

Failure in the Virtual Classroom

A study finds that many schools barely cared if kids did any work.

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The remote-learning experiment isn't going well. This month the University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education published a report looking at how 477 school districts nationwide have responded to the Covid-19 crisis. Its findings reveal widespread neglect of students.

The report found only 27% of districts required teachers to

record whether students participate in remote classes, while remote attendance has been abysmal. During the first two weeks of the shutdown, some 15,000 Los Angeles students failed to show up for classes or do any schoolwork.

The Philadelphia Inquirer reported that, 10 weeks in, "the Philadelphia School District registers just 61% of students attending school on an average day." The same week the Boston Globe reported that only "half of students are logging into online class or submitting assignments online on a typical day."

Students have an incentive to ditch digital class, since their work counts for little or nothing. Only 57.9% of school districts do any progress monitoring, the report found. The rest haven't even set the minimal expectation that teachers review or keep track of the work their students turn in. Homework counts toward students' final grades in 42% of districts. And some schools that do grade offer students a pass/incomplete.

Teachers unions never want teachers' performance judged by student achievement, so they've lobbied to ensure a lack of accountability and assessment during the shutdowns. They dressed up this demand in the language of social justice: Because the pandemic has not visited the same hardships on all families, the only equitable solution is to deprive *all* students of for-credit instruction, they claim.

Chicago Teachers Union President Jesse Sharkey said that “customary forms of grading are inappropriate in a global health crisis” and asked “how can such an uneven playing field produce fairness and justice for minority students?” United Teachers Los Angeles lobbied for no student to receive a failing grade, or a worse grade than they had before the shutdowns. The union declared that “we are pressing [the school district] to not mandate summer school for students who earned a D grade,” which they said was “simply an issue of fairness.”

The current and past presidents of the District Teachers Association for the Mountain View-Los Altos High School District in California jointly [wrote](#) in April that “in effect, assigning letter grades to our students is equal to assessing their access to technology and Wi-Fi, their housing security and ableism.”

In reality, this “equitable” treatment dooms poor and minority students to a lasting educational disadvantage. In April, the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported only 24% of eighth graders scored proficient or above in civics, while 15% showed proficiency in U.S. history. And that was before school districts decided to write off the spring semester as a loss.

Rich parents can afford tutoring or can transfer their kids to costly private schools where learning continues and homework still counts. The least privileged kids will be stuck. With no grades or tests to identify those who have fallen behind, children will be pushed into the next grade regardless of whether they’re ready. Many will never catch up. Where’s the outrage over this injustice?

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