

# 'Telepresence' can help bring advanced courses to schools that don't offer them

June 16 2020, by Jennifer Darling-Aduana and Carolyn Heinrich

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In schools where students want to take an advanced course that the school doesn't offer, [the telepresence model](#), which enables students in one school to use [videoconferencing](#) to take a course offered at another school, is an effective alternative that can keep students learning and engaged.

To reach this conclusion, which we published in a recent [study](#), we looked at the use of the [telepresence](#) model at the public [school](#) system in [Milwaukee](#). Beyond videoconferencing equipment, the telepresence model uses smartboards, an online learning platform, and video and text chat to bring students from schools throughout the city together into a virtual classroom.

Using telepresence enables schools to offer students advanced courses they wouldn't otherwise be able to take. By providing more students with advanced coursework, it makes them more [ready for college](#).

Telepresence can be particularly useful in [school districts](#) that don't offer many Advanced Placement courses, more commonly known as AP courses. While approximately [92% of schools offer AP](#) or [International Baccalaureate](#) courses, which are college-level courses that students can take in high school, research has found that AP courses are [offered less frequently](#) at schools that serve primarily low-income students of color.

In our research, we found telepresence allowed students attending 10 schools across Milwaukee to learn in a single virtual classroom. Teachers

facilitated learning from a classroom at the host [high school](#). Normally, there has to be an minimum number of students enrolled in an advanced course in order for a school to justify offering the course. Telepresence bypasses the need for an individual school to meet this requirement.

The approach appears to be effective. We found that participating students enrolled in one to two more AP courses than otherwise predicted. Students participating remotely also attended three more days of school than in prior school years. Students participating at both the host and remote schools scored two to three points higher on the ACT college entrance exam than students from similar backgrounds and of similar academic standing. In a survey of 499 students, 93% agreed or strongly agreed that the teacher encouraged them to participate in class. Eighty-six percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the telepresence technology provided many chances for [student](#) input throughout the course.

A teaching assistant at each remote site ensured engagement by helping the [teacher](#) get a read on whether students were paying attention. In some instances, students in a particular class took [field trips](#) or did weekend study sessions together.

These findings show that you can keep students engaged and learning together even when they are not located in the same classroom or even the same school.

This will be particularly important now and in the future since the recent COVID-19 crisis pushed many of America's school to transition to virtual learning—something that is [likely to continue](#) in various forms into the coming school year and beyond. For this reason, educators need to know what approaches are effective.

Telepresence by itself is not what makes it work. For instance, teachers

stressed the need to refer to remote classmates by name in order to make the social atmosphere more like a regular [classroom](#). Teachers also facilitated interaction by using text and video chat for group work. Teachers shared these successful strategies with each other online and through regular meetings.

The coming school year provides a chance to study the use of telepresence across more classrooms. There may also be the potential for partnerships between school districts in, say, rural and urban districts, to ensure that more students have access to quality advanced courses.

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