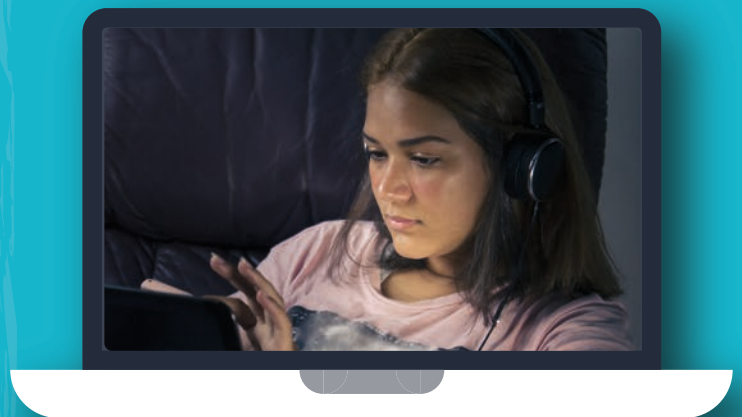
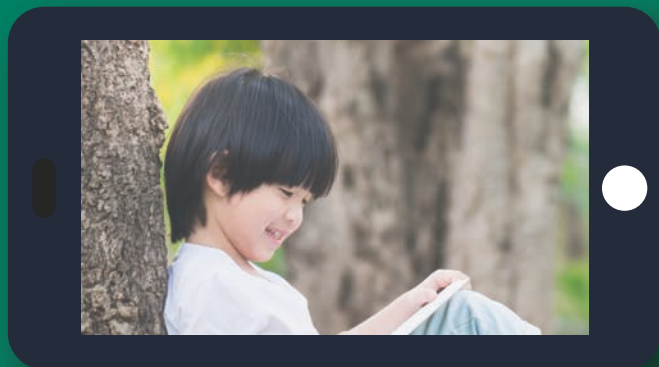
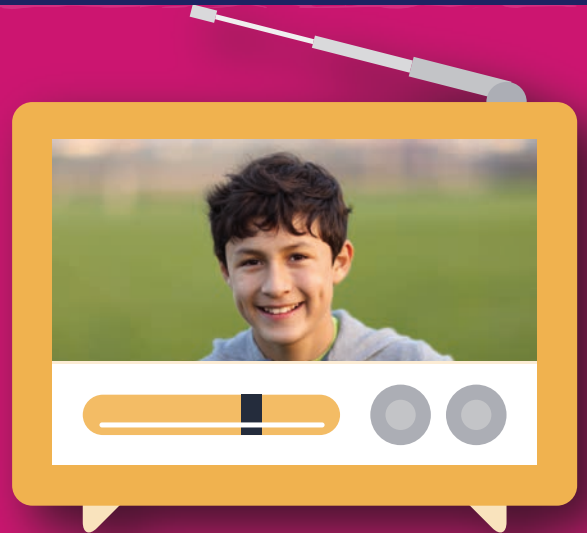


Education continuity during the Coronavirus crisis

# United States: Wide Open School

*Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin*



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Type of intervention: non-governmental

Website: [www.wideopenschool.org](http://www.wideopenschool.org)

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The coronavirus crisis led schools and universities to rapidly transition to a distance-learning mode, via the Internet, television or radio. This series documents some country initiatives that ensured education continuity for all using technology and provided support to teachers, students, and their families.



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## General description

Wide Open School is a web platform co-ordinated by a not-for-profit private organisation, Common Sense Media, which curates and makes available online educational resources provided by a partnership of 25 organisations willing to contribute resources free of charge during the crisis. The platform was set up in two weeks. It offers resources for educators and families for all grades from pre-school to upper secondary education. Part of those resources aim to develop disciplinary technical skills, but also creativity, critical thinking or social-emotional skills, while others just support family and informal learning activities. Beyond offering access to curated resources, the platform also suggests a daily schedule to help students and families have a good balance of activities, provides live events and classes delivered by artists, as well as tips and guidelines for teachers to teach on line and navigate online resources.

The platform also addresses IT infrastructure issues by partnering with major mobile and internet provider companies and embedding software such as videoconference solutions and educational suites. It also facilitates access to services to help lower income families get devices and better broadband, switch to mobile solutions, as well as other practical information such as where to grab a free lunch in their district.

### Main problems addressed

The initiative's general objective is to ensure education continuity with an emphasis on family schedule and a supplementary approach to e-learning with school support during the coronavirus crisis.

As parents and children spend a lot of time together during the lockdown, how can families be supported to guide their school-age children's learning? How can teachers also be supported during this time? The initiative assumes that most students will receive guidance from their teachers, and is thus not a home-schooling initiative. This supplementary approach to school and teacher guidance materialises in a broad diversity of learning experiences of different length and depth.

A second objective is to support students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and students with special needs, both in terms of infrastructure (getting appropriate connectivity and digital devices) and of learning resources.

This combination of infrastructure dimensions and of curated resources aimed at families and educators marks the originality of the initiative.

### Mobilising and developing resources

The initiative draws on existing online educational resources that the participating organisations make available free of charge, from publishers through to museums. All resources made available must remain free of charge for the whole duration of the platform – but organisations select which of their resources they are willing to share for this initiative. Some of the participating organisations are public organisations that share their resources free of charge anyway (museums, science societies, etc.).

Beyond a collective action among education not-for-profit and for-profit organisations, the main new features of the initiative are the web platform and the curation of the resources so that they are user-friendly. Some new materials were (and will be) developed to make the learning experiences more engaging, and incentivise users to continue to engage with the shared learning materials. The platform includes, for example, videos about exercising in lockdown that involve a physical education teacher and an NBA basketball player, tips from teachers for other teachers, as well as live events (conferences, lectures, etc.), some of which presented by star journalists well-known by the US audience. The platform also offers connection to digital communities of practice for teachers. The engagement of teachers and of US celebrities in these new materials is one of its original features.

### Fostering effective use and learning

Beyond being a hub of online educational resources, the platform proposes several functionalities to support families and teachers in using them and potentially learning more.

As far as families are concerned, use is supported by:

- Organising the resources by discipline and age group, and proposing many extra-curricular learning expeditions that can be recommended by teachers or just used independently.
- Suggesting daily schedules highlighting learning activities using some of the platform's resources (dividing the day in 4 periods: morning, mid-day, afternoon, evening), including offline and off-screen activities.
- Providing parents with guidance to "get started learning at home": Information and connection for lower income parents to have IT connectivity and devices; guidance about social-emotional well-being in a time of anxiety; information about COVID-19 for different ages and purposes; etc.

Teachers receive similar support and are expected to engage by using or advising on some of the learning experiences proposed to their students and families. The platform provides teachers with specific support by:

- Providing them with demos, tutorials and “how to guidelines” to use “virtual classroom” tools in different ways and adapt their teaching to the tools;
- Professional development provided by teacher unions to other teachers, sometimes with certification;
- Free digital learning plans for young students and their families.

## Implementation challenges

The main implementation challenge was to build a partnership that would be trusted by families and teachers, the two target groups of the initiative. In this case, the resource curator and co-ordinator Common Sense Media made this possible. First, it is a not-for-profit organisation. Second, many US families already know and trust this organisation that specialises in providing them with age-based media reviews (books, movies, software, toys, etc.). Curating age-based educational resources fit in its usual mission – albeit in a somewhat expanded way.

Bringing together several public institutions (Smithsonian, NPR), famous non-profits (National Geographic), a teacher union (American Federation of Teachers) alongside digital companies (e.g. Apple, Google, YouTube, Zoom) and education companies (e.g. Amplify, Khan Academy, Scholastic, Sesame Workshop) was important to the success, branding and visibility of the initiative. Involving teachers and organisations working on innovation in traditional school districts contributed to this building of trust. Having a party with no vested interest in the provided resources also gives more incentives to companies and organisations to contribute and accept external curation.

A second implementation challenge was to do something quickly and relatively cheaply with a sustainability until at least the end of the crisis. It was important to bring in enough materials for students of different ages at the stage of the launch, hence the importance of joining forces and the importance of professional relations between partners. But as an important part of the work load lies in resource curation, which takes time when there are many resources available, the way to speed up the process was to start by categorising the resources in broad age categories (primary, secondary) with only the suggested daily schedules having smaller age bands. This will be refined over time. The technology platform was also launched using existing and affordable technology, with the idea of improving it over time.

The last important implementation challenge lay in budget and legal matters. While it might be useful beyond the crisis, such an initiative only happened because of the willingness to contribute triggered by the dramatic circumstances. Participating institutions can be said to have an interest in joining in terms of image and marketing of their resources, although they do not necessarily have an interest in staying for a long time.

Legal issues (and slow speed of negotiations) were largely bypassed by directing users to the contributors' websites – and thus out of the platform. The platform has a disclaimer that, “The provided resources include links to external websites or applications that are governed by their own privacy policies or information collection practices, which may be substantially different from Common Sense Media. We encourage you to review the privacy policies and information collection practices of any external websites and apps before use with children or students”.

Funding is mainly needed for the curation of the resources and the development of the platform. Some of the participating organisations contribute resources, sometimes devices or special discounts, which all have a cost. The initial developments were also carried out *pro bono* by some of the partners. Contributing resources can be done as part of companies' “corporate responsibility”, with probably positive branding and marketing outcomes for them. All this is a sunk cost though. The development and curation of the

platform needs some additional funding. In a country like the United States where there is a vibrant philanthropic sector, large foundations with a focus on educational technology and innovation will cover development and curation costs.

## **Monitoring success**

As of April 2020, the platform was powered by 30 organisations or companies (against 25 at its launch), and it seems to attract more partners. In terms of visitors, it has recorded 640 000 unique visitors three weeks after its launch. Given that the platform is fully open (no sign-in) and directs users to the external sites of contributing and partner organisations, it is at this stage difficult to monitor how different users are using the different resources.

## **Adaptability to new contexts**

This initiative can easily be transposed in any context where an online solution makes sense, where there is a vibrant education industry available and enough resources to be shared. The initiative could easily be international where language links countries and markets. The Wide Open School web platform itself plans to be “open source” and could thus be adapted for other international contexts and purposes.

### **Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation**

1. Involve your educational technology companies, your education publishers, museums, cultural institutions, sports institutions and ask them to provide some educational resources free of charge for the whole duration of the COVID crisis (or for, say, 18 months). Make sure that those raising their hands provide enough resources cover all school-age groups and all domains of learning, as well as parents and teachers.
2. Give the lead of the platform (resource curation and co-ordination) to a not-for-profit organisation that is trusted by families and teachers – involve teacher unions, relevant associations and foundations if possible.
3. Develop a platform quickly with cheap existing software and tools, and ensure the resources are easy to find for families and teachers. Start relatively small and improve functionalities as you go.
4. As curation time has to be fast too, start by categorising the resources in broad age bands, and refine and add as you go.
5. Ensure that low income and special needs students can access the resources in their contexts and devote part of the efforts to providing them with technology infrastructure, but also other services they usually get (e.g. free meals, tutoring, etc.)
6. Propose regularly an age-based day schedule with a good balance of different resources, and organise live events to make the learning experience and the platform more interesting to families and teachers – as well as tips on how to use the resources and just use the family time productively during the lockdown.
7. Provide teachers with tools that they can use in their regular teaching, including tools for virtual classrooms, in addition to resources they can recommend. Provide dedicated tools and collaborative channels to teachers.
8. As you do not have time to deal with all legal issues in a short period of time, just let providers keep their terms and conditions and inform families and teachers clearly about the terms of data privacy and protection.

9. Engage celebrities and public figures in the initiative: make them work with teachers and schools in engaging ways, or ask them to value aspects of learning that the audience may find surprising (e.g. have a sport star read poetry).

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