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Beware Profiteers In Online learning

How Online Learning Companies Are Using the Pandemic to Take Over Classroom Teaching

Experts warn the rush to outsource teaching to private companies is bad for students, teachers, and taxpayers.

By Jeff Bryant

Opening schools during a pandemic in an underfunded urban district like Providence, Rhode Island, where buildings are in [miserable physical conditions](#), is already a huge undertaking, but the situation is made worse when district leaders bring in private contractors who know nothing about the community and make no effort to collaborate with public school teachers. That's what's happening in Providence, according to Maribeth Calabro, the president of the Providence Teachers Union, who spoke to me in a Zoom call.

As part of its [plan](#) to start the new school year with a gradual opening for in-person learning and an online option for all students, the district announced the creation of a new Virtual Learning Academy operated by Scottsdale, Arizona-based company Edgenuity.

When Calabro looked into Edgenuity, she found out the parent company, Weld North Education, was [owned](#) by a private equity firm, which had recently [acquired](#) Odysseyware. She recalled that when Providence had used Odysseyware for a high school credit recovery program there were problems with students cheating. "Students were quickly flying through courses that should have taken weeks or months," she remembered.

Calabro is also concerned the Edgenuity platform requires little to no

human instruction from Providence teachers and will instead rely on learning coaches, who are expected to be the parent, guardian, or someone else in the household of each child. She feels most parents signing up for the program may not realize this because the district's [description](#) of the program largely relegates the complete explanation of the responsibilities of a learning coach to a list of [bullet points](#) parents have to click a link to get to.

Calabro is also miffed at the process in which Edgenuity was hired. Since the district was [taken over by the state](#) in 2019, local officials have [no clear authority](#) in decision making, and a state commissioner appointed by the governor has complete control of budget, program, and personnel. Contract terms for the Edgenuity deal have yet to be made public as of this writing.

“They issued a plan that had no input from teachers,” she said. “We should be using the expertise we have here—our teachers—to improve on what we did in the spring.” She accuses district leaders—both the state commissioner and the superintendent—of picking “an off-the-shelf, canned product without any rigorous review” by teachers.

Also interesting, the sign-up deadline for the Virtual Learning Academy was [before](#) parents would know whether their home schools were opening with in-person or remote learning, giving it a head start for parents wanting to secure an early option for their children.

Despite Calabro's concerns, [6,200 students have enrolled](#) in the Virtual Learning Academy—[more than one in every four](#) students in the district.

The rush to outsource teaching to online learning companies is happening in school districts across the country.

Douglas County, Colorado, a relatively affluent and mostly white school district near Denver, is very different from Providence, but teachers there have similar complaints about having Edgenuity take over the district's online learning.

“Teachers had no formal role” in choosing the program, Kallie Leyba told me in a phone call. “It was very top-down.” Leyba is president of the local affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers.

Also, the process was very rushed, Leyba said. The first public [mention](#) of the deal with Edgenuity was at an August 4 school board meeting, according to Leyba, when teachers were scheduled to report to work on August 10. The start of the online learning program was eventually delayed to August 31, the Douglas County News-Press [reported](#).

Further, when principals were told that instead of following a districtwide implementation plan, each school would need to develop its own plan, they had only one week to figure out how to employ the platform, Leyba said.

As school districts across the nation faced the daunting task of opening the new school year with online learning or a blend of online and in-person, many [contracted](#) the work to private companies, and there's widespread evidence these arrangements are rush jobs that give teachers and parents no say in the adoption process as taxpayer funds are wasted on products of questionable quality.

“With the pandemic, districts have struggled and made hasty decisions, and some have been enticed by the promises of the established online providers,” writes Gary Miron, a professor of evaluation, measurement, and research at Western Michigan University, in an email. “These companies can say all kinds of things about their awesome platforms and curricula, but the evidence shows that students [who use the platforms] fail, and taxpayers are ripped off.”

‘A Disaster’ and ‘a Mess’

One of the most prominent examples of a failed attempt to outsource teaching to a private, online firm during the pandemic comes from Florida, where the Miami-Dade school district, the largest in the state and fourth largest in the nation, [abruptly fired](#) online learning company K12 Inc. just two weeks into the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. From the opening day of school, [NBC Miami reported](#), parents described the online platform as “a disaster” and “an absolute mess,” referring to what the district superintendent said was a “software connectivity switch problem.”

The deal with K12 was “rushed,” [reports Wired](#), with the board approving

a \$15 million no-bid contract the district ultimately never signed. A [CBS Miami](#) report on the contract termination places the failure of the program on a rushed implementation, a misplaced trust in a private provider, and the lack of involvement of teachers in the decision to adopt the platform.

Adding to those problems, an inspector general for Miami-Dade County schools is looking into another aspect of K12's involvement there, CBS Miami [reports](#), because of a donation of nearly \$1.6 million K12 made to a nonprofit linked to the Miami-Dade school superintendent the day before the school board was to vote on whether to keep the online system.

In another high-profile controversy involving an online learning provider, the New York Times [reported](#) teachers and parents in several school districts had complained about racist and sexist lessons in curriculum provided by Acellus Academy based in Kansas City, Missouri.

“In [one lesson](#), students are asked whether Osama bin Laden led the Islamic Jihad Union, Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, or ‘Towelban,’” the New York Times reported. “[In another](#), they are shown two images—one of a woman holding a small bag over her shoulder and one of a robber in disguise with a large sack over his shoulder—and asked which best depicts Harriet Tubman’s escape from slavery.”

As the 2020-2021 school year opened, controversies with “racist, sexist, or inappropriate” lesson material in the Acellus curriculum surfaced in school districts in California, Illinois, and Hawaii, according to [EdSurge](#).

According to [Honolulu Civil Beat reporter Eric Stinton](#), the program’s creator Roger Billings “left or was excommunicated from the Mormon church” for his [extreme polygamist views](#). His PhD in research is from the Institute of Science and Technology, an unaccredited institution he co-founded, Stinton reports.

In a [video](#) Billings posted on his blog on April 14, 2020—the same day New York City added [3,778 probable COVID-19 fatalities](#), the city’s highest daily total—Billings called the “garden-variety flu... so much worse than this COVID virus, so far,” and he mocked mask-wearing by fashioning his own, clearly inadequate, strapless version.....

‘Every Student Is a Widget’

Miron has written numerous [research studies](#) critical of online learning providers, particularly companies, [such as K12 Inc.](#), that operate as education management organizations and contract with states and school districts to operate virtual charter schools, license their platforms to schools, or deliver individual courses.

Other online learning providers, such as Edgenuity, don’t operate virtual charter schools but instead offer a platform, with preloaded curricula and assessments, that requires the district to support and manage it.

In both business models, Miron argues, online providers follow a “corporate model designed for profit, not learning.”

A significant source of profit, Miron explained, is that when online providers assume students learn at their own pace and parents (or another adult in the household) take on the role of learning coach, the parents are essentially providing a volunteer labor force from their homes.

“The models these companies use is glorified, publicly funded homeschooling,” said Michael Barbour in a phone call. Barbour, a professor at the College of Education and Health Sciences in Touro University California, is an expert on design and support of K-12 online learning, particularly for students in rural schools.

In a research brief he contributed to for the National Education Policy Center in 2019, Barbour [noted](#) “the role of the parent, or learning coach, is critical to the instructional model used by these virtual schools,” and he cited examples of online learning programs in which parents were required to spend four to five hours a day assisting students.

There’s also profit when teachers employed in this model are more like monitors and the number of students per teacher can balloon to 100 or more, according to Miron.

In Providence, for instance, the class size for students getting face-to-face instruction in the school is capped at 26, according to Calabro, but the class size for teachers overseeing a virtual classroom is [52](#).

In his [research brief](#), Barbour cited a study finding that some teachers in online programs “had nearly three times as many students per teacher than the national average.”

“In the corporate model,” Barbour explained over the phone, “every student is a widget, and if I’m a corporate operator, I know my job is to maximize profit per widget.”

Bad for Students, Teachers, and Taxpayers

Also key to the corporate model is removing teachers from the education process.

In the corporate model, at every essential step of schooling—from selecting learning content, designing curricula, delivering instruction, and assessing results—teachers are relegated to spectator status and expected to simply carry out what others up the line have determined.

Distancing teachers from the day-to-day functions of schools will quite likely have negative consequences for students, Miron and Barbour maintain.

“The corporate model narrowly assumes curriculum can be uploaded to modules, and students will learn the content through self-study,” Miron explained, “but curriculum is much more than knowledge content that can be uploaded.”

Miron’s concern is also that relegating the teaching process to a computer neglects “very important 21st-century skills”—such as communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity—that teachers convey through face-to-face classroom learning.

“District teachers have advantages because they know the students, the families, and the communities,” he explained. Letting a computer algorithm make instructional decisions and relegating students to work solely on their own eliminates teachers’ abilities to meaningfully interact with students through teaching activities and skills-building.

A more complicated problem is the corporate model’s tendency to limit transparency, Barbour said.

Because these companies are private, they can more easily shroud their business deals with the district and their vendor networks. And because students using the platforms often stay officially enrolled in their home schools, academic results are masked when test scores, course completions, and graduation numbers of the online students are mixed in with the students who received in-person instruction.

The lack of transparency has serious consequences not only because taxpayers may be sequestered from seeing how public funds are being spent and the results of those expenditures, but also because it poses risks to democratic governance.

As Slate's Kirsch and Smiley [reported](#) in 2017, online learning companies benefit from lax regulation partially as a result of intense lobbying efforts. Kirsch and Smiley found online learning companies, including Edgenuity and K12, "collectively spent millions of dollars donating to state-level officials" in the 10 years prior to their report.

The bottom-line analysis of the corporate model for online learning is that, according to Barbour, "What's good for business and what's good for education will always be at odds."

There Are Alternatives

The problems and consequences of moving students to online platforms operated by for-profit companies are "not a pandemic thing," Barbour said. "It's how they've always operated."

But there are alternatives, even under the current constraints.

Barbour pointed to ambitious alternatives created not by private businesses but by the government.

In Ontario, Canada, the Ministry of Education provides [providence-wide access to teacher-created courses](#) that help students learn from home and give teachers a base upon which they can build their own online lessons, according to Barbour. In South Korea, the government has developed a [cyber home learning system](#) that provides students studying at home with access to every course in the national curriculum with online tutor

support.

In both examples, the desired goal is to supplement teachers, not supplant them, said Barbour.

Miron noted there are established platforms that are not preloaded with curriculum but instead allow teachers to upload course materials and use the various tools to teach, including discussion boards, drop boxes, and video conferencing.

In his own teaching, Miron uses a learning platform to conduct weekly synchronous classes with small discussion activities. He uploads his own content, and the university provides assistance from a course designer from the tech unit.

It's noteworthy, he says, that his university caps the maximum number of students for fully online classes at the graduate level lower than the face-to-face classes—18 students versus 25.

“Although I am seen as a critic of virtual schooling, I am actually a believer,” he said. “I am only a critic of the corporate model.”

Jeff Bryant is a writing fellow and chief correspondent for [Our Schools](#). He is a communications consultant, freelance writer, advocacy journalist, and director of the Education Opportunity Network, a strategy and messaging center for progressive education policy. His award-winning commentary and reporting routinely appear in prominent online news outlets, and he speaks frequently at national events about public education policy. Follow him on Twitter [@jeffbcdm](#).

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