

A Practical Guide to Learning Support Centers

During this time of virtual and hybrid schooling, many Boys & Girls Clubs have expanded their services to provide supervision, support, and technical assistance for youth accessing school remotely. These *Learning Support Centers* (LSCs) (also called Remote Learning Clubs, e-Learning Centers, and Virtual Learning Hubs) are a new model for many but they are a vital resource in serving youth that need us most. They provide an emotionally safe space in which youth receive the support they need to navigate the challenges of this new virtual learning environment.

Whether you're just getting started with your LSC or are looking for ways to improve, the information below will guide you in developing a safe and productive space where youth can connect and engage in virtual learning.

Getting Started

Establish a solid foundation on which to open a Learning Support Center.

- **Conduct a community needs assessment**
 - Take time to first understand the specific needs of the community you serve. Ask youth and caregivers what they need and how you can best support them. Check out BGCA's [Sample Community Needs Assessment](#) for tips and a helpful example.
- **Secure funding**
 - Use the [Education Local Funding Toolkit](#) to support local resource generation. The toolkit includes a self-assessment, funding template, and customizable pitch deck that can be used to secure funding to support educational experiences and programming.
- **Recruit and register youth**
 - Reach out to families that haven't yet registered their youth to better understand their concerns. A personal phone call can go a long way in addressing some of their questions about safety, cost, and program offerings.
 - Partner with local schools and community organizations to disseminate information to potential members. Ask whether you can use their channels to share information about your programs and services and to distribute registration forms.
 - Discuss how you will prioritize registrations. You might consider need, previous attendance at the Club, siblings, number of days per week they're able to come to the Club, or some other aspect.

Safety

At Boys & Girls Clubs, safety is our number one priority.

- **Follow CDC and local health department guidelines**
 - Secure sufficient personal protective equipment (masks, gloves), mandate cloth face coverings/masks, practice social distancing, conduct temperature checks, ensure everyone washes their hands regularly, and establish strict sanitizing and cleaning routines.
 - If you need any PPE, talk to your CEO about BGCA's partnership with Amazon.

- **Secure parent/guardian permissions.**
 - Request consent for Club staff to have access to school platforms and be allowed to communicate directly with teachers and school administrators.
- **Provide age-appropriate Internet safety training for youth.**
 - Have youth earn the Digital Literacy badge on [MyFuture](#) which features activities related to digital privacy and online safety.
 - Facilitate an online safety training for youth such as [NetSmartz](#) so they are aware of potential online risks and make safe choices when using the Internet.
- **Develop a plan should someone become sick**
 - Create policies and procedures for what to do should a staff member or youth become ill. This should include communication with staff and families, processes for isolating individuals or sending them home, closure for cleaning and disinfecting, and notifying the appropriate personnel (health department, insurance provider, BGCA DOD).
- **Minimize physical interactions among youth**
 - Keep youth in small groups to minimize the spread of germs. Consider using a seating chart and organizing them into self-contained “pods” by schools, grades, technology needs, etc.
- **Supervise and monitor virtual learning**
 - Have at least two Club staff supervising youth in the LSC at all times
 - Request transcripts of chat logs between youth and adults to prevent potential inappropriate contact;
 - Step in immediately to stop online learning sessions if any inappropriate activity is suspected
 - Request recordings of online sessions to prevent against potential inappropriate behavior
 - Post codes of conduct or signs about good internet behavior to remind youth of expectations and encourage online safety

Emotional Wellness

Above all, we need to remember our Boys & Girls Club roots and make sure that we’re leading with connection and focused on developing a sense of belonging in our youth. Check out p.13-14 of [Program Basics for COVID-19](#) for more detailed information on how to support emotional wellness.

- **Develop Group Agreements**
 - Work with youth to establish agreed-upon behaviors that will promote physical and emotional safety for everyone. Have them sign these agreements and post them in a visible area as a reminder. Review and revisit them often. Check out the [Positive Club Climate Toolkit](#) for more information.
- **Start the day with Community Builders**
 - Community Builders are ice breakers or team-building exercises that build trust and supportive relationships through play, fun, and active engagement. The YD Toolbox app (available for free on the Google Play or iTunes App Store) has lots of great examples as does p. 8-9 of the [Emotional Wellness Summer Planning Guide](#).
- **Conduct regular Pulse Checks**
 - This is a way to quickly collect data about youth’s experiences so you can learn what is and isn’t working and make needed adjustments. Consider conducting a daily exit poll



for youth as they leave the Club to find out how they're feeling, their favorite part of the day, or what staff can do to help them be successful.

- For a low-tech version of a pulse check, have youth share their answer with stickers or write their response on a scrap of paper, and for a high-tech version use Kahoot or Poll Everywhere. You can learn more about Pulse Checks [here](#).
- **Take Brain Breaks**
 - Encourage youth to take regular breaks and do stretches to avoid the soreness and fatigue that comes from staring at a computer all day. Check out [this blog post](#) for 6 easy stretches to reduce "tech neck".
 - Have healthy snacks available in case youth get hungry: fruits, vegetables, nuts, cheese.
 - Create a list of go-to activities for youth if they need some mental downtime. Coloring sheets, art supplies, activity books, playdough, puzzles, playing cards, slinkies, and Rubik's Cubes are all good options.
- **Create opportunities for Recognition**
 - Take time to give youth some shine each day for all their hard work. End the day with some shoutouts in which you highlight specific positive behaviors like working hard, staying focused, and persevering through challenges. Recognize youth for both effort and progress, not just their accomplishments.
 - Create opportunities for youth to recognize each other. Provide prompts as necessary such as "Who would like to recognize someone who helped them learn something new?" or "Who would like to recognize someone who encouraged them today?"
 - Plan time for formal recognition and special events which can boost fun, excitement, and interest. Distribute awards, prizes, or coupons; host a party; plan a field trip; create a "Superstar" wall; or something else-get creative! Check out this list of [low-cost ways to recognize youth](#) to help get started brainstorming ideas.

Environment

Design a space where youth feel motivated and inspired to learn and have the resources to do so.

- **Stock up on supplies**
 - To minimize sharing of materials, purchase plastic containers for each youth and fill them with the basics: pencils, pens, coloring utensils, paper, glue stick, and scissors.
 - To minimize distractions, purchase dividers that youth can put up around their space when they really need to focus.
 - Purchase fidgets to help youth pay attention while working, but be mindful that they don't become too much of a distraction. Fidget spinners and snake twist puzzles are popular, but marble fidgets, stress balls, and putty can be less distracting.
- **Arrange the space**
 - If possible, let youth personalize their workstations so they feel inspired and motivated to work. Distribute dividers for them to decorate with encouraging messages, quotes, photos, and other images.
 - Make sure all computers face the same way so staff can easily see what youth are working on and so no youth are in the background of each other's videos.
 - Print each youth's individual schedule and tape it to their desk or computer for them to reference.
 - Post a group schedule and try to stick to a routine so youth know what to expect each day. This will also minimize behavioral issues.



- Determine whether you will play background music while students are studying and organize seating so youth who want background music are closest to the sound. If you decide to play music, avoid anything with lyrics which can be a distraction and instead choose instrumental, classical, or ambient music.
- Decide on a visual signal to show that someone is in a class meeting and/or is doing heads-down work and doesn't want to be interrupted. Consider a "Do not disturb" sign or a small orange traffic cone they can put beside them.

Technology & Hardware

Ensure your technology and hardware are able to support all of youth's virtual learning needs.

- **Check your tech**
 - Check your bandwidth and internet speed and upgrade if necessary. A general rule of thumb for upload speed (which is needed for video calls) is 4Mbps per youth.
- **Procure needed equipment**
 - To minimize noise, purchase a set of headphones for each youth. Make sure they keep them at the Club so they don't forget them at home!
 - To accommodate for so many devices, purchase multi-socket extension cords.
 - Buy additional chargers in case youth leave theirs at home.
- **Get familiar with the platforms**
 - Talk to schools and find out what different platforms they'll be using. Some of the most common platforms are [Google Classroom](#), [Canvas](#), [Schoolology](#), [Seesaw](#), [Zoom](#), [Flipgrid](#), and [ClassDojo](#). Check out their websites for tutorial videos (linked above) or ask the school if you can join in on a training session with their teachers.
- **Develop a system for saving login and password information**
 - Store usernames and passwords in a safe but easily accessible place in case staff need to help youth with logging on. Alternatively you can create a shared document with this information for staff to access.
- **Be prepared with common tech solves**
 - If students are having issues, encourage them to try the following:
 - Limit the number of open tabs and close unneeded programs.
 - Log off and log back on.
 - Try using another browser such as Google Chrome or Mozilla Firefox.
 - Reconnect to the WIFI.
 - Check for any software updates and run a virus scan.
 - Close out and restart the program or computer.

Academic Success

Academics are a key component of Learning Support Centers. Support your youth in becoming effective, engaged, and adaptive learners.

- Develop a checklist for youth and their caregivers so they know what they need to bring and how to prepare for each day (charge their devices, check class schedules, remember masks)



- **Support youth to become self-directed learners**
 - Spend time ensuring youth have the skills needed to succeed in this virtual space. Facilitate short tutorials and practice sessions about common tasks they may need to be able to do such as:
 - Use a mouse
 - Type
 - Save and share files
 - Take screenshots
 - Upload documents
 - Conduct research
- **Consider extrinsic and intrinsic motivation**
 - Determine what motivates youth, and remember that motivation occurs on a spectrum:
 - *Extrinsic motivation* is based on something in a members' environment and can include material incentives such as field trips, food, prizes, and quality time with friends.
 - *Intrinsic motivation* comes from within and happens when youth participate in a program because they have an interest in learning more. Intrinsic motivation helps youth become more independent students who love to learn. Staff can support youth in developing intrinsic motivation by allowing them greater autonomy (offering choices), creating opportunities to demonstrate competence (calling out progress and skill building), and providing relevance (connecting the content to something that matters).
- **Communicate openly and often with...**
 - Teachers. Let teachers know that you will be supporting the youth with their schoolwork. Ask to be added to the class platforms so you can access messages and assignments.
 - Caregivers. Set clear expectations and don't overpromise. Make sure they know that their child might not finish all of their work while at the Club or Youth Center and that they should continue to support them at home by checking their work and helping as they are able.
- **Use BGCA resources to support academics**
 - Spillett Leadership University has helpful trainings on topics such as Active Learning, Power Hour, and Homework Help.
 - Tutoring guidelines can be found [here](#) and tutoring resources can be found [here](#).
 - [Power Hour Activity Books](#) include a number of lessons that can provide additional practice in reinforcing essential reading and math skills in youth.
 - [MyFuture](#) has hundreds of activities related to education, health and wellness, leadership and service, and the arts. Education programs include Computer Science, Digital Literacy, DIY STEM, Lyricism 101, Media Making, Summer Brain Gain, and Ultimate Journey. Activities can be done both at the Club or at home.
 - Connect with the [Education Learning Community](#) to stay up to date on resources to support academic success.



For more ideas and suggestions, check out: <https://padlet.com/cbooth10>