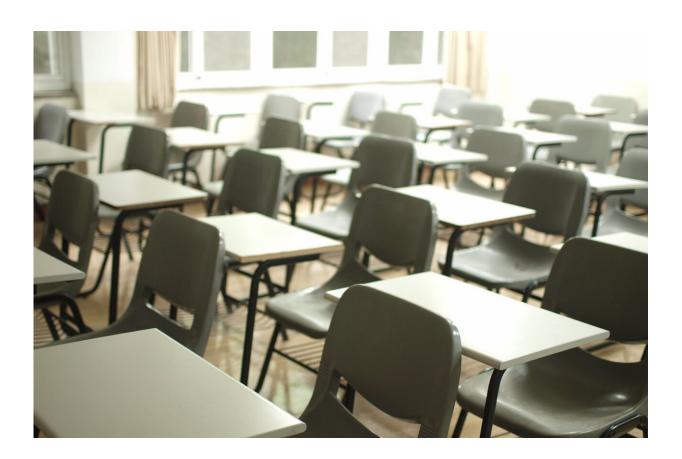# PHYS ORG

The unintended consequence of online schooling: Loss of cultural values

March 24 2021, by Laurel Thomas

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Although many K-12 students have returned to in-person education a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, many spent a better portion this academic season and some still remain online in a learning situation

researchers say "challenges implicit assumptions about school and home as separate institutions."

In an editorial piece in the *Journal of Children and Media*, Kristin Fontichiaro, clinical associate professor at the University of Michigan School of Information, and Wendy Steadman Stephens of Jacksonville State University wrote: "videoconferencing and always-on camera policies blur the boundaries between home and school and have unintended consequences."

Fontichiaro explains how bringing the classroom into the home via videoconference has tested the parent-teacher-school dynamic.

The headline of your piece provides the best first question: How is the videoconference-based schooling creating a risk for education's cultural values?

The big difference is that there are now multiple adults in the classroom at all times, blurring the boundaries between home and school. There are many factors about home life that teachers are now seeing firsthand, and the quality and focus of instruction is now being exposed at a much more granular level to families and caregivers. These two worlds have been respectfully distant for the past 100 years or so.

For much of the 20th century, school values were likely to be similar to home values. But as America moves away from the center (school) and further left and right, some of the "ideals" school espouses may be either too liberal or too conservative for families. Families may not have realized it … and now they do.

K-12 educators are used to their classrooms being spaces predominantly for themselves and their students. The educator is the unquestioned

authority in the room. Most previous online schooling experiences were often asynchronous, meaning that materials were posted to which students would respond, but not with real-time interaction or live two-way video transmission.

Cheap videoconferencing tools plus [parents](link)' real need for their kids to be kept busy throughout the school day are what distinguish this pandemic era from past online education efforts. Suddenly, it was easy to expect that teachers would be live and online for their instruction, with caregivers in an adjoining room or even on screen throughout the school day.

We cannot overstate how much society has leaned into the pandemic narrative that a key purpose of school is to keep children safe and preoccupied so the adults in the household can work. Videoconferencing is a way of maximizing teacher-student contact, but it also meant school was an uninvited guest in families' homes, and, by extension, that families were uninvited guests into the classroom.

We hear numerous stories—both in our personal lives and in the media—about this new dynamic. March is Reading Month guest readers might now include relatives or family friends joining the class from another state, as a positive example. Similarly, a parent might get in some needed exercise by working out offscreen during their child's physical education class. But at the same time, we've seen unintended consequences as the school-home barrier has blurred—parents reprimanding teachers in front of their students, teachers sending behavioral expectations home that include what they would like parents not to be doing, parents overhearing class discussion and responding directly to other children, school behavioral codes that are being enforced by educators inside private homes, and more. Against the backdrop of a politically charged nation that is questioning the role of public institutions and the broader government itself, this sets up a very

vulnerable situation for all sides.

As instruction was forced online a year ago, parents became a big part of making sure children were participating in school. But parents are hovering or at the very least in earshot of the entire online teaching session, which you say can be detrimental. Can you explain?

Thank you for acknowledging that school-from-home assigned parents a new role as technological facilitator for their child's school, a role many felt ill-equipped or uninterested in playing. The weight of that—if you cannot troubleshoot your home Wi-Fi, you are responsible for denying your child access to school—is a heavy burden on top of many other hurdles in a caregiver's pandemic life. Most parents have been incredibly helpful in stepping in as needed to keep kids connected and to make sure they have what they need to learn. But parents, like teachers, are tired. It's easy to lash out at a disembodied head on a screen. And that is happening, encouraged by pundits and social media.

I would also argue that it is detrimental to some children to have parents intruding on their daily classroom experiences. School—public school in particular—is where children learn to navigate the world independent of their family. And that hasn't been an option for many students this year. On the flip side, for students of color or students who are marginalized and bullied, online learning strips away many of those negative societal interactions, which may explain why families of color are less enthusiastic about returning to face-to-face instruction than white families are.

One of the problems with this sudden scrutiny you

describe as "a worrisome trend: emboldened parents imposing their personal perspectives on the range of choices presented to all." Can you explain this concern?

My co-author, Dr. Wendy Steadman Stephens, brought this issue to my attention when, as part of her role coaching preservice school librarians, she saw a parent that listened in on a story read aloud promoting diversity, equity and inclusion, and promptly complained. In the pre-pandemic era, the story likely would have been read and the parent might have heard about it in summary or not at all. Children are very good at knowing what various adults in their lives want to hear! The difference now is that the parent experiences the story firsthand, and the situation can escalate immediately. The principal may be called before the story is even finished. In Dr. Stephens' anecdote, and many others I'm aware of, the parent felt the story espoused too-liberal values, but we also hear of the reverse: that the school is not liberal enough.

We've also heard these extreme cases of the home invading the school environment: the boy with the toy gun, a child asked to remove a political banner. How does that dynamic—even having other children witness how differently parents respond to their children—impact the culture?

It's important to realize that schools are in an impossible situation: they are conceived of primarily as centrist institutions at a time when families are gravitating away from the center. The reality is that public education in America is designed to be what some call a "factory model"—education at scale. That means teachers do need to impose a set

of rules and requirements on their students in order to keep the system moving forward. In the face-to-face classroom, however, they (sometimes with their students' input) are the only ones deciding those guidelines. It's hard to get 30 kids on the same page; it's nearly impossible to get 30 plus their adult caregivers, all while being told your job is on the line if you don't keep your standardized test scores up.

Secondly, this time reminds us of how vulnerable both families and teachers feel right now. Families didn't invite school into their home: they were told it was happening, and your camera had better be on, and you had better have your hair combed and not be wearing pajama pants. At the same time, teachers didn't ask to come into their students' homes. Are they going to get in trouble with a parent if they allow another family's political flag to appear as a backdrop on a kid's video feed? The truth is, nobody has the emotional bandwidth to sit and work these issues out right now. As science writer Tara Haelle says, our "surge capacity"—the ability to respond to emergencies—is long gone after months and months of disruption. People are doing the best they can.

Many think of this as a temporary situation—surely children won't be doing online learning forever and there will be a return to "normal." But there are some who are also looking at this as a crude, although hasty, foray into online learning. With the reality of what you and others are observing, is it likely the future of online learning for K-12 at least will be a two-thumbs down?

I may surprise you when I say that online learning is here to stay. The pandemic has made many schools realize that online school is an option many parents want. As I mentioned earlier, it appears to be particularly

attractive to BIPOC families and to those who are marginalized or bullied at school. When you learn from home, you can avoid some of the societal ills schools haven't solved yet. Moving forward, I imagine schools will do a better job of negotiating the online rules and expectations with families, and vice versa. I hope we will see more innovative forms of instructional delivery than sitting in front of a computer all day. As a U-M student said to me recently, "Who decided Zoom was the best way to learn?" There are novel hybrid learning solutions percolating that build upon the best of online and the best of face-to-face schooling.

My worry, of course, is that the pandemic will result in more societal fracturing and more distancing from the concept that public education is a common good—if a flawed one—to which we collectively contribute. But my hope is that we will see the lessons the pandemic has taught us about what all children need to thrive and that we will support our schools in doing the tough work to get closer to that reality.

More information: Kristin Fontichiaro et al. Blurring the boundaries between home and school: how videoconference-based schooling places American education's cultural values at risk during COVID-19, *Journal of Children and Media* (2021). DOI: 10.1080/17482798.2020.1860101

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