



**90 DAYS
THAT CHANGED K-12
TEACHING & LEARNING:**
SPONSORING STUDENT
OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING



Blackboard



INTRODUCTION

Educators have long revered student engagement in learning as the holy grail for driving many positive outcomes in K-12 education including higher academic achievement, improved test scores, and higher graduation rates as well as decreasing disruptive behaviors and improving student emotional health. Consequently, teachers, administrators and parents were rightfully concerned when it was reported that some students were not showing up for their online classes or completing their asynchronous learning assignments during school closures. Some media reports bounced on this lack of engagement as a simplistic indicator of the failure of online learning. While some reports highlighted appropriately that some of these disengaged students lacked appropriate and consistent out-of-school technology access to support learning, others sought to put the blame on the learner directly, citing a lack of personal motivation or failure to take school seriously. What was missing from all of these discussions in spring 2020 was the thoughtful examination of student engagement within the context of the learning process, both before and during school closures, and the relationship between student ownership of their own learning process and their personal engagement in the learning activities.

Lessons learned from the spring school closures and sudden adoption of remote e-learning present a unique opportunity for education leaders to reframe these discussions and now think constructively about the purpose of school within a student's learning life, and the role of the student in their own learning destiny. These discussions have the potential to lead to new discoveries around how to effectively nurture higher levels of student engagement in learning, whether that learning is happening in a physical classroom or through a virtual connection. And the same discussions can help teachers and administrators gain new insights on how to use digital tools purposely for contextually relevant learning experiences that both engage students in learning and enable greater student ownership of the overall learning process.

Additionally, in the process of analyzing the learnings, we are also able to shine a brighter spotlight on issues and conditions that pre-date the school closures, but which we can no longer ignore. Like the equity issues discussed in our second brief, we have known for a long time that the traditional in-school experience is not an engaging or intrinsically motivating event for many students. The sudden shift to digital learning did not create this lack of engagement but rather it provides us with a new set of lenses that enable improved sight and a long overdue push to address the differentiated needs of our students relative to engagement and ownership of learning.

It is within the context of these types of lessons learned that Project Tomorrow® and Blackboard have collaborated on a new series of four executive briefs under the banner of **90 Days that Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning**. The series addresses four key considerations emerging from the spring virtual learning experiences:

- The changing views of digital learning because of the increased use of the technology tools during school closures
- The increasingly critical nature of understanding and addressing equity considerations in K-12 learning
- The importance of effective student—teacher communications to the learning process
- The long overdue need to change our thinking about student ownership of learning

Each executive brief in the series leverages new data findings from Project Tomorrow's Speak Up Research Project with a goal to not only inform but also to stimulate new local reflections and discussions on the experiences of K-12 stakeholders with remote e-learning and how to most effectively prepare for the uncertainty of the next school year and beyond. Consequently, each brief includes a short list of thought-provoking questions that school and district leaders can use to jumpstart these new conversations within their communities.

In this fourth executive brief in the series, we focus on what we have learned from the school closures and remote e-learning experiences about student engagement in learning and student self-ownership of their own learning processes. Leveraging the Speak Up research from the 2019-20 school year, we examine these lessons learned through the context of the utilization of online and digital resources. Our discussion in this brief covers two different perspectives on this topic: (1) the student point of view of their learning experiences, both in and out of school, and (2) the teacher and administrators perspectives around the value of technology to support both students' increased efficacy in the learning process. Highlights from this brief include:

- When students are given the freedom to direct their own learning in school, the efficacy of that experience overflows into more self-directed learning outside of school. More students reported using digital tools outside of school to self-direct learning during spring 2020 than in the previous 6 years of analyzing these student behaviors. This supports the value of student ownership of learning as an important goal for educators. Students enjoy the learning experience when they have control over the what, when and how of learning, and this results in the continuation of learning outside of school using formats and tools that they identify themselves.
- Mobile devices are a gateway tool for students to take ownership of their learning, both in school and at home. Both teachers and school site administrators agree that mobile learning creates an environment where students take more responsibility for their own learning and develop new habits around self-directed learning activities. It is also noteworthy that educators in schools where students have less access to mobile devices (such as in schools where most students represent minorities) also hold these same valuations even without the direct experiences.
- Students believe in the value of taking control of their educational destiny. They exercise that belief outside of school with their self-directed activities and within the school day by leveraging digital tools that help customize the learning experience for them. However, teachers need support to fully understand how to marry student ownership of the learning process with their own instructional goals. Only 18% of teachers currently say they are very comfortable letting students choose their own learning path. Professional learning is needed to help teachers adapt to and advance this new modality within their classroom.



WHAT ARE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND PREFERENCES FOR OWNERSHIP OF THEIR LEARNING PROCESS?

HOW DID THE SUDDEN SHIFT TO DIGITAL LEARNING CHANGE THIS ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS?

As discussed in the Introduction, student ownership of the learning process and their engagement in learning activities are two sides of the same coin. KnowledgeWorks defines engagement as “the student’s investment in a given activity” resulting from a combination of motivational and social processes and a self-driven spark of interest. The level of student engagement in any particular learning activity is therefore dependent upon whether or not the student feels that internal motivation or self-determined ownership of their learning path. Therefore, any examinations of student engagement in learning during remote e-learning must implicitly include a discussion about the types of learning experiences presented to the student, and if those activities engendered student ownership of the learning process. Students’ use of technology outside of school for learning purposes provides an exemplar for this discussion.

As reported in previous Speak Up reports, students use a wide range of digital tools and online resources outside of school to pursue self-directed learning around areas of academic interest, purpose, and curiosity. This usage is not teacher facilitated or sponsored, and it not due to a homework assignment. Rather this level of ownership and engagement is driven by the students’ own intrinsic motivation for learning, not by the extrinsic motivators traditionally leveraged in school-based learning environments including grades, compliance, recognition, and rewards.

In the traditional face-to-face classroom, students may have some opportunities to self-direct their learning, but the primary instructional modality in most classrooms continues to be teacher-led, not student led. **Student ownership of the learning process in the classroom may be limited due to teachers' lack of comfort with providing their students with choices about how, when and where they want to learn.** Only 18% of K-12 teachers say that they are very comfortable with a learning environment where students can choose their own learning path. However, the sudden shift to remote e-learning disrupted that traditional learning modality. During the spring school closures, many districts adopted an asynchronous learning approach with students using teacher provided materials and digital tools to self-direct learning at their own pace, in their own time, and in their own way. Not surprisingly, students in grades 6-12 (44%) were more likely during the school closures to say the ways they were using technology for schoolwork supported greater student ownership of the learning process.

This new ethos of student ownership and self-directed learning embedded within remote e-learning had an impact on students' out-of-school learning activities as well. **More students reported using digital tools outside of school to self-direct learning during spring 2020 than in the previous 6 years of analyzing these student behaviors.** For example, as illustrated in Table 1, students in grades 6-12 were more likely after participating in remote e-learning to engage in self-initiated learning by watching a video to learn how to do something (74% of middle school students), getting feedback from others through an online writing site (37%), taking a self-paced online tutorial (34%), or researching something online that interested them (64%).

Table 1: Students' use of online and digital tools to support self-directed learning outside of school

HOW STUDENTS USE TECHNOLOGY OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL TO SELF-DIRECT LEARNING	PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS IN GRADES 6-8 WHO REPORTED DOING THIS REGULARLY		PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS IN GRADES 9-12 WHO REPORTED DOING THIS REGULARLY	
	Before school closures	During school closures	Before school closures	During school closures
Doing online research about something that interests me	57%	64%	67%	70%
Taking an online course or self-paced tutorial on my own	20%	34%	32%	38%
Using online writing tools to get feedback from others to improve my writing	33%	37%	38%	42%
Watch videos to learn how to do something	66%	74%	71%	76%

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Other examples of students on their own using technology to support learning include the use of social media to learn about different ideas (55% of high school students), watching TEDTalks online (38%) and using voice-enabled assistants like Amazon Alexa or Apple Siri to answer questions for them (49%). These examples point to the reality that students continue to take advantage of technology to self-sponsor ownership of their learning processes when they are beyond the classroom.

Students have long advocated for in-school learning environments where they can be in control of when and how they learn. Students point to the effective use of technology as enabling that type of student ownership of the learning process. **Consistently since 2014, 50% of middle school and high school students have identified digital tools as creating environments where they can be in control of their own learning.** The sudden shift to digital learning did not change, either positively or negatively, students' beliefs on the value of technology to support their learning in this way.

The types of learning experiences that students highly value is also consistent with this desire for greater ownership of the learning process. **Seven in 10 students in grades 6-12 say that they like learning when they can be actively involved in the learning process by doing things.** Learning by building or making things is a preferred learning style for 55% of students today. Students (49%) believe that engaging in authentic problem-solving learning tasks are the best ways for them to be prepared for future success in college and career. Correspondingly, students also indicate that digital learning provides them with these types of learning experiences including being able to apply what they have learned to solve practical problems (48%) and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills (46%). These types of learning experiences are remarkably consistent with Dewey's 1916 instructions to new teachers about how to stimulate student ownership of their learning process. Dewey admonishes teachers to "give pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results."

Parents of school-aged children agree with both their children and Dewey on the importance of these types of learning experiences. Almost three-quarters of parents (72%) agree with their children that independent, self-directed learning is a good foundation for developing college and career ready skills. A similar percentage of parents (74%), with no differentiation by demographics, community type or age of children, also concur with Dewey that authentic learning experiences that put a premium on skill development are the best for developing life long learning habits. Parents point to the increased usage of technology during school closures to support these new learning paradigms for their children. As reported in earlier briefs, parents' personal views on the value of technology within their child's learning life changed significantly during the school closure period. These changed views included the articulation of new outcomes or benefits that support greater student ownership of the learning process as illustrated in Table 2. The number of parents saying the use of technology within learning results in greater student ownership of the learning process increased by 41% because of the child's remote e-learning experience in spring 2020.

Table 2: Impact of remote e-learning on parents' views about the value of technology to support student ownership of learning

BENEFITS OF TECHNOLOGY USE BY THEIR CHILD IN SCHOOL	PERCENTAGE OF PARENTS WHO AGREE	
	Before school closures	During school closures
Child is learning at their own pace	33%	49%
Child is taking greater ownership of their learning	27%	38%
Child is learning in a style that best fits their own needs	30%	41%
Child is in control of their learning process	30%	40%

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In addition, parents also make the connection between students' digital learning experiences during school closures, a greater emphasis on enhanced student ownership of the learning process and better academic results. **The number of parents who identified technology use as a factor in increasing their children's test scores and grades increased by 87% during the school closures.**



WHAT ARE THE CONNECTION POINTS BETWEEN THE TEACHERS' AND ADMINISTRATORS' VIEWS ON DIGITAL LEARNING, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF THEIR LEARNING PROCESSES?

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR HOW EDUCATORS IMPLEMENT NEW LEARNING MODELS?

Teachers and administrators place high value on the importance of student ownership of learning. Educators know that through student ownership of their own learning processes, students become more engaged in what they are learning. Research has long demonstrated that engaging students in the learning process results in better student outcomes including increased attention and focus, developing of higher-order critical thinking skills, and a more meaningful overall learning experience. It is for this reason that many educators are concerned when their students do not regularly participate in remote learning instructional activities. Despite the high valuation that educators hold for student ownership and engagement in learning, the rush to ensure continuity of learning and develop new practices and policies that create efficiency with new school formats, may be at odds with creating the desired culture around self-directed learning.

Thomas Arnett, Senior Research Fellow at the Christensen Institute postulated recently that the challenges associated with remote learning (and the reason some students may not be engaging) is that too many schools are still trying to replicate the in-school learning experience in an online environment, rather than re-engineering the curriculum, instructional practices and even the role of the teacher to better fit the new paradigms of virtual and/or hybrid learning. This shift in thinking requires educators to think differently about the goals for optimum learning experiences. Is our goal to have students sitting quietly in classrooms,

physical or virtual, waiting for teacher direction of the learning process or do we want to use this unique situation to develop student capacities for active learning where students have greater ownership over the when, how and what of the learning process? To accommodate hybrid learning, some schools are turning back the clock to a time when teachers' role was primarily the "sage on the stage." By requiring teachers to stand in one camera-optimum spot in their physical classroom while lecturing to a mix of students, some in the same room as well as others who are online, schools may be inadvertently promoting a passive learning approach. The goal of ensuring an equitable learning experience is obvious. The result however is a failure to take advantage of the unique characteristics of a hybrid learning environment and supporting technologies to create more self-directed, ownership-empowered learning experiences for students.

Education leaders already have a pre-existing roadmap for how to address classroom efficiencies and equity concerns with new school formats and at the same time, sponsor student ownership of their learning process. Prior to the pandemic-induced school closures, the most significant change in classroom learning over the past 15 years has been the introduction of mobile devices for student use. Schools and districts have made significant investments in tablets, laptops, and Chromebooks to facilitate this new approach to student learning, even prior to school closures. Coupled with targeted teacher professional development and mobile-enabled content and resources, teachers have developed new competencies with integrating mobile learning practices within their instruction. **The increased usage and reliance upon mobile devices in spring resulted in 55% of teachers now saying that they are comfortable supporting their students' use of mobile devices as a learning tool.** Like the shift to digital learning, teachers have had to adopt new mobile-supportive instructional practices that take full advantage of the learning potential when every child has a personally assigned computer to use for learning. The same adoption process with new practices is needed now to fully appreciate the potential of virtual and hybrid learning.

Teachers' and school administrators' views today on how mobile learning supports student ownership can provide insights for this discussion. As illustrated in Table 3, 72% of principals and 63% of teachers say that mobile learning results in students taking greater responsibility for their own learning. Teachers in schools where the majority of the student population are minorities (64%) feel even more strongly than their peers in majority white schools (58%) about the value of mobile devices to support student ownership.

Table 3: Views of teachers and administrators on how mobile learning supports student ownership of learning in the classroom

WHAT IS THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF MOBILE DEVICES IN THE HANDS OF STUDENTS?	PERCENTAGE OF EDUCATORS WHO AGREE			
	K-12 teachers	K-12 teachers in majority minority schools	K-12 teachers in majority white schools	K-12 school administrators
Increases student engagement in learning	76%	78%	72%	85%
Ability for students to review materials or self-remediate anytime they want	76%	76%	76%	80%
Promotes self-directed learning	71%	71%	70%	79%
Increases student responsibility for their own learning	63%	64%	58%	72%
Students can be content creators not just consumers	64%	64%	61%	72%

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These valuations indicate that teachers and administrators already understand the potential of technology to support the development of student ownership and engagement in learning. This positioning is further validated by other ways that school administrators connect effective use of technology with student ownership. For example, 59% of school administrators say that digital content usage in the classroom can extend students' learning beyond the school day, thus empowering students to self-direct learning. Making connections such as these are important for building teacher awareness and competencies in sponsoring student ownership of their own learning, as well as helping to develop a new school culture that values student ownership, self-directed learning and purposeful engagement.

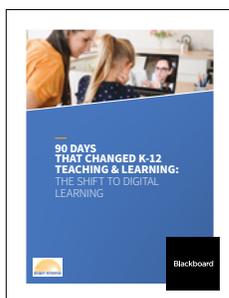


ENDING THOUGHTS—QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

As education leaders, parents and communities continue to reflect on the experiences from spring 2020, this series of executive briefs explores key takeaways from this shift to digital learning that we believe should be part of an ongoing reflection process in every school and district. It is our hope that the data-informed insights shared through these briefs will enlighten local discussions on these issues. In addition to this brief, Sponsoring Student Ownership of Learning, the other three briefs in the series include:

- **90 Days That Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning: The Shift to Digital Learning**

The cavalcade of school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the sudden and unplanned shift in the delivery mechanism for instruction, from primarily face-to-face, in-classroom instruction to digital learning facilitated over the Internet from home. Almost overnight, technology tools became the principal instrument for enabling the continuity of learning for students across the country. It also goes without saying that the roughly 90 days of school closures most likely forever changed our expectations for teaching and learning in K-12 education, and most certainly has shone a new spotlight on the role of digital tools, content and resources within the learning experience.



[DOWNLOAD BRIEF 1](#)

- **90 Days That Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning: Spotlight on Equity in Learning**

The sudden and unplanned move to remote e-learning resulted in a spotlight on the challenges to ensure that every student has appropriate, safe and consistent access to digital tools and resources to support learning outside of school. But creating equity in learning environments is about more than provisioning a Chromebook and a Wifi hotspot to a family. Equity in access to quality teaching and learning matters too.



DOWNLOAD BRIEF 2

- **90 Days That Changed K-12 Teaching and Learning: Strengthening the Bonds of Communications**

While schools have long championed the importance of school to home communications and encouraged family engagement with local schools, the remote e-learning environment has promoted effective communications from important to absolutely imperative. But what does effective communications mean in this new era, especially relative to the dialogue between teacher and student?



DOWNLOAD BRIEF 3

To support ongoing discussion around these critical issues, each executive brief in the series aims to provide research-based findings as a catalyst for new local discussions on the experiences of students, families and educators with remote e-learning and how to most effectively prepare for the uncertainty of the next school year and beyond. To assist education leaders with realizing that goal, here is a short list of thoughtful questions that can be used to jumpstart new conversations within your classrooms as well as school and district offices. While reviewing the questions, consider the best ways to create contextually relevant learning experiences across all new school formats and how to empower and sponsor greater student ownership of the learning process. Share your thoughts on these questions or how you have used them to support your planning efforts with your stakeholders on Twitter using this hashtag: [#90DaysofK12Change](https://twitter.com/hashtag/90DaysofK12Change)

1. While educators and parents place a high premium on the role of technology in fostering greater student ownership of their own learning, more work is needed to understand how to do that effectively. What types of digital tools and resources best support learning experiences that help students develop a new ethos around their responsibilities for learning? Do teachers know how to use these tools and resources effectively to create self-directed learning experiences? How should we evaluate the efficacy of those learning experiences to understand where improvements are possible?
2. Students are having a universal experience outside of school self-directing learning and developing greater ownership of the learning process. But is that also true within their school environments? What can we do as leaders to ensure that all students have access to learning experiences that help them develop greater ownership of their learning pathways? How can we help all students, regardless of home zip code or family background, develop the skills and self-efficacy they need to take responsibility for their educational destiny and to be advocates for their own learning preferences?
3. The sudden shift to digital learning in spring 2020 also resulted in a mindset change for our teachers to start thinking about technology as an effective instructional delivery tool, not just the means for keeping students engaged in learning. This mindset shift is necessary also for teachers to think differently about how to sponsor greater student ownership of their learning processes. What types of professional learning are needed to help teachers develop new practices around student ownership development? How can administrators support teachers as they develop new classroom policies and approaches that put more responsibility for learning directly in the hands of students? What do teachers need today to become more comfortable with this new environment?

ABOUT PROJECT TOMORROW

Project Tomorrow's nonprofit mission is to support the effective implementation of research-based learning experiences for students in K-12 schools. Project Tomorrow is particularly interested in the role of digital tools, content and resources in supporting students' development of college and career ready skills. The organization's landmark research is the Speak Up Research Project which annually polls K-12 students, parents, educators and community members about the impact of technology resources on learning experiences both in school and out of school, and represents the largest collection of authentic, unfiltered stakeholder voice on digital learning. Since 2003, almost 6 million K-12 students, parents, teachers, librarians, principals, technology leaders, district administrators and members of the community have shared their views and ideas through the Speak Up Project.

Learn more at www.tomorrow.org

ABOUT BLACKBOARD

Blackboard's unique approach to K-12 education focuses on creating a seamless and engaging experience for each learner. Our platform provides a way for students to learn in a safe, connected, and technologically savvy environment by focusing in advancing personalized learning and engaging and informing the entire community. For more information visit:

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ENDNOTES

- i. <https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/10-drivers-student-engagement>
- ii. <https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/10-drivers-student-engagement>
- iii. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov08/vol66/num03/The-Architecture-of-Ownership.aspx>
- iv. <https://teaching.washington.edu/topics/engaging-students-in-learning>
- v. <https://www.christenseninstitute.org/blog/looking-to-improve-hybrid-and-remote-instruction-consider-student-directed-learning>