

Why I'm Learning More With Distance Learning Than I Do in School

I'm 13 years old. I don't miss the other kids who talk out of turn, disrespect teachers and hit one another.

By Veronique Mintz

Ms. Mintz is an eighth-grade student.

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Talking out of turn. Destroying classroom materials. Disrespecting teachers. Blurting out answers during tests. Students pushing, kicking, hitting one another and even rolling on the ground. This is what happens in my school every single day.

You may think I'm joking, but I swear I'm not.

Based on my peers' behavior, you might guess that I'm in second or fourth grade. But I'm actually about to enter high school in New York City, and, during my three years of middle school, these sorts of disruptions occurred repeatedly in any given 42-minute class period.

That's why I'm in favor of the distance learning the New York City school system instituted when the coronavirus pandemic hit. If our schools use this experience to understand how to better support teachers in the classroom, then students will have a shot at learning more effectively when we return.

Let me explain why.

I have been doing distance learning since March 23 and 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.

I do not envy a middle-school teacher's job. It's far from easy to oversee 26 teenagers. And in my three years of middle school, I've encountered only a few teachers who had strong command of their classrooms — enforcing consistent rules, treating students fairly and earning their respect.

I go to a school that puts a big emphasis on collaborative learning; approximately 80 percent of our work is done in teacher-assigned groups of three to five students. This forces students who want to complete their assignments into the position of having to discipline peers who won't behave and coax reluctant group members into contributing. Distance learning gives me more control of my studies. I can focus more time on subjects that require greater effort and study. I don't have to sit through a teacher fielding questions that have already been answered. I can still collaborate with other students, but much more effectively. I am really enjoying FaceTiming friends who bring different perspectives and strengths to the work; we challenge one another and it's a richer learning experience.

I've also found that I prefer some of the recorded lessons that my teachers post to Google Classroom over the lessons they taught in person. This year I have struggled with math. The teacher rarely had the patience for questions as he spent at least a third of class time trying to maintain order. Often, when I scheduled time to meet with him before school, there would be a pileup at his door of students who also had questions. He couldn't help us all in 20 minutes before first period. Other times he just wouldn't show up.

With distance learning, all of that wasted time is eliminated. I stop, start and even rewind the teacher's recording when I need to and am able to understand the lesson on the day it's taught. If I am confused, I attend my teacher's weekly online office hours (which are 60-90 minutes long); there are never more than two or three other students present.

The fact that I am learning so much better away from the classroom shows that something is wrong with our system. Two weeks ago, my school began experimenting with live video teaching on Google Meet. Unfortunately, the same teachers who struggle to manage students in the classroom also struggle online.

What lessons from remote learning can be taken back to the classroom? I have a few suggestions. First, teachers should send recorded video lessons to all students after class (through email or online platforms like Google Classroom). Second, teachers should

offer students consistent, weekly office hours of ample time for 1-to-1 or small group meetings. Third, teachers who are highly skilled in classroom management should be paid more to lead required trainings for teachers, plus reinforcement sessions as needed.

These first two suggestions began during distance learning and have already been a great success. I hope they continue when we return to school, and that schools use this opportunity to improve the learning experiences of all their students.

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