

Distance learning changed California education. What's here to stay?

MARCH 15, 2021 | SYDNEY JOHNSON



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As schools across California welcome back more students on campus, some distance learning practices look likely to survive the pandemic.

School closures exposed deeply embedded inequalities in California education, as well as the crucial lifelines that schools provide for their communities. But in nearly 12 months of distance learning, teachers pushed through difficult days to find new solutions that kept kids learning during an upended school year.

Now, hope is on the horizon: Teachers are getting vaccinated, case rates are significantly lower, and schools are being offered special funding to assist in reopening. With that, some parts of distance learning appear to be finding a long-term place in the classroom.

Following is an overview of the changes resulting from distance learning that teachers, parents and school administrators told EdSource they want to preserve.

Providing connectivity to all students

Underlying the pivot to distance learning during the pandemic was a [massive push to get computers and Wi-Fi hot spots](#) to students who didn't already have access to the internet at home. Although California still faces glaring gaps when it comes to at-home internet access for thousands of students, many connected to the internet at home for the first time this year.

“Covid really forced our district to get up-to-date technology and teachers have gotten access to way more software and apps and training than before,” said Marissa Glidden, president of the union that represents teachers and other school staff in West Contra Costa Unified.

Along with providing computers, tablets and Chromebooks for students, several school districts, including West Contra Costa Unified, launched partnerships with cities to build broadband infrastructure and create [all-new free public Wi-Fi options](#).

California's education law was also updated to [include computers and internet access](#) under the Williams Act, which guarantees all students equal access to instructional materials, quality teachers, and safe schools.

“Universal internet access is not a luxury — it's a global necessity,” said Los Angeles Unified board member Nick Melvoin. “We will continue to advocate for both short- and long-term solutions to bridge the digital divide for our students and families, during distance learning and long after the pandemic has ended.”

Looking ahead, the California Department of Education is now soliciting ideas on how to bring internet access to parts of the state where service providers do not operate.

More communication channels for students and family

Finding simple ways to connect with parents and guardians has been critical to keeping kids safe and on track during distance learning, especially for special education students and English learners.

“We have had great attendance at IEP (individualized education program) meetings for our special education students this past year,” said Nancy Albarrán, superintendent of San José Unified. “Not having parents leave work for a one-hour meeting has been really good.”

For Melanie Paulson, a parent in Los Angeles, video-based meetings have made it easier for her to stay in touch with her child’s teacher and even follow school board meetings that have all gone virtual.

The virtual staff and parent meetings are also often equipped with [instant language translation](#), and some districts have hired American Sign Language interpreters for public online meetings.

For students, Zoom and other platforms with comment and question features have fostered student-led instruction even when they were shy about turning on cameras or speaking out, said Bob Capriles, a math and engineering teacher at Fremont High School in Sunnyvale.

“I’d like to keep the ability of students to make comments and ask questions anonymously,” Capriles said. “Also, I have easier ways now with Zoom and Screencast-O-Matic to record videos to either flip the classroom or record the class for absent students.”

Flipping the classroom is a teaching strategy where students watch videos or engage in new material on their own and come to class with questions to drive a lesson.

Modernized academic schedules

Daily academic schedules looked much different when schools moved online. But some teachers and students found that they liked their new routines.

In West Contra Costa Unified, which covers Richmond and surrounding areas, high schools this year had a later start time and began offering a homeroom that will become permanent. The district also is launching an entirely new [K-12 virtual academy](#) for students and teachers who prefer distance learning. It will be offered to all district students beginning this fall.

Some school officials want to keep distance learning as an option for students during future unprecedented events that might cause students to miss school.

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“When schools need to close for wildfire smoke, snow, or other natural disasters, distance learning will be a way that we can continue to keep students engaged,” said Joe Wood, executive director of Natomas Charter School in Sacramento. “Similarly, I think we will still need this for quarantined students next year.”

At the state level, there is interest among State Board of Education members, including President Linda Darling-Hammond, for [extending the school year](#) beyond the agrarian calendar as well. However, no official changes have been made.

More equitable grading styles and expectations

Teachers this year had to radically rethink the way they measure student learning online.

Google Forms is one tool that Molly Keimach, a math teacher at Kearny High School in San Diego Unified, turned to for assessments this year. “It’s forced me to ask deeper questions that require less calculation and more of a thought-provoking explanation,” she said. The tool allows her to automatically grade some questions by adding an answer key, type feedback faster than writing, and also creates “no need to haul papers back and forth,” which cuts her grading time nearly in half, said Keimach.

[Grading policies](#) themselves will look very different for some districts moving forward. West Contra Costa Unified introduced a new grading system for elementary-age students during the pandemic that will continue, for example. Unlike common report cards where students

are given a score on various topic areas, the new report cards offer a written narrative from teachers with information about what students learned and where they need more practice.

In San Diego Unified, where Keimach teaches, students now have until the end of the grading period to complete late work and will not be marked down.

“It’s still an accurate representation of what kids are capable of, and it’s important that grades reflect understanding,” she said. “If they show understanding a couple of weeks later, it should still be honored.”

Teaching with technology

If one thing is certain to come out of the 2020-21 school year, it’s that teachers now have more options and experience teaching with computer-based applications than ever before.

While the number of tools and resources was overwhelming at times, teachers like Celetta Hunter at Castlemont High School in Oakland Unified said working virtually created dedicated space to find what she likes. That includes an educational hip-hop app called [Flocabulary](#) and creating storyboards and other ways for students to show mastery instead of a test where they could easily look up answers.

Digital literacy, meaning the ability to use technologies to find, evaluate and communicate information, is Hunter’s main takeaway lesson for the years ahead. For example, she said, allowing students to use cellphones or computers to look up information during class, rather than banning them outright, can create more open conversations about how to critically and safely navigate online information.

“Even though our kids are born into this really tech-driven world, they are limited in the ability to actually use the devices,” said Hunter, who will transition to a district-level administrative position next year. “I think that heightened need to use tech responsibly is something I want to continue.”

Keimach, the math teacher at Kearny High, plans to continue using several digital tools she relied on this year, such as [Desmos](#), a free digital math curriculum and graphing calculator.

“In the classroom, we would print out worksheets and go through different problems together as a math class. But you can’t really get every student’s thoughts all at once like that,” Keimach said. “With Desmos, every student can enter their thoughts all at once. The big win is getting a lot of student feedback instantaneously to keep the conversation and lesson moving.”

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jakayla holmes

1 month ago



this was very helpful because I don't like being on virtual but I don't want to get covid

▶ **Rod**

2 months ago



I have nothing but respect for innovative teachers, but I kind of wonder if the majority of kids and parents would agree with this? Attendance is down, and transfers are up. Parent complaints about the failure of zoom classes have triggered back-to-school movements. The learning loss was abysmal, despite some teachers' best efforts, and worse for under-served groups, highlighting the disparities in education. At the next level college enrollment is actually ... [Read More](#)

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Thank you for this article. I'm interested in hearing more specifics along these lines. Anecdotally, I've seen a lot of creative problem solving among educators and a lot of deep rethinking about what is important in learning. I also look forward to these techniques making it easier for kids who are sick to stay home without losing access to instruction. And there are real opportunities too for creating access to special interest electives and advanced ... [Read More](#)