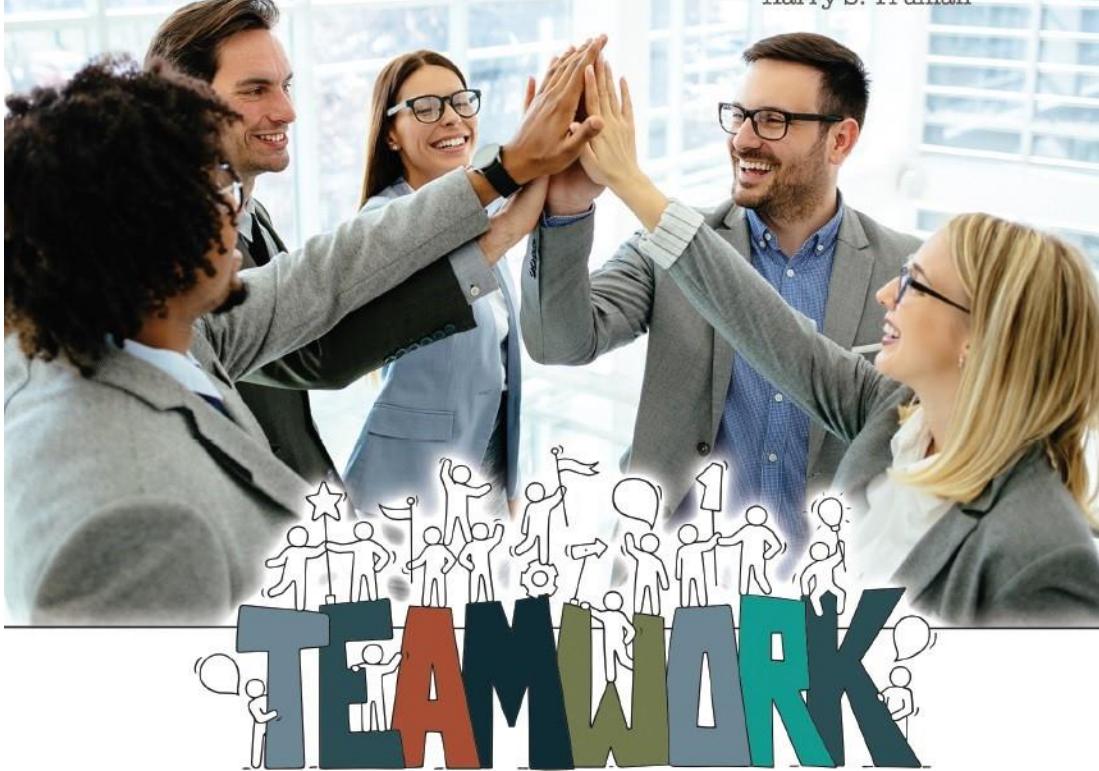


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~ Harry S. Truman



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Parents are starting to get emails about the fall school agenda, and for many, there's going to be at least some remote instruction.

So are we in for a repeat of last spring, when school districts had little time to prepare for the shift to online education, and parents were largely left to teach the kids themselves? This time, districts say they're going to provide better online instruction and more support for parents. Still, the success of distance learning is going to depend on parents' ability to provide help at home. That's a luxury many families don't have in normal times, let alone during the coronavirus pandemic, when job changes, loss of child care and illness have become added stressors.

Some school districts currently give parents the choice of fully remote instruction, or a hybrid model that involves sending children to school part time. Others, including many in California and Texas, are delaying school openings or have declared all students must be remote until public-health conditions allow a return to school facilities. So just what have they learned about remote instruction, and how might it be different this time? And by "different," I mean "better"—for parents, kids and teachers.

The districts I spoke with said teaching will be more comprehensive than last spring, when it often consisted of irregular video meetings and assignments posted online for students to complete on their own. There's one scenario where districts would outsource online instruction to private education companies and assign district teachers to act as "learning coordinators" for remote students. In another, districts would provide more hours of live online instruction from district teachers than they did in the spring. In a third scenario, schools would break up classes into smaller groups, for more manageable video-chat instruction.

The 9,500-student Alameda Unified School District in the San Francisco Bay Area offered families a choice between a fully remote learning option, and a half-day in-person option, and chose to partner with online education firm Acellus for the virtual track. Then, on Friday, California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced that schools in Alameda and other counties on the state coronavirus watch list wouldn't be allowed to offer in-person instruction. The 16% of Alameda families who had opted for the virtual track will have to commit to it for the full school year; the 84% who chose the partly in-person option will receive virtual instruction from their regular teachers for the same amount of time that they would have received at school in person, while working independently on assignments the rest of the day. Those students can return to schools this year when they reopen.

Alameda Superintendent Pasquale Scuderi said the fully virtual plan is intended to give families the flexibility to fit instruction into their schedules. Acellus licenses recorded videos of teachers providing instruction and assignments, developed in line with state standards, which students complete at their own pace, and meet virtually with a learning coordinator—a dedicated district teacher—every day for 30 to 60 minutes, depending on grade level, to ensure they remain on track. The learning coordinator will give parents direction on how to coach their children. It isn't a perfect solution, Mr. Scuderi said, adding, "it's the best choice for a current reality that I hope doesn't hang around for long."

Last spring's shift to remote learning magnified an already gaping digital divide: Many families in low-income and rural areas don't have the devices or internet connectivity to enable distance learning. My colleague Tawnell Hobbs recently detailed the effects of the sudden shift on the most vulnerable U.S. students. Many school districts have attempted to bridge that divide by lending out laptops and wireless hot spots. The bigger equity problem, though, is the inability to support at-home learning, Mr. Scuderi and others say. Even flexible arrangements will be challenging for many families. "There are families like the single dad I heard from, who has a 6- and 8-year-old and doesn't have a job that can be done remotely. What kind of support do I have for someone like

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him?" Mr. Scuderi said. "Content-wise, we'll be better, but our ability to deliver it will still get drowned out by the other daunting complexities families are facing, because we still haven't answered the child-care riddle."

Online-only learning has proven harder for students whose first language isn't English and for students with special needs. The Los Angeles Unified School District, which is starting the school year fully remote, says it will offer extra online support for those students, add after-school and Saturday morning tutoring and provide additional reading teachers for elementary students. Even under the best conditions, it's a heavy load for parents. Michielle Gatti, a marriage and family therapist in Phoenix who is able to work from home, echoes what many other parents have told me: She wants her children to return to school for the social and academic benefits—and for her own sanity—but she worries about the health risks for kids, teachers and staff.

Her district is currently planning to hold school remotely from Aug. 5 to Sept. 4 while assessing whether and when it will be safe to open in person. Last spring, her two elementary-school kids each had an hour-long video meeting with a teacher every day, then were on their own to complete schoolwork the rest of the time. "I think it will be hard for them to sit and stare at a screen all day," she said, "but I'm hoping with more engagement and instruction from the teachers, it will be easier."

Even in places that aren't currently coronavirus hot spots, the school year isn't likely to run smoothly. One outbreak of cases in a class could force an entire school to shut down for weeks. "Everyone, whether they're doing a virtual, hybrid or in-person opening, has a fallback plan for going fully remote if cases spike," said Deborah Rayow, vice president of instructional design and learning science at Edgenuity, a company that [provides digital curricula and instruction to school districts](#). She said the most successful models of remote education rely on technology for the basics of learning, such as math drills, and rely on teachers for more-nuanced instruction, such as teaching critical thinking and encouraging debate. "Technology isn't supposed to replace the teacher," Ms. Rayow said.

Mr. Scuderi of Alameda said schools plan to hold online classes with smaller groups of students. "One of the things we heard last spring was that trying to be engaged in a class with 35 to 40 students on Zoom wasn't an effective way to receive in-depth support from teachers," he said. Cindy Marten, superintendent of the San Diego Unified School District, said when schools closed in March, the district's focus was on delivering laptops to families, getting them connected to the internet and training teachers to use all the technology required to deliver online instruction. "What was missing in the spring was the support for families and students, and that's what we need to improve upon in the fall," she said.

The district heard complaints from families that there were too many tech platforms—from Microsoft Teams to Zoom to Skype to Google Meet—so now the district is narrowing them down. She said there will be more teacher-led instruction. The district plans to hold webinars or live-streamed meetings to give parents tips on how to help their kids thrive at home until it's safe for schools to reopen. "The parent's job is not to be the teacher, but they have a support role," she said. "We don't expect them to figure this out on their own." - **Wall Street Journal**

The FCC's Wireline Competition Bureau is seeking input on cable operators' request that it make clear pole owners' obligations when it comes to replacing those poles. NCTA-The Internet & Television Association on July 16 sought a declaratory ruling that:

[Related: FCC Defends Pole Attachment Dereg](#)

"(1) pole owners must share in the cost of pole replacements in unserved areas pursuant to [the] Communications Act,...and Commission precedent; (2) pole attachment complaints arising in unserved areas should be prioritized through placement on the Accelerated Docket under section 1.736 of the Commission's rules;" and that "(3) the Commission's rules authorize the Commission to order any pole owner to complete a pole replacement within a specified period of time or designate an authorized contractor to do so." Initial comments are due Aug. 19 and reply comments by Sept. 3. – **Multichannel News**



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