

Wholesale move to online education across the US: A nightmare for students and educators

Alexander Fangmann
13 April 2020

Nearly four weeks have passed since many US states began cancelling in-person classes at all grade levels in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Immediately many districts announced a transition to online classes via Zoom or other platforms. These measures are far from a panacea. The vast majority of young people are falling drastically behind and are increasingly anxious, while teachers tasked with designing new curricula virtually overnight are overburdened and stressed.

The rapid transition to online education has revealed the inadequacy of preparation for such an eventuality by schools at all levels. In short, it has become a disaster for large numbers of students. At the same time, it is clear that changes being implemented now are only a prelude, as the ruling class uses the crisis to mount even further assaults on public education at the expense of teachers and students.

Not only has it become evident that most school districts and colleges had no real plans for what to do in the event of a disaster of this magnitude, but decades of austerity have left them few viable or coherent options. Worldwide, according to a UNESCO, students in 188 countries are out of school, or over 90 percent of students worldwide. In many places, students have had no schooling at all since schools closed. As of this writing, 21 states have closed schools for the duration of the school year. New York City has, as of this weekend, done likewise.

A poll of 849 teenagers conducted by Common Sense Media between March 24 and April 1 indicates that 41 percent reported they had not attended even a single online or virtual class. While some districts are set to start distance learning on Monday, including in Chicago and parts of Oregon, others are set to wait longer.

Even when schools have restarted online, many students are not logging in. According to figures released by Los Angeles schools, around one-third of high school students have not logged into classes daily, while 15,000 have attended none at all. Nationally, 21 percent of students are now “truant,” according to Education Week.

Hundreds of thousands of young people, already traumatized by the lockdowns and deaths or illnesses of family members, are being made more anxious by attempts to learn with unfamiliar or unreliable tools.

“These students were distracted from their world by coming to this building that was outside of the community where they faced all these barriers,” said Malcolm Jones, a teacher in Norfolk, VA, speaking with Education Week. “Now, they’re stuck at home in that chaos. Who can really expect some of these students to do that [academic work packet] when they’re at home starving or they’re at home taking care of their siblings?”

Students that qualify for special education in many states and districts have so far been left out completely. Access Living, an Illinois disability advocacy organization, notes “it is unclear if all missed services will be made up.” In other words, some students may receive no education services at all if it cannot be provided through videoconferencing or over the phone.

With nearly 30 million primary and secondary students in the United States relying on free breakfast and lunch programs at schools, the move to online also threatens increased hunger for students, even for those whose parents are still employed in the midst of record layoffs. After initially setting up food distribution at schools to provide for these students, many districts have cut back on these plans, including Chicago and Detroit, or have eliminated them entirely, as in Houston, Memphis and parts of West Virginia.

An enormous obstacle for many students is a lack of access to technology and internet service. Some schools have been able to provide devices such as laptops or tablets to some students, though it is fairly clear the efforts are leaving many, especially working class students, out of luck. As an example, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is working to distribute 100,000 devices, a mix of iPads and Chromebooks, to students for online learning. Even with this effort, CPS concedes that around 15,000 students will have neither a computer nor internet access.

Bogdana Chkoumbova, the CPS Chief Schools Officer said, “The unfortunate reality is that our resources remain limited and there remains an unacceptable digital divide in our city and nation,” while Chief Information Officer Phillip DiBartolo said in a letter to principals, “Not all students in our district will get new devices, but our top priority is getting a device to every student who needs one.”

Despite its necessity for online education and other purposes,

the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) own figures estimate that 19 million Americans lack broadband internet. In all likelihood, the number of households with functionally inadequate internet service is much higher. While some schools are offering wifi hotspots to students without internet access, others are simply directing students to sign up to inferior, low-cost options from internet service providers.

In other words, the educational response to the pandemic—parallel to the medical crisis—takes place on a shoestring budget after years of de-funding. School closures, among the most important public policy measures to implement social distancing, were not implemented as national policy, with some districts still continuing classes. Likewise, district by district, the transition to online education is occurring in a chaotic and haphazard manner.

Many students will not even have an online education experience as schools offer inferior options for students lacking technology or who are unable to use it effectively. These students will be left with the equivalent of correspondence courses, filling out worksheets picked up at school and returning them to school to be graded.

Although college and university students often have better technology and internet access than primary and secondary students, online learning is still only undertaken by a minority of students in higher education. Before the pandemic, only a third had taken online classes and only 13 percent were taking classes exclusively online. As with students in primary and secondary education, the students already struggling the most academically fare worst in an online environment.

Expectations for what students will learn through the end of this academic year are being drastically lowered, with teachers in some districts told not to fail students. Other schools, colleges and universities are moving from assigning distinct course grades to a simple pass/fail system. This is a recognition that neither students nor teachers have been adequately prepared to conduct effective online education.

Real online education requires *more* work from instructors to do effectively, and it requires students to possess certain skills and abilities they may not have. According to a survey by the education technology company ClassTag, 57 percent of teachers who responded said they were not prepared to teach online.

At the same time as schools and students are struggling, the vultures from the for-profit online education and educational technology companies have been circling overhead. Practically all of them are offering some kind of limited-time access to resources that are usually quite expensive. Many are wagering that schools will be locked into the tools and be willing to pay large sums in the future when the limited free period expires.

K12 Inc., an “education management” company that runs many “virtual” schools and “academies” across the US for local school districts, has seen its stock surge since the beginning of the year. The company, founded by convicted

junk bond trader Michael Milken, anticipates increased enrollment at its schools and more districts signing up for its services. According to a report from the National Education Policy Center, virtual schools such as those run by K12 and Pearson's Connections Academy are marked by poor outcomes for students, with graduation rates of just 50.1 percent, compared to the national average of 84 percent.

Some colleges and universities are also being lured into arrangements with online program management (OPM) companies. In these arrangements, which have expanded greatly since 2014, institutions sign away upwards of 60 percent of their future tuition revenue to these for-profit companies to run their online education programs. Staffed by lower-paid adjuncts, instructional designers and “coaches” instead of full-time faculty, the OPM companies offer a model that the ruling class would like to see expanded throughout higher education.

These companies will be increasingly brought in as the expanding economic crisis begins to hit education funding. Many states and localities are implementing delays or freezes in collecting property and sales taxes, which are often a major source of revenue for schools, threatening a budget disaster over the coming months and the potential for layoffs in the fall, along with higher class sizes. During the last recession, hundreds of thousands of teachers and other education workers were laid off.

Workers should be on guard that the US ruling class will attempt to remake the education system from top to bottom in the wake of the pandemic. US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, an advocate of child labor, has already called for “rethinking education” in line with the previous Trump budgets for increased privatization.

The massive ongoing bailout of Wall Street and big business have put paid to the claims for decades that there is “no money” for education. It is high time for funding for schools at all levels to be drastically increased. Teachers and students must demand internet and technology access as part of a basic right to education and culture. Training in online platforms should be universally provided and services adapted to meet all learners, to augment in-person education in normal times and allow education to proceed in emergency situations.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact