

# How to Proactively Prepare for Distance Learning

This fall doesn't have to be like the spring.

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Rose Wong

Normally we rely on teachers and counselors or coaches and people in our communities to help us spot problems, then identify solutions. We try to build a village to not have to do everything alone.

But now the village is quarantined, and it's increasingly clear it's still on us to try and make the best decisions for our

families — though it feels like there are 200,000 new choices to make every day.

“I’m just overwhelmed,” said Lynn Cooper, a real estate agent and mother of two in Reston, Va. Her children, ages 11 and 13, are in Fairfax County Public Schools, and she had planned to send them back for two days a week [until the district shifted](#) to an online-only start to the year. “How can I set them up to be successful learners? I am flying blind, I am uncertain, and I have a lot of anxiety,” she said.

There’s one key difference between schooling in the spring and this fall: We should rely on teachers and counselors more. That’s not to say parents won’t have a major role to play as translators and messengers to teachers, who will not be able to develop as deep a relationship with our child through a screen as they would in a classroom setting.

“Let the teacher be the instructor, but the parent can be the observer and the facilitator,” said Bibb Hubbard, founder and CEO of [Learning Heroes](#), an organization that collects data and creates resources to improve the parent-teacher relationship.

Here’s how to get more involved without spending all day monitoring classwork, hiring expensive tutors, or losing sleep while wracked with guilt that we are failing our children.

# Figure out how your child learns

Start by having a conversation with your child that's less, "let's find a way that I don't have to nag you all day every day to do your work," and more "let's map out what successful learning will look like for you in this weird online world."

"Parents have this unique window into what kind of learner their child is," said Phyllis Fagell, author of "Middle School Matters" and a school counselor in Washington, D.C. They can now use that information to help figure out "what kind of support they need to be successful," she said.

Here are some questions to explore with your kid: Are they fired up by a certain topic? Do they shut down with a test but come alive when creating an e-portfolio? Are they a kid that needs a lot of accountability? Are video games distracting them? Would group math work help make it less boring?

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Once you figure out how your child learns, you need to communicate to teachers that you want clearer expectations and goal posts for your kids.

Bandle McQueen, who has a 7- and 10-year-old in public schools in Washington, D.C., said he wants more direction from teachers and administrators on how to support his kids' learning as well as their mental health during such a dramatic change in environment.

"You taught kids what the expectations are: get up, go to school, pay attention, follow the rules," he said. "They get grades, and they use those to set goals." But then kids stayed home, grades were put on hold and the game changed. No one explained the new paradigm — to parents or students.

"We have to keep kids safe and open the economy, but the thing that can't be omitted is how to deliver quality education that kids will embrace," said McQueen.

## **Ask for more feedback from teachers**

We didn't ask to be teaching assistants, but now we are. Quanshie Maxwell, a single mother of four — ages 12, 8, 5 and 2 — in Seattle, said the prospect of another year of home learning terrifies her. "I feel so alone," she said. "I have to be the nurse and the P.E. teacher and the lunch lady and the teacher, and then I have to just be mom."

Because parents are so underwater, they need to ask for more help from schools and teachers. It's clear that online

learning did not work for many families in the spring. Learning Heroes [surveyed over 3,000 parents of public school students](#) across the country between April 14-May 6, 2020, and found that only 33 percent of students had regular access to teachers, 15 percent of parents received personal guidance about how to support their child, and just 13 percent of students got one-on-one time with their teachers.

Families need more than that. Early on, one school district in Southern California provided a road map for how to make online learning effective for teachers and families alike. Throughout the spring, David Miyashiro, the superintendent of Cajon Valley Union School District held weekly Zoom meetings with P.T.A. heads and school staff to check in on how they were feeling — about distance learning, but also, about life — and to design a reopening plan together for the fall.

“It was almost like a therapy group for parents to vent and to have someone who is caring listen,” Miyashiro said. It was also useful data collection.

In July, when Gov. Gavin Newsom announced that [most California schools](#) would be remote-only, Cajon Valley, which had initially planned to offer parents four options, including in-person learning, was prepared for all possibilities because they had been checking in with their

community.

In a letter to parents, the district announced that it would focus on the issues parents said were most important in those weekly Zoom meetings, including live teacher-led daily instruction, personalized lessons, an emphasis on state standards using district pacing guides, physical education lessons, graded assignments, daily attendance tracking, and, finally, teacher feedback on student progress.

These are requests every parent can make: personalization, student accountability, and more feedback on where students are. But make sure that you remain kind and empathetic to your teachers as you ask for more. According to a Learning Heroes [study from 2018](#), 71 percent of teachers report they are afraid to speak with parents about their children's learning for fear they will be blamed for any bad news, and 51 percent also fear that parents will not believe them.

Since we all just experienced how hard it is to teach and motivate kids, let's remember that teachers are doing this for up to 30 children, while many also have their own kids underfoot at home. They are overwhelmed, too. But with a little empathy and a commitment to our communities, we can get through this fall and beyond together.

**Jenny Anderson is an award-winning journalist focused on the intersection of education, technology and parenting**

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