**Virus & Online Education– Aren’t Ya Glad You’re Retired???!!!!**

Tom Moscovic-Legislative Chair

**{Teachers Were Forced to Leave Their Buildings Like They Were on Fire and Have Not Gone Back}**

**The Scramble to Move America's Schools Online**

America’s sprawling K-12 public education system is scrambling to move online, almost overnight, with little time to plan and even less clarity about what happens next. Undertaken in response to the spiraling coronavirus crisis, the massive and scattershot transition has shifted much of the burden of schooling onto overwhelmed parents and caregivers, highlighting both the enormous potential and profound limitations of classroom technology.

Like everyone else, educators were caught unprepared for the scope and speed of the disruptions caused by a global pandemic. In little more than two weeks, the coronavirus led to the mass closure of at least 124,000 school buildings, leaving more than 55 million children without access to in-person classroom instruction, counseling, and other services.

Thrust into emergency triage, schools focused first on how to provide food and other basics. In recent days, they’ve pivoted to the far more difficult task of teaching children from afar. With minimal training, often while stuck at home and juggling their own family responsibilities, the country’s teachers and principals have sprung into action, distributing Chromebooks to students and sending Wi-Fi enabled school buses into their communities, teaching on Instagram Live and hosting virtual class discussions on Zoom—and calling students and parents on the telephone to make sure they’re OK.

Nearly three-fourths of teachers in schools closed due to the coronavirus say they are still providing some instruction to their students, according to a nationally representative survey administered online by the Education Week Research Center on March 24 and 25. Sixty percent say they are assigning and collecting student work online, and more than a third are using digital tools to teach live classes.

Anna Louisa, 18, receives her school laptop for home study at the Lower East Side Preparatory School after New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo tightened health and safety rules in the state.

Still, at a national level, the effort has been chaotic and uneven, with schools running into enormous barriers as they attempt to use technology to keep the country’s public education system up and running. Messages from state and federal authorities—about how long the closures may last, whether schools can require online classwork, and what will become of state requirements around instructional time—have often been contradictory and quick to change, and emergency financial relief has been slow to come.

Huge gaps in the nation’s broadband infrastructure have also left millions of rural and poor families without reliable internet access. Many schools don’t have enough computers or tablets for all their students, or an adequate plan to distribute the devices on hand. English-language learners and students with disabilities are often being left behind. Concerns about student data privacy and screen time are rising as the nation’s children turn en masse to digital learning tools.

**Continuity vs. Flexibility**

“The first question is how do we survive between now and the end of June,” said Michael K. Barbour, an education professor at Touro University California and an expert on virtual learning. “But we really need to start talking about what this looks like a year from now.”

In the short term, the coronavirus pandemic has left school systems across the country navigating an unprecedented dilemma, said Earl Aguilera, an assistant education professor at California State University, Fresno, who studies the role of technology in schools and society.

Should districts seek to maintain continuity and offer structure, by moving as much of the normal school day as possible online? Or should they embrace uncertainty and prioritize flexibility, by being as responsive as they can to the ever-shifting demands of an escalating emergency?

The 356,000-student Miami-Dade County Public Schools has taken the former approach, leveraging its existing ed-tech infrastructure and invoking its emergency “instructional continuity plan,” originally developed with an eye toward maintaining operations in the wake of a hurricane or other natural disaster. The district is planning to distribute tens of thousands of Chromebooks. Homebound children are already accessing the district’s core curriculum via online learning programs such as iReady and Edgenuity. Teachers are expected to monitor their students’ performance and communicate with them daily.

“M-DCPS is committed to ensuring the highest level of academic excellence, no matter the circumstances,” the district announced in a March 20 press release.

In the Boston suburbs, meanwhile, the 7,200-student Lexington, Mass., school district has taken the opposite tack. Last week, superintendent Julie Hackett rolled out a remote learning plan that stressed scaled-back expectations. Until school buildings re-open, Hackett urged Lexington families to anticipate that structured learning time will be reduced by half. Teachers will scale their workdays back significantly. Students will receive feedback, not grades. The district’s academic focus will be on reinforcing what’s already been taught, then providing students with opportunities for independent work that doesn’t require their parents to magically learn how to teach a child to read, or understand algebra, or pass the AP Physics exam.

“The traditional school day as we once knew it has completely changed,” the superintendent wrote in an open letter to the Lexington community on March 23. “We are in the midst of a global health crisis, necessitating a shift in our teaching and learning priorities.”

In between those poles, thousands of other school systems have adopted a hodgepodge of strategies.

According to the Education Week Research Center survey, 37 percent of teachers said they had interacted with students at least once per day since their school was closed due to the coronavirus, while 16 percent said they had not interacted with their students at all. In the same survey, the vast majority of district leaders said that at least some of their students are able to access digital content via an online learning e system. But more than half of those same leaders said they were not able to provide online learning opportunities to all students.

On the ground, remote learning in some communities has been limited to photocopied worksheets. In at least seven states, teachers are delivering lessons on public television via school district partnerships with local PBS affiliates. Other districts have focused on curating and distributing links to free online learning sites such as Khan Academy. In some schools, teachers are posting lessons and homework assignments to learning platforms such as Canvas or Google Classroom, where students can also upload their work. Elsewhere, schools are focused on maintaining social connections among staff and students, encouraging them to meet during virtual office hours or share photos on Seesaw.

The variety of approaches is staggering. But a common thread runs throughout.

No matter what districts are doing, many of the nation’s children are currently attending school in their beds and on their sofas and at their kitchen tables, alongside siblings and pets, with laptops and tablets and textbooks that offer only a partial connection to the rest of the world. That means that parents and caregivers, often juggling work-from-home obligations and money worries of their own, are now also responsible for shaping the day-to-day education of the country’s children.

“It’s been an incredible shock for families,” said Robin Lake, the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, a research and advocacy organization that has been tracking districts’ responses to the coronavirus crisis.

Huge, Complex Tech Equity Issues Federal and state officials haven’t made things any easier.

A massive coronavirus relief package—likely to include billions of dollars for public schools, including a substantial chunk that could be used to support remote learning—was expected to be signed by the president. But school technology advocates have voiced disappointment that the plan apparently won’t include new funding for the federal E-rate program, which supports connectivity for schools and libraries.

There have also been conflicting messages around when schools should plan to re-open. Many public health experts suggest that coronavirus-related infections have yet to peak, meaning that the social-distancing protocols, shelter-in-place orders, and mass school closures could remain in effect for weeks or months. If that proves to be the case, schools would be wise to devote scarce resources to planning for remote learning over the long haul.

President Donald Trump, however, has been emphatic in his desire to “re-open” the country—presumably including schools—by Easter, potentially putting the White House at odds with many of the nation’s governors, who will ultimately make the decision.

And the most confusing, highest-stakes question around schools’ rush to mass online- and remote instruction has revolved around equity. Even before the pandemic, advocates decried schools’ lack of digital resources for English-language learners and students with disabilities, as well as a nationwide “homework gap” that leaves an estimated 12 million American children without a reliable high-speed internet connection at home.

Many districts are in the midst of major efforts to address such concerns, and many superintendents and school boards are fearful of any misstep that could result in lawsuits or the loss of federal funding. So when the U.S. Department of Education advised on March 17 that online learning opportunities offered in response to coronavirus closures must be either accessible to all students or paired with “equally effective alternate access,” some districts immediately froze efforts they were just getting off the ground.

“To ensure equity, remote instruction should not be provided to students, including through the internet, technology at home, by phone, or otherwise,” William Hite, the superintendent of the 130,000-student School District of Philadelphia, wrote to the city’s principals that same night.

Four days later, the federal education department released a fact sheet clarifying its earlier stance. By then, however, Philadelphia had already switched gears, moving to offer supplemental, nonmandatory online learning materials while getting as many digital devices, mobile hot-spots, and paper packets out to students as possible.

Absent clear direction or guidance, thousands of districts across the country have pursued similar equity-related approaches. The 600-student Reardon-Edwall School District in northern Washington started sending its school buses along their regular routes to deliver paper lessons to students. The 82,000-student Austin Independent School District in Texas began adding Wi-Fi connectivity on more than 500 school buses, so that they can be used as roving hot spots to help students get online. In Boulder, Colo., school administrators rushed to translate online materials into multiple languages. In New York City, teachers worked quickly to make online lessons more accessible, through accommodations such as audio-recorded instructions.

Still, every such effort seemed to create a new worry.

The lessons from a decade of poorly planned device deployments seemed to go unheeded in places such as Orange County, Calif., where a hurried effort by the 47,000-student Capistrano Unified School District to distribute Chromebooks led hundreds of families to wait in close proximity in blocks-long lines that snaked around local schools, only to find there weren’t nearly enough devices to go around.

Just as millions of students across the country were being asked to log on, the researchers behind a massive new study of children’s screen time warned that overall time on computers, tablets, and televisions each day is linked to diminished language development—regardless of the quality of the content kids are seeing.

Cybersecurity experts cautioned that if students, teachers, and school information-technology professionals are forced to work remotely for an extended period of time, the country could see a significant spike in data breaches and cyberattacks involving public schools.

And those live lessons on Facebook and Instagram, or those class discussions teachers are hosting via the free Zoom accounts they just signed up for?

They’re almost certainly violating state and federal privacy laws, and they are exposing children to widespread collection of their location data, browsing histories, and other sensitive personal information, said Amelia Vance, the director of Youth & Education Privacy at the Future of Privacy Forum, who urged teachers to avoid commercial applications that aren’t intended for educational use.

“Honestly, at this point, I’d be thrilled if teachers would limit themselves to ed-tech products right now,” Vance said.

**Take a Deep Breath**

Still, virtual learning experts said, now is the time to take a deep breath, despite the confusion and false starts and glaring inequities.

The country is in a crisis unlike any other in its modern history. When the emergency bells rang, America’s public schools stepped up, quickly taking the lead on dramatic new efforts to stabilize and take care of their communities. The massive and ad hoc move online is only a week or two old in most places. Those realities shouldn’t be overlooked, said Barbour, the Touro University California professor.

A marquee sign at Brightwood Elementary School in Monterey Park, Calif., promotes the value of remote learning.

And even amid the press of immediate demands, Barbour said, educators desperately need a moment to assess the situation and consider what might be coming over the uncertain horizon. Most districts have not yet announced any hard plans to re-open. Those that have expect the dates and details to change. Alarmingly, if not surprisingly, 44 percent of district leaders say they haven’t yet figured out how to make up instructional time lost to the coronavirus.

That means the hard part is yet to come. Accomplish what you can during the remainder of this school year, Barbour advised. But find a way to look beyond tomorrow. Even if schools open again in May, or September, millions of students will re-enter buildings academically behind and having endured considerable trauma. How will schools support them?

And what if the remote learning strategies being developed now have to remain in place well into the 2020-21 school year? Two decades of experimentation with online education models—from full-time virtual schools to online coursework and credit recovery classes, and from distance-learning programs to snow-day emergency plans—have yielded mostly flaccid results. Can districts use this time to develop something better, creating new routines and processes and pedagogical strategies that could make remote and online education more successful if it becomes necessary for an extended time?

The good news, said Aguilera, the Fresno State professor, is that the technology schools are struggling to deploy at the moment is secondary to what will matter most in the months ahead. The compassion, empathy, kindness, and commitment that the nation’s educators have already shown is the best reason for optimism that America’s public-education system can weather what’s to come.

“Teachers have spent years cultivating the most important tools they need to address this crisis,” Aguilera said. “The biggest challenge now is taking those qualities and translating them at a distance."

**How Coronavirus Is Jeopardizing Teacher Pay Raises**

Just as the movement to pay teachers more money was gaining political steam, the economic fallout from the coronavirus is jeopardizing most of this year’s statewide initiatives to increase salaries, according to an Education Week analysis.

State lawmakers predict that the spread of the coronavirus and the extraordinary efforts to bring it to heel will send sales and income tax revenue into a tailspin next fiscal year. And they’re doing all they can now to brace for the coming storm.

In recent weeks, lawmakers in Florida, Georgia, and Tennessee, many citing a potential recession, have significantly reduced the pay bumps that teachers were expecting to get. In Kentucky, a much-anticipated $2,000 raise might get scrapped altogether. And in at least five states, proposals for teacher salary increases are in limbo as legislatures have either suspended their sessions or are retooling state budgets to account for the economic crisis.

“In the midst of a pandemic, you try not to put too much focus on that, but educators are very concerned about this decision,” said Tikeila Rucker, the president of the United Education Association, which represents teachers in Memphis, Tenn., of the governor cutting the proposed bump in the state’s contribution to teacher salaries from 4 percent to 2 percent. “It feels like a disservice to the people. … We’re already underappreciated, overworked, underpaid, and undervalued, and when there’s a need to make a cut, it feels like we’re dispensable.”

Over the past two years, teachers across the country have called attention to their stagnant paychecks, staging multi- or single-day walkouts and protests in at least 10 states. Rallies for higher wages and more school funding were planned at state capitols across the country for this spring, until the coronavirus pandemic squashed gatherings.

To maintain social distancing, Tennessee teachers canceled their March 16 protest in Nashville, while South Carolina teachers canceled their second-annual statehouse rally, which was scheduled for March 24 and expected to shut down some schools. In Kentucky, teachers [**have resorted to driving around the state capitol building**](https://twitter.com/120Strong/status/1240384641900728326?s=20) in Frankfort in their cars, honking in protest of lawmakers’ proposed changes to their pensions.

**Teachers Asked to Do More**

The freeze on pay proposals comes just as teachers must radically change how they work—[**transition their lessons to a remote-learning platform**](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2020/03/teachers_scramble_to_make_remote_learning_work_its_very_stressful.html), soothe students’ fears about the pandemic from afar, and bring a sense of normalcy to the disrupted school year.

Parents, now tasked with supervising their children’s learning, have exclaimed in memes, [**social media posts**](https://twitter.com/Caitlin_Rogger/status/1239544862925611010), and notes to district staff that it’s past time for teachers to get a pay raise. “Teachers deserve to make a billion dollars a year. Or a week,” [**tweeted television producer Shonda Rhimes**](https://twitter.com/shondarhimes/status/1239600550515101696) on her first day of homeschooling her children.

“Having parents at home who struggle to complete the work that their children are supposed to do will fuel a little more respect for the everyday lives of teachers,” said Thomas Easterling, an English teacher at the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science. He’s hoping that the state legislature, which has suspended its session, doesn’t forget about the $1,000 teacher pay raise proposal that is still pending.

But in state capitols, lawmakers worry they'll see a significant dip in revenue next year when they reconvene to craft the 2021 fiscal year budget. Many of their fiscal analysts have advised them to spend conservatively this year in order to avoid more drastic budget cuts next year.

District school finance analysts, meanwhile, are encouraging district superintendents to save any extra dollars they have to spend rather than bump their teachers’ pay during negotiations this year. The costs of salary increases this year will compound during a recession as more and more teachers qualify for step-ladder raises and fewer employees leave their jobs, said Marguerite Roza, a Georgetown University school finance professor.

“It doesn’t take much to destabilize district finances during a recession,” Roza said during a webinar for district administrators and school funding advocates earlier this week.

Of the 13 governors who proposed teacher pay raises in their State of the State speeches, only the governors in Arizona, Idaho, and New Mexico have so far been successful in getting their entire proposals across the finish line. Even so, New Mexico lawmakers are expected to head back into a special session to adjust the budget, which includes a 4 percent teacher pay raise, to reflect the new economic reality.

In Arizona, which saw a statewide strike over teacher pay in 2018, the legislature included in a streamlined budget earlier this month a 10 percent bump in pay this year. But Anabel Aportela, a K-12 fiscal analyst for the state’s school board association and school budget officers’ association, is concerned about future cuts in the state, which is heavily reliant on sales tax revenue.

“It’s a fluid situation,” Aportela said. “I'm really concerned about what this is going to do to the economy.”

Many teacher-pay initiatives now hang in limbo as state legislatures have promised to reevaluate next year’s budget after reviewing sales and income tax receipts this month and next to see the impact of so many people being laid off their jobs and locked up in their homes for weeks at a time.

In Georgia, the House of Representatives, citing the threat of a looming recession, cut in half a proposal to provide teachers with a $2,000 pay raise earlier this month before going into a temporary recess. While it’s yet to be determined what the state Senate decides, Joe Fleming, a lobbyist for the Georgia Association of Educators, a group that represents teachers, said it has put his members on edge.

“There are two ways to look at it,” Fleming said. “Yes, state revenue could be down substantially this time next year but, at the same time, I think our teachers are doing amazing work. … You can make an equally strong argument that it’s more deserved now than ever before.”

**'A Tough Spot’**

In Kentucky, Gov. Andy Beshear, a Democrat, had made raising teacher pay a hallmark of his campaign last year and has credited teachers with his election. He had proposed a $2,000 pay raise for teachers—their first in years.

In early March, the state House had passed a budget that gave teachers a 1 percent pay raise each year of the biennium. That was slightly less than Beshear’s proposal, but it also spread the pay raise to school support staff, too.

But the state Senate’s proposed budget cuts teacher pay raises entirely, though it includes a 1 percent raise for support staff. The legislature will reconvene on March 26 and April 1 to hammer out the details and finalize the budget. If Beshear vetoes all or parts of the budget, legislators have until April 15 to consider any veto overrides.

But Kentucky lawmakers are bracing for a financial crisis. [**According to the Courier Journal**](https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/politics/ky-legislature/2020/03/18/kentucky-senate-gop-advances-version-state-budget/2866849001/), state Sen. Tom Buford said that instead of a projected surplus through the end of the fiscal year, “we could be down $1 billion in revenues—and I think that’s a conservative estimate. We’re really in a tough spot.”

Even so, teachers are urging state legislators not to forget about them.

“Yes, we are in an unprecedented crisis—no one has ever imagined living through this kind of pandemic that shuts down states and nations,” said Tennessee Education Association President Beth Brown.

Still, she added, “we have to acknowledge Tennessee does have a very large cash surplus. So, while we’re disappointed that this proposal for teacher [raises] has been reduced, it’s a step back, but it’s not the end of our fight. …. As we recover, let’s not forget the problems that were already there before COVID-19 hit us.”

**Draconian Cuts to Schools Could Come As Soon As This Summer**

Drastic cuts to public school spending could come as soon as this summer, an acceleration of the fiscal pain that analysts had already been forecasting for K-12 education.

State budgets have been [massacred](https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/13/how-will-coronavirus-affect-school-spending-9.html)by the widespread shutdown of the economy. And school finance experts—updating their forecasts on a near-daily basis—are now saying public schools will be forced as soon as this summer to make dramatic cuts to their budgets.

Signs of the severity are already emerging. In Hawaii, the Democratic governor is considering deep cuts to teacher salaries as early as May 1.

For the last several weeks, K-12 analysts have assumed that districts wouldn't see budget cuts until spring 2021 because the federal government sent out a $13.5 billion stimulus fund, states have stored up billions of dollars in rainy day funds and because making mid-year cuts to public schools is so politically unappealing and disruptive.

But states have already lost tens of billions of dollars for the last quarter of this fiscal year and will likely lose hundreds of billions more in the 2021 fiscal year as federal and state governments struggle to contain the spread of the coronavirus.  The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities earlier this week [estimated](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/04/coronavirus_recession_worse_schools.html) that states will collectively lose close to $500 billion next fiscal year.

"I can't see a school district that won't be looking at budget cuts come this fall" Michael Griffith, a fiscal analyst and school finance expert said Thursday morning. "Some might be dramatic. Some places might start seeing cuts this school year."

**Pay Cuts, Furloughs, Layoffs Are All on the Table**

As more and more people lose their jobs and file for Medicaid and unemployment benefits, that puts a squeeze on state budgets and forces cuts elsewhere. On average, K-12 makes up more than a quarter of states' budgets. In some states, it amounts to more than half. More than 22 million people have filed for unemployment since President Donald Trump declared the coronavirus pandemic a national emergency on March 13.

The severity of the cuts will vary by state and district, depending on how much their revenues are tethered to income, oil, and sales taxes, all of which have tanked in the last two months.

Earlier this week, Gov. David Ige, the Democratic governor of Hawaii, [said he is considering](https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/04/15/breaking-news/gov-david-ige-proposes-20-pay-cuts-for-teachers-other-state-employees/) cutting teachers' and other public employees' pay by 20 percent starting May 1. The statewide school system, already woefully underfunded and experiencing a teacher shortage, is heavily reliant on tourism sales tax.

And in Nevada, another tourism heavy state, Gov. Steve Sisolak, a Democrat, asked every state agency, including the education department, to find more than 4 percent in cuts this fiscal year.

In a conference call with the state's teachers' union this week, a teacher asked Gov. Sisolak whether there would be teacher layoffs or furloughs this summer.

"I'll be honest with you," he responded, according to [the Nevada Independent](https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/sisolak-asks-state-agencies-to-prepare-for-up-to-687-million-in-budget-cuts), failing to give her a yes or no answer.  "I have a lot of sleepless nights over this. One thing I don't get much of any more is sleep. This has weighed heavily on my mind for weeks already as it relates to our budgets."

In other states, school district officials should prepare for the likelihood that legislatures this summer will reconvene and cut millions of dollars out of K-12 budgets to make up for lost revenue, fiscal analysts now say.

That will likely require superintendents to revise their 2020-21 school year budgets and, possibly, lay off teachers and staff just weeks before school starts this fall.

That sort of last-minute scramble will have a devastating impact on teaching and learning, especially for schools that serve large populations of vulnerable students.

The severity and speed at which the economy is cratering has placed into disarray the school finance community which, for years, has used [outdated district spending numbers](https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/07/15/gaping-holes-in-how-states-track-k-12.html), [inefficient and ineffective funding formulas](https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2018/02/14/state-k-12-funding-aid-formulas-high-on.html), and [piecemeal solutions](https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/11/states-scouring-landscape-for-new-pots-of.html) to send money to districts that need it the most, Griffith said.

During the last recession, advocates and lawmakers had time, data, and superintendents' testimony to make strategic cuts to public schools. That option is not really available now.

"People felt like the recession moved quickly," Griffith said. "But that took an extended period of time for things to happen. It didn't hit rock bottom until 18 months in. We've already got worse numbers now and we're only five to six weeks into this."

Marguerite Roza, a Georgetown University K-12 finance professor who has studied cuts during the last recession, said in a webinar Thursday that legislatures will likely first cut new initiatives such as Pre-K programs, counselors, and programs for English-language learners, before considering cuts to states' funding formulas, which could force districts to enact furloughs and layoffs.

"Historically, districts are insulated from economic shifts so when a contraction happens, many are unprepared," Roza said. Griffith said an analysis he did two weeks ago that described the fiscal impact school systems could face next year when factoring in new federal money is now outdated. The $13.5 billion included for schools in the coronavirus stimulus measure passed by Congress, known as the CARES Act, he said, will not spare the vast majority of districts.

School funding advocates, he said, should push for [another federal bailout](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2020/04/washington-coronavirus-aid-more-schools-wait.html), one that is exclusive to public schools and amounts to more than $200 billion. The question for school officials now, he said, is whether the economy will immediately bounce back or not.

"These are monumental figures," Griffith said, pointing to unemployment numbers and states' revenue forecasts. "No models can do these sorts of predictions. We have no previous experience dealing with something like this."