

K-12 School Closures and the Sudden Shift to Remote Learning Exposes Existing Inequities in Education

New report documents differences in students' learning experiences in school and at home

Irvine, California - The sudden and unplanned shift to remote e-learning caused by the pandemic last spring resulted in a national awakening on the challenges of learning continuity when not every student has appropriate, safe and consistent access to digital tools and the Internet outside of school. Ensuring equity in learning environments is about more than provisioning a Chromebook and a Wifi hotspot to families. Equity in access to quality teaching and learning matters too. Utilizing national research data collected before and during school closures from over 136,000 K-12 students, parents, teachers and administrators, the new report, ***90 Days that Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning: Spotlight on Equity in Learning***, examines the pre-existing as well as continuing inequities in educational opportunities based upon students' zip code, family income and racial identity. The report is a collaboration between Project Tomorrow®, a national education nonprofit organization and Blackboard, a leading EdTech company serving K-12 and higher education institutions.

Key findings from this report include:

- Students attending schools with a majority of minority student populations have less access to digital learning tools when they are in their physical classrooms, and fewer opportunities to develop workplace ready digital skills than students in majority white schools. This lack of familiarity by students and teachers most likely influenced the efficacy of the remote learning experience.
 - Prior to school closures, 57% of teachers in majority white schools said that they used the Google Education Suite daily or almost daily with their students. Only 35% of teachers in majority minority schools had that same level of daily usage with their students. Many schools used Google as their remote learning platform during school closures.
- The sudden shift to digital learning at home revealed a much wider digital divide in this country than what was believed before school closures. Significant efforts were made to connect students to the Internet in their homes. We need to expand our focus now from simply getting online to making sure that every student has access to appropriate devices and a safe environment for learning.
 - Influenced by their experiences facilitating remote e-learning, 68% of teachers now say that all students need access to appropriate technology and Internet outside of school for continued learning, even when the school buildings are physically open again.
- While the epicenter for understanding equity in education has been focused on digital access, evidence of inequity also exists when examining the social and emotional well-being of students.
 - Only one-third of students attending majority minority schools in grades 6-12 say that their school cares about them as an individual, compared to 42% of their peers in schools where the

population is majority white. A similar disparity exists when students are asked if they feel emotionally safe at school.

“The pandemic and resulting school closures certainly opened the eyes of many educators and policymakers to the reality that many students lack access to appropriate learning technology outside of school,” said Dr. Julie A. Evans, CEO of Project Tomorrow. “We must continue to ask tough questions about the inequities in learning opportunities that exist, whether schools are open or closed. We hope that this executive report can support those important discussions from the classroom to the school board meeting.”

“This year’s shift to digital learning is unearthing numerous areas of opportunity for K-12, including closing the gap on inequality,” said Christina Fleming, Vice President of K-12 at Blackboard. “Students need consistent access to learning tools, resources, Internet, and emotional support no matter their background. This executive report puts a spotlight on what we can do as an educational community to equal the playing field and help every student achieve their highest level of success.”

As the new school year is starting, many school and district leaders are using the experiences from the spring to re-invent and re-imagine education in their communities. To support that work within schools and districts, Project Tomorrow and Blackboard have collaborated on a new series of four executive reports under the banner of ***90 Days that Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning***. In addition to the spotlight on equity in learning, the series addresses three other key considerations emerging from the spring 2020 virtual learning experiences:

- The changing views of digital learning due to the increased use of the technology tools during school closures
- The importance of effective student – teacher communications to the learning process
- The long overdue need to change our thinking about student ownership of learning

More information on the series and downloadable links to the reports are available here:

<https://tomorrow.org/speakup/2020-90-Days-That-Changed-K-12-Teaching-Learning.html>

About Project Tomorrow

Project Tomorrow’s nonprofit mission is to support the effective implementation of research-based learning experiences for students in K-12 schools. The organization’s landmark research is the Speak Up Research Project which annually polls K-12 students, parents, educators and community members about the impact of technology resources on learning experiences both in school and out of school, and represents the largest collection of authentic, unfiltered stakeholder voice on digital learning. Since 2003, almost 6 million K-12 students, parents, teachers, librarians, principals, technology leaders, district administrators and members of the community have shared their views and ideas through the Speak Up Project. Learn more at

www.tomorrow.org.

About Blackboard

Blackboard is a leading EdTech company, serving higher education, K-12, business and government clients around the world. We connect a deep understanding of education with the power of technology to continuously push the boundaries of learning. Our mission is to advance learning together with the world's education community, so that all learners, educators and institutions can realize their goals today and prepare for tomorrow.

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