EDITOR’S NOTE
Online blended learning is here to stay. This Spotlight will help you clarify ways to relieve technology fatigue; obtain need-to-know info on the future of blended learning; identify hurdles in the way of more effective digital learning; address how to make tech use easier on teachers; recognize the teaching strategies that will outlive the pandemic; and identify the improvement opportunities for virtual instruction.

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Online Blended Learning

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Tech Fatigue Is Real for Teachers and Students. Here’s How to Ease the Burden

By Alyson Klein

The interactive smartboard in Denise Beasley’s high school classroom was supposed to make life easier: helping her present digital lessons, appeal to different learning styles, and boost student engagement by allowing kids to interact with images.

Instead, adding yet another technology to her classroom had the opposite effect. “It was just craziness,” she said.

With a recent grant, Beasley’s district, Ose-a-Fairchild in Wisconsin, decided to purchase the smartboards. The district believed the devices “would make our lives so much better, even though we’ve never been trained on them,” she said.

A high school English teacher who has been working for more than a quarter century, Beasley is no Luddite. She taught online courses before the pandemic and has used a learning-management system for years, unlike some of her colleagues, who still prefer a traditional pen-and-paper grade book.

But Beasley doesn’t think she—or most teachers in her school—have the bandwidth to master yet another new piece of technology at a time when they are being asked to cover classes for quarantining colleagues and help students recover academically and emotionally from the pandemic.

“It’s flying by the seat of our pants just getting through every single day,” Beasley said.

On paper, this should be the start of a golden age for education technology, the moment when devices and the teaching techniques they enable finally spur the kind of innovation and academic gains that their supporters believe they are capable of.

After all, teachers have a deeper understanding of technology than ever before. And laptops, tablets, and Wi-Fi hotspots are now available to students in nearly every school district.

But that rosy picture glosses over a major problem: Most educators are tired of using technology constantly. Nearly two-thirds of teachers, principals, and district leaders who participated in a survey conducted by the EdWeek Research Center in December said they were experiencing technology fatigue. And 79 percent said they felt their teacher colleagues were tired of all the tech use they have experienced over the past two years.

In response, some administrators who started the school year exhilarated by the recent education technology momentum are now giving their teachers some breathing room.

“Our teachers are really just juggling a lot,” said Justin Cutts, the principal of Whitney High School in Rocklin, Calif. He’s long been passionate about the power of technology to energize students and help teachers do their jobs more effectively. But, he acknowledged, “I have to kind of take a step back” and dial down expectations, at least for now.

Some of his educators are “people who I feel are good teachers. [I was] excited that they were going to learn something new,” he said. “And then watching them come back with frustration and say, ‘I did everything you talked about, or everything we said we were gonna do, and it’s not working. I just feel like I have to fall back on what I know works.’ And so, for me, it’s been tough, but I’m like, OK, I can’t not support that. Because they did try.”

What’s more, educator exhaustion, coupled with the staffing shortages that many districts face, mean that it might be a while before the K-12 system sees the kind of widescale changes to teaching and learning that some ed-tech advocates believe will grow out of the pandemic and the increasing use of technology during it.

“Many teachers and district leaders see the need for some other things out there to further differentiate instruction, to meet more students where they are, to accelerate learning,” said Chris Rush, a senior adviser at the U.S. Department of Education and a co-founder of New Classrooms, a nonprofit focused on innovation. But, he added, many educators “don’t feel like this is the moment that they can implement some of those changes and reforms.”

“They demand more technology with your lessons’

While new laptops and tablets opened fresh avenues of digitally enhanced instruction, they’ve also heightened pressures on teachers.
“The district paid for so much, they demand more technology with your lessons,” said Jeanette Escobar, an elementary teacher in El Paso, Texas.

But to her mind, some concepts are easier to grasp outside a computer screen. For instance, she’s had students dissect owl pellets, the undigested food that the birds sometimes regurgitate, in science class. There’s just no digital substitute for the experience of stumbling on, say, a mouse skeleton buried in the bird’s pellets, Escobar said.

She’s also not entirely comfortable with a new online camera that trails her around the classroom so that kids learning virtually from home can see what she’s up to.

“If I’m over helping a student, if I’m teaching a lesson, wherever I’m talking, whatever I’m doing, it’s following me around,” she said. “To me, it’s a little bit stressful to have that going on all the time. Because sometimes you want to decompress ... just relax with the students and have a good discussion. And you really can’t get to do that” with the device tracking a teacher’s every move.

Educators aren’t the only ones who want a break from technology. Students are also weary of devices at school, according to 72 percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders who participated in the December survey.

In some cases, that’s meant kids are reluctant to take advantage of extra support when it’s provided in a virtual space. The Topeka, Kan., school district offers tutoring after school, with both online and in-person options. While students show up for the in-person program, “no one logs on” to the online offering, said Tracy Keegan, the assistant principal at Eisenhower Middle School.

“They’re tired of the screen; they get home and they have 42 other distractions,” Keegan said. She and her colleagues end up assisting kids in the morning before class instead, who say, “‘Hey, I didn’t get to log in. Can you help me with this now?’”

‘Honestly, just back off and support them’

Teacher burnout isn’t just about technology, said Casey Rimmer, the director of innovation and education technology for the Union County public schools near Charlotte, N.C.

“I don’t think our teachers are tired because of tech,” she said. “I think our teachers are tired because of the thousand other things they’re having to do. They’re covering such a heavy load for their kids.”

By sticking with established, nondigital strategies, she said, “they’re trying to revert to a safe space with what they’re comfortable with and what they know. And that’s most likely pre-pandemic teaching.”

To be sure, some teachers in her district are building on what they learned when school was virtual, applying the tools they mastered more often and in different ways. But most aren’t interested in tackling something new.

“They don’t want to throw a bunch more tools into the mix and figure out where to click and what buttons to press again,” Rimmer said.

So, Rimmer is giving teachers space. “We’re not making anything mandatory,” she said. “We’re not reprimanding anybody for not doing what we’re offering.” She’s told current and prospective ed-tech vendors that “now is not the time” for new devices or platforms.

Diana Morris, the supervisor for humanities for the Penns-Grove Carneys Point Regional school district in New Jersey, had a similar take.

“This technology is, I don’t want to say difficult, it’s a challenge. It’s a challenge for teachers. So they don’t need anything new,” she said.

“Honestly, just back off and support them.”

I don’t think our teachers are tired because of tech. I think our teachers are tired because of the thousand other things they’re having to do. They’re covering such a heavy load for their kids.”

CASEY RIMMER
Director of innovation and education technology, Union County public schools, Charlotte, N.C.
The Hustisford school district in rural Wisconsin wasn’t an obvious candidate for blended learning before the pandemic. There were no immediate plans for a districtwide 1-to-1 computing initiative, and about 1 of every 3 students did not have reliable internet access at home.

Then the pandemic hit and Hustisford, like countless districts around the country, had to shift quickly to virtual instruction. That meant buying devices, handing out wireless hotspots, and making big changes to teaching practices.

Now, Hustisford’s teachers are regularly using tools like Kahoot, a game-based learning platform, YouTube videos, and even TikTok as part of in-person classroom lessons, said Heather Cramer, the district superintendent. More significantly: a handful of teachers took the initiative to flip their classrooms, allowing students to learn new material at home via online tools and spending class time on group work, class discussions, or digging deeper into the material.

“‘That’s something that we’ve really, really lacked in the past,’” Cramer said. “‘The kids didn’t have that technology at home to be able to do that research and bring that all together.’”

The pandemic and the increasing use of technology in K-12 education it prompted has added renewed energy to the blended learning movement as most students are now learning in school buildings. About two-thirds of educators are expecting their use of the approach to increase during the 2021-22 school year, according to a July survey by the EdWeek Research Center. Nearly 30 percent said they were betting it would “increase a lot.” Just 14 percent expected it to decline.

“Blended learning and the ‘new normal’ picking up momentum”

In some cases, educators are taking the initiative to continue instructional practices they started using during the pandemic. For instance, teachers in California’s San Marcos school district are much more likely to record their lessons and post them online for students than they were before COVID, said the district’s director of educational technology, Stephanie Casperson. That allows teachers to flip their classroom or gives students a chance to review lessons if they need help understanding a concept.

“Before COVID, it was mostly my American Sign Language teachers who did videos,” Casperson said. “‘Before COVID, it was mostly my American Sign Language teachers who did videos,’ Casperson said.

Teachers in California’s San Marcos school district are much more likely to record their lessons and post them online for students than they were before COVID.”

STEPHANIE CASPERSON
San Marcos school district’s director of educational technology
teachers at Corunna High School near Flint, Mich., were very comfortable using blended learning approaches, said Barry Thomas, the principal. Now, it’s more like eight to 10 of the school’s roughly 30 teachers, he said.

Corunna teachers are now more apt to record their lessons so that students can go back and review them, and the school’s math department has embraced online platforms like Khan Academy to supplement their own instruction.

“They’ve found things in the course of this last year and a half that they really have liked,” Thomas said. “And now it’s just part of their normal operation.”

But some educators are cautious about embracing too much digital instruction.

“I’m not going to force anybody to do more blended learning,” said Scott Clayton, the principal of Scofield Magnet Middle School in Stamford, Conn. “Most children have a device or a cellphone. And now we’re putting a Chromebook in front of them or a laptop. It’s increasing screen time.”

**Districts put greater emphasis on professional development for blended learning**

Yet as teachers’ level of interest in, and use of, blended learning has risen, districts and schools are making it a higher priority for professional development. More than half of the district leaders and principals who said they were planning to offer some remote instruction next school year in a survey by the EdWeek Research Center this summer—58 percent—said they plan to offer training on the strategy. That’s compared with just over 30 percent who said they were likely to work with teachers on remote instruction or teaching kids in-person and online simultaneously (so-called concurrent teaching), the next most popular approaches.

“Demand on our end has been explosive,” said Kareem Farah, the chief executive officer for the Modern Classroom Project, a nonprofit that works with educators on blended, self-paced, mastery-based instruction.

The organization has trained 2,300 teachers through a virtual mentoring program, which was at capacity last school year. And a free online course on blended learning launched at the start of the pandemic went from 500 users initially to 30,000.

But despite an influx of federal funding that can be used for professional development, there are logistical challenges to getting teachers hooked up with blended learning training. The San Marcos School district,
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for instance, is running up against a nationwide substitute teacher shortage, making it difficult to find time to get teachers out of the classroom for training.

And for some teachers, there’s a big temptation to revert back to traditional instruction.

“The initial shift is kind of almost been like, ‘We want to go back to exactly what we were doing before’,” said Justin Cutts, the principal of Whitney High School in Rocklin, Calif. “Which is, to me, a little bit of a disappointment. We had the math department burn through, like, 12 [packages] of paper in the first two weeks of school. How did we go [through] the last year and a half, and now we’re gonna go back to breaking copiers again?”

Blended learning for acceleration and remediation

There has been significant concern among educators and policymakers about students falling behind academically due to the pandemic. Half of teachers said their students were behind where they would be in a typical year, according to a survey of 1,042 teachers conducted this spring by the Clayton Christensen Institute, a nonprofit research organization that promotes innovation in education and other fields.

It’s unclear how much of a role technology can play in helping students regain their academic footing, through either acceleration or remediation, at least during class time.

School and district leaders surveyed by the EdWeek Research Center this summer were most likely to say their students would be able to use online tools for acceleration and remediation at home more frequently than before. Less popular: Offering intensive tutoring that incorporates digital tools more often than in the past.

About another quarter of district and school leaders surveyed aren’t planning to use blended learning at all to help accelerate instruction, or for remediation.

Some districts are trying a multipronged approach.

California’s Whitney High School is having some of its students catch up using a mix of software, courses specifically geared toward helping students who are behind in either math or language arts, and even smaller classes to help students who have failed multiple subjects.

While the district has used “bits of pieces of this system,” it has never been as comprehensive as it is this school year,” said Cutts, the principal.
But some schools are taking a more cautious approach to blended learning.

For instance, even though he and his school have embraced the use of technology for teaching and learning, Clayton, the principal from Connecticut, doesn’t think it’s necessarily the best strategy for making sure that students have the background information they need to access grade-level content.

“If anything instructionally will shift, it’s this move toward an acceleration model of learning, which is not about technology,” he said, referring to the practice of refreshing students on just the learning they need to access grade-level content. “That’s about instructional practices. It’s about teachers not relying on remedial instruction because they feel as if students have somehow lost learning over the [last] year.”

More educators are experimenting with flipped classrooms

Teachers are now more likely these days to try out an intensive form of blended learning—the so-called flipped classroom—in which students cover class content online at home and in-person instruction is used for discussions, projects, and practice, the Christensen Institute survey found.

Eighteen percent of teachers said they were planning to use the model after the pandemic, compared with 12 percent who said they used it before the pandemic.

For instance, last school year, when most schools were using hybrid instructional approaches, some 5th grade teachers at Winchester Trail Elementary School in Canal Winchester, Ohio, began to shift to a flipped model. The principal, Max Lallathin, who encouraged teachers to give the arrangement a shot, is hoping to see it used in his school more often this school year.

“It’s a timesaver for the kids because they can go right in” and begin discussing content, he said. “If they watch a scientific video, they can go right into the scientific method the next day, instead of watching the video in class.”

But despite all the trends showing teachers’ technology skills rising and increasing use of blended learning approaches, some educators worry about backsliding this school year.

“My biggest fear was that we’d go back to business as usual this [school] year, and that teachers would stop using some of the technology” that they mastered during the pandemic, Casperson said. “And I think that’s a fear of pretty much every ed-tech director that I’ve talked to.”

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**How do you plan to use blended learning this school year for remediation? Select all that apply.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students will have access to online programs at home more frequently than in the past</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will be offered intensive tutoring that incorporates digital tools more than in the past</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers will receive more training on how to integrate digital tools to help students catch up</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students will spend more time using software programs to supplement their classroom lessons</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We do not plan to use blended learning for remediation</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, please specify</td>
<td>4%</td>
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</tbody>
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*Respondents are principals and district leaders.
Source: EdWeek Research Center

**Please indicate the timing of your use of flipped classes:**

- Used pre-pandemic: 12%
- Used earlier during the pandemic: 20%
- Using currently: 20%
- Plan to use post-pandemic: 18%

Source: Christensen Institute, survey of 1,042 teachers
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Districts purchased thousands of new devices during the pandemic, and teachers quickly got up to speed on digital teaching methods. But now that most schools are back to in-person learning, educators are running up against hurdles as they seek to broaden their use of education technology.

At the top of the list are the challenges caused by digital distractions. Working on devices can be very distracting for students, who will often wander off task. (Classic example: watching YouTube videos during virtual instruction).

In fact, 60 percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders flagged tech distractions as a big stumbling block to reach deeper, more meaningful tech usage, according to a survey conducted Jan. 26 to Feb. 7 by the EdWeek Research Center. Nearly as many educators—59 percent—cited parents' challenges in helping their kids use school technology at home.

Because his district provided students with school-issued devices, parents often expect school officials to make sure the kids use them appropriately at home, said Todd Ostrander, the district technology coordinator for the Richland school district in Wisconsin. But that’s not realistic, he said.

“They’ll go home and they’ll watch stupid YouTube videos,” he said. “We can certainly put filters in place. But, obviously, filters are not all-encompassing,” he said. “Parents want us to make sure that they don’t go to this website or don’t go to that website. You have to try to explain to them, we can’t really control every minute of the day that [their] child [is] on a device.”

More than half of educators—56 percent—pointed to fears that expanding the use of technology in schools could mean much more screen time for students. And about the same percentage said that students’ difficulty in getting online at home remains a problem.

And Mark Ryan, the superintendent of the North Valley Military Institute, a charter school in Southern California, said both teachers and students are “tired of being in front of a screen all day.” They complain about problems stemming from the blue light that computers and phones emit, saying it causes tired eyes and blurred vision.

Ryan, who still teaches two math classes, said he and his students are happy to solve problems by hand on the classroom whiteboard instead of a Chromebook screen.

On the flip side, some students are so used to learning on screens that they have trouble adjusting to traditional instruction, said Tim Scott, the principal of Alta Elementary School in Iowa.

“Kids are totally fixated on, ‘I want to be on the computer. I want to be on the computer,’” he said. “Literally, some of them will throw tantrums when our regular learning is taking place because they want to be on the electronic device.”
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How to Make Tech Use in Schools Easier on Teachers

By Arianna Prothero

The pandemic greatly accelerated the use of technology in classrooms. But two years in, with nearly all students now learning in person, how can education technology leaders maintain—and even advance—teachers’ newfound skills while being sensitive to the fact that educators may be burnt out on technology?

One way is by providing ongoing support and resources to teachers without burdening them with additional obligations, said Heather Esposito, a teacher technology coach for the Cherry Hill school district in New Jersey. She has done this by providing ed-tech professional development that counts toward teachers’ required PD hours or by dropping into teachers’ professional learning community sessions to offer support and strategies on improving their teaching skills.

“I’m trying to make it a natural fit, so it doesn’t feel like an add-on,” she said.

Collaboration among teachers actually increased during the pandemic, Esposito said, as teachers started leveraging technology to share lessons, ideas, resources, and best practices, and she doesn’t want to lose the ground educators in her district gained during the height of the pandemic. Esposito shared with Education Week her strategies for building on teachers’ emerging tech skills and combating tech fatigue. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Education Week: How are schools in your district taking advantage of teachers’ newfound technology skills?

Esposito: At the onset of the pandemic, we invested a lot of time and energy into professional development and sharing best practices.

Today, we are still incorporating both in-person and online professional-development opportunities so that teachers can continue to enhance instruction with technology. My role in that has been a lot of supporting teachers. All of this stuff you created last year, how do you now utilize it in a different setting to make an impact?

Are you seeing any tech burnout in your teachers, and what are you doing to address it?

Absolutely.

One of the biggest things I was committed to at the beginning of the year is to help teachers feel like, yes, you amassed this incredible amount of lessons and slide shows and all this stuff, but it’s never tech for just tech’s sake. Use it when you remember a success you had with it last year, try it again. Or let me help you reimagine it in a different way.

Teachers have also noticed, especially in the middle and secondary grades, that a lot of the platforms and things they tried last year are actually taking some of the burden off of themselves because they are student-facilitated, student-driven work.

For instance, if a teacher created a HyperDoc or a Google site with embedded tasks or strategies, that’s something the kids are working on at their own pace. And now, a teacher doesn’t have to wait for a project to be turned in at the end; the teacher can pace him or herself by leaving feedback during the process.

I’m helping teachers find some of the ways that technology can help make their lives easier. Like a flipped learning model within the school day—the teacher in that case becomes the facilitator of learning. It’s not just that the technology is there but how you can weave the technology within your class day that can free you up to give you the chance to confer with kids or to walk around the room more because you’re not feeling like you have to stand at the front of the room so much.

I always say less is more. Even though teachers say there are hundreds of different platforms they should be using, I say don’t. Take a couple that work for your skill set, that lend themselves to your content area or grade. That has alleviated some of the fatigue, knowing that [they] don’t have to use everything. You have a toolbox and you pick what works for you.

How about students or even parents? Are they tired of all the technology use?

We try to encourage teachers to blend the old with the new. Not everything should be on a computer. The computer doesn’t have to go home every day. Let it stay at school.

As far as the parents, I think the parents have in general come to see things are a lot easier when you can access your kids’ grades online, when you can communicate for a quick meeting with a teacher via Google Meet rather than scheduling an in-person parent conference. I think we are all in a state of transition where everyone is trying to feel out a good balance.
How concerned are you that tech burnout is going to undermine the gains in education technology that were made during the pandemic and this massive experiment in virtual learning?

I’m not concerned. So, there is this continuum, I think it’s called the diffusion of innovation theory. Everyone falls on the continuum. There are people like me who jump off the boat without a life jacket when it comes to technology and innovation and trying new things. Then there are people who will dip their toe in the water and then jump in. And then there are people who are on the island, in their life jackets, saying I am never, ever going to leave. The people who say they are never, ever going to leave, they are going to experience the fatigue and not come out of it.

But the majority of folks are in a good place on the continuum where the fatigue will pass, they will find their rhythm. They’re going to be fine. So, I’m not worried about what this is going to do to the ed-tech world.

What do you think is the biggest impediment in Cherry Hill to using tech in teaching?

Time. The worst thing you can say to a teacher right now is to focus on self-care, because that requires time, and teachers want things taken off their plate, not put on their plate. Sometimes, when you think about tech, you think about it as something else on my plate.

That’s why I try to frame it as let’s find ways to make this seamless so it’s not feeling like something extra. The most challenging thing is the lack of time or the perceived lack of time.

What else should district leaders, principals, and teachers know about how to improve the use of technology in schools?

They should continually tap into student voice, teacher voice, and surveys. We do a thing called Thought Exchange. It’s a survey with open-ended pieces and it’s anonymous. We have done those at various points of the year because if you don’t ask, you don’t know, and if you don’t know, you’re going to make assumptions. Invite teachers into the conversation. Do focus groups, follow up on surveys. That is going to boost morale, it’s going to make everyone aware of where issues might be, so that you can correct them.

The Teaching Strategies Educators Say Will Outlast the Pandemic

By Sarah D. Sparks & Alex Harwin

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but what education innovations will last once the pandemic crisis has passed?

With COVID-19 infections on the decline and nearly all school districts back to in-person learning, teachers and leaders finally can take a breath and look forward. And they think the greater focus (and funding) for things like more flexible learning time and technology integration, mental health, and cultural relevance have led to creative education strategies.

"There was a real acceleration in the last two years of districts trying new things and switching quickly," said Terra Wallin, the associate director of federal P-12 education policy for the nonprofit Education Trust. “It’s going to be important that we ... monitor to see how that actually went.”

In a nationally representative survey taken this January and February, teachers and school and district leaders told the EdWeek Research Center which of those approaches they think will be sustainable for the next five years and beyond.

“We’re taking what we’ve learned from when we had to [provide services] in a crisis moment, and turning it into an opportunity for a convenience moment,” said Michael Lubelfeld, the superintendent of North Shore School District 112 in Highland Park, Ill. The 4,000-student suburban district plans to keep and continue to test in-person and online tutoring options for students.

Technology and more learning time

Expanding learning time and integrating technology—particularly through software platforms that allow teachers to assign and monitor students’ work—have both evolved significantly during the pandemic and are the most likely strategies to stick around for at least the next five years, educators told Education Week.

Nearly 40 percent of district leaders and principals say their schools or districts plan to maintain extended school years or summer sessions, while 10 percent plan to keep longer school days. Just 4 percent expect to continue extended school weeks, like Saturday school.

“We’ve actually flipped a model of time and learning to learning being the expectation versus the [seat] time being the
expectation. We’ve allowed our students to work extended times in greater capacity,” said Jeff Dylan, the superintendent of the 575-student Wilder School District 133 in rural Idaho. Rather than having separate summer school, the district has moved to rolling enrollments in secondary classes, so that students can join courses at any time during the year. “The model we have now is, students have the right to content 24/7, 365 days a year.”

Most school districts also invested heavily in technology hardware and software to support students learning remotely, and they plan to keep the technology integration that they spent so much effort honing.

Nearly 40 percent of respondents said their districts will continue widespread use of online learning platforms to support students academically. Canvas, Moodle, Google G Suite, and similar platforms can be used to monitor student progress, and in some cases, support online classes.

“How teachers interact with students has changed forever, because as much as teachers hated teaching in person and online at the same time, they’ve gotten good at it,” said David Law, the superintendent of the 37,000-student Anoka-Hennepin school district in suburban Minnesota. “The ability to say, ‘You missed class yesterday; everything’s on our Google class, so just log on and let me know if you have questions,’—that kind of interaction has stepped up 100 percent and will likely last forever.”

The systems can connect families to schools as well. For example, in early 2020, the learning management platform adopted by the 650-student Northern Cass School District 97 in North Dakota the year before was mainly used as a way to give students access to curriculum materials and assignments while buildings were closed, said Superintendent Cory Steiner.

The district has gotten even more use out of the system now that COVID-19 cases are down and students are back on campus. “Now we’re starting to see the benefit of the whole system,” Steiner said. “Now we are really getting parents to understand how to interact with it, the community to interact with it, … so they can use it to understand the progress their learners are making.”

**Help for teachers to tackle controversy**

Leaders also reported they are looking for ways to provide better training and supports for teachers to cover controversial topics in
developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant ways, amid the current overheated political climate.

For example, teachers and administrators in the 50,000-student Clayton County public schools in suburban Atlanta have developed a regularly updated database of instruction packets for teaching about controversial or newsworthy topics, as well as procedures to quickly hold class-, school-, or community-wide virtual town hall meetings.

“You know, during the pandemic, of course, we had that going on, but everything else was going on as well,” said Regina Wallace, the K-12 social studies coordinator for the district. “So for social studies, it was the Census. It was a major election year. It was voter suppression. It was Black Lives Matter. It was just a ton of issues where we had to decide as a district whether we were going to choose avoidance or awareness.”

“We want to overall make sure that teachers knew that they were supported in discussing these issues with students and let our students know that we hear them,” Wallace said. “We’ve done a lot of town hall meetings during the pandemic, and since the pandemic showed us how to have these town hall meetings virtually, since the pandemic we’ve continued the conversations around some of these controversial issues.”

**Mental health supports**

With experts, including the U.S. Surgeon General and the American Academy of Pediatrics, warning of a “national emergency” in child and adolescent anxiety, depression, and other problems, most principals and district leaders (52 percent) say they will continue providing more mental health support for students after the pandemic ends.

Thirty percent of school and district leaders plan to or have hired and plan to keep additional support staff, including social workers, counselors, or parent liaisons. And only a little more than 10 percent say they’ve made no changes to wraparound services for children and their families that they can sustain for the next five years, the EdWeek Research Center found.

“The mental health crisis among youth and adults in our country and in our schools is a big concern,” said North Shore Superintendent Lubelfeld. “I think we’re seeing social workers and counselors are being more normalized, not simply for extreme specialized situations, but for the mainstream. And that’s a good thing.”

In fact, the survey found principals and district leaders who work in districts where the majority of students are low income are more likely to plan to sustain more health-care services and wellness clinics for students on campus (39 percent versus 12 percent)—and particularly providing more mental health services for families (26 percent versus 15 percent).

Ronn Nozoe, the chief executive officer of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, agreed. “I’ve heard from many folks that [the pandemic] has really opened the door for a lot more focus on well-being—not just kids, but also teachers—and how important that well-being really is to human development,” he said. “We kind of put that on the back burner before the pandemic, when everybody was talking about accountability and standards and evaluations, and we definitely had lost focus on the broader needs of kids. And so I’ve heard from a number of [principals] about the excitement of mental health and well-being in schools starting to take root, and starting to become more of the fabric of how they do things every day in their schools.”

**What about the ‘funding cliff’?**

Districts split on how sustainable more intensive—and expensive—interventions such as high-dose tutoring, will be in the long run. Forty-seven percent of leaders who work in districts serving a majority of students of color say they are likely to keep in-person, high-dose tutoring programs developed during the pan-
demic, compared to only 28 percent of those who work in mostly white school systems.

Lubelfeld said his mostly white and middle-income district has found online tutoring helpful in “leveling the playing field” for students and is working to support tutoring via its regular budget rather than using recovery funding, to make it more sustainable.

Yet school and district leaders agreed that financial support—from federal, state, and local communities—will be the biggest hurdle to sustaining innovations after the pandemic.

“For tutoring and after-school programs, [the increased use during the pandemic] is a little bittersweet, because people are struggling with the potential cliff effect” after federal pandemic recovery funding ends, said Nozoe of NASSP. “People like the additional supports for kids, but you can’t always find qualified professionals to provide that service. ... People worry that when the money runs out, how do we continue to sustain this work?”

Law, the Anoka-Hennepin superintendent, agreed. While parents and the public in his wealthy suburban community have approved of the district interventions and hiring during the pandemic, they recently voted down a proposal that would have paid for those efforts for the next decade.

“We asked, do you want to keep these smaller class sizes in elementary [grades], keep these social workers and counselors and secondary [grades] interventions beyond the federal funds? But the community said, ‘not at the moment,’” he said. “So, you know, for us that will be 60 or 70 employees that we won’t have beyond the pandemic or beyond the [federal recovery] funds.”

Vicki Phillips, the incoming CEO of the National Center for Education and the Economy, said to sustain pandemic-era innovations, education leaders need to consider them in the context of continuous improvement. “We need to think differently about the system so that we don’t just get momentary gains, but we have a long-term, sustainable way of addressing the needs of young people and the educators who reach them.”

Law said districts also need to think of recovering from the upheaval of the last two years as a marathon, not a sprint.

“The only thing that’s going to cure the disruption of the pandemic is time,” Law said. “You can’t sprint mile 11 of a marathon to finish the whole thing faster; people will burn out. ... If the goal is to finish [pandemic recovery], we need to be smart about how we look at the capacity of our system and the capacity of our students.”

Is Remote Learning Here to Stay? Yes, But It Needs to Get Better

Most educators and parents would agree that the sweeping virtual instruction thrown together overnight at the beginning of the pandemic wasn’t nearly as effective as in-person learning for most students.

So, does that mean K-12 educators and policymakers should write off remote learning as a failed experiment to avoid at all costs?

Or, on the other hand, would it be better to ask questions, such as: When should schools use virtual learning and for what types of students? What lessons can be learned during the pandemic about what does and does not work in remote learning environments? And what do those lessons tell us about what this approach should look like in the future?

Two researchers, the authors of a recent report about online instruction, collaborated together on joint answers to those questions from Assistant Editor Alyson Klein. Alix Gallagher and Ben Cottingham, the director and associate director, respectively, for strategic partnerships at Policy Analysis for California Education, responded via email. The nonprofit group is led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley.

Many educators see virtual learning as inferior to in-person learning or totally ineffective. Others, though, see it as a great new path forward. What does the research say about the quality of virtual learning? Is the truth somewhere in between?

Looking Back: The field has developed wisdom over many years about how to pro-
Effective teaching is better than ineffective teaching. COVID overturned our school systems almost literally overnight and because our understandings of how best to mitigate COVID risks continually shifted, it was difficult for districts to allocate resources such as money and time toward a long-term plan that sufficiently invested in building teachers’ skills in teaching online. Almost every teacher was in their first year of online teaching, and the results were that many teachers worked harder than they ever had and yet most students had a less effective teacher than they would have had in-person.

Humans are social creatures and schooling is a social enterprise and learning quality decreases when instruction occurs only through a screen. The quality of virtual learning improved with increased touch points between teacher and student and between peers (e.g. phone calls, small group instruction, and targeted feedback), but few teachers have learned how to facilitate vibrant interactions in their classes. That means, for many students, virtual learning remains a second-best option to in-person instruction.

Looking Forward: Because most teachers were novice virtual teachers and few had the support or time to learn how to teach effectively online, our experience in COVID tells us nothing about the potential of widely available virtual learning as part of our educational landscape. We know that effective instruction—virtual and in-person alike—engages students in interaction with the teacher and each other around content. It is certainly possible for teachers to become highly effective at supporting high-quality interactions in a virtual environment and some educators’ success during COVID paved the way for a future expansion of virtual options.

You talk about teaching quality a lot in your report. Do we have enough evidence to determine if it’s better to have an effective virtual teacher rather than a less effective in-person one?

Looking back: Effective teaching is better than ineffective teaching. COVID overturned our school systems almost literally overnight and because our understandings of how best to mitigate COVID risks continually shifted, it was difficult for districts to allocate resources such as money and time toward a long-term plan that sufficiently invested in building teachers’ skills in teaching online. Almost every teacher was in their first year of online teaching, and the results were that many teachers worked harder than they ever had and yet most students had a less effective teacher than they would have had in-person.

Students who did not have access to an academically supportive environment were most likely to struggle in distance learning, as were younger students who need more frequent support to stay focused, and low-income communities were disproportionately impacted by virtual learning.

Looking forward: The keys to providing equitable access to high-quality virtual instruction are to ensure that all students have the opportunity to have positive interactions with teachers and other students around rigorous content. That means training teachers in pedagogies that support engaging virtual instruction, making technology widely available, and ensuring students who need it have supplemental supports to productively engage in virtual learning.

You say in your report that one of the biggest problems with remote instruction is that students miss important, face-to-face “social learning.” How can teachers help address this challenge?

Looking forward: Educators need to consider how to create spaces that facilitate more interactions with students and between students online. Virtual learning environments should not be structured in the same way as in-person learning; students shouldn’t watch a teacher on video all day. Schooling models such as “personalized learning” or the “flipped classroom” both have features that could effectively be applied to an online environment. They are among the approaches that create opportunities for individualized instruction or small-group interaction, as well as targeted feedback and support from the teacher.
Substantial support for teachers’ professional learning would be critical to achieve the potential benefits.

Due to the pandemic, some districts are offering remote instruction as a full-time option for students who prefer to learn this way. In your opinion, is virtual learning here to stay? If so, what’s your best guess as to what it will look like a decade from now?

Looking back: The type of remote instruction we saw in the wake of the pandemic is one that was rapidly implemented when our entire society was experiencing a massive crisis. Many educators are feeling burnout associated with rapid adaptations and high stress created by COVID and COVID schooling. No one wants to repeat the schooling experiences of the past two years and luckily we do not expect to.

Looking forward: Virtual instruction is here to stay, but generally as a supplement to in-person schooling. The strain remote learning has put on younger students and parents to facilitate learning combined with the centrality of social development in education of young learners makes it untenable as the main elementary school option under most circumstances. However, added flexibility makes virtual school an appealing option for high school students in smaller communities to expand access to a wide range of courses, accelerate learning for students that can manage their own learning experience, or create more options for credit recovery for students who have fallen behind. In fact, the American School District Panel found that nearly 20 percent of districts were considering offering a virtual school option after the pandemic has passed. Additionally, the pandemic forced all teachers to use technology as part of their teaching, and many teachers are retaining some of the digital tools they were forced to use during the pandemic because they provide diverse ways for students to engage in content and offer easy access to remediation. Finally, virtual learning environments provide a means to mitigate school interruptions due to weather or other factors that prevent students from being physically in school.

There is a potential for virtual learning technologies to create more pathways for students to interact and learn material in diverse ways. However, providing high-quality virtual education at scale would necessitate transforming educational systems on multiple dimensions, from rethinking teachers’ roles as the main source of content knowledge to one as facilitator of students’ learning and revising traditional school policies and structures.

Given how extensive these shifts would be, it is unlikely that many school systems will undertake the necessary changes in the near future. We can, however, imagine a scenario where some communities (e.g., low-density rural communities with WiFi access) might find it beneficial to create a stable remote schooling option for a large portion of the population they serve or where many of the students whose needs are best-served by remote learning options—such as high school students who need to enter the workforce for financial reasons—have access to remote learning.

**OPINION**

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**The Pandemic Could Have Unlocked Remote Schooling. It Hasn’t**

By Robin J. Lake

In a rush to return to normal and leave last year’s remote learning debacles in the rearview mirror, states and school systems have thrown away a potential pandemic breakthrough: the ability to shift quickly and seamlessly to remote learning whenever they need.

Earlier in the COVID-19 pandemic, school and system leaders hoped sick days and snow days could soon be a thing of the past. If future weather events or disease outbreaks forced children to stay home, schools could easily shift to remote learning.

“We have a flexible model where students can learn synchronously from home or from school,” one district leader told researchers. “We will continue to expand this process to make anywhere learning a reality.”

But as we transition from a summer of California wildfires and devastating hurricanes to an academic year disrupted by quarantines and staffing shortages, “anywhere learning” seems too futuristic. The important possibilities the pandemic experience offers for helping schools overcome disruptions beyond COVID-19 aren’t being fulfilled.

In our research tracking the 2021-22 reopening in states and school systems across the country, we’re seeing that, unfortunately, anywhere learning is not most students’ reality.

Take, for instance, how districts are handling learning during quarantines. In our review of a mix of 100 large and urban school districts, we find students exposed to the...
virus could be asked to quarantine from as little as two days to 14 or more. How much instruction these students can expect to receive is similarly all over the map, but for most students, the amount of synchronous teaching time would be scant.

Among the districts we track, 71 say they plan to support learning for students who have to quarantine. Nineteen districts—fewer than 2 in 5—guarantee students will have any real-time contact with a teacher. The continued disruptions promised by these figures threaten to exacerbate the pandemic’s toll on students’ learning and emotional well-being.

Parents should not have to accept their children being sent home for days or weeks with nothing but paper packets plus the expectation that they will be able to pick up right where they left off when back in the physical classroom. Teachers already coping with burnout should not have to revive last year’s practice of livestreaming their classrooms to students at home. Nor did most educators think that worked well for student learning.

At the start of the 2021-22 school year, only 35 percent of the large or urban districts we track offered a remote option to all students. Eight states—some red, some blue—have contributed to this problem with policies that limit the kinds of remote learning many districts offered during the past school year. Some policies, like New Jersey’s ban on virtual learning options except for quarantining students, were enacted earlier this year, when parent frustrations with school closures were boiling over but before the Delta variant posed new and even scarier health threats.

Even in places where online learning isn’t legally restricted, enrollment caps, summer application deadlines, and staff shortages have shut families out of online schools.

When school began, California’s Sacramento City Unified School District only had enough teachers for a quarter of its registered virtual learners. The Hawaii education department was forced to turn to out-of-state teachers to satisfy increased demand for its online option, lengthening its waitlist. In fact, hundreds of families are on virtual school waitlists in cities across the country, including Minneapolis; Savannah, Ga.; and Charlotte, N.C.

Parents interested in remote learning may also discover their choices are all or nothing: Either they can pull their child out of their traditional school to enroll for the whole year in a brick-and-mortar building and hope for the best.

To truly make sick days or snow days a thing of the past, traditional schools will need more flexible options that allow students to move seamlessly from the classroom to the cloud. Some organizations are creating such options, allowing schools to better respond to student and families’ needs.

ASU Prep Digital, a K-12 program affiliated with Arizona State University, is helping a charter school network in Cleveland provide every student who needs to quarantine two hours a day of live, one-on-one or small-group instruction from a teacher, plus a tailored set of assignments that ensures they will still be on track when they return to the classroom. The ASU online program is rolling out similar Learning Under Quarantine partnerships with other school districts across the country.

Remote learning isn’t the only need. Pandemic pods and learning hubs have shown the power of small, individualized spaces where community organizations—whose staff often have the trust of students and families in their neighborhoods—to help students discover a sense of belonging and connect them to essential services like tutoring or mental-health support.

States need to help school districts build systems that keep students safe, learning, and connected to one another all year.

They should repeal rules that prevent school systems from offering online learning options for families who need them. They should use federal COVID-19-relief funding to help school systems develop better approaches to online learning providers and work with community groups to support students outside school walls. And they should ensure all parents have online learning options, like statewide online schools, if their local districts won’t offer them.

These investments will pay off in the long run. Interruptions to learning, whether because of disease, natural disasters, extreme weather, or for other reasons, will continue this year and perhaps well into the future. As one district official told us, the critical question ahead for district leaders is, “How do we build a system that can withstand those disruptions?”

The need for an education system capable of keeping students safe and learning, no matter what, has never been more urgent given the high likelihood of continued disruptions. It’s also never been more achievable—if policymakers act now.

Robin J. Lake is the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, a research organization based in Seattle. CRPE has been tracking state and school district responses to the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020.
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