

Choosing a Student-Centered Virtual Classroom

for Your K-12 Institution

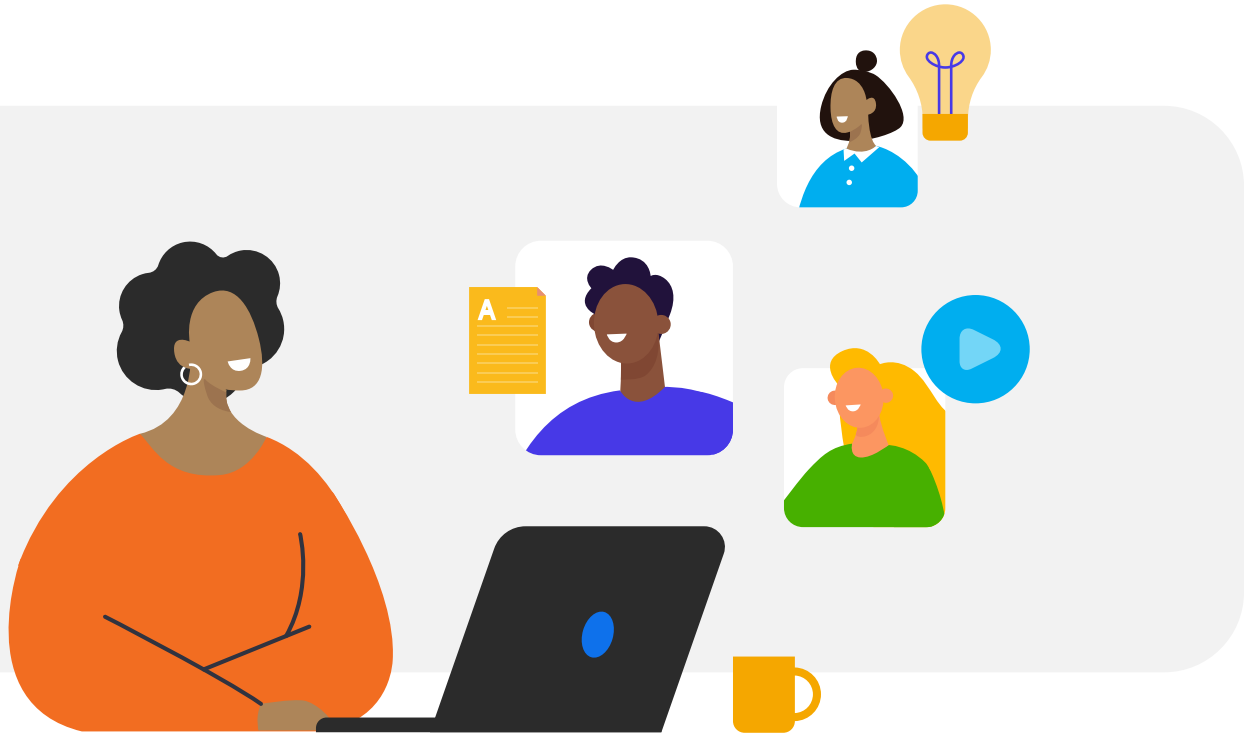




Zoom, Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas. Though as an administrator you may rarely use these platforms, the platform you choose fundamentally impacts the day-to-day lives of students and teachers at your school.

With this kind of pressure and so many options available¹ on the market, how do you know if you're choosing the right learning platform for your K–12 institution? In this whitepaper, we'll share guiding questions you should consider before choosing a virtual learning platform. We'll also share stories from real teachers about the features that were most valuable to them during the transition to online learning.

¹ Pappas, Christopher. "The Best Learning Management Systems (2020 Update)." ELearning Industry, 16 Sept. 2020, elearningindustry.com/the-best-learning-management-systems-top-list.



What Should You Expect From Your Virtual Classroom?

As educators, we ask a lot of our virtual classrooms. We need them to facilitate active learning techniques, offer opportunities for connection, and seamlessly integrate with existing technology— all through an online interface. Obviously, it's impossible for a virtual classroom to replicate the live classroom experience. When done right, however, virtual classrooms can offer many of the best aspects of the live classroom experience, while expanding in new areas that might never have been considered previously. **When selecting your virtual classroom, then, look for these three guiding principles:**

Designed with students and teachers in mind

Your platform should eliminate redundancies and simplify the teacher experience. For example, teachers shouldn't have to input grades in multiple places or navigate between screens to give a presentation.

Easy to find and use materials

Teachers and students shouldn't have to switch between platforms to access feedback, exams, or assignments. It should be easy for students to find the content they need, both during and after class.

Make teachers' lives easier, not harder

Your platform should include features that make it easy to manage the classroom and engage students, like the ability to enable and disable private chat, whiteboard functionality, and tools to give quizzes and assessments in real-time.

What do these principles look like in practice? And what do real teachers look for in a virtual classroom? We've pinpointed three key philosophies of an effective virtual classroom, so you can ensure that your online learning platform drives your mission.

3 Philosophies of a Mission-Driven Virtual Classroom

When it comes to choosing a virtual classroom, your mission should be at the center of your decision-making process. These three philosophies, which focus on the needs of students and teachers, can help you choose a platform that aligns with your institutional goals.

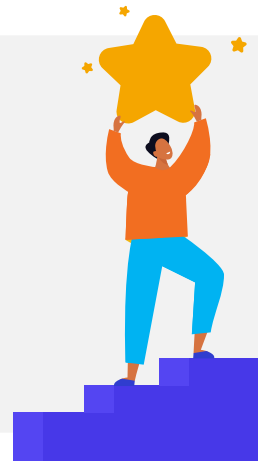
1 Center Student Engagement

Determining whether students are engaged in class is an ongoing challenge, both in-person and online. In a virtual learning environment, the most basic measure of engagement – attendance – hasn't even been defined in many districts,² especially in schools where students are primarily learning asynchronously.

As we move into a future where online learning is the norm, just providing a synchronous learning environment isn't enough. Your virtual classroom should have features that can help teachers measure student engagement, like check-in questions, quizzes, and small group discussion. Choosing a platform that includes tools to improve student engagement and give students an experience that closely mirrors the physical classroom can make a huge difference when it comes to learning outcomes.

Ask yourself:

- Does your virtual classroom make space for students to be active learners?
- What features can teachers use to engage students both in and outside class, and how easy are they to use?
- How does your platform integrate with existing tools that improve student learning outcomes?



Many teachers are already finding creative ways to use Zoom to improve student engagement. Middle school teacher [Loriann Schmidt from Beaverton, Oregon](#)³ shared one unique strategy:

“ I spend about 10 minutes at the beginning of the class with a home scavenger hunt. Everything is very open-ended, so nobody has to feel bad about not having that exact object. [I ask] ‘Find something that you could use to...’ and the choices are ‘fix a robot satellite,’ etc. It’s 10 minutes out of their day that enables them to be creative and they’re much more willing to engage in class after that.”

² Chambers, Dana, et al. “Promising Practices Brief: Improving Student Engagement and Attendance During COVID-19 School Closures.” Insight Policy Research, July 2020.

³ Nierenberg, Amelia. “Students, Parents and Teachers Tell Their Stories of Remote Learning.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 14 Oct. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/education/learning/students-parents-teachers-remote-stories.html.



2 Work Across Disciplines, Abilities, and Age Groups

As an administrator, you also need to think about the flexibility of your platform for varying age groups, disciplines, and abilities. The online learning needs of kindergarteners vary dramatically from those of 12th graders – and you need to think about how your virtual classroom works at every level.

Accessibility for students with disabilities is a particularly important, and often overlooked, feature of remote learning platforms. According to the [Pew Research Center](#)⁴, about 14% of students in America identify as disabled. Students with disabilities face unique challenges in an online learning environment, in large part because disabled Americans report feeling less confident using technology. Only 39% of disabled adults report a “high-level of confidence” when it comes to using devices to communicate (compared to 65% of able-bodied Americans). And kids aren’t exempt from these struggles.

A recent article⁵ in the Connecticut Mirror reported that for “18,716 children with autism, emotional disturbance, or an intellectual disability – one out of every 28 students in Connecticut’s schools – accessing education from a distance is either incredibly difficult or impossible.”

The need to consider a diverse array of virtual classroom functionalities is perhaps most clear at the Lang School, which serves students in grades 2-12 who are both gifted and have a diagnosed learning disability like ADHD, dyslexia, or mild autism. [A reporter for the New Yorker](#)⁶ followed one teacher, Ryan, during his virtual school day at the Lang School. During his online teaching day, features like the mute function and private chat were particularly important for Ryan, as he tried to maintain focus in the classroom and support students who needed more help.

As you choose a virtual classroom, consider the varying needs of your students and teachers. What do special educators need from a platform? What about high school teachers? How will science and arts instructors navigate the hands-on elements of their curricula in an online space? And how does your platform ensure the safety of younger students, who can’t be left alone in breakout rooms?

⁴ Schaeffer, Katherine. “As Schools Shift to Online Learning amid Pandemic, Here’s What We Know about Disabled Students in the U.S.” Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 23 Apr. 2020, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/23/as-schools-shift-to-online-learning-amid-pandemic-heres-what-we-know-about-disabled-students-in-the-u-s/.

⁵ Rabe Thomas, Jacqueline. “Some Kids with Disabilities Can’t Learn at Home. Parents and Advocates Want to Know: What’s the Plan?” The CT Mirror, 15 Apr. 2020, ctmirror.org/2020/04/15/some-kids-with-disabilities-cant-learn-at-home-parents-and-advocates-want-to-know-whats-the-plan/.

⁶ Widdicombe, Lizzie. “The Great Zoom-School Experiment.” The New Yorker, 2 Apr. 2020, www.newyorker.com/news/our-local-correspondents/the-great-zoom-school-experiment.



3 Support Teachers, Encourage Innovation

Though student experience is often the focus of conversations about online learning, it's important to consider how your platform supports teachers, too. Choosing a platform that allows educators to be more efficient with their time and innovate in the classroom has an impact on student learning outcomes.

According to a 2018 [survey from the Badger Institute](#)⁷, teachers spend up to 52 hours a week working, with 27 hours spent in the classroom, 10 hours in meetings with parents, other teachers, and administrators, and as many as 15 hours per week doing paperwork.

One of the benefits of a well-integrated virtual classroom is a significant reduction in those paperwork hours. If teachers don't need to do redundant work, like posting grades in multiple places, they save time – time they can then devote to developing engaging, innovative lesson plans. In fact, Class for Zoom was born when founder Michael Chasen saw his kids' teachers struggling with basic tasks such as grading, giving assessments, and watching videos via Zoom. He envisioned a well-integrated, feature-driven platform as a solution that would support teachers and improve student experience.

To ensure that your virtual classroom supports teachers, ask:

- How does this platform ease the administrative burden on teachers (i.e. grading, attendance, ease of providing feedback on student work, etc.)?
- How much training will teachers need to take advantage of existing features, and how will they receive that training?
- Does this platform allow teachers to create and easily implement innovative and engaging lesson plans?

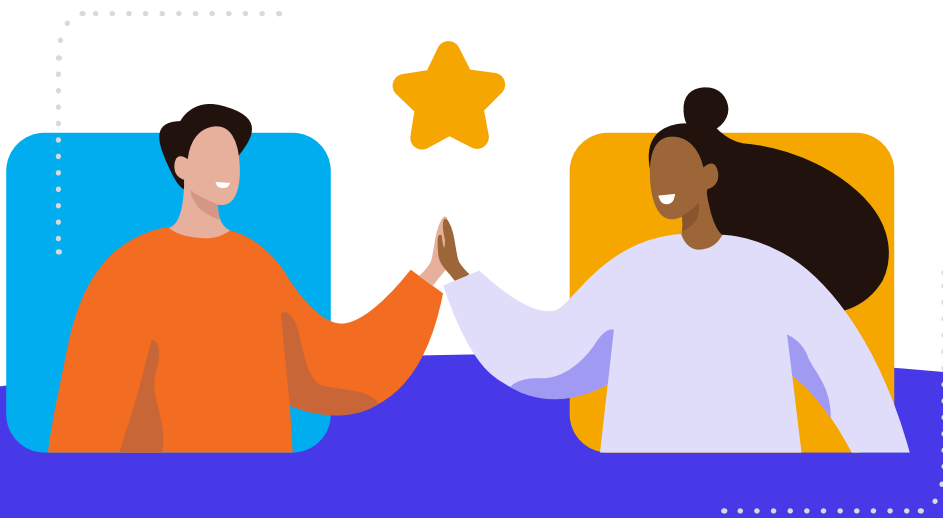
How Do Teachers Spend Their Time?



⁷Benson, Dan, and Julie Grace. "Teachers Want to Help Kids, Not Do Paperwork." The Badger Institute, 25 Jan. 2018, www.badgerinstitute.org/News/2017-2018/Teachers-want-to-help-kids-not-do-paperwork.htm.

The Right Virtual Classroom Makes a Difference

The right virtual classroom is more than just a tool. It's an instrumental part of your mission. With an integrated, easy-to-use, and flexible online learning platform, your students and teachers will have an experience that more closely resembles in-person learning – and the connection, engagement, and creativity that comes with it.



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