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# Challenges and Opportunities for Virtual Teaching in Nevada

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## Abstract

**Problem.** School closures in Nevada due to the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented challenge to schools, districts, teachers, parents and students. The rapid switch to virtual teaching left many students unaccounted for and teachers unprepared for teaching virtually. Therefore, there exists a need for advanced planning to assure education in Nevada continues at a high level, whether through on-premise learning in schools or through remote teaching. **Purpose.** This policy paper discusses ways virtual teaching requires adaptations to teacher professional development, access to technology, and teacher preparation. Ways to improve the viability of virtual teaching to enhance student achievement, teacher performance, and transform schooling in Nevada are also discussed. **Recommendations.** A legislative commission could be established to capture lessons learned from this year's virtual teaching and offer guidelines to ensure schools in Nevada always have the capability of switching between on-premise and remote learning.

## Introduction

School closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, affected all constituents of education in Nevada. In-person instruction halted on March 22, 2020, and district administrators, principals, and teachers were placed in the difficult position of trying to find immediate solutions to the unexpected problem of delivering instruction virtually over the approximately 60 days remaining on the calendar. One immediate problem of the school closures was that nearly 30 percent of students could not be contacted during spring 2020. Through the summer months, administrators diligently reached out to families to contact all students. Moving into the fall semester, of the 17 school districts in Nevada, less than half remained closed for the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, 12 opened full-time, resumed on-premise instruction, or followed a part-time hybrid model. Nevada's largest school district, Clark County School District (CCSD), remained in virtual instruction and a number of families moved out of the district or withdrew their enrollment for other schooling options. For example, 75 schools in the district enrolled fewer than 90 percent of the students they were expecting (Appleton, 10/5 LVRJ).

The challenge of student attendance was not just confined to Nevada. In a survey of at least 100 teachers in each state regarding student attendance during Spring 2020, Michigan had the largest issue with class attendance; 61.95% of Michigan

teachers reported that 1 out of 4 students or fewer attended remote classes. Other states with critical attendance issues included North Carolina, Ohio, and California with more than 40% of teachers in these states stating 1 out of 4 students or fewer attended remote classes (Fishbowl, April 13, 2020).

While the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid move to virtual learning has created a strain on Nevada's teachers, schools, districts, parents and students, virtual learning is not new to education or to Nevada, nor is it likely to disappear after the pandemic subsides. According to the National Education Policy Center, there were 500+ full-time virtual schools in 2017. In 1991, CCSD began offering distance education opportunities for students and in 2013, the Nevada Learning Academy (NVLA) was established. Currently there are 293 full-time students and 9,420 part-time registered students at NVLA, with a new elementary school for grades 3-5. Other institutions offering free accredited online education include the Nevada Virtual Academy and the Odyssey Charter School Nevada (OdysseyK12.org). Some institutions across the U.S. offer virtual education for tuition or small monthly fees ([liberty.edu/ms/online-academy](http://liberty.edu/ms/online-academy)). Such online learning programs offer individualized and customized learning paths.

The lessons learned from the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic creates an opportunity for policymakers to provide a more robust infrastructure for virtual learning in the future.

In short, lawmakers can help Nevada schools embrace the best of what virtual learning has to offer. In this paper, we discuss evidence-based actions for Nevada lawmakers to improve the state's virtual learning infrastructure. We provide four recommendations of how this might be accomplished.

### **Enhancing Virtual Learning in Nevada**

It is possible, even probable, that virtual instruction will become a common occurrence in education moving forward. Beitlers (2020) attests that, "We [are] learning there are circumstances where some amount of online instruction can benefit student learning." Virtual learning, for example, can be used to provide personalized and additional support for at-risk students or to students who need additional support to meet grade-level expectations. Through technology, teachers can offer additional second language learning by providing immediate translations of students' first languages along with the English version of the lesson. Additionally, technology can be used to provide continuity of learning during shutdowns for weather-related events. When power outages occur, teaching remotely may also include documents that can be delivered to support student learning when technology is not available.

Given the unique skills required to facilitate virtual learning and its potential use in the future of schooling, Nevada can engage in policy reforms now to help teachers gain the requisite skills and confidence in facilitating learning in an online environment. In what follows, we discuss the following four actions to make this a reality: 1) all teachers must be prepared to deliver excellent instruction whether remotely or in traditional settings; 2) funding must be made available for new technology and technology upgrades for all teachers, students, and parents; 3) support for teacher education candidates in traditional and alternative route to licensure (ARL) programs to expand their knowledge of teaching remotely; 4) development of a plan for virtual teaching in Nevada. The dramatic effect the closure of schools had on teaching and learning highlights the importance of preparing K-12 educators with the skills to effectively teach online should teaching virtually become part of the new normal (Trust & Whalen, 2020).

### **Preparing Teachers For Virtual Teaching**

Funding must be provided for institutions of higher education, school districts and regional pro-

fessional development programs to include teaching virtually as a necessary component of professional development (Kennedy & Ferdig, 2018). A mentoring system to support teachers in remote instruction can be created to provide the opportunity for teachers to specialize in online instruction through continuing education units or licensure endorsements. Teachers new to the profession can also receive support from experienced colleagues through induction and mentoring. The Nevada Distance Learning Collaborative and the Nevada Department of Education Digital Engineers cohort are in place to help teachers learn the best-practices for virtual teaching. These overarching organizations support virtual teaching. However, teachers learn best from one another in timely and relevant situations that are school-based and are concerned with specific groups of learners (Juliani, 2015). Small learning communities of teachers are common and often serve to create healthy school cultures and effective problem-based instruction leading to increased student achievement. A cadre of teachers with virtual teaching experience and expertise in technology and visual tools can support teachers in exploring the benefits of virtual teaching and creating online courses (Gordon et al., 2019).

Teaching skills in the traditional, face-to-face school setting do not necessarily translate well to the virtual setting. Teachers are used to being in close proximity to their students, of seeing an entire room in a glance and being able to re-engage students in learning with a nod or gentle suggestion. In remote education, the teacher is as distant from the learners as they are from one another. Educational interactions among learners and teachers in the virtual environment require more flexibility and adaptability than in a traditional classroom. The manner in which students interact with their teachers and with other students in a virtual classroom can occur at a different, even more rapid pace than in traditional classrooms and it is essential to keep students engaged. "Keeping the lesson flowing at a good pace helps keep students engaged—and remember, what we're after is maximizing not just time on task, but 'engaged time'" (Simmons, 2020). "A lot of what [instructors] know about really great in-person facilitation applies online," said Cindy Huggett, a virtual training consultant. But some skills need to be tweaked or expanded. "It's like, you already know how to drive a car; now you're learning to drive a truck. It's the same

set of skills, but you add on to it.”

Huggett (2020) identifies three key differences:

- The role of technology—while a face-to-face instructor might use technology, in the virtual classroom, technology becomes the main platform
- Engaging learners—different strategies are needed to engage and build a rapport with learners the instructor cannot see
- Multitasking—instructors need to simultaneously present, engage learners, and use the technology platform.

Creative methods of teaching have emerged from the rapid switch to virtual teaching. Teachers are working in teams to determine which programs and online platforms work best for specific groups of students. Administrators and teachers are learning ways that technology supports increasing the permeability of education. Distance learning “can be as effective as traditional instruction and to do so, online courses need cooperative/collaborative learning” (Dixson, 2010). As teachers gain experience teaching virtually, they develop new skills in online education and expand their abilities to reach all students individually (Affinito, 2018). According to Connections Academy (September 2020),

“The best teachers know that a successful online school year takes creativity, specialized training, knowledge of the curriculum, and lots of preparation. In today’s virtual classrooms, online teachers play an essential role in supporting student success, and it requires a slightly different skill set than in-person learning.” (page 1).

New approaches to teaching (in addition to being proficient in the use of various online learning applications) include online presentation skills, and the ability to view teaching virtually as both synchronous and asynchronous. In remote education the teacher becomes more of a facilitator of learning to help students with their interactions, both with the content and with others. As in all schooling, it is the teacher who organizes the instruction and guides discussions but it is the student who must learn. During the recent school closures, teachers have gathered numerous resources to support student learning and to encourage student-to-student discussions.

### **Technology for Access**

New technology and technology upgrades for all

teachers, students and parents across Nevada are needed. At the start of the pandemic many students in Nevada did not have access to the Internet or did not have the digital tools necessary to log into virtual classrooms. In an April, 2020 report, the Nevada Department of Education stated that approximately 136,507 devices were needed by students for remote learning, and 7,146 were needed by educators. A Pew Trust survey indicates that students in remote areas are less likely to use the Internet which can contribute to the digital-divide among students (Modan, 2020). This disparity in student access can create an additional inequity among learners during a rapid switch to remote instruction. (DeLa Rosa, 2020). The challenge of attendance in virtual classrooms may be further complicated by the necessity for multiple connections in a single home. Plans have been initiated to “boost Internet access for students in underserved communities allowing student access to heightened Internet via cellular phone, tablet, and mobile notebooks” (Johnson, 2020, p28). This support for access will assure all students can attend school whether in person or virtually.

Students without the tools for online learning were provided Chromebooks by districts. Organizations stepped up to help Nevada families obtain access to the Internet. T-Mobile began a program titled Project 10 Million, to provide free Internet access to school districts and families in need for five years. Cox Communications offered programs for schools and districts to expand their Internet capacities. Students from single-parent families were provided space and technology to attend virtual schools in city recreation facilities while their parent went to work.

This support from community members serves to make virtual schooling an integral part of education in Nevada. Building a strong network of Internet access for all schools, teachers and students will support all types of learning in the future. As districts begin to recognize the potential technology provides for reaching learners and their families as well as sustaining teacher collaboration, new approaches to schooling in Nevada will emerge.

### **Preparing Teacher Candidates for Virtual Teaching**

Funding is necessary to support teacher candidates in traditional and alternative route to licensure (ARL) programs to expand their knowledge

of teaching and practice. Time and space outside of coursework and teaching assignments should be provided for the formation of small learning communities of teacher candidates, novice teachers and experienced teachers. These peer support groups would establish time for collaboration and would include knowledge and skills related to virtual instruction. Teacher collaboration on effective practices can often be the best form of professional development (Quinn & Paretti, 2019). Teacher education programs could also include opportunities for teachers to specialize in online instruction through a licensure endorsement.

It is essential that teacher preparation programs also include methods to help teacher candidates participate in virtual teaching. In the past and the present, experience in classrooms has been viewed as the cornerstone of learning to teach. Practicum has long been espoused to provide PST's (preservice teachers) with an opportunity to practice and reflect on teaching and translate theoretical ideas into practice (Zeichner, 2010). Sasaki et al. (2020) studied the efficacy of using virtual reality simulations to prepare preservice teachers for a practicum experience. They found increased levels of confidence and competence as a result of the simulation and debrief sessions, suggesting that "the simulated practicum experience, whilst generally seen as a way to prepare [teacher education candidates] for their practicum experience, could now be a viable tool for supplementing or replacing the practicum experience [in classrooms] both during and after the current pandemic" (p. 334-5).

If classrooms are virtual, candidates must acquire skills in navigating virtual environments. Teacher candidates must understand digital-age competencies and skills, such as digital agility, a coaching mindset, adaptability and collaboration as part of their growth toward becoming expert teachers. A reconceptualization of teacher preparation should be considered. Instead of offering separate courses on distance learning, teacher preparation programs should strengthen existing coursework and field experiences to prepare teachers to use technology effectively in virtual or blended learning environments. This way, teachers will adopt strategies to enhance student learning in any context (Holdheide, 2020).

### **Developing a Plan for Virtual Teaching**

As states begin to lift emergency orders and districts prepare to reopen schools, this is an opportunity for state leaders to reimagine education and build a system that will emerge from the coronavirus crisis stronger than ever. It is important to keep a record of all that is being done now and how it is being done so that movement to online schooling can be tracked whenever it occurs. Virtual teaching can bridge emergency closures, provide an opportunity for innovative instructional practices, and increase parent and school staff communication (Arundel, 2020).

A plan for districts to document and track student achievement and teaching practices during virtual teaching can be established as well as new methods to evaluate teaching practices with video self-recording and reflection replacing in-person observation. Reimagining the roles and responsibilities of teachers, students, parents, and the community should be viewed as a blueprint for moving forward, recognizing that if a strategy is working in a virtual environment, it could also be adapted for a traditional classroom. A legislative commission to capture lessons learned during this time of virtual teaching could be created to provide guidelines so districts always have the capability to switch between on-premise and remote learning.

Development of a resource available to all teachers in Nevada regarding components of best practices in teaching virtually could be distributed by districts. Such a resource would include information regarding the use of technology (learning platforms), strategies for maximizing student engagement and accountability, development of communication skills, ways to be available and provide feedback to students, and ways to strengthen the home school connection.

While accountability is still a vital part of teaching and learning, administrators and teachers have begun to expand their thoughts about how evaluations represent success and growth in student learning. Standardized tests are not the only way to document growth (Voices from the Classroom, November 2020). A new way to look at student learning is to allow teachers to define what works for a specific group of students and how to document their growth. Accountability in a virtual environment is not just about metrics, it is more focused on what individual students are learning and how they are responding to 21st century access to learning.

## **Conclusion**

The recommendations here are intended to provide guidance to state leaders as they develop solutions for the short-term and long-term effects of COVID-19, or any other reason why schools cannot be open, with an eye toward maintaining high expectations for quality teaching. While the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) [Re-Opening] Schools Committee focuses on a safe return to schools, what can be learned from the virtual teaching experience should not be overlooked. “Change is inevitable. Growth is optional” (Maxwell, 2019). Positive growth in schooling in Nevada requires support and creativity.

As one teacher, Micaela Chewjalearn, fourth grade at Myrtle Tate Elementary School put it:

“Although we lost out on some benefits of in-person learning, we learned plenty of new strategies to take back to our classrooms when we do return. This experience has definitely been the most interesting experience of my career so far, but I am glad we were able to learn in so many different ways. The students will now have life skills, such as learning how to adapt to unforeseen circumstances, and new technology skills that they will be able to put to use throughout the rest of their lives. This is a perfect example of the curriculum philosophies I believe in. Teaching is a career that requires all educators to be adaptable, ready for the unexpected, and quick to transition to whatever new curriculum, learning environment, or set of students we may have.”

The goals and objectives of teaching and learning remained the same, but the necessity of working in a virtual environment prompted teachers to develop improved ways to support student learning and achievement. Through virtual schooling, students and teachers are developing new skills in technology that will become part of their knowledge and will remain with them into the future. Policymakers who had initially focused on the practical issues of online schooling should now turn their attention to the working levels of teachers and students. It is time to consider the learning effectiveness of virtual schooling. Since something could happen in the future that would require a shift to remote instruction, it is best to be prepared.

Research will continue to address resources and timely and relevant practices that use technology and digital tools. Effective practitioners need skills that are applicable for teaching and learning in both actual and virtual classrooms. While the elements of high-quality teaching and learning are essentially the same, the delivery system has changed (Marzano, 2017). Some teachers may have previously used technology as an engaging add-on but the advent of virtual teaching requires them to become proficient in the use of digital tools for teaching and learning.

The long-term effects of virtual schooling and the ways that teacher-preparation programs can be enhanced through a combination of face-to-face and distance learning strategies need to be addressed. Evidence thus far suggests that virtual education depends on old school principles: creative, attentive teaching and patient support from parents (Carey, 2020) and the relationships formed between the teacher and students.

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