



**WHITE
PAPER**

Teaching K-5 Students Successfully Online



For students to become independent learners even at a young age is critical for their growth and development. Learning in an online environment helps foster this independence and prepares students for a lifetime of learning and success.

There is a belief among some educators that students who are in kindergarten or early elementary school are too young to learn effectively online. The less-than-ideal experience that many educators and students had in shifting abruptly to remote learning during the pandemic might have reinforced this notion.

However, emergency remote learning is not the same as virtual learning that is intentionally designed to support best practices in instruction. The truth is that many K-5 students flourished in fully remote or hybrid learning environments in which teachers used well-designed, developmentally appropriate digital strategies and resources.¹

Online learning provides a viable alternative for parents who want a more personalized education for their children, as well as families for whom traditional education isn't working well. With the right strategies and supports, even the youngest children can thrive in an online educational setting.

Here are some insights to help school and district leaders provide effective online instruction for K-5 students by teaching them how to learn independently, while at the same time equipping them with skills that will serve them well both in school and in life.

Why independent learning is critical

Independent learning involves a shift in responsibility for the learning process from the teacher to the student. It involves teaching

students *how to learn*, so they can do this for themselves. With independent learning, students aren't waiting for their teacher to tell them what to do or what the answers are; instead, they're taking charge of their own education.

Independent learning ensures that students have the knowledge and skills to continue learning outside of school. As independent learners, students can follow their natural curiosity wherever it leads them. Learning isn't something that has to stop when the final school bell rings. Independent learning helps students become lifelong learners.

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"Student independence is so important," says Taya Bafford, a K-5 teacher for the Stride Instructional Services Team. "A teacher won't always be there to tell students what to do. The best thing we can do for students is help them develop the skills to work independently as appropriate."

To learn independently, students must develop self-confidence and self-direction. They must learn how to find information on their own. They must learn how to plan effectively, prioritize their work, manage their time, deal with distractions, and meet deadlines. They must learn how to solve problems, think critically, form hypotheses, reason logically, and reflect on their learning.

These are all skills that prepare students to be successful employees and members of society when they graduate. The workplace environments that students will encounter after school aren't like classrooms, where everything is laid out for them neatly. As employees, they'll be expected to work independently, find information, and solve problems on their own.

Besides preparing students for life after school, independent learning has been found to increase student engagement and improve academic performance. "Independent learning allows students to feel a sense of ownership over the learning process, which is highly motivating," says Will Plump, product owner for the Stride Learning Solutions [K-5 curriculum and platform](#). "Building agency at a young age helps students buy into their learning early on."

A study from the Netherlands concluded that students in self-managed learning environments are more motivated to learn, report more enjoyment of school, and are more actively

involved in their learning than those who study in more restrictive environments. Other studies have found that children who are independent learners work to higher standards and have higher self-esteem than their peers.²

How online learning fosters student independence

In a traditional school setting, students follow a predetermined schedule that accounts for their activities throughout the day. When students learn online, they're responsible for making their own schedule. There might be times when they're expected to log in for synchronous instruction, but otherwise they're free to learn whenever they'd like—as long as they don't fall behind in their work.

In an online learning environment, students don't have a teacher looking over their shoulder all the time, either. There is frequent interaction between students and their teacher, but much of this communication takes place through email, and students' activities aren't constantly being monitored.

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— Will Plump, product owner, Stride Learning Solutions K-5 curriculum and platform



To succeed in an online setting, students have to be internally motivated, and they must learn how to navigate the virtual learning environment for themselves. This forces students to become adept at learning independently.

What's more, the nature of online learning lends itself to a more personalized approach in which students are given a voice and choice in their learning. This leads to self-direction as well.

"We give kids choices in what to read and how to apply the lessons," says Davin Sullivan, a K-5 teacher for the Stride Instructional Services Team. "That's the golden nugget in education—understanding students' needs and personalizing their instruction accordingly. The [Stride] curriculum gives us opportunities to do that."

How to prepare K-5 students for successful online learning

The ability to learn independently in an online setting doesn't happen overnight. Students must learn how to work independently within the online platform, and that's particularly true for the youngest learners. However, with the right approach, even students as young as kindergarten can quickly achieve success.

Here are five key strategies for helping K-5 students become independent learners online.

1. Model the required skills.

Beginning with the first day of class, educators should explicitly teach the skills that students will need for success.

For instance, teachers should walk students through the online learning platform and how to use it, show them how to access any resources they might need, demonstrate how to find and

evaluate information, and explain how to communicate properly and collaborate with peers through chat and email.

It's important for teachers to model these rules and procedures in every interaction they have with students, so the lessons are reinforced. When communicating with students by email, for example, teachers should follow the same etiquette they expect from their students.

2. Use repetition.

Repetition is important for ensuring that K-5 students know how to work independently. Anne Marie Studer, who teaches the online learning program for the Hana-Lahainaluna-Lanai-Molokai Complex Area in Hawaii, uses a demo account to

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— Anne Marie Studer, teacher, online learning program, Hana-Lahainaluna-Lanai-Molokai Complex Area in Hawaii

share her screen with students and take them through the Stride platform at the beginning of the school year. She also gives her youngest students a refresher on the platform and its features whenever they return from a school vacation.

"You have to show students how to be successful—not just once, but repeatedly," she says.

Students also benefit from consistency. Establishing clear routines that are repeated daily, weekly, or at other regular intervals helps young students in particular understand what teachers expect from them.

3. *Build relationships.*

As in any kind of learning environment, building strong relationships with students is critical. “Make sure students feel safe and comfortable asking you questions,” Bafford says. When students feel supported, they’re more apt to take risks and assume responsibility for their own learning. And if they’re ever stuck and can’t solve a problem for themselves, they won’t be afraid to ask for assistance.

“Get to know your students on a personal level, and make sure they know you,” Studer advises. “Team building is key, and you can do that online just as effectively as you can in person.”

4. *Encourage peer learning and interaction.*

Developing strong relationships not just between teachers and students, but between students and their peers can pay big dividends. Encouraging students to interact with and learn from their classmates helps them feel empowered and gives them opportunities to assist each other, without having to rely on their teacher.

“One strategy I use to foster peer learning is to put small groups of students into virtual breakout rooms within the Stride online learning platform with a task to work on together,” Studer says. “I’ll upload a file to their breakout room and have them work collaboratively on the task. While students are working, I’ll visit each room to see how they’re doing and if they have any questions. At the end of the allotted time, students will rejoin the main group and report back on their findings. The kids love it, and I think they learn a lot from each other. I also have them use the chat feature to ask questions and respond to each others’ questions.”

Having the right online learning platform helps young students succeed

In a virtual learning environment, students are supported not only by the teacher, but also by digital resources. With the [newly designed K-5 curriculum from Stride](#), students have access to content that is intentionally designed to support greater student independence.

For instance, audio, visual, and interactive supports guide students into gradually more self-directed independent learning tasks that can be completed asynchronously. Students are able to attend live or recorded instructional sessions each day, and they can go back and watch the recordings as often as needed. In addition, multiple learning paths are available in subjects such as math and ELA, so that students can choose how they will experience the content for themselves.

“We’ve developed our new K-5 online curriculum specifically to promote student independence,” Plump says.



5. Provide scaffolded learning experiences.

Well-designed K-5 online learning experiences include a range of supports to help young students gain independence as learners. Through instructional scaffolding techniques, educators might provide varying levels of support to help students navigate and make sense of new information. As students become more skilled at learning independently, educators would gradually remove these scaffolds. This helps the youngest students learn at an appropriate level of challenge and gradually gain more independence over the learning process as they're ready.

Scaffolds for the youngest students who are still learning to read might include video-based instructions, for example. As students learn these routines for themselves, they no longer need short video clips explaining what they should do.

“The availability is there”

The experience of Studer and other teachers demonstrates that with the right strategies and supports, even the youngest children can thrive in an online environment—while learning independence and gaining vital skills that will help them succeed in school and beyond.

Studer uses the Big Universe™ library, a digital literacy solution built into the Stride K-5 online learning platform that gives students 24-7 access

to thousands of leveled ebooks for all subjects, to read books together with her students during shared reading time. Recently, she was surprised by what she found when she looked at their activity on the platform: Students were reading dozens of books independently as well.

“My kids blew me away with how many books they're reading on their own,” she says. “For a teacher, that's amazing to see.”

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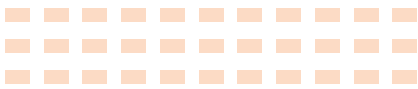
Sullivan says she has heard from some colleagues who struggled to get first and second graders to use online tools successfully during remote learning. But with the help of the strategies outlined in this paper, she hasn't had that problem in her own online classes.

“If my four- and five-year-olds can do it, anyone can,” she observes. “The availability is there. As educators, we just have to tap into it.”

To learn more about the Stride curriculum and platform for K-5, visit www.stridelearning.com/learning-solutions.

¹ For an example, see “Stride Inc. Bucks National Trend and Provides Improved Student Outcomes During COVID-19: New Study Refutes Claims of Learning Loss in Online Programs” <https://www.stridelearning.com/insights/stride-nwea-study-on-learning-loss.html>

² Meyer et al. (2008). “What is independent learning and what are the benefits for students?” London: Department for Children, Schools and Families Research Report 051 <http://www.curee.co.uk/files/publication/%5Bsite-timestamp%5D/Whatisindependentlearningandwhatarethebenefits.pdf>



About Stride Learning Solutions

Since 2000, Stride Learning Solutions has been a leader in strategic solutions to solve district challenges. Stride Learning Solutions' flexible online and blended learning options boost modern instruction and promote lifelong student success. With an innovative platform, comprehensive digital courseware, adaptable technology, and extensive support, Stride Learning Solutions is equipped to help your school or district empower a brighter future for learners.

To learn more, visit stridelearning.com/learning-solutions.

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