

Remote learning was chaos in the spring. Will it get any better when school starts again?

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Highland Park school district closed on Friday to sanitize all of its schools. An empty classroom at Bartle School in Highland Park. Friday, Mar. 13, 2020. Patti Sapone | NJ Advance MediaPatti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

As New Jersey schools' reopening plans remain a polarizing issue, parents, teachers and administrators can all agree on at least one aspect: remote learning desperately needs an upgrade.

“No one was prepared — parents weren’t prepared, schools weren’t prepared,” W. Steven Barnett, Founder of Rutgers’ National Institute for Early Education Research, told NJ Advance Media. “There is no way in which it went well. It was a disaster.”

Barnett co-authored [a recent study](#) on 3-to-5-year-olds, which found America’s preschools failed to provide proper instructional support this spring, resulting in the loss of crucial learning opportunities. [More research](#) from Brown University suggested that K-12 students will return to school in the fall having fallen behind key learning benchmarks due to inadequate virtual learning.

Barnett said students who miss out on a year of sufficient education — especially those at socioeconomic disadvantages — will make less money over the course of their lives and are more likely to suffer from chronic health problems as adults.

“Those are things that keep me awake nightly as an administrator as well as a parent, that loss of learning and how do we recapture it,” Linden Superintendent Marnie Hazelton said. “With some students we will be able to recapture it and fill in those gaps; however... we all have students who it’s always going to be a struggle for them.”

With September looming and hundreds of thousands of students expected to take part in at least some remote learning this fall, what is expected change?

NJ Advance Media asked superintendents to reflect on where their districts went wrong and how they plan to recoup those learning losses as the pandemic’s injunction on full in-person schooling stretches on.

Revamping remote

Complaints from parents this spring often honed in on asynchronous

learning, where students participated online without live interaction from teachers, i.e. busy work, pre-made videos and self-guided assignments.

In a series of four town halls, parents expressed to Delsea Regional Superintendent Piera Gravenor that they wanted more structure, face-time with teachers and accountability.

Under Delsea Regional's [hybrid model](#) for the fall, students will be able to book office hours with their teachers to ask questions and on Wednesdays — the districtwide designated day for virtual learning — instruction will be synchronous.

"We didn't have that last year, it was literally all asynchronous, where students were logging in at their leisure, completing assignments, watching videos — it was much more fluid," Gravenor told NJ Advance Media. "This time it's school."

Long Branch Superintendent Michael Salvatore heard the same feedback from parents in his community, where the [district's hybrid plan](#) will bring back kids two days a week.

"One of the major components that parents wanted was a live teacher every single day, so that's what my colleagues and I have worked on for the past few months: making sure we can provide that experience through multiple platforms, where the children have a structured day, anywhere from preschool to high school," Salvatore told NJ Advance Media.



Gov. Phil Murphy said New Jersey families will be given the option of continuing remote learning if they don't want students to return to class this fall.

Loss of student contact during remote learning was another obstacle across districts, where school officials had trouble locating students when they stopped responding to messages and phone calls. On top of nebulous policies in each district, the state's Department of Education [guidance on attendance](#) was lax, instructing schools they could mark all students as present during remote learning, "unless the district knowingly determines a student was not participating in any such instruction."

For the fall, Linden plans to have its attendance office track students and reach out to families sooner when students rack up absences. Highland Park will case-manage the students "who fell off the cliff" and assign counselors and teachers to check in with groups periodically, says Superintendent Scott Taylor.

As remote learning occurs outside the watchful eye of school staff,

superintendents expressed that most parents were ill-equipped to step into the role of educator.

Barnett added that homes, even more so than schools, vary greatly in how conducive they are to positive learning environments. While some parents hire tutors, childcare or “learning pods,” others work full-time, possess a language barrier or cannot afford private help, making it difficult to assist their children.

“Too many of our students and our young students were left home to navigate the virtual learning on their own with no support at home,” Hazelton said. “And then we have parents who, through no fault of their own, they were not able to assist their students with online learning.”

This fall, Linden will provide parents with tutorials in English, Spanish, Creole and Polish, the four most-spoken languages in the district, on supporting students through virtual learning. Delsea Regional is streamlining teacher-student communication under one platform, Google Classroom, and creating a “parent academy” with how-to videos on monitoring student progress.

‘Tremendous amount of training’

Of course, all this upheaval equates to an educational nightmare for thousands of New Jersey teachers. The laundry list of changes are easily overwhelming, especially for teachers who aren’t particularly tech-savvy.

To teach tech literacy and a catalog full of other best practices for remote learning, districts are turning to more frequent professional development. Though the Department of Education mostly leaves instruction methods to local districts, DOE spokesperson Michael Yapple said the agency holds PD programs and notifies districts of helpful trainings and resources.

“Teachers will be bombarded with more and more trainings so that they are

ready for September 8... teachers will be ready for that, because we've given them a tremendous amount of training," Gravenor said.

Delsea Regional is upping the number of PD days teachers complete over the summer and other districts are following suit. In Jersey City, where the school year will begin remotely, the district recommends teachers engage in structured PD at least once a week, for "a robust, rigorous, and leveled schedule of professional development in the areas of technology related to remote learning," [according to its reopening plan](#).

In Highland Park, Taylor is emphasizing PD not just on tech training but also on improving teaching methods and practices.

For example, he wants teachers to learn how to use the station-rotation model, where classes are divided into groups for different activities — some kids might be online at home completing work individually, before they rotate to a teacher-led station and then to a collaborative work station. He also wants to see teachers dedicate time to social-emotional learning, leading activities where students can build relationships and feel comfortable in their newfound environments.

Though there is a shared sense that virtual learning was insufficient and at times anarchic in the spring, some professionals seem optimistic that the fall will bring about positive change for education, as schools look to new methods and encourage innovation.

"There are times in our lives that there are major turning points, and I feel like for the profession of education, we have stumbled upon one of those moments," Gravenor said. "This is monumental. I don't know if education will ever go back completely to the way it was."

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