Charlotte Students Virtually Getting By – Barely

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By Nyle Paul (JAC 210 assignment for Prof. Waltz)

Imagine trying to complete an important writing assignment that is due at 11:59 p.m., and the schoolwork submission portal completely shuts down for the rest of the day.

That has been the reality for students in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School District since it shifted to virtual learning to protect students from COVID-19.

After initially letting students opt-in or out of virtual learning, the district went fully virtual one week before classes were scheduled to begin. The abrupt shift has students, teachers, administrations, and especially technical staff, scrambling to patch things together.

The first week of school was filled with technical difficulties, schedule uncertainties, and multiple phone calls.

The YMCA's School + program, where students come to attend their online classes, has tried to fill in the gaps and support students who are frustrated and discouraged.

From incorrect schedules, to lost zoom links and submission portals, to overwhelmed servers, nearly everything went wrong. Students who were new to the school didn't have their teachers' names or class schedules.

Chromebooks were glitching. The Canvas portal, which stores all of the students' class zoom links and submission slots, was down due to the high usage of the server, which provides internet to numerous school districts within North Carolina.

IT difficulties are plaguing schools across the nation. With schools swiftly switching to online, there has not been time to adequately test for the performance of IT servers under high usage volume. As a result, servers malfunctioned.

"As a district, we do not practice e-learning a whole lot," said Thomas Nawrocki, executive director of IT at Charleston County School District, said. "Once they started talking about teachers sending lessons via Google Drive or Google Meets, we had to act pretty quick."

The district uses an interface for teachers to post assignments and grades, but it has had problems as well. "I have had some difficulties with turning my work in on time due to the Canvas portal malfunctioning," said Peyton Paul, a 10-grade student enrolled in CMS.

Some of the IT issues stem from at-home difficulties.

"There were probably about 12 to 15 million students that did not have internet access at all," said educational digital divide researchers Nicol Turner Lee.

Some blame the school district for being unprepared.

"I do not believe that CMS prepared themselves to operate successfully in the virtual learning shift," said Stephanie Nelson, a parent to a high schooler enrolled in CMS. "It does not seem like they ran tests on the programs to ensure that there would be no major issues like what we're experiencing. I understand that this is new for CMS, but better preparation could have been taken."

The virtual learning tools are confusing to both students and teachers.

"The way that the schedules are set up is confusing. Logging in and out of zoom is confusing as well. The teachers do not really know how to operate all of the programs, either" said Jazmine Higgins, a 10th grader enrolled in CMS. "There are many times where we are helping the teachers navigate through the programs."

Still, some students find the virtual learning shift to be a relief.

"I enjoy not being in the in-person environment because I have the freedom to do more things, however I do think that this virtual learning shift has made me a little lax," said Peyton Paul.

At the YMCA School + program, counselors are concerned that students are losing focus and motivation. When the school technology fails, some students shift their attention to YouTube, TikTok, and many other social media and gaming sites, one counselor said. When the virtual learning portal is running smooth, the students are more engaged in their classes and schoolwork.

"It is now going into the 4th week of school for CMS," one counselor said. "Some progress has been made since the first week of school, but CMS still has a long way to go."