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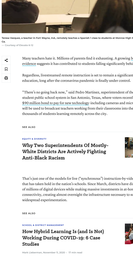
'No Going Back' From Remote and Hybrid Learning, Districts Say

By Benjamin Herold — January 27, 2021 ⏱ 10 min read



Tonya Vasquez, a teacher in Fort Wayne, Ind., everyday learner in Kaysen's class, is students at Glenn High School in Wheeler, Ind. Photo by Kaysen Kovacs for EdWeek

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

Regardless, frustrated 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 Chris Lehman, superintendent of the 49,000-student public school system in San Antonio, Texas, where voters recently approved a $570 million bond to pay for technology including cameras and microphones that will be used to broadcast teachers working from their classrooms into the homes of disconnected students who are learning from their classmates.

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Superintendent Chris Lehman of the Northeast Independent School District in San Antonio, Texas, is pushing for a bond to pay for technology that will allow teachers to broadcast their classrooms into the homes of students who are learning remotely. Photo by Kaysen Kovacs for EdWeek

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 social justice crisis. Over yet looses the full severity and duration of the resulting challenges. But a dozen experts consulted by Education Week district leaders and pediatricians, researchers and parents, tech-tech entrepreneurs and policy researchers see a confluence of forces that will likely hold continued demand for remote teaching.

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For starters, clinical COVID-19 vaccine trials are now beginning for younger children, meaning there's little reason to believe that most of America's 51 million students will be eligible for immunization before the fall of 2021 at the earliest. The nation's largest economic boom has driven financial offers, leading many experts to predict that the national's school districts will continue to shift 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 micromanagement and racial discrimination that augmed their children's spirit in traditional school, some parents of color report feeling empowered by remote learning, which has given them new opportunities to customize instruction, curriculum materials, and how and when the public schools can be during.

"They're not likely to give that up," said Annette Anderson, an assistant education professor at Johns Hopkins University, whose 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 seem optimistic.

Back in 1997, for example, Michael Chasen helped create the popular learning-management system Blackboard. Fifteen years later, a private-equity group bought the company for $4.7 billion. Now, Chasen is at the helm 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 lets teachers monitor students' screens and even lock them out of other sites. Chasen has already raised $34 million to 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.

"Making 'Hybrid' Instruction Permanent (San Antonio, Texas)

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.

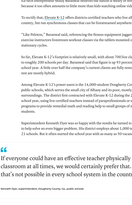
One reason for the omission, however, the district purchased 10,000 Chromebooks, distributed thousands of mobile hotspots, adopted a new learning management system, and worked with city and state officials to help build fiber optic networks. Superintendent Lehman said the district's "Hybrid" Instruction Permanent Plan of its elementary students for spring, when most of the city's schools reopened after 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 5,200 teachers provided live "hybrid" instruction from their schools. About 50 percent of their students were physically present in the classroom, while the remaining 50 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.

"Teachers are very empathetic," 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 $570 million bond proposal money for 1,400 cameras 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.



Martinez and 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 where 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 in late November said they plan to offer remote instruction to 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."

'Potious, Not for Classroom Teachers (Dougherty County, Ga.)

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

To rectify that, Elevate K-12 offers districts certified teachers who live all over the country, but no synchronous classes that can be livestreamed anywhere.

So far, Elevate K-12's footprint is relatively small, with about 700 live classes delivered to roughly 350 students per day. Basawad said this figure is up 95 percent from the 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 partners is the 24,000-student Dougherty County, Ga., school system, where about 70 percent of students are Black and live in rural surroundings. The district first contracted with Elevate K-12 during the 2019-20 school year, using live certified teachers instead of paraprofessionals or substitute 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 1,200 teachers across 23 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 Garcia, an economist with the Economic Policy Institute. And while data on COVID-19-related teacher retirements, resignations, and layoffs remain difficult to come by, centering state budgets offer plenty of reason to believe that shortage is about to get worse.

"We know from plenty of previous recessions that after a crisis, there's a cut in the number educators jobs," Garcia said.

Dyer continued against hiring third-party instructors as a cost-saving measure. His district now pays Elevate K-12 for 15 remote teaching slots, most of whom are live streamed into 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 administrators to help with classroom management when a physical teacher isn't present.

That fits with advice from Garcia 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 education, not less.

The real value of live remote instruction, according to Dyer, is flexibility. If there's an Advanced Placement course that 10 students or so in high school want to take, or separate high-school biology or calc, Dougherty County can now connect with Elevate K-12 to offer the course, without having to hire a teacher or juggle schedules 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 connecting teaching into "gizmos," with students sitting from being professional educational employees to becoming independent contractors doing the bass of Elon Jetsons. Basawad expanded by stating the Elevate K-12 teachers, 87 percent of whom are women, "want the flexibility to work at the hours that work best for them."

And as 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 71,000-student Guilford County, N.C., school system have 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," said Superintendent Sharon Contreras. "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's traditional schools, which serve students from pre-K through 12th grade from 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 to two fundamentally different sets of the same time. They also wanted to provide certainty to parents who have last summer been left scrambling to find childcare, and to avoid the disruption of the 2020-21 school year. And the biggest challenge they faced was funding. There wasn't enough money to allow teachers to be at their offices 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 School Academy, serving grades K-5, and Guilford eLearning University Prep, for grades 6-8. By mid-Feb, more than 7,000 students were enrolled in the two fully remote schools, which offered several hours of live remote instruction each day, with teachers scheduling options level as well as independent learning for students needed flexibility.

Such new models of schooling have been a gathered for many parents, especially those raising Black children, and Johns Hopkins education professor Annette Anderson. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the inequities that have long been baked into school instruct 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 zoned schools into the remote schools, for example, funding and staff will follow, a shift that some principals and parents will surely resist. An COVID-19 months, as it hoped, there will also be a fresh look at exactly how remote learning has been for the district's students, especially those who are most vulnerable.

But Contreras said she hears the voices of parents who have their children on thinking 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 we do it through, just, I, we continue to have some remote options for students in the future," she said.

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Benjamin Herold is a contributing writer covering learning environments and ed-tech issues for Education Week.

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