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Bethany Waiwada's children are in the Harrisburg School District. Ja'Mvea Adams, in

EDUCATION

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School districts have moved their classes online. But not all students have joined them

The Steelton-Highspire School District says it's reaching between 73 and 79 percent of its high-schoolers with online instruction.

By Christine Vendel/PennLive

With our coronavirus coverage, our goal is to equip you with the information you need. Rather than chase every update, we'll try to keep things in context and focus on helping you make decisions. [See all of our stories here](https://www.witf.org/coronavirus/) < <https://www.witf.org/coronavirus/>>.

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(Steelton) — Zach Horn hosts a video meeting online each Wednesday afternoon to talk to 9th-grade students in the Steelton-Highspire School District about civics.

But not every student tunes in.

In fact, he usually sees the faces of just about half of his students. Other students will watch a recording of his lesson and the class discussion later. But some won't plug in at all.

Keeping students engaged is a delicate balance, Horn said.

"I try to hit the key standards, and answer the essential questions in the time I have with students," Horn said. "I would like to have more time during the week, but if I spent too much time online, I think more students would tune out."

The district is reaching between 73 and 79 percent of its high-schoolers with online instruction of new academic material, according to teachers' records. That means more than 20 percent of kids may be getting left behind.

Other central Pennsylvania districts report similar results, saying they're reaching 70 to 80 percent of students with instructional material. But what are the other 20 to 30 percent of kids doing? Will they be ready for the next grade level or their next step in life?

Educators worry that the COVID-19 shutdown of schools is magnifying inequities among districts, and will put struggling students even further behind.

[Some well-positioned districts started online instruction < https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/04/pa-school-districts-jump-into-remote-learning-this-is-not-a-normal-situation-for-anybody.html>](https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/04/pa-school-districts-jump-into-remote-learning-this-is-not-a-normal-situation-for-anybody.html) more than a month ago. Others just made the transition in the past week or so.

"This pandemic has revealed the stark inequalities between the haves and the have-nots," said Mark DiRocco, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators. "Pennsylvania was already one of the worst

in the nation for that.”

Missing students

School leaders believe some of the “missing” students are due to technology gaps or barriers if their families don’t speak English as a first language.

Some students also struggle against distractions at home: babysitting younger siblings, sharing devices with siblings or parents, dealing with domestic issues or direct impacts from the new coronavirus and the constant temptation of social media and video games.

Participation also varies by grade level. For example, 92 percent of Steelton eighth-graders completed assignments or watched instructional videos recently. But just 52 percent of seventh-graders completed assignments or engaged with at least one teacher.

Districts are not grading the online material, which could contribute to a lack of urgency by some students. Instead of letter grades, most students will get a ranking of their participation level in the fourth marking period. Their final letter grade for each subject will be a compilation of the first three marking periods of the school year.

Many school districts are being lenient about participation and grades amid the pandemic because the situation already is stressful enough. Some families may be facing uncertainty about food, employment, childcare, and housing. Educators don’t want to add another burden but they also are trying to

get their students through the planned curriculum.

“Overall, I believe we have done a decent job,” said Travis Waters, superintendent of the Steelton Highspire School District, “but regardless of how well we do, online learning is not the best format for many students.”

Adding to the tension are the unknowns: Will districts be able to offer summer school for students who need it? Will the districts be able to open the doors to their buildings in the fall? Will they have to cut staff or programs next year because of plummeting state revenue and property taxes?

“The big push right now is to get seniors graduated and get kids ready for the next level,” DiRocco said. “But superintendents are very quickly transitioning to next year... People are running the film ahead to think about it. We need to be prepared for a second wave (of the virus.)”

Who's connecting?

With schools closed for seven weeks now, PennLive checked in with a dozen area school districts to see how well they are reaching students.

Most districts are keeping track of when students are online and which kids are turning in assignments.

The state department of education does not require districts to take attendance, but strongly encourages it. Experts say it's important to know why students might not be tuning in.

“Until you track attendance, you just won’t know where the gaps are,” Bree Dusseault, a practitioner in residence at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell told [the Philadelphia Inquirer](https://www.inquirer.com/education/coronavirus-schools-online-learning-attendance-digital-divide-20200427.html). <
<https://www.inquirer.com/education/coronavirus-schools-online-learning-attendance-digital-divide-20200427.html>>

The Harrisburg School District said it’s getting nearly 80-percent participation from high schoolers after devices were distributed to them the week of April 6.

High school teachers are meeting with each of their classes for a 45-minute period every week for live instruction and to give a week’s worth of assignments to cover big ideas from the curriculum. An additional 4 hours a week of office hours are offered by each teacher.

Tracking younger students’ participation is more difficult since many of them are getting instruction by prerecorded lessons on the district’s Facebook page, YouTube channel and partnership with the local public broadcasting station. [The district opted to broadcast lessons](https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/03/harrisburg-schools-cant-reach-all-students-online-so-theyre-going-to-try-public-television.html) <
<https://www.pennlive.com/news/2020/03/harrisburg-schools-cant-reach-all-students-online-so-theyre-going-to-try-public-television.html>> after a survey showed one-third of students didn’t have access to devices or high-quality internet.

“We are broadcasting 13 videos daily that go between 7.5 to 9.5 hours per day,” said Assistant Superintendent Chris

Celmer. "Facebook allots us 8 hours per stream for broadcasting and archiving our broadcast."

More middle schoolers could transition to online learning after the district distributed devices to them last week. And the district is buying additional Chromebooks for students in third through fifth grades and tablets for K-2 students with a \$361,000 competitive grant awarded by the state.

"To date, I am pleased with the results based on the metrics we can monitor," Celmer said. "No one can accurately predict what the 2020-2021 school year will bring, so we must continue to explore ways to increase the connectivity with students and families."

Officials from the York School District did not answer emails requesting information about their participation, but the Lancaster School District said they are seeing an average of 61-percent participation each day by high schoolers.

The instruction, however, is "asynchronous," meaning students don't need to be logged in every day, said district spokesman Adam Aurand.

"The lessons are posted the Friday before the week they are due and students can determine what schedule works best for them," Aurand said. "For example, a student could decide to do school work on Tuesdays and Thursdays only."

The district deployed 9,000 devices, developed online curricula and acclimated students, teachers and leaders to

this new method of teaching in a short period of time, Aurand said.

“We are steadily building capacity in order to offer robust online teaching and/or hybrid educational models over the summer and in the fall, as necessary.”

Most district that track engagement by grade level said younger students were more engaged than older ones. This was true for the Cumberland Valley and Derry Township school districts, where nearly all elementary students logged in. But at CV just 75 percent of high schoolers logged in, and in Derry, 70 to 80 percent of high schoolers turned in assignments.

The Middletown School District reported an average 93-percent participation by younger students but slightly lower for grades 9-12.

Other districts, such as Central Dauphin, just started moving into new academic instruction, so they didn't have participation numbers available.

The West Perry School District reported among the highest participation with 94 to 96 percent of high schoolers engaged. The sprawling district covers 300 square miles, but the superintendent is personally visiting the homes of students who haven't plugged in yet.

“The Technology Department is working with families to offer additional resources to better assist the students in

connecting with teachers,” Superintendent David Zula said. “The administration is coming up with other ways to get the materials to the students i.e. placing materials, videos on flash drives.”

Parents as teachers

Bethany Waiwada’s children went from getting seven hours of instruction per weekday prior to the pandemic to less than that each week right now. She lives in the Harrisburg School District, but the situation is the same in most districts, where instruction time has been slashed, limited by students’ attention span and technology capabilities.

Parents must step in and try to fill the gap. But it’s difficult for many parents who lack the resources and knowledge of professional teachers.

Two of Waiwada’s children, in fourth and fifth grade, are learning math through a method much different from what Waiwada learned when she was in school. And they don’t have math textbooks at home to explain the method, which involves “decomposing numbers” down into digit values.

“I’m tired of watching YouTube, trying to figure out their math,” she said. “I’m not breaking down anything.”

Waiwada’s youngest son, in third grade, is disabled and nonverbal. The computer at his school used to “speak” for

him. Now Waiwada is using a laminated board that shows words and commands on buttons that he can touch, but it's not attached to a computer. Waiwada will say the word or command, but it's not the same thrill that the school computer, and its instant feedback, provide.

"I try to teach him new things, but it just doesn't capture his attention," she said.



Bethany Waiwada's third-grade son uses this board to help him communicate.

Her son can log in with a specialist for a virtual lesson a few times each week, but the same hurdles remain.

"The kids are learning a little bit," she said. "But retention is hard when it's not really consistent. My daughter only has one class online per week. I think there should be teaching every day, at least once a day."

Waiwada teaches what she can at home. She can bake a cake with her children and talk about fractions or use real-world

examples to talk about debits and credits. But she knows it's not exactly aligned with the district's curriculum. And she knows other parents are struggling too, especially those who didn't finish high school or required special education themselves.

"How do we expect someone with no education to teach the kids?" she said.

One thing Waiwada has learned from this situation, she said, is a greater appreciation for what teachers do every day.

"I definitely will not be second-guessing a teacher anymore," she said.



Zach Horn, who teaches 9th grade civics, works from his dining room table.

Teaching remotely

Even students who are plugging into online lessons aren't as active as they were in when they were in an actual classroom, said Horn, of the Steelton Highspire School District.

His civics classes typically generated a lot of discussion among students, especially when they delved into voting, elections and polling in a highly divided political time.

"I'm definitely not getting as much participation," he said. "People can be shy with the new technology. They aren't used to having to mute and unmute their speakers and they're worried that if they speak, someone else might be speaking at the same time."

It's harder for Horn to connect with his students as well.

"Whenever you're behind the screen, you can't see the whole class at the same time," he said. "You can't gauge where they are like you can in a physical classroom. I kind of feel like I'm talking to a wall sometimes."

Rachael Kruleski teaches fourth grade in the West Shore School District and said she sees participation by her students vary by subject and by topic. The district recently shifted to a four-day model with expectations, assignments and meetings for each day.

For most math assignments, 20 out of 23 kids turn in their work. But for some science lessons, she's had just seven kids

turn in their work.

Other science lessons have prompted better response, depending on the specific topic, and whether it interests the students.

That didn't happen in a physical classroom, she said. The kids couldn't choose to skip certain topics or lessons when the teacher was right there.

"I record myself teaching lessons and I can tell some kids don't watch it," she said. "They go right to the assignment and do it all wrong, and I'm like, 'Did you watch me teach you about this?'"

A district survey showed some parents preferred paper packets to online lessons, so the district provided those. Some students take photos of their completed paper assignments.

"I've gotten some of those via email," she said. "But other students I haven't heard from since the beginning of all of this. We've reached out. I can't tell you how many times. Some kids are doing everything. And some kids may be doing nothing."

Even for those students who are doing all that they can, the instruction is just a fraction of what was being offered before.

"It's going to have an impact on everybody," Kruleski said.

"When we finally get back into the classroom, we're going to

be playing some catch-up. There are going to be some gaps.”



Rachael Kruleski teaches fourth graders from Hillside Elementary School in New Cumberland from her home.

What's next?

Most school districts are trying to prepare for the possibility that students may not be able to come back to their school districts in the fall. Or perhaps, they may come back with staggered schedules or some hybrid online model of learning.

But one thing is certain, according to many education leaders: access to computer devices and high-quality internet connection can no longer be viewed as a luxury. It's going to be just as essential going forward as textbooks once were, experts say.

Many decades ago, there was a debate about whether schools should provide resources like textbooks, said

DiRocco. Because of equity concerns, the decision was made that yes, “every kid should have a science book. It was a normal expectation.

“Fast forward to today, and a lot of people, including me, believe some type of device should be standard in lieu of textbooks,” he said.

Computers, laptops and tablets are the “new textbooks of our time,” DiRocco said, and also the inequity crisis of our time.

“I think the state should step in and help districts do this,” he said, “then they can pivot at a moment’s notice in case of another coronavirus situation or weather event. The districts could simply keep things going.”

DiRocco said he doesn’t blame districts for not having devices for every student right now, but in two or three years, “I would think every district would have that in place.”

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