

Teacher Perspectives on Remote Learning

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Research Question:

What are the advantages of remote learning and factors for success for some students in the virtual learning environment?

Rationale

The novel Coronavirus that made its appearance in early 2020 presented an unexpected and unprecedented interruption to student learning. For the first time ever, school leaders and staff members were forced to create a brand new virtual learning environment for their students in a matter of weeks. With the need to transition nearly all aspects of life online, schools quickly made an adjustment to accommodate students in a virtual setting. While the academic achievement and engagement of many students suffered greatly with the transition to online school, some students found academic success in ways that were unexpected. This study will identify the advantages of remote learning and factors for success for this subset of students who *did* thrive in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) elementary, middle, and high schools, and recommend ways to leverage this unique virtual learning environment in the future.

Literature Review

While use of the internet and technology tools has steadily increased in schools since the 1990s, a deluge of technology tools was revived or developed during the latter end of the 2019-2020 school year to serve the increased number of students forced to be educated solely online. With this rise in technological tools to facilitate and complement learning, an upsurge in careers in science and technology, and ubiquitous and easily accessible electronic devices, it is clear that schools were on a fast track to incorporating technology in new and innovative ways and potentially transitioning to a fully remote or hybrid learning model anyway. According to Robert Cummings, Director of the Learning Resource Center at the University of Alabama, with the increase in internet usage and technology, it can be assumed that “50% of learning will take place on the Internet, which is a better vehicle for cognitive learning due to the extent of information, low cost, and convenience” (Posey, 2010). In addition, as this generation of students develop into working adults, “employers will expect to hire people who know how to learn online [and the] Internet will dominate teleconferencing, because it's cheaper...offers universal access, and has a high level of interactivity” (Posey, 2010). Thus, a study on remote learning in DCPS is timely and relevant.

There are many advantages to remote learning. For instance, Posey, et.al asserted that the development of communication and technological skills for students, instructor and student organization, and cost were major advantages (Posey, 2010). Mukhtar held that student comfort in their own environments and accessibility of lessons and resources were also benefits of learning virtually (2020). Makarova’s study completed this year in Russia sought student perspectives, which was often missing from the literature. College students identified saving time and saving money on transportation fare as well as the availability, flexibility, and ability to choose any setting conducive to their own learning as significant benefits that caused them to prefer a hybrid model of education (Makarova, 2021). Students also described “innovative information and communication technologies, teacher’s individual approach to student’s needs, and teaching creativity” as positive elements of learning virtually (Makarova, 2021). With so many advantages to virtual schooling, a potential permanent switch for some students makes sense.

Much of the research on remote learning was done prior to the pandemic, and research done since last year has been geared mostly toward college and graduate students in contexts outside of the United States. More robust research is needed to learn about the impact of virtual schooling on K-12 students, especially in an urban school district. This research will help to fill that gap.

Methodology and Data Analysis

Data were gathered via an online survey that was distributed to DCPS teachers in all grade levels and across all wards. The survey included demographic questions as well as multiple choice and short answer questions seeking to know

teacher perspectives on factors that contributed to student success and advantages they experienced in the virtual environment. Teachers who responded to the survey came from all wards in the District, with the most (25.5%) coming from Ward 4. Of the 102 respondents, 72.5% were General Education teachers while 27.5% taught students with special needs and 1% were teachers of academically gifted students. Respondents taught classes that ranged from 4 students to 300 students, including self-contained students with special needs and students requiring language services.

55.9% of the teachers surveyed reported that over half of the students they teach were thriving (completely engaged and making academic progress). When asked their opinion on whether some students should continue virtual learning, teachers overwhelmingly believed that some students *should* continue fully remote learning in the 2021-2022 school year (79.4%) and identified instructional components that were working well with the virtual model, including the availability of online platforms available in DCPS, student engagement, and student and staff safety. According to survey results, students thriving in online learning ranged in grade level, ability level, and by ward. But there were common factors that seemed to result in success in the virtual environment for some students, including student self-advocacy and intrinsic motivation, parent and family support, and teacher actions, including building rapport and a strong community with students in the online environment. Most respondents agreed that remote schooling is not for everyone but for that population of thriving students, including some students with special needs, a permanent fully remote or hybrid learning model should be developed in DCPS.

Recommendations

As a model of innovation and forward-thinking for the entire nation, DCPS should develop a fully remote learning option, the DCPS Virtual Academy. Creating a fully online option would be an excellent way to promote equity in learning and support those students who were thriving in the virtual environment this year. Several important logistics would need to be worked out, including the application process, parent engagement, grading and attendance, and professional development, among others.

Ultimately, the DCPS Virtual Academy could be a K-12 fully remote school in the District that would accept students through an application process. Families would indicate interest through an online application. Several criteria would be used to determine admission into the Academy, including student performance, academic growth, and academic achievement, online attendance records, and teacher recommendations. A needs assessment would be distributed to families of students chosen for this virtual academy to determine internet access, technology needs, and more.

Parents of enrolled students would need to attend mandatory quarterly trainings and Parent University classes covering topics germane to the virtual learning environment, including supporting students at home with online learning, attendance, grading policies, and collaborating with teachers in the virtual environment. Monthly mandatory check-ins with teachers could also support strong family engagement, a key district-wide priority.

The Virtual Academy would need to be staffed by a fully remote group of teachers so they could focus primarily on teaching online courses, avoiding the incredible challenges of teaching students both in-person *and* online. Similarly, in-person teachers would only teach in-person students. This would allow teachers to direct all their attention to one modality and concentrate on teaching the students in their care well. Professional development, including LEAP, for teachers chosen to work remotely would be targeted, content-specific, and differentiated to address issues specific to teaching in an online format. Evaluations and observation policies would also be adjusted to accommodate online cohorts of teachers.

The development of a Virtual Academy in DCPS would benefit students who demonstrated success in the virtual environment. It would also alleviate the stress of teachers forced to teach in two different modalities and could save money for the district. This recommendation would require more thought and investigation since many additional factors need to be considered to fully implement the plan.

References

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