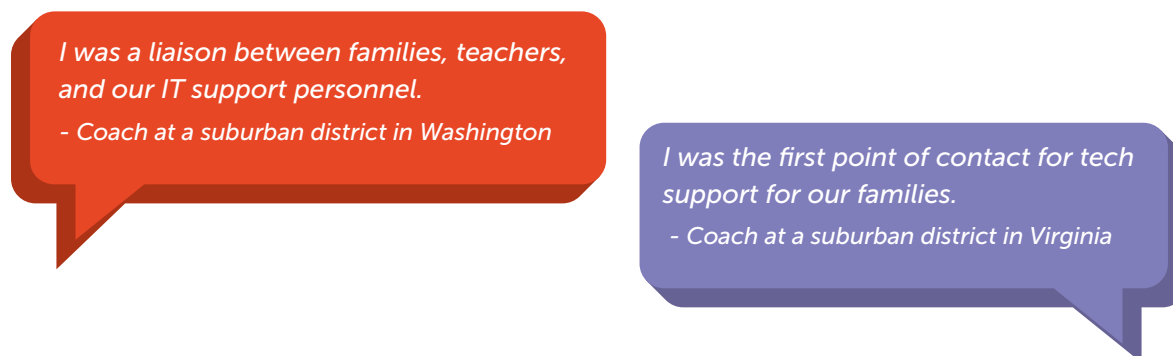
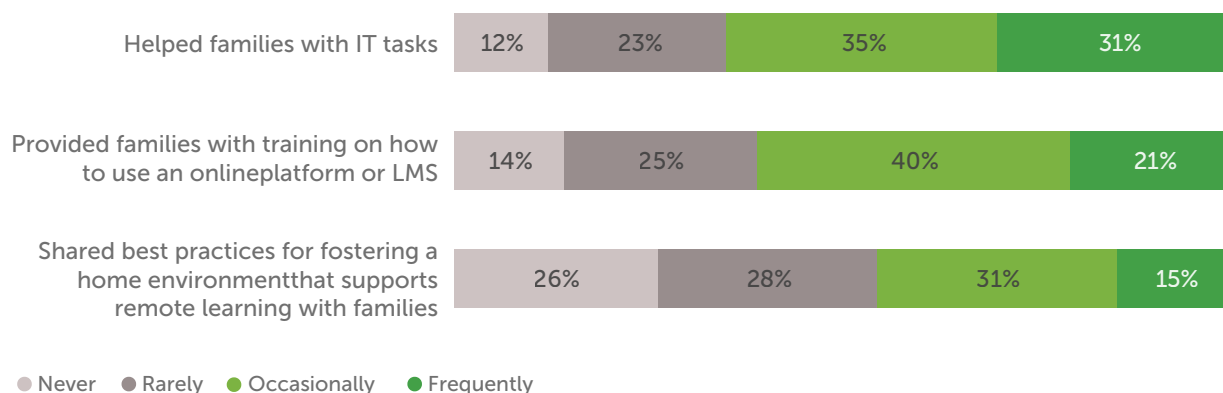


Figure 10 Edtech Coaches Support to Families

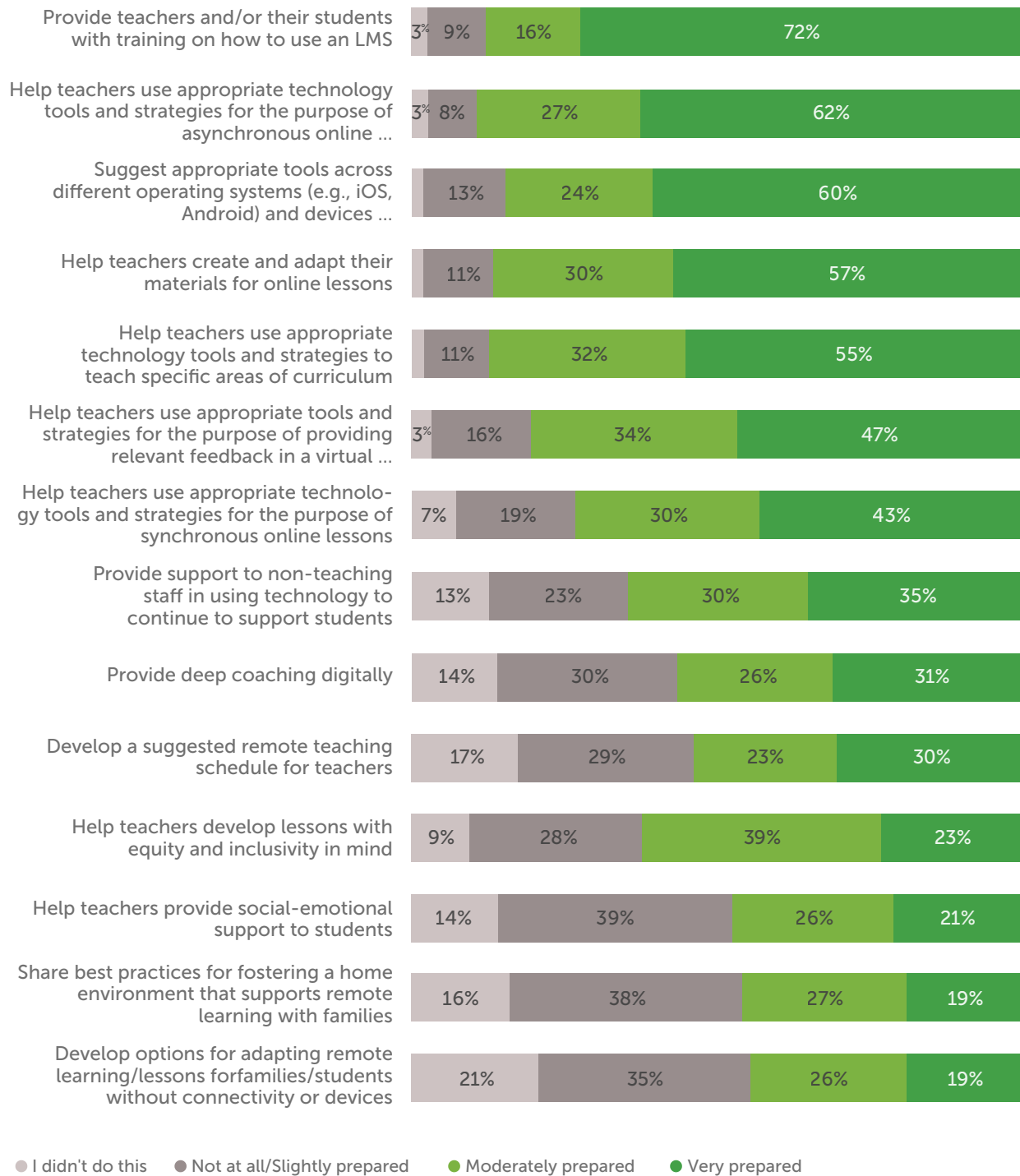


Edtech Coaches' Challenges in Supporting the Transition to Remote Instruction

In spite of their effort and capability in helping administrators, teachers, non-teaching staff, and families during school closures in different ways, edtech coaches also stated that they experienced challenges in some areas. As Figure 11 shows, **while more than 70 percent of respondents were moderately or very prepared to help teachers select and use appropriate technology tools and strategies for different purposes, on average more than one-third of respondents reported that at the onset of school closures, they were “slightly or not prepared” to support teachers in ways not always related to digital instruction**, such as:

- Helping teachers provide social-emotional support to students (e.g., managing stress, developing self-regulation);
- Sharing best practices for fostering a home environment that supports remote learning with families (e.g., develop a suggested remote learning schedule for parents to use with students or share best practices with families about online student safety and responsibility);
- Developing options for adapting online learning/lessons for families/students without connectivity or devices;
- Providing deep coaching digitally;
- Developing a suggested remote teaching schedule for teachers; and
- Helping teachers develop lessons with equity and inclusivity in mind (e.g., for English learners or students with disabilities).

Figure 11 Edtech Coaches' Readiness in Providing Support during 2019-2020 School Closures



Edtech Coaches' Role during the Next School Year

As the 2019–2020 school year drew to a close, it became increasingly clear that remote learning may extend into the following school year. Respondent coaches felt varying degrees of readiness for the challenges that a second consecutive semester of closures could bring. **A majority of edtech coaches reported that they will be significantly prepared to:**

- Provide digital PD sessions for groups of teachers (83 percent);
- Support teacher collaboration with each other (72 percent);
- Communicate teachers' online instruction challenges to district personnel (68 percent); and
- Help teachers create lessons and activities in ways that improve students' involvement in distance learning (66 percent).

That said, fewer coaches felt significantly prepared to do the following during the next school year; these are the areas where school and district administration should support their edtech coaches:

- Adapt the content of pre-service PD days (prior to the start of the school year) to better prepare new teachers for remote learning (57 percent)
- Provide deep coaching digitally (55 percent)
- Help teachers differentiate to meet the needs of diverse learners (51 percent)
- Support non-teaching staff, such as counselors and paraprofessionals (48 percent)

Coaches reported that they are least significantly prepared to help teachers provide social-emotional support to students, or to help the families of students cultivate a home environment that supports remote learning, with only a third of respondents feeling "significantly prepared" to provide these forms of support.

I agree with a phrase that became popular: "Maslow before Bloom." Attending to student context and [the] trauma of the sudden shift was the first priority. We need more training on the trauma experienced in this pandemic, and will continue to experience especially if we don't go back to in-person teaching.

- Coach in a suburban district in Pennsylvania

Deep Coaching in the Coming School Year

While most edtech coaches were not able to provide as much deep coaching during the 2019–2020 school closures (Figure 6), 70 percent of them reported that if school closures extend into the coming school year, they plan to provide deep coaching online. Several coaches identified **deep coaching as being even more “useful” and “welcomed” by teachers** than before COVID-19 because now, as a coach in a suburban district in Washington explained, “teachers understand the benefits that technology can provide to student learning in or outside of the classroom.”

While coaches anticipate continuing to support teachers in a typical coaching model, they expect several aspects of deep coaching to change if delivered online rather than in person. Specifically, as shown in Figure 12, a majority of coaches expect that modeling or co-teaching a lesson (85 percent), observing a lesson (80 percent), and developing a practical plan with each teacher for the implementation of a new teaching practice (78 percent) will change moderately or significantly. While 30 percent of coaches reported that meeting with teachers for reflection will change slightly or not at all, 30 percent of coaches indicated that these reflection meetings would change significantly for them if conducted virtually. Coaches also expected change in their strategies to recruit teachers. One coach stated that they would do more deep coaching with teachers who are less comfortable with technology. Some coaches expressed concern that building trust with teachers will take longer with online coaching.

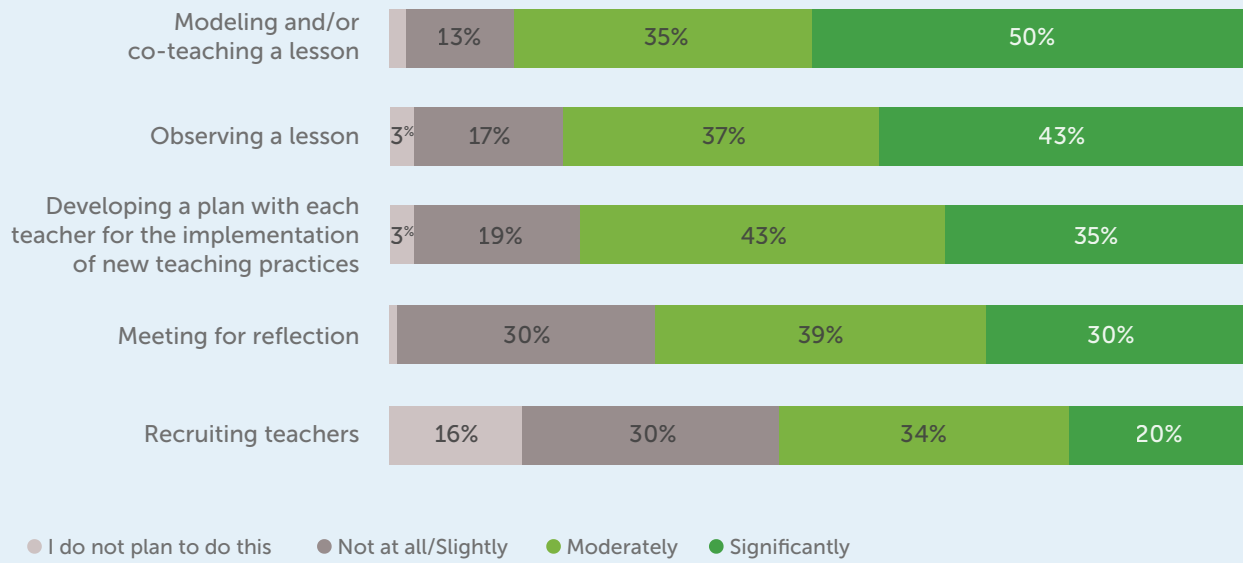
I think deep coaching will be more useful than ever to ensure teachers are selecting appropriate tools and utilizing them in the best way to include all students and provide meaningful and impactful learning opportunities for students.

- Coach in a rural district in Pennsylvania

If this [school year] is online, I believe I will have to work harder at developing those relationships with teachers because I will not be able to see them face-to-face every day. I won't be able to stop by their physical classroom to check in on them. I need to make more of an effort to have virtual meetings and follow-ups that continue to develop those relationships.

- Coach in a urban district in Texas

Figure 12 Expected Change in Different Aspects of Deep Coaching

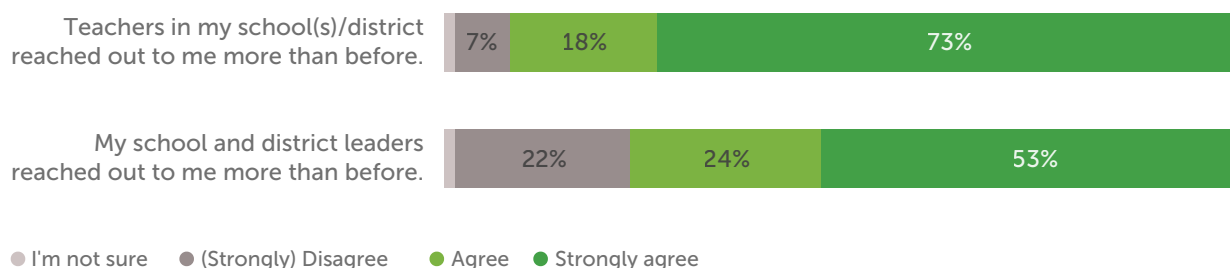


Suddenly Online: Lessons Learned for the Future

As a result of school closures due to COVID-19, both administrators and teachers appreciated the value of edtech coaches more than they previously did. As indicated in Figure 13, a majority (91 percent) of edtech coaches reported that their teachers reached out to them more than before as a result of school closures. In open-ended responses, many coaches reiterated this sentiment and explained that this was especially true for reluctant teachers who did not work with coaches in any capacity prior to the school closures. More teachers now see the role of edtech coaches as more than providing IT support and refer to them as an instructional resource.

I feel significantly more valued by my teachers at my site and around the district. Many teachers have noted how they would have been unable to provide distance learning during school closures if it weren't for my support.
- Coach in suburban district in Arizona

Figure 13: Perception of the Edtech Coach's Role



Similarly, 77 percent of respondents reported that their school and/or district leaders reached out to them more than before because of the shift to remote learning (Figure 13). Many of these coaches explained that their school and/or district leaders relied on them to provide feedback on distance learning plans. That said, 22 percent of respondents did not feel that their school/district administrators reached out to them more than before schools closed. These coaches lamented that their experience and expertise were ignored and they were left out of important conversations. **Some coaches learned that they needed to make themselves heard and amplify their impact during school closures.** "I will maintain a higher profile in the future and communicate the value of edtech in both in-school and remote learning," said a coach from a suburban district in South Carolina.

Districts also understood the value of technology in providing equitable learning opportunities for both students and teachers. For example, one coach from a suburban district in Indiana explained that the transition to online instruction has been helpful to their English learners (EL): “Our district has a lot of EL students. We’ve noticed that some of them have really thrived with video instruction. The ability to slow down videos, rewatch them, and/or use captioning has been beneficial for many students. We definitely want to push the use of flipped, differentiated instruction via video moving forward.”

The same coach also pointed out that they have seen a big uptick in teacher attendance for their summer PD sessions, which are being offered online this year: “We’re seeing more people being able to come because they don’t have to schedule babysitters or make the drive in from neighboring communities. While there is a lot of value in the live interaction of our face-to-face sessions, we are definitely looking at scheduling some virtual or hybrid sessions in future summers and also at providing more videos that teachers can watch at their convenience.”

Finally, coaches understood more than before the importance of creating and maintaining personal relationships with teachers in coaching work, especially when that work is online. Some coaches explained that the non-evaluative collaboration they had started with teachers before closures helped with their transition to remote instruction. This safe environment made teachers feel comfortable being vulnerable and asking questions without fear of judgment.

This experience reinforced how essential the aspects of relationship building are in building your coaching practice. I felt like right away teachers not only needed my support but also trusted me and weren't afraid to be vulnerable around me during these uncertain times. They knew there wasn't any judgment and they could be honest about how they were feeling regarding their uncertainties with not only the technology but the pedagogical practice of remote teaching and learning. Relationship building and curating trust among my teachers was critical in getting everyone up and running so quickly with online learning.

- Coach in a suburban district in Pennsylvania

Summary of Key Findings

- When suddenly confronted with the challenge of supporting their schools/district in the transition to online instruction, edtech coaches quickly switched gears and stopped or reduced their typical deep coaching work to support their administrators, teachers, and families. They supported **more teachers** than before closures and stayed **connected with them on a regular basis during and after school hours**.
- As a result of school closures, **both administrators and teachers, but particularly teachers, appreciated the value of edtech coaches more** than they previously did.
- Edtech coaches significantly **supported their administrators** in planning and ensuring continuity of learning by: 1) providing teacher PD on effective practices, strategies, and technology tools for transitioning to online instruction; 2) identifying, implementing, or expanding different tools to organize online/blended instruction; and 3) providing learning resources and expectations about curriculum.
- Edtech coaches significantly **supported families** by: 1) assisting with the use of technology; 2) providing information around appropriate home environments for learning; and 3) serving as a liaison between families and the school/district.
- Edtech coaches significantly **supported their teachers** in delivering online instruction by helping them: 1) access or better utilize video conferencing tools; 2) use an LMS or other tools for online/blended learning; and 3) use appropriate technology tools and strategies to teach asynchronous online lessons.
- While a majority of edtech coaches were prepared to help their community select and use appropriate technology tools and strategies for different purposes, **one-third of them were not prepared** to support their community in ways not specifically related to digital instruction, including:
 - sharing practices that support at-home learning;
 - developing suggested remote teaching schedules for teachers;
 - developing and adapting lessons for families without connectivity or devices;
 - helping teachers provide social-emotional support to students; and
 - helping teachers develop equitable lessons.
- **For the next school year, edtech coaches feel significantly prepared** to:
 - provide digital PD sessions for different groups of teachers;
 - support teacher collaboration with each other;
 - communicate teachers' online instruction challenges to district personnel; and
 - help teachers create lessons and activities in ways that improve students' involvement in distance learning.

- Edtech coaches **need additional support from their administrators** in:
 - adapting the content of pre-service PD days to better prepare new teachers for remote learning;
 - providing deep coaching digitally;
 - helping teachers differentiate to meet the needs of diverse learners; and
 - supporting non-teaching staff.
- Even though most edtech coaches were not able to provide as much deep coaching during 2019–2020 school closures, a majority of them **plan to provide deep coaching online** if school closures extend into the coming school year. **Coaches identified deep coaching as being even more “useful” and “welcomed” by teachers than before COVID-19.**
- While coaches anticipate continuing to support teachers in a typical coaching model, they expect **several aspects of deep coaching to change** if delivered online, including how they model or co-teach a lesson, observe a lesson, and develop a practical plan with each teacher for the implementation of a new teaching practice.

Conclusion

[Districts lose millions of dollars a year in unused education technology products](#), often because teachers lack the professional development support that would help them strategically incorporate technology in their practice. Our research on [the Dynamic Learning Project \(DLP\) pilot](#) instructional technology coaching program shows that districts are more likely to see a return on their investment in technology when they also provide teachers the support they need to implement it in their classrooms in meaningful ways. By harnessing the power of edtech coaches, [the DLP districts and schools](#) have been able to empower educators to overcome challenges and fears around using technology in teaching and learning. As a result of their collaboration with their technology coach, DLP teachers saw positive changes in their use of technology, in their teaching practices, and in their students' engagement and learning. The findings of the current survey show that edtech coaches can also be a very adaptive resource that can help a school system be resilient in the face of massive new challenges. With their knowledge of teachers in the district, they could rapidly shift the focus of coaching to support what was urgently needed.

What does this mean going forward? We expect that pandemic-driven urgent needs will continue to arise. We also anticipate that many districts will be buying new technology and/or seeking to use technology more effectively. Edtech coaches are important to that. Most importantly, COVID-19 has changed the context. Prior to the pandemic, technology may have been seen by many as one track in a district's instructional program but may have been a "nice to have" and not an "essential" track. Now that has all changed. There is no question that using technology well is now and will continue to be essential for all teachers and a core of every district's instructional program. As such, edtech coaches should be seen not just as specialists in one aspect of instructional improvement, but as a core asset that is essential to sustaining quality at the heart of every district's instructional program.