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The Class Divide: Remote Learning at 2 Schools, Private and Public

Some private schools provide online luxury learning during the pandemic. As many public schools struggle to adjust, the nation's educational gaps widen.

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For Rachel Warach's class, the 133rd morning of first grade, numbered on a poster board behind her, was similar to all of the previous mornings.

Her students from across Chicago spent 15 minutes working quietly on math problems and writing in their journals. They split into small reading groups, with Ms. Warach bouncing between them to offer feedback. Later, there was an Earth Day discussion of "The Lorax" and a math lesson on sorting everyday objects — rolls of tape, coins, pens — according to shape.

There was a break for lunch and recess, followed by Hebrew class. All as Oisabel sprawled on the floor, Shira snuggled against her mom, and a father whispered to his son, "Can you take that blanket off your head, please?"

This is first grade at a private school determined to make remote education during the coronavirus as similar as possible to what it looked like before the pandemic. Chicago Jewish Day School provides four hours and 15 minutes of daily live instruction, including yoga, art and music. Students even do messy baking projects over Zoom, with parents as sous chefs.

It bears little resemblance to the more typical experience that Jacob Rios is having in Philadelphia, where he attends first grade at a public school, Spruance Elementary.

Jacob did not see his teacher via video screen until late April; the district spent the first several weeks of the shutdown focused on training staff members to use remote teaching tools, distributing laptops to students and getting meals to low-income families, which make up a majority of the district's population.

Now Jacob's teacher, Dolores Morris, meets with her students each morning for an hour — Jacob's only live video instruction, according to his mother. About 11 of the 26 students in the class attend daily, Ms. Morris said.

A close look at these two very different first-grade classes in two of America's largest cities shows how the coronavirus pandemic has done nothing to level the playing field of American education, and instead has widened the gaps that have always existed.

About 10 percent of American children attend private schools, not all of which have been leaders in online education. And there are disparities in the public system, too, where some schools have done much more than others to get online instruction up and running effectively. But what the pandemic has made clear is that remote education, especially of the youngest students, requires a rare mix of enthusiastic school leadership, teacher expertise and homes equipped with everything children need to learn effectively.

At Chicago Jewish Day School, students who need extra help are being tutored in phonics via Zoom, or meeting remotely with a social worker. The school has sent home books, dry-erase boards, markers and other needed supplies. Parents have provided the rest: internet access, iPads, and quiet study nooks in well-appointed homes filled with pianos, books and tasteful wooden play kitchens.

The system has been up and running since mid-March.

Remote learning at the Chicago school is not perfect. There are spotty Wi-Fi connections, stray emojis in the chat panel and children who wander away from the screen. But there is little doubt that in a nation of over 100,000 shuttered schools, these children continue to receive a luxury good — one whose list price is $28,000 per year.

In Ms. Morris's class in Philadelphia, Jacob is one of the more fortunate students. His mother, Brenda Rios, sits by his side to help him with assignments. She is off work from her usual part-time job preparing meals at a preschool.

Because so many parents of the other students are essential workers — prison guards, cleaners, nursing assistants — Ms. Morris knows they may not be available to offer hands-on support. Still, she is trying to look on the bright side.

"I'm thanking God that I can at least see their faces," she said.

Dolores Morris, a first-grade teacher in Philadelphia, has many students whose parents are essential workers, including prison guards, cleaners and nursing assistants. Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

That is rare in the world of coronavirus-altered learning. The Center on Reinventing Public Education, a think tank, examined the remote learning policies of 100 public school districts and charter networks nationwide. It found that just 22 of them are requiring real-time teaching — and just 10 of those systems are teaching live in all grades, including early elementary school.

The country's three largest districts, in New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago, are not requiring teachers to do any live video instruction, though some individual schools are choosing to do so.

It is a different story in many private schools, both independent and parochial. Although associations said they did not have any hard data on the average number of hours that students in their networks were receiving live instruction, examples from around the country typically show a gap with public schools.

The reasons are clear: Private school students are more likely to live in homes with good internet access, computers and physical space for children to focus on academics. Parents are less likely to be working outside the home and are more available to guide young children through getting online and staying logged in — entering user names and passwords, navigating between windows and programs.

And unlike their public-school counterparts, private schoolteachers are generally not unionized, giving their employers more leverage in laying out demands for remote work. Some public school unions have won strict limits on video-teaching requirements, arguing that it can be difficult for educators to teach live from home when many are also taking care of their own children, whose schools and day cares are also closed.

In Philadelphia, Ms. Morris, a 42-year veteran, is in her last semester before retirement, and it looks nothing like the farewell she expected. Nevertheless, she has thrown herself into learning the technology to teach remotely. Often, she is texting and emailing with parents while simultaneously interacting with her students via Google Classroom.

A recent Monday morning was devoted to a phonics lesson on the sound "oy." Ms. Morris used Google Classroom to display vocabulary words on slides — "enjoy," "soil," "annoy" — and Jacob's mother, Ms. Rios, helped him complete an online activity identifying the various spellings of the sound.

Ms. Rios, home alone with three sons, said she appreciated Ms. Morris's dedication to her students at a difficult time. Still, the transition online had been rocky. At first, Ms. Rios was not sure how to operate the district-provided Chromebook. Since then, much of the day's activity has revolved around worksheets and compliance checks, which can be maddening to submit online.

For one art lesson, Jacob watched a video about Vincent van Gogh, then had to fill out an "exit ticket," writing what he had learned about the painter. Like any first grader, Jacob needed help to craft complete sentences on the computer. Then, after submitting his answer, Ms. Rios was required to click to another screen to report that he had finished the activity.

Sometimes during live lessons, Ms. Rios can see via the video feed that another child is confused — they have not opened the right window or clicked on the right link — and does not have an adult nearby to help them follow along.

"I was almost in tears today," she said. "It's excruciating to watch that — a child who wants to learn and isn't able to."

Ms. Morris, too, is frustrated by the limitations of online learning, especially by the fact that she cannot always see students' reactions while she is presenting material to them, to check that they understand. She can tell that using the system is difficult for first graders, because even some strong students are submitting blank assignments, meaning they most likely did the work, but their answers did not get recorded.

In Chicago, there are many reasons the Jewish Day School was able to handle the transition to remote learning so well. The school closed for students ahead of most others in Illinois. That allowed administrators to spend several days, before the building shut down, training staff members on how to use online tools.

The school's curriculum is based around hands-on activities and discussion, which means young children learning from home do not need to be as adept at typing as in schools that assign more structured, written worksheets.

Rachel Warach uses Zoom to discuss a reading assignment with her student Roey.

And crucially, families in the school are generally stable economically and available to closely supervise their children's education.

Given the possibility that schools will remain at least partly closed in the fall, Chicago Jewish Day School is now marketing itself as a leader in remote learning, with a slick video aimed at parents. School leaders hope to increase enrollment at a time when requests for financial aid may go up as donations decrease because of the economic downturn. Already, 57 percent of families at the school receive some assistance with tuition.

Parents in Ms. Warach's class said they had been pleasantly surprised by the effectiveness of online first grade.

Among them is Caroline Musin Berkowitz, a nonprofit manager, and her husband, a legal analyst. They are both working from their apartment while taking care of their two young children. Having 6-year-old Shira engaged with school for most of the day, sitting across from her parents at the dining room table with headphones on, provides some respite.

The family has no qualms about re-enrolling Shira in the fall, even though they are not getting the exact experience they thought they were paying for.

“We made a choice to go with private school over public school for so many reasons,” Ms. Musin Berkowitz said, “and the idea of a global pandemic and school moving to online was not one of them.”

Now, she added, “I can’t even describe how beneficial it’s been.”