

## Why Is Remote Learning So Hard?

By Peg Dawson, Ed.D., NCSP

For many years, I've been leading a study group on executive skills sponsored by the New Hampshire Association of School Psychologists. At our latest meeting, we talked about how schools are structuring instruction and how students are responding. It appears that distance learning is going a little better at the elementary level than at the middle/high school level. At two high schools, school psychologists estimated that about half the student body are currently earning D's and F's.

What changed when in-class instruction was curtailed? I've maintained that what got exposed the "hidden curriculum." People expect kids to have executive skills but no one's charged with teaching them. And for learning to occur, students either have to have well-developed executive skills (which is developmentally inappropriate, since these skills take at least 25 years to mature), or they need sufficient external supports so that weak executive skills don't prevent kids from learning.

What external supports do schools, classrooms, and teachers typically provide with in-person learning that enable children with under-developed executive skills to be successful? Here's a short list:

- An externally imposed schedule.
- Continuity—the schedule stays pretty much the same on a daily or weekly basis, so students know what to expect on any given day in any given class.
- A location where learning and teaching are the sanctioned activities.
- A set of learning activities with externally imposed start and stop times.
- Visual cues to help orient students to instructions and task expectations.
- Immediate support for students who struggle.
- Common organizational structures (classrooms and desks) where learning materials are readily available.
- Limited expectations for students to manage their own time, i.e., homework assignments. With in-person learning, homework is limited to more proscribed work

with the expectation that most of that work can be done quickly and handed in the next day. With distance/hybrid learning, students are given greater blocks of time to manage on their own and are more likely to have assignments spread out over several days (especially if their classes don't meet every day). Even before the pandemic, block scheduling and long-term assignments posed a challenge for students who struggled with time management and planning. With distance learning, the problem is worse.

- The presence of a peer group reinforcing focus during class time. Peer groups also meet the social needs of students so that during non-instructional times, friendships are made and strengthened. For some kids, getting to see their friends in school is the primary motivator getting them out the door in the morning.
- An emotional connection between teacher and student. For some kids, that connection is what propels them to do work they don't find particularly interesting or appealing. That emotional connection becomes more tenuous when the only contact a student has with a teacher is through Zoom, with little opportunity for private conversations and words of encouragement.

When you peel all that away, what's left? You've basically taken away massive amounts of support for executive skills. In the absence of that scaffolding, the student has to impose **self-discipline**.

When I googled this word, I found these definitions:

- Self-discipline is the ability you have to control and motivate yourself, stay on track and do what is right.
- the ability to make yourself do things you know you should do even when you do not want to.
- The ability to make yourself do the things you know you ought to do, without someone making you do them.

One of the sites I looked at noted that "Self-discipline is typically a learned behavior that people refine over time through practice and repetition."

The pandemic took away the supports that kids typically rely on for school performance and expected them to develop self-discipline with none of the practice and repetition that allows that skill to be developed!

Translating "self-discipline" into executive skill terminology, we're talking about response inhibition, task initiation, and sustained attention: the ability to set aside fun stuff or preferred activities, to start non-preferred activities (such as class attendance and homework) and to persist with them until they are done. And to be able to propel oneself to do that *all on one's own!*

When I asked people in the study group what was the biggest issue they saw that was making school so challenging this year, the answer was “lack of engagement.” Engagement is less an issue when the external supports provided by in-person learning are present. Take away the supports and students “have to want to do it.” Or “have to make themselves do it”—and now we’re back to self-discipline.

The challenge is to find ways to reproduce the external supports that in-person learning provides. For the “disengaged” students, it has to begin with helping them make the social connections that have been severed: either more contact with their peers or a stronger personal connection with a teacher or another caring adult at school—or both.

Once we’ve strengthened those social connections, then we have to help them figure out how to structure their time more effectively, which brings us back to response inhibition, task initiation, and sustained attention.

Felicia Sperry, a school psychologist in the Oyster River School District, shared an activity she did with 4<sup>th</sup> grade students at the elementary school where she works. She adapted a Study Plan form I created and introduced it to the students at Mast Way Elementary School that she worked with last year using her “Train the Brain” curriculum to teach students about executive skills (and the brain more generally). Here’s the form:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### School work planning sheet

Priority Order you will do it	Assignment What do you need to do?	How long will it take me?	What time will I do it?	Where will I do it?	Actual time		DONE! <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
					Start	Finished	

My Successes: *(what worked for me)*

My Challenges: *(what did I struggle with)*

Goal for next time *(something I'll keep doing or something I'll change)*

Felicia was able to generate good discussions with students about how they planned their homework and what helped them get their work done. She commented she wasn't sure whether students would use the form to plan on their own, and mentioned that teachers were reluctant to require students to do this. Thinking about this afterwards, I began to question why you wouldn't make this a required assignment.

Which brings me to my final point: we need to rethink the overall goal of instruction during the pandemic. Rather than focusing on teaching content, I think we need to focus on teaching executive skills. We should develop individual learning plans that focus on helping students develop and strengthen executive skills. Of course, they'll apply these skills to subject matter content, but shifting the emphasis from mastering content to mastering executive skills could be profound.

As I envision it, you'd begin by assessing students' current level of executive skills and then help each student develop a plan that works for them. By collaborating with students on this plan, at a minimum you're getting them to use goal-directed persistence, time management, planning, and metacognition. And if they come out of the pandemic with those skills strengthened, imagine how quickly they can make up lost ground with content area instruction.

Change at the system's level is incredibly difficult, so I would be surprised if anyone took me up on this suggestion. But even if this attempt at system's change is unlikely to happen, please spread the word about the hidden curriculum. We have an amazing opportunity to get people to think differently about how learning happens. Let's not waste it!

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