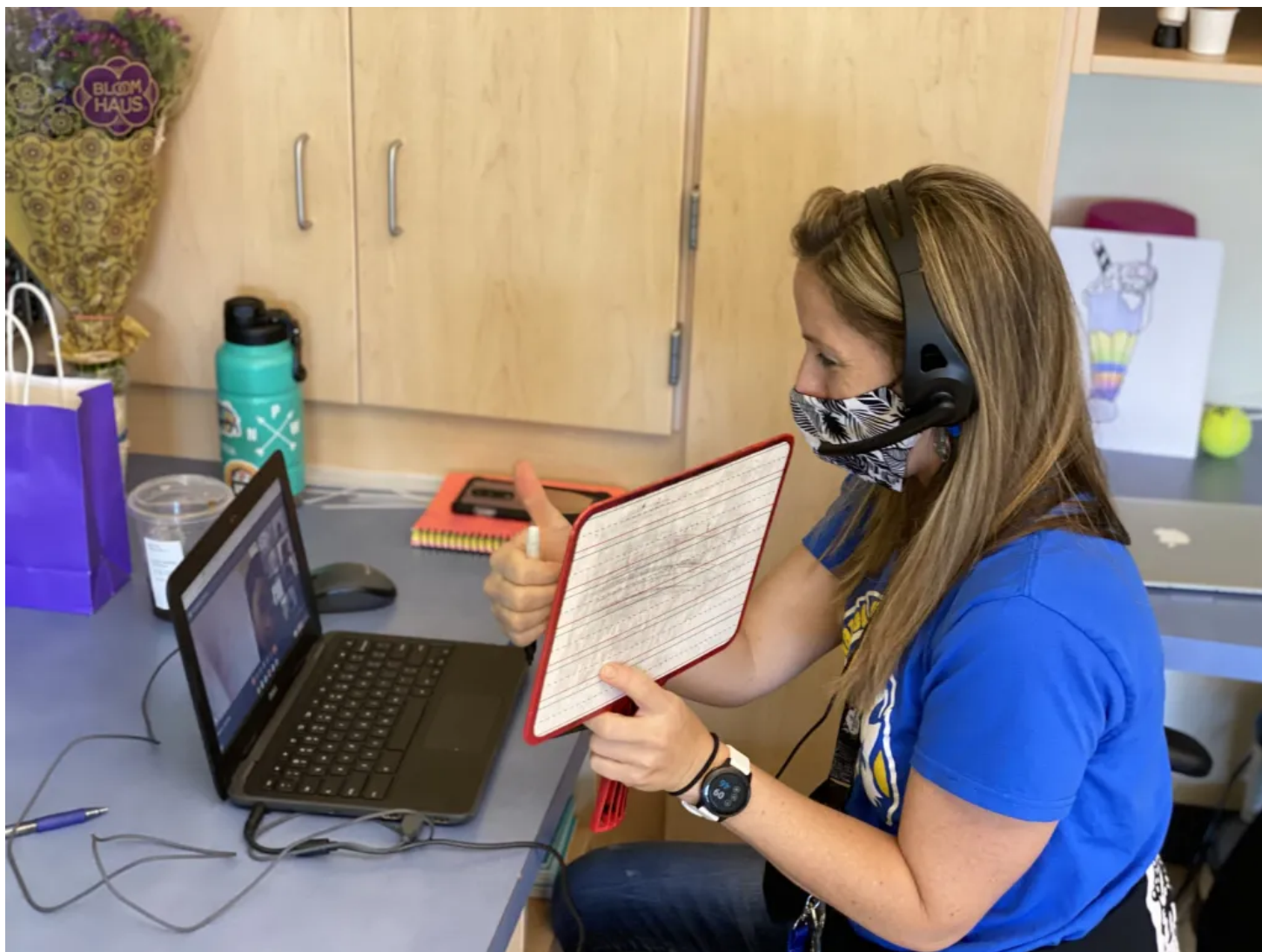


PROOF POINTS: Combining remote and in-person learning led to chaos, study finds

Many schools still asking teachers to teach both ways at once

by JILL BARSHAY
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Teachers described their challenges in combining in-person and remote teaching in a University of California, Santa Cruz, study published in January 2022. Credit: Lillian Mongeau/The Hechinger Report

Although educators are trying to keep schools open during the pandemic, they still have to figure out how to educate children quarantining at home. Some school leaders have been turning to an innovative solution: allowing children at home to learn remotely along with their in-person classmates. That sounds simple, but it means that teachers have to track students who are only present in Zoom squares while watching others at desks in the room.

Now a small study of teachers across nine states finds that this hybrid solution is the worst way to teach because it's exhausting for teachers to toggle back and forth between the two modes and all students appear to learn less this way. Student failures during the 2020-21 school year prompted three districts in the study to abandon the dual approach and split into separate in-person only and remote only classes.

“Every teacher in our study was clear that being asked to teach in a blended-hybrid manner was the worst way to be asked to teach,” said Lora Bartlett, an associate professor of education at the University of California, Santa Cruz. “This is not whining about working hard at all. It's a professional assessment of a flawed model. We're saying it's hard for teachers to meet the needs of students.”

Bartlett compared this sort of dual teaching to driving a car on a highway while simultaneously playing a race-car video game on a screen. “You can't play a video game about driving and drive in real life,” she said. “It's completely absurd.”

It's unknown exactly how many schools around the country have asked teachers to teach two ways at once. **Surveys** of school principals during the 2020-21 school year by the RAND Corporation found that 60 percent of schools were offering hybrid instruction, but that could also mean that students alternated between in-person and remote days. RAND estimated that two-thirds of the teachers in hybrid schools were delivering remote and in-person instruction concurrently.

Teachers' first preference, Bartlett said, was to teach in person. When that's not possible, the second best is all remote. Alternating days and class periods between the modes is practical too. The problem is combining the two at once, according to “**Specifying Hybrid Models of Teachers' Work During COVID-19**,” published online in the peer-reviewed journal, *Educational Researcher*, in January 2022.

When the pandemic first hit in March 2020, Bartlett wanted to document the lives of teachers. She was an expert in teachers' working conditions and the pandemic presented some interesting new ones. Along with some like-minded colleagues, she quickly formed an ad-hoc research group, “**Suddenly Distant**,” to capture this moment in history. Seven hundred and fifty teachers filled out a Google form saying they wanted to talk about what was happening to them.

“We naively thought this would be a short-lived situation,” said Bartlett.

As the pandemic dragged on, Bartlett decided to turn the short-term project into a long-term survey and oral history of what was happening in classrooms around the country. She selected 75 teachers from nine states to represent the range of demographics, geographies and union strength within the U.S. teaching work force. The teachers worked in elementary, middle and high schools. She sent them regular surveys and conducted more in-depth interviews with half of them.

One high school history teacher in a Florida city described juggling three devices in the study. “I have the desktop that goes to the smart board for the students who are face-to-face and also at home. Then I have my [school] laptop to monitor anything if students email me during class that they’re having technical difficulties. And then I have my personal laptop on so the students can see me with Microsoft Teams.”

Despite these efforts, the teacher said her students were frustrated and often felt ignored. The in-person students complained that she was spending too much time behind her desk, talking to the students on her laptop. When she attempted to mix the remote students with in-person ones in small groups, it was hard for the in-person students sitting together at desks to engage with students at home.

Remote students also complained of muffled voices behind masks, which made it hard to hear what classmates were saying.

One teacher in Texas attempted to overcome these audio difficulties by setting up cameras around her classroom and a big microphone and speaker in the middle of the room. “It would work great for the first period every day,” Bartlett said. “But then by second period, so many other teachers were on the internet that the system would crash. The students at home couldn’t see anything she was doing.”

A high school teacher in rural Kentucky called the two-way teaching “chaos,” with online students seeing something different on their screens than what the in-person students had in front of them.

The teacher decided to have the remote students work more independently, which took care of the chaos, but also diminished how much they learned.

“We ended up meeting with our virtual kids during homeroom [instead of in class] but it was only 30 minutes a day,” the Kentucky teacher told the researchers. “So I cut out a lot of stuff.”

Only three of the teachers in the study succeeded in sustaining synchronous instruction in both modes during the 2020-21 school year. Like the Kentucky teacher, many switched the remote students to independent “asynchronous” learning at home.

Bartlett says that many schools are officially teaching in person, but in reality are continuing to demand that teachers teach both ways. “When students are quarantining, teachers are required to, or opt to – it’s different in different places – Zoom or FaceTime their students into the classroom so that they don’t fall behind,” said Bartlett. “There is really a very large amount of this hybrid occurring.”

“And I think a whole lot more might have to soon,” she added, as the Omicron variant makes its way across the country.

