

THE REIMAGINE AMERICA'S SCHOOLS FORUM

THE IMPACT OF DISTANCE LEARNING ON EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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National Design Alliance to Reimagine America's Schools
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Introduction

We know that schools are an essential part of the DNA of our culture, of our neighborhoods and of our communities. But we also know that in many, many ways, they have failed us.

We want to be a part of an ongoing, collaborative conversation with thought leaders and citizens across a wide swath of experiences and disciplines, so that when the time comes for civic leaders, mayors and education leaders to ask “what are we going to do?” we can provide tangible strategies, inspiration, stories, content and road maps to help local leaders make better decisions.

In this forum, panelists focus on the impact of distance learning during the pandemic, and the takeaways that can be applied to future learning models. When we talk about Reimagining Schools, it would be tragic if we fell back rather than leaned forward after this is done. This enormous national experiment exposed the good, the bad and the ugly of distance or virtual learning; Ron Bogle, CEO of the National Design Alliance, Hon. AIA, investigates what worked, and where the opportunities for improvement lie.

This dialogue included:

- Ron Bogle, AIA, President & CEO, National Design Alliance
- Dan Foreman, Verizon Innovative Learning Schools
- Nadia Lund, High school student, Lewis and Clark High School, Spokane, Washington
- Mark Lund, Principal at Glover Middle School in Spokane, Washington, Spokane Public Schools
- Dan Coleman, Visiting Researcher in the Innovation practice at MIT Teaching Systems Lab and Principal, Big Sky Blue, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- Kristen Watkins, Director Personalized Learning, Dallas Independent School District, Dallas, Texas
- Ashley Flores, Senior Director of the Child Poverty Action Lab, Dallas, Texas

Summary of Forum

Seven themes emerged from this dialogue on distance learning:

- There were many immediate challenges to making this abrupt transition to digital learning, including lack of access to the Internet, lack of teacher training and feedback from parents who felt helpless and overwhelmed from working at home and teaching their children.
- Participants recognized several positive outcomes, particularly the impact on special education.
- There was a robust discussion on what tools teachers had at hand and would need going forward to make this massive transition work effectively.
- Identifying the role of “school” as a physical space, and what was lost during the transition, including the dynamic energy and feedback loops between students and teachers.

- How digital learning could help students focus, become more self-directed and resilient.
- How the expansion of digital learning could advance public education.
- There was a significant focus on sustaining reform with regards to digital learning.

Making the Switch: The Challenges of Distance Learning

The most immediate challenge for many school districts is lack of access to the Internet for many students. While schools were able to provide laptops, the lack of hotspots and access to the Internet became a barrier to success. What is immediately apparent is the lack of teacher training and development to adequately transition to distance learning. For many, the lack of connection to the student's energy and feedback is the most demoralizing aspect. Parents were equally caught off guard and lacked the tools and resources to fully support their children in an online learning environment.

Dan Coleman: What's been striking with these interviews with teachers is how hard it is. How most tragically hard and how demoralizing it can be. In that vein, I spoke to a teacher in a community which does not have some of the tech resources that you have described, where he basically said that two years ago, their schools got laptop carts and they assumed the laptops would follow soon after. Consequently, they had to go to strictly paper packets and leave a big pile on the school steps, and encouraged students to come pick them up. He said that his experience sometimes was like shouting into the void.

One of the challenges is what it's like for teachers to be so isolated. To not get the feedback of the simple back and forth that they're used to getting. That energy they're used to getting from being in the middle of their students. And I have strong suspicions that it's pretty much like that for the young people too, who aren't getting that back and forth. Who are out of that feedback loop.

Kristen Watkins: The hard part for us is that not every family has access, so as we pivoted at the end of March we got a lot of hotspots donated, and we are still trying to meet the demand. But the majority of students have access now to a device and to Wi-Fi and in the Fall that will be the standard across the board.

Dan Foreman: How do we bring back the idea of the school as the pillar of the community to bring back people to come in and be able to help and support it and how does that then support the community in general? I was also looking at the question about the role of parents in distance learning and how do you bring them into the fold. That answer changes dramatically based on the neighborhood, the demographics of the students, free and reduced lunch, as to what they can do and how much they can help and what that ultimately looks like.

You have to be systemic and systematic as to how it will work. I've seen some schools that were able to turn it around very quickly in very difficult, struggling neighborhoods of low rent. They were underestimated but they were able to address it and get it done because they did it systematically and because they were aware of the diverse needs of their neighborhood.

The Zoom Experience: Bright Spots and New Opportunities

Some teachers reported “transformative” experiences in being able to reach students on a one-on-one basis, and some were successful in helping special education students make the transition and provide them with resources they needed. There is an acknowledgement that students are quick learners and it was important to unleash and support their creativity.

The expansion of digital learning also holds opportunities for student engagement, self-learning and resilience. Panelists discussed whether digital learning might become a portal where parents could request access to other resources.

Dan Coleman: More interesting, I’d say, are those teachers who’ve said that they’ve had these kinds of transformative experiences with their students one-on-one. Because as I’m sure you guys have seen, many teachers have shifted away from a synchronous model of learning toward different kinds of modalities.

Several of the teachers we spoke to have talked about moments where they are able to spend say, 45 minutes or even an hour with just one student at a time. And what that’s enabled them to do is something they were never able to do when they had 20, 25, 30 students at time. Which is to work through a single problem all the way through with just one kid. And they say what they’re able to accomplish in that kind of mode is stunning to them.

Dan Foreman: So really obvious, astonishing downsides. Some few surprising moments of wow. If there were some way we could keep that going in the future, we sure should. I’m also really interested in what are those more surprising glimpses and glimmers of something really special happening that we might somehow be able to hold onto as we proceed.

In my conversations with some of the districts that I’ve talked to and work with, some of the bright spots that I’ve seen happen, surprisingly, is with special education students and students with IEPs who are actually getting some more time and more one-on-one instruction through Zoom meetings, through office hours, through that type of creative process.

Kristen Watkins: I think in terms of bright spots, it’s been really powerful to see the schools remain committed to that innovation and that work. So we have a lot of schools that are working with project-based learning as one approach to curriculum.

I got to join a fifth grade class, and they finished their exhibition and their project and shared it with a panel of folks all via Zoom. And they managed the entire thing. To me, I think it’s been really powerful to see that kids are learning. I think that’s been super powerful to see, that even from the kid’s perspective, that they’re the ones that are really driving and holding their teachers accountable to giving them rigorous, authentic work.

Mark Lund: I think we were positioned well to push out technology and to get kids Internet access. I know in working with teachers, they too have shared individually some of those transformative experiences working with students.

And also around IEP meetings, they’ve claimed that this will forever change how we do IEP meetings. Their attendance and participation within the individual meetings, it’s outstanding. And they really feel like they can have more authentic conversations with parents. So we’ve seen some pluses there. We’ve had to find ways and systems to go out and identify which students at the secondary level are and are not participating. So we’ve been creative there, because it’s harder than it seems.

Teacher Tools for Digital Learning: What We Have, What We Need

Some schools have systems in place that will allow them to scale up quickly, given their previous work with students and staff on personalized learning. Some principals have also taken the initiative to set their teachers up for success, long before guidance from the district office.

Kristen Watkins: We closed schools right at the beginning of Spring Break, and we had the week of Spring Break to get ready for home learning. We were super intentional about naming this “home learning” and then the autonomy was given to families and guardians to set that schedule for the day. What we are transitioning to in the Fall will really be true, authentic distance or remote learning. So we want to really parse out that those are two very different things.

Dan Foreman: I appreciated what Kristen brought up earlier about calling what we’re doing right now “emergency online virtual learning.” This is not the way that it was supposed to work. But it’s made us all stop, pause and reflect and think about how well we do when we come back. So we are having as a result very interesting, in depth, long-range planning ideas where this becomes some version of the new baseline.

Kristen Watkins: I think what really played a huge role in the success was the engagement of our teachers at the personalized learning schools. Engagement was not even an issue in this transition. We know what to do. We’ll do our small groups with the teachers and the teacher uses the same channel of communication that they used in the classroom. Kids were used to that, so that was helpful. Then we were super intentional about planning for the informal morning meetings or office hours or just fun, like their Friday celebrations.

Mark Lund: I got teachers who are going to do a bunch of leadership work this summer and I’m not waiting for the district. We have an awesome school district but I just identified some outcomes for this summer work and I’m going to put all of our leadership money into it.

I’m working to identify focus standards, develop a summative competency-based assessment system, develop a formative assessment feedback rubric system to use for students. Identify and organize existing online formative assessment platforms that already provide for frequent, timely and meaningful feedback. So I’m trying to identify all of these outcomes and then at the end of it, I’m thinking “well, what learning management system is the district going to choose?” I can’t wait.

Ashley Flores: Something that I’ve been thinking about is how can we take advantage of all of these institutions, like museums and zoos or arts and crafts stores, who suddenly are also creating digital experiences like a virtual art class or a virtual visit to the museum. And how do we better connect the dots between those great assets and schools, too?

Historically, some schools are better than others in building and sustaining those types of relationships with external partners. But there seems to be such a big opportunity to expand the universe of content and the universe of teachers that are working with students, and I wonder how we might tap into that as folks are muddling through where virtual learning goes from here.

Dan Foreman: A lot of our schools became the forefront and the leaders of what was happening. Before March 13th, the thinking was “okay, there’s this program, every kid’s got a device, whatever.”

They're really lucky they got into that program. After March 16th, they became the forefront of what was happening in schools across their cities. This is what teaching and learning could be when we got rid of the digital equity divide and we provided a level of ecosystem to every single student.

Schools in Cleveland are right across the street from the Cleveland Clinic. Nobody that worked at the Cleveland Clinic has students that went to the school. How can we build that partnership? There's nothing stopping any one of us from being able to Zoom into a class and teach that class. And what can that look like. As professionals, we should all be volunteering to also go in and say, "Okay, this is what I do. This is how I've gotten here. This is my story. I want you to know this and be able to paint that picture."

What Teachers and Students Miss About the Daily School Experience

For students, social relationships and friendships continue to be powerful factors that define schools. They not only miss direct interaction with their peer groups, but the one-on-one time with teachers that helps them set their learning path and forge student/teacher relationships. Similarly, teachers have often felt isolated and disconnected from their students; they miss feedback on their students' progress, as well as the energy of a full classroom.

Ron Bogle: I wonder if we might ask Nadia to share with us a little. Because as often happens, we grown ups have all sorts of sharp insights into what it's like to be a student in our schools. And I'm wondering, Nadia, if you could share what seems important to you. But here are two small questions that could be part of it. So we're guessing a little bit about what are the reasons you do school when you're doing it remotely. What your motivation might be like? And we're also really wondering about what it's like to be doing school from home next to your parents?

Nadia Lund: I'm pretty self-motivated about having a good GPA and college stuff. I've always just kind of been that way, even in middle school. And then doing school at home with my parents around is not as different as I thought it would be. Most of the time my parents are working and then I have to help my younger siblings out with their schoolwork. So the only difference now is that I'm somewhat of a teacher for my younger siblings, who are in elementary school. They just don't have access to their teachers as they usually do. I really don't have anything that I don't miss

Ron Bogle: I think that's a great affirmation for the value of school.

Mark Lund: My follow up question for you, Nadia, was: right now, if you had access to your school and your teachers in the current setting — you could come and go as you choose and see your math teacher or your English teacher. How would you imagine using the school in that way? What would be helpful?

Nadia Lund: I think it would be helpful, definitely to just go see your teacher and it's not the same as when you're just asking a question over Zoom, because sometimes the information gets lost in translation or it's maybe the teacher is teaching it too fast or too slow. So it's definitely easier to be able to have access to your teachers. Our Zooms are only 20 minutes anyway so it's more just bare minimum. It's not like you get a genuine amount of time to ask your question and have it heard. So you either have to email them separately and hope they respond, or you just try to learn how to do what you're supposed to do by yourself.

So I miss being able to walk to the cross and be like, "Hey, hi Senor Brake." Just that little moment right before class starts just to talk and see how everyone's day is; it's just not the same when

you're all in the same Zoom or Teams meeting. It's not the same as being able to sit next to your partner and ask "How's your day going? Oh, my first period was fine," or, "My day sucks." That's the biggest part I miss, those tiny conversations you'd have right before class just to see how everyone's doing.

Digital Learning as a Tool for Engagement, Self-Direction and Resilience

Participants discussed student engagement in the current environment and the transferring of that knowledge to school in the post-pandemic world. Rather than measuring participation by bodies in chairs, attention turned to how distance learning might foster new modes of self-directed, project-based learning, and challenge previous learning styles. Speakers were generally optimistic about the opportunities that virtual learning can provide.

Mark Lund: We've had to find ways and systems to go out and identify which students at the secondary level are and are not participating. So we've been creative there, because it's harder than it seems to say, "Hey Mark, if you could just go back last week and identify which of your students didn't participate in two or more of their six period classes." Well from the school level, to consolidate all that data, we realized we really need some processes and structures. And I feel like we've been able to respond to that and be creative.

Dan Coleman: We would look at state laws around school attendance and the number of students who actually just come to school and physically be there, but not engaging. And somehow we felt okay about that. So one bright spot for me is, it doesn't allow us to hide from those things. We still don't have all the solutions but we're definitely not hiding from them.

Dan Foreman: Now you can look at that from a disciplinary action, but you can also look at that as a triage action. For one school, they realized that a family was on lockdown, was put into quarantine and they needed resources and they needed food. By having all of that, they called the school and they were able to do that. That then enabled us to provide resources to that school to provide resources to that family.

Kristen, you started out by saying how the work that's been going on with your schools for about seven years has really deepened students' ability to self direct their learning. I'm wondering if that gets at the phenomenon that Mark's talking about, that you have actually found scenarios where kids are more engaged, more owning and driving their own learning? And if so, what kind of specific moves have you guys found actually cultivated that kind of thing in them? So they didn't all evaporate as soon as we kept our eye off them.

Kristen Watkins: I think some of the headlines of our work is giving kids the opportunity to learn how to manage themselves. You have to learn how to learn and I think sometimes we take that for granted as adults. We assume that a kid knows how to watch a video and learn from it. But if you're supporting them and telling them that you can actually pause that video and watch it over again, you're helping them manage their own time. It's been a productive struggle over the years and sometimes you let kids learn the hard way of what happens when you don't manage your time well. And then in those one-on-one conversations with their mentor or their teacher, you parse out and start to really identify "What am I doing that is supporting my self-direction?"

Dan Foreman: At Digital Promise, we call it "Challenge Based Learning", around this idea of how do you present a challenge to students and let them kind of crawl into that challenge, pull it apart, and come up with multiple different answers as to what that would be. We also try to make that

challenge personal to the student and personal to that neighborhood. You can bring students into the fold by giving them that opportunity to one, address what a challenge is. And then two, just crawl inside of it and all of that's still standards aligned as to what that will look like.

For example, I got to observe a classroom where it was a virtual space. The teacher was streaming through Twitch; they were playing Civilizations and teaching civics and having discussions around why we make these decisions, what does this look like, and getting really deep into it. And having this conversation through a live stream, and then the students would have to democratically decide what the actions were to take, as a group. It's using a video game, it's using Twitch, using those types of things, all free platforms.

Doing something highly engaging with 30 kids all together in the same space. And you're talking about very high ideas — this was a seventh grade classroom. Those are the types of things that we have available to us and those are the types of things that we need to put into school as a part of the regular school day.

Advancing Public Education Through Digital Expansion

Participants are surprised and pleased by what can be achieved in supporting special education students, though panelists recognized the need for more support systems for parents. Digital learning may provide a new and possibly effective tool for engaging students who were historically prone to “checking out”. The consensus seems to be that digital learning creates new opportunities for teaching students how to learn, and opens up the possibility of making learning more portable, given the democracy of the Internet.

Dan Foreman: I provide every kid with a device with Internet connection, so we can remove the digital equity divide from the conversation. What does that mean? Now every family has a device, every family has Internet connection, we can now systemize what communication looks like. They would come to school, and any student that doesn't come to school in that virtual space gets automatically put up to the dean of students. If they don't show up within that virtual time, well then I can lock that device from school and have a message sent to that device that just says, “Call the school for this reason”.

The other piece is this — we can now provide students with an opportunity to tell their story and control what I call The Second Narrative. The Second Narrative is the story that's told about a community; let's let the students control what that looks like. I have a school in Compton, and they're trying to change that term, “Compton.” Because as soon as you say it, you automatically have images that come into your head, and they want to change those images, so they're putting out content and videos to show what this looks like and show what Compton can be as opposed to what Compton was. We can all do that together as a much larger community, so let's use the Internet to build a bigger room. That's the power of what we're seeing, combined with peer-to-peer teaching and learning from each other, which is the best form of professional learning that is out there.

Ron Bogle: One of the topics that we're beginning to get into for our next forum is “where will learning take place?” Right now, we have a single location and approach — the school. But what does this pandemic teach us as far as what else might be available in terms of locations? How does technology change the location equation? How does technology bridge the equity gaps that we're experiencing?

Dan Coleman: I think we need to think about what are the fundamental, transferable skills that we really want our kids to be learning. Learning isn't just for what happens in the school building — we don't do school in order to get better at school. We're looking for things that transfer, and I'm wondering if another way of framing this question is “how might we make learning more portable?” What would students have with them, kind of in their pockets so they could actually do their learning in lots of different places? They could carry it with them. So this idea of portability is really interesting.

Dan Foreman: I think it's also part of the democracy of the Internet, nobody really owns the idea of explanation of the quadratic equation, right? I can teach that in a specific way. Or I can teach it in a number of different ways, find resources for how that quadratic equation can be built and taught, then also task my students with teaching each other and then teaching creation of media to be able to address what that looks like.

They can then take that media with them wherever they go, and be able to go back and address what the quadratic equation might look like. Because now you're getting into authentic audiences and authentic platforms; there's nothing stopping a student from making the most engaging video about how to teach the quadratic equation and getting 50 million views. Now we can remove barriers and we can now have the democratization of ideas.

How Can We Sustain Change When It Comes To Digital Learning?

The conversation concluded with hopes for the future of education, including integration of building design, community engagement and advances to curriculum, to ensure best outcomes for students, teachers and families.

Ron Bogle: Dan, what are you learning about what's happening in your program that might cause you to reimagine how schools work in a future situation where the pandemic is gone?

Dan Foreman: We gather a lot of data, but it's all double-blind. We can't see anything the students are doing on any of the devices or anything, but the schools can so I've heard schools say “Okay, we're seeing a large spike in searching for homeless shelters. Searching for food banks as well as battered women's shelters. Well let's put those resources out there and we can provide the community support for it.”

Ron Bogle: One of the things I've heard in this conversation and one of the bright spots that's come out of at home learning, is the opportunity that teachers have to do one-on-one's, and how much more enriching that is. So the question is, I wonder how we can influence curriculum directors to embrace a long-lasting change that enables teachers to provide that one-on-one time. What might the school and the school day look like?

Mark Lund: That for me has to be the curriculum directors, working with the LMS developers. I think one of the biggest things — and Kristen, I wanted to ask you — is how you're working to put teachers in a position to provide that real time feedback. So when I think about the power of a teacher; number one, the relationship, and number two is they're there, just in that moment coaching and providing that timely feedback.

Without those quick feedback mechanisms, there are some skills that I don't really know how you would teach. When you're working with the student in the moment, and they make a mistake, you're right there and you can prompt them or redirect in real time. So for me as we look at next

year, our standards don't necessarily take into account those quick, instantaneous moments for feedback.

Kristen Watkins: I would just say the power of that feedback loop coming from — whether it's parents, students or even in assignments and things — I think that's the only way we're going to get better.

Mark Lund: On your question of what we're learning today influencing the way we do school in the future, I think we need an environment where kids drop in for tutoring sessions, and then a secondary or a different role of teachers within the digital platform. There's definitely a skill divide among teachers right now.

At the same time, there are amazing programmers and designers out there whom we need in education more than ever. They may not have a teaching certificate, but the skills they could offer to education would be transcending work. I wonder if, within education, we'll be willing to spend some money on the research and development side of it, and take some chances.

Dan Foreman: I would agree with that wholeheartedly. We have to start realizing and understand: are we creating pieces of software, or are we creating programmers? We need to think about it as though we are creating programmers that can take ownership of their society, ownership of their learning and ownership of what's going to happen. Otherwise, we will just create pieces of software that will automatically execute a program the same way, over and over again. And that's not what we want.

We have to really think intentionally about what we're willing to let go of. I say, the most dangerous thing you can say in public education is that "this is the way we've always done it." We have finally come to a point where we've realized that we need a fundamental shift in what we think schooling is and what schooling can and could and should be.

Ninety per cent of my teachers, of which there are now 12,000, report that they are changing the way that they teach and changing their processes for teaching pre-COVID. That's over one hundred per cent for teachers that are changing their process. Every single teacher is changing what their teaching and learning looks like because they were able to pivot and be prepared and know that every kid had access. It's a fascinating process.