



Virtual is Here to Stay, so Make It Better

There's little reason to think online or virtual education will go away. It's time for schools to make sure it's not a lesser experience.



Elfreda Massie
VP of K-12 Strategy
Class

WITH THE RETURN TO THE PHYSICAL classroom, you might think schools should tuck away their Zoom licenses for the next time an emergency strikes. But that would be short-sighted. Educators have seen how technology can play a role in delivering learning options for students who can't attend in person. Now that K-12 administrators are reimagining and redesigning education, school districts would be foolish not to learn from their pandemic experiences. Their big lesson? Schools need virtual options.

They need them for students who, because of physical, emotional or mental disabilities, can't be in the classroom; who have dropped out just shy of a few credits and really want to earn that diploma; who are working to support their families; who are taking care of younger siblings; or who want to participate in dual enrollment and can't get the unique classes they need through their own schools.

Those virtual options can also be vital in emergencies: bad weather, fire closures, surges in COVID cases, and on-site staffing shortages. Long term, there are those events we don't even notice anymore because they're ingrained in our traditional model – summer break, winter break, and spring break.

Schools have realized that they need to have a strategy that helps them ensure continuity of learning throughout disruptions, which every district in the country faces.

Encouragement, Motivation and Teacher Attention

Educators have also figured out that it's not enough to turn on the webcam and microphone and expect students to show up and learn. Just like in the physical setting, they need encouragement, motivation, teacher attention, and clear expectations to stay engaged.

Take one example: the concept of breakout rooms. Teachers want to group students, whether to have each group work on different activities, create student agency, or some other reason. While Zoom offers a breakout room

feature, the functionality caters to motivated adults more than semi-bored kids.

The teacher needs the ability to see all of the breakout rooms together or move through them and hear what the students are covering, join them in a chat, provide separate assignments or links, and monitor their participation. Those activities are much easier to perform when everybody's in the same physical space, but there's no reason teachers shouldn't also be able to achieve them in a virtual setting too.

Virtual Learning at the Highest Level

Replicating the physical learning experience in the virtual classroom is the thinking behind **Class**. Founded by Michael Chasen, a parent and education technologist who watched his own three kids struggle through remote pandemic learning, Class is intended to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn at the highest levels.

That means having:

- A podium where the teacher can always be located and identified
- A "front of the room," where students can serve as presenters
- Tabs for organizing all of the digital activities and resources – assessments, videos, assignments, web pages, lesson plans, learning management systems – everything the teacher will want to pull up during the lesson and refer to or share with the class, without anybody having to depart from the **Class** interface
- Discussions where teachers and students can hold private one-on-one or one-to-several conversations
- Hand raises that communicate more than "call on me," such as "slow down", "I don't understand" or "I missed something..."
- Polling for the teacher to do quick checks on student well-being and on student understanding
- Enhanced breakout rooms that allow teachers to monitor activity across all breakouts and even send content to specific groups

- Automated grading that feeds into the grade book
- Cues using color and arrangement that signal which student has had their hand up the longest, who hasn't spoken yet, who hasn't asked a question or turned in an assignment
- Privacy views where individual students or the whole class can only see themselves, teachers, and assistants while still allowing the teacher to see everybody
- Invisible attendance tracking to show that students have logged in as well as when, precisely, they entered and left the class

Educators have long understood how to do these things as part of managing their classrooms in person, but many were thrown for a loop when they had to translate those same skills through a computer monitor.

That's where the right kind of technology comes into play – and even improves the in-class experience.

Only technology can maintain a real-time dashboard that displays drill-down data on participation trends for students whether or not they have asked questions, raised their hands, finished their homework, or passed tests. That kind of information can prove helpful during family conferences,

showing parents and guardians how their kids performed and what impacts technology may have had on student progress.

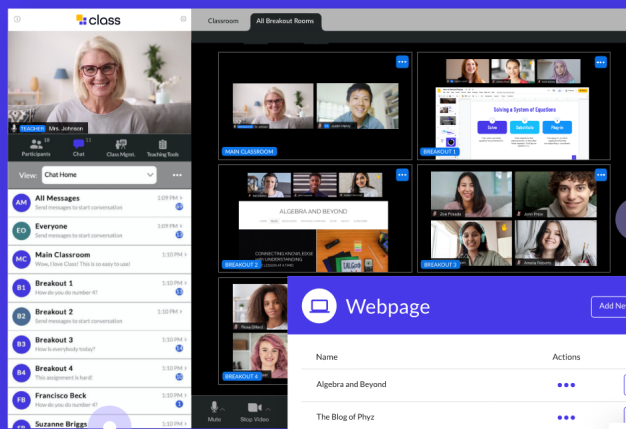
And here's a bonus improvement: the same dashboard also shows *teacher* behaviors, including how much time the teacher spent talking versus how often they called on students. Did the teacher indicate a preference for working with particular students? Did the teacher consistently miss one group's needs? Of course, no teacher intentionally uses inadequate teaching practices or shows bias, but technology can show when it's happening.

At **Class**, we're convinced that if schools plan to offer an online or virtual education option, they need to ensure it's not a lesser experience. Students deserve to be engaged virtually, and teachers need the tools that will help them deliver a high-quality educational experience.

Dr. Elfreda Massie is the Vice President of K-12 Strategy for Class. Alongside stints in district leadership at the District of Columbia Public Schools, Montgomery County Public Schools, and Baltimore County Public Schools, Dr. Massie held executive roles at Blackboard, GEMS Education, Catapult Learning, and the National Center on Education and the Economy, among other organizations.

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