In mid-March, as COVID-19 began spreading in earnest in the United States and the economy ground to a screeching halt, one of the biggest casualties was a sense of normalcy for America's youth. As businesses closed their offices and sent their employees home to work remotely, schools ceased normal operations months ahead of the summer holidays. At first, schools intended to resume after just a few weeks—then, it was a few more weeks—and finally, the in-person school year simply ended.

Educational institutions around the country scrambled to salvage their semesters by pivoting to distance learning, virtual homework, and online testing. While school districts and colleges varied their models, almost all educators shared the assumption that by the fall, things would be back to normal and in-person schooling would resume.

Despite the continued presence of the virus, some schools reopened—and many have been linked to upticks in COVID-19 spread. In Michigan, as of August 19, there have been 14 COVID-19 outbreaks at colleges and K-12 schools. In Mississippi, an elementary school reopened, experienced a COVID-19 outbreak, and closed its doors again within the space of a week. Similar anecdotes in nearly every state are calling into question the wisdom of resuming in-person learning so soon. They are also prompting an overdue conversation about what the future of education could be, with or without a pandemic disrupting its procedures.

In this white paper, we will examine the new educational normal that COVID-19 is creating and what it could mean for the future of schooling, from virtual-dependent schools to video chat tutors to parent-family pods. We'll also explain what these changes mean for due diligence vetting to ensure a safe and responsible future of education.

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Virtual Learning

Virtual learning and eLearning have been on the rise for years. In the 1990s, following the 1991 launch of the World Wide Web, education innovators considered ways to use the internet to supplement or transform learning. In 1996, Jones International University launched, remembered today as the first accredited online university. 1997 saw the launch of Blackboard Course Management, a still-prominent virtual learning software.

By 2018, 98 percent of public universities in the United States were offering online programming. In 2019, research suggested that the online education market would be a $350 billion industry by 2025.

While colleges and universities have largely been the leaders in adopting virtual learning over the past few decades, it has been growing in K-12 environments as well. For example, according to an August 2019 *Forbes* article, more than 30 states were offering online learning for K-12 students before the coronavirus pandemic.

Educational institutions aren't the only hubs taking advantage of the possibilities that eLearning provides. The technology has found a home in non-school environments, including in businesses that use online learning as a professional development strategy. In 2017, 77 percent of United States companies used online learning in some capacity.

These trends shine a light on the advantages (and disadvantages) of virtual learning.

The pros of virtual learning include accessibility, convenience, and scheduling flexibility. Colleges and universities can reach more students by offering online courses and degrees, particularly working students or students who don't live nearby. K-12 schools often use online courses to help students fit core classes and credits into their busy schedules.

This infographic from SHIFT eLearning includes multiple statistics outlining the benefits of eLearning for professional employee development. SHIFT claims that eLearning requires 40-60 percent less employee time than traditional classroom learning, increases retention rates by 25-60 percent, and allows employees to learn five times as much material over the same amount of training time.

Cons of online learning tend to revolve around social isolation. COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of eLearning by turning its biggest drawback a strength: because learners don't need to assemble in classrooms or lecture halls, virtual learning can eliminate the viral exposure risk that traditional face-to-face learning could bring with it. For both K-12 schools and colleges, this advantage was enough to force a nearly complete switch to online or virtual learning in March.

Today, many educational institutions are still operating predominantly online. Harvard, Princeton, Rutgers, and Georgetown all announced early that they would be offering most learning online for the 2020-21 academic year. Other schools, including Michigan State University, Brown University, the University of Maryland, and Illinois State University, initially announced plans to conduct normal in-person semesters for the fall of 2020 but walked back those plans to go all-virtual for the semester or delay their in-person start dates.

While terms such as "online learning," "virtual learning," and "eLearning" are often used interchangeably, there are two different educational approaches that fall under the umbrella of virtual learning.

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The first version is education delivered in a traditional format (e.g., by an institution's teachers or faculty) but conducted virtually via Zoom, email, Google Classroom, or other technologies. "Distance learning" is a term that describes this form of online learning, particularly since the start of the pandemic.

The second version is an all-online course delivered through a virtual platform (such as Lynda, Udemy, Lincoln Learning, Udacity, or Edgenuity) through which students complete all their lessons and coursework online on their own time.

Most educational institutions that are making the shift to online learning are using a mix of these methods. Some are offering their traditional course catalog paired with teachers or professors who deliver the curriculum at a distance through Zoom or other technologies. Others have implemented virtual learning platforms that allow students access to more eLearning opportunities. In some cases, students and their families can decide which option to choose.

At-Home Learning

Before the pandemic, homeschooled students were in the vast minority in the United States. Statistics from the spring of 2016 indicate that approximately 1.69 million students were being homeschooled— roughly 3.4 percent of the school-aged population. At the K-12 level, the virtual learning mandate during COVID-19 effectively placed parents in a homeschooling model.

While these students do have access to online learning, courses, or resources through their schools, parents used to having their kids supervised at school every day have found themselves in a difficult situation. For working parents who are unable to stay home and supervise their kids or help them with online coursework, the pandemic has been particularly challenging.

Historically, women with kids are more likely to leave their jobs and not come back, even with in-person preschool and K-12 education options available. Women are three times more likely than men to quit their jobs or remain home with their kids. There are worries that COVID-19 could exacerbate this discrepancy by leaving parents with no one to supervise or teach their kids during school and work hours.

Census Bureau stats show that 1 in 5 working-age adults are unemployed because COVID-19 disrupted their plans for childcare or school. In a recent Care.com survey, 73 percent of respondents said they would make significant changes to their professional lives to respond to the lack of in-person schooling or child care caused by COVID-19. Research suggests that this change (and its disproportionate impact on women) could widen the pay gap by five percentage points.

Child care is putting parents in a dilemma: should they anticipate sending their kids back into school environments, hoping that schools do reopen so that in-person learning is possible, or should they cut back on work to keep their kids home and away from coronavirus exposure risks?

For parents who must keep working even if their kids can't return to face-to-face learning, there is a growing need for babysitters, tutors, and child care—and a rise in "Zutors," or Zoom tutors, who can work with kids virtually or in-person to help with online courses, homework, and other needs that working parents cannot fulfill throughout the day.

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While Zutors are an option for some parents, they may prove to be an unaffordable one for most working-class families. According to *The Guardian*, some of the Los Angeles tutors offering services in this niche are charging as much as $125 per hour.

For families that can't afford the mix of teacher, virtual tutor, and babysitter that the average Zutor encompasses, another option is the "micro-pod." A pod is a pandemic bubble featuring multiple families who interact exclusively with each other while socially distancing from everyone else. The micro-pod can become an unofficial school, a structure which allows for a group of students in a neighborhood or region to get together, continue their social interaction, and enjoy a version of in-person school without a highly increased exposure risk.

In a less formal setting, these micro-pods may include private tutors or parents who agree to take on supervision and homeschooling responsibilities while other parents return to work. However, there are also several organizations, including Wildflower Schools and SchoolHouse, that work with parents and communities to establish more formal small-scale learning environments. These organizations still use a pod model but take it a step further, hiring qualified teachers and putting together schools that, while small, can replace traditional schooling options instead of supplementing them.

Growth in the popularity of both formal and informal learning pods is a likely outcome if schools do not resume in-person operations, close after a few weeks due to outbreaks, or use a staggered scheduled or hybrid models to blend in-person and classroom learning.

Changes for Schools

2020 has brought with it significant internal upheaval for schools, forcing administrators to develop plans to continue delivering education to students while facing significant uncertainty and challenges in hiring and staffing.

Early in the pandemic, unemployment skyrocketed across all corners of the economy, and the education sector wasn't spared. According to U.S. Labor Department statistics, more than 1.1 million teachers and school staff members lost their jobs in April, including 469,000 from K-12 public schools, 457,000 from K-12 private schools and private colleges, and 176,000 from public colleges and universities.

Not all jobs are gone for good. Schools could bring back laid-off teachers as face-to-face learning resumes, just as many businesses have brought back employees who were laid off during the stay-at-home orders of March and April. However, even if educational institutions do begin to rehire employees, COVID-19 could trigger a reshuffling of resources in schools.

If in-person schooling cannot resume or must do so in a limited capacity, that would likely mean a lessened need for building staff (such as cafeteria workers, librarians, and janitors) and other employees or contractors (including bus drivers). At the same time, such a shift could mean a greater need for IT workers who can help facilitate Zoom classrooms, contractors who can assist with building or customizing eLearning platforms, and other staff.

Before the pandemic, some school districts were already reallocating human resources in this fashion to respond to an ever-changing educational landscape. One example is Chicago Public Schools, which laid off 220 teachers and roughly 500 support personnel in 2019 but rehired two-thirds of those employees to fill other positions within the district. Recently, CPS laid off an additional 286 and 417 support staff but posted 1,900 positions that it was

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seeking to fill before fall. The district stated that most laid-off teachers would either continue to receive pay and benefits due to tenure or be eligible for new positions or substitute roles.

The layoff-rehire cycle could mean additional work for HR departments as they endeavor to staff schools and fill gaps in their faculties. Add the uncertainty that COVID-19 has created for the return of in-person learning and it becomes difficult to predict how the pandemic might alter the way that educational institutions hire.

The Question Marks

In July, the CDC published a report titled, "The Importance of Reopening America's Schools This Fall" which cited many of the flaws and shortcomings of virtual and at-home learning for K-12 schools. Some of the problems that the report identified:

- **Not enough social interaction or development for kids.** The CDC discusses multiple ways that school plays a vital role in the development of social and emotional wellbeing for kids. Kids learning in a home environment are less likely to interact with kids their age, build and maintain friendships, or learn how to behave in groups. In addition, in-person education often provides access to essential mental and behavioral health services, including speech therapy, occupational therapy, and counseling.

- **Nutrition issues.** Millions of students rely on school for their daily nutrition. More than 30 million students are part of the National School Lunch Program, while nearly 15 million receive breakfast from the School Breakfast Program. These resources are especially critical for students from low-income families. Based on a lack of access to these programs, the CDC notes that school closures could have an impact on food security throughout the nation.

- **Physical activity and fitness.** Schools encourage kids to be active. The CDC notes that, nationwide, more than 75 million children and adolescents do not meet the daily recommendation of 60 minutes of physical activity. Schools help address this issue through recess, gym, and physical education. Some students may not be getting the same amount of activity while learning at home.

- **Safety.** School sometimes provides a safeguard against neglect and physical, sexual, or emotional abuse at home. Teachers, social workers, and other employees are often the first ones to spot signs of abuse. A fear early on in COVID-19 was that instances of child abuse would go overlooked and unreported as students lost their regular contact with teachers and school staff. Stay-at-home orders meant that parents and kids were at home together for longer, which some experts suggested would lead to a surge in the frequency and severity of child abuse. There aren't answers yet regarding whether such a surge has occurred, but the CDC does mention that the Washington, D.C. Child and Family Services agency recorded a 62 percent year-over-year decrease in child abuse reporting between March and April but "more severe presentation of child abuse cases in emergency rooms."

Some versions of modified schooling offer safeguards or solutions to several of these problems. For instance, in micro-pods, students have opportunities for social interaction with other kids and contact with teachers or other adults who might notice signs of abuse. Some school districts have also continued to offer breakfasts and lunches for kids during closures.

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Background Checks and Due Diligence

The pandemic-driven evolution of schooling has created several significant questions about the future of background checks, vetting, and due diligence in the educational sphere. Is the responsibility of keeping students safe shifting away from schools, school districts, colleges, or universities and towards families?

Schools still have established responsibilities regarding background checks and vetting. As schools manage layoffs, rehires, and new hiring, the need for detailed background check policies remains essential to keeping kids safe. As schools lose funding due to COVID-19—one Michigan district expects to lose $650 per student—it is critical for these institutions to resist the temptation to cut down their investments in background checks for teachers and staff. In fact, there will be an even greater need for thorough vetting going forward as schools choose new online learning providers to help deliver curriculums during COVID-19 or bring on contractors to assist with virtual learning.

Parental responsibility is also growing. As more parents seek tutors or Zutors for their kids or consider entering into micro-pods with other families, they will engage in their own due diligence. Background checks and reference checks for tutors, babysitters, and other parents responsible for student supervision in a micro-pod are all likely to become necessary parts of the equation for parents as they pursue responsible post-COVID learning.

Due diligence goes beyond criminal history and references. Just as most parents wanted to learn everything that there was to know about their local schools' reopening plans and safety protocols, they will likely apply the same level of rigor to researching daycare facilities, learning about tutors or babysitters, and investigating established micro-schools.

Conclusion

What comes next in the evolution of education and schooling is difficult to predict. The key for both educators and parents is adaptability, whether that means a school adapting to distance learning or parents adapting to the demands of personal due diligence as they research and vet new educational options and professionals.

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