



Supporting Student Engagement at Stride's K12–Powered Schools

Key Takeaways

- Experienced online program providers like Stride Inc., formerly K12 Inc., were prepared to address the major obstacles presented by the pandemic. Meanwhile, most traditional brick-and-mortar schools were not ready for the sudden transition to remote learning.
- Lack of adequate equipment, such as access to home computers and reliable internet connection, exacerbate already significant inequities in the U.S. public education system. In contrast, many online schools have policies in place to ensure equitable access to online coursework.
- Many districts have struggled with staggering numbers of students disengaged from remote learning. High rates of disengaged or “missing” students were prevalent in the spring and continue to plague some brick-and-mortar schools this fall.
- In contrast, Stride's K12-powered schools' levels of student engagement have remained constant between 2019 and 2020 because of the robust student intervention methods implemented throughout Stride's vast virtual learning network.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic turned the world of education upside down, as traditional brick-and-mortar school districts rushed to balance social distancing guidelines, school closings, and then virtual learning—all within the span of a few months.

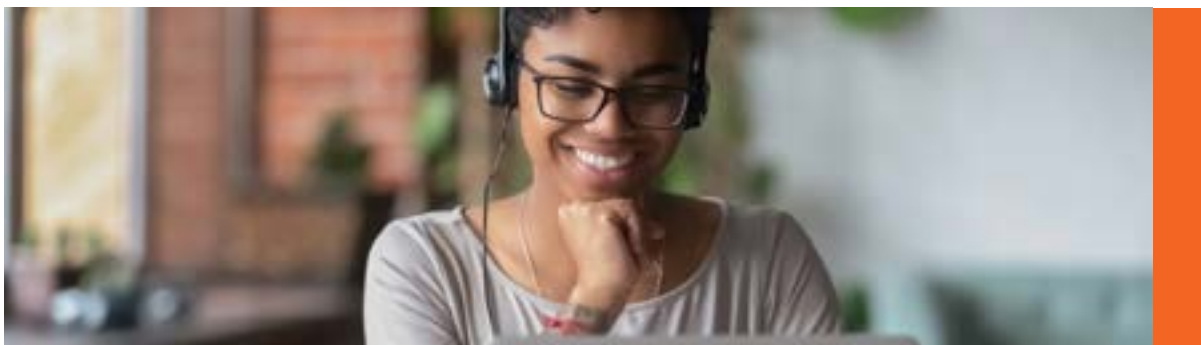
What resulted was widespread disorganization, confusion, and uncertainty, as teachers and administrators faced new announcements, restrictions, recommendations, and no clear idea of when or how to proceed in the classroom as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact how the public education system operates.

As traditionally brick-and-mortar schools reluctantly began switching over to virtual learning during the end of the 2019–2020 academic year, two obstacles began to worsen: technological inequities and student engagement.

Technological Inequities

The inequities surrounding the U.S. education system are a vast and complex subject. Most individuals familiar with the education system recognize the complexities regarding the achievement gap between white students and students of color, disparities in school funding, and the lack of quality education given to students in both urban and rural districts. However, one such inequity, the technology divide, has not been at the forefront of this discussion until recently.

As traditionally brick-and-mortar schools abruptly began the switch to virtual learning in the spring of 2020, many public-school districts began transitioning to an online format without the capacity to provide adequate equipment and support for their teachers and students. For students in rural and low-income communities, poor internet connection (if any) and lack of access to a computer paint a dreary picture of education in the age of COVID-19 for already underserved students. In Cleveland, Ohio, Chief Executive Eric S. Gordon estimated that between 30 to 40 percent of students in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District did not have reliable internet access at home.¹ And although these schools, despite their funding limitations, may have access to special funding and grants to provide students in the district with laptop access, most traditional brick-and-mortar schools do not provide internet access for students to access their coursework while at home.



How Stride's K12–Powered Schools Facilitate Adequate Technological Support

This is in stark contrast with many programs powered by Stride that supply students with their own laptop computer* to complete coursework and, depending on the school, provide internet reimbursement to families.²

Students may also be provided with a Wi-Fi hotspot if they live in a location where internet access may be less than adequate. Furthermore, Stride plans to roll out a pilot program later this year to provide laptops to students with LTE (cellular connectivity) capability built-in. Thus, giving students the technological support and flexibility to access their coursework—anytime and anywhere.

In doing so, Stride's K12-powered schools bring peace of mind to parents concerned about how their student can receive a high-quality online education, and how they will be able to afford the internet required to support virtual learning.

Technological support for student learning during the COVID-19 pandemic ensures access and equity. However, once students are given the proper tools to access their coursework, how can schools keep students engaged?

*Desktop computers may also be provided if needed for an IEP or specifically requested from Special Education services.

¹Dana Goldstein, Adam Popescu, and Nikole Hannah-jones, "As School Moves Online, Many Students Stay Logged Out," The New York Times, April 06, 2020, accessed November 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/us/coronavirus-schools-attendance-absent>

²"ISP Reimbursement," Ohio Virtual Academy, accessed November 14, 2020, <https://ohva.k12.com/resources/isp-reimbursement>

Student Engagement

With uncertainty looming over educators, school districts were forced to abruptly jump into the world of virtual learning without having a deep understanding of the intricacies and subtle nuances that dedicated virtual learning providers have had the opportunity to perfect throughout the years. This unprecedented experience led to dramatically different results between school types regarding student engagement throughout the pandemic.

A concerning trend that educators and school administrators around the country are finding is that problems accessing online coursework were just the beginning. In fact, according to an online news article published by Bellwether Education Partners, a national non-profit organization seeking to improve education outcomes for underserved students, an estimated three million students—predominantly English Language Learners, high-mobility students, and students with special needs—have been without any formal educational instruction since the initial school shutdowns occurred in March 2020.³

For example, when LA Unified decided to implement remote instruction during this period, roughly 15,000 students were unaccounted for, and as many as one-third of the students failed to stay in contact with their school.⁴

Some districts have implemented measures to improve engagement in remote instruction. But for many, the outlook is grim:

- The New York Times reported some teachers have fewer than half of their high school students regularly participating in online learning.⁵
- Even after personal invitations by administration, 75 percent of failing students did not return to school in North Dakota.⁶
- In Oakland, California, 17 percent of high school students are not showing up for class. Even more alarming, the number of foster youths not participating is almost double that rate at 31 percent.⁷
- In Connecticut, more than 5,000 students who opted-in to Connecticut's virtual learning option failed to log in to a single day of class.⁸

These kinds of stories illustrate the increasing concern among educators, administrators, and other stakeholders on the growing number of missing students within traditional brick-and-mortar schools. By falling through the cracks of the education system during the pandemic, these students not only suffer from chronic absenteeism, but also risk exacerbating an achievement gap that had long plagued the U.S. education system.⁹

³ Haily T.N. Korman, Bonnie O'Keefe, and Matt Repka, "Missing in the Margins: Estimating the Scale of the COVID-19 Attendance Crisis," Bellwether Education Partners, October 22, 2020, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/missing-margins-estimating-scale-covid-19-attendance-crisis#Introduction>

⁴ Blume, Howard and Sonali Kohli, "15,000 L.A. high school students are AWOL online, 40,000 fail to check in daily amid coronavirus closures", Los Angeles Times, March 30, 2020, accessed November 20, 2020

⁵ Dana Goldstein et al., "As School Moves Online".

⁶ Nicole Gaudiano, "Missing: Millions of Students," Politico, October 26, 2020, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/weekly-education-coronavirus-special-edition/2020/10/26/missing-millions-of-students-791170>

⁷ Theresa Harrington, "Alarming Percentage of Students Missing from Virtual Classrooms in Oakland, West Contra Costa County," KTVU FOX 2, October 20, 2020, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://www.ktvu.com/news/alarming-percentage-of-students-missing-from-virtual-classrooms-in-oakland-west-contra-costa-county>

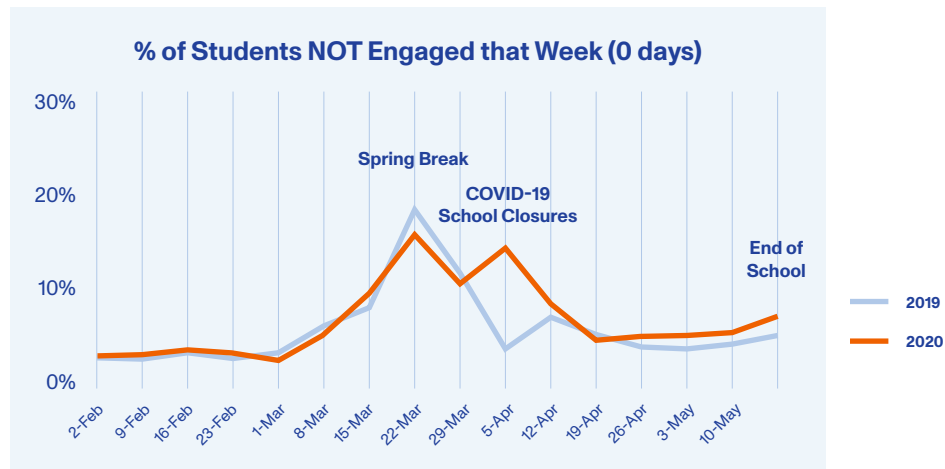
⁸ Amanda Blanco, "More than 5,000 Connecticut Students Who Chose Online-only Learning Haven't Logged on for a Single Day of Class," Hartford Courant, October 19, 2020, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://www.courant.com/coronavirus/hc-news-coronavirus-remote-learning-missing-students-20201019-hyn6jcepihdivkvpbr427ha7yq-story>

⁹ Emma Dorn et al., "COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The Hurt Could Last a Lifetime," McKinsey & Company, June 1, 2020, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>

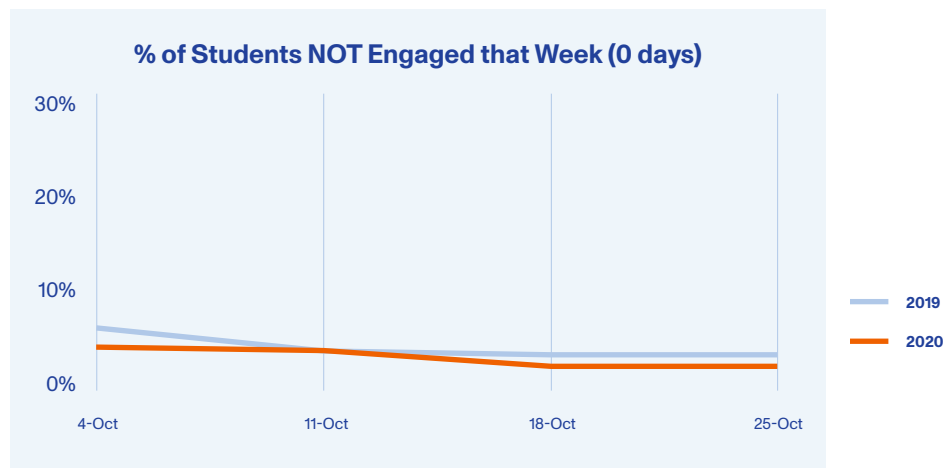
Student Engagement by Stride's K12–Powered Schools Before and During COVID–19 Pandemic

With strong initial onboarding, ongoing support programs, and intervention methods put in place, schools powered by Stride had consistent student engagement rates between 2019 and 2020. The exception being one notable difference: in late March 2020 when school closings began to occur. Fully prepared and equipped to deliver virtual instruction in a pandemic, most schools powered by Stride continued uninterrupted through spring 2020, providing students with much-needed stability in an otherwise unpredictable time. These full-time online schools were some of the only schools to offer daily instruction throughout the entire pandemic. The only time these schools closed was when some states, such as Oklahoma, mandated the closing of virtual schools as well.¹⁰

This compulsory closure of some full-time virtual schools accounts for the short-term increase in disengaged students in late March/early April. Once those schools received permission to re-open, disengagement rates returned to the low percentages likened to prior years.



Also, schools powered by Stride have not experienced the sharp increase in disengaged students reported by traditional brick-and-mortar schools in fall 2020. Disengagement rates in fall 2020 are comparable with, or slightly better than, 2019 rates at Stride's K12-powered schools.



¹⁰ KOCO Staff, "Board of Education Authorizes Closure of All Oklahoma Schools until April 6 amid COVID-19 Concerns," KOCO, March 17, 2020, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://www.koco.com/article/oklahoma-board-of-education-calls-emergency-meeting-expected-to-close-schools-until-april-6/31673315>

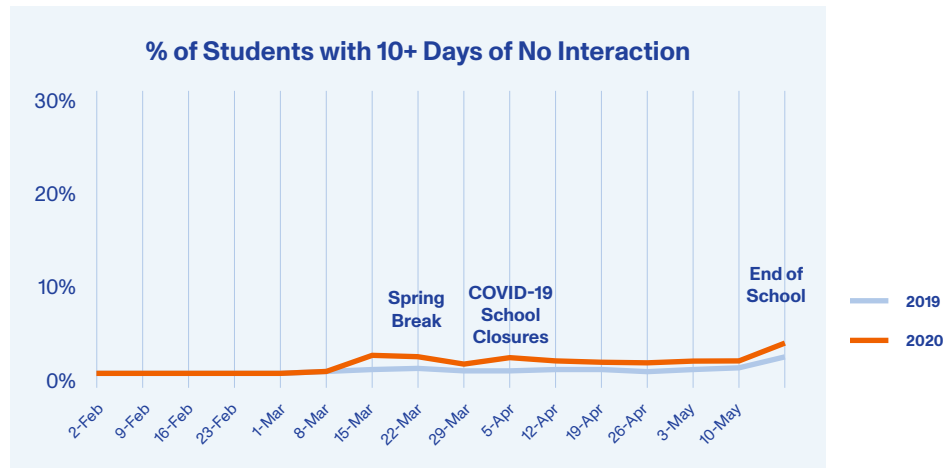
This data proves that students can be successful in an online environment with strategic supports including equipment needed to access the online school, onboarding programs that teach students how to navigate the online platform, establishment of clear expectations for behavior, and systematic interventions to address early signs of engagement issues.

How Students Go Missing

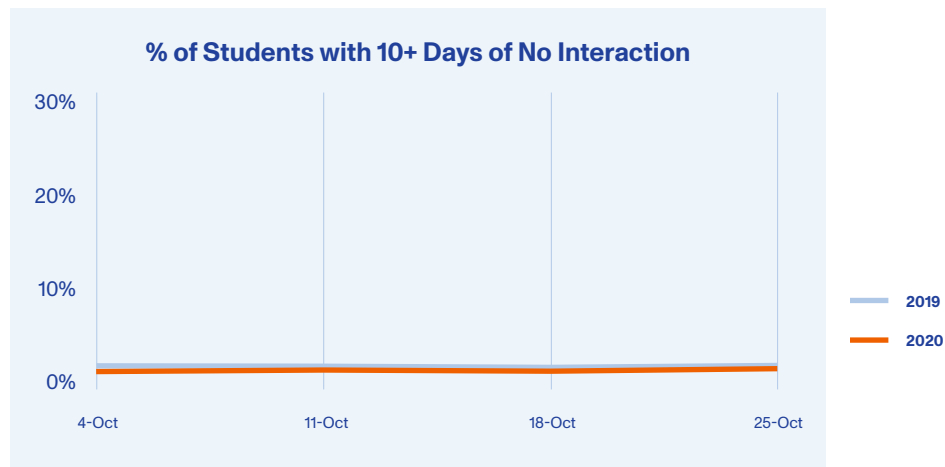
Students may fail to engage in a virtual setting and risk being labeled as “missing” if their rates of attendance reach a chronically low level.

Many traditional brick-and-mortar schools transitioning to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have struggled to provide students with the structure and supports needed to receive a quality education through virtual means.

Stride’s K12-powered schools have very few students that are not engaged or in contact with the school for ten or more days. If these students were labeled as “missing,” the pattern of “missing” students in spring 2020 was quite similar to the prior year.



There was a very slight increase (less than two percentage points) when some virtual schools were required to close in late March/early April per state mandates and a less-than-one-percentage-point increase for the rest of the spring, likely due to state policies that discouraged engagement, such as not allowing instruction or the introduction of new material.¹¹



There is no discernible difference in rates of “missing” students between fall 2019 and 2020 at Stride’s K12-powered schools. In 2019, just over 1 percent of students had no interaction for ten or more days, and in 2020, just under 1 percent of students had no interaction for ten or more days.

Most of the time, when a student stops interacting with the school for an extended period, they are planning to make a change in their education choice. It is essential to have systematic supports in place to minimize the number of students that may be labeled “missing” and help them through any schooling transitions that may occur, particularly when all schools are operating virtually.

How to Appropriately Facilitate Student Engagement in a Virtual Environment

In a working paper published by EdChoice, researcher Ian Kingsbury surveyed more than 10,000 parents of children who enrolled in Stride’s K12-powered schools. Results of the survey found that students at Stride “significantly outperformed [traditional] brick-and-mortar schools” in the areas of communication, classroom management, active learning (i.e., being actively engaged in the classroom), and pedagogical efficacy (e.g., “instructors taught new material rather than simply review old material,” and “instructors motivated students to care about what they were learning”).¹²

Dedicated virtual learning providers, such as Stride Inc., employ dedicated personnel to monitor student engagement and implement systematic student intervention methods when students fail to engage in their virtual learning environment.

Systematic student intervention methods are dependent on where an at-risk student falls on a student engagement tier-system. This tier-system considers passing rates, attendance at live courses, and recent “connection” (i.e., one-to-one interaction between an advisor and student or the student’s learning coach). This connection can be carried out via phone call, text, or any other means of two-way communication.

Tiers of intervention follow a standard three-tier format (i.e., low, medium, and high), with a student’s placement within this tier determining how students are to be supported. For example, low-tier students may be required to attend open office hours and study hall. Medium-tier students are required to receive peer-to-peer tutoring or one-to-one meetings with their advisor. Students at the highest-risk tier, requiring the most intense forms of intervention, must participate in mandatory discussions with their advisor and review course progress. Similarly, students in this tier are referred to an internal Student Support Team who will monitor the student’s progress, and they will go under further review after two weeks.

Although these tier levels are not concrete, students may remain in any given tier for multiple weeks to ensure they are receiving the proper intervention methods and are making ample progress in their coursework.

Strong systematic means of supporting student engagement are crucial in virtual learning. Without proper personnel in place dedicated to monitoring student engagement, additional responsibilities fall onto educators and school administrators who must put aside their duties to locate these missing students. In doing so, virtual learning environments without proper procedures to monitor such chronic absenteeism will cause a domino effect that negatively impacts the virtual learning environment.

¹¹ John Fensterwald, “Some Teachers Unions, Districts at Odds over Live Distance Learning Instruction,” EdSource, July 06, 2020, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://edsources.org/2020/some-teachers-unions-districts-at-odds-over-live-distance-learning-instruction/635237>

¹² “Virtual Schools Outperformed Brick-and-Mortar Schools During the Pandemic,” K12, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://www.k12.com/parent-student-resources/inside-look/research>

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the U.S. education system. Each passing day brings more uncertainty for educators and school administrators as they try to balance the health and wellbeing of their own families and themselves, while simultaneously transitioning students (and parents) into the world of virtual education.

Traditional brick-and-mortar schools have been turned upside down, trying to abruptly implement virtual coursework, technological access to computers at home, and student accountability measures to monitor student engagement. On the flip side, schools powered by Stride continued business as usual. Their experience and proven methods led to an increase in enrollment of tens of thousands of students as families sought to find high-quality online education solutions.¹³

Despite what the pandemic may continue to bring in the future, stakeholders of traditional brick-and-mortar schools should seek to replicate the strategies and structure successfully implemented by Stride's K12-powered schools. Stride can provide a model for fostering student engagement and, when necessary, dedicating systematic intervention methods that provide students with the support services they need. Stride stands ready and willing to support states and districts in these efforts.

¹³ "K12 Announces Updated Enrollment for Managed Public Schools of 170 Thousand Students," Business Wire, August 25, 2020, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20200825005916/en/K12-Announces-Updated-Enrollment-for-Managed-Public-Schools-of-170-Thousand-Students>

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