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The Results Are In for Remote Learning: It Didn't Work

The pandemic forced schools into a crash course in online education. Problems piled up quickly. 'I find it hectic and stressful'

By [Tawnell D. Hobbs](#) and [Lee Hawkins](#)

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This spring, America took an involuntary crash course in remote learning. With the school year now winding down, the grade from students, teachers, parents and administrators is already in: It was a failure.

School districts closed campuses in March in response to the coronavirus pandemic and, with practically no time at all for planning or training, launched a grand experiment to educate more than 50 million students from kindergarten through 12th grade using technology.

The problems began piling up almost immediately. There were students with no computers or internet access. Teachers had no experience with remote learning. And many parents weren't available to help.

In many places, lots of students simply didn't show up online, and administrators had no good way to find out why not. Soon many districts weren't requiring students to do any work at all, increasing the risk that millions of students would have big gaps in their learning.

"We all know there's no substitute for learning in a school setting, and many students are struggling and falling far behind where they should be," said Austin Beutner, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, in a video briefing to the community on Wednesday.



Boston public-school teacher Princess Bryant teaches her kindergarten class via videoconference from her apartment.

PHOTO: BRIAN SNYDER/REUTERS

Already, school administrators are looking ahead to an uncertain fall, when many will be trying to apply lessons gleaned from the rocky spring to try to reopen classrooms, possibly using a mix of in-person and remote learning. To prevent a repeat of the spring disaster, some of them say, more students will need suitable electronic devices and internet access, and teachers will need much better training about how best to instruct from afar.

Preliminary research suggests students nationwide will return to school in the fall with roughly 70% of learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year, and less than 50% in math, according to projections by NWEA, an Oregon-based nonprofit that provides research to help educators tailor instruction. It expects a greater learning loss for minority and low-income children who have less access to technology, and for families more affected by the economic downturn.

Even though many students these days are tech savvy, that doesn't ensure they will do well with remote learning. Some education experts say there is a huge gap between what students can do for fun on their cellphones and gaming systems and how good they are at using a device for educational tasks such as reading a document, answering a question or figuring out a problem.

"I think we have this assumption that since they spend all their time on their devices, it's no big deal for them to learn remotely," said Janella Hinds, a social-studies teacher at the 500-student High School for Public Service in Brooklyn's Flatbush neighborhood. "But being a digital consumer and a digital learner are two different things."

Parents, for their part, are frustrated after more than two months of trying to supervise their children's at-home learning while juggling jobs and other responsibilities.

“It’s been very challenging,” said Mara LaViola, who has a 17-year-old son with autism and other disabilities in the Eanes Independent School District in Austin, Texas. Initially, she figured she would be more tolerant of teaching shortcomings during such an unprecedented time. But she was dismayed that her son’s interaction with teachers didn’t extend much beyond a morning greeting.

“The vast majority of it failed because of a lack of imagination, and a lack of effort,” she said.

Molly May, the district’s executive director of special education, said she felt “all of our students got a high-level of services given the platform and their ability to access remote learning. Teachers were innovative and creative and tried to meet the needs of each child.”

School districts and teachers that had previously used forms of online learning made the transition more easily. But many educators, even those comfortable with the method, say remote learning isn’t comparable to in-person teaching.

“I find it hectic and stressful,” said Dallas middle-school teacher Delna Bryan, whose advanced Spanish classes include both fluent and nonfluent youngsters. “In the classroom, I can look around and see body language and know when some of my students not fluent in Spanish need me to switch to English. I can’t do that online. We need the interaction with the kids, face-to-face.”

Districts are now debating what they should do when schools reopen for the next academic year—whether to rewind back to where students left off in March, or to plow ahead with the regular curriculum and let teachers fill in missing skills. Some plan to administer exams at the start of the school year to gauge learning shortfalls.

School districts didn’t realize the number of students without access to devices and the internet until they surveyed parents. Districts that could afford to do so hurried to buy the technology needed to get students online. Some, such as those in Austin and Belleville, Ill., put Wi-Fi wired buses in parking lots for students to connect from their parents’ cars. Many districts prepared printed packets of work for students without online access, which were handed out in food drive-through lines at schools.

One major issue has been how to assess students fairly when learning is done remotely. Many school districts aren’t comfortable issuing grades for remote work. Some have told teachers not to give failing grades because of equity issues. Many are using a “hold harmless” approach, where grades that negatively affect students can’t be used, but ones that help them or are neutral are permitted. Some teachers believe the rule has simply resulted in students not doing work.



A student received a laptop computer for remote learning at Bell High School in Bell, Calif., in April.

PHOTO: FREDERIC J. BROWN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Others worry that remote learning facilitates cheating. "Whatever work we're receiving online may not always necessarily be the work completed by the child," said Alexa Sorden, founding principal of Concourse Village Elementary School in the Bronx.

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Some of the nation's largest school districts, including Los Angeles and Chicago, concerned about inequities in internet access and parental involvement, have told teachers not to give students failing final grades or anything lower than what they had before the shutdown. Washington state banned "F" grades in all of its districts.

"We can't use the shutdown to fail them," said Michael Hinojosa, superintendent of the Dallas Independent School District in Texas. "And some teachers are really good with this and some of them are not. We didn't want to penalize people until we can make it better."

Dr. Hinojosa said students won't be failed for not completing remote work assignments, but those already failing before the pandemic who didn't do any work will still fail. He said teachers can give an "incomplete" to students who fell short of passing but are willing to complete the work over the summer.

Many teachers unions have been supportive of not grading students because of inequities, although some of their members feel like it allows students to slack off.

Remote learning has turned the simple task of taking attendance into a challenge. Many count students as present if they log in to do work in programs like Google Classroom, an online

classroom manager. Some give attendance credit for weekly progress on completed work, while others allow parents to call in to vouch for their children. Some districts aren't bothering with attendance at all. Those that have been able to track attendance say it has been below regular levels.



'It's simply not acceptable that we lose touch' with students, said Austin Beutner, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District.

PHOTO: DAMIAN DOVARGANES/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Some students have simply gone missing. Early into the shutdown, the Los Angeles Unified School District estimated that on any given day in a week span, 32% of high-school students didn't log in to learn.

Mr. Beutner, the Los Angeles superintendent, said at the time that some of those missing are among the most vulnerable—those in the foster-care system or living in deep poverty, students with disabilities and those who regularly missed school in ordinary times.

"It's simply not acceptable that we lose touch," he said, while noting that the number of students logging in has grown as the district worked to provide students with laptops and internet access.

Some districts have opted to end the academic year early. The Bibb County School District in Georgia wrapped up on May 1, three weeks ahead of time. Officials cited stress on the community and said they planned to use the time to get ready for next school year.

The Quitman Independent School District in Texas stopped giving new assignments two weeks before the school year ended to focus on teaching life skills. Based on their age, students were asked to complete tasks ranging from making a bed to changing a tire to reading a bill.

"Parents are overwhelmed," said Rhonda Turner, superintendent of the 1,200-student Quitman district. "It seemed like a perfect time to implement this. We've had a phenomenal response"

from students and parents.

Lucia Curatolo-Boylan, a mother of four children, ages 4 to 10, in New York City public schools, found supervising the schooling a challenge. “It was definitely more difficult than I probably could have ever expected,” she said. “There was a lot that my oldest son was able to do on his own, which was wonderful. But the other two children really required my constant supervision and presence, which made it also harder to be there for my baby. Her nursery school education of her letters and numbers is quickly disappearing and not a priority because I had to sit with my kindergartner from 9 to 2 every day.”

Her son, 10-year-old Miles, has found remote learning exhausting and unpredictable. “Sometimes you have a lot of work and sometimes you don’t,” he said, recalling a time when he worked “almost an entire school day on three things.”

Some schools, particularly those with ample resources and some experience with remote learning, had a far easier time of it than most.





Ms. Curatolo-Boylan says she hasn't had enough time to work with her 4-year-old daughter, Mara Jane Boylan, on top, because the schoolwork of two of her older children requires so much supervision.

PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2)

In Broward County Public Schools in Florida, the district had been building its technology program for several years and many teachers were already managing classwork online, so things have gone more smoothly. Nevertheless, a survey of Broward students in grades 6 through 12 found that 52% don't feel motivated to complete distance-learning assignments. About 45% said they almost never receive adult help at home to complete assignments.

Administrators at Riverdale Country School, a private school in New York City, said their foray into online learning was successful, thanks to careful preparation and execution and having the resources to pull it off. The transition involved a month of infrastructure design and collaboration between administrators, teachers, the school's technology team, students and parents.

Faculty and students participated in one-hour training sessions during the school day, and the school closed for two days before its spring break for a remote learning trial run.

As the school year comes to a close, districts are focused on making improvements. Some will use summer break to retool remote learning, provide teachers with professional training to use it, and work to outfit students with needed technology, with hopes of using federal stimulus money to do so.

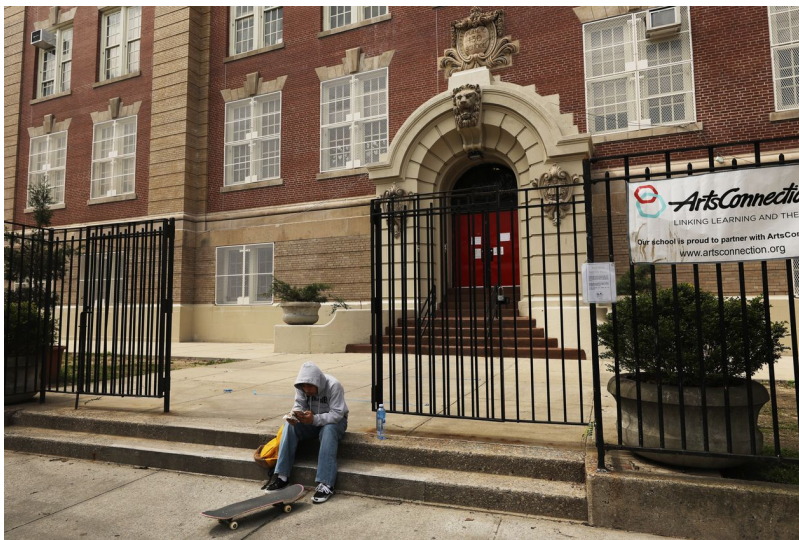
About 9.7 million students aren't connected to the internet, according to an estimate by the EducationSuperHighway, a nonprofit focused on connectivity in public schools. "As a nation, we were not prepared to take learning online," said founder and CEO Evan Marwell.

Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, West Virginia and Washington, D.C., have the largest percentage of unconnected students, ranging from 26% to 28%, more than the national average

of about 20%. New Hampshire, North Dakota and Utah have the lowest percentage, ranging from 10% to 12%.

Many districts plan to offer summer school, likely remotely, to get students caught up and help combat “Covid slide.” But some educators worry that the same remote learning that wasn’t effective in the spring won’t have changed much for summer.

New York City Department of Education will provide remedial instruction over the summer and possibly in the fall to thousands of students who have fallen behind during remote classes this spring. Officials expect about 177,000 of the city’s 1.1 million public-school students to enroll in remote summer learning, with about 102,000 of them required to take part.



New York City intends to provide remedial instruction over the summer and possibly in the fall to thousands of students who have fallen behind during remote classes.

PHOTO: SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

School superintendents differ on how to reopen schools in the fall using social-distancing practices. Many are contemplating a hybrid system of splitting up classes and rotating students in and out of classrooms, with some reporting to the school on some days while the others work remotely. Another strategy being explored is to have younger students who can’t be home alone in classrooms every day, while older students learn at home.

To keep everyone safe, districts are considering new rules such as requiring students and teachers to wear masks, having students eat lunch in classrooms and requiring them to attend school in person only two days a week. Other possibilities include prohibiting the sharing of school supplies and the spacing of desks closer than 6 feet apart, and limiting parents and other visitors on campuses.

Educators hope that the rockiest days of remote learning are behind them.

“We’ve been building this plane and flying it at the same time,” said Danielle Buttacavoli, a school counselor at IS 61, the William A. Morris Intermediate School, in Staten Island. “We’ve been getting stronger at using these platforms, and I think the same goes for the students.”

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