

## Unmute Yourself, Please: How Remote Learning Has Increased Inequities in the Education System

In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court struck down laws that allowed segregation in public schools based on race. The Court held that all children in the United States have the right to an equal educational opportunity, and “separate but equal” facilities were inherently unequal.<sup>1</sup>

Fast forward to the middle of the coronavirus pandemic when many school districts have shifted to online learning where students complete their schoolwork in their own homes. Some students complete their work in a quiet space with adequate technology like a laptop or iPad to connect to online class sessions. Other students try to log into online class sessions on the only cell phone that their family owns, trying to focus while battling competing background noise and commotion. Students whose families are trying to make ends meet during this economic recession may even have to work or care for younger siblings.<sup>2</sup>

These do not seem like equal educational opportunities. Lower-income students are in need of the requisite technology to adequately complete their education from home. A 2018 study found that over 10 million students did not own an adequate device at home.<sup>3</sup> Further, according to data from 2019, only 63 percent of people living in rural America have a broadband Internet connection.<sup>4</sup> The pandemic and remote learning has exacerbated the already existing inequities in the education system.

The digital divide among students was precipitated further by a shortage in low-cost laptops across the country. Shipment delays left many students empty handed at the beginning of the 2020-21 schoolyear. The more affluent school districts purchasing laptops for their students usually win out, again disadvantaging the lower-income school districts where students are less likely to have a personal device at home.<sup>5</sup>

Student disengagement in remote schooling has been especially high in poorer communities.<sup>6</sup> There is a strong argument that many students in the United States are not receiving an educational opportunity equal to that of their peers because of their circumstances and living situation. While there are always inequities within the educational system, the need for technology to complete online learning amidst the coronavirus pandemic has increased disparities within the educational system.

However, educators and local television stations around the country are coming together to help students who may not have access to online learning by broadcasting teachers on TV.<sup>7</sup> Airing educational lessons on public television channels is an effort to use different technology that is arguably more accessible to reach students who do not have the resources needed to participate

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1940-1955/347us483>

<sup>2</sup> <https://nyti.ms/2HcMFnd>

<sup>3</sup> <https://nyti.ms/3nJtS3A>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/remote-learning-unequal/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://nyti.ms/3nJtS3A>

<sup>6</sup> <https://nyti.ms/2HcMFnd>

<sup>7</sup> <https://nyti.ms/3hIbpSv>

in online learning. In some places, teachers' lessons are broadcast after school hours or on the weekends. Elsewhere, districts have scheduled time during the school day to watch. While this will not remedy the vast inequities, it is a way that educators can immediately reach students who do not have internet connection or devices to log into class.

It remains uncertain if students will be back to in-person learning or not in the spring of 2021. In Chicago, teachers were due back to schools on January 4, 2021 to return to in-person teaching. However, the Chicago Teachers Union has pushed back against the city's reopening plan and some of its members refused to return.<sup>8</sup> These dynamics are playing out in cities across the country as coronavirus cases reach their highest levels to date.

Educators faced immense obstacles and challenges in 2020. Even with the uncertainty that continues into 2021, teachers' creativity and innovation are a glimmer of hope that students without adequate resources and support can still be reached.

--Gabby Haddad

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*This piece explores the disparities in educational opportunity that have emerged during the coronavirus pandemic with the implementation of online learning. Poorer communities' lack of access to digital devices and internet access has prevented students across the country from completing their coursework.*

*Gabby is a 2L from South Carolina and hopes to practice law in Nashville upon graduation. She has fallen in love with Music City and cannot wait to get back to checking out fun restaurants and live music venues when COVID is under control.*

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<sup>8</sup> <https://nyti.ms/3rSDrPV>