The deliberate sabotage of online learning in the US

Part 1

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Tens of millions of students, parents and teachers across the United States and internationally are struggling through a semester unlike any other in modern history. The policy of closing school buildings and implementing online learning—the result of brave protests and strikes by teachers, parents and students—has saved an untold number of lives throughout the world.

In the US, the deliberate defunding of public education by both Democrats and Republicans, and years of a growing "digital divide" between the haves and have-nots, have meant that online learning is often bare-bones, unengaging or even completely inaccessible for millions of young people. It is no surprise that 60 percent of teens say that online learning is worse than in-person learning, and nearly one-fifth say it's "much worse," according to a recent survey by Common Sense Media.

The motives behind the sabotage of online learning

The unfolding disaster in the transition to online learning is both the cumulative effect of the decades-long defunding of public education and the intentional deepening of this policy amid the pandemic.

The disregard of the ruling elites for the lives and education of young people has been made apparent in the chaotic implementation of distance learning done "on the cheap." Students have experienced uncertain schedules, rotating between fully and partially online learning. Meanwhile, parents, teachers, and students have been left with little or no assistance and resources. The net result is the deliberate blackmail of a generation—to get a semblance of an education, they are being forced into deadly school buildings.

The ruling elites are attempting to force schools to reopen so that parents can be forced back into unsafe workplaces, pumping out profits for the major corporations. The last thing big business wants is a quality online education alternative which would cut across the demand that parents be on the job.

According to CISION PRWeb, over 60 percent of K-12 students now attend schools in-person at least part of the week, with 35.7 percent of schools offering in-person learning every day, 26.5 percent in a hybrid schedule of two-three in-person days per week and 37.8 percent of schools only offering virtual learning.

The unplanned character of online learning under capitalism

As the pandemic wore on over the summer and government officials at every level moved to embrace "herd immunity," no financial support was forthcoming to assist schools in the creation of innovative new distance learning plans for the fall school year.

The consequences of this policy have been devastating for everyone involved. School children from the youngest ages through high school are forced into six-hour days of nearly continuous screen time online with little social interaction.

Educators were plunged into distance teaching and mostly left to completely redesign their lesson plans with no assistance. Teachers are consumed with fixing technical problems and managing large classes, while in many cases being directed to impose punitive policies for student "absenteeism."

A pittance of resources were made available through the CARES Act, and most school districts chose to use these funds to pay for minimal PPE and community meals programs, instead of deploying them to assist with the transition to online education. This meant no significant funding on the part of the federal, state, or local governments—whether controlled by Democratic or Republican officials—to address this qualitative change in education.

Andrew, a Houston educator, told the WSWS, "Students were burned out from being on the computer all day. Students acknowledge that it's boring, they will start searching TikTok

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and Instagram and stuff like that. In my class they are literally not there, they don't show up. It wasn't thought through about how to make this work.

"It was apparent to me that a lot wasn't planned, it was just by ear. Even following up with missed work is too much, with the amount of students I have, especially with teaching both in-person and online simultaneously. It's not possible to create an individualized learning experience with the amount of kids in a typical public school class. We have to manage 200 students."

Another Houston teacher, Brandon, added that the transition was "rushed." He emphasized, however, "Educators who know the facts about COVID-19 are for distance education. People saying that they want face-to-face are probably wanting to please their boss; most educators want to stay in online-learning."

While there is certainly no substitute for in-person learning, saving lives must take priority in a pandemic, especially with no vaccine or reliable therapeutics. Young people overwhelmingly agree. In fact, nearly seven in 10 teens are worried—either somewhat or very—that they or someone they know will get sick with COVID-19 because of in-person schooling, reports EdWeek .

But instead of tapping into teachers' creativity and public resources to envision new ways to enliven lessons, the government poured trillions of dollars into Wall Street, including the tech industry, which promptly handed out vast payouts to CEOs, owners and venture capitalists. The tech giants have amassed record profits during the pandemic, while leaving large sections of the US poorly-connected or charging fees unaffordable to many.

Growing frustration among educators and students

The deliberate sabotage of online learning is increasingly generating frustration and exhaustion among both teachers and students. These inevitable results are being cynically used as a battering ram to put students "in seats" even as the pandemic rages out of control in nearly every state.

Andrew explained the myriad difficulties faced by educators, saying, "I still can't say there has been an effective transition from what we used to do to what we are doing now. A lot of the teachers are still struggling with it, a lot of the students have been struggling. At first it was kind of exciting and invigorating to have a new challenge, but it turns into a struggle to survive and you feel like you are just scrambling and don't have enough time to do your job properly."

There was a "slew" of back-to-back professional development courses, Andrew related, but not enough time to master the online learning tools. When asked about online learning tools for students, Andrew said, "I don't know that there was any instruction or orientation for students." He said he got the feeling that students were left to "learn as you go, by asking questions, and hoping that your teacher or one of your teachers knows the answers."

Brandon noted that much of the software and hardware being used is ad hoc or of poor quality, saying, "The technology as it exists right now is not very student-friendly, students are not able to use cellphones and laptops interchangeably. Sometimes they have certain problems getting kicked off the system."

He added, "One of the problems students and teachers have is the audio portion of the class or meeting is horrible. Some have good quality and some have terrible quality. Even if they want students to answer questions in class, there is no way to tell what their answer is."

Noting that teachers are essentially being asked to do two jobs at once, Brandon emphasized, "Hybrid is a lot of work. There are four different systems for tracking attendance. You have to follow up with every attendance issue or else you end up with this huge roster of students who may not be attending. You have to go back, record all the work, make sure you have two grades and that there is no missing work."

A further complication is added for students who are learning English as a second language. Brandon added, "There is a huge population of English language learners, and none of the technology is in dual language version. Not all of them are able to read or decipher what is going on with their technology. Teachers are left to deal with it, and not every teacher is qualified to teach dual language."

Many teachers have reported working 12- and even 15-hour days, sometimes working 90 hours or more a week, rarely getting enough sleep or time to spend with their families in order to keep up with working both online and in-person teaching. Unsurprisingly, thousands of teachers have quit their jobs as a result. Cash-strapped school districts are leaving these as unfilled vacancies, creating even larger classes for teachers that stay in the profession.

To be continued

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