



# Student Experiences with Distance Learning

## Virtual Town Hall

May 5, 2020



## Key Takeaways & Policy Recommendations

*<< How do we go that extra mile ... to make sure that students that might not have the best home life, might not have parents that have much education, and experiencing abuse, all kinds of different experiences, how do we make sure we're reaching out to them and make sure they have the same amount of access and support that other students are having? >> - Helen Clanaugh*

**MN Youth Council Representatives Participating:** **Salma Abdi** - Congressional District 1 (Rochester Century High School), **Adri Arquin** - CD4 (St. Paul Central High School), **Helen Clanaugh** - CD 8 (Duluth Denfeld High School), **Ava Kalenze** - At Large (St. Anthony Village High School), **Weston Loughmiller** - At Large (Fairmont High School), **Liv Steen** - CD5 (Hopkins High School)

## Challenges Related to Distance Learning

While all the Representatives reported trying to make the best of a difficult situation, they shared a number of challenges that distance learning presents:

- Overall, the common sentiment was that students were learning and retaining less than they would in a traditional school environment. This stems from the nature of the assignments, open-book exams, reduced access to teachers, and less time dedicated to school work for many students.
- STEM subjects repeatedly came up as being much more difficult to learn in a virtual environment than other school subjects.
- Figuring out how to access support from teachers was a frequently cited difference. Representatives shared there are designated physical locations at school where they can find teachers for additional help: classrooms after school, the school library, a designated math resource room, etc. Connecting with teachers in this manner virtually has proven much more challenging and made it difficult to get additional assistance with school work.
- Trades programs, which are especially popular in rural school districts, have been particularly difficult to translate to virtual environments.

*<< I don't think we're learning as much, and there aren't really any parameters we have to stick to to make sure we're retaining the information. >>*

**- Ava Kalenze**

# Inequalities Exposed by Distance Learning

Representatives expressed concern about a number of inequalities that should be on policymakers' minds:

- All the representatives gave their schools credit for trying to support students with access to devices although universal coverage did seem to vary from school to school. Broadband internet access is also a chief stumbling block to successful distance learning, especially in Greater Minnesota.
- Representatives expressed significant worry about students who were already falling behind or those with special learning needs who are now lacking the support a traditional school environment provides.
- The assistance of parents who have both the educational background and the time to help is a key indicator of who succeeds in distance learning.
- Many students have less time for school work because they are taking care of younger siblings at home or picking up additional hours at work to compensate for a parent's job loss.
- Having your own quiet, dedicated workspace and access to safe outdoor space to relax and get fresh air is a privilege that is essential to distance learning success.

## Policy Recommendations to Increase Equity

Representative Adri Arquin succinctly summarized the priorities for policymakers in a distance learning world: first, make sure everyone has access to education, and then figure out how to catch up those who have fallen behind because of it. The Representatives stressed we have to look at the long-term impact, not just the immediate COVID-19 response. Other recommendations for policymakers included:

- Universal access to devices and broadband.
- Standardized pass/fall for all students across Minnesota for this period of time.
- Increased access to mental health resources.
- Lower student to counselor ratios to provide academic and emotional support.
- Providing free meals to students this summer to fight hunger and support the struggling agricultural economy.

## Bright Spots and Opportunities

The Representatives also shared some of the unexpected benefits or opportunities they saw resulting from distance learning:

- Several appreciated the time and opportunity to build new skills, like learning to cook new dishes or how to learn in new ways.
- This is a great time to explore project-based learning and how it can be implemented more once students return to the classrooms.
- Distance learning creates opportunities for teachers to develop individualized learning plans which could transform how learning happens in the future.
- And last, but certainly not least, a quote from Representative Helen Clanaugh: "The amount of support teachers have been offering to students has been really awesome"!

**<< The way distance learning is going is rather not equitable, but equal, so it's like putting everyone on the same scale when in reality some people's parents have different education levels, more access to tutoring and other services, and have the time. >>**

**- Salma Abdi**

## Contact

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