



# Let's begin the lesson, shall we

## Remote 911 does not equal traditional online learning

By Dr. Wendy Oliver, Dr. Rachel Book, and Charlie Thayer

At the onset of the pandemic, change was abrupt. Schools closed. Learning stopped. Fear prevailed. Districts scrambled. Children paid the price.

With nowhere else to go, many administrators turned to online learning to get students back on track. Exhausted teachers soldiered on but weren't trained at all or nearly as much as they needed to be. Students, while not unfamiliar with an online environment, had no footing, no bearings. Parents were lost and struggled to support their children.

This, my friends, is what we call "remote 911."

A closer look at remote 911 reveals that time and resources stood in the way of a well-planned roll out of online learning programs, leaving everyone frustrated. Some students didn't have books at home. Others didn't have connectivity or hardware. Best practices, like those dictated by the [National Standards for Quality](#), or NSQ, went by the wayside. Causing even more confusion, vendors tried to help by throwing a myriad of free resources at schools. These free "solutions" came with little or no training, exacerbating the turmoil.

At the same time, well-intentioned online learning providers experienced an astronomical increase in enrollment and demand on their systems and personnel. More than 1.5 billion students, or 91.3% of global enrollments, were directly affected by school closures at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak in early April 2021, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Providers scrambled to meet this unprecedented demand to keep students learning and often found themselves ill-equipped to handle the staggering number of students, teachers, and parents who needed help.

Everything was reactive, rather than proactive, which is not a criticism since nobody really had a choice. It's just a fact of any emergency situation. In a planned blended or online environment, students have orientation and learn rules for behavior at the beginning of the learning experience. The same thing applies to teachers using and designing digital curriculum; in planned environments, they are trained in best practices for employing online resources. It is hard to assure an adequate level of professional development when you are thrown in the deep end.

The Census Bureau found that "Nearly 93% of people in households with school-age children reported their children engaged in some form of 'distance learning' from home in 2020." So,



nearly all of us, in one way or another, are familiar with the tectonic shift to remote 911. Whether you're a public official, administrator, teacher, student, parent (or therapist, neighbor, or friend of a parent), you know this. You lived this. But this is not what digital learning looks like. This is what *remote 911* looks like.

Remote 911 is not what successful digital learning looks like. Nor should it be a reflection on what a blended learning environment could achieve for our students.

## **Cracks in the foundation**

In its basic form, most educators and policymakers would agree, traditional, online learning, which some people refer to as distance or virtual learning, is defined as education delivered through the internet and facilitated by a teacher or instructor. Sometimes there is a virtual classroom, but, most often, teacher-to-student and student-to-student communication happens through standard means, such as message boards, chat, text, and email. Alternative online settings allow students to work asynchronously, i.e., at their own pace, which allows many students to learn more effectively.

In the spring of 2020 in [a New York Times op-ed](#), 13-year-old Veronique Mintz put it this way, “I find that I am learning more, and with greater ease, than when I attended regular classes. I can work at my own pace without being interrupted by disruptive students and teachers who seem unable to manage them. Students unable or unwilling to control themselves steal valuable class time, often preventing their classmates from being prepared for tests and assessments. I have taken tests that included entire topics we never mastered, either because we were not able to get through the lesson or we couldn't sufficiently focus.”

Aside from removing disruptive classmates from the equation, online learning is touted for providing a safe learning environment, accessibility, and flexibility. It gives students more access to real-world experiences by providing the flexibility to allow them to work a job or volunteer for a local charity. Neither weather nor medical issues present barriers. It creates more opportunities, like the freedom to travel with their families, which forces students out of their comfort zones and presents them with different worldviews, new perspectives, and prospects for meeting new people.

Christine Greenhow, associate professor of educational technology and the 2018 recipient of Michigan State University's Teacher-Scholar Award, said online learning stacks up academically as well. “Online learning can be as good or even better than in-person classroom learning. Research has shown that students in online learning performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction, but it has to be done right. The best online learning combines elements where students go at their own pace, on their own time, and are set up to think deeply and critically



about subject matter *combined with* elements where students go online at the same time and interact with other students, their teacher and content.”

Although online learning — when implemented with intentionality — can be as or more successful than traditional education, it is not a one size fits all model.

Conventional, face-to-face learning in a brick-and-mortar setting is familiar to all of us. After all, the United States has been delivering education to K-12 students in this manner since 1821, when the first public school was established. So, most of us have experienced first-hand the characteristics of a face-to-face K-12 education. We all know how it lends to collaboration, helps to hone social skills and nurtures comradery. We also know how students forge meaningful relationships with teachers, who oversee their curricular, extracurricular, and social activities, always acting the advocate and often providing much needed advice, encouragement, or a shoulder to cry on. It’s much easier for a teacher in a traditional setting to read nonverbal cues, which can be telling.

Curtis Cain, superintendent of the Wentzville, Mo., district, who recently won National Superintendent of the Year, said in [an interview with Education Week](#) that the importance of in-person schooling for student mental health is crucial. “It’s one of the reasons keeping school doors open is so important. It’s not just for the staff to work together but for us to be able to put our eyes on our kids and make sure they’re OK. It’s the reason staff greet students at the door: You can quickly assess how a kid is doing, literally, from class session to class session. And it’s critical that we keep those efforts, keep moving them forward.”

So, how do we implement the benefits of online learning while maintaining the best practices of traditional instruction?

Blended learning — a hybrid of face-to-face and online — on the other hand, has many complexions. Its efficacy lies in its ability to cater to the varying ways human beings process information and learn. It accounts for diversity and targets school investments more wisely, allowing for personalized learning, as opposed to expecting all students in a specific grade to learn on the same scale and timeframe as their peers. A blended-learning approach also frees up teachers to focus on supporting students who may have fallen behind and foster those who can work ahead.

In the blended learning environment created in Arkansas, teachers with a solid background in using technology to support instruction created opportunities for students to learn “anytime and anywhere,” according to Director of Educational Assessment, Accountability, Curriculum and Instruction for the Arkansas Public School Resource Center, Melody Morgan. She said they



adapted courses to meet individual student needs and created digital assessments by blending local resources with the Lincoln Empowered digital library. Morgan said students engage with digital content in the classroom to support real-time and asynchronous on-site instruction.

“Students who desire to learn differently are driving the need for teachers to continue to adapt to new teaching strategies. This is evidenced in the number and type of support calls we are receiving from teachers in the field using the resources,” she said.

## **Fundamentals matter**

Irrespective of the setting, educators must adhere to basic tenets and best practices if students are to thrive. Community building, learner engagement, and diverse methods of instruction, as well as giving teachers a voice, are all indispensable.

Teachers would be the first to tell us that preparation is elementary. Teachers who are prepared and who prepare their students see better results. Simple class and time management tools like creating routines, staying organized, maintaining records and being flexible work just as well in an online setting as in a traditional classroom.

Communicating with and engaging families is also a no-brainer. Study after study shows that the more parents are actively engaged, the better their kids achieve academically, regardless of the medium. The fundamental role parents played during the pandemic is not lost on any of us. By engaging on a broader scale with their children’s classwork, knowingly or not, they provided encouragement.

Allowing students to learn through varying modalities to include multimedia, like you see in digital curriculum, gives them the impetus to express their creativity and will yield a higher level of student engagement and outcomes. Students and educators benefit from flexible learning models.

## **Let common sense prevail**

Still, most Americans personally have no other reference point for an educational delivery system other than the conventional, industrial-era approach and remote 911. But the pandemic can and should serve as a catalyst to open our minds, jump start our education system, and move it into the future. Now is the time for change.

Policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, and taxpayers alike are rooting for our students. We all want the best outcomes for them. Despite the level of funding coming from federal, state, and local governments, wisely investing those dollars is essential to this goal.



Blended learning models provide schools with the luxury of giving their students more opportunities. Courses in diverse sectors of sciences, math, and languages are more easily made available; schools can more easily provide equitable access to courses and meet the needs of students and demands of parents. Online curriculum with the right support can be a game changer.

Now is the time to treat our teachers like the front-line workers they are. Let's give them access and time to master new technologies, tools to diversify learning, and a means to enable them to spend time giving students the individual support they need most. We've been talking about busting open the doors to the 21st century for about 30 years now. Let's get it done.

Let's face it. At this stage of the game, it's not a matter of embracing new technology, it's a matter of *utilizing current* technology. Isn't it time we give educators, students, and families a choice in how they educate and are educated? Isn't it time we empower them?

A senior research fellow in K-12 education for the Clayton Christensen Institute Thomas Arnett said in [a Boston Globe opinion](#), "It's a sad irony that after school systems spent so much money and effort last year to set up online learning resources and infrastructure, for the most part those resources are now underutilized." Arnett said about 60% of district administrators who responded to his survey said their school systems had spent federal pandemic relief funds on infrastructure and resources for remote learning. Sadly, he said, "Much of that technology is now going to waste in the rush to reestablish normalcy."

While a return to normalcy might be just what the doctor ordered for many aspects of our lives, there are lessons we've learned from this pandemic that justify rethinking what normalcy should look like, especially in the educational space. Let's have the sense, the will, and the conviction – after all of this – to make a change for the better.

*Dr. Wendy Oliver is the Chief Education Officer at Galileo Preparatory Academy in Franklin, TN, a private school with options for in-person, blended, virtual, and hybrid learning.*

*Dr. Rachel Book is the Chief Sales and Marketing office at Lincoln Learning Solutions in Rochester, PA. She leads Lincoln's Client Success team, which focuses on supporting all schools interested in designing an ideal educational plan for students through online, blended, or homeschool options.*

*Charlie Thayer is the Vice President of Academic Affairs at Lincoln Learning Solutions where he leads a team of K-12 curriculum developers and online educators in designing and facilitating the Lincoln Empowered digital curriculum.*