EDUCATION WEEK
2020

SPOTLIGHT

—Compilation: E+ and iStock/Getty

REMOTE LEARNING DURING COVID-19

EDITOR'S NOTE

As schools experience closures due to COVID-19, teachers and district leaders have worked to implement effective remote teaching. In this Spotlight, learn about how educators are addressing equity issues within remote learning, how teachers are employing trauma-informed teaching online, and how districts are helping teachers understand new tech tools.

CONTENTS

COMMENTARY

Published on April 17, 2020, in Education Week

Teach New Content or Review Familiar Material? A Tough Call During Coronavirus Closures

By Sarah Schwartz

—AP Photo/Matt Rourke

Terrell Bell, wearing a protective face mask, looks at a learning guide he picked up last month for his little sister at John H. Webster Elementary School in Philadelphia. The school district is struggling to figure out how to keep students leaning during building closures.

Tania Stoker, the assistant superintendent for the Northern Lehigh School District in Pennsylvania, remembers the moment when administrators realized they needed a new plan for distance learning.

Schools in the district had been shut down for about two weeks, sending out review packets by mail and posting enrichment activities to Google classroom. Administrators didn't want to hold students responsible for new learning, because they couldn't know what was going on at home. But the activities were only a stopgap measure, a way to keep kids "in the educational mindset," Stoker said. And every day, the questions loomed larger: "What if this extends? What are we going to do?"

The turning point came at the end of March, when Gov. Tom Wolf announced schools would be closed indefinitely. Just over a week later, they would be closed for the academic year. "We said, OK—we need to kind of figure out what we're doing here," Stoker said. "We need something more structured."

By now, more than half of all states have recommended or ordered schools closed through the academic year. Faced with the new reality that they won't see students in classrooms again this year, many districts are having to make the same choice as Northern Lehigh: Should they reinforce the learning that students have already done this year, continuing to provide optional enrichment and review? Or should they try to forge ahead through the curriculum, continuing to cover new standards and content?

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos weighed in on the question earlier this month, saying that learning should continue for all students. "We would hope that it would be an aspirational goal ... that the students would not only maintain their current level of learning, but continue to expand," she said.

But states have issued conflicting guidance. A report from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Teaching Systems Lab found that this decision—enrichment versus progressing through the curriculum—was one of the most common areas of policy divergence in states' distance learning plans.

The decision often hinges on questions of equity. If students don't have internet access, devices, or a quiet place to work at home, they might fall behind as teachers cover new concepts.

"If we charged forward and tried to say we're covering a lot of new learning, we're just going to exacerbate a lot of inequities," said Jared Myracle, the chief academic officer for the Jackson-Madison County Schools in Tennessee. Between 60 percent to 70 percent of students in the district have internet access at home, he said.

But not moving forward comes with its own consequences, said Thomas Parker, the superintendent of the Allentown school district in Pennsylvania. The district plans to start its distance learning plan the week of April 20, after about a month of enrichment and review during closures.

Inequities in his students' lives have already created a divide, between kids in his district and kids in wealthier districts. "We can't afford not to push the envelope," Parker said. "If their peers are progressing, they have to progress, too."

Avoiding 'Dogmatic' Guidance

State level guidance on this question mostly consists of suggestions, with frequent caveats that districts—and even individual teachers—may make different decisions based on unique circumstances.

"No one is dogmatic about these things," said Justin Reich, the director of the MIT Teaching Systems Lab, and one of the authors of the report on state remote learning guidance.

For instance, Massachusetts recommends that districts focus on "reinforcing skills already taught this school year as well as applying and deepening these skills," but notes that teachers may wish to continue with new material. Tennessee suggests that remote learning materials be "duplicative of what students have mastered to allow for independent work at home." But schools can include "bonus"

material that covers new content if they want to.

Some states have changed their guidance, as closures have extended. In Pennsylvania, the department originally gave districts a choice between "planned instruction"—moving forward with new standards—or enrichment and review. Now, all districts are expected to submit a continuity of education plan, though the state suggests still making enrichment and review available.

Nebraska's guidance from the department of education recommends a "layered approach," where districts might start with "short-term enrichment opportunities" and then move to a long-term instructional plan for the rest of the closure. Nebraska's schools are now closed through the end of the academic year.

An enrichment-only approach made sense back when Nebraska districts thought they might only be closed for two weeks, said Cory Epler, the academic officer in the state's office of teaching, learning, and assessment. But as closures extended further, "we wanted [districts] to be thinking about the different phases of the resources they would be providing students."

'What Do You Do With Kids in the Fall?'

As for most questions about distance learning during this pandemic, there's little roadmap or precedent for which approach is best.

But the topic has courted controversy. When Philadelphia Superintendent William Hite announced that teachers couldn't cover any new material until May 4—to give the district time to get devices and internet out to students without connectivity—he faced criticism that the decision disadvantaged students who had the access to start new lessons immediately.

"As long as Philadelphia denies its students online instruction, they will fall behind students from other districts. What's equitable about that?" wrote Paul T. von Hippel, an associate professor of public affairs at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas, Austin, in an article for Education Next.

But forging ahead through the curriculum, when only some students are logging on, creates other problems, Reich said.

"What do you do with kids in the fall, when half of the kids have progressed through the standards and half haven't?" he asked. The question isn't just hypothetical. In New York City, the mayor has said "there's clearly an issue with attendance" in remote learning; in Los Angeles, thousands of students are missing from online classes.

And it's not clear that one approach over the other would be best for students' wellbeing during this time, said Isaiah B. Pickens, the assistant director of service systems at the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

"The context for each kid experiencing this pandemic is different," he said. Pushing forward through the curriculum could help children stay engaged in school—and keep them from getting too bored at home. But kids who are experiencing intense stress and trauma—maybe they have a family member who's sick with the virus—might have limited ability to focus on new material. Enrichment could be more useful for them, Pickens said, as a tool to stay connected with familiar routines.

> "What do you do with kids in the fall, when half of the kids have progressed through the standards and half haven't?"
>
> **PAUL T. VON HIPPEL**
> ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, LBJ SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

Regardless, Pickens said, predictability is important. Students should know what they're doing and when, and what outcome they're working toward.

"Anyone with a coherent, simple, communicative plan, is going to be better off than otherwise," Reich said.

'Figure Out Ways to Cover New Material'

In districts that don't yet have plans to cover new material—or have waited several weeks into shutdowns to make the transition—leaders say they're trying to get the system right before they start requiring kids to participate.

For Myracle, the chief academic officer in Tennessee, consistency is a key part of the plan. Right now, the district is focusing on enrichment, providing resources that are aligned with the universal curriculum that Jackson-Madison uses during the school year. Knowing that students will be doing enrichment activities in curricula that they're already familiar with and use year-round can assist in "maintaining some momentum," said Myracle.

Not every student has adults at home who can help with schoolwork, so his district took this approach to make sure that lessons could be completed independently, without adult supervision—as advised in Tennessee's remote learning guidance.

"As we continue to get further into this, we're going to try to figure out ways to cover new material, while keeping in mind that not every kid has a parent at home to help," Myracle said. For now, the district is still trying to make contact with all of their students, some of whom they haven't heard from. "Their learning is still unaccounted for during this time," he said.

In Allentown, devices and internet connectivity are the limiting factor, said Parker, the superintendent. The district plans to start its long-term distance learning plan the week of April 20, a month after schools first shut down.

The 17,000-student district started with an enrichment approach so as not to disadvantage students without internet access, and give schools time to plan for how they would serve English-language learners and students with disabilities, Parker said. Preliminary results from a survey of families found that 83 percent of students had internet at home, and a little over half have access to a computer.

The district is planning to purchase additional devices and transition to Edgenuity and Odysseyware, online learning platforms that the state has provided access to. Allentown has also applied for the state department of education's new equity grant program, which will allocate up to $5 million in grants for devices and hotspots in districts, and to pay for delivery of paper materials.

"There's an almost unseen, untalked about issue with districts that are fiscally distressed," Parker said. "This has been an extra burden and an extra challenge, because we just didn't have the capacity internally to turn around as quickly as some of our peers."

'Overwhelming' Gaps to Fill

In some ways, the Northern Lehigh district—less than an hour away from Allentown—seemed poised to make an

> As we continue to get further into this, we're going to try to figure out ways to cover new material, while keeping in mind that not every kid has a parent at home to help."
>
> **JARED MYRACLE**
> CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER, JACKSON-MADISON COUNTY SCHOOLS, TENNESSEE

easier transition out of review work and into new learning.

Schools there have 1-to-1 computing environments at all grade levels, and many teachers had already uploaded their classes onto Google Classroom or Canvas in the year before the pandemic. Northern Lehigh is also a tenth of the size of Allentown, at about 1,700 students. Staff were able to search for individual students' Chromebooks in school buildings, and hand-deliver them out to kids whose families drove to pick them up.

For some teachers, this infrastructure made for a mostly seamless shift. But for others, progressing through the curriculum online still won't come close to what they could have done in the classroom.

Kim Filipovits, an 8th grade English/language arts teacher at Northern Lehigh Middle School, said she's had to rework some lessons, but can still cover most of her curriculum remotely.

She's assigning about 30 minutes of work a day—per district guidelines—which works out to about the same amount of time she would have gotten with students in a 45-minute class period. Her students are familiar with Google Classroom, having used it this past year.

"There will definitely be review and catch-up [next year], but I don't know if it's going to be as much as people think," Filipovits said.

But even when students have technology access, some teachers have had to radically redesign their instructional plan for the rest of the year. Tony Tulio, a 5th grade math and science teacher at Slatington Elementary in the district, has students for an hour and half in math class each day during the regular school year. Online, he only has 30 minutes.

"One day of assignments is now split over three days," Tulio said. "That's the tough part."

As soon as he and his colleagues heard that the district would be moving to a longer-term distance learning plan, they got to work on a month-long calendar, outlining the standards and essential content that they would cover. Some things had to go.

Practice opportunities were slashed—instead of 10 word problems, for instance, students would only do one or two. The entire last module of the year, in which 5th graders learn about graphing, plotting points, reading charts, had to be cut. The 5th and 6th grade math teams worked on the distance learning calendar together, Tulio said, so next year's teachers will know what students still need to cover. Still, he's worried.

It makes sense to try for new learning, Tulio thinks. "It's going to be easier to bridge gaps than it's going to be to teach something brand new," he said. But there's going to be a lot of gaps to fill. "We're trying not to think about it now, because it's a little bit overwhelming," Tulio said.

Northern Lehigh is already planning to address learning gaps in the fall, said Stoker, the assistant superintendent. "I'd love to say that we're going to be at the same point, but probably, we won't," she said, noting that there was likely learning lost in the first few weeks of the closures.

Making plans for fall should be a priority for everyone, regardless of which approach—review or new content districts take, said Reich, from MIT.

If districts decide to move forward through their curriculum, some students won't be able to complete assignments from home. But if districts stick with enrichment and review, families with more time and resources will make sure that their kids are progressing—also widening gaps, Reich said.

"I think there are very few ways of imagining what happens that don't expand inequality," he said. "There may be more to be gained in investing resources in the fall than in investing resources in trying to make remote learning work." ■

Published on April 22, 2020, in Education Week

How Districts Are Helping Teachers Get Better at Tech Under Coronavirus

By David Saleh Rauf

When the School District of Philadelphia, where the vast majority of educators have never used Google Classroom, went live with remote learning this week, teachers were instructed to take it slow: "review and enrichment" only for now—no new material will be taught until early May.

In preparation for the debut of its distance learning program, the Metropolitan School District of Pike Township, a small district outside of Indianapolis, relied on more than tech coaches to help teachers with digital training: Librarians got in the mix, too.

And when Miami-Dade Public Schools joined the wave of coronavirus school closures sweeping the country coast to coast in mid-March, the nation's fourth-largest school district rolled out a smorgasbord of online instructional offerings, including dozens of webinars and third-party edtech resources.

The three approaches highlight how professional development for educators is adjusting to meet the new reality of digital teaching during a pandemic, and how there's no one-size-fits-all approach for districts facing the challenge of delivering remote learning on the fly.

Across the country, educators are being equipped with new tech tools—devices, apps, software, and online textbooks—in greater volume than ever before. So now the push to train teachers on how to effectively use that technology is in full swing.

The approaches are almost as varied as the districts themselves. Some have seemingly made training available to teachers for just about every video, pod-

—Amanda Ray/Yakima Herald-Republic via AP

Debbie Williams, a 1st grade teacher at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in Yakima, Wash., scrolls through a math book as she plans lessons for her students while school buildings are closed due to the coronavirus. Districts across the country are trying to provide professional development on the fly to help teachers better prepare remote learning lessons.

casting or live streaming app available under the sun, letting educators pick from a wide menu of options based on their individual tech know-how. Other districts are minimizing their offerings for now to avoid tech overload.

PD 'for the Forseeable Future'

At a time filled with uncertainty, and no shortage of individual district game plans for how to survive or even thrive in a total remote learning landscape, district academic officers and ed-tech leaders agree on this much: digital professional development has a long way to go.

"The need for this type of training is going to be ongoing for the foreseeable future," said Jennifer Hall, an education tech specialist for the Atlanta Public Schools, a district of about 55,000 students.

Nestled in her home office, behind a crowded workspace equipped with a PC and two full-sized computer monitors, an iPad, a Macbook, and a podcast mic, Hall is one of about 15 education technology specialists with the Atlanta school district helping train teachers remotely to use different tech tools.

A typical day for Hall might involve one-on-one virtual help sessions with teachers, recording tutorials, writing tip sheets, or holding court about a new tech tool via a webinar broadcasting on public television.

Prior to the pandemic, all teachers in the district were already trained on Google Classroom in case of inclement weather closures. Since teachers and students were familiar with how to log on and navigate a basic online platform, the district was "ahead of the game," Hall said.

And that's opened the door for much more creative uses of technology, even during the early stages of remote learning this spring.

Teachers are holding live classes with Nearpod, an online engagement tool, in conjunction with Google Meet. Math and foreign language teachers are using Flipgrid to let students record short video responses during online classes. Jamboard is another common collaboration tool helping substitute for a lack of face-to-face interaction. Meanwhile, art and theater teachers are asking Hall how to use image and design tools such as Adobe Spark and Google Drawings to facilitate class projects remotely.

Hall said teachers who have never used technology before are now seeing its benefits.

"It can be overwhelming. There's not an expectation that teachers use all the tools," she said. "The goal has been to provide as many resources as possible for our teachers."

'Deal With This New Normal'

Long before the coronavirus forced schools into throwing together remote learning strategies, Miami-Dade district officials were steadily ramping up the use of technology over the past six years as part of a "Digital Convergence" initiative. It has included the acquisition of more than 200,000 new devices and continual professional development focused on e-learning. District officials say it allowed them to hit the ground running during the current crisis.

On the morning of March 16, when Miami launched its online curriculum following the sudden announcement three days earlier of district-wide school closures, teachers were able to access a fresh webinar guiding them through the newly-hatched distance learning curriculum. Staff spent a portion of that weekend at a district-owned television studio recording voice-overs so that new online instructional videos would be ready on day one.

"We were up with our phones in bed until 2 in the morning the night before because we were waiting for sound engineers to finish renderings, and for IT to upload the content to our YouTube channel, so we could hit send on an email to our teachers to let them know the webinars were ready to go," said Marie Izquierdo, the district's chief academic officer. "By 8 in the morning on Monday, we had 900 teachers that had watched the webinar. Overall, we had 18,000 views the first day of the webinars."

The 355,000-student district has held dedicated PD days after negotiating with its teacher union, and offers webinars on how to use tech resources such as Microsoft Teams and Flipgrid, along with presentations from ed tech vendors ranging from Discovery Education to Khan Academy. Teachers can also access a variety of distance learning training sessions produced by the district, such as one showing them how to "navigate your remote classroom by exploring best practices for distance learning," and a session providing an "explicit approach to plan for distance learning."

"The commitment was there before we had an emergency we had to deal with," said Izquierdo. "This is a very big aircraft carrier, and you can't turn it on a dime. It's because of that foundation that we've been able to turn and steer it so we can deal with this new normal."

'Not Comfortable With Remote Learning'

In Philadelphia, the school district is taking a slower approach to offering full-

blown online instruction. Though remote learning began this week, teachers won't start introducing new material and issuing grades until May 4.

Google Classroom will power the district's digital curriculum in large part, but only 15 percent of its teachers were using the platform before coronavirus school closures. Professional development sessions started during the final week of March, said Fran Newberg, deputy chief of the district's office of educational technology.

About 6,500 teachers trained that week on the basics of Google Classroom, she said, and additional training was focused on using other Google tools such as Docs, Drive, and Meet.

Instructional coaches will work with Philly schools to build activities for teachers based on grade and content areas, all accessible through a Google site.

"We know many of our teachers are not comfortable with remote learning," said Newberg. "At this point, we're teaching them how to utilize a very simplistic platform, but if they are already comfortable with a technology or a platform, they can do their own thing."

The strategy of sticking with basic tech tools is common. However, even that approach can go sideways.

Amy Hunter, the K-12 Mathematics Coordinator for the Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, a district of roughly 188,000 students, said after "running the gamut" of virtual professional development sessions with teachers, her division opted for platforms already in use.

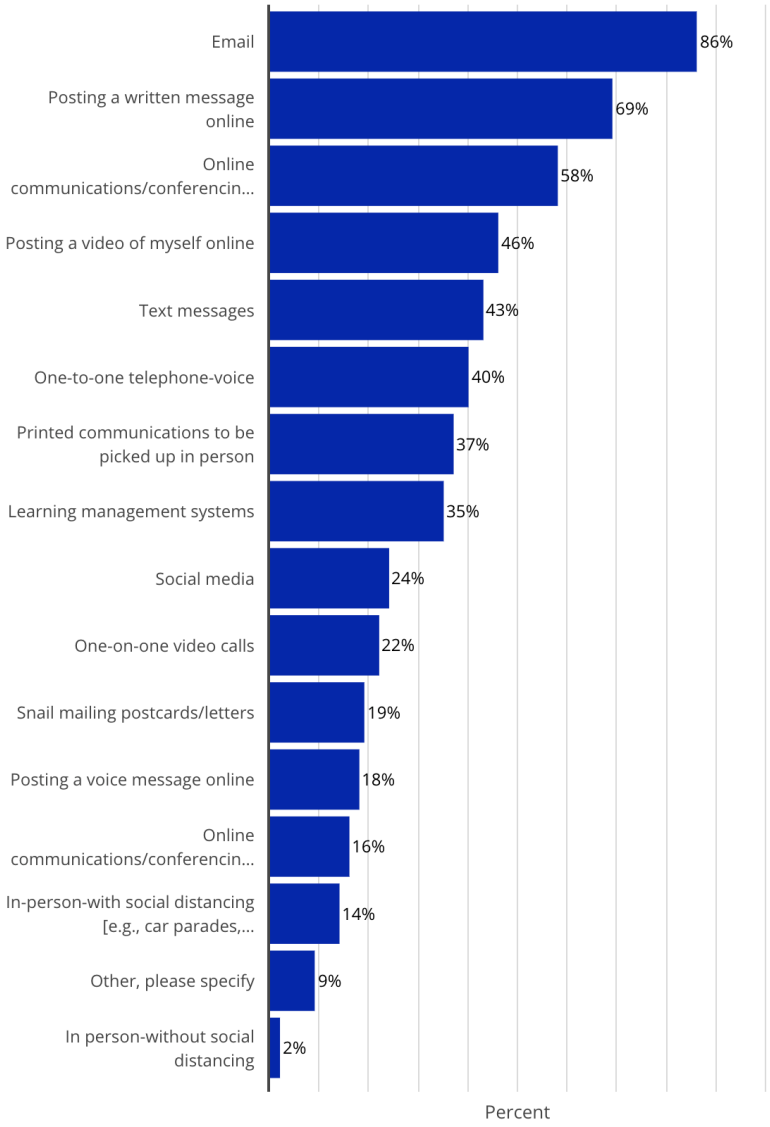
That includes Google Classroom, along with several digital textbooks and Blackboard, the district's learning management system, as the go-to platforms for math teachers. Since starting distance learning in mid-April, however, major Blackboard technical glitches have disrupted lessons for teachers across the district—and on Thursday the fallout over the botched remote learning program resulted in Maribeth Luftglass, the district's longtime information technology chief, stepping down.

Earlier this week, the district temporarily canceled face-to-face online instruction, and announced it was moving away from Blackboard, retaining a law firm in the process to review what went wrong, according to the Washington Post. Superintendent Scott Brabrand apologized to families in a message, saying the mistakes have been "frustrating and disappointing for everyone," the Post reported.

But to a large extent, Hunter said that decision to use tools like Blackboard came down to equity: district officials wanted to use tools that all teachers, students, and even parents, could access. But Hunter said there was also a conscious decision to avoid putting too much on teachers' plates, given the current circumstances.

"We didn't want one classroom having options that another didn't. But to me it just seemed unfair to start introducing new resources that could overwhelm teachers," she said. "We wanted to keep it as simple as possible for folks and make sure everybody has simple plug and play tools. Now, if you feel comfortable with that we can show you how to go deeper and do some fancy things."

How have teachers interacted with students since schools closed due to Coronavirus?
(Select all that apply.)



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center Survey, 2020

'The Teachers Are My Students'

At the 11,250-student Metropolitan School District of Pike Township in Indiana, teachers are using Zoom, Google Classroom, and relying heavily on a

learning management system called Canvas, said Mary Kay Hunt, director of instruction and professional development.

Since the district shut its schools in mid-March, teachers had been doing "some kind of digital learning" nearly daily leading to the launch of remote learning earlier this month. Training has also become a team project, with librarians pitching in to help digital coaches by showing teachers how to use basic tools like Zoom and Google Hangouts. Hunt said: "Anybody who has a level of expertise is helping teachers."

But officials at the small district admit they were caught somewhat flat-footed.

Teachers in the district's high schools had received two days of e-learning training earlier this school year. The rest of the district was going to receive that training next school year, and some teachers seemed somewhat dismissive of the notion altogether, said Hunt.

"We were using this year as a get-ready year, but we were forced into it," she said. "Teachers were kind of hanging back and saying this was going to go away. I think they thought, 'That training is next year, so we don't have to worry about it.'"

Still, Hunt said the district started seeing positive results early: teachers overcoming initial tech trepidations and successfully creating lessons in Canvas, integrating digital training tips to create new ways to engage students.

"We had one teacher videotape herself with the periodic table of elements and explain all the elements," she said. "There are different levels. The high-level learners have been going really gung ho with this."

Inevitably, teacher progression with new tech tools is going to vary.

About 25 miles northwest of Cincinnati, Rebecca Dwenger spends most of her days coaching teachers "with whatever they need." Dwenger, an instructional technology consultant for schools in Hamilton County, said those personalized virtual training sessions are tailored to the subject area and a teacher's familiarity with technology.

PD sessions were made available for teachers within days of school closures in the district that Dwenger spends most of her time helping, but even with continual sessions "you don't just teach them something one time and say 'you're good.'"

"The teachers are my students. You can't do a one-time training and tap out," she said. "I have teachers I have to show the tool to 12 times before they become comfortable using the instruction. I might have some teachers I can show a tool to once, and then they can become teachers of that technology."

> "We know many of our teachers are not comfortable with remote learning. At this point, we're teaching them how to utilize a very simplistic platform, but if they are already comfortable with a technology or a platform, they can do their own thing."
>
> **FRAN NEWBERG**
> FAIRFAX COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, VIRGINIA

'Jumping on the Bandwagon'

Jennifer Tatum, a 6th grade teacher at Cane Creek Middle School in North Carolina, is one of the more digitally advanced educators in the Buncombe County Public Schools, a district of about 24,000 students. As a result, she helps out as a liaison of sorts between the district's technology coaches and its teachers, vetting new tech tools for educators and providing guidance on how to use them from an in-the-trenches perspective.

She has noticed reluctance by some to fully embrace tech tools, but "those teachers are surviving right now because they're asking questions."

"They want to know because they have to know," she said. "Are they moving as fast as the teacher that feels comfortable? No. Do they have an LMS and a way to help kids? Yes. In a week or two will they be ready for something new? Yes."

Jennifer Hall, the education tech specialist for the Atlanta Public Schools, said she's encountered similar scenarios. Some teachers don't pay attention during digital PD because "they say 'I'm old school paper and pencil.'"

"But a lot more teachers are jumping on the bandwagon," she said. "More than one teacher has told me that they're excited about how they've leveraged something new and how they want to implement it in a regular school setting next year."

Despite a lot of fear and trepidation, teachers seem to be jumping into the technology and are having some seemingly amazing experiences, said Lynette Guastaferro, CEO of Teaching Matters, a nonprofit that supports teachers.

In response to the pandemic, Guastaferro's organization provided free online lesson plans that it estimates have been used by about 58,000 educators around the country to help with mass distance learning. She said every teacher is going to bring some element of their new digital learning back to the classroom when brick-and-mortar teaching resumes.

"This has been learn by fire. Every teacher right now is a first-year teacher," she said. "When we come out of this the adoption curve on technology will be through the roof." ■

—maxkabakov/iStock/Getty

Published on March 26, 2020, in Education Week

Massive Shift to Remote Learning Prompts Big Data Privacy Concerns

By Mark Lieberman

Schools are confronting a wide range of potential problems around student data privacy as they scramble to put technology tools for virtual instruction in place during extended school building shutdowns.

Teachers have already begun connecting with students using a variety of digital tools, some of which are new to them and their schools and weren't designed for classroom use—everything from videoconferencing apps like Zoom to digital devices like Chromebooks and learning platforms like Babbel and BrainPop.

An unprecedented number of online interactions between teachers and students from their respective homes introduce new privacy questions that lack easy answers. And at least one state's governor, aiming to speed up implementation of new remote learning tools, has temporarily waived legal requirements for agreements between school districts and technology companies that typically include student data privacy provisions.

The challenges for schools in staying abreast of privacy concerns have become acute as companies have begun offering temporary free subscriptions to their expensive tech products, said Antonio Romayor Jr., chief technology officer for El Centro Elementary School District in California.

Some teachers in his district have begun bypassing the typical vetting procedures for new tech products by adding the free products directly to their single sign-on platforms for students and teachers to use, he said.

Some of those free products could eventually cost schools and parents money, which means anyone using them should be extra careful about offering credit-card information when signing up, Romayor said. Programs that aren't vetted in advance also might run afoul of privacy policy. "It's a constant struggle," he said.

While the new technological landscape for schools feels unprecedented in many ways, schools still have an obligation to inform parents of how their students' data is being used, even if the teaching is occurring outside school buildings. Federal laws—such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)—should help guide school leaders in deciding what new technologies to use.

"The rules, the regulations apply whether the student is actually in the classroom physically or is at home being taught through a distance learning framework," said Linnette Attai, president of privacy compliance consulting firm with education clients PlayWell and a close observer of student privacy issues.

Student privacy experts are recommending that school districts take a deliberate, rather than frenetic, approach to adopting new technologies, and guard against overinvesting in new tools before being fully aware of how they work and how they could jeopardize students' data privacy.

Cheri Kiesecker, co-chair of the Parent Coalition for Data Privacy, wants parents and schools to minimize as much as possible the amount of student data that's being collected and sold by tech companies. She felt the same before the COVID-19 outbreak.

In fact, Kiesecker points to a 2018 warning from the FBI noting that the consequences of ed-tech companies collecting too much data on students "could result in social engineering, bullying, tracking, identity theft, or other means for targeting children." Most U.S. states earned a "C" or lower grade from a 2019 survey of student data privacy protections by Kiesecker's organization and the Network for Public Education.

As schools rush to put remote learning programs in places, Kiesecker argues that those student data privacy problems could get significantly worse. And that could have long-term consequences for many students. "Data is actually your identity and a form of social currency," she said.

Speed vs. Quality

Schools are struggling to find the balance between moving quickly and prioritizing privacy, said Andrea Bennett, executive director of California IT in Education, a membership group for IT professionals in the state's K-12 schools. Teachers and administrators at schools that haven't focused on technology in the past are eager to quickly adopt new tools and catch up to help students. "That enthusiasm, I'm afraid, is something that might lead them into using an app that might not be safe," she said.

Some schools in need of a quick technology solution have signed up for services while simultaneously negotiating an agreement, rather than waiting to start until an agreement is drawn up, said Laura Pollak, a program specialist for the Nassau Board of Cooperative Educational Services in New York state. Legal

experts in districts should be administrators' most trusted source of guidance on these kinds of more flexible approaches, she said.

Several states, including California and Connecticut, have clearing-houses that vet education software tools so they can be used by any school districts in those states.

But in most states, such as New York, each district has to individually vet a new product. For Manhasset Union Free School District in New York, "this is a process that has taken as long as six months" and is now more urgent than ever as schools move to remote learning, said Sean Adcroft, the district's director of instructional technology and libraries.

In Connecticut, meanwhile, Gov. Ned Lamont signed an executive order last week that allows the state's education commissioner to temporarily waive its student data privacy law, "as he deems necessary in order to provide quality online educational opportunities to students during the period in which schools classes are canceled."

The law, passed in 2016, requires schools and companies entering a partnership to sign a written contract that explicitly states the company will not use student data for any purpose beyond the company's stated function. "The Commissioner of Education has alternative means to assure that student data is afforded privacy protections, including federal student privacy laws, without the use of a written contract," the order says.

Jennifer Jacobsen, one of the original advocates for the 2016 law and the parent of a high schooler, said she empathizes with the goal of waiving the order to help schools get remote learning programs up and running. But "proper notifications and transparency to their families is not any less important today than it was yesterday," she said.

Companies that have been offering education technology products for several years have already been working to comply with existing privacy requirements, said Sara Kloek, director of education policy, programs and student privacy for the Software & Information Industry Association. She's more concerned at this point about companies whose products aren't designed for education.

"Ed-tech companies need to figure out how to help schools through all of the marketing jargon and get through what the product actually does and how it can help the school," Kloek said.

"The decisions to close many schools came so quickly, and schools just didn't have the time" to take stock of potential privacy issues before jumping into planning, Attai said. "We imagine there will be and likely have been mistakes made."

> "The decisions to close many schools came so quickly, and schools just didn't have the time" to take stock of potential privacy issues before jumping into planning. "We imagine there will be and likely have been mistakes made."
>
> **LINNETTE ATTAI**
> PRESIDENT OF PRIVACY COMPLIANCE, PLAYWELL

On-Camera Concerns

The online videoconferencing tool Zoom has emerged as one of the most popular resources for educators during the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak, in part because the company is offering the service free to all K-12 schools. Data privacy advocates recommend that schools only use the company's education product, which includes specific provisions for FERPA compliance that the company's other products lack.

The Parent Coalition for Data Privacy recommends that parents consider covering students' webcams unless they're actively using the Zoom platform—or transitioning to the similarly free, open-source Jitsi, which doesn't require anyone to create an account. The coalition cites an Federal Trade Commission complaint filed by the Electronic Privacy Information Center in 2019 that alleges the company activates users' webcams even when they're not using the platform.

Some educators have been wondering whether they need parent permission before inviting students under the age of 13 to participate in Facebook Live chats, according to Bennett. Others want to establish rules for appropriate and safe conduct while teachers and students are on camera—"making sure there's nothing inappropriate in the background, someone walking around without a shirt on," she said.

Schools are taking different approaches to regulating videoconferences to avoid student privacy violations as well—some in Pollak's area are discouraging any video face-to-face interactions with students, while Romayor's district has instructed teachers to conduct only "whole-group" video chats, rather than conferencing with individual students.

Staying Informed

Parents play a role in protecting students from threats to their personal or data privacy, whether they realize it or not. Romayor said he often talks with parents who haven't heard of FERPA or aren't aware of laws that prohibit predatory activity or digital marketing to children. Districts have been trying for years to educate teachers on best practices for protecting student data privacy, but that continues to be a work in progress.

The lack of widespread knowledge about the intricacies of student data privacy can cause problems for schools, he said. If students or parents send a text message that contains a student username or password with identifying information, that student's identity could be at risk of being stolen. If school employees access district data on a personal computer that has a virus, they could be compromising that data.

Romayor has been working on resources to keep district employees abreast of its policies and practices around privacy, and he's drafting a letter to families, in both English and Spanish, that summarizes federal and state laws around student data privacy.

Bennett said schools should send as much information to parents by regular mail as possible, to avoid excluding parents who don't have internet access or aren't frequently checking school sites or

social media. Among parents, "The biggest frustration I've seen is lack of communication," she said.

Some parents are expressing more pointed concerns. In Montgomery County, Maryland, a group of parents has been lobbying the school system for several years to share the details of its contract with Google for Chromebooks—specifically, whether the company is deleting students' data according to the district's policy. The urgency of their efforts has increased now that the district is distributing devices to students who don't already have them.

"Once we allow students to use Chromebooks at home, they're likely to use them for school work for exponentially more time—given social distancing, no teacher oversight, etc," says the parents' draft letter to the district. "This will turn the small spigot of information that currently flows to Google into a virtual firehose."

The technological and logistical chaos in K-12 education during the COVID-19 outbreak is likely to continue for some time. Educators may feel they need to rush to get things up and running, but experts caution them to take the time to figure out the best approaches for protecting students' data privacy.

"I think everyone needs to pay attention, make smart decisions, not rush to grab technology where technology is not needed, and fall back on old-school teaching," Attai said. "There's nothing wrong with some good worksheets, there's nothing wrong with writing essays." ■

Published on March 17, 2020, in Education Week's Learning the Language Blog

English-Learners May Be Left Behind as Remote Learning Becomes 'New Normal'

By Corey Mitchell

As the nation shifts to online learning during the novel coronavirus outbreak, language and access barriers may shut many of the nation's English-learner students out of the learning process.

A December 2019 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that few teachers reported assigning English-learners to use digital learning resources outside of class, in part because of concerns about students' lack of access to technology at home.

The same report also revealed that teachers who work with English-language learners are more apt to use general digital resources rather than tools designed specifically for English-learners and that English-learner educators reported fewer hours of professional development with digital learning resources than did mainstream teachers.

Those findings suggest the spread of outbreak-related school closures could have severe consequences for the millions of students with limited access to digital devices or the internet, limited understanding of English, and limited ability to work independently without support.

"This crisis has emphasized the inequities and gaps that exist in our [education] system," said Kristina Robertson, the English-learner program administrator for the Roseville, Minn., schools. "This is a wakeup call about the value of having technology for all."

English-learner educators often offer tailored support for their students in class, something that is not available in many of the online programs schools have implemented, said Joseph Luft, the executive director of the Internationals Network for Public Schools.

The New York City-based network operates 28 high school and middle school campuses in New York city, the San Francisco Bay Area, the Washington, D.C.-area, and Minneapolis that educate more than 10,000 English-learners and newly arrived immigrant students.

The widespread closures have left teachers and administrators scrambling for ways to connect with students they may not see face-to-face again for weeks or months. In New York City, schools are closed until at least April 20, and perhaps the rest of the year, Mayor Bill de Blasio said this week.

Education Week created an interactive map to track school closures across the nation: As of Wednesday, at least 39 states have closed schools to help slow the spread of coronavirus; the closures have affected more than 40 million public school students.

In some of the International Network's New York schools, teachers spent

the weekend printing paper packets for student pickup. The organization has also created a network-wide resource for teachers to share curriculum ideas and suggestions for connecting with families.

"This makes online learning a lot more difficult," Luft said. "We're trying to be very creative but it's very hard to transition so quickly."

Language Barriers

Across the country, public schools educate about 4.9 million English-learners from hundreds of different language backgrounds. While the numbers for several other languages are on the rise, 76 percent of the nation's English-learners speak Spanish.

Many of the nation's largest school districts have had significant English-learner populations for years, but communication challenges even exist for many of those school systems.

In Seattle, where schools will remain closed until April 24, the district offers translations for materials in six languages: Spanish, Somali, Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, Amharic, and Tagalog. That still leaves some families out of the loop. The district has nearly 7,000 English-learners and they speak a total of about 160 languages.

"[English-learners] who don't speak one of the major languages have much less support," Judie Haynes, an author and English-learner-educator consultant, wrote in an email to Education Week. "All distance learning will probably be in English or Spanish unless another language group has a big concentration."

The state of New Jersey, where Haynes in based, has a concentration of Portuguese students and teachers that would allow their needs to be met at school, she said.

Roughly 40 percent of the 7,000 students in Robertson's district, the Roseville schools, speak a language such as Spanish, Hmong, Karen, Somali, or Nepali at home.

The district employs 11 cultural liaisons, whose duties range from providing interpretation and translations, advising students, cultural navigation, and working to bridge the language and cultural gaps that emerge between district staff and families.

The district also plans to establish a multilingual Facebook page to communicate with families and send daily robocalls and emails in multiple languages to inform families about meals and other efforts to support families.

"Families need to have somebody they trust to communicate what they need from schools, Robertson said. "They want their children to be safe and have learning opportunities just like everyone else."

Banding Together

Colorín Colorado, a site for English-learner educators, has compiled a list of resources and suggestions for school staff and English-learner families. The guide includes tips for ensuring that families have access to information about online learning and that their district or school online-learning plans account for English-learners.

> You can digitize instruction, but education is about connections. We don't really know what this is going to look like over the next couple of weeks. I'm not looking for miracles; I'm just looking for people working to keep kids connected to school."
>
> **JOSEPH LUFT**
> EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, INTERNATIONALS NETWORK FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In addition to providing links to COVID-19 information in several languages, the site also offers tips on staying connected with English-learner families during the extended shutdowns by communicating with families via phone calls, texts or video chats and providing translated information whenever possible.

"We want to ensure immigrant and English-learner families aren't left behind," said Giselle Lundy-Ponce, an English-learner advocate with the American Federation of Teachers. "It's going to require a monumental effort."

In an ongoing online survey of teachers conducted by the site, respondents have reported that many of their English-learners don't have laptops or tablets to access online lessons; in some cases, they don't have internet access.

"We would like not to lose anything [in terms of learning progress], but that's not very realistic," Robertson said. "Some families are going to be left behind."

A longtime English-as-a-second-language teacher, Haynes started #ellchat about a decade ago. On Monday, the Twitter chat focused on online learning for English-learners during the coronavirus outbreak. The exchange focused on tools that could help students access online lessons and remain in touch with teachers.

TESOL International Association, an organization for teachers who specialize in working with English-learners, has also collected resources that teachers and administrators can use to help guide their discussions with students about this pandemic.

'Losing Ground'

Luft is especially concerned about a particular subset of English-learners: older students who are nearing graduation.

School districts have long struggled to meet the educational needs of these students, including refugee and immigrant students who often have gaps in their formal education. Laws allow students to enroll in traditional public schools until they reach age 21, but many times they're pressured to leave campuses or funneled into alternative programs.

Luft fears that, with extended school closures, some of these students may leave school without graduating, unless some districts waive exam requirements or amend state laws on how many days schools must be in session.

"It's just throwing another roadblock in their way," Luft said. "We don't know how long this is going to last. They're in real danger of losing ground."

Robertson has asked district staff, including the cultural liaisons, to monitor whether families have enough food and understand when to seek medical help during the coronavirus outbreak.

Staff in the district—which has a one-to-one computing initiative—were also pressing to get tablets to students as schools shut down Wednesday through at least March 27.

"You can digitize instruction, but education is about connections," Luft said. "We don't really know what this is going to look like over the next couple of weeks. I'm not looking for miracles; I'm just looking for people working to keep kids connected to school." ■

—KazimYilman/iStock/Getty

Published April 10, 2020, in Education Week

Where Are They? Students Go Missing in Shift to Remote Classes

Some districts step up outreach efforts

By Stephen Sawchuk and Christina A. Samuels

A few weeks into his district's distance learning program, high school English teacher James MacIndoe and his colleagues took an afternoon to telephone the families of every student they hadn't yet heard from.

What they found was sobering: voicemail prompts, full mailboxes, wrong numbers, disconnections, busy signals.

"I called 12 sets of parents on Friday and I got to speak to one mom, and that was really frustrating," said MacIndoe, who works in the Jefferson County, Colo., district. "I have some students I legitimately haven't seen since March 13," the last day of in-person classes.

"I don't want anything bad to happen to my students, and I feel protective of them, and I want them to be fine," he said. "And it's distressing not to have any idea where they are and not to be able to get in touch with them."

In the upheaval created by the coronavirus, school district administrators and teachers alike are struggling to answer some of the most basic questions about their students: Where are they? How do they go about finding them?

Are the students who aren't participating in distance learning merely checked out—or are they in some kind of peril wrought by the pandemic?

There have long been gaps in the contact information districts maintain on students and their parents, particularly for vulnerable children, but never before has that information proved so critical on such a large scale. The cracks in the formal systems meant to protect children have become chasms. Some students have disappeared into them, and educators have limited resources to find out where these children and their families might be.

Plus, the informal check-ins that schools typically rely on—a teacher, coach, bus driver or cafeteria worker who would normally be alert to a child in distress—have been disrupted. There are just fewer eyes on children right now.

"We take for granted the hundreds of thousands of points of contact we have with students on a normal day," said Chad E. Gestson, the superintendent of the Phoenix Union High School district in Arizona, which recently rolled out a robust plan to reach all of its students as it moves to distance learning. "In a virtual setting, the only way to get personal contact and connection with kids is to say to them: 'We will contact you every day.'"

Fractured Information

Keeping tabs on a dispersed student body is a daunting task for most school districts, its challenges only now becoming clear as districts have teed up their remote learning programs.

All over social media, teachers are sharing stories tinged with both frustration and fear for students who haven't logged into learning platforms, participated in threaded discussions, completed an assignment, or returned texts and emails.

There's little research explicitly on the state of district communications, primarily because they are usually multilayered—a combination of formal and informal calls home, parent-teacher conferences, home visits, emails, robocalls, and report cards, as well as the informal lines of sight that bus drivers, cafeteria staff, and coaches have on students.

But the fractured state of formal contact information has been rising as a subtext in a number of studies that have examined student absenteeism.

In a 2019 study, for example, three graduate research assistants at Georgia State University used a random-assignment study in four districts to see whether personalized "nudges" sent by email and text messages through districts' communications systems to parents could improve attendance among students at risk of chronic absenteeism.

The study's good news finding: The nudges did help. The bad news? Only 55 percent of grade K-8 students' parents in the study, and 49 percent of grade 9-12 students' parents, actually had a valid email or number where they could receive texts, and those students with the most absences tended to have parents who were the hardest to reach.

Some student groups are particularly vulnerable during the coronavirus crisis, most notably the nation's approximately 1.5 million students identified as homeless.

Take a situation that Sherrice Roness,

the homeless liaison for the Bismarck, N.D., school system, recently encountered.

A single father struggling with chronic homelessness moved into the district, right when the system was shifting to remote learning. He tried to pick up two Chromebooks for his children that the district was offering for home use. The school staff said that he wasn't registered, and that he should come back.

The registration snafu has now been resolved on the district's side, Roness said, but the family is now unreachable. The district has tried last known addresses and phone numbers for the family without success. Even "do you need any help" texts to the phone numbers on record have gone unanswered so far.

"With my job, I think, sometimes you should have to have a [private investigator's] license," Roness said.

A Growing Population

The 1.5 million homeless students in 2017-18 marked a record, data from earlier this year show, and could grow larger as unemployment rises and the economy stumbles.

Barbara Duffield, the executive director of SchoolHouse Connection, a national advocacy organization for homeless youth, said that the students falling out of contact with trusted adults is one of the biggest issues her organization is facing now.

And the concern is not just with the families who are already known to schools.

"We have students who are newly becoming homeless," Duffield said. "They're not going to be on anybody's list." And these families are often worried that involvement with the authorities will mean losing their children to "the system."

"Any communication coming from a school district needs to have information about homelessness or housing in it. People could be housed one week and the next week, they've lost their housing," Duffield said.

Even for students who are not facing homelessness, new problems have cropped up because the virus has effectively made it much more difficult to engage in other forms of communication. There are no notes to send home in backpacks. Counselors and truancy officers can't go about their jobs in traditional ways. And even committed teachers say they don't always know what steps to take now in the face of absenteeism.

"Normally if a kid racks up a few absences I know what to do in that case—I need to document it with a counselor, and reach out to a family, and ultimately I know it's highly likely the student will come back at some point. I can do all that and be a good professional and employee and lay the groundwork for the intervention," said MacIndoe, the Colorado teacher. "What makes this so much worse and different is, I just don't have that. I don't know when I'm going to see those kids again."

It's a challenge that rings true for those who have actually experienced instability. From 5th grade through high school, Kara Friese and her family bounced between sleeping in motels, rented basements, and their car. Now 22, she graduated from the State University of New York at Fredonia and is pursuing a master's degree in counseling at Columbia University.

She has sympathy for school officials who are trying to track children who have disappeared from educators' sights since schools closed.

"It just breaks my heart for those teachers; it makes me feel like they were placed in a role they were never trained for. To me, it feels so unfair that a person with a master's degree in education is now trying to be a social worker or a psychologist," she said.

Caring teachers did support Friese through her time in school, so that connection was extremely important, she said.

"I don't want to say it's on the teachers, but I do think the teachers [are the ones who] connect to certain students in the best way," Friese said.

> "We take for granted the hundreds of thousands of points of contact we have with students on a normal day. In a virtual setting, the only way to get personal contact and connection with kids is to say to them: 'We will contact you every day.'"
>
> **CHAD E. GESTSON**
> SUPERINTENDENT, PHOENIX UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, ARIZONA

'Every Student, Every Day'

Faced with limited information, some districts have tried to tap other sources, including their free and reduced-price meal programs, which serve low-income families who are probably more likely to move frequently or have challenges accessing the internet. But even that poses multiple obstacles for administrators.

Children whose families receive food stamps are directly certified for school meal programs, which means those families don't need to fill out annual applications for school meals. Beyond that, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's privacy rules are quite strict, raising some complicated legal issues for districts about the sharing of information across divisions.

Districts' food-service employees can potentially share child-eligibility information with colleagues to help provide some services, like those funded through federal Title I aid, for example. But generally, the data they can release doesn't include parent contact information, according to guidance put out by the USDA.

In the end, school administrators said, nothing can really replace ongoing efforts to build relationships with each student before an emergency.

Every staff member in Cleveland County, N.C., has been involved with the effort to connect with and support families, said Nellie Aspel, the director of exceptional children for Cleveland County schools in North Carolina. In addition to working with special education, Aspel also oversees a major social-emotional support program in the district.

Some of the students who are still in touch with school staff are already exhibiting a lot of stress, Aspel said—sharing writing, for example, that says they're afraid of dying from the coronavirus, or that their parents are fighting with one another.

"This is where relationships are so important," she said. "If they had a good relationship with one person before school let out…they view the school as some

> Any communication coming from a school district needs to have information about homelessness or housing in it. People could be housed one week and the next week, they've lost their housing."
>
> **BARBARA DUFFIELD**
> EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
> SCHOOLHOUSE CONNECTION

place that will help them."

Cleveland County administrators are also recognizing that the process of keeping track of students is ongoing. Families are reachable one week and difficult to find the next. Families are running out of cellphone minutes and are unable to buy more. Children are sent to live with relatives in other communities or other states.

The Phoenix Union district, meanwhile, is pioneering a new program that equips staff and teachers with tools for building those relationships as they track down each student.

The district, which serves more than 27,000 high school students coming from 13 K-8 districts in the area, had already created a new student and family services division out of a sense that rising levels of poverty, mental-health needs, and rates of suicide ideation among adolescents were demanding a coordinated approach. The coronavirus has proved to be its first test.

As the specter of the pandemic grew, Gestson, the superintendent, and his team devised a case management system called Every Student, Every Day. Each student's advisory teacher, coupled with one other employee in the district—a counselor, principal, paraprofessional, or central office staffer—are together responsible for checking in by phone each day with a "caseload" of about 20-30 students.

"If this was already a generation in crisis, how do we know they are going to be well during the shutdown? Because most abuse and neglect in our nation happens at home, and now we are sending kids home for four months, essentially," said Gestson, explaining the theory of action behind the program. "The only way we can guarantee our kids are well is if we're in touch with them every day.

"The idea isn't just about academics; it's about connection every day, so that kids know they're loved," Gestson said. "We talk about love all the time."

All participating teachers and staff are supplied with scripts for initial conversations with parents, and then with students. For example, when talking with students, the scripts begin with an affirmation telling them they're missed, and then contain prompts about how to inquire about supports they might need to stay engaged in school.

Every time they reach a student, the educator will log notes of the call in a secure database—for example, if a student is having problems connecting to online learning or if a family member lost a job. On the other side, counselors, principals, and case managers will use the notes to connect the families to resources.

For those students it can't initially reach, Phoenix Union will begin using emergency contacts to try to track down families, and it will also send some to conduct home visits using appropriate social-distancing techniques.

"We've had plenty of disconnected numbers and wrong numbers, but this is going to help us solve that problem," Gestson said.

Although only about a week into the initiative, some patterns are already emerging. Many families are already in food crises thanks to soaring unemployment rates; others are struggling with internet connectivity.

It's difficult work, but also a fundamental duty, the superintendent says.

"People [in the district] ask, 'What if we can never make contact?' And we tell them, one phone call can save a life," Gestson said. "This is not just about academic preparedness and attendance, it's about lives. It's not just changing lives, but in some cases, about saving lives." ■

—Compilation: E+ and iStock/Getty

Published on April 17, 2020, in Education Week

Taking Attendance During Coronavirus Closures: Is It Even Worth It?

By Mark Lieberman

Each day, students and parents in New Jersey's Chester schools head to the district website and fill out a link to a Google form, which indicates that the student is "present" for the day.

Administrators monitor the forms and check in with students who appear not to be engaged. They've been lenient so far with anyone who turns in their form after the 9 a.m. deadline.

Attendance is one of the many facets of K-12 education that has changed dramatically as the novel coronavirus pandemic has forced the majority of U.S. schools to close buildings and deliver instruction remotely.

Typically, taking attendance is simply a matter of asking, is the student in the

building or not? With most school buildings closed, it's now represented by a more amorphous set of factors: whether the student is engaged in learning, completing assignments on time, staying in touch with teachers.

That atmosphere has created quite a bit of confusion for Chester's school leaders, who are considering eliminating the Google form requirement. The information schools collect can provide valuable context about how they're serving students remotely. But it's a time-consuming task for families, particularly those with multiple students under one roof.

Brad Currie, the district's director of planning, research, and evaluation, worries that revising the policy would confuse parents even more. His team decided this week to stay the course for now. "Whatever we can do to not stress people out," he said.

Emphasizing Leniency, Flexibility

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to report chronic absence data as a measure of school quality. During COVID-19, though, several states have given schools flexibility to decide whether and how to take attendance. State governments in Colorado and Oklahoma, among others, have suspended requirements that schools report attendance numbers to them, but encouraged attendance tracking for districts' own purposes. Kentucky has pushed schools to focus on project completion dates rather than instructional time.

Florida schools are tapping into the technical infrastructure of the state-funded Florida Virtual School to keep tabs on students' progress. New Jersey hasn't issued any attendance guidance, Currie said.

Many districts have simply stopped taking attendance altogether, or focused on preparing teaching materials and getting students access to technology before determining whether they were using it. Georgia, Ohio, and Washington, D.C., have declared that all students will be marked "present" for the rest of the school year.

Researchers at the University of Washington's Center for Reinventing Public Education have been tracking district approaches to a variety of topics, including attendance. Fourteen of the 82 districts in the current iteration of the center's survey have attendance tracking systems in place, as do half of the 18 charter management organizations in the center's analysis.

Some districts are taking attendance but emphasizing leniency, especially when using completion of assignments as an attendance tracking approach. Angola High School in Indiana, for instance, is giving students two days after an e-learning assignment is posted to attempt to complete it. "Students may not understand the material and may have questions, and we want to create a culture where students will attempt the work," said Travis Heavin, the school's principal.

> "We take for granted the hundreds of thousands of points of contact we have with students on a normal day. In a virtual setting, the only way to get personal contact and connection with kids is to say to them: 'We will contact you every day.'"
>
> **CHAD E. GESTSON**
> SUPERINTENDENT, PHOENIX UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, ARIZONA

Schools that already use learning platforms that report student logins and participation to teachers are ahead of the curve. But "it's not a proxy for whether they're learning or not, or whether they're necessarily engaged," said Susan Patrick, president and CEO of the Aurora Institute, an advocacy and research organization for online learning. "We don't want students to be logged in necessarily to a single platform for eight hours a day."

Teachers at Woodside Elementary School in Sussex, Wis., are giving students daily assignments, such as a trivia question or a drawing activity, that they complete as an indication of their attendance for the day. If the school records that a student misses that assignment three days in a row, administrators try to reach the family.

"The least of our concerns is being very stringent that a kid has to be in front of their computer from this time to this time," said James Edmond, Jr., the school's principal.

Students who have struggled with attendance prior to the pandemic are continuing to do so, Edmond said. Other students are missing assignments if they or their parents don't understand how to access virtual lessons. "If they don't know what to do, and it's too frustrating for them, they just say, 'You know what, forget it,'" Edmond said.

Measuring Online Engagement

Some educators and policymakers have been looking for lessons learned from state policies around virtual schools, which have been teaching students remotely far longer than most traditional public schools. A Wisconsin statute for online schools, for instance, requires that schools notify a parent or guardian when a student has failed to respond appropriately to a school assignment from a staff member within five school days. In Oklahoma, virtual schools are required by law to measure attendance by considering factors such as "online logins to curricula or programs, offline activities, completed assignments and testing."

But measuring engagement time online can be an imprecise science, said Gary Miron, a professor at Western Michigan University's College of Education and Human Development. A student might have schoolwork open in one window while spending more time on social media or a game in another window. Virtual schools that have quantified attendance as "one interaction per week" fall well short of ensuring students are engaged, he said.

Virtual schools' attendance monitoring methods have also been controversial. A 2016 Education Week investigation found that some virtual schools have a low bar for marking students present, which means attendance numbers don't reflect students' academic progress.

Miron thinks many traditional public schools, which have lower average class sizes than virtual schools, are well-positioned to keep students on track remotely, once they get procedures in order. "I have confidence that with some training, for a class of 25 to 30 students, you can have face-to-face contact with them," he said.

Why Attendance Matters

There are myriad reasons why students may not be virtually attending classes during the COVID-19 crisis. Some lack access to Wi-Fi or digital de-

vices. Others are more focused on basic necessities like getting food or taking care of siblings while parents are still at work.

Many schools are struggling to reach students who have not been engaged in learning since the pandemic hit, Education Week reported this week. Among more than 1,000 teachers who answered a nationwide survey this month from the Education Week Research Center, an average of 21 percent of their students have been "essentially truant" or unreachable during COVID-19 closures.

Some districts, like Los Angeles Unified, have connected with most middle and high school students but still struggle to reach elementary students. The average truancy rate was highest among students in middle school classes, according to EdWeek Research Center surveys of teachers.

Schools, and students, need time and districtwide policies to "figure out what the new routines are, and to make sure that they're healthy and well," Patrick said. She compares the traditional model of taking attendance to the "factory model of punching a time card," which doesn't take into account the quality of a student's learning experience.

Attendance monitoring might seem like too much of a logistical hassle for schools and parents when students are learning from home, but it may prove valuable once school buildings reopen, said Bree Dusseault, practitioner-in-residence for the Center for Reinventing Public Education.

"This attendance data is going to be very important for future teachers to know what students had access to, and it's also going to be important for making sure that we don't lose whole cohorts of students," Dusseault said.

All districts should be keeping records of students' engagement with learning materials, though not with a goal of administering consequences or punishment, she said. Teachers who inherit students who were affected by the pandemic will benefit from records of which students were able to participate, and which ones struggled to engage.

Schools that already had systems in place to keep in touch with families by phone or email will have an easier time tracking virtual attendance, Dusseault said. For those that did not have measures in place, she recommended that now is a perfect time to start developing that infrastructure.

With everything from graduation requirements to testing protocols shifting rapidly to accommodate the urgency of the pandemic, schools are now focusing more on whether students are learning than whether they're merely present, according to Patrick.

"Maybe this is an opportunity to really consider what we are taking attendance for," she said. ■

COMMENTARY

Published on April 3, 2020, in Education Week

Yes, You Can Do Trauma-Informed Teaching Remotely (and You Really, Really Should)

How to support students experiencing adversity during the coronavirus crisis

By Brittany R. Collins

This is a challenging time for everyone, and teachers are concerned. Concerned for their health and their families. Concerned about equity, access, and best practices as they turn to new online learning-management systems. Concerned about curricular continuity. And concerned for students' physical and emotional well-being.

In recent years, trauma-informed teaching strategies have offered salve in times of stress, giving educators guidelines for supporting students experiencing adversity. But how can these pedagogies translate to an online context? How can we support students' social-emotional health and help them process these unprecedented events when we are not sitting in a circle or walking out to recess?


—Getty

In addition to completing my undergraduate education program via distance learning, I have worked for three years with middle and high school students through Write the World, an online writing platform for young people across the globe. Zoom is my office, asynchronous programming and communication the constraints within which to develop innovative curricula.

Throughout my work supporting the writing, thinking, and development of teenagers in this virtual space, I have found it helpful to keep in mind psychologist Howard Bath's three tenets of trauma-informed care: safety, connection, and emotional regulation. Although the COVID-19 crisis precludes teachers' ensuring students' physical safety, there is much we can do to create online learning environments that feel safe—that foster connection and emotional regulation as we all face uncertainty and potential trauma.

Research suggests that when adversity feels like a shared experience, we cope better—not only emotionally, but neuro-

logically. That's (partly) why we should be integrating storytelling into online learning. From teenagers who take to Twitter while mourning the death of a close friend to gang violence, to middle schoolers who whisper to the paper cut-out of an ear taped to their classroom door, trauma studies reveal that the very act of formulating and articulating narratives about our lived realities offers reprieve and promotes resilience.

But there are much more effective ways to bear witness to students' stories than resorting to Twitter or a "talk to the ear" system. In your online community, be forthright about your care and concern for students and the contexts in which they find themselves. Establish yourself as a safe person to whom they can turn for support. Do this by directly acknowledging the circumstances we are in and being honest about how this situation impacts you.

Though it is always important to maintain appropriate boundaries with students, calibrated reciprocity is a key component of storytelling. Naming emotions ("I'm feeling stressed and confused") can teach students, by modeling, that it is healthy to experience, articulate, and process emotions in community. Especially in difficult times.

Countless trauma studies also suggest that establishing a sense of routine in the face of stress helps students maintain (or regain) feelings of control, ensuring that they know what to expect. Something as small as a schedule can help give structure to students' days in times of upheaval, when very little feels familiar. Imbue online-learning rhythms into your routine: Check in at the same time of day; require reading assignments during a set period; build into your schedule times for debriefing, sharing stories of solidarity, or moments of mindfulness. Knowing what to expect helps calm students and quell concern.

Even as you are helping your students through this difficult time, be sure to honor your own limits as well. Secondary traumatic stress, or compassion fatigue, occurs in helping professionals who are routinely exposed to others' traumas. Stress changes our brains and behaviors, making emotional regulation much harder to achieve. This doesn't just mean that the young people we teach may be coming to us dysregulated; we, too, may be teaching from a place of dysregulation. When students' traumas exacerbate our own, we may respond with a number of self-protective but misaligned mechanisms: retreating rather than reaching out, reacting with frustration, avoidance, denial.

Though paradoxical, these responses often come from a place of caring. We care about young people's well-being, and we feel powerless to change their circumstances as we witness their pain. This—coupled with the distancing inherent in virtual education—can breed feelings of saturation, isolation, and helplessness, which are precursors to and symptoms of secondary traumatic stress.

Build into your remote working routine time away from screens. Call a colleague, friend, or family member. Get outside if you are able. Read. Cook. Write letters. Protect your emotional reserves so that you may receive students' distress in a way that meets them where they are, validates what they're going through, and promotes everyone's attainment of—and attunement to—emotional regulation.

Know, also, that psychological studies reveal perceived support availability—the sense that one could turn to a circle of connection for help should one need to—is critical to, and perhaps more important than, actual proximity and intervention. This means that virtual reach-outs—letting your students know that you are there and that you care—can make a real difference in their lives, no matter how inadequate it may feel to you.

In my community, an elderly couple sit in their car in a grocery store parking lot too afraid to walk inside. A young mother takes their list and returns with an overflowing cart. Musicians gather in living rooms and offer virtual house concerts. Yogis Zoom meditation courses to reduce stress.

All around us, there are helpers. People who remind us of breath, of melody, of humanity.

Remember that education transcends test scores and curricular continuity. Sing out in your own way–fostering connections across generations, time, and space. We need each other, now, and our joining together is itself a defense—an inoculation—against that which seeks to divide us.

May we not lose this boon of caring on the other side of the COVID-19 bell curve. ■

Brittany R. Collins is the Teaching and Learning Coordinator at the online writing community Write the World, as well as a freelance education and curriculum writer.

Published by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc.
6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100
Bethesda, MD, 20814
Phone: (301) 280-3100
www.edweek.org

EDUCATION WEEK

SPOTLIGHT

Get the information and perspective you need on the education issues you care about most with Education Week Spotlights

The Achievement Gap • Algebra • Assessment • Autism • Bullying • Charter School Leadership • Classroom Management • Common Standards • **Data-Driven Decisionmaking** • Differentiated Instruction • Dropout Prevention • E-Learning • ELL Assessment and Teaching • ELLs in the Classroom • Flu and Schools • Getting The Most From Your IT Budget • Gifted Education • Homework • **Implementing Common Standards** • Inclusion and Assistive Technology • Math Instruction • Middle and High School Literacy • Motivation • No Child Left Behind • Pay for Performance • **Principals** • Parental Involvement • Race to the Top • Reading Instruction • Reinventing Professional Development • Response to Intervention • School Uniforms and Dress Codes • Special Education • STEM in Schools • **Teacher Evaluation** • Teacher Tips for the New Year • Technology in the Classroom • Tips for New Teachers

VIEW THE COMPLETE COLLECTION OF EDUCATION WEEK SPOTLIGHTS

www.edweek.org/go/spotlights