

6 Reasons Students Aren't Showing Up for Virtual Learning

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on April 26, 2020 8:05 AM

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Many teachers, students, and parents are proving to be remarkably resilient during this time when it comes to the effects of the pandemic on school, education, and student learning. It is not easy to teach in a physical classroom one day and turn it into a virtual classroom the next. Most college and university teacher prep programs do not have a course focusing on virtual teaching and learning (something they may consider doing soon).

Many teachers are still trying to replicate what they do in a classroom, with what they are doing online. It's important to shift that way of thinking and continue to adapt. Most of us will never feel as confident or competent about how we teach virtually as we do when the students are in front of us. This adaptation is not easy, but we have to start looking at the parts of virtual teaching that are not working and let them go, and begin looking at the places where we can go a little bit deeper.

As I comb through the countless teacher Facebook pages that have been created due to the pandemic, I have learned a great deal about new tools and ways to engage students, at the same time I am constantly reminded of just how much work teaching is, and it's even more complicated when it all has to be done virtually. When it comes to how teachers are meeting the needs of their students, there are a few important aspects to keep in mind.

Did you know:

- Teachers have their own children at the same time they are teaching students? And yes, I realize parents have their own virtual working conditions at the same time their children are required to virtually learn.
- Some teachers live in a studio apartment with no space to work and questionable Wi-Fi.
- Even in areas where the Wi-Fi is usually strong, there are interruptions.
- There are teachers who have roommates and have to teach from their bedroom, which is beyond awkward. How comfortable would you be having your students see into your bedroom?
- Many of the free online sources that students are using were not free a few weeks ago, so teachers are learning those at the same time they are using them to teach virtually.

Teaching During the Pandemic

Over the last few days, I have collected over 120 comments from a few different pandemic pages on Facebook. There were numerous reasons why I started reviewing them. First and foremost, I wanted to get a feel for how teachers were accomplishing the art and science of remote teaching. Secondly, I wanted to be able to code the comments under categories like social-emotional learning, student engagement, instructional strategies, efficacy, and leadership. The interesting part of the coding activity is that many of the same questions for virtual teaching come up with teaching in physical classrooms. For example:

- How do I use that tool?
- My students are not handing in assignments.
- I cannot get parents to call me back.
- How is your administrator involved in your classroom?
- How often are you having faculty meetings?
- What is the required workday?
- What does aradina look like in your school?

One of the posts that appeared time and time again, and created the most responses, had to do with student accountability. There were numerous posts that highlighted the fact that students are not necessarily signing on to get assignments and certainly not handing in assignments, either.

The piece that is a bit different between teaching in the physical classroom and the virtual classroom is the amount of "control" the teacher has over student engagement. Teachers can use:

- Their physical proximity to engage students
- The promise of a good or bad grade
- The threat of a loss of some privilege
- The promise of an incentive, or one of their other positive social-emotional tricks of the trade.

Most of those actions are gone because of new school policies that prevent teachers from giving grades or repercussions. There is a lot less "control" on the part of the teacher right now, and that can make us uncomfortable. Especially when teachers are being held accountable as teachers.

So many posts focus on student engagement, and there are others that are meant to get people to laugh and breathe, while other posts are examples of venting. It's a frustrating time in our world, so all of these posts are natural expressions of that frustration, anger, and sadness.

Why Aren't Students Signing On?

When looking at the idea of why students are not engaging with teachers in virtual learning, I wanted to provide a list of a few reasons why that may not be happening. Some of the reasons are issues we know and understand, while one seems to be a reason no one is talking about on any of the pages. It's not an exhaustive list, and just like any list, it is based on data I have collected. If there is one you feel is missing, please feel free to add it in the comment section.

The 6 reasons are:

No access - Some students are living in homes that may not have access to Wi-Fi or limited access at best. Many of those students may not have a "device" to use for schoolwork. Yes, schools hand out devices to students, which is extremely helpful, but not all families are experts at devices and Wi-Fi. Common Sense Media reports (Today Show. 04/21/20) that over 10 million students in the US do not have devices. If teachers and leaders are struggling with technology, perhaps it's probable that families are struggling with technology, too? Not everyone works for the Geek Squad.

Essential Workers - Some students are working full time. Whether they are working the fields in California or at grocery stores in the Midwest, it's plausible that our students have had to take on jobs to help their families put food on the table. Their work, and the contributions they make monetarily at home, is essential.

No Grade Incentive - Many school districts in many states have gone to a no grading policy because they don't want to punish students who cannot attend all classes or hand in all of their work due to equity of access to virtual learning. The interesting thing happening here is that there are students who find that the incentive for showing up is not there, so they no longer need to attend the class. Is there a way that we can use a no grading policy to our advantage? Can we continue to provide students with the flexibility to do project-based learning around topics they find interesting to get a sense of their interests and creativity?

Taking care of their siblings - If parents or caregivers are still working because they are essential workers, it is possible that our students are caregiving for their siblings and helping those siblings do their classwork ... or keeping siblings from tearing things apart. These students may attend only half of the classes they are "required" to attend.

Bedlam but No Bedroom - Not everyone has a bedroom to themselves. In fact, I work in many schools where multiple families live in the same apartment or house. If there isn't a quiet space where they are able to focus, perhaps it's just easier to not connect with their teacher at all.

Student - Teacher Relationships - Some students are not connecting because they felt invisible while they were in the physical classroom, so they feel that they will not be missed in the virtual one. Additionally, some students just didn't find their teachers very engaging in person, so they aren't really concerned about engaging with those particular teachers online.

In the End

There are students not attending all of their classes because of a lack of accountability at the same time their teachers are being held accountable. Let's face it though, most teachers are less worried about the kind of accountability that comes from their school leaders, and more of the accountability they are concerned about comes from the pressure they put on themselves as teachers. So many teachers care deeply about their students and worry about their social-emotional and academic growth during this pandemic.

In one of the pages I explored, someone posed the question, "*Knowing what you know now, would you have done anything differently when the students were in front of you?*" I thought it was a great question, and apparently so did others because there were 79 responses at the time I began writing this blog.

Most of the responses focused on how they would have used different tools, or they would have assigned at least one virtual assignment every week. All of these responses are important. However, very few of the comments focused on how teachers would have built better relationships with students so those students would show up to the virtual classroom. If we find ourselves in a situation where we are teaching online for the first month of school, knowing we have the same restraints we do now (i.e. no grading, access, etc.) student teacher relationships is the first place we must start, and we need to take some time soon to think about what that may look like in a virtual setting.

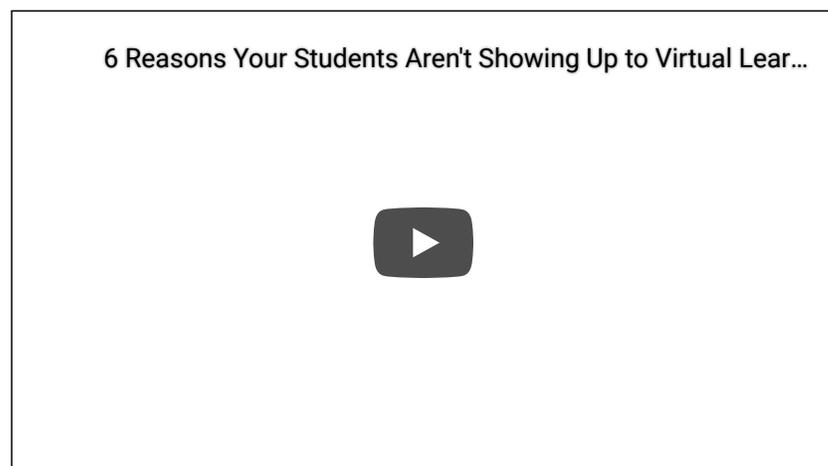
Questions I have been pondering:

- We know that virtual teaching during a pandemic is hard, and takes a lot of work. However, what is working for your school/classroom right now that can continue to be used again in the fall?
- What is one way you have communicated during this time that brought in the most attention by the community (i.e. teachers, students, families, etc.)? Many years ago, we went from just sending home paper newsletters to parents (we went from a 5 pager to a 1 page), and I began flipping communication through our parent portal. I was amazed at how well it went the first time around. Are there any similar changes you have made that have worked well, and it surprised you?
- As school leaders, what do you need to do during the summer to continue to connect with families? With my PTA we would have at least one summer meeting, and one summer event. If social distancing is still in place, is there a virtual event that you can create?
- As school leaders, how are you supporting teachers and students socially-emotionally and academically? For example, are you engaging in their live classroom chats with students?
- As school leaders, what incentives are cable companies offering that may help put more hot spots in the community? I coach with a high school principal that contacted those companies and got them to compete with each other a bit, and his high poverty community ended up with a few more hot spots set up.

Teachers, please take a few moments to fill out this survey that focuses on your experience with pandemic learning.

Parent of a K-12 student? Please consider having each child fill out this student survey.

Check out the new Vlog addition to Finding Common Ground below.



Peter DeWitt, Ed.D., is the author of several books including his newest release *Instructional Leadership: Creating Practice Out Of Theory* (Corwin Press. 2020). Connect with him on Twitter or through his YouTube channel.

Photo courtesy of Getty Images.

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[Willow Ravenwood](#) • 5 months ago

I am a parent of two high school students and three adult children who live at home. Of my adult children, one lost a job before she even started, one is working from home and living in our family room due to cost of living, and one is on disability. My two high schoolers are both ADHD and high functioning autism. My husband is an essential worker.

I am also a teacher and have never worked such long hours to try to create learning opportunities for students both at my school and at my district.

ADHD and autism, and other learning disabilities, are also a strong factors in participation. I cannot sit with my 16 and 18 year old to attend online class - first, they are not small children, and second, I am doing my own job at the same time. We are fortunate that they do both have their own room and computer, but ADHD, autism, and digital learning are a very poor combination. My daughter, who has an IEP, has been given online classes before and hates them. She gets lost - even though she is generally a 3.5+ student.

My son's ADHD is very intense, and medicines do not work as well as they should. He has maxed out on medicines and the other one we would like to try, Vyvanse, is too expensive because there is no generic. He does not have an IEP, but does have a 504. At his school, they are on a quarter system, so although he had a B average at the end of quarter 3, quarter 4 starts fresh tomorrow, and I am very concerned about his participation and effort. He would not have that issue if he were in brick and mortar.

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[Peter DeWitt](#) → [Willow Ravenwood](#) • 5 months ago

Willow,

Thank you for your thoughtful and insightful response. I agree that those are very difficult circumstances and I applaud your efforts as a parent and as a teacher. I hope your daughter gets the opportunity to start her job once this begins to calm down.

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[Brittany Daniels](#) → [Willow Ravenwood](#) • 4 months ago

As an autistic woman diagnosed with anxiety disorder, auditory processing disorder, dyspraxia, language processing disorder and oral language disorder, I took two different college classes online in the Spring 2019 semester. I had one good experience and one bad experience. The one class, Exit Review, is offered only as an online class and was taught in a way I needed it to be taught. The other online class, Web Interface Design (beginning web design) was taught by a professor who never taught a class online and it was taught like it was an in person class meaning it wasn't correctly set up for an online class at all. I just wish the Web Interface Design class that was taught online was taught in a module format written down with still images/photos at the same time along with practice all along the way. I failed that class with a F along with other students without disabilities who took that class online. When it comes to online classes, it depends on how the classes are taught online and if you can get help from the professor teaching the class(s) when you need more help to understand anything they are teaching.

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[Jeff Wise](#) • 5 months ago

My wife is a middle school band director and has said that maybe half of her students have logged in after 6 weeks of distance learning. She has a moderately high amount of poverty students, so her big concern for now is their well being. She's been using multiple methods to reach out to students including sending them via US Mail a note letting them know that they matter. To your point about accountability, you are spot on - she has placed much more pressure on herself to be there for her students than her administration, which is not to criticize her administrators, they are also trying to build the rocket while it's blasting into space.

As an electives teachers she has somewhat different challenges with distance learning, but what fascinates me is how she continues to iterate her teaching. I work in IT where Agile continues to be all the rage and I'm watching her executing Agile concepts out of necessity. And I've seen other teachers do this as well and it's wonderful to see and be reminded again how creative and innovative our teachers are.

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[SandieBB](#) → [Jeff Wise](#) • 5 months ago

I love how your wife is reaching out by any mean possible, including the "low tech" U.S. Mail. I'll bet that for her students who [can](#) connect (e.g., who have home internet and a device) it has made a huge difference. We have a lot of work to do to unravel the barriers to distance learning, but at least now we have a better sense of how important it is that we --as a nation -- do that!

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myersbo1 • 5 months ago

There certainly have been challenges during the COVID-19 experience. However, the opportunity to experiment and gain experience for the next "major event" that will undoubtedly present itself. We will have to be positive about finding ways around and through the negatives of this.

This is a life challenge will bring out the best in many and the worst in some.

I would rather create a plan, execute the plan, review the plan, and revise the plan for the next time!!! The US Marine Corps Mission Framework Bo,

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SandieBB • 5 months ago

Just before our state's stay-at-home order went into effect, I attended a conference sponsored by NC State University: *ReCONNECT to Technological Opportunity*. There was a lot of discussion about the "homework gap", with data suggesting that a high percentage of public school students did not engage in or complete online learning assignments **even before the pandemic**. Completing online work assignments would seem an important life-skill beyond this current pandemic. As you point out, there are lots of barriers, but even when students have high speed internet and a device at home the percentage of students completing online assignments is often low. I don't know any published research to support it, but from our company's internal data it appears that the **student - teacher relationship** (and maybe the parent-teacher relationship, as well?) is one of the best predictors of students "showing up".

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David Smith → SandieBB • 5 months ago

Technology as a medium has always diminished the value of communication between people. Sure, Zoom and Google Meet let's us see each and talk, but that's only half of it. True communication and connection is a social construct, and can't replicate that digitally. The deeper we go down the rabbit hole of digital technology, the more lost we will become. Society will be a shadow of its former self.

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Guest → SandieBB • 5 months ago

Kids know that a lot of what they are assigned is busy work that will have no impact on their adult lives. Why bother?

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CeaNO • 5 months ago

There's some good sense in here, but it also veers rather toward the typical teacher blaming at times. I notice that what you say about why teachers are having difficulties is from what teachers themselves have said; however, what you say about why students are not signing on is based on speculation. Therefore, I find it offensive that you would posit that it is because students felt their teachers didn't see them and were not engaging in the first place. Teachers have picked up the habit of blaming themselves (for example asking "Knowing what you know now, would you have done anything differently when the students were in front of you?"). I fully believe in reflective teaching, but I would hope that teachers would recognize that actually they probably had been doing all they could in what were already, as teaching usually is, difficult circumstances. It took leaving the high school classroom for college teaching to forgive myself for not being a superhuman being, especially as every PD was telling me I was supposed to be one and that really I just didn't care even though I thought I did. When I meet my former students now, as we talk it turns out we did pretty well together. As you acknowledge, teachers do care. Why doesn't that acknowledgement show throughout your article?

To return to the online issue. Many teachers and many students are more engaging in real life. When I talk to teachers making the switch, they pretty uniformly report that students who were fully engaged in the classroom are not signing on, or are signing on but not speaking, etc. Like teachers, they feel very exposed away from the neutral setting of the classroom. Also students, like teachers, are in many cases simply very unhappy in the middle of all this.

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VMeyer65 → CeaNO • 5 months ago

CeaNO,

Thank you for your response!!! I sat here and clapped loudly after reading your post! I saw how quickly teachers were suddenly valued when parents had to step into the teachers shoes when COVID19 paralyzed the American school system. No longer were we vilified, we were actually praised for doing our jobs.

As a mother of two children in middle school, I am also a high school teacher at home with a husband who suffers from PTSD and TBI. It is like herding cats most days, but I get it done. Why? Because I love this profession and I love my students.

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Chris Poppe Moore → CeaNO • 5 months ago

As human beings, not every human being will connect with every other human being...that is human nature. Teachers need to give themselves grace that they will not build strong relationships with every single student - it's natural and it's ok. What we all hope for is

members grace that they will not build strong relationships with every single student...it's natural and it's OK. What we all hope for is that each student will connect with a staff member at school; a teacher, counselor, interventionist, administrator, nutrition services, office or custodial staff. ALL are educators and can build relationships. It's unfortunate that this article was read with the lens that it was negative to teachers not being able to connect with all kids. It's impossible.

Teachers, give yourselves grace. And please give the author of this article grace that there was not negative intent given to teachers. Let's assume positive intent with ALL people working hard to support our kids and our future. :)

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GEresearch • 5 months ago

Peter, I appreciate the thoughtful caption of what is happening and where to go next. I am working with a team of individuals in California to explore how CTE teachers are coping with this shift in paradigm. I'll be curious to find out the implications behind how we support them post-COVID, and how we keep a pipeline coming into the profession.

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Gym • 5 months ago

A lot of good things said already. I believe the accountability of school districts has quite a bit of students not signing in. My district and others here have said grades can not go down, only up or stay where they are. Why would students sign in if they've already passed classes? I completed my Masters on-line well before all these tools. I had to have self-discipline and my family supported me.

I believe another reason comes from parents. Before all this COVID 19, the students who did well had the parents checking on their progress and supporting them. I have had quite a few parents contact me checking on their student's progress. If the student is behind and I tell the parent the assignments the student needs to do, I see completed work right away. I have contacted parents and some students work and others still don't. I understand parents may have lost jobs and students must work to help pay bills, but parents still need to encourage those students to pass classes for their future. This is a good example of time management, something we focus on for students in extra-curricular activities or full time jobs. This will go a long way in life.

Our district interviewed some students in a zoom meeting. The students said they were motivated and quite a few of their peers were not. Their parents were also supportive and encouraging.

The comments are all good points. Especially teachers have high expectations for themselves and trying to do more than possible for all the kids. Some kids will realize what they should be doing, maybe late as 5th year seniors do. Again, sometimes we spend more time on kids that don't care and not enough on the kids that want to excel. The old saying, "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink".

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Margo/Mom • 5 months ago • edited

There is no doubt that educators were at best thrust unprepared into an extended distance learning situation. And there is no doubt that educators have done all that is humanly possible given that reality.

But we also, going forward, have to acknowledge some realities. First off is that pre-corona readiness was widely divergent. There ARE solutions to lack of in-home internet and lack of family-owned devices. However, these were simply viewed as either unimportant, or insufficient by many districts with large numbers of low-income students. This allowed some districts to move forward logically in providing teachers needed training for the use of online resources, developing platforms and acclimating students to them, as well as using them to communicate with parents. I know a district, weeks into distance learning, announcing that it was working to provide every student with a district email account. This should have happened years ago.

Far too many educators still echo "how can we get parents involved when we cannot even get them in the building?" One might well ask, how can teachers be involved with parents and community if their work takes place exclusively in the building.

The time to build readiness is BEFORE a catastrophe. This is why we have fire drills. Leadership needs to focus on moving forward with massive support for teachers' ability to use online resources--every day and in many ways. This will mean investment in devices, support for parents and lots of training, coaching and development for teachers.

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Marietta Fassinger Lachenauer • 5 months ago

i would suggest that some children simply aren't comfortable participating in a virtual class session. Perhaps they don't want to open up their homes to their teachers and classmates and don't want to share their personal space or lives in that way. Perhaps they aren't connected with their classmates, so they have no desire to engage with them. Or, perhaps not participating in this sort of venue is one thing they can control during a time in which they can control so little.

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aurorarising • 5 months ago

Here's another reason: Some students simply DO NOT like school. The transition to remote learning provides an opportunity for these learners to avoid this hated experience. Despite 2 college-educated and involved parents, a respectable & well-resourced school district, wifi, her own laptop, and other resources, my niece does not like anything about school, except maybe lunch and extracurricular volleyball and soccer. No, she can't stand gym either, just those 2 sports. Once this high school junior learned that grades for remote learning will be only pass/incomplete, she checked out of attending school remotely. The usual punishment and inducements from parents have no influence.

Since we're all in shelter-in-place she can't go anywhere or have any friends visit so we can't hold those experiences as a stick or carrot

since were all in shelter-in-place she can't go anywhere or have any friends visit so we can't hold those experiences as a stick or carrot. We're just trying to get her to high school graduation.

4 ^ | v • Share >

Guest → aurorarising • 5 months ago

If she hates it, why make her do it? Find another way. Public school is not the only option.

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Ebasco • 5 months ago

Shocked, just shocked. Bad content knowledge, bad pedagogy, bad curriculum, useless schoolbooks, fake collaboration used to create apparent engagement, competitive spirits locked into small solitary spaces. Not working. Who would have thought?

1 ^ | v • Share >

David Smith • 5 months ago

Another super important question--though one most people will probably ignore because it's inconvenient--is how is all this technology use going to impact language, community, culture, and social responsibility?

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Margo/Mom → David Smith • 5 months ago

Interesting question. And I would imagine the best answer is, it depends. Just out the gate we can already see that where there are inequities, these are amplified in the move to a resource that is largely a function of family income/wealth, parental levels of education and geography. Yet, pre-Covid, we have examples of the use of technology to positively impact such things as inequity, language barriers, community, culture and social responsibility. There are examples, for instance, of rural districts partnering together and with colleges and universities to expand student access to an array of coursework previously unavailable, Some districts have used technology to enable higher levels of school-home communication and engagement.

Clearly we have been unprepared to use the tools currently at hand for extended periods, let alone use them well. But imagine if we built a "new normal" in which we commit to universal access. Imagine if teachers began building libraries of online lessons (as they have always done for in-class/paper-pencil oriented teaching) to draw on. Imagine if we established vetting to identify excellent teacher-made lessons to be shared openly. What if we established multiple online communities, of parents, of teachers, of learners in order to connect and share. We cannot pretend that we were excelling in these areas in the pre-Covid world. But what if we use this as an opportunity?

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John Schroeter Jr • 5 months ago

There are many rural school districts, even in New York, where 20 to 40 percent of students do not have internet service at home. Many also have no cell service. So much of what we do now is dependent on an infrastructure that is non-existent

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Dawn • 5 months ago • edited

I don't know if this was mentioned, but the first week of distance learning, one of my students who is autistic really struggled with the distance learning concept. I think the quoted words told to me from the case manager was, "School is for school things and home is for home things." That stuck with me and I quickly recognized that many of our students and to some extent myself, have that mindset. In my opinion, that is one of the biggest hurdles. Throw in little brother or sister, the "I can do it later," and the appeal of the back yard and well, there you have it.

2 ^ | v • Share >

NancyEH • 5 months ago

I wish someone would look into the differences between elementary grades and middle-high school student attendance and engagement.

My husband is a special ed teacher and chases students to get them online, but once there, they seem to manage relatively well. Subject teachers hold online classes two-to-three times a week and then assign projects and homework. My 7th and 9th-grade grandkids seem to be in similar situations. It's working OK.

This afternoon, however, I'll be working with my 5th-grade grandchild whose parents are both still working full-time. The teacher sends daily emails and holds twice-a-week meetings to check in and read a story. The emails are, by their nature, text-heavy, so my grandkid (a competent, but not excellent, reader) relies on me to explain what the teacher wants done. The teacher provides some downloadable material (usually pdf, but sometimes googledocs that are locked to me) and lots of links to multiple programs, apps, lists of worksheets, videos, practice sites similar to IXL, and more. It's sometimes too much for me to decipher, let alone a kid.

On the other hand, this same grandkid is part of a gymnastics program that is providing daily classes, usually held in the afternoon. Many athletes there are ignoring those classes, despite the fact that they are all good at what they do (national-level competitors) and used to go the gym several times a week. Why? I don't know, but someone might want to use such programs as a research base.

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Catherine Chant • 5 months ago

I think all of these points are valid, and I hope that when we return in the Fall we will be able to take time as a staff at our respective schools to filter through many of these things. I have two main thoughts; as a teacher, I feel like there are too many people trying to "help" by throwing resources at us which is overwhelming, but secondly, I see some positives in the discussions as families. Just as travel is a tremendous way to learn, all of this family time together has (or has the potential to) create(d) unique learning for our students/kids. During the brief time outdoors walking, it's refreshing to see so many parents playing outside with their kids. Playing, building, non-academic projects...

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DWBracken • 5 months ago

When things aren't going as well as I would like (and when are they?), I use this model to ask why:
Performance = Alignment X (Ability x Motivation x Opportunity),

or ALAMO for short. Note that ALAMO is multiplicative, so any element can drag Performance to zero.

These comments have touched upon all of these areas, but maybe least on Alignment, that is, making sure that the students know exactly what they are supposed to be doing, including when and where to be, how to contact us and ask questions, goals and objectives (especially when they have changed, which is likely), and basically what they are supposed to be doing.

I wonder if we assume too much when it comes to Alignment, and how could more communication be a bad thing anyways?

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Kyle Sanders • 5 months ago

The biggest problem I am seeing is motivation. Many students where I am at only go to school because they have to. It was difficult to get them to do work or participate in regular school, it is impossible in this format. I think that is some of what gets lost in this situation, not every student likes school, not every parent cares about their child's school. Online learning works well in college because you have motivated students who already have access to the technology they need. This model is terrible for students who do not like school or really care about their grades.

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Guest • 5 months ago

Kids have always hated school. We have known this for generations. Why are people shocked that kids if given the choice would skip what they see as useless busy work?

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