

Computer glitches disrupt classes as schools return online

September 8 2020, by Juan Lozano, Adriana Gomez Licon and Rebecca Boone



Keith Trim, from left, gives a hug to his twin brother, Vincent, both 5, as they say an emotional goodbye while accompanied by their big brother, Bricen Trim, 8, before heading into Wilkinson Gardens Elementary School for the first day of school Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2020, in Augusta, Ga. (Michael Holahan/The Augusta Chronicle via AP)

Students across the U.S. ran into computer glitches Tuesday as they began the school year with online instruction at home because of the coronavirus, adding to the list of problems that have thrust many a harried parent into the role of teacher's aide and tech support person.

The online learning platform Blackboard, which provides technology for 70 of the nation's 100 biggest districts and serves more than 20 million U.S. students from kindergarten through 12th grade, reported that websites for one of its learning products were failing to load or were loading slowly, and users were unable to register on the first day of school.

Blackboard, which hit four times its year-to-date user average by 8 a.m., wasn't the only tech company running into issues Tuesday. Websites that track internet outages like downdetector.com also recorded spikes in reported problems for services like Microsoft Teams and Google Drive, many spiking around 9 a.m. Three of Texas' largest districts—Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth—were hit with technical problems, as were school systems in places such as Idaho and Kansas. A ransomware attack forced schools in Hartford, Connecticut, to postpone Tuesday's start of virtual and in-person classes.

A Blackboard spokesperson said the problems with the company's

website content management system occurred because of a big morning surge in online traffic. D'Anthony White said the system was restored by about 1:15 p.m. and the company was working on refining its approach to prevent further problems. He apologized for the disruption.



Ruth Venman-Clay, a para-educator at Green Street Elementary School, in Brattleboro, Vt., checks the temperature of Lebron Murray as he returns for his first day of school as Carter Trowell looks on Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2020. This was the first time students returned for in-person learning since March when schools closed down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Kristopher Radder/The Brattleboro Reformer via AP)

"While we planned for a surge in traffic greater than a typical back-to-school period, the patterns of usage exceeded what we anticipated," White wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

Elsewhere across the country, Seattle's system crashed last week. An online learning program used in Alabama and other places recently went down. And North Carolina's platform crashed on the first day of classes last month.

Amanda Mills' 8-year-old son, Rowan, woke up excited to start his first day of third grade, even though it was online through Idaho's largest school district, based in the town of Meridian, just outside Boise. But they ran into trouble even after practicing logging in smoothly on Monday.

"Whatever happens, we'll figure it out and we'll make it work however we can, and rely on the patience of those teachers who are up against their own obstacles," Mills said. "It's a weird, wild world right now."



A student cleans his hands with hand sanitizer as educators welcome students on the first day of class at Lake Harbor Middle School with coronavirus restrictions Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2020, in Mandeville, La. St. Tammany Parish schools are opening with a quarter of students returning to school each day this week to assist in coronavirus precautions along with temperature checks, hand sanitizing at the door and face masks. (Max Becherer/The Advocate via AP)

Summer break gave school districts time to iron out kinks that cropped up when the virus forced them to switch to online classes in the spring. But the new school year already has been plagued by some of the same problems, with no end in sight to the outbreak that has infected more than 6.3 million people and killed 189,000 in the U.S.

Erik Rasmussen, a Falls Church, Virginia, resident who has three children taking online classes, said he regularly copes with computer glitches and short attention spans. The divorced dad has his children half the time.

"You put your kids in front of the computer, and then I go to do my work, but kids are kids—they're going to turn off the video function and start playing a game," he said.

In the Houston school system, with 209,000 students, a web hosting service went down, causing problems for families as they tried to sign into the district's main classwork portal. Families were given a different link to access the portal until the problems were resolved by about noon.



Children head back to class for the first day of school at Wheelless Road Elementary School Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2020, in Augusta, Ga. (Michael Holahan/The Augusta Chronicle via AP)

The Dallas and Fort Worth districts said they were working to fix problems with their phone lines and websites.

"In this unprecedented school year, we must remain flexible and quickly adapt to changing conditions and circumstances like we noticed this morning," Houston interim Superintendent Grenita Lathan said.

Florida's largest school district, in Miami-Dade County, had assured parents that it had consolidated different programs into one platform that would be easier to navigate. But software glitches and cyberattacks disrupted the first week of the new school year that started Aug. 31.

A high school student was arrested and accused of orchestrating a series of network outages. School administrators believe other people may be doing the same.

Christy Rodriguez, 36, said her third- and fourth-grade boys' classes struggled with connection problems during the first week of school.



In this Aug. 31, 2020, file photo, Andrew Burstein, 13, logs onto 8th grade class with Don Estridge High Tech Middle School from his home in Delray Beach, Fla., during the first day back for Palm Beach County Schools. Burstein said it took about an hour to log into school but after the delay he had no issues. (Joe Cavaretta/South Florida Sun-Sentinel via AP, File)

"Four full days were lost," she said. "Either somebody is not able to go on, or the screen goes blank, or the teacher can't hear the kids, so the teacher then just logs off and then sends a message to the parents."

Rodriguez said she has been forced to work until late at night because her children need help fixing connection problems.

"The teachers are frustrated. The kids are frustrated. I hope that they

soon open up schools," she said.

Another parent, Alessandra Martinez, said her 7-year-old son has struggled with logins, passwords and connection problems. He had a meltdown Friday when he was moved to a smaller breakout group but didn't see the teacher and didn't know what he was supposed to be doing.

"At their age, everything is amplified, and it feels like a big deal," Martinez said.

Martinez said she was against the school district using a product commonly employed by parents who home-school.



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Holahan/The Augusta Chronicle via AP)



Educators welcome students on the first day of class at Lake Harbor Middle School with coronavirus restrictions Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2020, in Mandeville, La. St. Tammany Parish schools are opening with a quarter of students returning to school each day this week to assist in coronavirus precautions along with temperature checks, hand sanitizing at the door and face masks. (Max Becherer/The Advocate via AP)



Evy Williams, a health screener at Green Street Elementary School, in Brattleboro, Vt., checks the temperature of Bralynn Earle, before her first day of kindergarten on Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2020. This was the first time students returned for in-person learning since March when schools closed down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Kristopher Radder/The Brattleboro Reformer via AP)

"This is a home-schooling program, but for parents who are working from home and have multiple children, it is a bit overwhelming," she said. "We have this set up as a one-size-fits-all, and it doesn't work for

everybody."

In Hartford, where the start of the school year was pushed back to Wednesday, parents were upset at what they called the last-minute notice of the delay. They noted that officials knew about the problem since the weekend.

Kate Court said her 13-year-old son was already dressed and ready to go to the bus stop when she learned of the postponement. The shipping warehouse employee counted herself lucky that her mother could watch over the teen and his younger brother so she didn't have to miss work.

"This is crazy," Court said. "We're looking for normalcy again, whatever that may be."

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