

Zoom, Microsoft and Apple take on remote learning challenges as kids head back to school

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Middle school teacher Jodie Deinhammer is prepping to take a blended approach to distance learning as the school year kicks off.

A fraction of her 150 students will be allowed to sit spaced out in physical classrooms, she said. Most others will stay home, and practice remote learning.

All students will use iPads and Zoom to video-in, whether they are at home or not.

"They will be doing virtual lessons even if they are in the classroom," Deinhammer said. "We still can't get close to them."

As [school districts](#) nationwide welcome students in August and September, teachers are facing an unprecedented number of hurdles. How do you keep students engaged when hands-on activities are limited? How do you take control of a classroom when discipline options are few and far between?

Many instructors got a trial run in March when classes were forced to go remote as the coronavirus spread throughout the U.S.. Tech helped buoy the transition and is playing a more central role as schools figure out what to do next.

Still, parents are facing what could be months of tech-related hurdles to overcome as they help keep kids focused on education from their homes.

Modou Nyang, 44, of the Bronx, New York, said his 7-year-old son's school gave the students tablets for distance learning. However, the devices weren't compatible with all the software his son was required to use for virtual class.

"That was a big challenge, so I had to give him my laptop to use," Nyang said. "Then I found out he downloaded games to play while class is in session, even though the [teacher](#) puts them on camera."

Teachers also say they lose valuable class time by troubleshooting when problems arise, like a recent widespread Zoom glitch that prevented some students from logging on.

Big tech companies like Microsoft, Apple and Google have responded to remote learning by bolstering their education offerings, which teachers say has been a lifeline in a sea of uncertainty. Zoom has also made some online learning updates, such as removing the 40-minute time limit for schools.

Zoom

On Thursday, Zoom announced the ways it claims its video conferencing service will better facilitate remote school in the months ahead.

In a blogpost addressed to teachers, the video software company said it's adding new controls to minimize disruptions and its enhancing tools related to focus groups.

To prevent Zoom bombings, teachers have an option that only allows authenticated users to join. That means participants would have to be signed into Zoom accounts using their school's domain. Instructors can also require a meeting passcode to join.

Teachers will be able to disable video for individual students and create a virtual classroom seating arrangement, according to Zoom. And students will be able to hop from one focus group to another with ease.

Deinhammer has grown fond of Zoom's "Mute All Participants" option. "I told one of my classes that I'm going to miss this button when we get back in the physical classroom," she said.

Microsoft

Microsoft enhanced its Teams for Education platform to add tools specifically geared toward remote and hybrid learning situations.

It added a Together Mode to video calls, which brings all students into the same view to mimic what a teacher sees in a traditional classroom. It also added Live Reactions, live captions and transcripts for video meetings to enhance accessibility.

Leveling-up the features on Teams was meant to "extend the boundaries and borders of the classroom," according to Anthony Salcito, vice president of worldwide education, at Microsoft.

Over 180,000 learning institutions currently use Microsoft Teams.

Rory Yakubov, a middle school teacher in Old Bridge, New Jersey, said Teams was central to her school's pivot to remote learning. Pre-pandemic, her students used it to take quizzes and tests, she said.

Now, with the school district requiring distance learning until October, she's tapping other virtual tools such as Quick Polls and Surveys. "I started doing a lot more little polls just to keep things engaging," Yakubov said. "In the fall, with brand new students, it's a perfect time to try some new things."

Apple

Apple has taken a varied approach to support educators and students in today's distance learning environment.

On Aug. 5, the state of California announced a collaboration with Apple

and T-Mobile to connect students who are in need with a cellular service-enabled iPad for the [school year](#) ahead. The effort gave school districts a deeper discount on the devices.

Teachers across Los Angeles Unified, the country's second-largest school district, are in the midst of training students—and their parent teaching assistants—how to utilize the iPads with district-connected software now in this second week of school.

A similar initiative was announced in Texas.

Apple also launched a new Learning from Home website that offers tools and resources like instructional videos and webinars for teachers.

Tanya Leon, a middle school English teacher in Michigan, said iPads made all the difference when shifting to blended and remote instruction.

For years, her school district has supplied each [student](#) with an iPad that was used both in class and at home, she said. "Having those made the transition, while not ideal, pretty smooth," she added.

The [school](#) year kicks off after Labor Day this year for them, and she plans to use Apple's Classroom app to guide learning and share assignments. "I'd argue that with iPads, we can do almost everything virtually that we could do in person," she said.

Google

Google recently announced a number of upcoming tools meant to make virtual education easier.

The company is adding updates to its Google Meet conferencing platform, including a larger tiled view that can show up to 49 meeting

participants at time. Google first launched its tile view, which allows instructors to see what more students are doing, in April.

But users could only view 16 participants in one glance. That wouldn't work for classes with upwards of 30 students and more.

Since then, the company's education arm has "seen all the ways that we need to adapt our tools to meet the challenges of a world relying on [distance learning](#)," said Zach Yeskel, group product manager for Google for Education.

"Teachers have told us that it's especially challenging to keep students engaged virtually, so we're introducing a whole set of features that brings the best practices from an in-person classroom into the digital class."

The tech giant also adding more moderation tools, so teachers can prevent disruptive students from joining meetings after they've been digitally kicked out or denied from entering twice.

Google is also flipping the switch on a setting that won't start a meeting until the teacher has joined.

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