

# The Great Distance- Learning Experiment

By Madeline Fry

*How is our  
forced effort at  
online education  
going?*



**W**ith almost no warning this spring, America's schools closed, and more than 56 million children became part of a giant remote-learning trial. In-person instruction, over-the-shoulder help, team projects, guided lessons in music or chemistry lab—all gone. Video calls, packets in the mail, tutoring by text message—all deployed in a mad scramble.

So how is it going? Are any schools passing this crash course? What's made the difference at places that are successfully instructing from afar? Which elements are failing?

Definitive answers won't be available until the affected students continue their education at the next level. Then we'll see how much they absorbed during their episode of digital-only education. Through dozens of interviews, however, we have assembled a preliminary glimpse of what U.S. educators, students, and philanthropists produced during the Great Distance-Learning Experiment of 2020.

### The mixed bag

A child's educational success depends on a medley of factors. Family circumstances, teacher skills, school resources, and student motivation all play roles. So some children have leapt at the chance to work on line at their own pace, and thrived at remote learning. Others—like the 15,000 students unaccounted for in Los Angeles schools—have dropped off the radar completely.

A similar spectrum of performance appears among school systems. It took Philadelphia public schools 38 days from the shutdown of their brick-and-mortar schools to even begin online classes. Schools in Miami-Dade, where hurricanes are part of life and disaster preparedness is essential, transitioned quickly, and boasted an attendance rate of 92 percent. Success Academy Charter Schools in New York City decided to shift to virtual education even before the government ordered children to stay home.

Brian Greenberg, CEO of the Silicon Schools Fund, a donor-supported charity that invests in K-12 schools in Silicon Valley, says two things predicted a school's success during covid-19: A

familiarity with technology before the pandemic. And a culture of flexibility and support. Organizations capable on both fronts were able to help their students "within a day or two" of going virtual, he says. Organizations with neither competence were "stuck."

Marc Sternberg, director of K-12 programs at the Walton Family Foundation, echoes Greenberg's emphasis on culture. What separated successful from unsuccessful schools was strong leadership that yields an ability to continually adapt on the fly. It was easy enough for schools with tech savvy to quickly get Zoom running, but if they didn't have a flexible culture of problem-solving administrators and teachers, that didn't yield much learning.

Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, has been studying which schools coped well during the pandemic, and which lagged. In the first few weeks of the transition to online learning, she reports, more than half of all public school districts provided students with only very general self-administered materials, or no materials at all—and no instruction or grading. Barely one-fifth of all schools were even taking attendance. "The general picture here is initial shock," says Lake. Nearing the end of the school year, however, a majority of districts were providing instruction in one way or another, and many were also monitoring students' progress in some fashion.

The charter schools Lake studied "really stood out in terms of their progress monitoring. They were much more likely than district schools to be doing check-ins and feedback and grading." Lake notes that teacher-union contract stipulations, and concerns among district administrators, like worrying over Zoom calls being hacked, slowed many public school districts from pivoting to the new forms and content necessary for online learning. "There's this whole host of system constraints that explain why some districts are moving ahead and others aren't."

### Logging on

For schools of all types, the first step toward remote learning was very basic: Make sure students have a device and Internet connection they can use for classwork.

Success Academies was able to transition to virtual learning even before the mayor shuttered city schools because it already ran a largely paperless operation—thanks to donors who have for years provided devices to all students in fourth through twelfth grade. When the coronavirus burst onto the scene, Success connected parents and students with free home WiFi services and raised additional funds on an emergency basis to purchase devices for its K-3 students as well, along with other resources like Audible licenses giving students access to recorded literature.

Donors in other places likewise leapt to overcome obstacles to online learning. "We started hearing from school districts that students did not have digital devices, and the teachers were very worried that those students would be left out," says Connecticut philanthropist Barbara Dalio. To solve what she and her husband Ray considered "a very pressing issue," Dalio Philanthropies made a quick pledge that allowed 60,000 laptops to be purchased across their state for students in need.

IDEA Public Schools, a donor-supported charter network with schools in Texas and Louisiana, quickly distributed 12,000 computers and 6,000 WiFi hotspots to its students, many of whom are low-income. The school rapidly got 75 percent of its students on line. To reach the remainder, the network took creative steps like parking 25 buses in densely populated areas to stream WiFi to students.

For students who still couldn't access the Internet for one reason or another, IDEA created printed packets. Families pick up packets at their IDEA school or receive them in the mail. After students have worked through the contents, they return the packets either by drop off or through the post. This combined strategy worked. By mid-May, IDEA

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was in contact with all but 49 of its 50,000 students.

### All the other stuff

Schools serving low-income children have long been used for purposes other than just education. About half of all American students currently rely on their school to provide at least one free or subsidized meal a day. The National School Lunch Program only provides funds to schools where students are physically gathered. When Rivertree Academy in Fort Worth, Texas, a private Christian school participating in the federal program, lost government funding for its feeding of low-income students, it relied on its donor base to provide breakfast, lunch, and a snack to students. Olivia Kearney, a school supporter whose regular donations cover tuition for three neighborhood children each month, joined other givers to quickly meet the cost of feeding 83 low-income students learning at home. Families were able to drive by the school in the morning and pick up nonperishable meals for the day.

Larger school systems also developed partnerships to meet this need. IDEA served 1.6 million meals to students and their families in the first seven weeks of home instruction. For this effort, IDEA schools received a \$30,000 grant from No Kid Hungry and \$36,000 from GENYOUth and Dairy MAX, split across several IDEA campuses.

Other schools set up funding mechanisms to assist families with a variety of emergency needs. At the Partnership Schools, a group of neighborhood Catholic academies in New York City supported by Russ Carson and other donors, parents were told they could apply to their school principal for aid during the virus crisis. “We let principals be gatekeepers because they know families,” explains Amy Stevens, president of the board. More than 400 families have put in requests so far, with most receiving \$500 checks.

### Close contact

Once students are logged on, fed, and secure at home, other issues arise. One is communication. Educators from all

backgrounds emphasize the importance of check-in calls during distance learning, to make sure students feel supported and parents are heard.

“One of the things we’ve always worked really hard to do is to be in touch with parents,” says Partnership principal Molly Smith. This can take the form of phone calls, electronic Q&A sessions, or Instagram live videos. Jocelyn Santiago, who has two children at a Partnership school in the South Bronx, says the jump to online learning was a difficult transition, but it’s now going fairly well thanks to the school’s responses to her feedback.

“I reached out and said we were having difficulty keeping up on time. Two days later, I got an e-mail that they were going to try to get a Chromebook for the kids.” Within 24 hours, the principal of her children’s Partnership school dropped the laptop off herself.

At Success Academies, which has always relied on extraordinarily close connections between home and school, regular phone calls to every family guaranteed that no child got lost in the shuffle. Alexis Holzmann, a third-grade teacher at Success Academy Crown Heights, says she and her co-teacher made sure that each student received at least one call every day. For example, Holzmann coached a struggling reader over the phone by having him read to her from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* each school day.

Travis Brady, a high-school engineering teacher for Success, is also the academic adviser for 15 students, with whom he checks in each morning. For 15 to 30 minutes, he’ll use Blue Jeans, the school’s preferred video-conferencing platform, to make sure all students are awake and ready for another day.

For the students in his classes, he’s had to figure out how to teach biomedical engineering online, without performing experiments or dissections. To keep kids involved, he assigned them independent research projects, and had students peer-review each other’s papers.

Some students have flourished under distance learning, benefitting from additional supervision from parents who are at home instead of at work. Brady says his own newfound flexibility of schedule

also gives him chances to offer special attention to those in need. He has used repeated FaceTime calls, for instance, to help one struggling student.

High expectations and requirements are important, says Brady, even during a pandemic. “This is a demanding place,” he notes. “We’re asking them to sign in from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., almost like a regular school day.” Many of his students have friends at other schools, however, “who aren’t really having class at all.”

The virtual school days at Success were soon running in ways similar to a pre-pandemic day, agrees third-grade teacher Holzmann. Success students now log in each morning and then alternate between computerized instruction and independent work.

Eva Moskowitz, the CEO of Success, says the transition was difficult. It was only the school’s culture of high demands and intense links between school and home that allowed it to make the leap to online. “If you don’t have a culture of learning and you don’t have strong work habits, it will be very hard to do remote learning well,” she suggests.

### New modes of instruction

Rather than just patching holes and approximating previous practices, Success has used this period of enforced remote learning to test new instructional models. For instance, it has used some of its strongest lecturers to deliver talks, while other teachers take on more of a tutor’s role. “There are opportunities to think differently about education,” Moskowitz says. “Success Academies will not be the same as a result of this radical event.”

IDEA schools have also experimented with using master teachers to deliver lectures, while deploying other instructors to follow up with students afterward. IDEA too is using the online-learning emergency to broadly assess fresh approaches. In the past, for instance, “sometimes we’ve struggled getting our teachers to release kids to do the work,” says CEO JoAnn Gama. “They over-facilitate. Help maybe more than they should. Read more than they should, versus letting kids read on their own. At least from what I’m seeing from my third and seventh graders, they’re now doing a

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lot more reading and writing on their own than I think they did in class.”

At Rivertree, Head of School Justina Jenkins says that as teachers began remote instruction the school had to rethink what works for each age group, and what doesn't. “The funniest thing I experienced was being on a Zoom call with a pre-K teacher. She was trying to do a literacy lesson with 3-year-olds, while they were all yelling hello to their friends. There are times when working individually works better than trying to bring everyone together.”

Some education reformers have suggested that more schools try “looping”—letting a teacher follow her students up to the next grade, so she can continue to work through what she has discovered about each child's strengths and weaknesses and needs. The idea seems especially relevant now. The inability of teachers and children to physically interact for much of this school year has slowed their process of meshing with each other and getting on the same wavelength. Rather than starting that process all over again in the fall, some elementary teachers at Rivertree will follow their students to the next grade during the next school year, giving them a head start in establishing compatibility.

Many schools, and their parent networks, are also acquiring new online tools and platforms for future use. Zearn, an 8-year-old nonprofit that provides online math lessons to students, has

skyrocketed in popularity during the school shutdown. It was already used in 60,000 schools across the country—public, private, charter, Catholic, even homeschool networks. After schools closed in March, one million new accounts were opened.

To help educators shift gears in these kinds of ways during the pandemic, the Walton Family Foundation has focused on providing additional support to previous grantees, as well as directly funding sources of online lessons like Zearn, Khan Academy, and Wide Open School. Google.org has likewise distributed a \$10 million Distance Learning Fund, with \$1 million of that going to strengthen Khan Academy, for instance.

“This virus has pretty effectively upended our educational system. I think that's good in the sense of getting people to rethink how learning is delivered and where it happens,” states Tony Lewis of the Donnell-Kay Foundation. Through a new Education Innovation Fund, his organization and a few others, including Colorado's Gates Family Foundation, are seeding educational content providers to encourage clever ways of supporting learning by small collections of students. “The more we try to guess what students need, the worse we do,” says Lewis. “We want people to design what they need and want.”

### **Change ahead**

Many school systems are in financial peril as a result of virus disruptions. The online shift and new hygiene protocols increased costs. Tuition-charging schools find many

unemployed parents can't pay. Public schools are worried about the budget shortfalls local and state governments will face as a result of the economic shutdown.

Some Catholic schools, in Newark and Houston for instance, have already announced permanent closures. In Newark the victims included even a Cristo Rey school, whose model is known for its strong financial basis. The work placements Cristo Rey kids use both to learn occupational skills and subsidize their tuition became problematic overnight amidst the economic lockdown.

In New York City, Partnership Schools decided to waive tuition entirely for the rest of spring 2020. This amounts to a \$580,000 monthly loss for that group of seven Catholic schools. Fortunately, Partnership has a strong group of donors. Led by William E. Simon Prize philanthropist Russ Carson, its board of trustees not only agreed to subsidize the tuition waiver for parents, they also established an emergency fund to provide instant mini-grants to families hit hard by the virus, using \$895,000 provided by board members.

Though the board's actions were costly, Carson says the decision to waive tuition was spontaneous. Most of the 1,800 families in the Partnership network are low-income, and 85 percent of its students rely on scholarships even under normal circumstances. After our current national emergency passes, Carson argues, all philanthropists will have to ask themselves, “How did you perform during the pandemic?”

Facing new demands carrying price tags while simultaneously dealing with threats of revenue loss is difficult, notes Brian Greenberg of the Silicon Schools Fund. Donors can help by keeping their support simple. His fund created a streamlined application process that made it simple for his grantees to explain their needs, then distributed “almost immediate flexible additional grant dollars” to schools. “We cut checks within 24 hours,” he says. “It made a big difference.”

Walton's Sternberg likewise urges donors that “now is not a moment for a ton of process” in the form of grantee requirements and reports. “Where possible, you want to shorten the

distance between a first conversation about an idea and a check getting out the door to make it happen.”

In addition to a flat \$20,000 that the Charter School Growth Fund provided to each of its 150 charter networks, it offered interest-free loans to bridge financial problems. “We have so much trust in our portfolio members,” says CEO Kevin Hall, that all the networks had to do was send in a few bullet points describing how they’d use the money, and it was theirs. “For groups you have confidence in,” he suggests, “go fast, and give them flexible money.” Venture capitalist and philanthropist Arthur Rock once gave Hall advice that has stuck with him: “You have to show the people you back that you really believe in them.”

Hall believes donors should particularly support schools that are taking innovative approaches to online learning. “School is going to be different. In the short term and the long term. Remote learning is going to be a key piece of that.” Schools that implement blended learning (a mix of online instruction with classroom teaching), year-round schooling so students don’t suffer the “summer slide,” increased use of proven master teachers, and other reforms need backing. “I think we’ll see a bunch of innovation. And the high-performing charter networks are going to be on the vanguard of that,” Hall concludes.

### What will stick?

Mike Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, says he doesn’t expect online education to become the norm. “In general, in the K-12 world, online education hasn’t worked very well,” he argues. For most children, online learning alone just isn’t enough.

That said, he acknowledges that our 2020 experiment in remote learning may forever change how schools operate. “This might open the door to more hybrid models.” He’s already seen expanded interest in the “flipped classroom”—a model in which students watch online lectures on their own to get basic content, and then spend class time having discussions.



There are many policy barriers, and much institutional inertia and union resistance, opposing any dramatic shifts in educational instruction. Yet even Petrilli the skeptic acknowledges that the pandemic might help nudge people out of the “we’ve always done it this way” rut. Achieving good online education in volume will take time, though. “It’s going to be a while before we get to the positive results. We’re in for some real pain between now and then,” he believes.

“Even before covid, I had seen blended learning implemented terribly,” says Stephanie Saroki de Garcia of Seton Education Partners. “Blended learning in and of itself, if it’s not implemented the right way, doesn’t make a lick of difference for children. It’s how you implement it that matters.” She maintains that teachers who motivate students to explore the world are the key to making computer-based instruction work. “Online learning is not a substitute for human relationships,” she says. “It never has been. It never will be. It is a way to provide truly individualized and adaptive lessons for children at a range of mastery.”

For Andy Smarick at the Manhattan Institute, it’s too soon to draw many conclusions. Educators and students have been dabbling in online learning for well over a decade; the pandemic just scaled the experiment up to 56 million students. But an overnight switch that almost no school was prepared for is not a fair indicator of the merits of remote education.

At the same time, he notes, few parents have ever pushed hard for online learning. “It’s the tech companies and policy wonks” who thought computerized instruction would be a great thing. “The longstanding system of communities sending their kids to schools, the rhythms of PTAs and science fairs and school-bus schedules,

that traditional model of schooling, just fits the lifestyles of millions of families.” For those reasons of custom, Smarick believes the great distance-learning lab of 2020 “is not going to lead to dramatic, long-lasting changes in the general arrangements of public education.”

Education commentator Michael Horn, who produces a podcast called “Class Disrupted,” is hearing spluttering from parents across the country. “The lid has been lifted on how school works,” Horn says. And now parents are curious: Why is my child not motivated? Why is she doing worksheets? Does it really only take two hours to complete his full day’s work? What is the rest of the school day then used for? “I hope this leads them to keep asking big questions,” Horn says.

Looking back on this crash episode of remote education, Horn thinks parents will have mixed feelings. “There will be those who have good experiences or hints of good experiences. But I also think a lot of parents are having a really difficult time in this rush to online learning. As soon as they can get back into something more normal, they’re going to say, ‘Thank goodness that experiment is done.’”

Some observers are hopeful. “Covid creates this catalytic moment that helps people think differently,” notes John Bailey of AEI and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. “We’re going to need new playbooks.”

At the Walton Foundation, Sternberg predicts we’ll see many innovations in response to the virus crisis. Why stop school on snow days when children are now equipped to learn from home? Why not have master teachers take the lead on group instruction while other teachers fill supporting roles? Why not use MOOCs (massive open online courses) to bring world-class expertise to the classroom? “As long as the Internet has existed there’s been talk of using technology to bring the very best teaching into every classroom and change the role of the resident teacher,” he says. “This could be a moment of cultural change for the profession.”

Michael Horn puts it more bluntly: “A hope that we’re going to go back to normal is crazy.” **P**