

# With schools closed, wide disparities in instruction for WNY students

By *Jay Rey and Mary B. Pasciak*

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Ever since classes were canceled at her high school over coronavirus concerns, Dagny Rebhan hasn't missed a beat.

She just logs onto her laptop at home and gets in a full day of classes with her teachers and classmates at Buffalo Seminary using online video conferencing.

"It's fine, for now, the way the state of the world is," said Dagny, 16, "but I do miss the social aspect of school."

The online learning format being used at the private girls school on Bidwell Parkway is the ideal while schools have been shut down for at least the next month. But it's also far from the norm.

The student learning going on at home during the Covid-19 closures varies widely from district to district and grade to grade, ranging anywhere from the online schooling at Sem to packets of worksheets that were sent home with kids.

There are all kinds of obstacles.

While technology is ubiquitous in the classroom, most districts weren't prepared to move teaching fully online, especially for younger students or those with special needs. And while many districts have equipped students with their own laptop or tablet, internet access is an issue, particularly in the poorer neighborhoods and rural areas.

For now, districts say they are doing the best they can as they scramble this week to pull together educational materials for students and their new teachers: the parents cooped up with their kids at home.

"This is all new to me as a mom, and thousands of moms like me," said Nadia Francis, 35, a Buffalo mother with four kids ages 8 to 15. "It's hard to teach your own kids."

## **Buffalo public vs. private**

In Buffalo, students in high school brought home laptops, which they use to access assignments and an array of online resources.

In addition to online resources, elementary school students were given handouts. Teachers put together learning materials and textbooks that families picked up at schools this week. If they were unable to, buses were dispatched to drop off assignments at their doorsteps.

"My main message to them is to read every day and write every day and try to do something with math problems," said Superintendent Kriner Cash. "That's what I'm emphasizing. The more you do that, the more you sharpen your skill set."

Some private schools have had an easier time adapting to an online format.

At Canisius High School, for example, students convene online five days a week, taking only three classes a day – but for two hours each. Some teachers post an activity for students to do. Others teach live via audio or video.

At Buffalo Seminary, teachers have continued to hold all of their classes as usual. The only difference is that classes convene online using Zoom, an online remote conferencing service.

Teachers can talk to their students and see their faces arranged on a screen like a “patchwork quilt.” Likewise, the students – who must wear outfits that comply with the school dress code and sit at a table or desk at home – can talk to and see on their laptop screens the teacher and fellow classmates.

As an educator, Kanika Durland would prefer being together in a classroom, but is better with using distance learning than she would have thought.

“It hasn’t been that long but it seems like our students are doing well,” said Durland, a faculty member and an assistant head of school at Sem. “Something that has surprised me is attendance. It’s been unsettling for them and I imagined it would be easier to not show up, but attendance has been remarkably good.”

## **What suburban schools do**

But public schools, in general, have not had the same experience in fully transferring instruction online.

Many districts do have technology in place, using online platforms such as Schoology or Google for teachers and students to upload assignments, and eDoctrina or Castle Learning to give tests. But that’s much different from actually teaching lessons online.

And even though some districts have the technology to conduct live lessons, teachers have not been trained to do that.

Many school officials say their priority is providing meals and offering emotional support. The level of instruction will be nowhere near what it normally is, schools acknowledge.

The goal is not to replicate the teaching that would normally be happening, according to Lisa Krueger, Orchard Park's assistant superintendent for curriculum.

“I don’t believe it’s the right time to be forging ahead with the curriculum we would if we had all the structures and supports in place during the regular school year,” she said. “Our mindset is not about grading and assessment right now.”

Orchard Park teachers have spent the past few days putting together what she described as “a curated database of enrichment games to allow students to practice” various skills.

The next few weeks will look very different for students, depending on where they go to school. In the Amherst School District, secondary students are expected to work on each of their classes every day for half an hour.

In many districts, much of the emphasis is on older students, who are able to navigate online learning platforms on their own. In Akron, though, even first-graders are being provided with chromebooks.

The state Education Department has asked each district to submit plans for how it will continue to instruct students until school reopens.

“Guidance has been vague and limited, truthfully,” Krueger said. “We have many more questions than answers from State Ed. I hope we will get greater clarity so we can move forward in a more comprehensive and consistent manner.”

### **Niagara Falls: No new concepts**

In Niagara Falls, teachers have provided links to educational sites and put together packets with three weeks of work, said Mark Laurrie, superintendent of the Niagara Falls City School District.

“It’s all reinforcement work in Niagara Falls,” Laurrie said. “Reading and writing – there are no new concepts.”

Schools realize that some kids will complete the packets they're given, and some won't.

“Some kids could be finished in two weeks and then they’re done,” said Lori Allan, a spokesperson for the Charter School for Applied Technologies. “I think there might be kids that just don’t touch the work. When they come back in April, we have to assess what we’re going to do.”

Laurrie was asked if the academic year was lost.

“It really depends on when we come back,” he said. “If we come back April 20, I think we can salvage some of the year with some tweaks in the curriculum and after-school work. Once we go past April 20, each day and each week gets more and more difficult to salvage.”

## **A full day of classes**

As for Dagny, a junior at Buffalo Seminary, she sleeps in a little later than usual these days, but is ready to go and seated at a desk in her home by 8:15 a.m., in time for her first period Spanish class.

“The Wi-Fi will go out for a few minutes, but there hasn’t been a big problem,” Dagny said.

On Thursday, she logged into her third-period English class, followed by math and history, before getting some free time when she did a little coding. Seventh-period chemistry concluded her school day.

“I think my mom really likes it,” Dagny said of being stuck in the house, “because I clean up my room a lot more often.”

**Story topics:** [Coronavirus/ Covid-19](#)

**Jay Rey**– *Jay Rey covers education and Buffalo Public Schools for The Buffalo News. He has been a reporter at The News since 1993.*

**Mary B. Pasciak**– *Mary Pasciak, a member of The Buffalo News' watchdog team, has been using Freedom of Information Law requests and data analysis to uncover stories for her hometown newspaper for more than 20 years.*