

# Digital Resources and Pandemic Pedagogy

What new research tells us about teachers' challenges in accessing and using online instructional materials



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This blog post is part of a series unpacking findings from the American Instructional Resources Survey, a project of the RAND Corporation, and other RAND surveys related to teaching during the pandemic. You can read the first post in the series [here](#), and you can read more about the survey [here](#).

As vaccine rollouts continue to expand, many students and teachers around the country are in the process of returning to some version of in-person instruction. A year or more of online and hybrid learning has renewed conversations around many aspects of instructional materials: how school leaders select them, how teachers use and perceive them, and whether they support or impede student learning in this new reality of online learning. The [first post](#) in this series explored key findings from the 2019 and [2020 AIRS Teacher Survey](#) and [Fall 2020 COVID-19 Response Teacher Survey](#), projects of the RAND corporation, that unpack which materials teachers are using most frequently and why. This post will explore some of the greatest challenges to teaching and learning with those materials during the pandemic, including access to reliable internet and the devices to use it, and teacher capacity and professional learning.

According to the [2020 AIRS survey](#), 89% of teachers reported that they somewhat or strongly agree that teaching and learning aligned to state standards prepares students for their future, however, 61% believe their students “need something different” than what is outlined in the standards. The latter may help explain why this same survey found that so many teachers have turned to online instructional materials outside of what is recommended to meet those standards, such as new digital learning tools or content they curate themselves. As a result, this trend toward digital tools has presented teachers with a new set of challenges that existed before the pandemic and have been grossly exacerbated since.

One of the biggest challenges highlighted in the 2020 AIRS survey and the COVID-19 survey, fielded in spring and fall of 2020 respectively, underscores the impact of the [digital divide](#), or the gap between students with reliable access to home internet—and the devices to use it—and those without. In the AIRS survey, 21% of teachers overall reported that 50% or less of their students have home internet access, compared to 29% of teachers in

schools with a majority of their students relying on free and reduced priced meals, or FARMs. In this same survey, 72% of teachers reported never receiving training on how to provide accessible instruction for all students, regardless of resources available at home. Yet, in the Fall 2020 COVID-19 survey, 82% reported that they still send schoolwork home to students with the expectation that it would be completed, and 83% reported providing these instructional materials and assignments through an online learning management system, or LMS.

The COVID-19 survey also showed that, as of October 2020, about 40% of teachers reported that their school was engaged in online-only learning and another 38% reported the use of hybrid models. Teachers from schools with a majority of students relying on FARMs also overwhelmingly reported that their schools were still open only online, relying primarily on an LMS and requiring assignment completion at similar rates to the average teacher surveyed—without receiving any guidance on how to provide accessible instruction to the students whose access to internet or digital tools is even more limited.

The Fall 2020 COVID-19 survey indicates that most teachers have spent significantly more hours working since the start of the pandemic, with a 19% increase overall in teachers working 56 or more hours per week, and a 17% increase for teachers at schools serving majority FARMs students. ([Research from Brookings](#) shows that before the pandemic, teachers were averaging about 42 hours a week.) Despite—or perhaps because of—the longer hours, teachers in the COVID-19 survey overwhelmingly indicated a need for additional support from school leadership, particularly around online learning that promotes student engagement, instructional accessibility, and curriculum adaptation. The AIRS survey shows that teachers believed this type of support was not available even prior to the onset of pandemic—it was needed then and it's especially needed now.

Although 82% of teachers in the AIRS survey found professional learning activities to be at least somewhat effective in helping them meet students' needs, AIRS data suggest that current professional development training is often still too broad, too infrequent, and only moderately helpful. Data from the same survey show that even before the pandemic, most teachers indicated general workshops and teacher training were only offered 1 to 3 times per year, while training on specific materials and how to integrate them into subject areas was offered seldom, if at all.

In the Fall 2020 COVID-19 survey, 61% of teachers reported not yet receiving training during the 2020-2021 school year (which includes summer 2020) on how to provide remote instructional opportunities that are accessible to all students, regardless of resources at home. Half reportedly have not received training on how to provide remote instructional opportunities that support students' social emotional wellbeing, and another 21% had not received training on how to use virtual learning management platforms, the very technology most frequently used to teach.

The research from RAND underscores the depth and breadth of both the challenges that teachers face and the expectations they are being asked to meet. Without clearly acknowledging and accounting for these expressed needs for better support and guidance, these challenges to effective instruction will likely continue.

The next and final post in this series will explore some of the opportunities and policy levers for meeting these challenges for teachers and students.

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