

Distance Learning Instructional Minutes under COVID-19: Insights from Educational Institutions

Research Methodology

EAB Researchers Identified Distance Learning Instructional Minute Allocations at Districts, Charter School Network, and International Independent Schools

EAB researchers searched publicly available studies and articles on best practices for allocating age-appropriate instructional minutes in a distance learning environment and report an absence of robust research literature on this topic. While EAB researchers did find related studies that discuss optimal video length in distance learning—such as in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) study [How Video Production Affects Student Engagement](#)—EAB researchers did not find studies that discuss how to differentiate overall instructional time among grade levels in distance learning. To that end, EAB researchers instead investigated how educational institutions—including multiple school districts—have adjusted their instructional minute allocations as they shift to distance learning.

Given states' relatively recent decision to close districts, EAB researchers note that many districts have not yet published comprehensive plans for distance learning on their websites. For example, from a review of the Center of Reinventing Public Education's evolving, public database [District Responses to COVID-19 School Closures](#) (see "District Response Database" tab), EAB researchers note—as of March 26, 2020—only four of the 47 profiled districts explicitly provided information on instructional time: **Boulder Valley School District** in Colorado, **Hillsborough County Public Schools** in Florida, **Miami-Dade County Schools** in Florida, and **Orange County Public Schools** in Florida.

Due to limited examples of districts that provide information on differentiating instructional time by grade level, EAB researchers also explored the charter school network **Success Academy** in New York and international, independent school examples to supplement insights from districts. Specifically, EAB researchers explored the instructional time approach at international, independent schools in Asia, where administrators had to close schools earlier (compared to the U.S.) and thus have employed distance learning for a longer period. Administrators at these independent schools were more likely to publish more detailed instructional time expectations by grade level/range. EAB researchers profiled instructional time approaches at the **American School in Japan**, **Hong Kong International School**, and **Shanghai American School** in China.

While districts must adhere to state-specific mandates on instructional time, charter schools and independent schools have more flexibility with these mandates. For example, in the Education Commission of the States' [50-State Comparison](#) of charter school rules, only three states—Kentucky, Oregon, and Pennsylvania—

explicitly stipulate that charter schools must adhere to state instructional time requirements. Further, district administrators should be aware that international, independent schools adhere to different instructional time requirements than do districts in the U.S. Thus, district administrators should first ensure that instructional time allocations at profiled charter and independent schools align with state and federal requirements before adopting similar requirements.

State Requirements

Districts May Receive Some Flexibility with State-Mandated Instructional Time Requirements During COVID-19

In general, districts must adhere to state-specific policies on minimum instructional hours during the school day and the school year. In [Virginia](#), districts must provide a minimum of 3 hours of instruction per school day for kindergarten students and a minimum of 5.5 hours for students in grades 1-12. Virginia districts must provide a minimum of 540 hours per school year for kindergarten students and a minimum of 990 hours for students in grades 1-12.

However, due to the unique circumstances triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of Virginia may receive some flexibility on instructional time as districts transition to distance learning. According to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) resource [Graduation Requirements, Awarding of Credits, and Continuity of Learning](#), VDOE plans to address seat time as a separate communication upon completion of state and federal waiver processes (**page one**). As of March 26, 2020, the state had not waived instructional time mandates for districts.

District administrators in Virginia should consult the VDOE web page [COVID-19 updates](#) for evolving updates that affect district operations.

Other states have provided school districts with more flexibility in instructional minute requirements. The state of California recently waived instructional days and minute requirements for districts, as profiled in the article [Uncharted Territory: How 10 Local School Districts Are Tackling the Transition to Distance Learning](#). Similarly, the [Department of Public Instruction in Wisconsin](#) recently announced that districts may seek waivers from state instructional time requirements. Lastly, the [Louisiana Department of Education](#) declared, on March 13, 2020, a temporary suspension of instructional minute requirements for distance courses.

District Examples

Reduce Screen Time and Increase Offline Enrichment Opportunities for Pre-K and Kindergarten Students

In the article [Costanza: Online Education is Difficult for the Littlest Learners. Here's Some Help for School Leaders, Teachers, and Families](#), Victor Costanza—the chief academic officer at [Teaching Strategies](#)—emphasizes the challenge of translating pre-K education to distance learning. Effective early childhood education relies on “positive face-to-face interactions between adults and children to meet developmental milestones.” To that end, as administrators design distance learning schedules for pre-K and kindergarten students, administrators should limit the amount of screen time and provide suggestions for enrichment opportunities between students and their parents.

The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) and [American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\)](#) recommend that children between the ages of two and five should not exceed more than one hour of screen time. Accordingly, at [Northshore School District](#) in Washington, administrators expect pre-K students to spend only 30 minutes per day online. Administrators allocate one total hour of instructional time for pre-K students, which includes two, 15-minute blocks of screen time (i.e., online story time, online learning activity).

For pre-K students, administrators should prioritize offline enrichment activities. Administrators at some districts choose to provide time recommendations for these activities. For example, administrators at [Northshore School District](#) suggest that parents encourage pre-K students to complete 90 or more minutes of play (i.e., choice time/free play, movement activity, and outdoors play) and 40 or more minutes of “life skills” (i.e., clean-up time, family time).

Further, administrators should intersperse periods of instructional time for younger students with breaks, as discussed in this [article](#) from the 74 Million. **Chapter 2: Managing Instructional Time** of the book [Key Elements of Classroom Management](#)—profiled by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)—notes that younger students generally have shorter attention spans. The book explains that administrators can roughly estimate the number of minutes of a child’s attention span by simply adding two to their age. For example, a six-year-old student has an average attention span of eight minutes. At **Northshore School District**, administrators divide the time for [pre-K](#) learning activities into four, 15-minute chunks. In the [sample daily schedule](#) for pre-K students, administrators suggest that students take a break after each 15-minute learning activity (e.g., play outside for 30 minutes). At **Palo Alto Unified School District** in California, administrators recommend that [kindergarten students](#) spend 20-30 minutes per day on reading and explicitly state that parents should “feel free to break it up into smaller chunks: 10 minutes, two to three times a day.”

Multiple Districts Provide Recommendations on Instructional Time for Distance Learning, and Some Differentiate Between Elementary and Secondary Students

Administrators at some districts vary instructional time recommendations based on grade level, including [North Shore School District](#), [Palo Alto Unified School District](#), and [Los Altos School District](#) (CA). For example, administrators at **North Shore School District** increase the amount of recommended instructional time by grade range: pre-K, K-2, grades 3-5, grades 6-8, and grades 9-12. Similarly, administrators at **Palo Alto Unified School District** allocate different amounts of instructional time for different grade ranges: pre-K, K, grades 1-2, grades 3-5, and grades 6-12. Across all three districts, administrators require younger students to complete fewer instructional minutes than older students.

Below, EAB researchers present the three district approaches, as profiled in the article [Uncharted Territory: How 10 Local School Districts Are Tackling the Transition to Distance Learning](#), **Palo Alto Unified School District’s** [School Closure Resources](#) web page, and **Northshore School District’s** [Home Learning Resources](#) web page.

District Approaches to Adjusting Instructional Time by Grade Level During Distance Learning

Northshore School District

Administrators recommend a daily instructional time total of:

- **Pre-K:** 60 minutes (does not include "Play" and "Life Skills")
- **K-2:** 75+ minutes
- **3-5:** 90+ minutes
- **6-8:** 220+ minutes
- **9-12:** 260+ minutes

See table on next page for breakdown of instructional time per grade level.

Palo Alto Unified School District

Administrators recommend a daily instructional time total of:

- **Pre-K:** 45 minutes
- **K:** 55-75 minutes
- **1-2:** 70-105 minutes
- **3-5:** 105-135 minutes
- **6-12:** 60+ minutes per course each day

Los Altos School District

Administrators recommend a daily instructional time total of:

- **Younger students:** 2-3 hours
- **Older students:** 4-6 hours

Administrators do not specify grade ranges associated with "younger" and "older" students.

Palo Alto Unified School District outlines instructional time guidelines for PK-5 students in the [School Closure Resources](#) web page (see "Elementary Resource Links" in the "Flexible Learning Chronicles" section).

Daily PK-12 Schedule at Northshore School District

Administrators can find a weekly schedule example for each grade range on each hyperlinked webpage. In addition, **Northshore School District** provides suggested activities specifically for [English learners](#), [students with special needs](#), and [highly capable students](#).

Grade Range	Daily Allocation of Instructional Minutes by Subject Area	Total Daily Instructional Time	Highlights
Pre-K	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning Activities (e.g., story time): 60 minutes • Play (e.g., free play): 90+ minutes • Life Skills (e.g., family time): 40+ minutes 	60 minutes (does not include "Play" and "Life Skills")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrators break down time allocation within each set of activities (e.g., "Play")
K-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading: 60+ minutes • Math: 15+ minutes 	75+ minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to daily time allocations, administrators expect students to spend 40 minutes per week for reading and math on i-Ready (online assessment and instruction program)
3-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading: 60+ minutes • Math: 30+ minutes 	90+ minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>See above</i>
6-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English Language Arts (ELA): 60+ minutes • Math: 40+ minutes • Science: 60 minutes • Social Studies: 60 minutes 	220+ minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to daily time allocations, administrators expect students to spend 40 minutes per week for ELA and math on i-Ready
9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ELA: 80 minutes • Math: 60 minutes • Science: 60 minutes • Social Studies: 60 minutes 	260+ minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrators encourage juniors and seniors enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses to complete activities in Khan Academy and/or AP Student Central

In contrast, administrators at some districts do not vary instructional time requirements based on grade level—or even between elementary and secondary students more broadly—during distance learning. Instead, administrators may adjust instructional time per course for all students, adjust total instructional time for all students, or even maintain a normal school schedule. EAB researchers present these alternative approaches—gathered from the Center of Reinventing Public Education’s database [District Responses to COVID-19 School Closures](#)—below.

Alternative District Approaches to Instructional Time During Distance Learning

1

Adjust Instructional Time Per Course for All Students

- Administrators at **Miami-Dade County Schools** recommend 45-60 minutes of instruction per course each day for K-12 students.
- Administrators at **Orange County Public Schools** recommend 30-45 minutes of instruction per course each day. Administrators appear to designate this time allocation for all K-12 students.

2

Adjust Total Instructional Time for All Students

- Administrators at **Boulder Valley School District**, which plans to transition to distance learning on March 30, 2020, recommend that students complete four hours of schoolwork each day. Administrators do not specify the amount of instructional time per course.

3

Maintain Normal School Schedule

- Administrators at **Hillsborough County Public Schools** plan to resume normal instructional hours via distance learning starting March 30, 2020.

Charter School Examples

Success Academy Charter School Network Differentiates Instructional Time by Grade Level for PK-12 Students

In the article [Success Academy Goes Virtual: New York City's Largest Charter Network Shares How It's Restructuring to Provide Online Learning](#), the 74 Million profiles how **Success Academy** decreased instructional time for elementary, middle, and high school students as they transition to distance learning.

Administrators decreased instructional time most significantly for elementary school students. Students in higher grades must meet higher instructional minute requirements. K-2 students complete 2.5 hours of daily instructional time (i.e., excludes breaks). Students in grades 3-4 complete 3.5 hours of instruction, students in grades 5-8 complete 5.25 hours of instruction, and students in grades 9-12 complete 7.5 hours of instruction. (The calculation of instructional hours includes electives but excludes advisory and breaks.)

District administrators can review the **Success Academy [daily schedule](#)**—which breaks down instructional time per course—in the **Appendix (page nine)** of this document.

International, Independent School Examples

Supplement One Hour of Instructional Time with Enrichment Activities for Pre-K Students

For pre-K students, administrators at profiled international, independent schools allocate one total hour of instructional time each day, with less than 30 minutes of

time per subject area. Similar to at **Northshore School District** and **Palo Alto Unified School District**, administrators at the **American School in Japan** and **Shanghai American School** supplement the hour of instructional time with enrichment activities that students may complete with their parents.

- Administrators at the [American School in Japan](#) allocate a minimum of one instructional hour for pre-K students (**page 14**). Administrators divide this hour into three, 20-minute blocks. These blocks focus on literacy, numeracy, and “holistically-focused activities” (i.e., enrichment activities) that support students’ cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. For example, administrators suggest that students learn a new board game or skill, explore a new passion, or practice mindfulness/breathing exercises.
- Administrators at the [Shanghai American School](#) allocate a minimum of one instructional hour for pre-K students (**page seven**). This instructional hour includes 20 minutes of literacy, 20 minutes of math, and “limitless” time (i.e., at least 20 minutes) for enrichment activities (e.g., art, music, physical education (PE)) (**page seven**).

Designate Approximately 30 Minutes Per Subject Area for K-5 Students and Increase Daily Total Instructional Time from K-2 to 3-5

For K-5 students, district administrators may consider allocating between 20 and 35 minutes for each subject area each day. Administrators generally increase total daily instructional time for older students. For example, administrators at the **American School in Japan** recommend a daily instructional time of at least 80 minutes for students in grades 1 and 2 and at least 100 minutes for students in grades 3-5.

- Administrators at the [American School in Japan](#) dedicate 20-25 minutes for each of four subject areas (i.e., reading/writing, math, science/social studies, Japanese) for students in grades 1 and 2 (**page 15**). Students in these grades thus complete at least 80 minutes of total daily instructional time. Administrators appear to dedicate 20-30 minutes for each of five subject areas (i.e., reading, writing, math, science/social studies, Japanese) for students in grades 3, 4, and 5. These students complete at least 100 minutes of total daily instructional time.
- Administrators at [Hong Kong International School](#) allocate 25-35 minutes for each of four subject areas (i.e., reading, writing, math, Chinese studies) for students in grades 1 and 2. Students in these grades thus complete at least 100 minutes of total daily instructional time. Administrators do not specify instructional time requirements for students in grades 3, 4, and 5.
- Administrators at the [Shanghai American School](#) allocate 20-25 minutes for each of three subject areas (i.e., literacy, math, Chinese) and “limitless” time for art, music, and PE for K-2 students (**page eight**). Students in these grades complete at least one hour of total daily instructional time. For students in grades 3-5, administrators allocate 25-30 minutes for each of four subject areas (i.e., reading, writing, math, Chinese) and “limitless” time for enrichment activities. Students in these grades complete at least 100 minutes of total daily instructional time.

Designate 60-90 Minutes of Instructional Time Per Course for Secondary Students

Administrators should increase the amount of daily instructional time for secondary students relative to elementary school students. For example, administrators at the [American School in Japan](#) expect that middle school students spend 45-60 minutes daily on work for each of four courses (**page 16**). Total instructional time spans 3-4 hours. Administrators dedicate 60-75 minutes per subject area for grades 9-10 and 60-90 minutes per subject area for grades 11-12 (**page 17**). Administrators do not specify how many classes high school students attend.

Appendix

Daily K-12 Schedules at [Success Academy](#)

Grade Range	Daily Allocation of Instructional Minutes by Subject Area	Total Daily Instructional Time (Does Not Include Breaks or Advisory)	Highlights
K-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9:00 am-9:30 am: Reading • 9:30 am-10:00 am: Writing • 10:00 am-11:00 am: Break • 11:00 am-11:30 am: Science • 11:30 am-1:00 pm: Lunch • 1:00 pm-1:30 pm: Math • 1:30 pm-2:00 pm: Break • 2:00 pm-2:30 pm: Reading 	2.5 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 minutes per subject area • Three breaks (30-90 minutes) across the day
3-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9:00 am-10:00 am: Reading • 10:00 am-10:30 am: Break • 10:30 am-11:00 am: Writing • 11:00 am-11:30 am: Science • 11:30 am-12:00 pm: Break • 12:00 pm-12:30 pm: Math • 12:30 pm-1:30 pm: Lunch • 1:30 pm-2:00 pm: Reading • 2:00-2:30 pm: Math 	3.5 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 minutes each for writing and science, 60 minutes for math, 90 minutes for reading • Three breaks (30-60 minutes) across the day
5-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9:00 am-9:15 am: Advisory • 9:30 am-10:30 am: Math • 10:40 am-11:40 am: Science • 11:40 am-12:40 pm: Lunch • 12:50 pm-1:50 pm: ELA • 2:00 pm-3:00 pm: History • 3:00 pm-3:15 pm: Break • 3:15 pm-4:00 pm: Reading 	5.25 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About 60 minutes per subject with 10-minute breaks between consecutive classes • Two breaks (15-60 minutes) across the day
9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9:00 am-9:30 am: Advisory • 9:35 am-11:05 am: Math • 11:10 am-12:40 pm: History • 12:40 pm-1:20 pm: Lunch • 1:20 pm-2:50 pm: Science • 2:55 pm-4:25 pm: English • 4:30-5:30 pm: Academic Elective (M/W/F) or Counseling (T/Th) 	7.5 hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 90 minutes per subject area with 5-minute breaks between consecutive classes

**Daily Instructional Time Recommendations for Elementary Students
at Hong Kong International School**

Grade	Daily Allocation of Instructional Minutes by Subject Area	Total Daily Instructional Time
<u>1</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading: 25 minutes • Writing: 30 minutes • Math: 25 minutes • Chinese Studies: 10 minutes 	90 minutes
<u>2</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading: 30-35 minutes • Writing: 30 minutes • Math: 30 minutes • Chinese Studies: 10 minutes 	100-105 minutes
<u>3</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily schedule does not provide time recommendations for literacy, math, social studies, and Chinese studies 	-
<u>4</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily schedule does not provide time recommendations for reading, writing, math, science, and Chinese studies 	-
<u>5</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily schedule does not provide time recommendations for reading, writing, math, science, and Chinese studies 	-