Defeating the Modern Student’s Struggle

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Just over one year ago, students rejoiced at the idea of two weeks of online learning; however, the COVID-19 pandemic had other plans for society. For most students in the United States, March of 2020 marked the beginning of one of the most unique years in their lives. Adolescents gradually began to view online learning as a curse rather than a blessing. Friends turned into boxes on a screen; assignments became notifications in a sea of emails; arguably most importantly, students’ daily lives shifted suddenly and completely to spending days locked in their rooms, staring at screens of new content, thrusting teenagers into a mental purgatory. From a survey of over 500,000 students during the 2020-21 school year, 46% stated that depression, stress, and anxiety posed an obstacle during distance learning (Youth Truth, 2020). Among other issues, the pandemic has brought much attention to the mental health crisis of students.

Yet even with all the media coverage of the situation, school administrations often fail to take tangible action even though they have the resources to do so. Many schools merely send newsletters that wish students well, undermining adolescents’ health further by sending the message that schools simply do not care for their students. These ideas contribute to students’ stress and depression, as they begin to feel as if school has simply become a station for busywork, rather than an interactive learning experience, resulting in a drop in well-being which goes as far as hindering academic performance. Schools in Austin, Texas demonstrate this, with jumps in failure rate as high as 70% during virtual learning (Wong, 2020). With such poor performance, schools have the incentive to aid their students, but these dismal statistics still find their way into news reports. Surely, another factor plays a role in this dilemma.

Although unclear at first glance, the mental well-being obstacles of distance learning stem from the concept that school-organized wellness programs address the wrong problems. Schools attempt to alleviate student stress through reassurance: a decent solution at face-value but one that proves ineffective over time. Fatigued students open emails from teachers riddled with weak phrases such as “we hope this email finds you well” or “thank you so much for bearing with us through this year,” which, while polite, offer no real consolation or relief; this reveals a key concern at hand. School administrations mistakenly focus their efforts in a superficial way.

An initiative that truly attempts to alleviate students’ issues must utilize all possible resources— a comprehensive reform to the current system that incorporates teachers and modified lesson plans. Online learning is as complex to navigate to teachers as it is to students even this far into the pandemic, so instructors may require additional training on how to properly manage teaching in such an environment. For example, teachers could fuse real-world news into class content to engage participation in classes. This technique serves particularly effective in STEM curricula, such as math or biology courses. Utilizing this technique demonstrates the practical value of course content to students and differentiates schoolwork from busywork. In addition, teachers could utilize the unique aspects of virtual meeting software such as “breakout rooms” to have more one-on-one time with struggling students, allowing them to still have access to the interactive element of a regular learning environment.

For many classes, lesson plans contain largely independent assignments; however, the social isolation brought by the pandemic makes this platform highly ineffective, as students become distracted from their work. Adjusting lesson plans to contain more group work does not entirely resolve the interactive limitations of an online environment, but it partially works around some of the shortcomings students face. In this case, teachers use increased interpersonal exercises to compensate for the lack of social activities outside of school. By doing so, classwork is made to feel less like forced work and more like a fun activity.

When schools revise lesson plans and orient teachers, they optimize course content for the online environment. Without this adjustment, schools essentially attempt to fit a square peg into a round hole. Modification to the system is necessary, so the pandemic has forced us to adapt, but it should not be at the expense of students.

**References**

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