

## OPINION

## YOUR SAY: VIRTUAL SCHOOLING

## Socialization lacking for younger students

As the father of a 7-year old child, I have witnessed firsthand the horror of distance learning. I use the word "horror" because for a child, it is horrific to have your whole school life shut off in an instant.

My daughter was an academically achieving, outgoing student. She not only participated in the spelling bee but also in the running club, the theater club and took yoga at school. That all ended and was replaced by the oxymoron of "distance learning." I saw my happy, enthusiastic, school-loving child become angry, depressed and withdrawn. Her frustration was only magnified and exacerbated by online learning. Not only was she now isolated at home, but she was pitted against her parents in a fight over school work. When I spoke to the principal of my daughter's school about this, he admitted that in spite of all his credentials and his educational acumen, he was getting nowhere trying to "distance teach" his son. Eventually he had to back off because it was damaging their relationship. If administrators find the system unworkable, how can parents, most of whom have to work, educate our children at home?

The overriding problem with distance learning is it is antithetical to any real educational experience. Socialization for a small child is not a luxury, it is a necessity — like food, water and love. This is the way children process the world: physically, through direct, tactile interaction with their peers. To offer a virtual substitute is analogous to offering the child virtual food, virtual water or a virtual hug. It only leaves the child frustrated and desperate for the real thing.

Parents recognize their children's inherent need for socialization. There has been a huge drop in enrollment at public schools and increased attendance at in-person private institutions, as well as an explosion of "educational pods." Parents are determined to provide their children with the interpersonal contact they desperately need.

Distance learning is not only destructive to children on a micro level but is devastating to communities on a macro scale. Those without the financial resources for in-person education, or even the necessary digital capabilities to participate in their district's mandated alternative, are finding themselves pushed even further down the socio-economic and educational ladder, and farther from the American dream.

While there may be some applicable benefit for older students (high school and beyond), for younger students, distance learning is nothing but a painful and frustrating remainder of everything that is missing from their lives. We are told by the apologists for this "system" that "it's not forever." Six months in the life of a child is forever. We are also told that "children are resilient." Are they?

Every year therapists and psychiatrists treat millions of Americans for the ongoing trauma that they suffered in their youth. Distance learning is nothing more than the systematic traumatization of a generation of children. It provides nothing but a pathetic, albeit expedient, substitute for school districts that refuse to meet the challenges of really reopening schools.

Edward Ewing, Clairemont

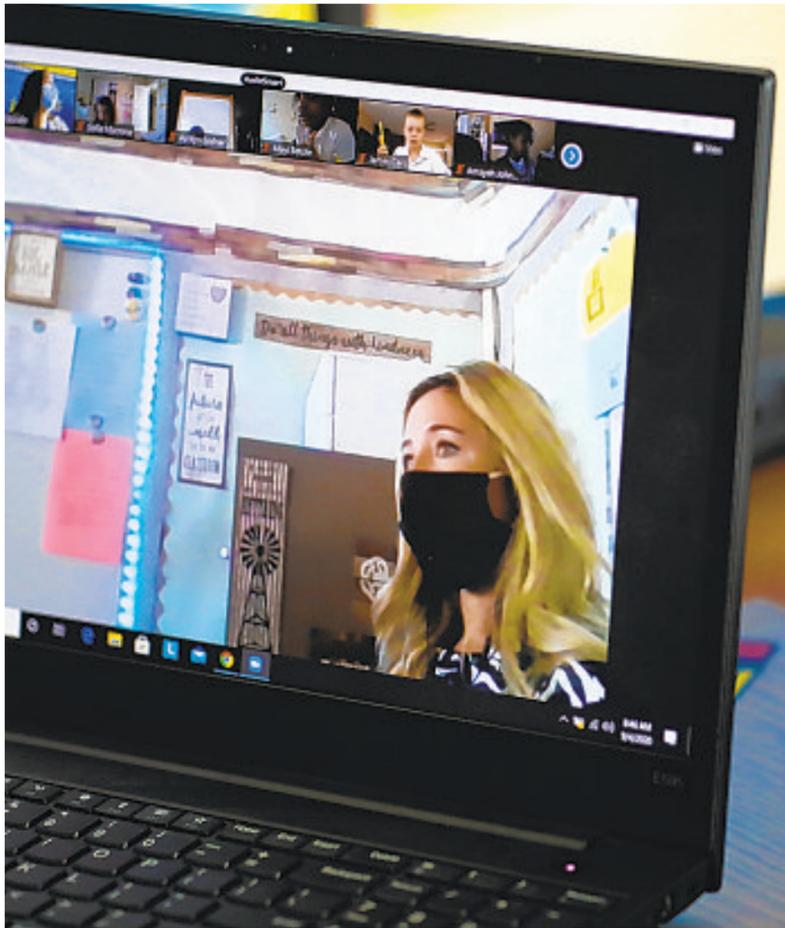
## Situation isn't perfect but we are making do

Early last March, the coronavirus topic came up in my classroom. When students asked, I distinctly remember saying there was a low chance we might close down. Later the same week, I upgraded my prediction to probable. The next day, March 13, we were out. We were abruptly put into distance learning without any warning, training or choice. As teachers, we cobbled together an online learning schedule and we got through the rest of the year. That seems like a lifetime ago.

The circumstances that surround distance learning are tragic and I am not even going to pretend that teaching online is superior to in-class teaching, but, as the

We asked: Most students, teachers and parents now have had exposure to distance learning as the pandemic lingers.

What have been your experiences, both positive and negative, with virtual schooling?



NELVIN C. CEPEDA U-T

At Our Lady of Grace Catholic School in El Cajon, second-grade teacher Amber Elizondo teaches her class to students who are distance learning.

## Social media responses to this week's question.

**William O'Hara** — When I get a positive experience with it, I'll post it. The entire experience has been negative, and has convinced me that home schooling is the best method to teach a child. At least until after the election when no one cares about this silly virus business anymore.

**Ray H. Ramage** — Teaching proper hand positions on piano is not possible remotely.

**Scott Osmon** — By now everyone knows how to protect themselves and their families! Open it up. These kids will never get this time back.

saying goes, there has been a silver lining.

I am fortunate to belong to a large, public charter school that has been proactive in creating the best online experience possible for students. We came together early in the summer to decide what an effective online situation might look like. We voted several times on various schedules and every teacher, student and parent had a say. The mandatory teacher development days that we use to train throughout the year were added to our summer instead.

We partnered up with Cuyamaca and Grossmont Community Colleges to take a 12-hour course on Canvas, an online teaching platform we use. Our entire staff completed a 30-hour professional certification program through the San Diego County Office of Education. We had a 3½-hour community board meeting where parents, students and staff spoke of their concerns. In the end, we voted for opening online for all of quarter one (to keep our students' lives consistent). Now here we are.

When I open my Zoom meetings up and see my kids' faces, I miss the relationships that I know I could be making with them. They make me laugh, think and challenge me as a person. I am sorry they are stuck at home away from their learning environment — away from their friends. At some point, we will open back up. We will get back to normal. We will move on. However, as teachers, we will not have forgotten the hours of training and preparation that has been necessary to teach online. It has brought us all to a new level of teaching.

The situation we find ourselves in now

may not be ideal, but the pairing of virtual and in-class learning in the future will make for powerful teaching instruction. This will benefit all of our students in the long run. This is the silver lining.

Vicki Hoffman, Rolando

## Virtual learning is no classroom substitute

I fell in love with school in the second grade. I was fortunate to have a teacher who was engaged, who loved to teach and who loved his students. He worked long hours and put his students first, and as a young student, I reaped the fruits of his labor.

It is frustrating, maddening and depressing to know that my 7-year-old son is unlikely to have a similar experience and be completely helpless to change it. My family lives in San Diego County where it has been deemed "safe" by the state and county public health officials for students to return to class. Yet my son, along with thousands of others, continues to be taught in a virtual environment plagued with issues and technical glitches. His education at this point cannot be described as anything other than a joke.

I sacrificed a short commute and lower property prices for my neighborhood's top-rated schools. I now ask myself every day, what was it all for? Three hours with a teacher on Zoom, at least half of which is

comprised of "brain breaks" and technical malfunctions? A school-provided Chromebook that lacks sufficient processing speed to deliver Zoom instruction in any coherent format? To have me take hours out of my full-time law practice to educate my own child out of fear that he will be left behind if his education is left to those who are supposed to be providing it?

But the questions I find myself asking most frequently throughout the day are: Why are things this way? How can the state and county public health officials say it is safe to reopen schools but they're not open? Why can my child attend an elongated afterschool program provided by the district at the same school campus and be guided in his classroom assignments by a recent high school graduate, but not his teacher?

How does it make any sense that teachers unions, such as the California Teachers Association, which claims as its mission fighting for "the rights for every public school student to have access to quality education," are fighting for less instructional time and in a format that even it cannot dispute is inferior to in-person education, particularly for young children?

People say to be patient, to be understanding. But there isn't time to be patient or understanding. Every day that our children are out of school, forced to learn in an unworkable format, is a detriment to them, their families and society. The schools have had months to prepare for this moment. It is time for our educators to do the right thing and uphold the values they claim to espouse and reopen our schools. Our children cannot wait another minute.

Amanda Fitzsimmons, Rancho Peñasquitos

## San Diego district's system is flawed

After experiencing the initial days of the San Diego Unified School District's distance learning system, it has become apparent the district has purchased a system that is not only problematic for many students to learn but also with the teachers attempting to teach the students how to operate.

In addition to purchasing a system that is as much a mystery to the teachers, we learn the system content is proprietary and students with larger than postage stamp screens cannot use or access the program. If your student has a learning disability or a district-mandated individualized education program, the situation gets even worse. It is obvious the district never vetted or beta-tested the system with the majority of teachers as they are as befuddled with its inner workings as the students and parents.

Though not even a week into the new school year, some parents are already exploring other educational opportunities with the intent of providing their children a real (private school) education. As a parent and grandparent, this initial attempt to provide distance learning appears seriously flawed and does not provide the standard of education we are all paying for. The pledge to "leave no child behind" appears to be lost in the proverbial online attempt at distance.

I would urge the U-T to initiate an online parent survey to confirm the overall level of satisfaction and experience with the district's fledgling program.

Ron Smith, Pacific Beach

## NEXT WEEK'S YOUR SAY: PROFESSIONAL SPORTS

With pro sports successfully underway and some college sports starting competition, how do you think the sports world has handled the coronavirus pandemic? What do you think should be done differently? Please email your 500-word essay to [yoursay@sduuniontribune.com](mailto:yoursay@sduuniontribune.com) by Wednesday and we may publish it in the newspaper and online. Include your name, city or San Diego neighborhood and a daytime phone number that we won't publish but that we may use to call you. Thank you for participating in our civic conversation.

## TEACHING FINANCIAL LITERACY NEVER MORE IMPORTANT

BY SIDDHARTHA VIVEK

At a time when our country — and the world — grapples with economic uncertainty and social unrest, we have a unique opportunity to make positive change for a population of innocents, our children.

It is fitting that racial injustice and economic inequity take a front-row seat just as a global pandemic rocks the entire world, making clear that connecting our youth to what their futures — both economically and societally — will look like is more critical now than ever. While education can be the great equalizer, students' access to opportunities to apply that education is key.

Experiential learning, combined with an understanding of how business and money work and layered with a network of advocates and mentors, have always been and continue to be cornerstones to empower the next generation of society's leaders in business and policy.

Most parents, educators

and coaches have heard, "When am I ever going to use this?" from a young person when posed with questions of financial literacy. What if we could illustrate the value, not just dictate it, in a way that resonates and leaves an indelible impression? Unfortunately, at a time when millions of Americans are unemployed and graduating students at all levels see their world change overnight and are sheltering in place, employers report that high school and college graduates are *less* prepared for the workforce, and the pandemic adds an unprecedented dimension to the challenge.

Recent studies conducted before the pandemic attributed much of that sentiment to a decreasing pool of opportunities for young people ages 14-19. The study focused on extracurricular activities, service-learning projects, summer school and other "must haves" for college resumes.

Junior Achievement (JA) statistics that led to this study are startling: 20% of

U.S. students will not complete high school on time and earn a diploma; 49% of U.S. employers recognize that talent shortages impact their ability to serve clients and customers; 36% of Americans say that they have at some point in their lives felt their financial situation was out of control; and 91% of millennials wish they had greater access to

Students today have seen question marks appearing daily about what their future may hold.

entrepreneurial education programs.

In light of these statistics and the coronavirus, students today have seen question marks appearing daily about what their future may hold. This is particularly critical for low-to-moderate-income communities where cycles of poverty are repeated because of the generational lack of access and opportunity to alternate career pathways. The virus has only exacerbated these concerns.

We recognize that providing real-world context for students starting in classrooms as early as kindergarten, has helped to socialize young people to concepts they will continue to see throughout their lives. Simulated experiences (i.e. "gamified" life) achieved at Mission Fed JA Finance Park, McGrath Family JA BizTown and the JA Com-

pany Program, for example, have allowed students to live their future lives by applying what they have learned in the classroom to real-world situations. From applying for car loans, paying for child care or health insurance to understanding how to develop/manage a budget and communicate effectively, students need the opportunity and structure to understand how their future career pathways might work. Never has this been more important.

In a report released last month by the Christenson Institute, relationships and networks, while admittedly complex and difficult to measure, are critical to the growth and skill development of young people. Combined with research over the years that affirms the positive career and employment outcomes of youth who have had mentors, it's clear that "who you know" matters starting as early as K-12 education, pandemic or not. Working together as educators, community-based organizations and the business community, we must prioritize and provide opportunities for students to build social capital, and we must continue to do more to connect students to people who represent shared communities and career goals.

With schools essentially closed and physical social encounters restricted for our youth, the importance of these indicators doesn't wane; in fact, they become more important because our children are even more isolated than before.

Through organizations like JA San Diego and partners like Mission Fed Credit Union, even in a new environment, we continue to focus on connecting our industry partners with students, now virtually, through a variety of programs and activities just as we did for more than 23,000 in-person students last year.

Given recent guidance that many school districts start remotely in California, distanced-but-not-disengaged experiential learning, direct connection to business and economics and engagement of virtual mentors are critical and like Mission Fed, others in our business community have a major role to play.

In short, connecting students to what's possible, combined with tangible experiences, tools and networks to achieve that vision, will inspire, motivate and empower San Diego's future leaders today — pandemic or not.

Vivek is president and CEO of Junior Achievement of San Diego County.