

## **Article School discipline with online learning**

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/school-discipline-enters-new-realm-with-online-learning/2020/09/14/e19a395e-f393-11ea-999c-67ff7bf6a9d2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/school-discipline-enters-new-realm-with-online-learning/2020/09/14/e19a395e-f393-11ea-999c-67ff7bf6a9d2_story.html)

### **Education**

# **School discipline enters new realm with online learning**



Brian Batugo, a high school teacher in Stockton, Ca., meets with his class via Zoom. “As a teacher you feel flustered” with managing a virtual classroom, he says. (Michael McCoy)

By

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Teachers know how to quiet a classroom. Good ones do, anyway. Counting to three, a sharp clap of the hands or a withering glare are all proven methods for getting most students to settle down. Sometimes a song or a smile does the trick. This school year, with millions of students learning via Zoom and other online platforms, some teachers have added a tech weapon to their calming arsenal: mute all.

It has become the button of choice for teachers who want to muzzle mayhem and get on with instruction. Blocking out the disruptive noise, the teachers say, makes it easier for them to focus on the work and teach a lesson without having to stop to respond to arguments between students, bathroom break requests and class clown commentary. “A lot is mitigated by the teacher having control of the microphone and the camera,” Josie Burton, a middle school art teacher in San Jose, Calif., said in an interview. “There has been an increase in interruptions in classrooms over the last few years, and we just don’t have that now. The inverse is that it can be hard to tell when someone is participating.”

Hundreds of teachers on a private Facebook group for educators agreed with a recent post by an experienced teacher about how some discipline issues were much easier to handle in the online-only environment.

If it were just a matter of keeping the virtual classroom quiet, that would be one thing. But online discipline extends well beyond limiting noisy outbursts during class time.

Teachers are also finding themselves having to monitor issues from attendance and appearance to whether the dozens of children or teenagers on the screen in front of them are engaged, sitting still, keeping their cameras on, answering questions, not eating or drinking, not petting their dogs and not bickering with siblings. It can all be a bit overwhelming. In a normal classroom setting, a teacher can quickly scan the room and gauge how students are feeling, who needs more attention and what potential problems are in the offing. Teachers say that reading students online while handling all of their other responsibilities is much harder.

“As a teacher you feel flustered,” said Brian Batugo, a high school teacher in Stockton, Calif. “You’re not only managing your content, you’re also the DJ of Zoom. Bringing people into class, kicking them out, figure out the tech problems, muting students. It’s definitely difficult.”

Many schools and districts, including in D.C., Montgomery County, Md., and Fairfax and Arlington, Va., have simply extended their normal behavior guidelines to the virtual classroom with a few modifications that factor in the home setting. Students are finding out that the comforts of home don’t extend to the virtual classroom — even if the virtual classroom happens to be in their home.

The long-standing requirement that students wear appropriate clothing now includes not wearing pajamas. Some online guidance informs students that they can’t be in bed or wrapped up in blankets during class. Heading out of the room to get a snack from the fridge in the middle of a lesson is also a no-no.

Other schools have created a raft of new rules and regulations for their online learners. In Tennessee’s Shelby County School District, which includes Memphis, students, parents and teachers received a 24-page “Virtual Student Conduct Expectations” [document](#) detailing the district’s online policy on discipline and possible punishments. Behavior that could result in disciplinary actions includes cyberbullying, wearing clothing that reveals underwear, repeated tardiness, inappropriate use of electronic media, threats, and intentional disturbance of an online class. Students are also expected to have a designated work area in their home cleared of everything other than what they need for class.

For students who break rules, many districts, such as Georgia’s Clayton County Public Schools, will discipline them with one of two kinds of virtual suspensions: in school and out of school. In-school suspensions would see students working in a virtual classroom with others who have been punished. Out-of-school would see students doing assignments alone.

In New York City’s Success Academy charter schools, the year started virtually last month for all students, with rules so stringent that parents with young children complained and school officials revised the schedule.

Success Academy is the largest and most controversial charter network in the city, known for its rigid rules of behavior, which have carried over into the virtual

environment. Students are required to wear uniforms and sit with their hands clasped at their desks when they are not doing schoolwork or another activity. And they must ask for permission to use the bathroom in their homes. If a child has trouble logging on and a parent does not immediately notify the school, that student will be given an unexcused absence. Students who disregard the rules can be suspended, meaning they cannot long on to classes for a period of time.

After school started, families of young students complained that the children were being required to sit at their desks doing schoolwork for too long with no breaks. School officials altered the schedules for grades K-4, saying the changes were “in response to parental feedback and the long-term reality of remote learning.”

Some advocates for restorative justice and equitable disciplinary practices say they are concerned that students of color who misbehave during online classrooms will be disciplined and labeled troublemakers more often than White students.

“Considering that peer-reviewed research has consistently shown a disparity in discipline by race for the same offenses, media reports demonstrating the overreaction of districts and schools to remote behavior by children suggests that students of color are readily being identified as troublemakers instead of children in need of mild discipline and/or restorative interventions,” said Julian Vasquez Heilig, dean of the University of Kentucky College of Education.

[\*A Black seventh-grader played with a toy gun during a virtual class. His school called the police.\*](#)

Last month, a middle school in Colorado Springs notified law enforcement when a Black student displayed a toy gun on screen during a virtual art class. Police went to the student’s home, and the school ultimately gave the student a five-day suspension. He now has a record with the El Paso County Sheriff’s Office and a notation in his school record saying he brought a “facsimile of a firearm to school.”

Dani Elliott, the student’s mother, told The Washington Post she didn’t think the school understood the possible consequences of contacting the police about the toy gun. “With the cultural events going on right now, especially for young African Americans, you calling the police and telling them that he could have a gun, you put his life in jeopardy,” Elliott said.

Some districts are attempting to implement practices online that help students’ social and emotional needs, including the use of restorative disciplinary practices rather than pure punishment. Restorative justice is aimed at repairing the harm a student has caused and teaching him or her to learn from the experience.

For all of the rules and guidelines, discipline often comes back to the individual teacher, whether that’s online or not.

“You have to be engaged with your students and know them,” said Batugo. “Teachers who don’t focus on building a welcoming and trusting place for their students have more of a problem with discipline.”

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