



—Nam Y. Huh/AP

Chicago charter school teacher Angela McByrd teaches remotely from home.

# Virtual Learning

## EDITORS NOTE

Virtual learning has become the norm. In this Spotlight, review new data on what's working for both students and educators. Gain perspective on what the future may bring for virtual learning; discover tips for educator training in a virtual world; and hear feedback directly from the students.

Remote Learning Will Keep a Strong Foothold Even After the Pandemic, Survey Finds ..... **2**

Survey: Teachers and Students Are Struggling With Online Learning..... **3**

How to Bring 'Surprise and Delight' to Virtual Teacher Training During COVID-19..... **4**

How Hybrid Learning Is (and Is Not) Working During COVID-19: 6 Case Studies..... **6**

Schools Struggled to Serve Students With Disabilities, English-Learners During Shutdowns..... **10**

## OPINION

Remote Learning Cuts Into Attendance. Here Are Remedies ..... **11**

Distance Learning 'Has Been OK, I Guess': Students Share About This Year's Experiences ..... **12**

Published on December 15, 2020, in Education Week

# Remote Learning Will Keep a Strong Foothold Even After the Pandemic, Survey Finds

By Denisa R. Superville

**W**hen the pandemic is over, there's at least one thing that's likely to stick around in many K-12 schools: online learning.

Twenty percent of district and charter management organizations said in a survey that they had started or were planning a virtual school or fully remote option during the 2020-21 academic school year and expected those options would remain after the pandemic. Another 10 percent said the same about hybrid or blended learning, while 7 percent said some lesser version of remote learning will continue when the pandemic is in the rearview mirror.

Those are among the findings from a survey of leaders of nearly 300 traditional school districts and charter management organizations that was released by the Rand Corporation. The survey also revealed that school system leaders had major anxiety about their ability to address students' emotional well-being and mental health as well as concerns about disparities in the opportunities students have to access schooling, especially among leaders running systems where at least half the enrollment are eligible to receive free and reduced-price meals or are Black and Hispanic.

The survey was the first of its kind of district leaders by RAND, which has conducted similar polling from its panels of teachers and principals.

When district leaders noted the staying power of remote learning beyond the pandemic, they cited increased flexibility for students, parent or student demand, and addressing a variety of students' needs among the reasons. And virtual schools were the "innovative practice" that most system leaders foresaw lasting for years.

Remote learning and virtual schools have been challenging for many students and districts, particularly those serving large numbers of students in poverty, where lack of devices and internet access continue to be a problem. Some students are often juggling multiple duties – balancing schoolwork and household chores. And across the country,



Nam Y. Huh/AP

“It’s notable that school districts plan to offer more online options. Some students and teachers really value the flexibility. Now the challenge will be to ensure virtual schoolrooms provide high-quality instruction and equitable access.”

**ROBIN LAKE**

DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER ON  
REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

millions of students have not logged on.

“It’s notable that school districts plan to offer more online options. Some students and teachers really value the flexibility,” said Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, which worked with

RAND and Chiefs for Change to set up the district leaders’ panel. “Now the challenge will be to ensure virtual schoolrooms provide high-quality instruction and equitable access.”

CRPE has examined school districts’ reopening and operating plans for the new school year and published a deep dive into six school systems’ remote learning programs.

With district leaders expecting some form of remote learning to be a mainstay of their educational programs in the future, RAND recommends more state and federal aid to help districts improve technology, including expanding internet access, hire qualified teaching staff, and partner with organizations to provide additional academic supports—like tutoring—to help students. It also emphasized the need for “coherent, high-quality instructional systems for online instruction in academics and social and emotional learning,” as well as continued professional development for teachers, especially those working with students with IEPs and English-language learners. Publishers also must increase support for high-quality instructional materials, and federal funding can help states work with publishers to make those more accessible to school systems, according to RAND.

Internet access also continues to be a top concern for school system leaders, especially those running systems where at least half of the students qualify for free and reduced-price meals or are Black or Hispanic. Forty-four percent of those school systems’ leaders said internet access was an area in which they needed support and guidance this school year, according to the survey. And 40 percent of those leaders said making sure that teachers and students were able to access the internet for remote learning was a “significant challenge.” Only slightly more than a quarter, 26 percent, of leaders in schools where fewer than half the students lived in poverty or were Black and Hispanic said the same.

## SEL, Student Mental Health Are Major Challenges

Overall, addressing students’ emotional well-being and mental health continued to be the overwhelming challenge for school

system leaders this academic year, with 67 percent of those leading school systems where fewer than half of the enrollment qualified for free and reduced-priced meals listing SEL and student mental health as the area they most needed guidance and resources. Among those leading school systems with higher numbers of poor students, that number was 53 percent.

Providing specialized instructional supports for students and delivering high-quality instruction to all students also ranked among the top three areas where system leaders needed additional resources and guidance, according to the survey.

The survey, conducted between Sept. 15 and Nov. 11, included seven questions that covered areas such as staffing challenges, professional development, and approaches to the 2020-21 school year.

The survey was sent to leaders in 317 regular public-school districts and charter management organizations, who are part of RAND's district panel. The response rate was 84 percent.

School system leaders expected dealing with disparities in students' opportunities to learn to be the most significant challenge this school year, with half of the respondents anticipating that to be the case. Again, that need was even more pronounced in systems serving large numbers of students in poverty, with 62 percent of those leaders saying that was the case. Even among their colleagues leading lower-poverty districts, 39 percent said they expected addressing disparities in students' opportunities to learn would be a major hurdle this school year, according to the survey.

Forty-five percent of high-poverty systems also expected state accountability requirements to be a top challenge this year.

School system leaders expected funding to ensure adequate staffing to be a major barrier this school year, with that concern more heightened in systems serving fewer students in poverty. While 39 percent of the respondents overall said they expected funding to be a "major hindrance" to staffing this year, 45 percent of those leading systems with fewer numbers of students in poverty said that was the case.

Slightly more than a quarter, 26 percent, were worried about not having enough qualified instructional staff to cover teaching.

Surprisingly, the number of teachers with health issues did not rank high on the

list of concerns, with only 9 percent of leaders listing it as an area of worry.

And they said their staff needed professional development in a wide variety of areas, especially in addressing students' social and emotional well-being, learning loss, and the needs of English-language learners and students with Individualized Education Programs, or IEPs.

The creation of virtual learning communities for teachers and principals, flexible staffing models for teachers, and adjusting instructional time policies were among the most common approaches districts considered this school year.

Unsurprisingly, school system leaders said guidance from local health departments held more sway over their 2020-21 decisions than the media and the U.S. Department of Education. The latter two ranked behind every other option on the survey, including parents, teachers, community members and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And only 13 percent said that guidance from national organizations, like AASA, the School Superintendents Association, and the Council of the Great City Schools, the national organization that represents 76 urban school systems, influenced their decisions.

Principals held slightly more influence in those decisions in schools where at least half of the students qualified for free and reduced-price meals or were students of color.

Interestingly, districts with fewer students in poverty often looked to other districts' plans for guidance in comparison to districts with higher levels of poverty, according to the report.

In answer to an open-ended question, district leaders noted the lack of funding, unclear guidance and substitute teacher shortages as major challenges.

Amid all of those difficulties, district leaders highlighted offering students more choices and flexibility as well as delivering meals to students among the bright spots this school year.

There are also some things that districts would like to do but don't have money to: like hiring more tutors to help students back on track. Twenty-four percent of the districts said they'd like to do so, but couldn't afford it or did not have the flexibility. That barrier was more acute in districts and charter management organizations serving fewer students in poverty. ■

*Publishing on November 16, 2020,  
in Education Week*

## Survey: Teachers and Students Are Struggling With Online Learning

By Sarah Schwartz

Several months into several months into the 2020-21 school year, the question remains: Is remote learning going better in fall 2020, than it was that spring?

Data from the RAND Corporation show that many teachers are still struggling.

Teachers in all-remote environments reported higher student absenteeism and less student work completion than teachers in face-to-face classrooms. These online teachers also said that they needed more support and guidance in planning instruction than their colleagues who were teaching in-person.

These results are especially relevant as COVID-19 cases are surging across the country, and several big-city school districts are weighing a return to fully remote classes.

"From this data that we've collected, it's clear that there are some students who are very likely falling through the cracks because of remote learning," said Julia Kaufman, a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation and a co-author of the report, in an interview with Education Week.

RAND surveyed 1,082 teachers and 1,147 school leaders from the organization's American Educator Panels in October, asking about their experiences during the 2020-21 school year so far.

The results cover a wide swath of issues, from teacher morale to substitute shortages to technology access. But the data on instruction, specifically, hint at the pandemic's long-term effects on student learning.

### Slower Pace of Learning

Classes are not proceeding at the usual pace, the report found:

- **Two-thirds** of teachers said that the majority of their students were less prepared for grade-level work than they were at this time last year
- **56 percent** of teachers said that they had



# Four Flexible Online Learning Models that Improve Learning Today While Building for Tomorrow

## 1. Close learning gaps quickly with rich data and engaging adaptive targeted practice tools

**Newman-Crows Landing Unified School District** is a rural district serving the Newman, Crows Landing, and Diablo communities in the heart of California's Central Valley. The district is comprised of eight schools serving about 3,200 students. Roughly 75 percent of the student population is Hispanic, and 36 percent are English Language Learners (ELLs). Superintendent Randy Fillpot says, "With the wide range of skill levels among our students, we needed better formative assessment tools to help identify individual learning needs and help students when and where they need it most. We selected Stride from K12 Learning Solutions because it gives us the data we need. It's fun for the kids, and they love the games they earn."

Heavy use of benchmark and real-time formative assessment data creates individual and small group interventions based upon state and national standards. Real-time statistics allow teachers to help students exactly when they need it, and Stride's Progress Monitoring Assessments, administered several times a year, indicate which exact standards students understand and don't understand.

### Individualized instruction boosts student learning

In the four years since NCLUSD implemented Stride, it has become an essential component of the district's elementary school instructional program. "Stride has really helped improve learning, and it gives us real-time visibility into students' progress and the standards on which to focus," says Superintendent Fillpot.



## 2. Go virtual with CRE in high school to ensure college and career readiness

There is no question that K–12 education is undergoing a seismic change. The widespread adoption of virtual learning amid the pandemic is more than a temporal blip. It has exposed millions of learners and educators to the ways that technology can enhance learning.

"Education has looked the same since the early 1900s. It takes something like this to drive human innovation," says Mike Dardaris, senior director of career readiness education at K12. "During this time, people are recognizing how important it is to have an equitable, quality education."

Online and blended career readiness education (CRE) and career and technical education (CTE) programs are key ways for schools to expose students to different career options and provide them with practical training they can apply to future degrees and jobs. Those programs, however, must be robust and reflect the evolving nature of work to ensure success in the new economic environment. This means:

- Exposure to high-growth industries
- Personalized blended learning that offers multiple modes of education
- Multiple opportunities for students to learn the same thing in a different way
- Project-based learning to develop skills that are the new currency in the labor market

Virtual CRE/CTE programs can help students prepare for this reality by adapting new ways of teaching. Rather than giving tasks, teachers should assign projects. This style mimics the modern workplace, a collaborative environment where problem-solving and creativity are crucial skill sets.

### 3. Fully support a successful alternative education culture and climate

**Achieve Online** is Colorado Springs School District 11's (D11) full-time online and blended learning school for middle and high school students. Achieve Online focuses on at-risk students by providing a flexible blended learning and socially supportive environment suited to the particular needs of its student population. A very high percentage of students have some form of anxiety disorder, medical problem, or challenging family situation, that makes it difficult for them to thrive in the higher paced, more stressful setting of a traditional brick-and-mortar.

The online learning environment means teachers can customize the curriculum, giving them the autonomy necessary to create and deliver instruction for each student to best make them successful.

The flexibility of online learning at Achieve Online can be seen in the curriculum, setting, and structure. Rotating schedules and online office hours, learning labs, and tutoring help meet the needs of diverse learners whose only chance at an education comes because of the flexibility. For example, young mothers or fathers are able to squeeze in slices of time to study online while children are napping. In other cases, students who struggle with anxiety or other mental health issues that can make learning in a traditional brick-and-mortar challenging, thrive in online and blended learning.



Sally Jergensen, Achieve Online's head counselor, shares "We have the most fragile of students medically or emotionally. The thing I like about our online school model is that it is very individualized, which is a must-have for our many students on 504 Plans and IEPs." These at-risk students may need to cut back on learning time, extend time needed to complete a course, or work while in a hospital, for example. K12's online courses provide the location and time flexibility students need to fit these situations.



Read more about these four districts' flexible online implementation models at **[districtresources.k12.com](https://districtresources.k12.com)**

### Flexibility = success

Over Achieve Online's ten-year history, the school has become an invaluable program for the school district, helping middle and high schoolers become successful, both as students and in life. Achieve Online ranked second highest in SAT scores among Alternative Education Campus schools in Colorado in SY 2017–2018 and has earned a solid reputation of excellence in the region. It is a top go-to school for at-risk students, evidenced by its waiting list of over 100 students.

Sources: Achieve Online SAT score ranking information provided by D11 Achieve Online administrative staff.

Colorado Alternate Education Campuses (AECs) are schools with specialized missions designed to serve high-risk student populations.

<https://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/coloradoalternativeeducationcampusesppt>

## 4. Expand student opportunities for language learning even in the face of teacher shortages

To ensure ample opportunities for middle and high school students to take world language courses in schools where a teacher does not exist for that language, or where specific world language courses are not offered, **Clark County School District (CCSD)** in Nevada provides a robust supplemental online world language program using K12 Learning Solution's Middlebury Interactive Languages™ curriculum.

The Middlebury Interactive Languages world language courses taught at CCSD include Spanish, French, Chinese, and German, and are provided to students throughout the district by the Nevada Learning Academy (NVLA), a CCSD alternative school.

Many of the reasons why classroom-based world language instruction does not meet CCSD's needs fall into two basic categories:

1. Language teacher shortages
2. Traditional logistical and economic challenges typical in a large and diverse school district

K12 Learning Solutions makes it possible for Clark County School District to augment classroom instruction with online world language courses, creating a balanced and robust offering to all students. In addition to NVLA and CCSD's own teachers, the district also has access to certified world language teachers available from K12 for those situations where they need a temporary teacher.

### Access to courses that expand opportunity for the future

After the first full year's usage, Clark County School District has many examples of success, and the teachers of Middlebury Interactive Languages believe that it is better preparing students to be more fluent speakers. And this is significant. World language skills are crucial in today's society. Multiple language skills are becoming more critical as both society and business increasingly span the globe. The new federal Every Student Succeeds Act stresses that foreign language ability is essential for students to fully participate in today's global society and increasingly diverse communities.

Find your online learning delivery model at **[k12.com/learning-solutions](https://k12.com/learning-solutions)**



Learning Solutions



covered only half, or less than half, of the curriculum content that they would have gotten to by this time last year

- Only about **1 in 5 teachers** said that they were on the same schedule as years past

Teachers in remote and hybrid environments reported more challenges than those in solely face-to-face instruction.

Absenteeism has been a persistent problem survey conducted in October 2020 across all learning modalities, as Education Week has reported. But teachers in the RAND survey who were working in person said that their students showed up more consistently:

- In-person teachers said **91 percent** of their students were present every day
- Hybrid teachers reported **85 percent** of their students attended daily
- Teachers who were fully remote estimated **84 percent** attended daily

Assignment completion varied by learning environment, too. Teachers who were fully in-person said that 82 percent of their students turned in most or all of their work, compared to teachers who were fully remote, who said that only 62 percent of their students did the same.

### Some Students 'More Likely to Be Falling Behind'

Like the Education Week Research Center, RAND found that schools where most of the students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch, and schools that serve majority stu-

dents of color, are more likely to offer remote learning, rather than in-person classes.

"These are students who are also more likely to be falling behind, less likely to have access to a digital device or the internet. The odds are kind of stacked against them," Kaufman said.

Online teachers were more likely to say that they needed guidance on how best to support students with severe disabilities, English-language learners, and students experiencing homelessness or poverty.

They also said they needed more general instructional support—in adapting curriculum, in motivating students, in accelerating them academically, and in assessing their learning—than teachers who are in the physical classroom every day.

Even as they struggle to make remote learning work, teachers still report deep concerns about the virus: 57 percent of teachers said that their health and the health of their loved ones was a major concern right now, and 27 percent said it was a moderate concern.

This picture leaves state and federal governments with a dual imperative, Kaufman and her co-author Melissa Diliberti argue. One, make schools safer to attend in person: Take precautions like universal mask-wearing, and then keep track of which precautions actually work. And two, direct much more funding and support toward making remote learning better.

As EdWeek's Catherine Gewertz and

“

From this data that we've collected, it's clear that there are some students who are very likely falling through the cracks because of remote learning.”

**JULIA KAUFMAN**

SENIOR POLICY RESEARCHER,  
RAND CORPORATION

Stephen Sawchuk wrote earlier this month, schools are making these decisions with incomplete and imperfect information, and often face harsh criticism from community members whether they're open or closed.

"Regardless, we know that students who are getting remote instruction, especially if they're in high-minority and high-poverty schools, they need the most support," Kaufman said. ■

*Published on November 18, 2020, in Education Week*

## How to Bring 'Surprise and Delight' to Virtual Teacher Training During COVID-19

By Alyson Klein

**D**yane Smokorowski, the coordinator of digital literacy for the Wichita public schools in Kansas, wants people who run professional development sessions to make them so engaging that educators get FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) if they don't sign up.

A former Disney World employee, Smokorowski is inspired by the Magic Kingdom's focus on bringing "elements of surprise and delight" to the visitor experience. She's taken

teachers to play pickle ball, brought them to an improv stage, and yes, organized a trip to Disney World to model playful, engaging teaching.

Then, the pandemic hit. Smokorowski (or "Mrs. Smoke" to most of her colleagues) can't bring a group of teachers together in the same classroom, much less a theme park.

So how is the former Kansas Teacher of the Year adjusting? In an email interview with Assistant Editor Alyson Klein, Smokorowski addresses that challenge as well as other questions about teacher professional



**Dyane Smokorowski**  
Coordinator, Digital  
Literacy, Wichita public  
schools, Kansas

development. (This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.)

**Before the pandemic, you worked hard to bring “surprise and delight” to professional development. Why do you think that approach helps teachers learn?**

Surprise and delight is an element to professional learning where the lead facilitator designs something special and unexpected that elicits a positive response for the teachers.

This could be something as simple as a personalized note that acknowledges the hard work and dedication it takes to teach in the current environment or something a bit more complex such as investigating the attendees’ favorite sodas and having them delivered just in time before lunch.

Often I seek out opportunities for attendees to hear from other inspirational teachers via a surprise video conference. In the current environment of professional learning this is still possible. For example, I visited with a teacher who just read *The Playful Classroom: The Power of Play for All Ages* by Jed Dearybury and Julie Jones, PhD. The teacher was so impressed by the book that I arranged for a quick Facetime call with one of the authors. Another example I’ve used in recent small group trainings is playing improv games that are great for remote or in-house students. These brief moments where teachers light up, giggle, and take deep sighs of relief bring back a renewed sense of joy. It’s really about making connections with other people, seeing them as unique and talented individuals, and helping them know they matter.

This is true in any learning environment, but it’s especially true now when teachers are feeling additional stress and anxiety. Even the smallest gift of a giggle, an “elbow high 5” or a short video message from an inspiring teacher helps a teacher feel appreciated.

**What was it like for a professional development expert like you when everything suddenly shut down last spring?**

When we saw the writing on the wall that teachers would be moving to remote learning last spring, my professional development colleagues and I shifted into full gear.

I was invited to co-lead the Continuous Learning Task Force in Kansas at the same time that I was playing a leadership role in my own district preparing teachers for remote learning. We dedicated all of our energies to helping

teachers navigate digital tools such as Google Classroom, Seesaw, Flipgrid, and Canvas. All of a sudden, every teacher needed additional levels of support.

Some were ready to shift to full personalized learning where student agency in demonstrations of understanding could shine and others were still trying to navigate basic keyboard shortcuts of copy/paste. Needless to say, we embraced differentiated instruction for professional development sessions.

Additionally, our teachers needed a new set of skills to engage students in virtual settings. The majority of teachers had little to no previous experience in blended or virtual environments,

“One thing that became clear over the spring semester is how relevancy, agency, and feedback are the three keys to great learning both online and in person.”

**DYANE SMOKOROWSKI**

COORDINATOR, DIGITAL LITERACY,  
WICHITA PUBLIC SCHOOLS, KANSAS

so we dedicated time to host virtual brainstorming sessions and lesson plan design.

Often, teachers requested tips and tricks for students to learn with limited resources in their homes. We explored ways students could use found objects such as cardboard, sidewalk chalk, pantry items, and items found in nature to practice spelling, math, and writing skills. For older students, we often discussed how cell-phones were creation tools for video production, photo essays, graphic design, and podcasting.

Our goal was to help both students and teachers be creative and celebrate learning opportunities both with screens and without. We also explored ways to build a positive classroom culture with students through video conferencing so students wanted to attend virtual class meetings and feel comfortable to engage with their teachers and classmates. Much of these discussions focused on parlor games that could

support learning such as charades for vocabulary practice or trivia games for review, but we also explored how these games and more could be used for online family engagement sessions.

**How has the pandemic limited professional development for teachers?**

One thing that became clear over the spring semester is how relevancy, agency, and feedback are the three keys to great learning both online and in person. These three elements 1) Relevance: students needing to experience personal relevance and real world connections to content 2) Agency: students have voice and choice in how they demonstrate understanding and 3) High Quality Feedback: students need to know more than just a letter grade.

They need detailed feedback that helps them reflect on their learning while helping them move forward. Sadly, these elements took a backseat during the spring semester, which quite possibly contributed to poor student engagement. When we moved to professional learning for the fall semester, we spent time highlighting these elements, but the need for teachers to feel confident in both synchronous and asynchronous digital learning took priority.

With the ever-changing need to pivot on short notice looming over teachers, the conversations around deeper levels of learning are limited. I do believe, however, that we will move closer to those meaningful conversations in the spring semester once teachers feel confident in hybrid and fully remote environments.

**Are you able to bring any of that experiential learning to this new socially distanced world? How?**

Site-based, experiential learning is still happening, but it’s shifted to creating classroom-focused [virtual field trips on Microsoft Teams]. These virtual sessions allow us to have up to 20,000 attendees and have given us a new opportunity to reach thousands of students all at once. To design these experiences, my district ed-tech team has forged new relationships with local museums, zoos, bookstores, and organizations to bring real world connections of content to our students while also providing enrichment learning opportunities.

The district has hosted site-based discussions about animals at the zoo, author visits, a performance reading of Edgar Allen Poe for Halloween, a Day of the Cultural Exchange with a local bakery and with a school in Mexico, as well as interviews with veterans. Up-



coming events will focus on Kansas history, civil rights, and more

### How can you model engaging lessons with “elements of surprise and delight” for teachers in remote or hybrid learning environments?

One of my favorite ways to bring in that surprise and delight element is through drama games. For example, as a way to reinforce short story elements or sequence of events, playing String of Pearls is a great activity to build community and practice those skills. Instead of lining students up in a face-to-face setting, teachers simply play with the students on the screen.

The first student on the screen starts the story, the next two students continue the story, and the fourth student shares the conclusion. A great vocabulary activity is the home scavenger hunt. Students can either find something in the house that would represent a vocabulary word or use Legos or even paper and crayons to draw an example of the word.

For example, if the vocabulary word was “change,” there are multiple visuals that could represent the word. One student might grab coins, another could hold up a pair of socks to show changing clothes, and yet another could hold a piece of ice to explain physical change. Use these visuals as a class discussion around a vocabulary word before reading a passage. The students will be able to connect a deeper meaning of text with keywords.

### What do you think teachers will continue to need during these difficult times?

I fully believe teachers will need more opportunities to collaborate with each other and others outside of their buildings. Our large virtual field trip events are easily adapted to the classroom level. No matter the content, connections to careers and real world applications exist. Museums, national parks, zoos, and more that rely on field trip events are looking for ways to connect with classrooms virtually.

Teachers simply need to find the education contact at these locations and learn more about what opportunities exist or be willing to brainstorm with the organization to design a personalized event for their students.

Additionally, teachers are seeking screen-free learning opportunities while still providing accountability and engagement with their students. For example, while on a live call, teachers challenge students to upcycle an old

pair of socks as puppets to explain how to solve a math equation or ask students to create paper slide shows to explain their top takeaways from yesterday’s lesson. I believe more of these ideas will be shared through the winter months and into the spring once teachers feel comfortable working in their current environments. My hope is teachers continue to share strategies and student samples on social media so we all can grow from one another.

### What else should district leaders and teachers know about trying to make PD more engaging?

Don’t forget that all learners including adult learners want to have fun while learning. It’s okay to engage them in giggles, challenge them to create with hands-on materials, and provide a little special surprise and delight along the way. ■



—Jacquelyn Martin/AP

A student at The Social Justice Public Charter School in Washington raises two fingers in answer to a question during an in-person English language arts class. Although some students are attending classes in the school building, others are still learning virtually.

Published on November 11, 2020, in Education Week

## How Hybrid Learning Is (and Is Not) Working During COVID-19: 6 Case Studies

By Mark Lieberman

**M**ost U.S. school districts are currently using “hybrid learning”—a mix of in-person and online instruction. The precise nature of that mix, though, varies greatly from school to school, based on factors including the local rate of COVID-19 transmission, the availability of funds to support new instructional approaches, and the willingness of stu-

dents and staff to return to buildings.

Many students chose to learn entirely in-person or entirely online this school year. Others are spending a couple days a week in person and the rest at home. Some schools have set aside the bulk of slots for in-person instruction for vulnerable groups like students with special needs, English-language learners, and students experiencing homelessness.

These approaches aren’t static. Increases in COVID-19 spread have forced some schools in hybrid mode to revert back to full-time re-

mote learning, while others started out fully remote and are now slowly transitioning more students to some in-person instruction.

Close to two-thirds of district leaders said their school systems are doing hybrid learning, according to an Education Week Research Center survey.

As with almost everything schools are doing during the pandemic, hybrid learning has inspired a wide range of reactions. Many parents and students are grateful schools are finding creative ways to bring their children back to school buildings while taking precautions against COVID-19. Others have protested schools' reluctance to fully resume in-person instruction or expressed confusion over complex school plans that seem to be constantly changing. Some teachers find the new demands of hybrid instruction overwhelming, while others are more eager to adapt.

"Hybrid learning can be a best of both worlds, or a worst of both worlds reality," said Bree Dusseault, practitioner-in-residence at the University of Washington's Center for Re-inventing Public Education, which has been surveying schools throughout the pandemic.

In the best-case scenario, schools can keep students and staff safe while providing them with valuable in-person instruction that gives them the tools to do meaningful schoolwork at home. At worst, teachers are forced to cut corners on instruction, schools struggle to transition students seamlessly from in-person to remote and vice versa, and students who are learning at home get left behind compared with students who choose to spend at least some time in person.

That last possibility threatens to further widen equity gaps along racial lines. In an EdWeek survey this fall, Latino, Black, and Asian parents were more likely than white parents to report their children would engage in full-time remote learning.

Pulling off an instructional approach that's completely new to most U.S. schools during a pandemic is no easy feat, either. The challenges partially come from a lack of adequate resources: Congress has yet to follow through on plans for a second multi-billion-dollar stimulus package for education, and school budgets are increasingly stretched thin as the pandemic takes a toll on state and local finances.

At Scofield Magnet Middle School in Stamford, Conn., students have chosen either full-time remote learning or a hybrid model with in-person classes a few days a week and remote instruction for the rest. Teachers are not live-streaming classwork to any students who are learning at home. Placing cameras in

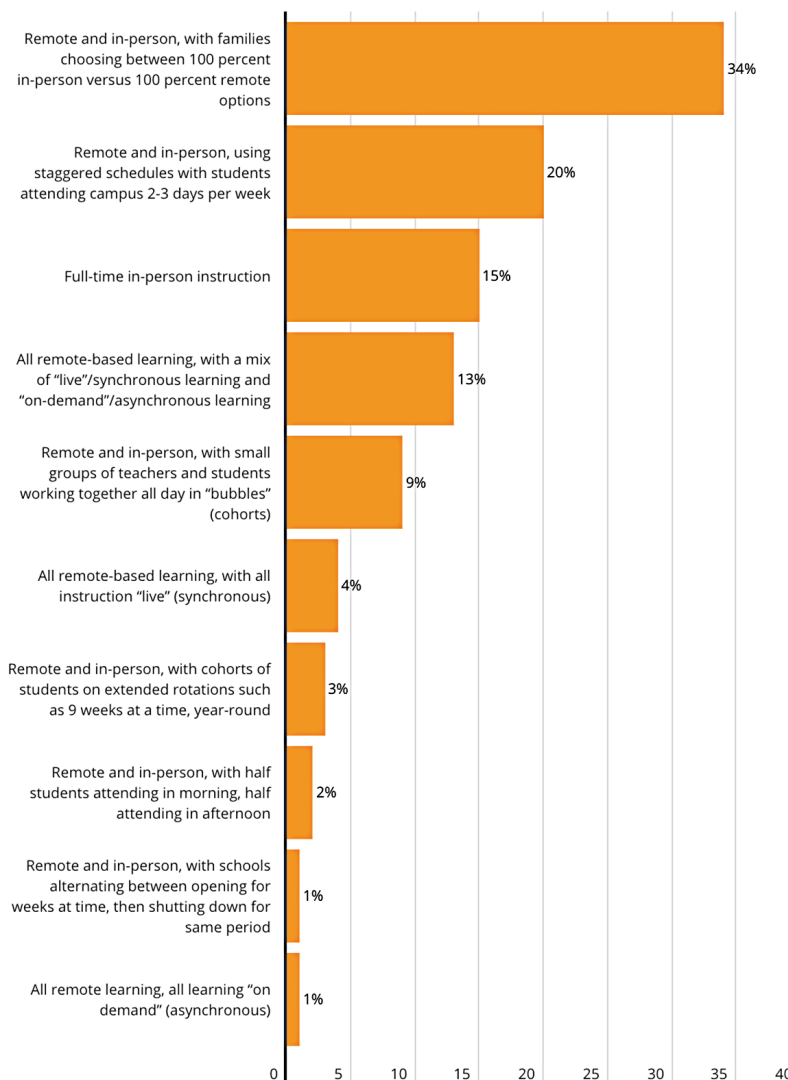
classrooms was difficult, and connectivity issues were common for the school's students, half of whom are eligible for free and reduced-price meals.

"If you have two or three kids in a home and you have them all logged in live-streaming all day, that's going to eat up your data pretty quick," said Scott Clayton, the school's principal.

The trickiest part, according to Clayton, has been getting students to complete assignments at home, where they might have other responsibilities like child care or a part-time job.

Many schools also have struggled to balance investments in personal protective equipment and other safety precautions for in-person instruction with the technology and

## Which model most closely reflects what your district is implementing this fall?



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, 2020

EdWeek  
Research Center

professional development necessary to reach students who will be learning at home part- or full-time, Dusseault said.

She recommends schools actively survey parents and students, and try to structure classes to make the most of students' time either in person or at home, in whatever hybrid configuration they choose.

"They have to be putting resources into everything that it takes to result in a quality classroom experience: the materials, the training, the curriculum," she said. (For more on how to do this work, visit Education Week's guides to balancing in-person and remote instruction and pivoting back to full-time remote learning if necessary.)

The ongoing chaos of the pandemic sometimes obscures the lessons schools are learning and the strategies they're employing to overcome steep challenges. Education Week talked to educators from school districts across the country about how they developed their hybrid learning models, how they're working so far, and what they have planned for the months ahead. Here is a look at hybrid models in six school districts and the challenges of making those approaches work.

### VICTORIA INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, Texas

*Enrollment: 14,000*

**The Model:** Students chose at the beginning of the year from two options: Attend school in person five days a week, or attend school virtually five days a week. Teachers' classes are a mix of in-person and virtual students.

**The Challenges:** Jennifer Atkins, a 7th grade English teacher at Howell Middle School, typically enjoys walking around her classroom to engage students. Social distancing and masks make that teaching style virtually impossible.

She's also had to deal with the ongoing evolution of the composition of her classes. When school started, roughly half her students were online. But as parents have grown more comfortable with sending students back to school, that proportion has shifted—roughly 90 of her students attend in person, and 50 are at home.

"I have the same kids, the same roster, but now I've got a new group that's coming face to face that I haven't met in person," Atkins said. "They have been away from some of their friends for so long. It's interesting to see how the class dynamic changes."

Atkins posts textbook PDFs online because some students don't have the book at home, even though the school set up times for parents to pick up the books. Grading takes longer

“

Hybrid learning can be a best of both worlds, or a worst of both worlds reality.”

### BREE DUSSEAULT

PRACTITIONER-IN-RESIDENCE,  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON'S  
CENTER FOR REINVENTING PUBLIC  
EDUCATION

because she has to look at some hard copies and then log in online for the rest.

Howell students aren't required to keep their cameras on during videoconference instruction, so Atkins worries that some students may have logged in at the beginning but aren't actually paying attention. "Without being here and constantly reminded to stay on task, it is probably enticing to log into the meeting and then just walk away," she said.

**The Benefits:** Atkins has been able to use technology tools to keep better track of which students are struggling. If they don't open an assignment, for instance, "something's got to be wrong," and she has a tangible record of the student's progress, she said.

Hybrid learning has also forced her to consider more innovative use of technology in her teaching. A handful of teachers were offered interactive whiteboards that students can access from their desks, and Atkins accepted. Prior to COVID-19, she might have resisted a big change like this because she saw it as unnecessary, but the rising use of technology as a teaching tool has made her think differently.

**A Small Victory:** To help students at home hear her voice better through the mask, Atkins logs into the virtual meeting on her laptop and her smartphone, and talks into the microphone on her phone, addressing the remote and in-person students simultaneously, while using a clicker to scroll through PowerPoint slides on the computer.

**The Takeaway:** "It is nothing short of exhausting," Atkins said. "It's basically like teaching two different classes at the same time in one class period."

### SANTA FE PUBLIC SCHOOLS, New Mexico

*Enrollment: 13,000*

**The Model:** The district is gradually bringing students into school buildings based on the number of teachers who are willing to return and the amount of space in classrooms to allow for adequate social distancing. Special education students and English-language learners are prioritized for in-person instruction, and students who eventually want to go back to face-to-face instruction are placed with the teachers who are teaching from the school building.

**The Challenges:** Managing in-person and virtual instruction simultaneously requires more digital devices than many teachers have in their classrooms, said Tom Ryan, chief information and strategy officer for the district. Ideally, they need one for the lesson, one for seeing the students' faces, and one to monitor what students are doing on their school-issued devices. Cameras that pivot when a teacher moves are also ideal to prevent teachers from constantly exiting the frame when they move around.

Meanwhile, the digital divide remains a significant barrier for equitable remote instruction. Some students attend day-care facilities with inadequate internet connections for videoconferencing. Other students have school-provided hotspots that may not be sufficient for the amount of strain remote learning puts on the connection. Efforts to determine the minimum bandwidth necessary for what's required of students learning at home are still underway, Ryan said.

**The Benefits:** Teachers who wanted to return to classrooms are eager to serve as test cases for how in-person instruction can work during these unprecedented times, said Ryan. Giving teachers the option to stay home engenders more goodwill and prevents people with underlying health conditions from having to choose between their job and their safety.

So far, Ryan's team has found teachers need a microphone to amplify their voices through their masks, and that simply replicating face-to-face instruction while livestreaming to students may not be as effective as offering online students differently structured activities from their in-person counterparts. Younger students and English-language learners are particularly likely to struggle



when they can't see a teacher's mouth movements, Ryan said.

**A Small Victory:** Ryan's daughter, a 5th grade teacher in the district, said she's had more robust contact with parents than ever before. One student learning remotely in her class was constantly disrupting the class, pulling out inappropriate household objects, and sleeping on camera. After communicating with his parents, Ryan's daughter decided to work with him individually after school hours, when his parents could be there by his side.

"I'm not saying I recommend this for all the teachers," Ryan said. But "there are options that are available now that weren't available last year."

**The Takeaway:** "This isn't a comparison between online versus face to face. This is between having nothing at all or something that is still engaging the kids and instruction can happen," Ryan said. "Some are very successful and other kids are struggling."

#### MARSHALL PUBLIC SCHOOLS, Mich.

**Enrollment:** 1,000

**The Model:** Elementary school students attend school in person four days a week, and middle and high school students attend school in person three days a week. In both cases, students are split into five groups, with each one having their remote learning on a different day of the week. The district tried to ensure that students who live in the same household have the same remote learning day. A handful of English-language learners, students with special needs, and newcomers to the district attend school in person every day. And some students opted to learn at home full-time for the school year.

**The Challenges:** "I would say our teachers are very overwhelmed," said Beth Ritter, the district's director of teaching and learning. "I'm not going to sugarcoat it."

Each day, teachers have some students who are missing, which means it's hard to keep all students on the same page. The students who are at home full time could easily get lost in the shuffle if teachers don't put in extra work to engage them. And the quality of instruction needs to be higher than in the spring, when emergency remote teaching set everyone back.

"We have that experience to fall back on, but yet teachers are doing so much more this year," Ritter said.

**The Benefits:** Hybrid learning has led to some positive changes. Meetings with multilingual families have gone a lot smoother for interpreters than usual. Rather than having to rush from room to room in the school building on a busy night of in-person conferences, all they have to do is open a new Microsoft Teams meeting to enter a video conversation. Families also appreciate that they don't have to scramble for day-care options when they need to meet with their students' teachers.

The hybrid model also forces teachers to be more intentional about how they structure their lessons. Elementary teachers now focus on reading, math, and social-emotional learning when students are in person, while home assignments build on what students learned in class.

**A Small Victory:** The district has appointed "assurance of mastery coaches" in elementary schools to check in with students during their remote learning day. Students get to have some interaction with the school even when they're not in the building, and teachers get a small reprieve from yet another responsibility.

**The Takeaway:** With big changes like a heightened emphasis on social-emotional learning, school administrators need to communicate clearly and regularly with teachers and staff who will be implementing these changes. "We've always known it, but we've really found that this year," Ritter said.

#### MILTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT, Pa.

**Enrollment:** 2,000

**The Model:** Students who chose a mix of in-person and remote instruction attend school buildings on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Other students are doing 100 percent synchronous online instruction, or largely asynchronous instruction through the Milton Cyber Academy, which existed prior to the pandemic.

**The Challenge:** Students learning remotely—particularly the older ones—have been reluctant to turn on their cameras and keep their microphones unmuted. "K-5 is absolutely great—they are happy to see their classmates," said Cathy Keegan, the district's superintendent.

But some groups of older students have been very quiet, forcing teachers to get more creative with ensuring that they're engaged. As of this month, the district is now specifying to students doing synchronous learning that they're expected to be ready to speak and be seen when a teacher calls on them.

Some parents have fallen behind on notifying the school when their student won't be at-

“

Managing in-person and virtual instruction simultaneously requires more digital devices than many teachers have in their classrooms.”

#### TOM RYAN

CHIEF INFORMATION AND STRATEGY OFFICER FOR THE DISTRICT, SANTA FE PUBLIC SCHOOLS, NEW MEXICO

tending at-home instruction that day. "We're reinforcing that," Keegan said.

**The Benefits:** Discipline rates in the district have been sharply down this year compared with previous years, Keegan said. "We genuinely believe—this is just a feeling—that kids are just happy to be back," she said. Keeping them at home might have exacerbated the social isolation that has prompted many experts to urge schools to find safe ways to reopen.

**A Small Victory:** The president of the district's teachers union told Keegan she and other teachers were tired of spending valuable time at the start of each class period asking students to type their name in the chat as a means of taking attendance. Keegan's team helped advise her on integrating a discussion question into the Microsoft Teams platform that teachers can use to jump-start that day's lesson and take attendance simultaneously.

**The Takeaway:** Efforts to transform an American education model that hasn't been comprehensively updated in generations are happening at a breakneck pace, Keegan said. It's painful and necessary work: "We may still be back here in 2022."

#### NORTHERN LEHIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, Pa.

**Enrollment:** 1,550

**The Model:** Students can attend in-person instruction up to two days a week: Monday and



Learning Solutions

ADVERTISEMENT

# All-Encompassing Solution. No Limitations.

Learners and educators need innovative online resources that allow them to overcome their challenges and reach their goals. It's why cookie-cutter solutions just get in the way. K12 Learning Solutions offers flexible technology and online curriculum that addresses a variety of needs—across districts, within schools, and for students.

## Why K12?



**20+ YEARS** of experience delivering online and in-person instruction to students



**6,000+ ONLINE EDUCATORS** in the K12 network to help teachers in real time



We support more than **2,000 SCHOOL DISTRICTS** across all **50 STATES** and more than **100 COUNTRIES**



**1 MILLION+ STUDENTS SERVED**



**55,000+ TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS & PARAPROFESSIONALS** are K12 trained



Delivered **MILLIONS OF ONLINE COURSES** over the past 10 years to public school districts, charter schools, private schools, and students

“As we have learned more about students and how they learn...we've been really working towards that 21st Century student...being able to offer them different atmospheres, different classroom models to meet their needs. The Flex Model of blended learning has allowed us to really look at students and individualize and support them. With this we've been able to reach some of those students that maybe school wasn't their favorite thing.”

MINDY BARRON,  
Technology Coach, Hermiston High School, Oregon



**Meet today's needs and prepare for tomorrow.**  
**Learn more at [k12.com/learning-solutions](https://k12.com/learning-solutions)**

Tuesday for students with last names starting with the letters A through L, and Thursday and Friday for students with last names starting with M through Z. When students aren't in school buildings, they're learning at home, and Wednesdays are reserved for one-on-one check-ins for all students. Nearly three-quarters of students have chosen that option.

Slightly less than a fifth of students have chosen to learn from home all week. Some teachers have been assigned to work exclusively with fully online students.

Another less popular option (3 percent of the district's students) is an existing online program offered by the school but managed by a third-party vendor; the district has revamped that asynchronous online program to include more direct involvement from a district teacher for students in grades K-8.

**The Challenge:** Teachers have had to adjust to a curriculum that must be more streamlined than usual. District leaders have urged teachers to consider which aspects of the learning material are essential and which could be optional. "We don't want the curriculum to become a barrier to achieving success," said Matthew Link, the district's superintendent.

Early in the school year, many virtual students weren't showing up or turning in work on time. The district's professional development efforts have helped teachers get more creative in engaging students who are at home. Still, for certain students, "we need to double down on our efforts to make sure they're active participants in the process," Link said.

**A Small Victory:** District administrators are recognizing more than ever the value of teachers collaborating with each other, said Tania Stoker, the district's assistant superintendent. One teacher might be using a tool another teacher doesn't know about it; that kind of sharing is much more common now than it used to be.

**The Takeaway:** "Know that it's OK that when you're developing your plan and you think it's done, it's probably not. You're going to go through different iterations constantly," Link said. "Don't feel bad if you have to change something that you thought was the answer."

#### WALL TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS, N.J.

**Enrollment:** 3,400

**The Model:** Elementary students are either

fully remote or fully in-person.

In grades 6-8, students attend school in person every other day (except Wednesday). Teachers have the same students in their class each day—the only thing that changes is which ones are in person and which ones are online. On Wednesdays, all students learn online.

In-person instruction is reserved for lessons on math, English, and social studies. Next semester, they'll switch to science instruction. "We had been hopeful and optimistic that we would be in fully live instruction when we really need that practical application in lab," but that may not be the case, said Lisa Gleason, the district's director of curriculum and instruction.

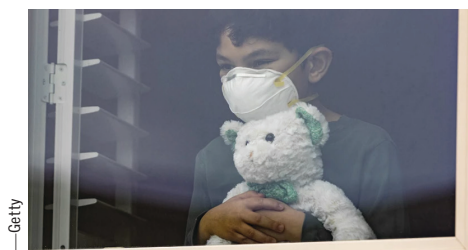
**The Challenge:** Simply having a Chromebook doesn't mean all the problems are solved. The district has found those devices can't support all the resources and instructional technology programs that teachers use. "We had to pivot and start acquiring more PCs," Gleason said. The district also was hit recently with a cyberattack that prompted some teachers to work from home until the problem was resolved.

Substitute teachers who think they're capable of teaching online or comfortable with the health risks of teaching in person have been difficult to find, even as the number of teachers who need to take time off for legitimate reasons is higher than usual.

**A Small Victory:** Some teachers who are particularly worried about COVID-19 exposure can teach remotely from a separate area of the school building that students don't visit. Some students in those teachers' classes are attending school in person, but they are supervised by another teacher who is in a physical classroom with them, while others are at home, in the same Google Meet link as the remote teacher.

"We had really analyzed what our needs were back in late August," Gleason said. "We were able to craft teachers' schedules around that."

**The Takeaway:** "When you put all your eggs in the basket of technology being the main vehicle for delivering instruction, even in the hybrid model, it takes away that stability of having a human being in the classroom who can deliver instruction no matter what," Gleason said. ■



*Published on November 19, 2020, in Education Week*

## Schools Struggled to Serve Students With Disabilities, English-Learners During Shutdowns

By Corey Mitchell

Accessing education during the nation's COVID-19-related school closures was often an uphill battle for the combined 12 million students who are English-language learners and students with disabilities and their families.

A report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office outlined the factors that complicated the delivery of special education services and shut off access to learning for English-learners. Under federal law, these students are eligible for tailored, specialized education services designed to help them succeed in school. But those services are not always easily transferable to distance learning.

For the study, the Government Accountability Office reviewed distance learning plans for 15 school districts, selected for their proportion of either English-learners or students with disabilities to measure how well schools adapted to serve students who were physically separated from the teachers and staff who are crucial to their academic success.

The shift to distance learning "laid bare both the logistical and instructional challenges of distance learning" for both sets of students, the report found.

The study found that educators struggled to meet the wide range of needs of students with disabilities served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which covers students who struggle academically, need emotional and behavioral supports, or are



medically fragile and require full-time aides to access learning.

To adapt to the schooling limitations created by the pandemic, some schools adjusted students' learning goals and service plans with mixed results, the study found.

For students with disabilities, schools were often unable to deliver services, such as speech, occupational, and physical therapy, that were guaranteed in students' Individualized Education Programs.

In districts that provided virtual therapy, parents were pressed into duty, forced to try to replicate the therapy that trained specialists would normally provide in school.

Schools did report increased parent and teacher collaboration, but the study authors concluded that "providing students with the services they need remains an ongoing challenge."

English-learners, especially those from homes where English is not the primary language, lost access to teachers and classmates who helped foster understanding of the language.

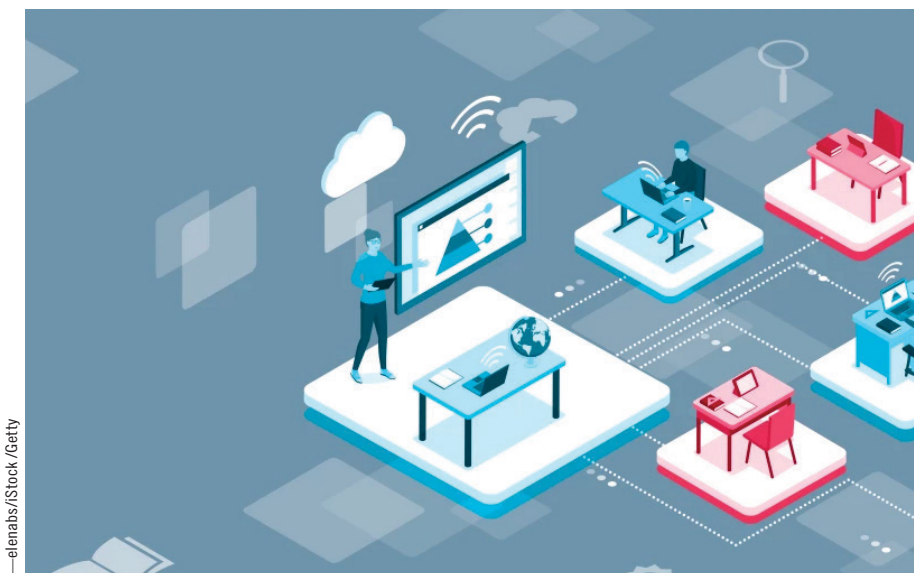
Many English-learners also lacked access to dependable internet and technology at home, the report found. Their teachers faced a digital divide of their own: English-learner specialists undergo fewer hours of professional development with digital learning resources than traditional classroom teachers.

The study found that schools used strategies to build connections with families and adapted and translated learning materials in Spanish and other languages to compensate for the loss of in-person instruction. Despite the efforts, schools still struggled to address the needs of families who speak less commonly spoken home languages.

Faced with these challenges, several states urged schools to prioritize in-person learning for children with disabilities and those learning English when classes resume. But those plans are threatened as another surge in coronavirus cases has forced a growing number of school systems back into districtwide remote plans.

"This is a pivotal and perilous moment in our fight for equity in education," Democratic Rep. Bobby Scott, the chairman of the U.S. House education committee, said in a statement. "The impact on students will be felt long after the pandemic is over."

The study was conducted as part of the Government Accountability Office's COVID-19 monitoring and oversight responsibilities under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security, or CARES Act, which provided billions of dollars in funding dedicated to K-12 schools. ■



—elenabs/Stock/Getty

## OPINION

*Published on December 3, 2020, in Education Week*

# Remote Learning Cuts Into Attendance. Here Are Remedies

By Heather C. Hill

**D**ata suggest low-income communities are much harder hit than high-income ones

I know a 10-year-old—social, responsible—who went AWOL for the first two weeks of school this fall. It's easy to imagine a scenario like that playing out in thousands of remote schooling households across the country: K-12 students "stopping out" or dropping out by not attending class or completing assignments. In school buildings, students mostly must remain physically present once they arrive. But when students learn at home, they have opportunities to disengage just about hourly: from that synchronous session at 9 a.m., from the division of fractions video at 10 a.m., and from the essay for English class that is supposed to be in a Google doc by noon.

My 10-year-old friend had a teacher who called home and got him back on track. In many cases, though, it will take more than that.

Unsurprisingly, surveys and district data show that remote attendance has flagged. In May, less than 10 percent of teachers surveyed nationally said that remote attendance

approached normal attendance levels, and two-thirds reported that assignment-completion rates were down since the start of the pandemic. Cities including Detroit, Chicago, and Rochester, N.Y., have all reported lower-than-expected attendance rates this fall.

Reduced attendance might explain the negative impacts of remote schooling compared with in-person instruction. As reported in Education Week's Weighing the Research opinion essay series earlier this year, a number of researchers have discovered that on average, achievement suffers with online classes. Recently, for example, Carycruz Bueno found that students attending public virtual schools in Georgia between 2007 and 2016 scored significantly below students in the state's public brick-and-mortar schools on standardized tests and were 10 percentage points less likely to graduate from high school, even taking into account the different characteristics of online students.

Attendance data show a disturbingly uneven playing field. Spring login data from Zearn, an online mathematics curriculum, suggest that student-participation rates in affluent communities dipped in March but climbed back to normal by late April. However, participation rates for low-income communities never recovered, lagging be-

hind normal by about 40 percent at the end of the spring. November data show Zearn logins in low-income communities remain about 15 percent below normal.

With the number of school closures already high and rising, educators need to think strategically about both measuring and encouraging remote attendance. A look in the literature suggests several lessons.

First, bring students back to school where and when possible, prioritizing the most vulnerable students.

Second, adjust attendance early-warning metrics for COVID-19 realities and use them. Early-warning metrics are a component of many programs aimed at improving attendance and preventing dropouts, and most large U.S. school districts have some version of them.

In typical times, early-warning metrics include a battery of student indicators such as test scores, absenteeism, course grades, and credit accumulation, but some of those may not be available or equally meaningful during the pandemic. Districts may be able to gin up new metrics, though, such as measuring student-assignment completion in the virtual setting. In the Garden Grove Unified school district in California, for example, teachers record each student's assignment completions and logins to the learning-management system daily.

Harvesting data automatically generated from learning-management systems (for instance, Google Classroom, Schoology, Asistments) can fill in gaps in attendance data. Integrating data from these systems with student-information systems, which officially track attendance, can take some burden off teachers.

Third, educating parents about student absences may help. Research suggests that most parents underestimate the number of days their child has been absent; low-cost mailings correcting those estimates can improve student attendance. Moreover, using simple language in these notifications, emphasizing parental efficacy, and highlighting the negative effects of missing school can be particularly effective.

Hedy Chang at Attendance Works and others advise against taking punitive measures against students or parents since they tend not to work. A new review of the attendance literature comes to the same conclusion.

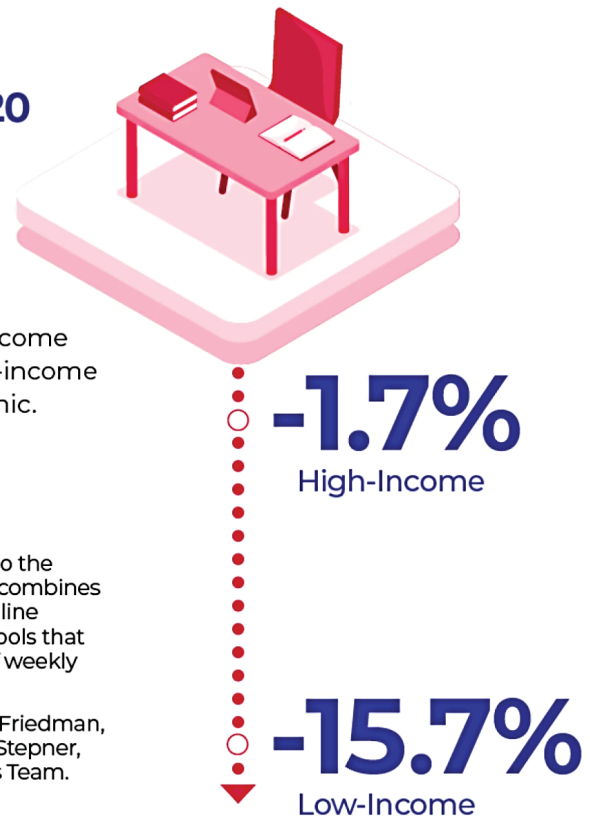
Fourth, many successful programs aimed at increasing attendance focus on improving the bond between students and their school or teacher. In fact, the literature shows that monitoring student-absence data is by itself not enough to improve attendance; students need to want to attend. This approach takes many

## Online Math Participation: Jan. to Nov. 2020

Student participation in the Zearn online math curriculum has dropped off much more in low-income communities than high-income ones during the pandemic.

NOTE: Data are from logins to the math program Zearn, which combines hands-on instruction with online lessons. Only students in schools that use Zearn as a regular part of weekly teaching are included.

SOURCE: Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, Nathaniel Hendren, Michael Stepner, and the Opportunity Insights Team. See [tracktherecovery.org](https://tracktherecovery.org).



—elenab/iStock/Getty

forms. The Check & Connect program assigns each student at risk of dropping out to a caring, committed mentor who supports and monitors that student over an extended period of time. Many other successful programs use teams of school counselors and teaching staff to spot and lower barriers to student attendance.

Because remote learning may leave some students vulnerable to mental-health concerns, districts might consider programs like Positive Action, which addresses student social-emotional skills and has adapted its offerings for COVID-19. In experimental trials, Positive Action has seen consistently encouraging results on student mental-health and achievement metrics.

Finally, in the pandemic, student-participation data can help suggest needed changes, especially when it is combined with hearing from teachers, parents, and students about barriers to remote learning. In San Francisco and other cities, for instance, districts have listened to parents and opened community hubs for students who do not have access to technology or adult supervision at home. Chang and other experts on absenteeism also advise

working on the fundamentals—creating engaging and challenging remote instruction and fostering students' sense of belonging.

The stakes are high. A McKinsey & Co. report issued over summer 2020 predicted an increase in the dropout rate this school year of between 2 percent and 9 percent. This figure likely underestimates the increase because the report assumed that in-person instruction would resume in January 2021. Attendance and engagement with learning is a leading indicator for dropping out.

Districts have been understandably consumed by the basics: returning to school buildings, providing either hybrid or remote instruction, and managing COVID-19 cases among staff and students. But especially with hopes for in-person school dimming, now is the time to attend to attendance. ■

*Heather C. Hill is a professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and studies teacher quality, teacher professional learning, and instructional improvement. Her broader interests include educational policy and social inequality.*

## OPINION

Published on November 17, 2020, in Education Week's Classroom Q&A with Larry Ferlazzo

## Distance Learning 'Has Been OK, I Guess': Students Share About This Year's Experiences

By Larry Ferlazzo

**T**he question-of-the-week: *What has your online learning experience been as a student this fall? What is working for you and why? What is not working for you and why?*

Student voice is important, and some of the most popular columns appearing here feature them.

This new series will highlight contributions from students in my classes.

Today, Cathy Liu, Julia Yang, Eliseo Angulo Lopez, and Masihullah Shafiq share their thoughts.

### It's "been okay, I guess"

*Cathy Liu is a junior at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.:*

My learning experience as a student this fall has been OK, I guess. The schedule of the class has been OK, and the work is fine, well that is because I have no life. Unlike other people, I have no job or a big responsibility in the house. I don't have to take care of my brother since he is old enough to take care of himself but he still does stupid things from time to time. I don't have chores that take me so long that I can't do my work. Even if the school decides to change the schedule completely, it will still work for me because of how open my schedule is.

There are some difficulties with online learning. I'm more lazy than the times when we were all in school. I postpone my assignments until the last minute, and that makes me feel overwhelmed and stressed because I don't have much time to finish my work, and the assignments take a long time to finish. I have been trying to fix the bad habits, trying to finish my work way before the deadline. Another thing that is hard about online learning is that it's harder to bond with other people. It's harder to get to know other people. Sometimes in the breakout room, no one talks at all, everyone is quiet, and it is so awkward because you waited and thought that someone was going to talk, but no one did. Then you are stuck in the position of should you say hello or is it too late

to do that. You just don't know what to do. Other than those random things that bother me, my learning experience has been OK so far.

### "I can get distracted"

*Julia Yang is a junior at Luther Burbank High School:*

This year of 2020, it has been very crazy. It is unfortunate that the pandemic happened, and we all are stuck at home. Many schools closed down due to the coronavirus. During this time of the year, I feel like it is a time for all people to learn how to appreciate important things. It is a new perspective for all of us, and with this new perspective of the world, we can learn and be more considerate of others.

When distance learning first started, it was frustrating that we had to end the school year with online classes. It was a whole new experience doing online classwork. I remembered I woke up early every morning thinking that I had to get ready for school, later on realizing that schools are closed. While working on my assignments, I realized that it was weird to not hear any of my classmates talking or other students yelling or laughing in the hallway. It was strange to learn at home without teachers. Since this was a new learning experience, I had troubles with technology a few times, which made me stressed out a lot. This made me very scared, and I started to doubt myself whether I'll do well with distance learning.

The few months of online school went by, and summer came. I begin to think we'd able to go back to school again. I held onto my hopes, hoping that the virus would go away soon and that things would go back to normal. Sadly, it didn't happen. This disappoints me to know that I won't be able to go through the school year of high school normally. And I'm pretty sure that it's not just me who feels like this.

Now, it's fall season, and we're back to online learning. Beginning this school year with distance learning as a junior, I'd found what is working for me and not working. Some of the pros for online learning are slideshows posted by teachers. These slideshows help remind

“

The few months of online school went by, and summer came. I begin to think we'd able to go back to school again. I held onto my hopes, hoping that the virus would go away soon and that things would go back to normal. Sadly, it didn't happen.”

**JULIA YANG**

JUNIOR AT LUTHER BURBANK HIGH SCHOOL

me of what I learned and did in class. For example, if I forgot something or want to clarify my understanding, I go back to the slideshows and I can get my answers there. Another thing that is also helping is that I don't have to get up too early. With that, I can get more time to get prepared for my classes. An hour break of lunch is also helpful because I can then focus on my asynchronous work.

Some of the problems I have with distance learning is that sometimes I can get distracted. The reason why I sometimes get distracted is because I'm at home. And being home can urge me to procrastinate. Whereas at school, there are students who are working and teachers. That helps me focus more. Another thing I found difficult is communication. I feel like sometimes communicating



with other students is hard because we don't see each other.

I am hoping that things will go back to normal next year.

### Eye strain

*Eliseo Angulo Lopez is a junior at Luther Burbank High School:*

Although distance learning is new for many of us, it will not stop me from reaching my goals. Through these past two months, students like me have found the new schedule helpful and less confusing. In addition, writing on a computer is way more simple than writing on a piece of paper, and having the internet available and the possibility of investigating any information that you need in order to completely understand a lecture is by far something that we should never miss out on.

The only negative thing that I've found is that spending these many hours in front of a monitor or screen can be really damaging, causing eye strain and headaches from which I've personally already experienced. In order to prevent this from happening, I suggest having one Monday off every 2-3 weeks, one day off to add to your weekend in which you can spend

more time with your family and less time looking at a screen, which is what we do all week. This change can be really helpful to avoid stress and maintain a more positive mindset.

### "Distance learning has been really good"

*Masihullah Shafiq is a junior at Luther Burbank High School:*

For some people, distance learning can be stressful and boring, but overall my experience with distance learning has been really good. Just like before when we went to school, I haven't missed any classes or assignments. I also have good grades.

The positive thing about distance learning is that we don't have to go class and I get enough rest, even though sometimes we have so much work to do sitting in front of the screen all day makes your eyes and your brain really tired, and it's also unhealthy.

I sometimes struggle with getting my assignments done because I won't have enough time, or in some cases, there are lots of assignments to do, and I can't get all of them done on time. For now, I'm not really struggling with any of my classes, but it is sometimes really

difficult to manage your time with distance learning.

The downside to it is sitting in front of a screen all day and sometimes technical issues; sometimes the teachers struggle with getting all the students into Zoom because the Zoom keeps dropping them, and in some cases, the internet does not work, and students can't get into Zoom, which leaves them behind from others, and they will have to catch up later.

In general, distance learning is not so different from going to school, and in my opinion, it's better with distance learning since it makes things much easier if we don't have technical issues, which we often don't. I don't know if it's just me or not, but I learn better with distance learning than going to school, so I prefer distance learning. I also have to say my teachers are doing really well, and so far, I have not had any problems or difficulties asking questions or learning. ■

*Thanks to Cathy, Julia, Eliseo, and Masihullah for their contributions!*

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

Copyright ©2021 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder.

Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source.

For additional print or electronic copies of a Spotlight or to buy in bulk, visit [www.edweek.org/info/about/reprints.html](http://www.edweek.org/info/about/reprints.html)

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

EducationWeek®

# 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](http://www.edweek.org/go/spotlights)