

(Post)Pandemic Distance Learning: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

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Distance Learning Policies address online, hybrid, and flipped learning for the purpose of standardizing quality for students, but there have been conflicting views—from government, educator, and student standpoints—on the purpose and consequences of online learning.

Issues related to educational access for the citizenry, while still appropriately matching technology to pedagogically sound strategies, are often discussed with particular respect to higher education. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed these issues to the forefront for all students: especially the young, racially-diverse, and those from poor districts. Perhaps because of heightened awareness of deep economic and equity divides in our education system, and the need to be creative for our most vulnerable populations, further discussion related to distance learning and consequences for diverse students should be at the forefront.

This paper will describe: (1) a brief history of distance learning policies, and its relevance for today; (2) current state and federal policies governing distance learning; and (3) my perspective, as a mathematics teacher in higher education, of preferred future directions for distance learning that embraces equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Understanding Distance Learning: What is its History?

State government websites that contain remote learning policy updates are meaningful and provide helpful context for community members. To help provide context, I will refer to policies from my home state: the Ohio Department of Education's working definitions.¹

Remote learning is defined as when teachers and students do not meet in-person; it includes both digital and analog approaches. The Ohio Department of Education explains that digital approaches deliver learning via internet and technology devices, while analog approaches deliver learning via non-digital "high-quality" paper packet materials. Another term familiar to those in higher education includes Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Whereas the history of MOOCs and corresponding educational policies reach back to the 2000s, the concept of "remote distance learning" stems from the 1800s correspondence schools.²

The existence of correspondence schools was the start of accessible higher education—from a distance. It allowed for equal access to higher education for citizens from all socio-economic classes. Correspondence school learning has evolved from the use of mail for lectures and course assignments, to the use of technologically-innovative tools for MOOCs. However, there is arguably a wide range of modalities, from minimal "online exchange of course material" to

¹ Ohio Department of Education, *Ohio's Remote Learning Resources*, (Columbus, OH: ODE, 2021), <http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Student-Supports/Coronavirus/Ohio's-Remote-Learning-Resources/>.

² Kate O'Connor, "MOOCs, Institutional Policy and Change Dynamics in Higher Education," *Higher Education* 68, no. 5 (2014), 623-635.

serious consideration of instructor–student interaction.³

Historically, distance-learning policies stem from federal and state levels. Policy regulations and discussions address fully online for-profit programs and have varied standards from state to state. Some consequences are that regulations have not protected the citizenry from a barrage of predatory for-profit university distance learning advertisements aimed at promising “a false road of prosperity” to struggling households.⁴ Current day pandemic-related online learning concerns now extend to K-16 and turn towards remote learning achievement shortfalls.

In short, all stakeholders are embroiled in re-considering equitable democratic learning that balances academics, economic insecurity, mental health, and social skills, especially for marginalized communities.

Distance Learning Policies

While researchers continue to address the feasibility of online and blended learning, and educators debate effective online teaching strategies, our educational policymakers forge ahead with guidelines, standards, and requirements.

At the US federal level, oversight of distance-learning policies addresses the academic quality and credit value of online courses, both at the high school and post-secondary levels, and aim to protect students from rising higher education costs. Each State, and each school within the State, determines its standards and requirements, its choice of digital tools, as well as its educator preparation, and student course rigor.

This broadens college flexibility. However, it leaves students, parents, and employers responsible for understanding state reciprocity requirements and possible deviation in quality between each school’s offering. As of March 2021, Miguel Cardona has been confirmed as the twelfth Secretary of Education, and he aspires to address structural inequities that adversely affect vulnerable populations by focusing on developing a diverse teacher workforce with training and support that will address funding inequities.

There is renewed hope for educators, parents, and students to have their voices heard, and advocate for educational policies that address enduring disparities—achievement gaps, worsened by the pandemic, that are a result of “opportunity gaps.”⁵ As the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to sweep global communities, families have been pulled into an unintentional political and pedagogical experiment on remote learning.

Each child, each parent, each district, and each member of our community is realizing the importance and relevance of remote learning and educational policies.

Policy Alternatives: Transforming Distance Learning Practices

Reframing pedagogical strategies to bring about the improvement of online learning will invariably be fraught with tensions.

My perspective aligns with progressive social justice values that center on students to provide opportunities to learn and develop democratic

³ Libby V. Morris, “MOOCs, Emerging Technologies, and Quality,” *Innovative Higher Education* 38, no. 4 (2013), 251-252.

⁴ Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (New York, NY: Crown, 2016), 70-81.

⁵ Prudence Carter and Kevin G. Welner, *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must do to Give Every Child an Even Chance* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

skills. As a mathematics teacher, I welcome the prospects of reinventing educational practices and assessments to empower diverse students as productive contributors to society. The Biden administration's plan to revisit federal distance learning policies may be an opportunity for states to introduce new and much needed educational policies that provide clear procedures and rules to simultaneously serve all communities and promote equitable education. We need to discuss distance learning—this includes balanced perspectives that go beyond content, to include ethics, access, special needs, culture, and social inequities. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, arguments against distance learning revolved around the “digital divide.” At this juncture in time, the pandemic has forced us to immerse education in technology and remoteness.

It is important to have local, state, and federal funds to provide access to technology, as well as funds that can support student welfare concerns, such as food and housing insecurity. This means cost-effectiveness is not an appropriate metric for success—we need to rethink societal and pedagogical needs for opportunities to meet student needs.

Taking advantage of flexible remote learning policies to enhance social justice concerns is imperative. We must reinvent pedagogical

strategies and practices that match the many needs of the moment.⁶

Conclusion

When considering issues of equity, such as race, socioeconomic status, and disability, the existing remote learning policy has failed the most vulnerable.

It seems the Biden administration aims to focus on this funding. As a community, we can take advantage of flexible requirements to rethink pedagogical practices and address issues of equity. If stakeholders do not engage in community dialogue to help reimagine education, then we have missed an opportunity to address the needs of our most vulnerable society members, our children.

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⁶ Barnett Berry, “Good Schools and Teachers for All Students,” in *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance*, ed. Prudence L.

Carter and Kevin G. Welner (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 181-192.