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‘No Going Back’ From Remote and Hybrid Learning, Districts Say

By Benjamin Herold — January 07, 2021 13 min read

Teresa Vazquez, a teacher in Fort Wayne, Ind., remotely teaches a Spanish 1 class to students at Monroe High School in Albany, Ga.
— Courtesy of Elevate K-12

Many teachers hate it. Millions of parents find it exhausting. A growing body of evidence suggests it has contributed to students falling significantly behind.

Regardless, livestreamed remote instruction is set to remain a significant part of K-12 education, long after the coronavirus pandemic is finally under control.

“There’s no going back now,” said Pedro Martinez, superintendent of the 49,000-student public school system in San Antonio, Texas, where voters recently approved a $90 million bond to pay for new technology–including cameras and microphones that will be used to broadcast teachers working from their classrooms into the homes of thousands of students learning remotely across the city.

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That’s just one of the models for live (“synchronous”) instruction-by-videoconference that has taken hold in the nation’s schools. Since March, districts have distributed tens of millions of digital devices while making massive investments in at-home connectivity, creating almost overnight the infrastructure necessary to support widespread experimentation.

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As a result, teachers and students in many communities now spend hours each day interacting via Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams. In Guilford County, N.C., local education leaders took just six weeks to stand up two new full-time virtual academies, which at one point this fall served nearly 10 percent of the district’s 73,000 students. In Dougherty County, Ga., a company that bills itself as the “Peloton of Education” provides the short-staffed local school district with certified teachers who livestream their lessons onto students’ laptops from hundreds of miles away.

“We really like the flexibility,” said Superintendent Kenneth Dyer.

For America’s schools, COVID-19 isn’t just a public health crisis. It’s also a budget crisis and a mental health crisis, an academic crisis and a racial-justice crisis. No one yet knows the full severity and duration of the resulting challenges. But a dozen experts consulted by Education Week–district leaders and pediatricians, economists and parents, ed-tech entrepreneurs and policy researchers–see a confluence of forces that will likely fuel continued demand for remote teaching.

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For starters, clinical COVID-19 vaccine trials are just now beginning for younger children, meaning there’s little reason to believe that most of America’s 51 million public school students will be vaccinated by the start of the 2021-22 school year. The nation’s stagnant economy has also drained state coffers, leading many experts to predict that the nation’s school districts will continue to slash personnel. Even before the pandemic, many schools were facing a severe shortage of highly qualified teachers, especially in rural areas.

And perhaps the biggest wildcard is a surge in interest in remote schooling from a small but significant subset of families. Tired of the constant microaggressions and racial discrimination that sapped their children’s spirit in traditional school, some parents of color report feeling empowered by remote learning, which has given them new visibility into classroom instruction, curricular materials, and how the adults in public schools are behaving.

“They’re not likely to give that up,” said Annette Anderson, an assistant education professor at Johns Hopkins University, where she also serves as the deputy director of the Center for Safe & Healthy Schools.

Add it all up, and it’s easy to see why players in the nation’s multi-billion dollar ed-tech industry sense opportunity.

Back in 1997, for example, Michael Chasen helped create the popular learning-management system Blackboard. Fifteen years later, a private equity group bought his company for $1.7 billion. Now, Chasen is back in the game, launching last summer a new company that aims to make Zoom more suitable for education, by adding functions such as assignments, interactive quizzes, and an attention-tracking feature that allows teachers to monitor what students are viewing on their screens. ClassEDU has already raised $16 million in venture capital.

Remote instruction has “passed the acceptance barrier,” said Chasen, who described the past eight months as hands-on training in online education for millions of students and teachers.

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For some observers, though, that’s cause for concern. The push to make permanent a temporary “solution” intended as an emergency stopgap fits a long tradition of schools throwing good money after bad when it comes to ed tech, said researcher Audrey Watters, author of the forthcoming book *Teaching Machines*.

“I don’t think making Zoom more quiz-friendly is particularly interesting,” Watters said. “I wish we would just make a commitment to fund schools and prioritize the safety of students and teachers.”

And for Jenny Radesky, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Michigan who studies the ways mobile technology affects child development, the sooner most children can step outside the current “flattened, two-dimensional, technology-mediated” version of school, the better.

“We’ve all been through this traumatic experience together,” Radesky said. “Kids are going to have to heal. The way that happens is through positive relationships.”

Following are inside looks at how three school districts are seeking to pursue remote and hybrid instruction next school year and beyond.

Making ‘Hybrid’ Instruction Permanent (San Antonio, Texas)

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Before shutting its physical doors last March to help slow the spread of COVID-19, the San Antonio Independent School District offered “pretty close to zero” live remote instruction, according to Superintendent Pedro Martinez.

Over the ensuing months, however, the district purchased 30,000 Chromebooks, distributed thousands of mobile hotspots, adopted a new learning management system, and worked with city and state officials to help build fiber-optic networks in neighborhoods around the city. And after the district lost touch with one-fourth of its elementary students last spring, when most of the city’s elementary schools could offer only an hour or so per day of live instruction, officials decided to change their approach.

During the first half of this school year, almost all of San Antonio ISD’s 3,200 teachers provided live “hybrid” instruction from their schools. About 30 percent of their students were physically present in the classroom, while the remaining 70 percent followed along remotely from home.

Still, there were problems. For teachers, trying to keep in-person students engaged while also remaining visible on-camera for remote students proved particularly challenging.

“Our best teachers are very energetic,” Martinez said. “They asked for additional equipment, so they can move around.”
That’s why the district decided at the last minute to include in its $90 million bond proposal money for 1,600 camera-and-microphone rigs from a company called Swivl. The gear automatically follows teachers as they circulate in their classrooms, with the aim of creating a more dynamic livestreaming experience for remote students.

> I want that flexibility, as long as we can show children are still learning.
>
> Pedro Martinez, superintendent, San Antonio public schools

Martinez said the purchase is a long-term investment that can help his district maintain hybrid instruction, even after coronavirus-related restrictions eventually end.

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“I think the right mix is the reverse of what we have now,” the superintendent said. “My ideal is when we can have 70 percent of students in-person and 30 percent remote.”

San Antonio isn’t alone. Ten percent of district leaders surveyed by the RAND Corporation last fall said they had adopted or were considering a similar hybrid instructional model. Another 19 percent said they were at least considering offering ongoing remote instruction, perhaps to specific subsets of students or to keep all children learning during weather emergencies.

To make that vision more feasible, some education leaders are already pushing for state-level policy changes. Since the coronavirus hit, for example, the Texas Education Agency has allowed schools to include remote instruction when calculating student attendance. Martinez is advocating that state officials make that change permanent.

“I want that flexibility,” he said, “as long as we can show children are still learning.”

‘Peloton,’ But for Classroom Teachers (Dougherty County, Ga.)

Ed-tech entrepreneur Shaily Baranwal believes the nation is weary of remote learning because it too often amounts to little more than kids watching online videos.

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To rectify that, Elevate K-12 offers districts certified teachers who live all over the country, but run synchronous classes that can be livestreamed anywhere.

“Like Peloton,” Baranwal said, referencing the fitness-equipment juggernaut whose exercise instructors livestream workout classes via the tablets mounted on riders’ stationary cycles.

So far, Elevate K-12’s footprint is relatively small, with about 700 live classes delivered to roughly 200 schools per day. Baranwal said that figure is up 93 percent from last school year. A little over half the company’s current clients are fully remote, while the rest are mostly hybrid.

Among Elevate K-12’s power users is the 14,000-student Dougherty County, Ga., public schools, which serves the small city of Albany and its poor, mostly rural surroundings. The district first contracted with Elevate K-12 during the 2017-18 school year, using live certified teachers instead of paraprofessionals or software programs to provide remedial math and reading help to small groups of struggling students.

Superintendent Kenneth Dyer was so happy with the results he turned to Elevate K-12 to help solve an even bigger problem. His district employs about 1,000 teachers across 21 schools. But it often started the school year with as many as 50 vacancies.

> If everyone could have an effective teacher physically in the classroom at all times, we would certainly prefer that. But that's not possible in every school system in the country.
>
> Kenneth Dyer, superintendent, Dougherty County, Ga., public schools

In a country that is short an estimated 100,000 teachers or more, that’s a common problem, said Emma García, an economist with the Economic Policy Institute. And while clear data on COVID-19-related teacher retirements, resignations, and layoffs remain difficult to come by, cratering state budgets offer plenty of reason to believe that shortage is about to get worse.

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“We know from plenty of previous recessions that after a crisis, there’s a cut in the number education jobs,” García said.

Dyer cautioned against hiring third-party instructors as a cost-saving measure. His district now pays Elevate K-12 for 15 remote teachers, most of whom are live-streamed onto large-screen televisions in physical classrooms that students attend in person. The district saves some money, because it doesn’t have to provide benefits to the teachers. But there are also added costs, Dyer said, such as paying paraprofessionals to help with classroom management when a physical teacher isn’t present.

That fits with advice from García and other experts, who stressed that no matter what schooling looks like in 2021 and beyond, the combination of learning loss and trauma that children and families have experienced will require *more* educators, not less.

The real value of live remote instruction, according to Dyer, is flexibility. If there’s an Advanced Placement course that 10 students at one high school and 10 students at a separate high school hope to take, Dougherty County can now contract with Elevate K-12 for a single remote teacher who can be livestreamed into both schools simultaneously. There are also options to hire Elevate K-12 teachers to provide synchronous instruction for just three or four days a week, or just a few periods a day.

Some may worry about converting teaching into “gig work,” with educators going from being professional unionized employees to becoming independent contractors along the lines of Uber drivers. (Baranwal responded by saying that Elevate K-12 teachers, 83 percent of whom are women, “want the flexibility to work at the hours that work best for them.”)

And an even more fundamental concern is that even the best live remote instruction is a poor substitute for face-to-face teaching.

On that, the Dougherty County superintendent agreed—to a point.

“If everyone could have an effective teacher physically in the classroom at all times, we would certainly prefer that,” Dyer said. “But that’s not possible in every school system in the country.”

A New Choice for Parents (Guilford County, N.C.)

Officials in the 73,000-student Guilford County, N.C., school system learned something surprising from their COVID-driven foray into remote learning.

“It offers parents a unique opportunity to be much more deeply involved in their children’s education,” Superintendent Sharon Contreras said. “They actually get to observe instruction regularly. That hasn’t happened before.”

Prior to last school year, online offerings in Guilford County consisted mostly of asynchronous supplemental and credit-recovery courses for high school students. The district was still recovering from an ill-fated experiment with 1-to-1 computing several years earlier, and schools still had to contend with a significant digital divide in the surrounding community. As a result, teachers’ live instruction availability was limited to an hour or so per day in the weeks immediately after the coronavirus hit.

Many parents weren’t happy. So this summer, the district decided to triple the amount of live remote instruction schools offered.

“Expectations changed dramatically,” said Chief Academic Officer Whitney Oakley.

She and Contreras wanted to avoid hybrid instruction as much as possible, believing it’s not realistic to ask teachers to teach in two fundamentally different ways at the same time. They also wanted to provide certainty to parents who knew last summer they wouldn’t send their children back to physical school at all during the 2020-21 school year. And the biggest challenge they faced was funding: There wasn’t enough money to allow teachers to be all-remote or all-in person *and* to allow for appropriate social distancing inside classrooms.

> Parent choice is going to drive much of this conversation. Districts would be wise to think about how they're building out these new options.
>
> Annette Anderson, education professor, Johns Hopkins University

The district decided to create two of its own full-time virtual schools: The Guilford eLearning Virtual Academy, serving grades K-5, and Guilford eLearning University Prep, for grades 6-8. By mid-Fall, more than 7,000 students were enrolled in the two fully remote schools, which offered several hours of live remote instruction each day, as well as alternative scheduling options (such as evening hours) for families who needed flexibility.

Such new models of schooling have been a godsend for many parents, especially those raising Black children, said Johns Hopkins education professor Annette Anderson. The opportunity to virtually invite educators into their homes, observe how the adults in school interact with students, and protect the emotional well-being of their children has totally shifted many parents’ relationships with public schools, she said.

“Parent choice is going to drive much of this conversation,” Anderson advised. “Districts would be wise to think about how they’re building out these new options.”

According to the recent RAND Corp. survey, that process has already begun. Across the country, roughly 2 in 10 district leaders have adopted or are considering their own virtual schools for the long haul.

In Guilford County, for example, Superintendent Contreras is already planning for how to make the district’s new virtual academies permanent, as well as possibly continuing the remote instruction that is now happening from traditional schools.

There are funding and equity challenges to consider: If students move out of their home schools and into the new remote schools, for example, funding and staff will follow, a shift that some principals and parents will surely resist. As COVID-19 recedes, as is hoped, there will also likely be a closer look at exactly how remote learning has been for the nation’s students, especially those who are most vulnerable.

But Contreras said she hears the voices of parents who believe their children are thriving under the new model. She also believes there are real opportunities to better serve thousands of students who currently slip through the cracks of physical schools, often because they are homeless or raising children of their own.

“We intend to ensure that pre-K through grade 12, we continue to have some remote options for students in the future,” she said.

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