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A pandemic year

How the pandemic is reshaping education

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The coronavirus pandemic upended almost every aspect of school at once. It was not just the move from classrooms to computer screens. It tested basic ideas about instruction, attendance, testing, funding, the role of technology and the human connections that hold it all together.

A year later, a rethinking is underway, with a growing sense that some changes may last.

“There may be an opportunity to reimagine what schools will look like,” Education Secretary Miguel Cardona told The Washington Post. “It’s always important we continue to think about how to evolve schooling so the kids get the most out of it.”

Others in education see a similar opening. The pandemic pointed anew to glaring inequities of race, disability and income. Learning loss is getting new attention. Schools with poor ventilation systems are being slotted for upgrades. Teachers who made it through a crash course in teaching virtually are finding lessons that endure.

“There are a lot of positives that will happen because we’ve been forced into this uncomfortable situation,” said Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA, the school superintendents association. “The reality is that this is going to change education forever.”

[Parents and teachers: How are your kids handling school during the pandemic?]

School by screen

Remote learning keeps going

School systems in America are not done with remote learning. They want more of it. After a year when some systems did nothing but school by computer screen, it has become clear that learning virtually has a place in the nation's schools, if simply as an option.

"It's like a genie that is out of the bottle, and I don't think you can get it back in," said Paul Reville, former Massachusetts secretary of education and founding director of Harvard University's Education Redesign Lab at the Graduate School of Education. "In many respects, this is overdue."

Few suggest that remote learning is for everyone. The pandemic showed, unmistakably, that most students learn best in person — in a three-dimensional world, led by a teacher, surrounded by classmates and activities.

[Do you have questions about how D.C.-area school systems are returning kids to the classroom? Ask The Post.]

But school systems across the country are looking at remote learning as a way to meet diverse needs — for teenagers who have jobs, children with certain medical conditions, or kids who prefer learning virtually.

It has also emerged as a way to expand access to less-common courses. If one high school offers a class in Portuguese, students at another school could join it remotely.

Colorado's second-largest school system, Jeffco Public Schools, recently announced a full-time remote learning program across grade levels. Students would regularly interact with teachers, have mostly live instruction, and stay connected to their neighborhood schools, meeting with a staff member at least once a week.

To make it work, some of the system's teachers would only be remote. Parent interest was one impetus for the program.

"We're taking all that we have learned from the pandemic — and others have learned — and going with it," said Matt Walsh, a community superintendent, who estimated that 1,000 to 2,500 students will enroll during the first year, starting this fall.

In the Washington region, suburban Montgomery County is exploring the creation of a virtual academy for full-time online instruction. Parents have advocated for a program for some time, said Gboyinde Onijala, a spokeswoman.

“The pandemic has helped us see that it is possible and can be done well,” she said.

A study by the Rand Corp., a nonprofit research organization, found about 2 in 10 school systems were adopting virtual schools, or planning or considering the idea. It was the innovative practice that the greatest number of district leaders surveyed said would outlast the pandemic.

Not everyone imagines the same path forward.

“Remote learning is a supplement, not a substitute, for in-school instruction,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, emphasizing that classroom learning is best for most students and that remote school can mean intense isolation.

“Staring at a screen all day is not optimal,” Weingarten said. “Zoom fatigue is real.”

The quality of remote learning varied widely among school districts, with parents complaining about the lack of live instruction and individual attention as well as technical difficulties. Even many families who want remote learning to continue want it improved.

Remote learning has also meant a spike in failing grades for the most vulnerable students in some areas, including English language learners. And across the country an unprecedented number of students have gone off the radar even as schools try to track them down.

Kevin Dougherty, a Laytonsville, Md., parent, said that while remote education has worked for some families, most kids have struggled — and the toll on mental health and social well-being is hard to ignore. Any program, he said, should be operated by the state, with a dedicated budget so “the needs of virtual learning don’t interfere with in-person learning, and vice versa.”

Katie McIntyre, a mother of two in Damascus, Md., said that for her family, virtual classes were “wonderful experiences” — especially for her 10-year-old daughter who has autism and is gifted. Teachers have gone above and beyond.

“If I had any opportunity to do this again, I would,” she said.
— Donna St. George

The great catch-up

Schools set to attack lost learning

Could this pandemic year — when so many children fell so far behind, when students dropped off the radar, when teachers could hardly tell who understood what as they tried to teach from a distance — could this be the year that American education gets serious about helping kids catch up?

An infusion of cash from Washington and a new determination from educators across the country are laying the groundwork for an unprecedented combination of summer programming and high-intensity tutoring, all aimed at helping children recover from what was, for some, a lost year.

What's more, some believe that once this infrastructure is in place, it could last for years, especially if it shows results.

"We've got a big opportunity to do it much better, to really come up with practices that are actually going to catch kids up. If that sticks, it's revolutionary," said Dan Weisberg, chief executive of TNTP, a nonprofit group that focuses on effective teaching.

['A lost generation': Surge of research reveals students sliding backward, most vulnerable worst affected]

The coronavirus rescue package signed into law by President Biden includes almost $123 billion for public K-12 schools, and districts are required to spend at least 20 percent of their funding on evidence-based interventions to address learning loss. Districts across the country are now gearing up programming for this summer and beyond.

They are also rethinking what the great catch-up should look like, with many shifting the focus from remediation to acceleration, or what's sometimes called "accelerated learning."

With remediation, the goal is to make up what a child missed the first time around. Some call it meeting students "where they are."

The problem is students may never catch up. Accelerated learning, by contrast, seeks to make grade-level work accessible to those who are behind through a combination of intensive help and modifications.

So if a child is behind in reading, he might be given the grade- level text along with tools to make it more accessible, such as a plot summary or a list of characters, or perhaps the audiobook version.

“Instead of segregating these children and trying to give them what they didn’t learn, you say to yourself, ‘What must they know in order to stick with their peers and have access to next week’s lesson?’” said David Steiner, executive director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy and former education commissioner for New York state. “The key is you’re always asking yourself, ‘What do they need for next week?’ not ‘What did they miss?’”

That’s the approach that Alabama is encouraging for its districts, said Eric Mackey, the state’s schools superintendent.

“We are afraid that when we come back, many of our students are going to be way behind,” Mackey said. “Even if we said, ‘We just need to catch them up to where we were,’ where we were isn’t good enough.”

He said there is simply not enough time for teachers to make up all the lost material. Reteaching is unrealistic, so he is recommending that schools try accelerated learning.

“It’s a shift for most of our districts,” he said. “It’s something that everybody wants to do, but in the past we’ve had neither the time nor resources to really do that.”

The movement is also underway in Los Angeles. L.A. County Superintendent of Schools Debra Duardo, who works with 80 districts, said educators have been thinking about accelerated learning for a long time, but the deep losses of the last year have prompted them to try something new.

“In the past we have done a lot of remedial work and we’re finding we need to have really high expectations, finding ways of keeping students at the level they should be … not just giving them the same stuff all over again,” she said. “We’re looking at this as an opportunity to think about the whole system about what’s working and what’s not working and how we can improve.”
— Laura Meckler

When students struggle

More support for mental health

The mental health struggles of the nation’s schoolchildren will outlast the pandemic, and so too will school districts’ efforts to meet the far-reaching need.

“We’re getting countless questions from districts that are asking, ‘How do we do this?’ ” said Sharon Hoover, a professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and co-director of the National Center for School Mental Health.

A year into the pandemic, counselors and others in mental health report an increasing number of students who are depressed or anxious. Hoover says that 75 percent of students who get mental health services get them at school.

With the need so great, she expects schools to hire more staff and to forge partnerships with community mental health providers. In many cases, therapists are based at schools, working with students and families on campus.

“I think we will see more of this,” said Hoover, who once worked as a school-based therapist in Baltimore public schools.

[Partly hidden by isolation, many of the nation’s schoolchildren struggle with mental health]

Some school systems have started to expand mental health services. In Broward County, Fla., which was rocked in 2018 by the fatal shootings of 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, the school district was already attentive to mental health issues.

Following the mass shooting, it put at least one mental health professional on staff at each of its nearly 240 schools and opened a hotline. But a survey of students and families after the pandemic began revealed another wave of mental health needs.

The 2020-21 school year opened with a focus on mental health, mindfulness, social-emotional learning and equitable distribution of support, said Antoine Hickman, chief of Broward public schools’ student support initiatives. Schools were required to start every day with 10 minutes of mindfulness.

The district stationed a nurse in every school because “nurses are at the front line of mental health,” he said, and more support was added to the hotline. Teletherapy was arranged when in-person services were not possible. A new app — “Tell Another. Listening is Key” (T.A.L.K.) — on students’ learning platforms enabled them to confidentially request mental health support or report abuse.

Mental health services will continue, Hickman said, because the problems the pandemic caused won’t disappear.

In New York City, the country's largest school district, Meisha Ross Porter, who is taking over as chancellor on Monday, said this month that schools were already arranging for guidance counseling check-ins with students — a step that added to other recent supports, including teacher training on dealing with trauma, grief and self-care.

Last October, 26 schools in neighborhoods hardest hit by covid- 19 were connected to outpatient mental health clinics, therapy, evaluation and other clinical services. Plans are in the works to hire 150 social workers.

But in some school districts, mental health interventions underway are "relevant but insufficient," according to Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor, co-directors of the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools.

Too often the focus is on hiring more support staff, increasing education and expanding social-emotional learning but, they said, those are "often unrealistic and usually produce counterproductive competition for sparse resources."

What's also essential, they said, is unifying the district's services and then weaving in community and home resources "to develop a comprehensive and equitable system of student learning supports."
— Donna St. George and Valerie Strauss

Connected at home

Laptops and hotspots likely to stick around

Before the pandemic began, millions of students got by without a computer or Internet connection at home. The "homework gap," by which some students could Google their way through research papers and others could not, was derided by policymakers but, like so many other inequities in education, it persisted.

Over the last year, by necessity, the vast majority of students have been connected. Millions of devices and hotspots have been purchased and distributed. The question now is: Will this new, more equitable arrangement persist? Most say yes.

In Texas, officials are looking into a plan that would bring broadband connections to every K-12 student beyond the pandemic, funded by a combination of state and local dollars.

The coronavirus rescue package signed into law by Biden includes more than $7 billion for the Federal Communications Commission to fund at-home Internet connections and devices through the E-rate program, which typically pays for service in school buildings and libraries. Pressure is mounting on the FCC to also use regular E-rate funding to connect students at home.

The FCC has yet to rule. But acting commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel has called the homework gap the most important issue of digital equity facing the nation and said the pandemic provided the incentive needed to finally address it.

“The days when out-of-school learning required only paper and pencil are long gone. Today, students live their lives online and use Internet-based resources for so much of modern education,” she wrote last spring.

Some argue an expansion would put too much pressure on the Universal Service Fund that pays for service and is funded by telecom user fees, but proponents say it’s urgent. A change in the FCC’s rules depends in part on the agency’s definition of “educational purposes.” Since the program began in 1996, that has been defined as inside school buildings.

“Our argument is even connecting people off-campus can be for educational purposes,” said John Windhausen Jr., founder and executive director of the Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband Coalition. “Education does not only happen at school. Kids do homework at night and that’s education.”

For now, he hopes that some schools use the $7 billion in new E- rate funding to go beyond handing out hotspot devices to families who need them, and to deploy new wireless networks that can serve many homes and live beyond the pandemic.

In the meantime, school districts have invested millions of dollars to buy devices for students that should last for several years, and students have become accustomed to doing schoolwork at home. Some also see benefits beyond direct education. Parents whose schedules make coming to the school difficult can now easily arrange a 10- or 15-minute online conversation with a teacher.

It adds up to a no-turning-back moment, said Richard Culatta, chief executive of the International Society for Technology in Education, a large nonprofit focused on helping teachers use technology to improve quality of learning.

“There’s been a huge amount of work to build out the infrastructure,” he said. He estimates that the share of districts that provide every student with a device has jumped from about

one-third to about 80 percent. It was necessitated by the pandemic but will persist, he said, especially if schools figure out how to best use the technology to advance learning most effectively. “I don’t think there’s a question the technology will stay around.”
— Laura Meckler

Rethinking attendance

Who attends, who is absent

What it means to be in school is in flux.

For decades, students took their places at desks in classrooms, as teachers recorded who was there and who was not. But as schools shuttered and students began to learn remotely, the conventions of taking attendance through “seat time” fell away.

School systems scrambled to come up with new ways to define attendance in remote school. Was it enough just to log in for the day or tune into a Zoom class? States took varied approaches.

In Connecticut, students need to spend half of the day in learning activities, including live classes, independent work and time logged into an electronic system. In Alaska, they are counted as present whether or not they log on, with the state viewing remote learning as similar to a correspondence course.

“The pandemic wreaked havoc with measuring attendance,” said Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, a national nonprofit initiative that has tracked state policies.

The hodgepodge may well continue this fall, as many school systems continue to offer families the option of remote learning. Beyond that, a number of school systems are also planning virtual programs as a more lasting effort, for students who need or want to learn that way.

For many school leaders, the issue was a balancing act as they tried to support students who may be in crisis — as covid-19 has claimed lives and left many workers strapped and jobless — but also draw them into school.

Without reliable ways to track attendance, it's harder to recognize patterns in chronic absenteeism — a major worry before the pandemic that is worsening, experts say. High rates of absenteeism are linked to academic failure and dropping out of school.

In Connecticut, described as the first state to produce monthly statewide data on the issue, the percentage of chronically absent students as of January was 21.3 percent — a 75 percent jump over a year earlier.

Harder hit were some of the most vulnerable students. The rate of chronic absenteeism for English learners more than doubled to 36 percent, and the rate for students from free meal-eligible families shot up by 78 percent, to roughly the same level.

"It's pretty troubling," Chang said. Some say it's past time to rethink attendance more broadly, to focus on mastery of skills and content.
"It's not about seat time," said Robert Hull, president of the National Association of State Boards of Education. "It's about engagement. I think as a result of this pandemic we can see some innovation in that area."
— Donna St. George