Five challenges in modern education

and how virtual schools can address them

It's a new world in K–12 education

The sudden shift to remote instruction during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a roller coaster of emotions for administrators, teachers, parents, and students alike, and the reality of impending school interruptions and longer-term online learning is setting in for everyone involved.

As district leaders and teachers have pivoted to online learning, they have grappled with a giant learning curve that has made it a challenging undertaking indeed. After all, it's a very different scenario to provide "remote instruction," compared with offering true "online learning." In one model, teachers take in-person lesson plans and move them online. In the other, the curriculum has been designed with a virtual-first approach.

But COVID-19 is just one reason that families are more interested in online education than ever before. They're also turning to virtual learning for more educational choices and the flexibility it provides. District administrators recognize that online education can be an attractive alternative to the traditional classroom — creating opportunities for underserved populations, providing personalized instruction, and offering greater flexibility in a safe learning environment.

A spring 2020 **Parent Pulse Report** from Pearson found that parents remain nearly unanimous in their support for closing schools — 94% say it was the right call, but 77% of Americans are concerned that COVID-19 will affect or delay the start of school in the fall. In addition, an overwhelming 91% of parents believe schools need to be better prepared to switch to virtual learning programs.

As we sit on the precipice of change, the writing might already be on the classroom wall: Almost 75% of respondents to the 2020 **Pearson Global Learner Survey** believe that education will fundamentally change due to the pandemic, with 87% saying that online learning will remain a component of primary and secondary education going forward. In the United States, 74% go so far as to say that students are more apt to attend school virtually than in a traditional school within 10 years.

Here are five challenges that school districts face, and how administrators can help address them through a robust virtual learning strategy.

1 Students express diverse needs — from learning disabilities to social anxiety — that can make it hard to excel in a traditional classroom.

While it might seem that there has been an increase in the number of young people impacted by anxiety, depression, learning issues, and more, the reality is that there's more of a *willingness* for young people and their parents to be transparent about the issues and seek accommodations, explains Mickey Revenaugh, director of the New School Models for Pearson Global Schools and co-founder of Connections Academy and Harrow School Online.

"It used to be that parents and students would conceal issues in order to accommodate the system, but now we see they are expecting the system to accommodate them," she says. "There's a healthy transparency around embracing what young people are going through and admitting that those needs are front and center."

The virtual learning solution

Virtual learning can help districts meet the diverse needs of students with a flexible school environment that is personalized to them — from what time of day they work best to how they choose to work. For example, kids with anxiety can choose to turn their camera off when they meet with the teacher one-on-one, notes Morgan Champion, school counseling department lead for Pearson Online & Blended Learning.

This expanded comfort level can yield big benefits. "Many of the teachers who had three months of online experience this spring noticed that kids who might have been shy or struggled in the classroom thrived when the pressure of talking in public was removed," says Asha Choksi, head of Global Research & Insights at Pearson.

Revenaugh also mentions kids who are dealing with gender identification issues, where a traditional school can make them feel anxious about issues as fundamental as which bathroom to use. "In virtual school, they're in a place where they can thrive academically and socially — they can find 'their peeps,' so to speak, through a club like the Gay Straight Alliance." And yet, she adds, it's not designed to be a place where kids hide. "We hear them say we gave them the tools they needed and the opportunities to practice so they could fully be themselves in the world."
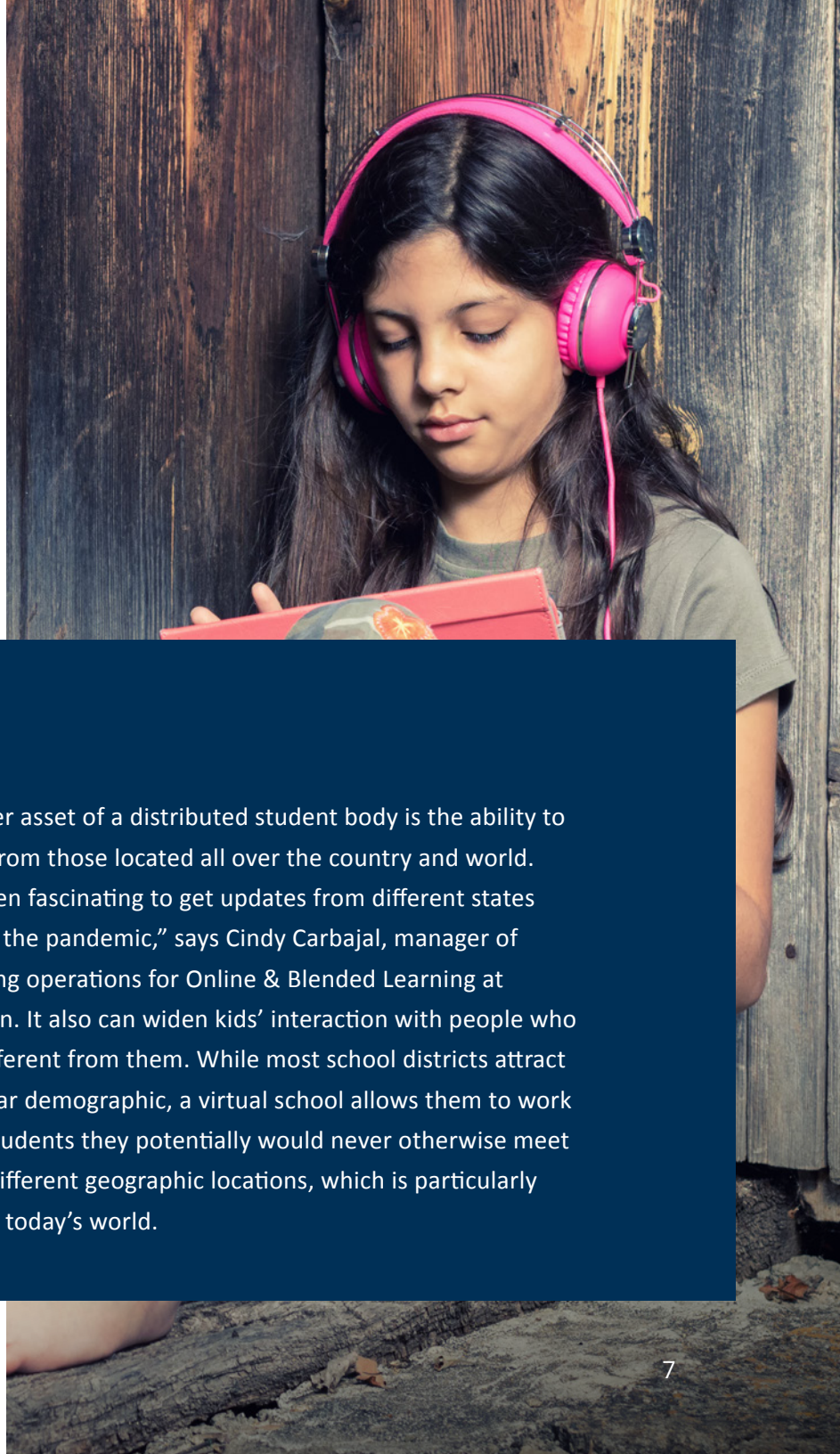
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Asha Choksi,
Head of Global Research & Insights at Pearson

2 Families need flexibility.

While COVID-19 has renewed interest in effective online school, there are many other reasons that families crave flexibility in their educational choices. They may have health issues that can make traditional school challenging, move frequently, or be involved in time- and travel-intensive activities, like athletics, music, and scientific and artistic endeavors. And as the trend toward remote work grows, families will progressively escape cities to live in more remote areas or areas with more affordable housing.

The virtual learning solution

"While these issues have always been part of the fabric of what we do, our schools are perfectly positioned for today's heightened interest in working and studying anywhere," Revenaugh says.

In an online school, kids and teachers can make appointments to keep in touch at a time that works for both. "While school is still a top priority, it's not a problem if students are out of pocket for a couple of days as long as teachers know their whereabouts and the work is getting done," says Champion. For example, she cites a family who's doing "road schooling," where education becomes a complement to their travel adventures.

Another asset of a distributed student body is the ability to learn from those located all over the country and world. "It's been fascinating to get updates from different states during the pandemic," says Cindy Carbajal, manager of teaching operations for Online & Blended Learning at Pearson. It also can widen kids' interaction with people who are different from them. While most school districts attract a similar demographic, a virtual school allows them to work with students they potentially would never otherwise meet from different geographic locations, which is particularly vital in today's world.

3 Students learn at different paces, and a one-size-fits-all model can leave some learners behind.

While today's teachers strive to offer customization, there's still an overarching need to teach to the middle, given the volume of material that needs to be covered, combined with growing class sizes. And this construct means kids can get left behind.

"I often say that the poster child for virtual school is a gifted fifth-grade boy with ADHD; in a regular classroom, he's bored to tears because it's not moving along quickly enough for him, but he also needs to get up and run around after every lesson," says Revenaugh.

The virtual learning solution

Most kids learn at different cadences given the topic, and virtual school allows for that. "Within math, you could be great at fractions, but struggling in multiplication, so you can spend your time where you need to and breeze over concepts you've mastered," points out Carbajal.

In virtual school, students also don't have the pressure of deciding whether to interrupt the whole class to ask the teacher to repeat something or decide to dismiss it if they don't understand. "You can ask the teacher privately or play back the recording later as a review," says Choksi.

And it's not just kids who prefer this model, but teachers, too, Revenaugh says. "They can accommodate the individual customization needs of students without working 80 hours a week or depriving any learner of what they need."

The strategy even goes beyond classroom teachers. In Champion's previous role as a school counselor, she had a multitude of supplementary responsibilities, from staffing lunch duty to taking behavioral notes. Without those demands, virtual school counselors can create more customized social and emotional learning activities that dovetail with their student populations' current needs.

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4 Resourcefulness and self-service learning are vital in today's economy.

The traditional model of frontloading your life with learning is changing, and increasingly learning will be an ongoing, self-service activity. In fact, 40% of respondents to the Pearson Global Learner Survey believe you can do just fine in life without a university degree.

The virtual learning solution

Today's "digital natives" have no trouble finding what they need to know online, but those in a virtual school may have an advantage as we move toward becoming a society of lifelong learners. Technology is how future learners will succeed, and virtual school can make learning less of a passive exercise and promote autonomy.

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"In a regular school, a kid walks into a box, and some adult manages every single element of their day, while in a virtual school the student has to proactively log on, access their lesson, learn the material, show up for a live lesson and discuss it with their teacher, then decide what they want to do next," says Revenaugh. "There's no better preparation for life than continuously being an advocate for your own learning."

Champion finds this skill has proven powerful for graduates when they head to college. "They tell me that they had no issues adjusting to being a good self-manager of their own time and no hesitation asking a professor for help because they were used to it."

And that carries through into the professional world, too, where upskilling is required these days. "It used to be that you would learn a skill and essentially be equipped for a 40-year career," says Choksi. "But now, the work model is changing due to technology disruption, and to stay relevant you have to be able to adapt and learn things fluidly, as well as collaborate online."

The Global Learner Survey bears out the importance of self-service learning in the future workforce, as 88% believe they will need to take more personal responsibility for upskilling for their job.

5 Safety is a fundamental prerequisite for learning, and schools can be scary places.

Today, the threat of COVID-19 looms large, but that's not the only issue today's students contend with. Schools are less safe than they were 25 years ago, say 62% of the respondents to the Global Learner Study. 62% of respondents also agree that social media has made school difficult for students, and more than 75% say the same about bullying.

The virtual learning solution

These are all sad facts of life, and many of the families who choose virtual schools do so as an antidote to bullying — for reasons that run the gamut from a medical condition to just being on the bad luck end of a group of kids. "Here, they find an escape from that daily barrage of trauma, as well as the opportunity to get their feet under them as a learner and as a peer in a school setting," explains Revenaugh.

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But, while this model can provide refuge from bullying, it's not just a place to hide out. "Whether they stay in virtual school through the rest of their education or eventually return to a brick-and-mortar situation, they've had the time and attention to develop the tools they need to be resilient so they can have a robust, meaningful school experience going forward."

While Revenaugh believes there is no excuse for schools not taking measures to combat bullying — often it can be a drawn-out process — and there's no reason for any kid to be a guinea pig allowed to suffer abuse while the school figures out what it needs to do.

Online school also provides a haven from cyberbullying, as you might see on traditional social media, adds Champion:

"We have avenues that allow students to still be social, but with caring adults present." They also monitor the chat function for signs of depression or other concerns, with protocols in place to ensure students get what they need.

The bottom line: virtual learning can be an effective solution to a wide variety of situations that families are facing due to COVID-19 and beyond.

"People may initially have been a little shy about virtual learning based on experiences they had this past spring when everything changed abruptly," says Carbajal. "But we see people fundamentally realizing that's not really what 'virtual learning' is. Once they explore the benefits inherent in a model that promotes self-advocacy, flexibility, and safety, they love what they see."

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