

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Best practices for virtual education

Pottstown and many other area school districts will provide virtual education only this fall.

Sal Khan is a pioneer in virtual education. He recently offered his perspectives in The New York Times. The following has been edited to fit the available space:

By Sal Khan

It is becoming clear that many of our nation's children could be attending school from home for this school year and possibly longer. If educators and families aren't empowered with the right support and tools, this will evolve from an education crisis to an education catastrophe.

As the founder of the philanthropically funded nonprofit Khan Academy, which provides free online exercises, videos and software to over 100 million users in 46 languages, I'm something of a poster child for online learning.

It all started 16 years ago, when I was working as an analyst at a hedge fund in Boston and learned that my then-12-year-old cousin Nadia — who was visiting for my wedding — was struggling with math. She lived in New Orleans, so I offered to do distance tutoring with her every day. It helped her catch up with her class within a few months.

Word soon spread in my family that free tutoring was available, and by 2006 I was working with 15 cousins and family friends in my limited spare time. I decided to make math practice software and videos to help even more.

Before I knew it, people who were not my cousins started using those materials. Fast forward to today and that family side project has become my life's mission: to provide a free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere.

Despite all this, I'll be the first to say that for most students, distance learning can't replace a great in-person experience. Pure distance-learning is suboptimal, but we have to do it out of necessity because of the pandemic. I have been working with teachers over the last several months and together we have realized that lesson plans designed

for in-person classes don't work in this coronavirus world.

The lessons are falling short in terms of the social-emotional experience that school should provide. Remember that school is where most of us developed our deepest friendships, were inspired or motivated by amazing teachers and learned to collaborate with others.

Because every aspect of a child's life has become more "distanced" during the pandemic, there's an even higher burden on distance-learning to emphasize human connection.

These traditional lessons are also too long and not interactive enough to hold a student's attention over a video conference. The traditional paper-based homework that's being assigned does not provide students with enough feedback or teachers with enough information to understand what students are learning.

To ensure that kids keep progressing on both the academic and social-emotional fronts, it's critical that educators provide live teacher-led video conference sessions (*known as synchronous learning*).

(Pottstown is mandating synchronous learning using Google's G-Suite educator platform and Chromebooks.)

These need to optimize both academic coverage and social interaction. A baseline would be two or three 30-to-45 minute sessions in each of the core academic subjects each week. These should not be broadcast lectures, which are not particularly engaging even in person...

These sessions need to drive conversations between students and teachers and among the students themselves. Teachers should do cold calling to ensure students are on their toes and to pull them out of their screens. Teachers need to constantly ask students to work on questions together and share their thinking. Ideally, virtual breakout sessions will allow students help each other.

Only by pulling out all the stops can we have a chance to ensure that what is already a health care and economic crisis doesn't also leave an entire generation of learners with insurmountable gaps in their education.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton



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