Since the pandemic, blended learning has taken on new meanings. In this Spotlight, discover the successes of blended learning; evaluate where the disconnects are; and assess how lower expectations do not have to mean lower standards.

Struggling Readers Score Lower on Foundational Skills, Analysis of National Test Finds

5 Ways to Remotely Support Students With Dyslexia

How to Make Teaching Better: 8 Lessons Learned From Remote and Hybrid Learning

Remote Learning Isn’t Going Away. Will It Create Separate—and Unequal—School Systems?

Most States Fail to Measure Teachers’ Knowledge of the ‘Science of Reading,’ Report Says

Strategies for Teaching Students Online and Face to Face at the Same Time

We ‘Can Lower Expectations and Still Have High Standards’ in Hybrid Teaching
A recently released analysis of student scores on the test known as the “nation’s report card” helps paint a more detailed picture of the country’s struggling readers.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is given to a nationally representative sample of U.S. students to measure what they know and can do across subjects. This new report looks at results from a supplemental Oral Reading Fluency NAEP test that a portion of 4th graders took in 2018—a test that measured their ability to read passages with speed, accuracy, and expression, as well as their word-reading ability. These 4th graders also took the main NAEP reading test, which measures reading comprehension.

On the ORF test, students were assessed on how quickly and accurately they could read short passages aloud, whether they could recognize and read familiar words from a list, and whether they could sound out nonsense words that followed typical sound-spelling patterns.

The researchers found that students’ reading comprehension was connected to their ability to read text fluently and accurately, and to their ability to recognize and decode words. The lower students scored on the main NAEP reading test, the harder time they had with reading fluency and foundational skills on the ORF.

These results are in line with what research has shown about how skilled reading works. When children read a passage, their ability to understand the text is dependent on interrelated skills: They have to be able to decipher and recognize the words on the page, and they need to be able to make meaning of the words that they read. (See Education Week’s reading research explainer for more background on how skilled reading works.)

Being able to decode printed text and recognize words quickly and fluently are building block skills in early reading instruction. Even so, reporting from Education Week and other outlets has shown that many schools don’t teach these skills in ways that will lead most students to mastery.

“Research shows that reading comprehension is very much dependent, critically dependent, on oral reading fluency and what we call foundational skills that underlie oral reading fluency,” said Sheida White, an educational researcher at the American Institutes for Research, and the lead author on the study.

“Students who have oral reading fluency and foundational skills, they tend to comprehend connected text—passages and paragraphs—with greater efficiency and effectiveness,” she said.

One long-standing problem with the main NAEP reading test is that the results can’t pinpoint which component skills of reading low-scoring students are struggling with. The test asks students to respond to questions that test their comprehension of text. When they get the question wrong, it’s impossible to know if they couldn’t read the words or if they couldn’t parse what the words meant—or both.

While this test of oral reading fluency and foundational skills does provide new information, White noted that it similarly can’t prove causation.

“We have not looked at other elements of language—we haven’t looked at vocabulary, we haven’t looked at syntax,” she said.

Report offers “much-needed” information on low-performers

The supplemental test had two main tasks. Students read four short passages out loud for the assessment of reading fluency, and read word lists—of English words that most 4th graders would recognize, and of fake “words” that were phonetically regular, meaning students would be able to use their knowledge of sound-spelling correspondences to decode them.

Researchers then compared 4th graders’ performance in these domains to their performance on the main NAEP reading test, which categorizes students as either below basic, basic, proficient, or advanced.

They found that scores on the supplemental test fell in tandem with scores on the main test: Students who scored advanced on the main NAEP reading test had the highest oral reading fluency, read the most familiar words correctly, and had the highest decoding skills; students who were below basic on NAEP reading scored the lowest on the fluency and word reading tasks.

The researchers also looked more closely at struggling readers. They divided students who were below basic on NAEP reading into three categories: The bottom third were below NAEP basic low, the middle third below basic medium, and the top third below basic high.

They found differences among these
The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the needs of students with dyslexia, but also made it more difficult to support them. Some students have found that their support services, such as one-on-one or small-group reading sessions, have been disrupted by the need for social distancing. Others may be straining to understand what their masked teachers are saying in class. And, almost a year later, still others remain physically separated from the teachers that help them overcome the challenges presented by dyslexia, which is marked by readers’ struggles with recognizing and decoding words.

Because schools often don’t track it, there is no way to know how many students struggle specifically with dyslexia, which can lead to difficulty with reading comprehension. Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the nation’s special education law, dyslexia is listed as an example of a disability under the broader term “specific learning disabilities.”

Part of the problem lies in the difficulty in diagnosis. Not all students with reading difficulties have dyslexia. Some students with dyslexia can go undiagnosed until late elementary, middle or even high school because they can conceal their struggles or find ways to compensate for them.

Education Week interviewed four experts to find out what advice they have for educators and parents who are working with students with dyslexia.

Here’s a look at what the experts had to say. Their statements have been edited for length and clarity:

1. **Avoid asynchronous learning**

   The experts universally agreed that students with dyslexia need direction, instruction, and real-time feedback that isn’t available during recorded lessons.

   “The idea of asynchronous learning for dyslexic learners is not appropriate,” said Josh Clark, the head of school at The Schneck School, an Atlanta-based private school for children with dyslexia. He also serves as the executive director of The Dyslexia Resource, a nonprofit that focuses on dyslexia education and advocacy through teacher training, tutoring programs and community partnerships.

   “You know they’re already struggling in the traditional school environment. Then you expect them to navigate independently work they can intellectually access, but they can’t decode the instructions?”

   Yvette Goorevitch, the chief of specialized learning and student services for Norwalk, Conn., schools, said her district has also avoided asynchronous instruction for students with dyslexia.

   “There is a distinction between teaching children how to read and assigning reading. We have stayed away from asynchronous learning because it’s not direct instruction,” Goorevitch said. “There needs to be guided practice. Kids need feedback and immediate correction. They need independent practice, and then they need review. You’re constantly evaluating.”

2. **Find new ways to support students who struggle**

   Students with dyslexia may not be comfortable discussing their difficulties in front of the class or signaling for help if they have trouble. Teachers should communicate how students and parents can ask for help or additional support.

   “We sometimes have this misconception that this generation all really feels comfortable online,” said Donnell Pons, a reading and dyslexia specialist in Salt Lake City. “But that’s not
always the case with someone who struggles with language difficulties. As a teacher, you have to have clear protocols for how students engage in the online classroom, like, ‘Is it clear how I communicate when I have difficulty?’”

For older students, Clark recommends teachers reach out directly to students.

“If you have a dyslexic learner in your classroom, it’s not something that we need to hide or not talk about or ignore,” Clark said. “Let’s have the conversation, especially for older students. Let’s have conversation about what works: ‘What would remove barriers for me to better understand what you know and you’re able to produce?’”

Students in middle and high school may be able to advocate for themselves and seek help in office hours or through private online chats, but students in early elementary school have often not developed those skills, said Joanne Pierson, project manager for Dyslexia Help at the University of Michigan. The website serves as a resource for people with dyslexia and their parents and employers. Pierson, a speech and language pathologist by training, also runs a private clinical practice that specializes in helping students with dyslexia.

“Keeping those children engaged, when you can’t do something subtle like walk around the classroom and stand next to them or gently put your hand on their shoulder or notice when they’re looking lost, has to be tough,” Pierson said. “All those subtle things that teachers do to keep kids on track. Those are big challenges, particularly if you don’t have a parent sitting there with the child because many parents are working. I work with kids one-on-one. So I can say things like, ‘Are you with me?’ or ‘I’m on page whatever in the middle of the paragraph’ and show it to them. That’s a whole different ballgame when you have 25 or 30 students.”

Schools must also remember that a year into the pandemic, some students still struggle to understand how to use technology.

3. Rethink how and what you teach

Teachers cannot take what worked in the traditional classroom and try to transfer it to an online setting. When they make changes, they must consider the needs of students with language-based learning disabilities, especially disabilities that can make some tasks more difficult.

“As we’ve gone online, a lot of teachers have thought, ‘Oh, if we can’t be in-person having class discussions, I guess more reading and writing is called for,’” Pons said. “We need to evaluate putting more demands in the reading and writing area without understanding the needs of students with dyslexia. We need to be patient and understanding, reach out to students who seem to be disengaging and ask questions like ‘What is this workload like for you?’”

Students will also need help maintaining their focus as the pandemic stretches on. While students will benefit from in-person instruction, expecting them, dyslexic or not, to sit through six or seven hours of screen time is not the solution, said Goorevitch of the Norwalkschools.

“The challenge for the kids and for the staff has been, how do you inhibit the intrusion into the instructional day? If the kid is remote, you know the distractions that can happen at home,” Goorevitch said.

“There’s an intrusion into the natural flow (of the school day) that teachers need to plan for and overcome,” she added. “Students need real help in sustaining their efforts and developing the stamina to do the really hard work of learning to read, particularly when you have a learning disability or you’re dyslexic. The kids need that support as well as the direct explicit instruction.”

4. Take advantage of remote options

A school district that has five dyslexia specialists each with dozens of students to support may be able to use online learning to its advantage, even after the pandemic.

“If you can do things online, the breadth of resources is no longer limited by geography,” Clark said. “As long as you have an adult in the physical room, they don’t have to be the one delivering the instruction.”

The Norwalk school system operates a literacy center that focuses on early identification, assessment, and intervention for students with dyslexia. During the pandemic, the district has found new ways to connect students and staff.

“We’ve been able to pull together kids with similar needs from across the district and put them together in small remote groups and have our literacy and dyslexia specialists work with them very intensely,” Goorevitch said. “Rather than sending these specialists out to all our schools or pulling kids in from a variety of schools and (having them miss) instructional time, we have been able to come up with a good remote option to help them.”

5. Embrace assistive technology

With students with dyslexia spending more time in front of screens, whether at home or during in-person learning, schools should use tools, such as speech-to-text and text-to-speech functions, that can help them navigate lessons and complete assignments.

“I do think people are not so afraid of technology anymore. It levels the playing field for these students,” Pierson said. “If these kids aren’t reading the same text as their peers, they’re not getting that vocabulary.”

Clark, the chairman of the International Dyslexia Association Board of Directors, is dyslexic. Both of his children also have dyslexia.

“It’s just the idea of presenting multiple ways of gaining meaning,” Clark said. “So I could read an article, but I could also watch a YouTube video. That removes barriers to the knowledge so that more people can access it.”
A few years ago, a rising number of schools were piloting or beginning to implement blended learning programs. However, last spring, the lights went out in many schools across the country due to the pandemic. When students went home, educators, administrators, and caregivers suddenly found themselves in uncharted blended learning territory.

Although districts that had already begun to implement some type of blended learning approach may have found the transition a bit easier, almost all schools struggled with connectivity, lack of devices, and programs that did not lend themselves to remote or hybrid settings.

If the current technical and support infrastructure is lacking, blended learning might not be successful even if all stakeholders are on board, a scenario exhibited within many districts that were thrust into remote learning without the proper infrastructure.

Although four keys to blended learning success are presented next, it is critical to remember the central role played by the teacher in all blended learning models.

Indeed, the data used to integrate online learning with teacher-led learning is also essential to empowering the teacher and ensuring their instruction is targeted and time-efficient.

Now, as schools assess plans for the fall, there is an opportunity to re-examine the blended learning tools being used. Here are four key success factors to consider when evaluating an effective blended learning program.
SUCCESS FACTOR NO. 1

The Technology Adapts to Each Student’s Abilities

Choosing a technology-based curriculum that includes elements of scaffolding and adaptive technology is an important way to ensure instruction is more personalized than the traditional “one-size-fits-all” instruction.

There are many benefits to consider here:

- Students at or above grade level can continue to soar ahead
- Students who struggle with particular skill areas can progress at their own pace
- Scaffolding and additional instructional support can be provided
- Teachers may focus their class time on students who need targeted support

An important reminder here is to look for programs that actually provide “adaptive instruction,” and not just “adaptive assessment.” Without adaptive instruction, all students would be required to receive direct instruction on every skill, regardless of whether they show signs of struggle or have demonstrated mastery.

SUCCESS FACTOR NO. 2

The Instructional Program Captures Student Data

As part of their blended learning models, many schools integrate some of the free apps available online. Although these apps may provide valuable exposure to important skills and concepts, they often lack the ability to record and report student data back to the teacher.

However, when the right technology tools are used, the student experience is monitored in real time. Teachers can then view data showing which students have completed each skill area and which students encountered an obstacle and require individual or small-group direct instruction.

Efficient, effective classroom instructional plans can then be designed with students’ individual needs in mind.

SUCCESS FACTOR NO. 3

Accessible Resources for Teacher-Led Instruction

Blended learning can provide a powerful, flexible way for each student to progress as quickly as possible. To this end, effective blended learning programs will also provide resources to teachers.

These resources should help teachers connect performance data to instructional strategies. This can include the synthesis and analysis of data in terms of a school’s existing basal program or a more customized approach to be used for direct instruction purposes.

The key is to help the teacher understand not only which students need support but exactly how to support them.
SUCCESS FACTOR NO. 4

Next-Step Recommendations For The Teacher

Because a blended approach meets every student at their own level through personalized learning, the student experience can become much more individualized.

Here are some examples of this:

- Students’ online experience will become increasingly catered to their individual needs
- Students can work at their own pace and focus on specific skill areas
- Students can also develop automaticity in skill areas that have been mastered

In this approach, teaching becomes significantly more complex. It also becomes more individualized through direct instruction and intervention that reflects fairly granular information on each student’s performance.

Teachers will face the challenge of analyzing and connecting those data to the appropriate instruction or intervention strategies.

To remedy this, schools can dramatically improve their levels of teacher effectiveness if they implement technology that provides recommendations for teacher intervention by connecting personalized learning, embedded assessment, and teacher-led instruction.

When a blended learning model seamlessly incorporates the impact of both technology and teacher-led instruction, it becomes a robust tool for educators.

Lexia’s adaptive blended learning model is powered by data gathered through adaptive technology, provides real-time progress monitoring, and includes the recommended next steps and resources to customize instruction for each student to help teachers become more targeted and time-efficient.

Learn more about Lexia’s adaptive blended learning model.
How to Make Teaching Better: 8 Lessons Learned From Remote and Hybrid Learning

By Sarah Schwartz

It was a year of false starts and frustrations, of troubleshooting technology glitches, and trying—and often failing—to coax students to speak from the tiny windows of their Zoom screens. But, teachers say, it was also a year of growth.

In most cases, remote and hybrid learning during the 2020-21 school year is demanding more from teachers than the crisis solutions schools improvised last spring, in the first few months of the coronavirus pandemic. Many districts went back to traditional grading policies and school day schedules, expecting online courses to more closely match the scope and sequence of their in-person counterparts. Often, in hybrid settings, teachers were instructing both at once, working with one group of students live and another via video stream, a practice known as concurrent teaching.

After a year of experience working with students online, teachers say they’ve figured out some key lessons: Accept that virtual classes will look different from in-person ones, keep instructions simple and routines consistent, and find ways to show students that you’re there for them, even if you’re separated by a screen.

It’s likely that many teachers will still need these skills next school year, even as more districts open their buildings to in-person learning. In a recent, nationally representative survey from the EdWeek Research Center, about a third of school and district leaders said that they’re planning to start the 2021-22 school year with some form of hybrid instruction.

And most of these lessons, teachers said, will inform their practice even once they return to the physical classroom. Being forced to slow down, to think creatively about how to reach all students in a new format, and to adjust based on student feedback built new skills that teachers want to continue using post-pandemic, they said.

By facing the challenges of remote and hybrid learning, teachers say they’ve been able to find some successes. Education Week spoke with six teachers about the important lessons they learned during this time, distilling eight of them here.

1. Adjust your expectations about how much content you’ll cover and how quickly.

At the beginning of the school year, Jasara Hines noticed that her students had trouble completing assignments that spanned multiple days. Hines, who teaches high school English/language arts in a suburb of Chicago, was only seeing each class for two 50-minute blocks a week. Students would lose the thread of a multi-day lesson, or forget to turn in work. So she switched up her strategy mid-year: “I really had to hone in on readings and activities that we could do in a 50-minute time frame,” Hines said.

She’s ditched one of the novels that they usually read for a justice-themed unit—To Kill a Mockingbird—in favor of shorter articles and excerpts that they can analyze together in class.

Cheryl Manning, a science teacher at Evergreen High School in Colorado, also cut down on some of the work she assigned this year. Instead of always requiring written summaries after labs, Manning built in more time for oral discussion—a change that she thinks has boosted her students’ science communication skills and given them a chance to connect with each other through the screen.

Manning’s choices reflect a greater trend in pandemic-era approaches to assessment and grading. In an EdWeek Research Center survey asking teachers with remote or hybrid students how their practice changed from the beginning of the 2020-21 school year to now, 55 percent of teachers said they increased the amount of flexibility their students were given when it comes to how they choose to complete assignments and demonstrate knowledge, and 59 percent said they decreased the strictness of their grading policies.

Getting rid of the some of the grades she would normally give shifted students’ focus, from just getting their thoughts down on paper to deeper reflection on how they got the answers they did. “Why didn’t I do that 20 years ago?” Manning said, talking about the change.

2. Don’t try to recreate your in-person lessons over Zoom. Try a new approach if you feel stuck.

Manning remodeled all of her in-class labs into experiments that the high schoolers could
do at home, assembling kits filled with baking soda, vinegar, balloons, and pH paper that remote students could pick up at the school building. “It was still mathematically rigorous, it was still good chemistry, but it was simpler,” Manning said—and, she added, more environmentally friendly, as it omitted some of the chemicals that students would normally handle in the classroom.

Sumner Bender, a theater teacher at Spring Hill High School in Chapin, S.C., used an entirely new curriculum unit with her online students this year: slam poetry. She chose it in part because videos of performances abound online, meaning students would have easy access to examples outside of the physical classroom. But Bender also appreciated how writing poems gave the teenagers a space to process the isolation and grief of this year.

Some of the teachers who work with Ericka Mabion, a K-8 STEM coordinator in the Kansas City Public Schools in Missouri, also brought in a new project. All of the K-6 students started studying computer science. The subject gave students a creative outlet, Mabion said, and it also was a good fit for multiple-sibling households that might all be doing remote school in the same space. The problem-solving inherent in coding lends itself to collaboration. “If you have siblings, they would be able to help each other. They would be able to celebrate with each other,” she said.

3. Use collaborative, digital workspaces to better understand student thinking.

In a normal year, Hines, the Chicago area ELA teacher, would ask her students to annotate passages as they read. This fall, she tried to digitize that process, asking students to mark up PDF files. But the editing tools were too cumbersome for the process to work well, so Hines moved to programs like Pear Deck that allowed students to write their thoughts on a shared set of slides.

The solution has two big benefits, Hines said. First, because she’s the owner of the slide set, she knows she’ll have a record of all students’ work at the end of the period—unlike with the PDFs, which she has to rely on students to submit. Second, she can respond to students’ contributions in real time, as the slides update live.

Samantha Wiley, a 4th grade math and science teacher at Haywood County Schools’ Virtual Academy in Brownsville, Tenn., also highlighted the value of collaborative digital workspaces that show teachers how students are figuring their way through problems. “Sometimes when they get off track, you can stop at that point and correct,” Wiley said, before students head off down the wrong path on a question. She said she wants to continue using these collaborative documents, even after a return to the physical classroom.

4. Give explicit instructions and stick to routines.

Throughout this school year, Tina Stevenson has asked her remote students for feedback on what’s been going well, and what could be going better, in virtual learning. (Stevenson teaches remote and in-person students concurrently.) Her middle schoolers told her that they wanted clearer, more specific instructions for everything—from assignments to how to use the tech itself. Stevenson, a math teacher and department chair at Locust Grove Middle School in Virginia, started giving tips on how to use some of the tools embedded within Google Slides. She also created a consistent routine for every math lesson: warm-up, go over yesterday’s assignment, then answer questions. She said she wants to continue using these collaborative documents, even after a return to the physical classroom.

5. To get kids talking, try smaller groupings, or one-on-one conversations.

Stevenson, who’s teaching one group of students in the physical classroom concurrently with an online class, used to hear crickets from her remote students when she asked if anyone had questions—though her in-person students didn’t hesitate to speak up. But once she started one-on-one meetings with the online students, she found that they would use that space to ask questions and talk about their thinking.

Hines, from the Chicago area, cut down on the number of students she put in breakout rooms from five to two or three, after having trouble getting students to engage in conversations in the bigger groups. The smaller groupings made the teenagers less intimidated to unmute and contribute, Hines said, and they also lowered the chances that one or two students would dominate the conversation while the others stayed silent.


Some teachers never asked students to turn their cameras on—like Hines, whose district had a policy against requiring it. Instead, she found other ways to hear students
talk and get a sense of their personalities. She asked them to send her video responses to a prompt via the app Flipgrid, allowing her to “meet” her students while still giving them control over when and how they portrayed themselves on video.

Bender, in South Carolina, struck a compromise: She doesn’t ask students to turn their cameras on during regular class periods, but does ask students to appear on camera if they’re performing a poem, or a scene from a play.

In Wiley’s class in Tennessee, students are required to keep their cameras on. But, she gives them other options to contribute as well, like the chat box on their video meet. “A lot of students might be shy, so they would rather type it in,” Wiley said—again, a strategy she would consider using, alongside face-to-face class discussions, when she and her students return to the school building full time.

Offering nonverbal methods of class participation, like typing into a chat box or private messaging a teacher, was a common tactic—67 percent of teachers said they encouraged students to do this more now than they did at the beginning of the school year.

7. Give students more time than usual to talk about what’s going on in the world, share their feelings, or just vent.

“Sometimes we want to just jump into those lessons,” said Wiley. But she’s tried to spend more time at the beginning of classes talking with students—with some, about how they like virtual learning a lot; with others, about how they miss their friends and in-person pep rallies.

With the pandemic, the movement for racial justice, and ongoing economic uncertainty, this has been a difficult year for students, said Bender. She’s tried to open up opportunities for students to process these events together.

She’s invited students to share with her the small things that are bothering them that they feel like they don’t have any control over right now. She remembers one student who talked about constantly being late for track practice, because the virtual school day ends after the in-person day. The coaches were giving him a hard time about it, Bender says. Still, she remembers him saying, he felt bad complaining—this was right after a massive winter storm hit Texas, and he didn’t want to sound ungrateful when so many people had lost power and water. “That doesn’t mean that what you’re going through needs to be minimized,” Bender remembers telling him.

8. Celebrate the new skills students are learning.

Manning, the Colorado teacher, knows that her students aren’t getting exactly the same chemistry course, or earth science course, that they would have during a regular school year. But they’re also gaining experiences and learning skills they wouldn’t have done in the physical classroom: using shared online documents to collaborate with their peers on written work, interviewing scientific experts over Zoom.

“When it comes down to this narrative of lost time, lost learning, I’m irate from that. It’s so negating,” Manning said. “I feel like my students did a lot of learning this year.”

Remote Learning Isn’t Going Away. Will It Create Separate—and Unequal—School Systems?

By Catherine Gewertz

Schools are stumbling out of the pandemic’s shadow transfigured, cleaved in two as they teach some children in classrooms and others at home, remotely. Originally imagined as a time-limited response, that duality is reshaping schools for next year, and possibly longer, prompting new questions about how separate—and how equal—remote learners’ educational experiences will be.

If even 20 percent of students learn virtually next year, that would create “a whole new parallel track for schools,” said Heather Schwartz, a RAND Corp. researcher who led a recent study showing that 1 in 5 districts were planning or considering a fully remote learning option for 2021-22. Before the pandemic, less than half of 1 percent of U.S. K-12 students studied virtually, according to 2018-19 federal data.

A February survey by the EdWeek Research Center found that 7 in 10 districts plan
to offer a “much wider array” of remote options. And polls of parents show strong interest in remote-learning options next year.

“If they were of equal quality, offering equal services, maybe that’s neutral or even potentially positive,” Schwartz said. But given the uneven instructional quality documented in some online schools, “it’s a big red flag.”

Parents are keeping their children home for a variety of reasons. Some, particularly in working-class Black and brown communities hit hard by COVID-19, don’t yet trust their children will be safe in school. Others have found remote learning to be a haven for students who are harassed or bullied, who suffer social anxiety, struggle with school’s endless distractions, or simply learn better via their computers.

Tiffany Newton won’t send her two daughters back to their charter schools in Newark, N.J., this spring or next fall. Laid off from her job at a nonprofit, she’s home to support her 3rd and 6th graders, and they’re thriving, she said. Newton doesn’t trust that their schools’ aging, poorly ventilated buildings will protect them sufficiently against COVID-19. And she doesn’t trust the brand-new vaccines enough to get herself or her daughters inoculated.

“My children will not be used as guinea pigs,” she said. “I’m not willing to put my children in jeopardy.”

Newton does worry about the social interactions and enrichment her daughters will miss out on. But she’s confident she can provide those experiences through other channels.

Across the country in Berkeley, Calif., Brett Cook says his 15-year-old son has found his happy place learning via computer screen at home. He’s a good student and a “homebody” who loves the quiet—and the snacks—at home, and he stays connected with his friends through digital tools like Discord. If his high school offers a remote option next fall, Cook would let his son opt in. “For him, it’s been successful,” Cook said.

### Demand for virtual learning likely to remain strong

School districts are seeing the writing on the wall. Parent surveys and emerging patterns in how families have opted to return to school this spring suggest that hefty proportions of students—tilting toward students of color and those from low-income families—could choose to stay remote next fall.

In a national poll of 1,350 parents in April 2021, 58 percent said schools should offer both remote and in-person options next year and let parents choose. Another 12 percent said schools should be remote-only. In the Los Angeles Unified School District this spring, more than half of the parents in whiter, wealthier neighborhoods like West Los Angeles chose to send their kids back to school, while in neighborhoods with large numbers of lower-income Latino and Black families, that number was as low as 30 percent.

When the Chicago district polled its parents in December about spring semester, only 37 percent said they were ready to bring their kids back to school. Nearly half the parents in the District of Columbia schools and two-thirds of those in Shelby County, Tenn., said the same.

But that was when COVID-19 case counts were much higher. With the public health picture improving in most places, parents might feel more comfortable opting for face-to-face instruction next fall. But few districts have started polling parents about that yet, and virus patterns could shift. New variants are gaining ground, and though vaccines for children ages 12 to 15 may be approved soon, it’s not clear how widespread the uptake for inoculating children will be.

Districts are figuring out their options. With more confidence that schools can operate safely and the conviction that there’s no substitute for face-to-face school, some districts are shutting down their remote-learning options next fall.

The superintendent of schools in Chapel Hill-Carrboro, N.C., told families in April 2021 that the district has no plans to offer remote or hybrid options if coronavirus case trends remain positive. But it’s surveying high school students to see if there is enough interest for a virtual academy.

The superintendent of the South Washington school district in Cottage Grove, Minn., said the district wouldn’t offer virtual learning options this fall due to “low interest.” New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy has barred districts from offering remote learning next fall.

Will quality of curricula, teaching, and social opportunities be as rich in remote programs?

But districts want to hang onto their students and the funding that goes with them. From Riverside, Calif., to Bibb County, Ga., they’re figuring out how they can provide what many parents want: a virtual option.

Some districts will have their own teachers teach remote-learning students, but others, like the Alhambra County, Va., school system, are creating virtual academies with separate teaching and administrative staffs. Still others, like the Dayton, Ohio, public schools, have outsourced their entire remote-learning operation, turning over instruction to outside companies.

Activists and scholars who follow what happens when school districts create separate tracks for some children are watching these developments with cautious eyes. They wonder about the quality of curriculum and teachers that remote learners will get, and how they’ll fare without the socialization schools offer. Will children get equal access to sports, music, counselors, reading specialists?

History shows that there’s good reason to fear someone will end up with a “watered down” version of education when there are separate tracks for students, said Pedro Noguera, who has studied equity in education for decades, and is now the dean of the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California.

Because low-income families and families of color disproportionately chose remote learning during the pandemic, “there is a huge question about whether we’ll have two different school systems,” said Bree Dusseault, an educator who has been tracking school districts’ responses to the pandemic as part of a project by the University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education. “There is a real potential for segregative learning environments.”

The large proportion of students still opting for remote learning and the likely overrepresentation of historically marginalized students in that world make it more important than ever for districts to provide strong instruction and high-quality curriculum designed for online learning, experts said. Without them, the children most harmed by the
pandemic risk being set back even further.

“So much online learning has not been working well, particularly for underserved students,” said John Bailey, an educational technology expert and visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. “The fear is that the longer those students stay in online learning, the further behind they will fall. It’s important to make sure online learning is a much better experience than what we put kids through this year.”

**Who opts for online school could become an equity issue**

The superintendents in Albemarle County and Dayton are grappling with these and other questions as they look ahead to their virtual options for the fall. The answers aren’t entirely clear yet.

Matthew Haas, who runs the Albemarle County district, said that 8 percent of his 14,000 students want a remote option for next fall, so he and his team are creating a new, full-time virtual school to serve them. The district will hire a principal, who will then hire staff to work at the new school, he said. Students will follow a regular school schedule, with their cameras on all day for synchronous learning, and will follow the state curriculum like other schools in the district do, Haas said.

In addition to providing an instructional mode that families want, Haas said, the new school will also eliminate a hardship many students endure in this 726-square-mile, largely rural district: long bus rides.

But he is keeping his eye on a pattern that concerns him this spring: Families opting for remote learning right now are disproportionately Black and Latino. He doesn’t see that disproportionality based on income level; the proportion of students who qualify for free or reduced-priced meals is about the same in remote and in-person modes. But racially, he sees the disparity, and wonders if it will hold true in the future.

“I’d like to see the same representation of all groups across the board,” he said. “It’s a measure of equity.”

In the current remote mode, his schools are trying to provide the same kinds of access to academics, including math, reading, and ESOL specialists, that in-person students get. But it pains him that remote learners get less access to “specials” like art, music, and physical education. He’s working on how to improve that access.

In Dayton, Superintendent Elizabeth Lolli isn’t quite sure yet what remote-learning option, if any, she will offer in the fall. The district contracted with two outside companies, School-SPLP and Apex Learning, to serve its remote learners this spring. About one-quarter of Dayton’s 12,500 students made that choice.

Since Dayton teachers are all teaching in person now, they don’t work with remote students. Instead, those students follow self-paced lessons based on Ohio’s state curriculum, checking in weekly with coaches from School-SPLP in K-8 and Apex Learning in high school, Lolli said. They can also request help from teachers at their brick-and-mortar schools.

As a group, the remote learners mirror the Dayton student demographics, Lolli said, except for English-learners, who opted disproportionately for in-person instruction.

The district is surveying families now to see how many want a remote option in the fall, and few, so far, have raised their hands. But the district also restricted who’s eligible. It extended the option only to those with health conditions that put them at higher risk for COVID-19.

Even still, Lolli worries about the students who will opt for a fully remote experience next year.

“Will they really have the math and literacy they need?” she asked. “In some cases, like at good charter schools or in good home schooling, they will. In others, they won’t. It hurts my heart. And the interaction with their peers, the arts, phys ed, having access to counselors and social workers. All the guest speakers, the field trips, the concerts, that whole experience of understanding the world and what’s outside their backyards. That’s what’s missing. It concerns me.”

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**Most States Fail to Measure Teachers’ Knowledge of the ‘Science of Reading,’ Report Says**

By Sarah Schwartz

For special education teachers, a group that regularly works with students with reading difficulties, just 11 states’ certification tests meet this standard.

Previous studies have shown that early elementary teachers often have gaps in their knowledge of evidence-based practices for teaching reading, and that many teacher-preparation programs that don’t adequately cover this topic. Some preparation programs introduce strategies that aren’t supported by research.

A 2019 Education Week Research Center survey of K-2 and special education teachers found that only 11 percent said they felt “completely prepared” to teach early reading when they finished their preservice programs.

By NCTQ’s assessment, 32 states require elementary preparation programs to address the five components of reading, as defined by the National Reading Panel report released in 2000—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Ensuring that teachers are prepared to teach reading before they enter the class-

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room, and incentivizing preparation programs to provide that training, will be especially important over the next few years, said Kate Walsh, the president of NCTQ.

“In normal years, we know about a million 4th graders haven’t learned how to read,” Walsh said, referencing results from the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress that categorize only 35 percent of 4th graders as proficient in reading. It’s possible that the pandemic will leave students with more ground to make up, she said.

Some research has suggested that young students may need more support with reading next year. A study of 400,000 students released in December 2020 by Amplify, a digital reading company, found that students were further behind in early literacy skills at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year than they have been in previous years.

Can changes to licensure tests lead to better reading instruction?

For this analysis, NCTQ looked at content outlines, test objectives, and test prep materials for the state licensure tests given to elementary, early education, and special education teacher candidates—the three groups that are most likely to be responsible for foundational reading instruction.

The organization based its evaluation of the tests on two guiding questions: 1) whether the tests addressed each of the five components of reading, and 2) whether they assessed students on any practices that aren’t supported by evidence, like three-cueing—a method that teaches students they don’t need to rely on decoding alone to figure out what a word says, but can also make guesses based on pictures and syntax. (Three-cueing can lessen the chances that students will use their understanding of letter sounds to read through words part-by-part, taking away an opportunity for students to practice their decoding skills and making it less likely that they’ll recognize the word quickly the next time that they see it.)

Many of the tests that didn’t meet NCTQ’s criteria paid little attention to two important components of foundational skills instruction, Walsh said: phonemic awareness (the understanding that spoken words are made up of individual sounds) and phonics (how those individual sounds are represented by letters). These two skills are building blocks to fluent reading, and without them, some students will continue to struggle with reading into higher grades.

Walsh would want to see more states start giving tests that fully assess teachers’ knowledge of the five components of reading. Giving these tests, and holding preparation programs accountable for students’ first-time pass rate, would incentivize preservice programs to devote real resources to teaching these skills, she said.

Still, some education professors don’t place much emphasis on teaching candidates how to do explicit, systematic phonics instruction, and resist what they often call a “one-size-fits-all” approach, as Madeline Will reported in 2019.

Another hurdle, Walsh said, is that some states are also wary of adding more or tougher assessments to teacher candidates’ plates.

In some cases, reading instruction tests are the only barrier between teacher candidates and certification. In California, for example, one-third of prospective teachers fail the first time they take the Reading Instruction Competence Assessment, or RICA, as EdSource reported in 2019. First-time failure
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rates are higher for Black and Latino candidates, and opponents of the assessment have argued that it's racially biased. (The majority of teachers of all races pass after multiple attempts.) The state has assembled a panel to recommend alternatives to the test.

In general, “it’s reasonable to say that teachers need to know certain things before they get classroom responsibilities of their own,” said Dan Goldhaber, the director of the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research at the American Institutes for Research and an expert in teacher certification, who wasn’t involved with the NCTQ study. Even so, he says, any time certification tests show disparate impact on different populations of teacher candidates, it raises concerns.

It’s up to professors of teacher education, and preservice programs more broadly, to make sure that what they’re teaching is aligned to what states expect candidates to know, said Travis J. Bristol, an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education, who studies teachers’ workplace experiences.

“We’re placing an undue burden on candidates of color when the preparation programs aren’t giving students the necessary skills to pass this exam, and so these teacher candidates of color are now having to do extra work,” he said.

States should also be considering whether a paper and pencil test is the best way to determine how prepared preservice educators are, and whether a performance-based assessment might be a better demonstration of candidates’ skills, Bristol said. “There is evidence that people of color across all standardized exams do not pass them at the rate of their white peers,” he said. “I think what we have to ask ourselves is, is that the right way to determine proficiency?”

Teacher preparation programs could set a higher bar for early reading instruction, Goldhaber said, a change that would be “at least as important” as stricter testing requirements in supporting teacher knowledge and effective instruction.

“What programs do or don’t do to try to develop teacher candidates, and teach them how to teach, is really important,” he said. “And it’s that part of the system that I think we know very little about.”

**OPINION**

Published on February 28, 2021

**Strategies for Teaching Students Online and Face to Face at the Same Time**

By Larry Ferlazzo

What are the do’s and don’ts of hybrid teaching?

Many districts, including the one where I work, are making plans to begin teaching in the physical classroom after being fully online since last March 2020. Teacher vaccinations and decreasing COVID-19 infection rates in the community are now making that move a possibility.

Many schools are considering an option that has several names—concurrent, hybrid, hyflex—and most include teaching students who are in our physical classroom at the same time we are teaching some who are online.

What better way to learn how to do this kind of teaching than from those who have been at it for months?

Today, Christina Diaz, Christina E. Cox, Erin R. Scholes, and Matt Carlstrom share their recommendations.

**Student Interaction**

Christina Diaz has been teaching EL and bilingual students for 12 years. She is currently a 4th and 5th grade dual-language teacher in Downers Grove, Ill. You can follow her on Twitter at @BilingualLions:

If you have found yourself being asked to teach virtual and in-person students concurrently, you are not alone. This instructional model is sometimes called hybrid learning, and while some teachers have been teaching it since the beginning of the year, many are making the transition from remote to a form of hybrid teaching over the next portion of the school year. This may sound daunting (and it is), but the following are some practices that may help with your transition.

Do:

- Make your remote students feel like they’re still part of your class even though they’re still learning from home. Your remote students should still be able to participate in the same activities and lessons that your hybrid students are. This may require you to plan ahead if you want to send home or have families pick up crafts or activities. You can also have the students submit an activity electronically and you can print it out afterward so they are included.

- Have your in-person and remote learners interact with each other often, via breakout rooms or on apps like Jamboard, Kahoot, or FlipGrid to maintain your classroom community. Community is EVERYTHING!

- Set learning expectations for in-person and remote learners. While they may be different for both groups, students should
know what materials they need to have for class daily, when and how to submit work and expectations while on Zoom, such as cameras, participation, and safety.

• **Give your remote learners a variety of ways to demonstrate that they’re engaged during your lessons.** Just because their screens may be off, doesn’t mean they’re not there. You can encourage them to unmute themselves, use the chat box, use reactions or hand signals to share.

• **Create routines.** Give your students a sense of routine and stability by starting your days the same way. You can begin with a question for the students to answer while you take attendance; begin with a fun greeting or class meeting; review the schedule for the day; and assign class jobs (greeter, attendance taker, chat monitor, co-host for the day, etc.).

• **Reach out to your school/district technology department for support.** You’ll want to make sure that your in-person and remote students can see the same things while you are teaching. I accomplish this by projecting my computer on the board for my in-person students and then sharing my screen on Zoom for my remote students. My projector has built-in speakers that allow my in-person students to hear what the remote students are saying. Because every school/district is different, it is important to reach out to see what devices and tools you have at your disposal.

• **Use a second device to give your remote students a glimpse into your classroom.** While this is optional, it allows your remote students to see what’s going on in your classroom and to see their classmates. Your in-person students can also see their remote classmates through that second screen.

• **Find ways to celebrate your students.** This has been such a tough time, so celebrate the little things, such as birthdays, student accomplishments, spirit days, and class rewards.

• **Do find opportunities for experiences like virtual field trips.** Take advantage of experiences that websites, museums, and children’s organizations are offering.

**Don’t:**

• **Don’t expect to follow the same pacing as you did last year.** Everything takes longer, and that’s OK.

• **Don’t be so hard on yourself or your students.** Give yourself and your students grace. It’s easy to get discouraged when something goes wrong. When something does go wrong, don’t take it personally. This is all new for you and your students.

• **Don’t forget to unmute (or mute) yourself!** This happens to me WAY too many times!

• **Don’t overextend yourself trying to keep up with other teachers.** Find 2-3 resources/apps you and your students are familiar with and stick to them.

• **Don’t forget to practice self-care.** Teaching concurrently is no easy feat, so make sure you take care of yourself! Meditate, stay active, spend time with your family, and leave schoolwork at work every so often. Self-care is not selfish. You cannot serve from an empty vessel.

Take care and best of luck, teacher friends!

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**Community is EVERYTHING!**

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‘Don’t Panic’

Christina E. Cox is the chair of the history department at York Preparatory School in New York City:

Here’s what I’ve learned since I first started teaching online and in person concurrently in September:

• **Get creative about class discussions.** The biggest challenge has been facilitating classroom discussion. Even in the best circumstances, students participating from home aren’t always able to hear their masked and distanced classmates as well as they could when everyone is logged in from home. I do my best to repeat student questions and observations so that the Zoomers can hear, but I’ve moved some of these conversations to our LMS, Canvas. On Canvas, I can set up electronic discussion boards that allow students to interact with each other in real time. PearDeck is another great option for facilitating interaction between students in different locations.

• **Use breakout rooms to set up partners.** Buddy in-person students with classmates at home and have everyone log on to Zoom. One caveat: Avoid having more than one in-person student in the same breakout room, especially if students don’t all have headphones handy, as this can create feedback issues. (Ask my 10th graders—I tried this, and it was a bit of a disaster.)

• **Try a 2021 version of a “Fishbowl Debate.”** In an archaeology elective I teach, students were given “case studies” of different ethical dilemmas that an archaeologist might face in the course of her career. Teams in the classroom worked together from their seats via shared Google Docs and teams made up of students at home worked together in breakout rooms, each proposing their own solution to their assigned dilemma. Then spokespeople for each team took turns presenting and arguing their cases over Zoom. It was great to see students at home and in the classroom engage with each other so passionately—and it was a lot of fun!

• **Project-based learning has been a great fit for the hybrid model.** This year, I’ve assigned all of my classes medium- to long-term projects. My 9th graders, for example, were each required to research an overlooked historical event and argue for its inclusion in history curricula in a short paper. Whether students are in the classroom or at home, I ask them to share their Google Docs with me and I talk through their work with them as I leave feedback in their documents as I go. It’s been an excellent way to build and maintain student relationships despite having a physically divided class. Breakout rooms have worked wonderfully for peer review, and students can share their projects with the class over Zoom when they are done.

• **Don’t forget anyone! (But if you do, don’t panic.)** Dividing my attention equitably between students at home and students in the classroom has been a major challenge. It’s easy to get drawn in by what’s happening in the classroom and forget to check to see if a Zoomer has a question (and vice versa!). I’m still working on mastering the art of hybrid teaching, but I’ve gotten better with practice. And don’t forget that a teacher’s best assets are her students. Be upfront with your class about the challenges of switch-
ing “modes” as you teach and ask them to point out if you’ve missed a student who needs help. In my experience, high school students have been incredibly patient and kind—and they know that you’re only one person. Indeed, one of the silver linings of this very difficult year has been seeing how hard students have been willing to work to make lessons go smoothly and how gracious they’ve been when they haven’t. It gives me hope for the future.

“Roomies” and “Zoomies”

Erin R. Schoes is a 7th grade math teacher in northeastern Connecticut. She is an ISTE certified teacher, on the board of trustees for the Association for Middle Level Education, and the co-creator of the website Tech4Teachers.info.

Those first steps into a school building that you haven’t seen for a year are full of emotions; excitement, uncertainty, and a fear of the continued unknown. The truth is, you have so many of the skills you need to be successful in the hybrid model because you have been teaching remotely all year. It really will be the cross between in person and remote in more ways than one. Stick to what you and the kids know; remember that you are an exceptional teacher who has learned a lot over the last year.

Classroom Setup

Realize that by following all of the protocol and safety guidelines, your room will look different, but it doesn’t mean you can’t make it your own. Add your own personality to the plastic dividers or to the tape marks on the floor, Washi Tape or colorful painters tape can go a long way to add your own personality to your classroom.

Teacher Technology Setup

Hybrid learning gives your students in the room a little break from being on the screen all day; create a teacher technology setup that allows the in-the-room kids, or “roomies,” to see what you are presenting on the front board. To make your life simpler, I would suggest one of two options. If your district has access to dual monitors, I would suggest using them; this allows you to have two screens, and that way, you can see your remote kids, or “zoomies,” on one screen and share the other screen both in the classroom and with your “zoomies.”

The second option is logging into your digital classroom with two devices. Use your main device to see your zoomies’ faces and the chat. With your second device, log in without connecting to audio (trust me the feedback will be awful) Use this device to present your lesson or whatever else you need all your students to see. This should also be the device connected to your projector in the classroom.

Classroom Management

One of the great things about hybrid teaching is not having to wait for kids to unmute. The open conversation that happens as the kids enter and leave is one part of teaching I really missed during remote teaching. Continue using the same routines and expectations that you did during remote. Keep using the same learning-management system to distribute and collect assignments; the consistency will be helpful to you and the kids.

For lessons and student practice, use interactive technology that lets you see all students’ work at the same time. You may already be using some of these, but I would suggest technology like Pear Deck or NearPod that both let you make your lessons interactive. You could also use something like ClassKick, Whiteboard.chat, or Whiteboard.fi. These all let you see a grid of all of your students’ work at the same time and let you jump in and assist as the students need.

Finally, find ways to continue to engage all of your students, roomies and zoomies. A few things that have worked in my room: Let Zoomies use the chat to participate and/or plug in the computer sound to speakers, so the full class can participate and hear each other. Play games “Roomies vs. Zoomies.” This can work great when kids use whiteboards to communicate with their team. Encourage participation from your zoomies. Recently, I have been saying, “The last one to turn on their camera will answer the next question.” (Sometimes I am left answering the question, because they were all so fast I couldn’t tell who was last.) Have your roomies log into Zoom and create breakout rooms so that every breakout room is connected to the classroom through a roomie. This really encourages participation, because the roomie needs to communicate with the group what is happening in the room. This is an awesome way to finally get to do some group work where you can still monitor part of the conversation.

Switching from remote to hybrid is “one more thing” in this already stressful year, but you have the skills to tackle it all. You will love getting to know your students in person, and they have missed the human connection, too. Honestly, they have missed school, they have missed their friends, and they have missed their teachers, too!

‘It’s all about the relationships’

Matt Carlstrom is in his 29th year of teaching social studies, 23 of them in Deer River. He is the social department chair and a board member of the Minnesota Council for the Social Studies (MCSS) as well as working on the Minnesota State Social Studies Standards team:

Being in hybrid since September, I’ve learned a few things about teaching in this environment:

1.) As in normal face-to-face teaching, it’s all about the relationships that you create and maintain. I decided early on that I was going to be very intentional about how I greeted kids as they entered my class, regardless of geography. I enthusiastically announce each student who arrives in my class, and for those who’ve missed a few days, I greet them and then tell them how thankful I am that they chose to come to class.

2.) My interaction with the online kids doesn’t end after I’ve greeted them. Regardless of the online platform you’re using, the mechanics are the same. My student “squares” are on my laptop, and my students are in their desks. I keep my roster close by to put a check mark next to each student I call on, to make sure I’m getting as many different students as I can. My online students can virtually raise their hand or as often happens, they just start talking. I’ve got my notes or assignment up on the TV screen that I’m sharing with both online and in-person students.

When having a discussion and at the beginning of the class, I have my camera on, but if we’re taking notes or working on an assignment in class, I turn it off because many of my students online have said it’s distracting. Throughout the
class, I will call on my online students just as often as I do my in-person students. And when I call on a student in class, I doubt that all my online students heard the response or the question, so I try to always repeat what was said and who said it. The in-class students can easily hear the online students through the speaker system or TV.

3.) **Do not force cameras to be on.** ... And any administrator who says you have to ... they are wrong, and I’m certain they don’t have the data to support this position. I want my students to come to class regardless of what their room or house looks like or how they’re dressed or what their hair looks like. Be respectful of the different environments your students come from. Teaching in a pandemic is not a time to potentially shame students, even if unintentionally.

4.) **Pacing is very important to the success or lack of success of your hybrid students.** We’re teaching and learning during a global pandemic during which some families have lost jobs and family members and some of my students are responsible for their siblings when they’re online. Just because you’ll see most of your students every other day or whatever system your district is choosing, fight the urge to ramp up the pacing. In my humble opinion, and fortunately that of my admin and school board, we are not sprinting to get all of our standards in and every lesson taught this year.

Be intentional about what you choose to teach; modify assignments to get the most bang for the buck. Work with your students to find the porridge that is “just right.” I have found that my students, most of them anyway, have been very honest in this conversation. I’ve asked many times this year, “How’re you/we doing? You OK with the timeline for the assignments, etc...?” And that has led to some good discussions and given my students some ownership of the class. In all honesty, even with these discussions, as the year has gone on, I’ve had to extend many of my timelines on “due dates” as the stress of the year is really starting to wear on my kids.

5.) **I know “due dates” are a hot-button issue in education with two very distinct sides:** those that are in favor of hard due dates and those that are in favor of no due dates. Prior to this year, my “late work” policy was: “All work from the beginning of the quarter to mid-quarter was due the Friday of mid-quarter week. Then all work from that Friday on was due the last day of the quarter.” I did this for multiple reasons, but key amongst them was I wanted my kids to be “present” in the learning. If a student is rushing the last week of the quarter to do assignments from the first week of the quarter, how focused can they be on either what you did then or what you’re doing now?

This year? My “due dates” are “soft,” and while I’ll mark them “Late” in Infinite Campus, I deduct no points. Our class periods this year have been 25 minutes, with an 8th and 9th hour that are 60 minutes long for the tech-ed, band/choir, and science labs to give kids enough time to work on their projects, labs, and full choir/band with spacing. So, I was going to have to change my pacing and late-work policy regardless.

6.) **How to manage the students in class without losing your online kids?** I’ve taught myself to stay tethered to the desk when I’ve got kids in both environments. My F2F students bring their questions and work to me. It’s not ideal, but it lets the online kids know I’m there for them as well. For those of you moving to hybrid from online, I’m guessing that you’ve already learned much of this. Be patient with both yourself and your students. Like you, your students are worn out from this year that is unlike any you or they have lived in; be willing to acknowledge that. Approach each day asking yourself, “What is best for my students,” and you’ll be OK.

Thanks to Christina Diaz, Christina Cox, Erin, and Matt for their contributions!

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, California.

**Additional Resources**

This is the third post in a multipart series. You can see Part One here and Part Two here.

**We ‘Can Lower Expectations and Still Have High Standards’ in Hybrid Teaching**

By Larry Ferlazzo

**We ‘Can Lower Expectations and Still Have High Standards’ in Hybrid Teaching**

By Larry Ferlazzo

What are the do’s and don’ts of hybrid (also called concurrent) teaching?

Today, Meredith White, Sara Sparks, Kyla King, and Stephen Capone continue this series with their observations.

‘Pack the Right Umbrella’

Meredith White is a Spanish teacher in Gwinnett County, Ga., and the 2020 Georgia Foreign Language Teacher of the Year:

To say that this school year has been a very different one for those of us in the classroom would be a gross understatement. Stakeholders, administration, students, and policymakers all seem to have steadily increasing opinions about what should and shouldn’t be happening in schools right now.

These schools, much like the opinions surrounding them, are also buried in innumerable shades of nuance: physical school building use, internet access, device availability, teacher/administrator experience, substitute obtainability, to name but a few. Now, with spring on the horizon, many of these communities that have been mired in decisionmaking, decision-changing, protests, and heated school board meetings are looking to shift gears once again, from virtual to a form of in-person and/or hybrid classes. So, how the heck—or perhaps more appropriately—how the tech do we do this?

**Organization:** In our physical classrooms,
teachers decide on systems and procedures for the things they deem important: turning in work, physically being in the space together at the same time, storing and using supplies, and going about the daily business of classroom teaching.

Online teaching is no different; there are now links to turn in work, expectations for being present on video calls, class resources and their join codes/log-ins, and procedural pieces like assigning work and taking online attendance. If it was working in the online setting, it will translate into the hybrid setting. And, I would add here, if students are used to it by now from a class having been virtual, why change it? My virtual and in-person students complete the same lesson plan at the same time with the same locations for everything so that there isn’t a difference or advantage/disadvantage in delivery or accessibility.

**Planning:** Along the same lines as organization, if it was working for virtual classes, it will also work for in-person/hybrid classes with the added bonus of transparency. Confession #1: My planning has never been more intentional than it has been this year because I’ve had to take a hard look at whether or not I focus more on teaching or learning. (Spoiler: It should be the latter.) Online students don’t necessarily have the luxury of time with so many trying circumstances surrounding them and us: Hybrid students also want their time and productivity maximized and considered. If an activity or game is just “extra” since now they’re in-person/hybrid but 1) it excludes the virtual students and 2) wouldn’t have been feasible when completely online, it may not be one we pressure ourselves to include, like many other things. We can adjust or even lower our expectations and still have high standards, for ourselves and for our students; the two aren’t mutually exclusive.

**Grading/Feedback:** Speaking from experience, here: A lack of systems and schedules for giving frequent, relevant feedback is only amplified by having in-person students. Confession #2: Because the majority of my students are online, I’m giving more personalized, timely formative and summative feedback than I ever have in my career. My students are hearing from me about their work every single day in the form of a score, a comment, a .gif, or a Bitmoji sticker. With in-person classes of 35+ before this year, that was impossible, and I therefore didn’t have any expectation for myself to provide that for them.

Bethanie Drew, a Spanish teacher in Wake County, N.C., says, “Summative assessments are like an autopsy: an in-depth look at what happened and what had been happening over time. Formatives, on the other hand, are check-ups to check in: How is everything going? How do you feel? What do we need to adjust? This pedagogy is the same whether we’re face to face, virtual, or hybrid: Good teaching is the same and good teaching actually focuses on learning.

As many teachers transition to hybrid teaching, it’s important to keep in mind: Habits and behaviors transfer, so if it was working before, it will likely still work. If it wasn’t working before, it isn’t too late to scrap it and simplify. This is a difficult time, indeed, but luckily, every storm eventually runs out of rain. While we can’t control the weather, we can help each other to look around and pack the right umbrella.

**Working Collaboratively in Stations**

Sara Sparks is a secondary ESL specialist for the Hays CISD in Kyle, Texas. She is passionate about pedagogy and strives to provide instructional strategies that benefit all students:

This year has certainly been unlike any other in education. Teachers have been swept into a current of swift decisionmaking, monitoring, adjusting, and adjusting again as they redefine and reimagine classroom instruction. As this year has unfolded, many teachers have had to acclimate to a concurrent teaching model, teaching both in-person learners and virtual learners simultaneously. Virtual learners, in the present state of education, are faced with several disadvantages: isolation, limited socialization, lack of collaboration, and minimal engagement. It is our job as educators to provide instructional strategies to overcome the hurdles this year has imposed.

In a concurrent learning environment, stations afford opportunities for in-person learners and virtual learners to work together.

**Planning**

Properly planning the stations is critical. First, the teacher should determine the content standards to be taught. For example, a middle school English/language arts teacher who is targeting the standards’ author’s purpose, making inferences, reading comprehension, and text structure can create stations accordingly. Next, the teacher must group the students. Each station will include a blend of in-person and virtual learners. These groups can be of mixed ability or same ability. Once the standards and groupings are determined, the teacher will then assign the appropriate activities for each station.

**Structure**

Setting up stations requires thoughtful and intentional planning. Establishing and communicating clear expectations for the students is imperative. Desks can be clustered as long as they are socially distant and abide by CDC guidelines. Using the aforementioned English/language arts example, we would have four stations focused on the following standards: reading comprehension, text structure, author’s purpose, making inferences. Each station would have a desk for every in-person learner and one extra desk for the computer where virtual learners will participate through a video-conferencing platform. The stations will consist of virtual and in-person learners working together to complete the assigned activity for that standard. The teacher can lead one of the stations or can monitor and help facilitate all of the stations.

At the start of class, the teacher will log into a video-conferencing platform to greet the virtual learners. Next, they will separate the students into virtual breakout rooms that represent each one of the stations. For example, station one is reading comprehension, station two is text structure, station three is making inferences, and station four is author’s purpose. A student at each station will then log into the video-conferencing platform to invite the virtual learners into their group. Virtual learners assigned to virtual breakout room one will be working with in-person learners in station one, reading comprehension. The expectation for in-person and virtual learners is that everyone participates. This can be established through group roles.

**Activities**

Activities should be designed so that they are accessible to both in-person and virtual learners. In-person learners can complete the activities on paper, and virtual learners can complete the activities via Google Docs and/or a learning-management system. If technology is readily available, all students can collaborate and complete the activities on their computers.

Here’s an example of what a station can look like. In the reading-comprehension station, in-person and virtual learners can read...
and annotate a text together. Students will take turns reading a paragraph, and all students will collaborate to annotate that paragraph. All students will have the opportunity to read a paragraph, and all students will contribute to the annotations. All students must have access to the text; in-person learners can have a hard copy and virtual learners can have a digital copy.

At the completion of each station’s activity, the teacher can provide a closing statement so students can demonstrate their knowledge. For example, students in the reading-comprehension station will complete the sentence stem, “The main idea of this passage is... and I know this because...” This will help the teacher assess the students’ learning.

Virtual learners are entitled to an education that is equal to that of their in-person peers.

Stations address the aforementioned disadvantages of virtual learning by providing a shared, collaborative learning experience. When students work collaboratively, engagement increases, and learning occurs.

Ask yourself, “Who are my learners, and what are their needs?”

Make it a priority to be a kind adult with a calm and reassuring voice. Be their champion and celebrate their successes. Design content to be finished during class time. Students need time outside of the school day to be teenagers, unplug and relax. Have all students log into the same virtual meet; this way they can “see” each other and work collaboratively.

Take a skill-building approach

Teach students “how to do” this new version of school. Reflect on the skills students must have to complete each task and incorporate the necessary skill-building into instructional time.

Make things as simple as possible

Use templates and handouts when possible. Provide routine, structure, and clear expectations. Post clearly defined learning objective(s) in each lesson and include resources as hyperlinks. Simplify so that students only need to look in one place for all instructions and resources.

Design with the end in mind

What are the three or four most important things that you want students to learn in your class? Then work backward with the end in mind. Everything will take much longer and require lots of scaffolding. Design each lesson as if it were fully online.

Make connections with students

As all students are working in the virtual learning environment, share positive and encouraging comments. If a student has not completed their work, leave a comment offering extra help. This is a way to build an authentic connection and provide formative feedback. Keep your camera on as much as possible, even when presenting slideshows.

Recognize that things are hard for them

Students cannot see their friends in person, and they are stuck at home. The reality is that some learners may be helping younger siblings or even employed as essential workers. They are watching the global crisis in real time on social media, and their worry is real.

Radical compassion

Realize that we are a protective factor in their lives. Practice radical compassion. Be the person who makes students feel good. If you do this, they will produce and they will learn. Assume the best, even when you know it isn’t true.

Talk about mental health and provide resources, repeatedly. Instill hope and communicate that COVID-19 is not forever. Validate their feelings of loss, anger, and grief and acknowledge that we are going through a collective trauma.

The “pep talk”

Do not fall into the trap of perfectionism. Some days will be “outstanding,” some days will be “good enough.” Remember that you are not alone; find a team and share the work. Connect with other teachers on social media. Build a network.

This year is tough, challenging, and pushing you professionally beyond what you thought was possible. Keep going, you can do this, and know that you are making a difference.

Don’t ‘Overcontrol’

Stephen Capone (@CaponeTeaches) is a full-time faculty member at the McGillis School, a K-8 independent school in Salt Lake City, and a part-time faculty member of the Department of Philosophy at Utah Valley University:

1. Design for online; use class time as workshop time.

Design for a virtual environment and use in-class opportunities to coach students. Plan courses as though they were strictly virtual. Students can get what they need if I post the following: multimodal resources, playlists with instructions, and 2-4 minute mini-lesson videos. Students can carry on independently if I’m absent. If I’m present, I don’t deliver content but rather guide students through playlists, reteaching core concepts, and using the hybrid classroom as a workshop where I can meet each student’s learning needs.

2. Iterate with help from students.

Whatever solutions we generate will change as we learn. Do not tinker continuously with what is working right now, though, or you’ll never rest. Design improvements are usually most useful for the next unit’s design, so keep notes. And for help, put student experience at the core of iterative design processes.

Recently, I asked some 6th graders, “How do our to-do lists compare with Ms. M.’s playlists?”
“Yours are awful, Mr. Capone,” came the unflinching reply.

I smiled. “OK. Tell me why.”

The students couldn’t identify the specific problem or a targeted solution. No problem! I learned that my to-do lists offer too-heavy doses of instructions, and links in playlists with most instructions appearing on a separate page would make the list itself easier to interpret. I took 15 minutes to implement some initial changes and I will design differently from now on. Prod students for real feedback, thank them for it, and adjust.

3. Use playlists and offer choice.

Students move at different paces. Whenever possible, let them find success at their own speed with playlists. And here’s great news: Offering genuine student choice becomes easier in a hybrid or remote model. When I taught causal thinking using what I called social revolutions as a content backdrop, students chose the movement they wished to study: Black American Rights, Women’s Rights, LGBTQ+ Rights, or the American Anti-War Movement. Students in the same room practiced the same skills while learning different content in assignments they selected from a short list of activities that would help them all develop target skills. Engagement skyrocketed.

Don’ts

1. Don’t try to “overcontrol”

Don’t attempt to control at-home student behavior during class. Set and stick to clear boundaries, and that’s it. Avoid calling students out during class. If the student has a low-impact habit that interferes with learning, make a quick note and address it personally at a later time. If they’re interfering with another student or the group, keep it to a simple and direct notice and then follow up according to clear guidelines. Relax. You’re not in control and you never were.

2. Don’t put students on blast.

Kids in middle and high school are self-conscious. Don’t put students on blast by displaying them on a giant screen or the wall in the classroom (especially if your school has a camera-on policy—eek!—that you’re following). Keep them on your monitor, remind them that they’re only visible to you, and give fair warning if you’re going to make an exception for a specific learning purpose.

3. Don’t lecture.

It bears repeating. Do not lecture. Remember that even those students proficient at mock attention will be visiting the gardens of their imagination in a few minutes. Stick with 2-5 minutes of instruction at a time. Ideally, prerecord and post lessons to ensure maximum equity of access across contexts. YouTube provides captions. If I’m doing live instruction, there are several groups I’m not serving well.

Last words of advice: Give yourself a break!

Thanks to Meredith, Sara, Kyla, and Stephen for their contributions!

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, California.

Additional Resources

This is the eighth post in a multipart series. You can see Part One here, Part Two here, Part Three here, Part Four here, Part Five here, Part Six here, and Part Seven here.
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