

# What's an E-Learning Day? - 10 Tips for Successfully Planning For And Implementing E-Learning in Your District



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In 2015, the state of Illinois began an E-Learning Day Pilot. At that time, the Illinois State Board of Education gave three school districts (Leyden Community High School District 212, Community High School District 94, and Gurnee Elementary School District 56) permission to run up to five school days per year virtually when the districts would have otherwise been closed due to inclement weather or other reasons. Notably, those virtual E-Learning Days count as student attendance days and no emergency days need to be added to the end of the school year.

With the recent changes in Illinois associated with the Evidenced-Based Funding Formula and Competency-Based Learning, the Illinois State Board of Education has issued guidance on the new definition of an instructional day. With this additional flexibility, many districts have been reaching out to the three pilot districts with questions about how to run a successful virtual E-Learning Day. In order to help, Leyden would like to offer the following 10 Tips for successfully planning for and implementing an E-Learning Day in your district:

## **Tip #1 - Work Closely with Your Stakeholders**

Early conversations and participation from all stakeholders are critical in this process. You need to involve students, teachers, support staff, parents, technology staff, administrators, and your School

Board in this conversation. We would suggest organizing a committee or a working group to begin the conversation. We also suggest finding ways to solicit input from everyone in your school community. An E-Learning Day is a significant change in working conditions, so you will need to involve union leadership and representation in this process.

### **Tip #2 - Address the Equity Gaps**

While many school district issue devices to students (Chromebooks, iPads, etc...), fewer school districts have solved the internet connectivity gaps in some households. To solve this problem, we worked with Sprint and their ConnectEd program. The district purchased WiFi hotspots and Sprint provides free internet access to them for a period of five years. We provide those additional devices to any family that demonstrates a need. Together this helps level the playing field for our students in terms of technology tools and access to the internet so that all students can participate in an E-Learning Day.

### **Tip #3 - Leverage Your Learning Management System (LMS)**

The students on our planning committee were very clear that they needed a consistent way to access the work they would need to complete on an E-Learning Day. They said it would be too confusing if one teacher sent an email, another wanted them to go to a teacher website, and yet another posted something in the learning management system. This led us to create a common set of protocols for how staff would use consistent communication and learning tools. For example, at Leyden, all teachers agreed to post their assignments within their Schoology courses so that students could find everything in one place.

### **Tip #4 - Create a Plan for Taking Attendance**

Attendance and work completion are two different things. On a traditional school day, a student can be present in class and still not complete the work. The same is true on an E-Learning Day. At Leyden, we chose to use Google Forms and we require students to submit their names to each teacher as a way to “check in” and acknowledge that they have seen their work expectations for the day. All students complete that task by 1:00 p.m. That Google Form then creates a sortable spreadsheet for each teacher to use when submitting attendance online. We ask teachers to complete their attendance submissions by 4:00 p.m so that we can run our normal end-of-day reports for the following day.

### **Tip #5 - Move the Curriculum Forward**

While meeting with our planning committee, both students and staff members felt strongly that an E-Learning Day shouldn't be filled with busy work. Whatever assignments are given to the students should substantially align with what the classes are currently doing and should move the curriculum forward. With this in mind, we ask staff to post their assignments by 9:00 a.m. on an E-Learning Day so that they have time to generate and post meaningful assignments.

### **Tip #6 - Set Reasonable Expectations for Students**

While E-Learning is new to Illinois, it has been happening in surrounding states for many years. In talking to educators with more experience, we were advised not to overwhelm our students with work on these days. It is unrealistic to think that you can fit a full day of instructional material and a full day of homework into an E-Learning Day. As a rule of thumb, students should be able to complete the work for each course or content area in about 30-45 minutes.

**Tip #7 - Build in Flexibility**

E-Learning days are an asynchronous experience, meaning that the learning is not happening in real-time. Students are able to work on their assignments when it makes sense for them. This was important as we wrestled with the fact that kids might need to help supervise younger siblings, shovel a driveway, or a number of other responsibilities. The same is true of staff members. When being a teacher on an E-Learning Day, we ask our staff to be generally available and responsive on email. However, they are not required to be at their computer all day long. They may have their own children at home if their local schools are closed.

**Tip #8 - Plan for Your Unique Populations**

What works for some populations on an E-Learning Day will not work for everyone. For example, higher need special education students and English language learners might need an adapted approach in order to fully participate. You need to be mindful of working within the confines of an IEP. For some of our special education students, for example, case managers created unique E-Learning Day assignments that are consistent with their IEP goals.

**Tip #9 - Communicate and Practice**

The concept of an E-Learning Day is new and different for students, families, and employees. You need to openly communicate about expectations and procedures. Before we ever ran a “live” E-Learning Day, we helped staff create the folders to store their assignments and had students simulate the process of checking in for attendance purposes. These processes will help you identify any potential problems and help ensure that everything will run smoothly in the future.

**Tip #10 - Consider the Roles of All Employees**

E-Learning Days affect more people than your students and your teachers. You need to explore the impacts on your clerical staff, maintenance, transportation, food services, etc. Is there work they can do from home? Will those days be paid or unpaid for them? At Leyden, our instructional coaches and our technology staff make themselves available for support to students and faculty, but each employee group has different implications you will need to consider.

**Bonus Tip - Have Fun!**

During an E-Learning Day earlier this year at Leyden, one of the teachers sent out a challenge for students to post videos of themselves creating snow angels. After dozens of videos showed up on social media, the teacher uploaded a video of himself making a snow angel. E-Learning Days shouldn't be seen as the end of snow days, but rather as an evolution of learning possibilities.

Ultimately, SCHOOL is more than a building, it's a collection of learning experiences for our students. E-Learning Days not only help move curriculum forward on a daily basis, but also help reinforce to students that learning can happen anytime and anywhere. As you prepare to run your own E-Learning Days, please feel free to reach out as we are happy to help in any way we can. Good Luck!!