

# Learning Next Fall: The Hybrid Classroom

A D2L Policy Brief

## **Executive Summary**

With the unprecedented disruption to education caused by COVID-19, parents and students are yearning for a return to normalcy. Calls for re-opening school buildings closed during the COVID-19 pandemic have increased, and states and school districts are grappling with how to provide learning in the next school year. In this uncertainty, there is a clear need to redesign our systems of learning for resiliency. Enabling them to adjust to second wave outbreaks,<sup>i</sup> parental concerns about sending children out of the house, mandates for physical distancing, and the tremendous amount of learning loss students have incurred.

Essentially, school districts are in a real life Schrodinger's Cat scenario.<sup>ii</sup> Because we don't know the state of COVID-19's trajectory for next fall or the timeline for a vaccine, it is impossible for school systems doing their planning now to know whether school buildings will be open or closed. School systems must plan for both realities: one where school buildings will re-open at a limited capacity—with some students at home and some in the classroom—and one where buildings are closed for long stretches at some point during the fall semester.

A hybrid learning model, where the majority of learning is done online with supplemental face-to-face instruction, is the only option that will accommodate the learning needs of students and provide districts with the flexibility to adapt to changing scenarios.

To effectively implement a hybrid learning model, states and districts will need to address device and internet access deficiencies, implement the digital learning infrastructure for effective teaching and learning, and increase professional development for teachers in online and blended pedagogy.

This policy brief intends to address how a hybrid learning model will address the needs of school districts to redevelop a sense of normalcy and routine for students through teaching and learning. It does not address other critical issues in education such as transportation, nutrition, athletics, or other extra-curricular activities.

<sup>i</sup> <https://thehill.com/homenews/news/495215-fauci-second-wave-of-coronavirus-in-fall-inevitable>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/8/130812-physics-schrodinger-erwin-google-doodle-cat-paradox-science/>

## **School buildings will not re-open for school year 2020-21**

At least not in any form that we would recognize as school today.

The rapid onset and spread of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has brought global society to a standstill. Though many people want to return to normalcy soon, the ability to do so in a safe manner requires a vaccine or other assurances against continued spread of the virus.

In recent weeks, the federal government,<sup>iii</sup> state governors,<sup>iv</sup> and other expert groups,<sup>v</sup> have produced guidelines for re-opening economic activity, including schools, in the United States. While the guidelines differ slightly in approach, there is a consensus that, without a vaccine, a multi-phase approach to re-opening is the path forward. School building re-openings will not occur in any fashion until about midway through a plan, and, when they do re-open, mandatory safeguards will be in place that will alter the concept of face-to-face education as we know it today.

Based on the recommended guidelines coming out today, we can assume school buildings will be allowed to re-open only when a state and a community is able to achieve all of the following:

1. Testing capabilities for any individual with COVID-19 symptoms;
2. Contact tracing systems are actively monitoring all confirmed cases;
3. A sustained reduction of cases over multiple weeks;
4. Health system capacity allows for the safe treatment of all patients; and
5. Personal protective equipment (PPE) is in sufficient supply to protect school employees and students.

Consequently, without a vaccine as a firewall from further outbreaks, school districts will face a host of logistical challenges to returning to traditional face-to-face learning.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/openingamerica/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://coronavirus.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/covid-19/responsible-restart-ohio/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/National-Coronavirus-Response-a-Road-Map-to-Recovering-2.pdf>

## **MANDATORY CONTINUATION OF PHYSICAL DISTANCING MEASURES**

Schools will have to ensure students follow physical distancing guidelines—at least 6 feet of distance between students and staff. Physical distancing will be used to prevent a potential infection from spreading and to lessen fear and anxiety among students, staff, and parents that might keep them away voluntarily.

Some education stakeholders have considered shrinking class sizes, staggering school start times, reducing offerings to just the core curriculum, and limiting student movement between areas of the building. Each of these options has drawbacks for student learning and significant limits on feasibility due to typical student behaviors, cost to implement, and effects on the working conditions of faculty and staff.

## **DISCOMFORT IN RETURNING TO SCHOOL**

Even with cases on the decline and stay-at-home provisions lifting, a level of fear and anxiety about the safety of school buildings will remain.

A majority of Americans (69%) in a mid-April survey by ABC News/Ipsos said they do not expect to get back to their normal routines until after July 1,<sup>vi</sup> which is an indication of uncertainty and concern. Those expectations have risen since earlier surveys. Many parents will likely still have a raised level of fear and anxiety about sending their children to school to be in close proximity with others. There are likely to be a number of parents who choose to keep their children at home even if buildings re-open or pull their children out of school at some point during the year. Districts will need a way to keep those children enrolled and engaged.

Teachers and staff will need to be assured that their working conditions are safe for themselves and their students. Flexibility to ensure the safety of all staff, especially those with compromised immune systems, is a vital part of any plan to re-open buildings and to provide learning continuity.

## **SCHOOL BUILDINGS WILL CLOSE AGAIN**

As we start to see a reduction in the rate of confirmed cases and states begin to ease their restrictions, it is likely that new outbreaks will occur. The director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has warned of a second widespread outbreak this winter; which, when combined with the seasonal rise in influenza cases, could again overwhelm our healthcare systems nationwide.<sup>vii</sup>

With the high likelihood of this scenario happening and the absence of a vaccine, school districts will need to implement strict quarantine rules for students who show any symptoms of COVID-19, such as barring them from school buildings and school events until they test negative. Should a second wave outbreak occur in a community, school buildings may be required to close again to prevent the spread or due to rising absenteeism of students, teachers, and staff.

## **Schools Will Face Challenges Beyond Access**

Beyond the physical and logistical barriers in re-opening school buildings, school districts will be facing an even greater challenge in the coming year – addressing the learning deficits already incurred this year and through the summer.

The “summer slide” is a well-documented effect of the learning loss that occurs between school years. The average student can lose the equivalent of a month of learning between the spring and fall terms.<sup>viii</sup>

vi <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/abc-news-coronavirus-poll>

vii <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/04/21/coronavirus-secondwave-cdcdirector/>

viii <https://www.brookings.edu/research/summer-learning-loss-what-is-it-and-what-can-we-do-about-it/>

With student learning having halted in mid-March in many school districts due to school closures, students are already at a deficit compared to where they should be at end of the 2019-20 school year, and that loss will compound with summer slide loss. In some cases, students may be arriving next year a full grade level behind where they otherwise would have been without COVID-19 disruptions.<sup>ix</sup> For students who were already tracking below grade level, it will be a devastating position to start the year.

In addition to learning deficits, students will need the care and attention of their teachers to address the social and emotional needs resulting from living and learning amidst a pandemic. Teachers fill many roles beyond instruction and must be well equipped to continue to do so if they are to fulfill the needs of the whole child—social, emotional, wellbeing, etc.

Technology point solutions, such as document sharing, word processing, or video conferencing apps, will not be able to solve these challenges on their own. States and districts will need to work with teachers to identify a comprehensive learning solution to meet the needs of students.

### **The (Hybrid) Classroom of Next Fall**

Addressing the access and learning challenges next year demands that states and school districts redesign their systems of learning for resiliency. We cannot accept again that learning will be obstructed because our physical infrastructure is no longer accessible.

Our schools must be able to serve students face-to-face and through distributed learning simultaneously. They must be capable of serving students in person one day and fully online the next day, seamlessly and without interruption of learning.

Resilient systems of learning will keep student learning moving forward. Never stagnant. Never falling behind.

Redesigning systems of learning for resiliency requires the implementation of a **hybrid learning model**; where the majority of teacher-led learning happens outside of the classroom, with face-to-face instruction used to supplement the online activities. A comprehensive learning solution is the platform from which teachers provide instruction, activities, engagement, and communication, leveraging best practice pedagogies for the online space.

A hybrid learning model schedule may have students physically attending school only 2 out of 5 days—allowing for minimization of students, teachers, and staff in the building and classroom at any given time. In-person days are used as “flipped” learning days; where students can seek help from teachers on the lessons and assignments given online. Teachers can provide in-person interventions and individualized and small group supports, as well as fulfill the social and emotional needs of students. In the event that school buildings need to close again due to additional outbreaks or if parents keep their children at home (by choice or by requirement), teachers will be able to accommodate full-time online learning without adding to their workload or compromising the quality of their instruction.

<sup>ix</sup> [https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/04/Collaborative-Brief\\_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf](https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/04/Collaborative-Brief_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf)

## **What teacher-led learning in the hybrid model looks like:**

**Fewer virtual class meetups.** Less video lecture, more learning. Occasional meetups offer a chance for engagement, question answering, and social interactions and allow students the flexibility to work and learn primarily on their own schedule. Teachers provide learning objectives, activities, and content for students to complete on a weekly or daily basis and students submit evidence of their learning and activity completion (i.e. pictures, essays, assessments, etc.) for grading.

**Rich Feedback.** Teachers provide group and individual feedback to students based on student and class needs and assignments—keeping students connected, engaged, and informed. A comprehensive learning solution provides multiple pathways for teachers to engage students, including 1:1 support, assignment annotations, discussion post engagement, badging, video based feedback, and rubrics.

**Differentiated learning pathways.** Teachers provide students with individualized learning pathways based on their actual knowledge coming into the school year. A comprehensive learning solution allows teachers to disseminate personalized content, activities, and assessments based on a student's needs; ensuring those with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) receive their required interventions and accommodations. Students then progress through learning standards at their own pace while receiving guidance, assistance, and nudges from their teacher when needed to keep progression moving. In-classroom days provide a further chance for interventions and small group instruction.

**Tracking engagement but measuring learning.** Teachers in hybrid classrooms leverage mastery-based instruction and assessment methods to measure student actual knowledge and progression. Understanding whether students are making gains or meeting grade-level standards allows teachers to provide targeted interventions and adjust a student's learning pathway. A comprehensive learning solution provides teachers with data on student engagement (i.e. logins or time spent online) to better inform when to provide additional check-ins, touchpoints, or interventions with students—not just for attendance.

**Addressing social, emotional, and other health needs.** In addition to access to learning, teachers use the comprehensive learning solution to provide social engagement opportunities between students through group assignments and activities, student-to-student video feedback, and virtual social clubs. School counselors and other student support staff can leverage the learning solution to connect to students in need and provide services and resources. Students with disabilities can attend therapy sessions during physical attendance days, which are supplemented with virtual assisted sessions and home visits.

**Parent engagement.** Parents have a direct view into their child's hybrid classroom through the comprehensive learning solution and can view assignments, activities, due dates, teacher feedback, and grades. For younger learners, teachers communicate learning activities and expectations with parents during virtual days; answering the question of "what to do today" and ensuring parents are not required to be the teacher.

## Recommendations

Redesigning systems of learning to be resilient requires states and districts to make investments today in a comprehensive learning solution and adopt a hybrid learning model. Furthermore, teachers must be an integral part of this solution. Digital solutions can provide the medium for hybrid learning but teachers must supply the instructional methods and strategies for success. The research is clear,<sup>x,xi,xii</sup> online learning can be an effective mode of learning, but the pedagogy is the secret sauce.

To make the hybrid learning model work for all students and teachers, states must work with districts to do the following:

### 1. CLOSE THE HOMEWORK GAP

Every student must have sufficient access to a device and internet access. As districts have been faced with solving learning access for the current school year 2019-20, there has been tremendous progress in closing gaps in access. States need to support school districts in closing the remaining gap.

In setting up their hybrid learning systems and expectations, districts should consider the availability of mobile devices and older devices that may be available to students at home. The right digital learning and instruction infrastructure should allow students to access their learning from any device, any time.

To help families leveraging mobile data plans with data caps, districts and states should work with telecommunication providers to ‘zero rate’ approved web-based digital learning tools by web address or URL (i.e. [exampledistrict.brightspace.com](http://exampledistrict.brightspace.com))—exempting them from data limits.

### 2. ENGAGE TEACHERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING STRATEGIES

Transitioning instruction from face-to-face to online is not a copy/paste job. Best practice requires learning strategies that minimize lectures and many of the synchronous classroom-based activities. To be successful in the hybrid model, teachers will need ongoing professional development in online instructional methods and strategies. Moreover, teacher input during the development of plans for hybrid learning implementation and the selection of the comprehensive learning solution, is imperative as they will know best what works for their students.

### 3. IMPLEMENT A COMPREHENSIVE DIGITAL LEARNING SOLUTION

Districts must have the digital learning infrastructure to meet the needs of the whole child. Technology point solutions cannot individually address the myriad of learning strategies necessary for hybrid learning. Assembling a library of point solutions is unruly and, especially with non-education solutions, invites student data privacy and security issues.

A comprehensive learning solution can provide teacher-led learning and engagement, differentiated learning pathways, social and emotional supports, assessment, parent engagement, and the administrative functionality of grading, and learner progression measurement. A learning management system (LMS) is the most effective tool that can functionally enable the hybrid learning model and provide teachers the ability to meet the needs of their students.

x <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ694412>

xi <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED505824>

xii [https://www.scirp.org/\(S\(lz5mqp453edsnp55rgjct55\)\)/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=36974](https://www.scirp.org/(S(lz5mqp453edsnp55rgjct55))/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=36974)

An LMS enables teachers to engage in the different methods of instruction necessary of the online environment that word processing and document-sharing and collaboration tools cannot. Similarly, those solutions that take the teacher out of the equation, such as packaged content and credit recovery tools, miss the critical whole-child supports particularly necessary in times of crisis.

#### **4. PROACTIVELY RELEASE SCHOOLS FROM SEAT TIME AND INSTRUCTIONAL HOURS REQUIREMENTS**

With students learning outside the classroom for substantial portions of the school year, districts need relief and alternatives to mandatory seat time and instructional hours requirements. Attendance mandates that require students to be online at specific times or for long periods of time will hinder the development of student learning pathways best suited to the hybrid model, and learning progression will suffer. States must work with districts and teachers to provide an alternative to attendance that is based in learning progress.

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### **About D2L**

D2L develops software that makes the learning experience better. Our cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is the leading learning management system (LMS) for blended and fully virtual learning. It's easy to use, flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, schools can personalize the learning experience for every learner to deliver real results. Brightspace is used by learners in K-12, higher education, and the corporate sector, including the Fortune 1000.

Learn more about D2L for schools, higher education, and businesses at [www.D2L.com](http://www.D2L.com).

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