

City parents with younger children say they face challenges with virtual learning
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While at least a half-dozen Charlottesville City Schools parents lauded improvements made with virtual learning since spring, some parents with younger children said they face tougher challenges with online platforms.

And computer literacy and short attention spans could be contributing factors to the issue, city parents said.

Faith Vandever, a mother of three CCS students, said online learning for her 5-year-old kindergartner is much harder than for her fourth-grader, who has no problem operating a computer.

Vandever praises the teachers for doing a great job, like directing them on how to mute during a breakout session.

"It's really hard for him to stay focused for so long," Vandever said. "He's struggling. It's just a lot of extra directions."

Vandever, who supervises all her children at the same time all day, said not only is her son learning the content for a kindergartener, he's also learning computer literacy — which is a lot for a 5-year-old.

But she does not blame the city schools, adding that she's not even sure what the administration could do to better assist her. She said the teachers are doing the best job possible for what's happening.

"All the teachers are trying to be as engaging as possible to the computer," she said. "They are emailing super promptly. I'm getting texts from teachers throughout the day."

Vandever said she has created a schedule to manage her children's schoolwork, making sure that they go outside during the day as well as ensuring that they all eat at the same time.

Because she has a teaching degree, she said it's much easier for her than it would be for anyone else because she understands how to take a lesson provided by a teacher and make it easier for her children.

"It's just a lot because all day they're asking for help," she said. "I'm going from one kid to the next and trying to sit with a kindergarten as much as possible."

The challenge is not unique to the Vandever family.



Jessica Harris, a CCS parent said, having a kindergarten who needs her support to stay focused coupled with her son and working a full-time job is challenging. Credit: Credit: Submitted by Jessica Harris

Jessica Harris, a CCS parent said, having a kindergarten who needs her support to stay focused coupled with her son and working a full-time job is challenging. The single mother said staying in front of a computer in general is already hard for adults.

With her daughter's situation, she needs to be with her or with close proximity.

"It's just hard because she's young, and she doesn't want to sit still, and she wants to mute and turn her camera off and not want to sit in front of it," she said.

"For her, she was excited to join Jackson-Via because my son is there and he's in second grade, and

she's missing all those social opportunities to really meet her classes. She sees them on Zoom. But there's nothing like being able to have a good lunch with them and being able to engage with them in a classroom setting."

Harris added that she's worried about how her daughter will be able to acclimate to the in-person classes as well as standardized testing. She's also concerned about how much her daughter is learning and retaining the information in a virtual setting.

But virtual learning is far the only concern that Harris has.

Harris praises the city schools for improving online learning since Gov. Ralph Northam in March ordered all schools to close. But Harris said the city schools still need to address the lack of childcare.

"As a parent who struggles with childcare, I feel like that is really lacking," she said. "The burden became on the parents to find additional childcare that wasn't supplemented by the schools."

If she's not able to assist her children either during the day or after school, she's left to find childcare alone.

"I don't feel like the division has considered those factors. I'm a single mom, and I don't have family in this area," she said.

The city schools have partnered with third-parties, including the YMCA, to assist children with virtual learning. But Harris said the partnership doesn't seem fair because it's income driven, and she would have to pay for her children to attend school there, whereas if the schools were open, they'd attend the schools for free.

Harris added she's fortunate to have a job that allows her to work from home.

The city schools recently considered resuming in-person classes in October. But parents and community members pushed back against the decision, citing concerns over the rise of COVID-19 cases in Albemarle County and Charlottesville.

As of Monday, Charlottesville reported 1,222 COVID-19 cases, 29 hospitalizations and 28 deaths since record keeping began. Albemarle has reported 1,274 cases, 76 hospitalizations and 21 deaths.

CCS has convened a committee to discuss options for a return to in-person instruction with Nov. 9. as the earliest possible return date, according to the division. An update will be presented to the School Board on Thursday, the division also said.

CCS Chief Academic Officer Katina Otey said computer literacy among younger children is certainly an issue that could come up if a kindergartner has not been in school and has not used technology.

That could be a challenge, Otey said.

"We took the first week to really try to get kids acclimated to utilizing their devices, to utilizing Canvas [educational software] and developing relationships with the teachers now," she said. "It's not a perfect situation."

While parents are voicing concerns about virtual learning for kindergarten, they're also praising the city schools for improvements.

"One hundred percent improvement in the spring. It's not perfect, but it's going really well compared to the spring for sure," Vandever said. "They have taken such great steps to try to do the best they can with online learning. They've changed software that's much more user friendly for the kids."

Vandever said the school had a meet-and-greet that allowed her children to meet the teacher.

"Throughout the day, they're getting face-to-face personal interaction with their actual teacher, whereas in the spring, we were just sent, like a PowerPoint of a teacher we didn't know talking through a lesson."

Harris said her daughter's teacher is responsive. The school has apps set up to send reminders, but the teacher is also communicating with her family via texts. For instance, the teacher was able to swiftly assist her when her daughter was kicked out of Zoom.

"The school did a good job making sure that every student has a computer," she said. "My daughter has a computer. My son has a laptop, so that has really helped."