

Virtual school: Teachers want to improve but training varies

August 2 2020, by Carolyn Thompson



Aimee Rodriguez Webb works on her computer reading emails at her dining room table that she set up as a virtual classroom for a Cobb County school, on Tuesday, July 28, 2020, in Marietta, Ga. After a rocky transition to distance learning last spring, Webb is determined to do better this fall. She bought a dry-erase board and a special camera to display worksheets, and she set up her dining room to broadcast school lessons. (AP Photo/Brynn Anderson)

After a rocky transition to distance learning last spring, Georgia teacher Aimee Rodriguez Webb is determined to do better this fall. She bought a dry-erase board and a special camera to display worksheets, and she set up her dining room to broadcast school lessons.

"I'm getting myself geared up for what I feel will prepare me and allow me to teach remotely with more fidelity now that I know what I want it to look like," Rodriguez Webb said.

She and other teachers from suburban Atlanta's Cobb County School District recently started three weeks of training as they prepare to launch the [school year](#) virtually.

With remote learning part of an increasing number of fall reopening plans, districts are facing pressure to improve after many students got left behind this spring in the scramble to close schools during the coronavirus pandemic. But investment in training varies widely. While some [school systems](#) have offered new guidance on teaching from afar, many educators feel like they're on their own.

More affluent [school](#) districts have used the summer to train teachers both on technology and getting the most from students who are learning at least partly online, according to Richard Ferdig, an education technology researcher at Kent State University. Teachers in those districts will perform well, he said.



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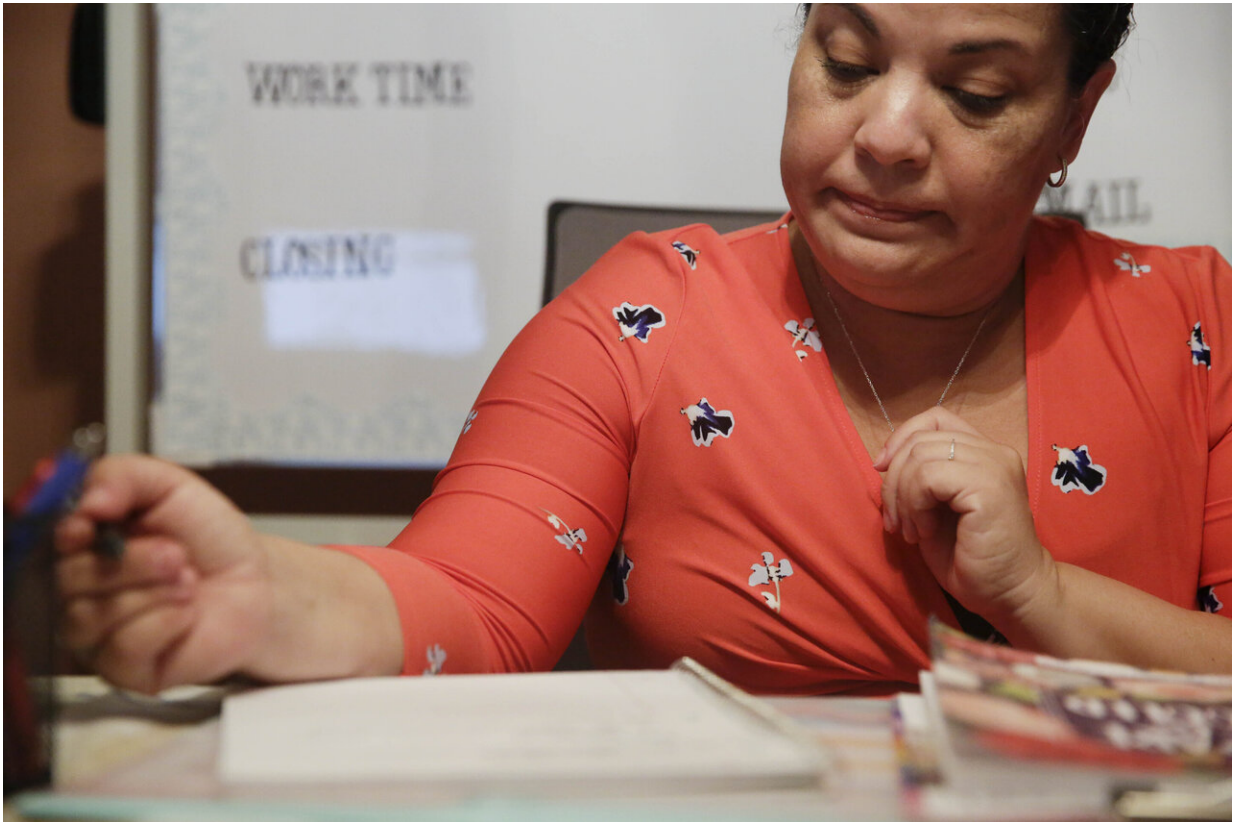
"For the 'have-nots,' I'm concerned—not that they couldn't do it, but that they weren't necessarily given the right things to do it," said Ferdig, who edits the Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, which released a special issue and online [book](#) dedicated to professional development during the pandemic. "They've either been given nothing or they've been told, 'Here's the tools we bought for you,' with very little support on how to integrate those tools into" teaching.

Many teachers were frustrated by the unplanned experiment in [distance learning](#), a change most weren't prepared for given how few schools had virtual components and how little their own college education focused on teaching both in person and online.

A poll of 1,500 Washington state teachers said 79% wanted more professional development or training before the start of the school year, with 23% of those saying they need significant training to be more effective in the fall, said Linda Mullen, spokeswoman for the Washington Education Association, which surveyed its members.

"They want to do better," Mullen said.

In New York, polls indicated that parent dissatisfaction with distance learning increased as school closures persisted. That was especially true among families in high-needs districts, where instruction was less likely to mirror a typical classroom.



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"We kind of just threw them out there and gave them a Zoom link or gave them a Google Hangout or a Google Classroom," said Dia Bryant, deputy director for The Education Trust-New York, which conducted the polls. "Our teachers deserve better, and we need better professional learning for them."

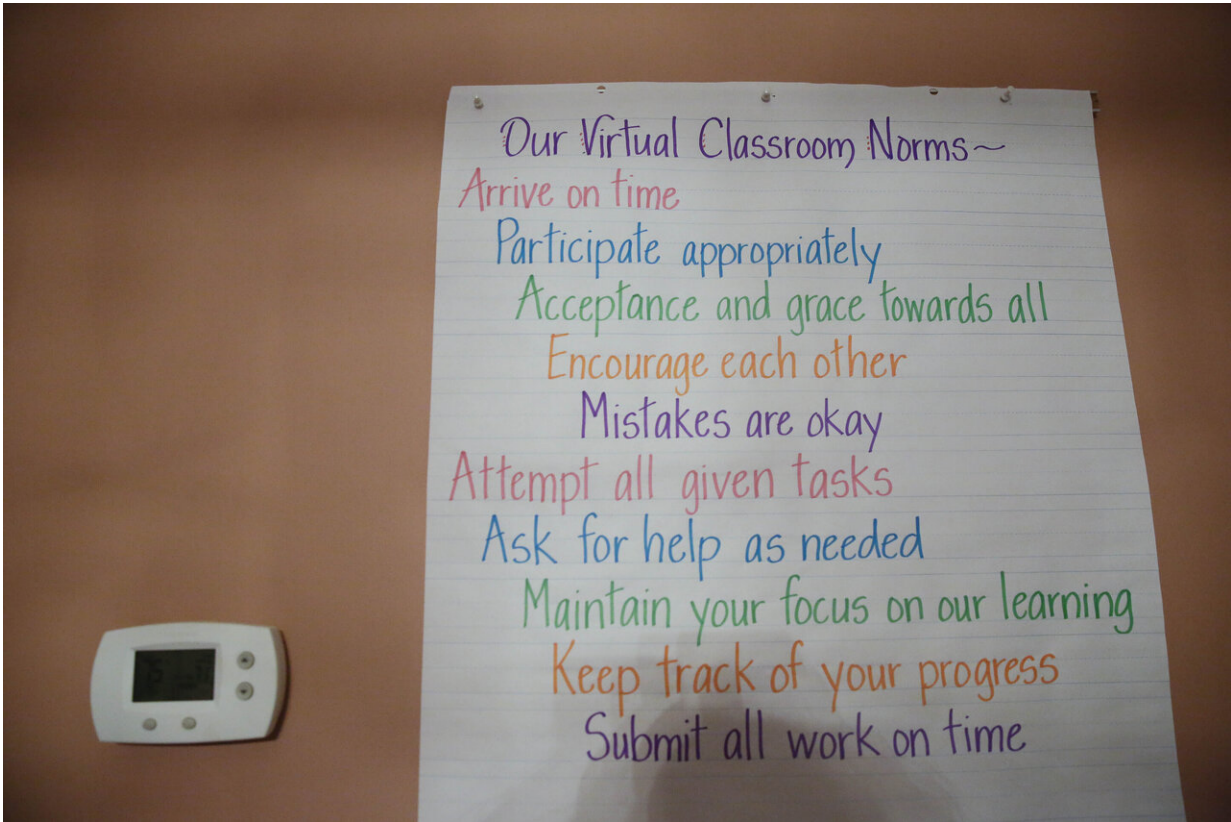
Some districts are adding days at the start of the school year for training

in distance learning.

Portland, Oregon, public schools are relying on in-house learning and technology teams as they set aside part of the first two weeks of school for training. In western New York, more than 500 teachers from 27 districts signed up for online sessions offered by a public education collaborative body. Texas officials offered 8,000 principals and other school leaders training on how to guide teachers through the shift to remote or blended learning.

Rodriguez Webb said her [district](#) brought teachers back three weeks before students, instead of the usual one week. She is optimistic the new school year will go better than the spring, when she worked long hours and taught herself skills like modifying worksheets into Google Slides only to see a small percentage of students engage regularly.

"We winged it," she said of the shutdown that was expected to last weeks but stretched for months. The district's guidance consisted of long emails pointing out resources she had little time to explore.



A list of virtual classroom norms hangs on Aimee Rodriguez Webbwall in her virtual classroom for a Cobb County school, on Tuesday, July 28, 2020, in Marietta, Ga. After a rocky transition to distance learning last spring, Webb is determined to do better this fall. She bought a dry-erase board and a special camera to display worksheets, and she set up her dining room to broadcast school lessons. (AP Photo/Brynn Anderson)

A Cobb County schools statement said the district is committed to ensuring "teachers have the tools, resources, and training to help students succeed, no matter the classroom setting."

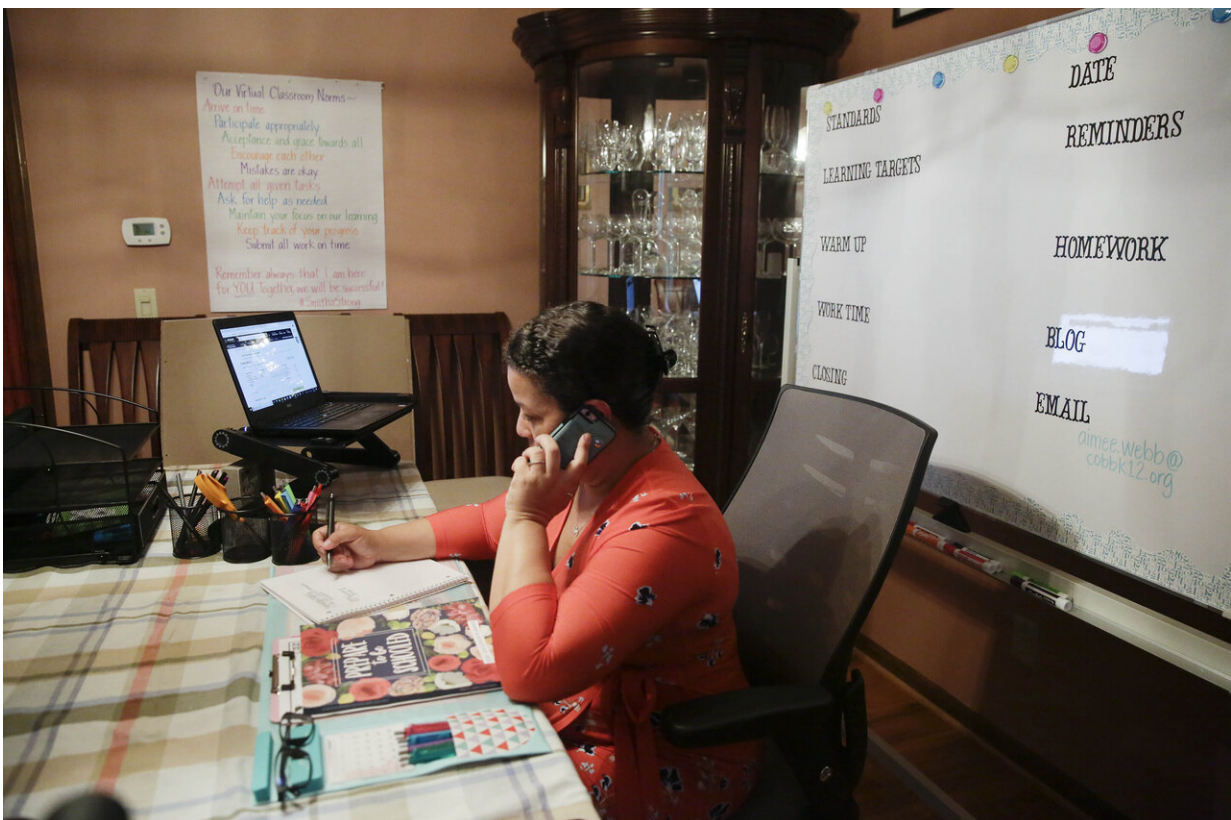
In New Haven, Connecticut, Assistant Superintendent Keisha Redd-Hannans said officials know teachers weren't prepared to deliver "high-quality, equitable instruction in a hybrid or a remote learning

environment." Early on, no one knew how much work to give or how long students should spend on computers, she recalled.

The district contracted with a company to provide virtual training and has held "summer institutes" on topics like "building a digital toolbox," Redd-Hannans said.

She said teachers are "clamoring for additional professional learning," some of which will happen under a \$269,000 contract with Learning Innovation Catalyst, a company that says it provides online and live coaching to districts in 14 states and several countries.

Some districts weathered the spring shutdown better than others. Kiski Area School District officials in Pennsylvania plan to pick up where they left off as they start the school year fully online.



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Administrators credit steps taken over several years, including being designated a Google Reference District in 2017—meaning teachers regularly incorporate technology into learning.

"We mapped out the day, starting from eight o'clock to three o'clock. Teachers had prep in the morning, then they had to have assignments posted by nine o'clock," said Brian Swartzlander, principal of Kiski Area Upper Elementary School. They also built in half-hour blocks for team meetings and one-on-one Google meetings with students.

Some parents have pleaded for schools to reopen fully, saying distance learning is no substitute, no matter what resources teachers receive.

"They can train them all that they want. They could give them the millions of dollars and tools ... for online learning. They could do six weeks of intense [training](#)," said Christina Higley, a mother of three in Webster, New York. "There is still going to be children who can't learn that way, and the teachers aren't going to be able to change that—no matter what they do from afar, period."

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Citation: Virtual school: Teachers want to improve but training varies (2020, August 2) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-08-virtual-school-teachers-varies.html>

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