



Returning to Normal:

What “Back to School”
Really Means for IT Teams

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Lightspeed Systems is an AWS Advanced Technology Partner within the AWS Partner Network, with an Education Competency status, a designation earned by delivering proven customer success in providing specialized solutions aligning with the AWS architectural best practices of supporting the learning experience of instructors, learners, and administrators.

Introduction

With the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shutdowns, schools and districts scrambled to adapt to a monumental, nationwide crisis. Now, a year later, many schools are reopening their doors. Following a significant traumatizing event such as the coronavirus outbreak, in which students may have lost loved ones, families may have suffered job loss or displacement, and large numbers of students, parents, and teachers have experienced unfamiliar and unprecedented stress, school and district communities face a period of recovery.

Just as with weather-related disasters or other major disruptions, such recovery efforts must address the academic, physical, and social/emotional needs of students as well as the fiscal imperatives of the district itself. Phenomena such as learning loss, exposure and infection risk, mental health and wellbeing, and budget crunches will doubtless affect virtually every school and district to some extent.

As schools and districts prepare to welcome students back to campus, what does the new normal look like? Is there a predominant scenario, or are there multiple instructional models and learning arrangements appearing on the horizon? How can the technology acquisitions occurring last spring and summer assist leaders with making wise budgetary choices, help with questions of student safety and mental wellbeing, address classroom tech needs, help districts sustain remote and/or hybrid learning options, or enhance school-parent communication and transparency? The entire mass of resources and apps adopted during the emergency switch to remote learning may no longer all be needed, but how do school officials decide which should go and which should stay? Can—and should—schools incorporate their newly acquired tech arrays into in-person classrooms? And how can schools keep paying for it all?

With this eBook, we hope to speak to many of the specifics around a return to substantial in-person learning and walk you through some of the main considerations regarding a return to campus, its impact on your IT teams, and solutions that can help make the entire process easier and more efficient.



Back to School and Your Tech Spend

A recent survey of 200 K-12 district leaders revealed the following:

- More than 82% of those surveyed said reducing spending inefficiencies and maximizing the reach of their budget was their top priority
- Nearly 79% are prioritizing the need for better understanding of app and program usage
- And more than 77% said that visibility into app usage was their most important tech data metric, followed closely by student login activity

Couple these district priorities with the results of additional research:

- In the last year, the average number of educational tech tools per district nearly doubled
- 2/3 of district-purchased tech licenses went unused
- Twice as many unauthorized apps were downloaded to district devices as expected
- The surveyed districts collectively spent more than \$37 million on unused licenses

Many schools and districts turned to emergency government funding sources to help pay for device acquisitions and tech enhancements dictated by the redirect to remote learning during the COVID pandemic. As students now begin to return to schools, how can districts manage to pay for their expanded and continuing tech commitment? Cutting excess items and identifying critical but underutilized technology and apps and addressing that usage deficit through targeted professional development will free dollars to be spent on more effective tech solutions. During the last year, the usefulness and cost-effectiveness of many purchases may have become clearer. The adoption-to-usage ratio is therefore one critical data point, as is demographic data that can help determine whether more devices, or things like hotspots to support them, are needed.

DETERMINE YOUR BUDGETS

While a user survey can give some valid insight to administrators and finance personnel regarding where to start looking for potential cost savings, a survey can only reveal part of the picture. Hard data, including teacher usage rates, student engagement rates, costs per student, and levels of data privacy compliance, all point toward places where instructional and finance leaders can find efficiency gains and cost reduction opportunities when determining budgets. Also, some resources may have been adopted individually by teachers made aware of a flurry of free subscription offerings. New analytical tools (outlined below) can help district leaders and IT decision makers drill down to specific data that they previously didn't have easy access to—data that can help them make informed choices about which tech acquisitions to keep or eliminate and determine just what their tech budgets should look like going forward.

EVALUATE YOUR TECH STACK

There may be very good reasons to maintain your entire suite of newly acquired devices and a substantial number of the software subscriptions set up during the pandemic. For instance, even though the emphasis may primarily be placed on the needs of students physically returning to the classroom, it is possible and even likely that some districts will choose to maintain an enhanced or expanded distance learning capability and for whatever reason cannot resume regular in-person attendance. Determining which apps and subscriptions can be utilized across all learning settings, be they in-person, hybrid, or remote, seems like a reasonable place to begin analysis and can guide prioritization.

In addition, some applications might be critical for district operations or needed to analyze aspects of student performance, even if they are not favored by faculty and staff. Hard data regarding possible underusage of such applications may indicate critical professional development opportunities.

GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR FUNDING

It is also important to keep in mind that various supplemental government funding streams have arisen as a result of the pandemic. The CARES Act passed by Congress in 2020 offers funds under few restrictions to states and schools regarding how they are spent in support of schools, districts, and students affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through CARES and its subsidiary funds such as the ESSER grants and the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF), schools and districts can apply such funding for a wide range of needs to address educational pandemic response—including tech purchases. And in December 2020, Congress extended funding to remain available through calendar 2021. Combined with possible cost savings resulting from eliminated redundant or unnecessary tech acquisitions, these sources can help districts support and sustain device and application use going forward.

Beyond fund sourcing, take advantage of discount offerings available from software and hardware providers. Consider purchasing multiple solutions; these could come in the form of full-suite products or product bundling discounts. And carefully consider multi-year subscriptions. If adoptions are normally multi-year items, extended subscriptions can result in significant per-year savings.

DATA VISUALIZATION TO ENSURE COST-EFFECTIVENESS



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How exactly can school leaders capture key numbers to recognize the most effective elements of their tech spend and ensure data-driven decisions that will maximize ROI? Sophisticated, purpose-built yet affordable analytic software such as [Lightspeed Analytics™](#) from Lightspeed Systems® enable K-12 leaders to track and analyze their software purchases in precisely the ways outlined above and see the effectiveness of their investment. Such systems can provide districts with robust data on the efficacy of any tech tools they implement so they can make strategic decisions regarding their technology stacks and streamline substantive reporting to budgetary decision makers.

Online Student Safety Will Translate to Greater Physical Safety and Emotional Wellbeing

A return to the physical classroom, depending on the particular learning model, may or may not mean a reduction in student time spent online, but that doesn't mean districts can be any less vigilant regarding dangerous online content threats or inappropriate online student behavior. Research has documented that violent incidents occur most frequently at the start of the school year or after students return from breaks. Between 2008 and 2017, 41% of violent school incidents took place within the first week back to school following a break in attendance.*

COMBAT THE SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL LEARNING DEFICIT

In fact, psychologists are warning of the need for educators to be aware of social/emotional learning deficit that may have grown over the past year. Students isolated from peers and guiding adults, including counsellors and other district mental health support personnel, may be feeling significantly disengaged and socially disoriented. School leaders may well wonder whether simple in-person contact between educators and students will be enough to help head off any issues that may arise. Student social/emotional learning evaluations, as well as training for counsellors and professional development for teaching staff, may prove valuable.

PREVENT ON-CAMPUS VIOLENCE WITH ONLINE INDICATORS

Law enforcement studies have shown for the better part of two decades now that threats of student violence are often posted online hours, days, or even weeks prior to an incident—as many as 74% of violent school actors in one study. 80% of these perpetrators were victims of bullying, including cyberbullying. By contrast, only 17% of the targeted schools employed any kind of monitoring system to track online student activity.

Software systems that employ advanced AI plus human monitoring of student online behavior, when combined with well-designed safety plans and threat response protocols, can help key district personnel recognize the warning signs of violence, bullying, self-harm, and even suicide ideation before such tragedies can occur. Equipped with such systems and coupled with the foreknowledge that students returning from periods of time away from the classroom are among the most vulnerable, educators can be well prepared to ensure positive student engagement following the extended shutdown, as well as future discipline-related breaks, including suspensions and expulsions, especially within the first days that a student returns to school.

*https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Protecting_Americas_Schools.pdf



EARLY WARNING FOR POTENTIAL VIOLENCE, BULLYING, AND SELF-HARM

Software systems such as Lightspeed AlertTM, which use smart AI to monitor, interpret, and flag evidence of inappropriate, dangerous, harmful, and even suicidal student behavior in emails, online documents, social media posts, web searches, chat applications—virtually anywhere students interact online. For an extra layer of protection, Lightspeed Alert provides 24/7/365 human review by highly trained safety specialists who conduct a threat assessment of flagged behavior and escalate imminent threats via a live phone call to school district personnel or law enforcement.



Enhancing the In-Classroom Experience with Online Tools

Last year K-12 school districts distributed and brought online more mobile devices than ever before, and as students have become more familiar with using these devices for learning, some districts may choose to adopt more of a 1:1 instructional model within the in-person classroom. We mentioned above the pragmatism of determining which devices and applications could be used across instructional modes, including in-person, hybrid, and remote settings, because such purchases would arguably represent a districts biggest bang for its tech buck. But it's important to realize that the intent of such an approach is more than just to save budget dollars.

EASE YOUNGER STUDENTS BACK INTO THE CLASSROOM

Encourage classroom instructors to be mindful, however, of the phenomenon of learning loss. Students—especially younger ones—who have been subjected to months of relative isolation from teachers and peers may need to be eased back into the “classroom habit.” Here, technology can help. The routines and methods practiced over the months of remote classes should be imported and where appropriate, emulated or even continued in the live classroom. Repetition of these methods, enhanced by the presence of a live teacher, combined with the dynamism of online capability, can infuse the in-person learning experience with the best of both worlds.

ENHANCE YOUR LEARNING MODEL TEACHINGS WITH DEVICES

The use of online learning devices and dynamic content, such as video, audio, and interactive learning programs can enhance live, in-person learning. The use of apps and devices shouldn't be abandoned solely because students and teachers are back in school. And some of the pedagogical approaches developed out of remote learning necessity during the pandemic can be adapted to the in-person classroom. In fact, most of these suggestions are just plain solid elements of good teaching practice. These elements include:

- **Modeling** – demonstrating techniques and desired outcomes
- **Segmenting** – focusing on smaller, more digestible pieces of content
- **Thinking aloud** – related to modeling, this technique guides students through a mental process
- **Socratic discussion** – posing a problem and brainstorming solutions, sometimes through role-playing
- **Gradual release** – the “show me, help me, now let me” approach to learning

When combined with the dynamic assistance of online content and interactivity, in-person lessons can come alive.

But teachers and IT associates should be wary of scenarios where students hide behind the flipped-up laptop screens. When devices are utilized in the “traditional” classroom, teachers must be able to monitor the appropriateness of their use without such attentiveness interfering with instruction or disrupting lesson flow.



REIMAGINE THE INSPIRED CLASSROOM

Products that allow for real-time teacher line of sight into student online behavior and usage, such as [Lightspeed Classroom Management™](#), enable teachers to keep students logged in, engaged, and actively participating regardless of whether they are in the classroom or learning remotely. Highly developed AI technology can give teachers direct visibility and control of their students' user interface and digital workspaces. A teacher can infuse lessons with dynamic, interactive online content designed to ratchet up students' love for learning. And to keep students focused and moving forward, they can message a distracted student without calling the student out, redirect the student's browser, close distracting or off-task windows and tabs, and enable screen sharing to facilitate collaboration between students. Such classroom management software helps ensure that technology in the classroom truly serves an instructional purpose—including alerting teachers to students who may have fallen behind or who might be slow to re-engage when back in school.



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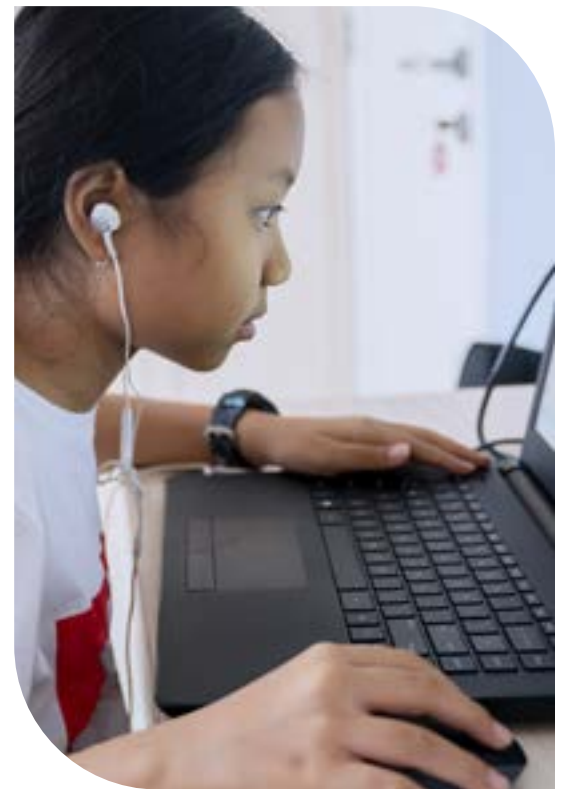
The Case for Keeping Open Your Remote and/or Hybrid Learning Options

As we emerge from the pandemic, some students—and some parents, for that matter—may have recognized the potential positives that remote or hybrid learning models have to offer during the course of the pandemic. Students with chronic health issues; children with social or emotional difficulties who may struggle with peer interaction but who otherwise prove academically capable; students with work or home responsibilities; students who for one reason or another cannot consistently match a personal schedule with a traditional school bell schedule—any of these could benefit significantly from districts choosing to continue with a hybrid or remote learning option. Adapting instructional delivery and timing to specific student needs is so much more easily accomplished through online delivery.

OFFER THE ONLINE COURSES YOU ALWAYS WANTED

Students have become comfortable with the protocols of remote learning, so districts can easily expand course offerings to students with exceptional or accelerated curricular needs. Districts can now offer the courses they always wanted to offer but couldn't because of the challenge of finding a qualified local teacher. Such expanded offerings could be accomplished in various ways, including subscribing to 3rd-party courses from local colleges and universities or hiring, at a state or regional level, a single certified teacher who could deliver online instruction to any number of students across buildings or even districts.

Districts should determine their own hybrid or remote learning needs and recognize that online delivery frameworks can generally be remarkably adaptable. In January 2020, no one would have anticipated the experience most students and educators have undergone in the ensuing months. And although few of us would want to go back, be cautious about throwing potential advantages and innovative learning approaches out with the bathwater.



DEVICE MANAGEMENT FOR REMOTE, 1:1, AND HYBRID ENVIRONMENTS

Giving IT staff remote line of sight to both in-school and remote device and application usage will also be critical here. Systems such as [Lightspeed Mobile Device Management™](#) can equip district IT leaders with a centralized tool for scalable device, application, and policy management. Such systems can help ensure safe and secure control of student learning resources with real-time visibility and reporting capabilities, and they can make app management flexible with remote configuration and deployment without physically handling devices.



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Mobile Device
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Maintain the Communication Advantage with Parents

One positive result of the experience the COVID-19 pandemic was that many schools and districts saw an uptick in parent involvement in their students' day-to-day learning. In many cases that was unavoidable, as parents themselves were forced to work from home and coordinate workspaces, bandwidth demands, and other unforeseen logistical situations with their children.

But since virtually everyone found themselves having to manage new ways of communicating nearly all the time, schools and districts that could create consistent and accurate communication channels with parents regarding their student's experience and progress under trying conditions clearly had an advantage. The added focus placed on the amount of time students were required to spend online just added to an already stressful situation.



DETERMINE BEST PRACTICES FOR KEEPING PARENTS INFORMED

Districts, schools, and teachers must determine best practices for keeping parents informed and involved, even if students have moved substantially away from remote learning situations and are now using their devices primarily at school. Regular, consistent communication is key to keeping parents in the loop, engaged with their own children's specific status, and encouraging them to contribute constructively to delivering the best instruction for their students.

Beyond best practices, schools and districts should provide guidance for parents around how best to help their own students be successful, whether or not they're learning online. Email tips and even live or recorded webinars are great ways to communicate thoroughly and consistently. School or district guidance is also extremely important for helping parents understand how to monitor and regulate their children's at-home and after-hours access to and use of school-issued online devices.

EMPOWER PARENTS WITH ONLINE ACTIVITY INSIGHTS







Student online safety systems, such as [LightSpeed Filter™](#), not only use artificial intelligence and years of online activity scanning to block access to inappropriate or dangerous online content, but the best of such systems offer portals for parent insight into their own students' online experiences. These sophisticated systems provide parents with access to their students' online activity dashboard, where they can see firsthand updated data regarding their child's most frequent sites visited, the number of pages visited per day, and time spent online, with a weekly summary report sent directly to the parents' inbox.

Conclusion

No common roadmap exists for a universally successful return to the classroom. But the considerations outlined above will help guide decisions by educators, and particularly district IT team members, regarding which pandemic-era tech acquisitions to shed, which to keep, and which new enhancements to explore going forward. After all, maintaining the momentum we have—and accelerating up to speed as quickly and efficiently as possible—are the best ways to continue to deliver the safest and most effective educational experience for every student.



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