



5 strategies for hybrid learning success

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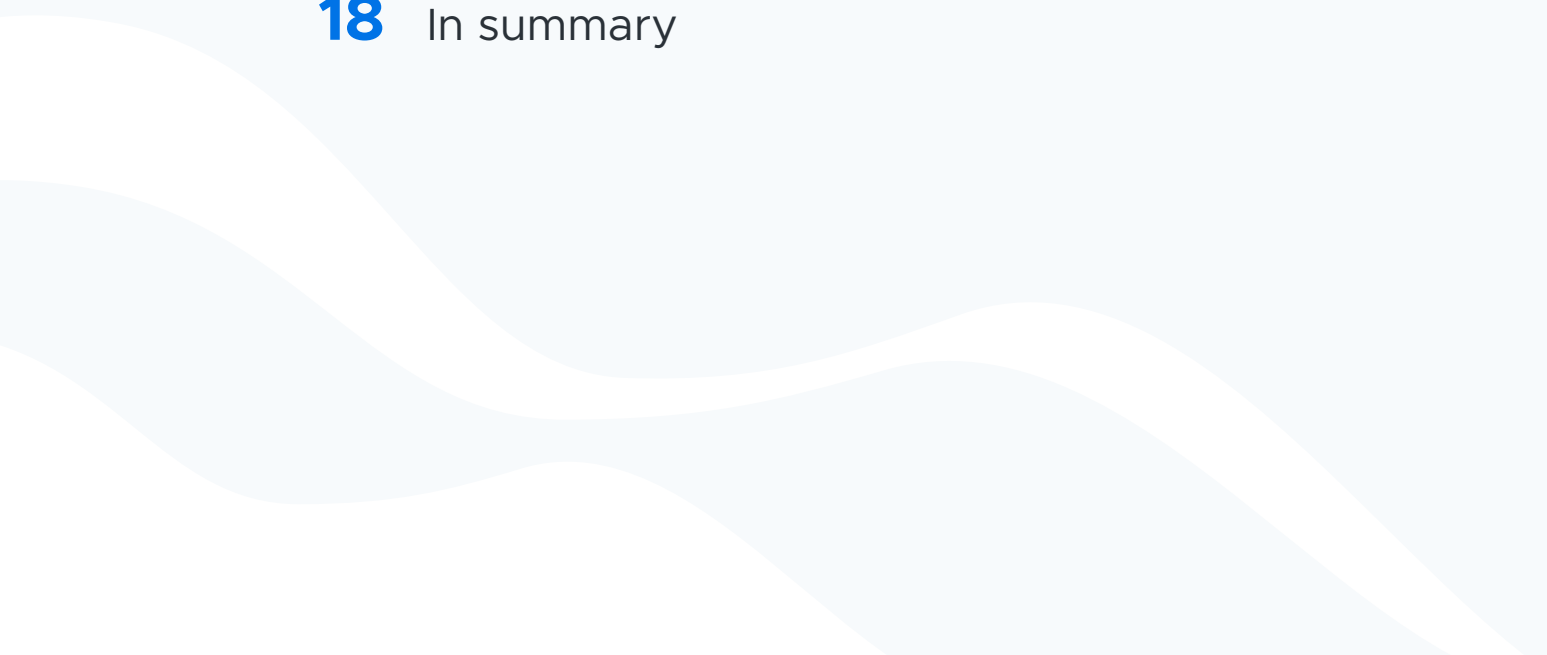
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Introduction

In the face of day-to-day priorities, it can be difficult (if not downright impossible) for IT administrators to find the time and resources for long-term strategic initiatives. Understandably. Especially when an admin's day is filled with everything from training teachers on new technologies, to performing routine maintenance on essential hardware, to, in many cases, pulling double-duty as a teacher, coach, or after-school caretaker.

But if the experience navigating the Covid-19 pandemic taught us anything, it's that planning for the future is one of the most important things school IT leaders can do.

Districts that had the forethought to begin 1:1 programs prior to the pandemic, for instance, were better equipped to quickly pivot to distance learning once school devices started heading home. Those that hadn't found themselves waiting in long lines to get their hands on the Chromebooks and iPads their students would need to continue learning remotely.

Granted, “planning ahead” is hardly limited to large-scale efforts like 1:1 programs. And of course, not all budgets or school boards are created equal.

But even small steps taken today—to improve documentation, update aging infrastructure, or pilot test new platforms—can pay big dividends down the line. And help ensure your school or district is ready for what challenges the future may bring.

As districts embrace the “new normal,” few if any will be returning to the status quo of 100% in-person school. Whether to provide parents with more flexibility, ease the burden placed on kids who take the bus to school, or enable learning to continue during inclement weather, a great number of districts plan to embrace hybrid learning as the way of the future.

Make no mistake: hybrid is here to stay. So, what steps can your district take to be ready? To be prepared for a hybrid learning future? To keep a handle on today’s tasks while charting a course for tomorrow? In this playbook, we outline 5 key strategies school IT leaders can take to be future-ready for hybrid learning.



PLAY

01

Ensure every student can connect

When learning moved from the classroom to the kitchen table, issues of equity and access came to the fore in districts and schools around the country. Many students were able to seamlessly transition to distance learning because their home environments were already well served by high-speed internet service providers.

Other students weren't so lucky. Learning how to learn from home was an adjustment for all students, but for those in rural districts underserved by major internet providers, or those from big cities trying to connect in crowded, multi-family apartment buildings, even getting online in the first place was often a struggle.

At the risk of stating the obvious: if kids can't connect they can't participate in remote classes. And when they can't participate, they fall behind. Underconnected households are left to create patchwork solutions that eat up parental data plans, or force kids to connect via unsecured public networks (and putting your entire district's network at risk in the process).

[The issue of internet accessibility disproportionately impacts Black, Latino, and Native American students](#)—meaning the move to distance learning has widened the achievement gap in districts across the country. For kids already struggling, distance learning only made things worse.

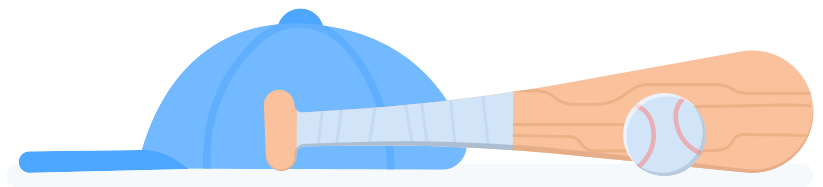
Going forward with hybrid learning, it's imperative that districts large or small, rural or urban prioritize—in partnership with parents and local officials—internet access for every student they serve.

What your district can do today

- The first step to ensuring internet access for every student is to take stock of your current situation. To better understand if you have a connectivity problem in the first place, and if so, how severe and widespread it is.
- Create a feedback loop between yourself and your educators, giving them an open channel to report issues they've observed with students. With tools like [Securly Classroom](#) enabling teachers to see student screens, monitor activity, and more, teachers are better able than ever to keep a pulse on which students are excelling in distance learning, and which ones might be falling behind—possibly due to connectivity issues.
- Engage parents with a community survey to better understand their home internet setup. Don't shy away from getting specific. Go beyond simply, "do you have internet access at home?" A few questions to consider including:

- Ask them to run a speed test and report the numbers they're seeing. Download and upload speeds are important. Maintaining a stable connection to platforms like Zoom depends as much, if not more, on upload speeds than download speeds.
- Ask them to report how many internet-enabled devices are also on their network. Lots of Alexas, smart lights, and iPads around the house? They can all be a drain on available bandwidth.
- Ask whether parents are also working from home, using the same network. If mom or dad are heavy internet users from 9-5, that can impact students' connectivity in a big way.

All responses become valuable data that can help you optimize your distance learning IT strategy. For new families, make this survey part of the orientation process. Soon you'll have a clear picture of every student's internet accessibility fingerprint.





PLAY

O2

Standardize. Standardize. Standardize.

Whoever said “variety is the spice of life” clearly didn’t work in school IT. Any technology leader in education will gladly take predictability over variety any day of the week. Systems and tools that simply do their job—no surprises, no fires to put out—are an admin’s dream. In an admin’s world, boring is beautiful.

But school year after school year, as new tools are adopted, new teams come aboard, and new school priorities take shape, maintaining a coordinated and cohesive tech ecosystem becomes more and more challenging.

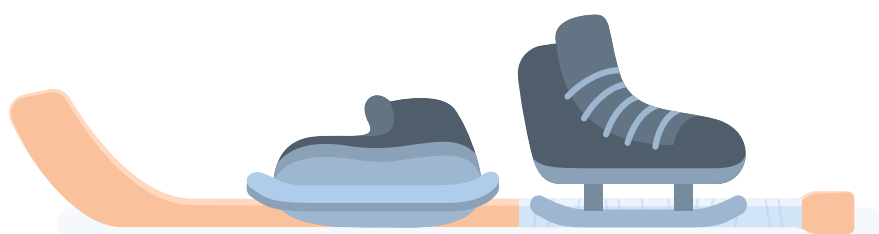
And as with seemingly everything, Covid-19 only made things more complicated. Admins with even the best of intentions to keep everything nice-and-tidy quickly found themselves scrambling to wrangle an unpredictable patchwork of tools and technologies. Critical tools and services that at one time only had to work on school grounds now had to function throughout hundreds if not thousands of households and devices across the district, all without any detriment to the learning experience.

Standardization, as an operating principle, has far-reaching benefits across a school environment—for IT teams, school leaders, even parents and students themselves. For most districts with a hybrid learning plan going forward, making strides toward standardization will bring with it:

- **Increased security** — The more stuff you have to manage, the more likely it is that a critical software update or patch might be missed. When this happens, vulnerabilities enter your infrastructure, leaving systems and data at risk of breach. Ransomware attacks are a hugely concerning—and potentially hugely costly—concern for districts. Giving you and your team fewer moving pieces to manage can help keep your IT ecosystem secure.
- **Happier, more collaborative users** — When it comes to your end users—staff, teachers, and students—collaboration and knowledge sharing is much more efficient when everyone is working with a standard set of tools and solutions. With a consistent suite of tools in place, end users can become power users, and become an extension of in-house experts, relieving the burden placed on IT to onboard and train everyone in the district.
- **Lower costs** — Few districts have extra dollars lying around. A standardized approach to your IT infrastructure can certainly impact your bottom line. Finding and correcting redundancies in your stack will help save money wasted on unused licenses. Many districts see big savings by aligning multiple functions on a single platform from an end-to-end provider. Many solutions providers will stack savings as you bundle more products.

What your district can do today

- Shine a light on “Shadow IT.” Get a handle on the tools you’re currently using (and likely paying for) by surveying your end users and having the finance team review recent statements, taking stock of recurring subscription payments.
- Compare functionality across the many platforms your teams use every day. You may quickly recognize overlapping functionalities that represent an opportunity to streamline your systems.
- Prioritize documentation. As the first two bullets indicate, half the battle when it comes to managing complex IT infrastructure is simply knowing what you’re working with. And that starts with documentation. Develop and implement best practices for your teams (and frankly, yourself) to document everything from processes and workflows to what version of iOS your iPads are running. There’s no bad time to start improving your documentation.





PLAY

03

Take small steps to big data

We know. We know. Everyone and their mother talks about data these days. And while it's still early days in terms of realizing data's full impact on education, forward-looking districts are already planning for this eventuality. Big data is definitely coming.

The events of the past year have only accelerated the trend, ushering in the dawn of the data-driven district. Equipped with accurate and timely information, readily available at their fingertips, district leaders can make smarter decisions to help shape the future of schools and students.

For IT, detailed reporting and analytics can provide insight into device usage, internet browsing behavior, and security vulnerabilities. When a new (and not

school appropriate) site or social platform is gaining popularity among the student body, admins can see the spike in data and quickly make adjustments to their district block lists, for instance. Helping ensure school devices are used for school work.

When it comes to student safety, innovative tools like [Securly's At-Risk algorithm](#) use AI and natural language processing to recognize warning signs in online activity that a student might be struggling. And since many children are not going to admit they're having problems, tools like Securly's Filter and Auditor help schools spot these signs in real-time and share the data with those in a position to help.

In the classroom, data can assist teachers with identifying students who might be lagging behind their peers, and conversely identify those who are ready to advance to new challenges. Soon every teacher will have at his or her disposal intuitive dashboards to track student performance week over week, month over month—allowing educators to more quickly and effectively know that all students are on track, or know who might need special attention.

For school administrators, having data at hand to guide high-level strategy will only become more important in the future. Zooming out from the day-to-day to look at macro-level trends in data can help leadership and school boards make better decisions to impact attendance, parental engagement, equity, test scores, and, ultimately, better outcomes for students.

What your district can do today

- Start collecting data today. Even if you don't yet have the tools or platforms in place to do anything with it. Data storage is as cheap as it's ever been, which means most districts can afford to begin collecting the raw materials today that will turn into data-driven decisions down the line.

- Prioritize data privacy. For any of us, but especially when it comes to students who are minors, protecting privacy data is of utmost importance. Ensure any solutions you consider can prove they're certified as Soc 2 Type 2 and iKeepSafe compliant, as well as signatories of the Student Data Privacy Pledge. Any outside vendor you contract with should prove they prioritize student privacy just as much as you do.
- Set the right expectations early. This goes hand-in-hand with the point about privacy. Make sure your school community—especially parents—are well informed and comfortable with your data collection plans and policies. Overcommunication is never a bad thing when it comes to data.





PLAY



O4

Move to the cloud

These days, it seems that everything from family photos to banking has found new life in the cloud. The cloud refers to software and services that run on the web, instead of locally on a computer, and are accessed through a browser or a dedicated app. As long as you have access to the web, you have access to the cloud.

Part of why Securly's cloud-based web filter revolutionized edtech was because district admins no longer had to rely on hardware (with their manual, time-consuming upgrades and planned obsolescence) to provide a safer web to their students and staff. With a configuration of IP numbers, a district's entire 1:1 and BYOD environment could be authenticated and managed anywhere, practically instantly.

The cloud in a post-Covid environment

For schools that relied on an on-site filter, a sudden shift toward remote learning saw them forced to become, more or less, their area's K-12 ISP. For many of these schools, the combination of students and staff working remotely created more bandwidth than the school was ever equipped for, which translated into frequent crashes and less efficient learning.

These problems simply did not and do not exist for schools already in the cloud. Because many schools had transitioned to a 1:1 environment that relied on the cloud, the rapid transition between on-campus learning to remote was seamless and, most importantly, learning was not interrupted.

Cloud = Efficiency

For what feels an eternity, schools have complained about not having enough support or staff to achieve the educational efficiency they knew they were capable of. These days, a simple solution can be found in the cloud. By moving to a cloud model, more pieces of these educational institutions can work and function together flawlessly. Filtering, personal safety, monitoring of emotional well-being, even teaching and learning can be done in the cloud without concern of power outages or hardware failures.

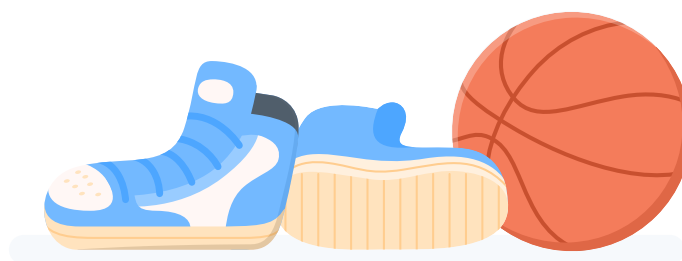
Cloud-based matters

While some industry providers offer a selection of cloud-based solutions, Securly is the only one that engineers and provides cloud-based solutions exclusively. Why does that matter? Because whenever a district needs two or more solutions, they can be positive that all Securly products are designed to integrate seamlessly. Everything has been built to allow schools the ability to build their own environment based on their own needs and to adapt as those needs change.

The interoperability and capabilities of cloud systems allow current staff to be more efficient, which in turn improves learning outcomes, which in turn benefits the students and their communities at large.

What your district can do today

- Conduct a cost-benefit study. Whether you're leasing or buying it outright, hardware has more costs associated. Not to mention the need to upgrade infrastructure to accommodate the added bandwidth. Compare this with the subscription cost of a bandwidth-friendly cloud model.
- Compare cloud service providers to discover what kind of technology is offered and the different specialties. Ex: Is the provider designing solutions more for corporations or specifically for schools?
- Virtualize your existing environment as much as possible. Spill a cup of coffee on a physical report and you might lose a day's work. With everything in the cloud, data is secure and accessible. Plus, the built-in redundancy of cloud providers means that even if one server goes down, your environment remains up and running.





PLAY

05

Cultivate your community

Regardless of whether a school is remote or hybrid, the education and general happiness of students is always a priority. Without students on-campus, however, ensuring their emotional wellness becomes difficult, if not even more essential.

With on-premise hardware, the onus of receiving and acting on safety alerts fell to the IT department. With a cloud environment, guidance counselors, teachers, and even parents can be informed. Securly's Filter allows admins to delegate reporting and alerting access to the person closest to a particular student, one who can have the greatest impact. As the saying goes, it takes a village.

Empowering parents

When schools suddenly shifted to remote learning, one of the groups hardest hit and least prepared: parents. Seemingly overnight, parents became teachers and administrators in their own homes.

With over 1M downloads since the early days of Covid, [Securly Home](#) allows parents more control and peace of mind over school-owned devices. With Home, parents are able to view their child's online activity, including recent searches, sites visited, and videos watched. Parents can receive flagged activity notifications for signs of bullying, self-harm, and other concerning content. These alerts provide parents the opportunity to address concerns in real-time and intervene when every second counts.

Transparency is safety

As schools return to in-person learning or hybrid models there may be a lot of people and activity going on. So the need for knowing who's stepping foot on-campus or who's picking up which students becomes even more important.

Many schools rely on visitor identification and safety screening systems to verify who should and shouldn't be on campus. With police databases such as registered sex offenders publicly available on the web, solutions with cloud-based access to these lists can be vital.

These solutions, like [Securly's Visitor](#), work by asking visitors (including guests, contractors, aides, and parents) to sign in to a web-connected device (example: an iPad). A visitor's ID is checked against registered sex offender lists, as well as school or district blocklists, as well as adults legally prohibited from claiming custody or guardianship.

It takes a village

For students, a school is a place of many things. It's a place to learn, a place to see friends, a place to simply be a child. School should never be a place where kids feel unsafe, unwanted, or unnoticed. Through integrated cloud-based solutions, everyone professionally and emotionally invested in the well-being of each student can do their part to ensure students are able to learn and grow happily and confidently.

What your district can do today

- For student safety alerts, shop around for cloud-based solutions that allow admins to delegate which alerts go to which staff members. If certain staff members are more influential with certain groups of students, that influence can translate into a more meaningful and successful intervention.
- Research ways to provide parents with more insight into the day-to-day of their child's education. Whether that is by sharing weekly reports or encouraging them to download apps that allow them to view real-time activity online and provide more control of school devices in the home.



In summary

There's no shortage of daily priorities to occupy the working hours of busy school IT professionals. We get it. But at the same time, we hope this playbook—and the strategies and steps it provides—demonstrates how carving out time for future-looking priorities can have a big impact on the future of your district.

Partnering with a company like Securly, with its end-to-end solutions built especially for schools, can provide a platform to help you tackle what you're facing today while laying the foundation for long-term, sustainable success for you, your school, and every student in your district.



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