

(continued from page 88) and shifting other tasks to independent study, prerecorded lessons, or online learning programs.

A third big takeaway is that it is still incredibly important that learning be active for kids. We observed one kindergarten teacher, who, every time she asked a question, had her students quickly mark down their answers on the little whiteboards she had mailed home, and hold the boards up to the screen. The engagement and the enthusiasm of these kindergartners were infectious. And everybody had something to do. Contrast this with classes we observed where teachers simply lectured or asked questions of the entire class. In those settings, we saw far fewer students engaged and active in their learning.

Fourth, this moment presents an opportunity to rethink some of our assumptions. Do we really need every algebra teacher in America sitting at home this summer recording a lesson for September 1? With distance learning, schools can leverage their strongest teachers to reach more students over a virtual platform, while other teachers focus on small groups and pay attention to students' work. We've seen schools do this effectively and believe that such thoughtful models could improve learning. If we are forced to run schools from a distance this fall, let's at least take advantage of some of the potential benefits. Let's try to get effective lectures from the best and most accomplished teachers and more personalization from the teachers who know their kids well and whom we can free from having to design all their own materials for every second of the day. I'd advise school leaders to think carefully about how

to use in-person time to build relationships, establish trust, and teach the material that can best be communicated face to face, while shifting tasks that can be accomplished independently to the remote setting.

Schools will also do well to pay special attention to new students. My heart goes out to incoming kindergartners. Can you imagine starting kindergarten either staring at your screen at home without classmates or, even worse, going to school wearing a scary and uncomfortable mask, with everyone else wearing a mask too, and the adults trying to keep five-year-olds six feet apart? My heart goes out to the kids, the families, and the educators. This is going to be the hardest fall we've had maybe in the modern history of education.

This extraordinary challenge, though, also gives us permission to experiment and try different things. It's going to take creativity and determination. We could easily become overwhelmed by the job ahead, but we have no choice but to gear up and find that next level of energy to figure out how to do something that's never been done. How do we welcome students back to the school building safely, or into a better version of virtual learning, or potentially hardest of all, some combination of those two?

Brian Greenberg is CEO of Silicon Schools, a nonprofit organization that has launched or transformed more than 50 schools in high-need communities in Northern California. This essay is adapted from an episode of the EdNext podcast, available at educationnext.org.



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“This Is Going to Be the Hardest Fall We’ve Had Maybe in the Modern History of Education.”

Silicon Schools CEO on how schools can make a high-quality jump to distance learning

by BRIAN GREENBERG

THIS PAST SPRING, the Center on Reinventing Public Education surveyed districts and charter schools nationwide, asking how they were running schools from a distance. How long did it take to transition to distance learning? Were they taking attendance?

At Silicon Schools, a nonprofit organization that I lead, we were blown away by the results of that survey and by how few schools and districts were truly meeting the needs of kids. It’s important to acknowledge how difficult it was for schools to tackle the job they faced this spring. Nonetheless, we can’t ignore the fact that from March through June of this year, more than half the students in this country essentially got no real functional education. For those students who did, we saw teachers breaking their backs trying to figure out how to do it well.

Our organization provides funding to launch or transform California schools that serve as laboratories of innovation. We decided to survey about half of the 50 schools in our portfolio, which serve more than 20,000 kids, to ask the same questions that CRPE used, and then some. We wanted to find out: what’s working, what’s not?

And the data from our schools told a very different story. The schools were immediately responding to the needs of families. They were taking attendance. They were offering several hours a day of instruction, both live and asynchronous. Our survey confirmed what we had thought, that many of the students were still thriving, despite the obvious challenges for them and their teachers. It got us wondering, what accounted for the differences?

We wanted to figure out how some schools had made the transition look so seamless. We had schools in our portfolio that literally closed on a Friday and opened the following Monday with 100 percent student attendance, five hours of synchronous instruction, and parents responding with glowing comments to the administrators saying, “My kids are happier than they were last week.”

That remarkable agility allowed them to rise to the challenge of adapting in this unprecedented time. The educators at these schools have such deep relationships with their students and such a strong sense of moral purpose, they would find it unconscionable to take weeks or months off and just see where the kids landed.

When we looked closely at what had enabled these schools to succeed, we found that it came down to two main factors—school qualities that had existed before Covid-19 struck. The first was a school’s overall comfort level with technology. Schools

that already used a learning-management system, whose students were accustomed to logging in and checking homework assignments, and whose teachers knew how to record a video and send messages were positioned to keep doing that remotely. Schools whose staff and students were inexperienced with such practices, though, faced a huge learning curve.

The other main key to success was that schools that flourished had a highly positive school culture, flexible teachers and staff, and a can-do spirit among team members that allowed them to reinvent the school on the fly over the course of a week. In a highly rule-bound organization where there is no strong sense of teamwork, little trust, and no overall commitment to excellence, I would venture to say it would be impossible to make the jump to distance learning with any quality.

These two factors working together—school culture and experience with technology—were strong predictors of which schools succeeded with virtual learning and which ones got stuck.

I hope that schools will be able to return to in-person learning this fall, with appropriate safety protocols in place, but I think it’s likely that many schools and districts will continue to rely almost entirely on distance education. As a nation, the remote instruction we supplied from March to June will not suffice. In too many settings, kids were not getting enough real learning.

So, what can we do to get better at distance learning quickly?

First, teachers need to see examples of great distance learning, and they need coaching and feedback from their school leaders and peers to keep improving. Schools that embrace a culture of continuous improvement and make their teaching practice public get better.

Second, there’s something magical about live teaching, interacting in real time with a skilled teacher. Many students, especially those who are not already motivated learners, need someone checking in and keeping them engaged. As we looked at the schools in our portfolio that got it right, we found the “sweet spot” resided in giving students one to two hours a day of live synchronous teaching with their classmates.

Granted, it will be hard for parents to coordinate all of these live sessions, often for multiple children, while also dealing with their own work schedules and obligations. For that reason, schools will also need to offer some asynchronous activities and build in some flexibility for families. School leaders will have to be thoughtful about how they balance live and asynchronous methods, saving the live instruction for the most meaningful high-value interactions between teachers and kids, *(continued on page 87)*



Brian Greenberg

COURTESY BRIAN GREENBERG