



# Special to ACA School Counselor Members

## Transitioning Back to In-Person Learning: What's Worth Keeping?

If the course of recovery from the coronavirus pandemic continues at the current pace, American education should see a significant return to “in-person” learning in the fall of 2021. While students have been adjusting to the challenges of learning remotely for more than a year, now comes a time of transition back to the ways preK-12 pedagogy that was present in the days before COVID19. A primary questions that remains to be answered as the school doors swing open again is whether there were any upsides to those emergency protocols that are worth keeping and how will they be integrated into the ways American schools functioned before the pandemic.

Although many students struggled during the past year, a significant number have reported a more positive outcome. A study of American teenagers by the Institute of Family Studies and the Wheatley Institution in mid 2020 found more than half of respondents reporting greater student strength and resilience as they recounted behaviors (i.e., greater family interaction, improved sleeping and eating habits) they had not experienced previously.

While many students have failed to conquer the challenges associated with remote learning, others have prospered. Those in the latter group made the adjustments that resulted in working independently and at a pace that they were able to set and manage for themselves. Still unanswered is whether the crème de la crème of the lessons learned from learning during the recent crisis can be incorporated in the “new normal.”

### Remote Education Upsides Worthy of Examination

Students, parents, families and educators have had to adjust their “modus operandi--the particular methods they employed in their approach to the learning and schooling and the roles each has played in the recent remote education experience. Most important in this examination is the identification and preservation of strategies and practices that have produced positive results. A number of those consequences follow:

#### Managing Time and Tasks

As all work became “homework,” remote education placed a greater emphasis on independence, individuality and self-governance. Schedule creation and time management were put to the test with many students reporting pleasure in a form of calendar creation that afforded opportunities to use their time more effectively and efficiently.

Individual students who have found that they learn faster were afforded a new “flexibility” that did not anchor them to class progress or achievement. Students that needed additional attention discovered that smaller classes and more compact learning units allowed them to seek and receive tutorial attention. Newly discovered time and pacing opportunities led to expansion of academic interests.

### **Adjusting to Social Distancing and Isolation**

For the most part, social distancing and isolation of students eliminated team and group projects and the other student activities known to foster healthy social experiences. The need for social interaction was exacerbated further when quarantining and lockdowns were established in communal places beyond the school. The worst of these new social patterns resulted in social stressors for some, matters that sent both educators and parents in search of feasible peer social activities that might address the concern. Also observable, however, was the protection of students from negative social experiences (i.e., bullying, peer pressure) brought on by social distancing.

### **Mastering Learning and Communication Technologies**

Remote education required students (and sometimes their parents) to master the array of technological tools required to prosper in a distance learning environment. Beginning with online delivery of classes and extending to the independent use of a variety of research and investigative tools, students who became proficient in their use display evident of greater achievement. Students also learned new and innovative ways of communicating (both routine and as needed contact with teachers and counselors).

Parents who once had to leave the workplace for live parent/teacher/counselor conferences found those meetings could be conducted remotely. In fact, many schools and school districts required or encouraged this form of communication to promote parent engagement and awareness of student progress and to address any individual student concerns requiring attention during remote education experience. In many settings student and parent communication with educators expanded as a result of these new tools and techniques. As the communication technologies of the times became a learning saving buoy for many, there continued utilization begs strengthening and perfection.

### **Serving Unique Student Needs**

Students with unique learning needs found remote education especially challenging and many teachers have had to design new and pioneering ways of personalizing the learning process to accommodate those differences. Similarly, counselors and other pupil services providers have had to adjust how they respond (i.e., telecounseling) to their student's academic, career and personal-social development needs.

Targeted and smaller distance learning classes, coupled with a newly found flexibility in student pacing and packaging of their personal educational experiences, has resulted a major positive takeaway attributed to remote education. It should also confirm for educators and parents that children and adolescents learn differently and that any "one size fit all" model needs to be reassessed.

### **Overcoming Achievement Loss and Gaps and Interruptions**

Gaps and interruptions in the learning experience were rampant at the beginning and continued for many throughout the remote education experiment. Systemic change of this enormity was bound to impact both achievement and learner behavior. As the school doors swing open again, renewed examination of individual and/or institutional achievement losses or changes in student behaviors (i.e., self-discipline, study skills, attention to detail, etc.) need to be prioritized as assessment targets. Once those findings have been authenticated, curative measures must be initiated to resolve or mitigate them.

### **Takeaways from Remote Education**

After a year of remote education, quarantining, mask-wearing, social distancing and other COVID19 rules, the anticipated mass opening of schools to in-person learning for the 2021-2022 academic year calls for the incorporation of any positive takeaways from this unanticipated and unwelcomed crisis. The positive outcomes reported herein should never

be construed as an exhaustive list of improvements and advancement. Teachers, counselors and administrators everywhere need only look as close at their classroom or school to identify many others.

As educators begin to see the pandemic's effect on education in our rear view mirror, the largest lesson learned will be how adversity and unpredictability were faced and conquered. May we never be caught off guard like 2020 again. During the pandemic, educators expanded their roles as advocates, facilitators, innovators and change agents. The best of those practices need to be preserved and nurtured.

If we don't come away from the pandemic with any new ways of facilitating student learning and making educational institutions function more effectively, we deserve an "F" on our report card.

**References:**

*Teens in Quarantine: Mental Health, Screen Time and Family Connection*, Institute of Family Studies and the Wheatley Institution: <https://ifstudies.org/ifs-admin/resources/final-teenquarantine2020.pdf>

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Frank Burtnett, Ed.D. is the founder, former President, and principal investigator of Education Now, an independent consulting firm specializing in the design, delivery, and evaluation of educational, career, and human resource development programs in institutions, organizations, agencies, and the private sector. Dr. Burtnett has served as a school counselor and director of guidance with the Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools and as a state level school counseling supervisor with the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Over his career he has also held leadership roles with the National Association for College Admission Counseling (Executive Director), American Counseling Association (Associate Executive Director), and the National Association of Personnel Services (Education and Certification Manager). He is the author of several Rowan & Littlefield Education books on career and college matters and currently resides in retirement in Springfield, VA and Rockport, ME.

