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As School Moves Online, Many Students Stay Logged Out

Teachers at some schools across the country report that less than half of their students are participating in online learning.

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Chronic absenteeism is a problem in American education during the best of times, but now, with the vast majority of the nation's school buildings closed and lessons being conducted remotely, more students than ever are missing class — not logging on, not checking in or not completing assignments.

The absence rate appears particularly high in schools with many low-income students, whose access to home computers and internet connections can be spotty. Some teachers report that less than half their students are regularly participating.

The trend is leading to widespread concern among educators, with talk of a potential need for summer sessions, an early start in the fall, or perhaps having some or even all students repeat a grade once Americans are able to return to classrooms.

Students are struggling to connect in districts large and small. Los Angeles said last week that about a third of its high school students were not logging in for classes. And there are daunting challenges for rural communities like Minford, Ohio, where many students live in remote wooded areas unserved by internet providers.

Educators say that a subset of students and their parents have dropped out of touch with schools completely — unavailable by phone, email or any other form of communication — as families struggle with the broader economic and health effects of the coronavirus outbreak.

Even before the outbreak, chronic absenteeism was a problem in many schools, especially those with a lot of low-income students. Many obstacles can prevent children who live in poverty from making it to class: a parent's broken-down car or a teenager's need to babysit siblings, for example. But online learning presents new obstacles, particularly with uneven levels of technology and adult supervision.

Titilayo Aluko, 18, a junior at Landmark High School in Manhattan, is one of the students trying hard to keep up with her classes who has been thwarted by her lack of access to technology. She has a district-issued laptop, but no home Wi-Fi network any more. The cable company removed the router from her family's Bronx apartment after they had trouble paying the monthly bill.

For classes like statistics and neuroscience, Ms. Aluko has tried to complete assignments and participate in video conferences using her cellphone, but that is sometimes impossible.

"I actually need my teachers, who know me and understand me, to help me, and I don't have that," she said. "I just keep thinking, 'Oh, my God, I might not pass.' I'm just really scared for the future."

Cratering attendance in some districts contrasts with reports from several selective or affluent schools where close to 100 percent of students are participating in online learning. The dramatic split promises to further deepen the typical academic achievement gaps between poor, middle-class and wealthy students.

The scale of the challenge, and the work that will need to be done to catch children up academically and socially, is "huge," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, a network of urban education systems.

He called the prospect of "unfinished learning" from this time "a serious issue that could have implications for years."

There is no precedent in educators' memories for what is happening right now. Schools have weathered disruptive events like Hurricane Katrina and the California wildfires, but those disasters were limited to shorter time periods and smaller regions. During the coronavirus pandemic, every state in the country has ordered or recommended closing schools, in many cases through the end of the academic year.

School leaders across the country are already debating how to help students catch up. To maintain social distancing, some regions may bring children back to school in waves, in order to reduce the number of people inside classrooms and buildings at any given time.

There is also concern about whether large numbers of students will need to repeat all or substantial portions of their current grade.

"Many skills build one on another," Mr. Casserly said. "If a child misses out on some key idea, then all of a sudden, additional ideas as they're introduced just become Greek. Will we need some kind of beginning of the year diagnostics to try and figure out just where the kids are, how much they have lost?"

For many students, it seems likely that the answer will be: Yes, quite a lot.

In the Cleveland Metropolitan School District last week, teachers returning from an extended spring break attempted to hold virtual parent-teacher conferences for the first time for all of the district's 38,000 students. Initially, they were able to reach only 60 percent of families, but after a few more days of trying, the number reached 87 percent, said Eric S. Gordon, the district's chief executive.

The city of Cleveland has one of the nation's highest child-poverty rates. Despite the economic slowdown, many parents continue to work full-time outside their homes in fields like sanitation, health and food service, meaning that many students do not have an adult at home to supervise their learning.

Mr. Gordon estimated that 30 to 40 percent of the district's students also do not have reliable access to the internet at home. So in addition to developing plans for online learning, the district has distributed printed work packets along with free meals, and will soon begin mailing those packets to students' home addresses.

Tracy Radich, a fourth-grade teacher at the Joseph M. Gallagher School in Cleveland, spent Tuesday and Wednesday going down her roster of 20 students, attempting to call each student's parents and make individual plans to help each of them learn from home.

Some of her students' families speak Somali, Swahili or Spanish, so she asked colleagues who speak those languages to help.

So far, only three of her students have been consistently engaged with online lessons, she said. About six do not have regular access to the internet. One boy typically goes to the library to get online, but the city's libraries are now closed, too. She expects to interact with several students mostly through phone calls.

"We are going to come together and meet everybody where they are," Ms. Radich said.

School funding is typically tied to student enrollment or attendance counts across the country, but Ohio has unlinked funding from those counts, a policy that education experts expect most states to adopt in the coming weeks.

In rural Minford, a town of about 700 in southern Ohio near the border with Kentucky, the district is distributing laptops as well as work packets on paper to students without internet or technology access, estimated at about one-fifth of the student body.

Regardless of whether Minford's students can participate in online classes or turn in work, administrators expect to promote a majority of them to the next grade, said Marin Applegate, the district's school psychologist. "We do not feel they are in control and cannot be held accountable," she said.

Some school systems, like the District of Columbia Public Schools, have stopped taking formal attendance altogether. The nation's largest school district, New York City, which is at the center of the coronavirus crisis, has not yet released data on the number of children

participating in online learning. The district said it will officially begin tracking remote attendance on Monday.

In Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest school district, about 13 percent of high school students have had no online contact with teachers since schools closed three weeks ago, and one-third are not regularly participating in online learning, according to the superintendent, Austin Beutner.

Heber Marquez, a high school English teacher at the Maywood Center for Enriched Studies in Los Angeles County, estimated that just 45 percent of his students were showing up to Zoom classroom meetings.

"A lot of our students have siblings they have to take care of, and their parents are still going out and working," Mr. Marquez said. "It makes it very difficult to log on at the same time as feeding breakfast to their siblings or helping with chores."

Many schools are making efforts to distribute digital devices to students who don't have their own at home. Los Angeles is trying to get them to more than 100,000 students, Mr. Beutner said. The Miami-Dade County Public Schools have distributed more than 80,000 mobile devices for distance learning, and more than 11,000 smartphones to serve as home Wi-Fi hot spots, according to a spokeswoman.

In New York, the city's typical inequalities are reflected in the wide range of participation levels in remote learning.

At Brooklyn Technical High School, one of the city's most competitive, Serge Avery, a social studies teacher, said 98 percent of his students have been participating in daily online activities, like reading and responding to a Financial Times article about the coronavirus.

His freshman global history students are currently studying the Middle Ages, and he has considered doing a unit on the bubonic plague. But he thought twice after receiving a heartfelt email from a student, written at 4 a.m., in which she described her mother being taken away by ambulance with Covid-19 symptoms.

Mr. Avery said he worries that even among his high-achieving students, participation could drop off as online learning becomes more of a daily grind for restless teenagers.

"Teachers really get energized by the classroom," he said. The current limitations, he added, have left both teachers and students "slightly depressed."