

# HOME ROOM

Classes have resumed in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, but most students and staff are relying on virtual instruction, and questions remain about how well learning is happening.

By TyLisa C. Johnson



Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy teacher Sean Means is back to work with his students, adjusting to teaching from his home instead of the classroom.



**S**ean Means is overjoyed to be back with his students at Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy 6-12, even though it is in a completely virtual learning environment for the first time.

He relishes hearing his students joke and laugh with each other. He hadn't seen them since Pittsburgh city schools were shuttered in March because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and many families' lack of home technology made virtual interaction almost impossible.

Now, his students' faces remind Mr. Means why he became an educator. These days he clings hard to his mission, as he embarks on a completely unprecedented school year, which began with full-time electronic, or e-learning, in the face of the health crisis.

His biggest concern to address: Are children still falling behind?



Sean Means, teacher at Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy.

“The more time we’re away from class [physically], the bigger the opportunity gap becomes,” Mr. Means said. “Honestly, that is one thing I am extremely afraid of . . . because I do believe education is such an opportunity for them to create a better life for themselves down the road. And while we can create an all right, decent platform, I don’t think we can replace all the opportunities that lie within our building.”

Student regression is just one major issue for educators like Mr. Means as students return to school amid a year with new and possibly unforeseen challenges ahead.

In the last weeks of summer, thousands of teachers and students across Allegheny County started classes that were a blend of traditional, hybrid and completely virtual environments. Many were filled with anxieties and hopes for the ensuing school year and the future of education as their communities grappled with the best way to provide equitable instruction to all students during this difficult time.

Challenges with access to technology — laptops, tablets and internet connections — food insecurity and threats to social-emotional well-being intertwine among the major concerns that families, teachers and organizations countywide are working to address. When the pandemic struck and school

districts were forced to transition to virtual learning, the digital divide and technological gap were made clear, according to staff members of The Heinz Endowments’ Learning team.

Not only are “the inequities widened in terms of who’s impacted negatively, but the inequities are widened in terms of what are some of the lasting changes to the way that families and young people experience learning—and who has a leverage point to get ahead, versus who’s systematically held back,” said Endowments Creative Learning Program Officer Mac Howison.

Stan Thompson, senior education program director at the Endowments, echoed Mr. Howison. “The reality is you still have folks who are in a crisis, and everyone’s scrambling trying to figure out how do we address this,” Dr. Thompson said. “We’ve never been here before.”

Starting Aug. 20, all staff across the Pittsburgh Public Schools began training on platforms that the district now relies on heavily in the new virtual learning environment, including Microsoft Teams and Schoology. For five days, staff received a combination of different types of instruction—synchronous trainings by colleagues-turned-coaches and asynchronous online courses on a vast range of topics. Counselors, social

workers and paraprofessionals received training specific to their fields.

Meanwhile, school officials had difficulty pinning down when and how to start the school year for the district's roughly 22,000 students. The fall reopening was delayed a week as the district awaited the arrival of a technology shipment. The schedule for in-person instruction for most students was pushed back three times, finally settling on January 2021—for now. Exceptions were initially made for students who have special needs, are medically fragile or are English language learners, allowing them to have some in-person learning in school buildings beginning Nov. 9. But later that week, when Allegheny County experienced a sharp uptick in COVID-19 cases, school officials shifted all district students back to full-time online instruction.

By the end of November, the district had obtained 23,719 technology devices, already distributed nearly 18,000 to students and faculty, and was developing a plan for giving out devices to those families who had been using their personal home equipment, district spokeswoman Ebony Pugh said.

The total cost of device purchases for the district, including warranties and accessories, surpassed \$10.7 million. The Endowments provided PPS \$360,000 in grant funding to aid the district's effort to order the thousands of devices needed to shift the district to a one-to-one model, where each student has a district device.

"One of the things is understanding that, even though you're going one-to-one, it's not a panacea," Superintendent Anthony Hamlet said. "There's still a large level of training that needs to be had for our faculty and staff."

Kendrah Foster, who lives in Pittsburgh's Observatory Hill neighborhood, breathed a sigh of relief at the end of August when she finally received devices from the district for her three children—a first-grader, second-grader and third-grader at Allegheny K-5—days before school was first scheduled to start. Once classes began, her family faced several device issues. Sometimes her children were kicked off the platform in the middle of class; other times technology simply didn't work altogether. For her children, who have emotional and behavioral disabilities, this made learning a challenge.

Though remote learning has become easier over time, "it's been very hard," Ms. Foster said. Her children lack the structure they need. However, their teachers have been an invaluable support, sending extra resources and educational

tools. One teacher even dropped off paper instructional packets to the family in the spring when learning first shifted online.

Teachers, in general, have been organized, helpful and encouraging for her and her children, Ms. Foster said. Without their assistance throughout the pandemic, she likely would have shifted her children to home schooling.

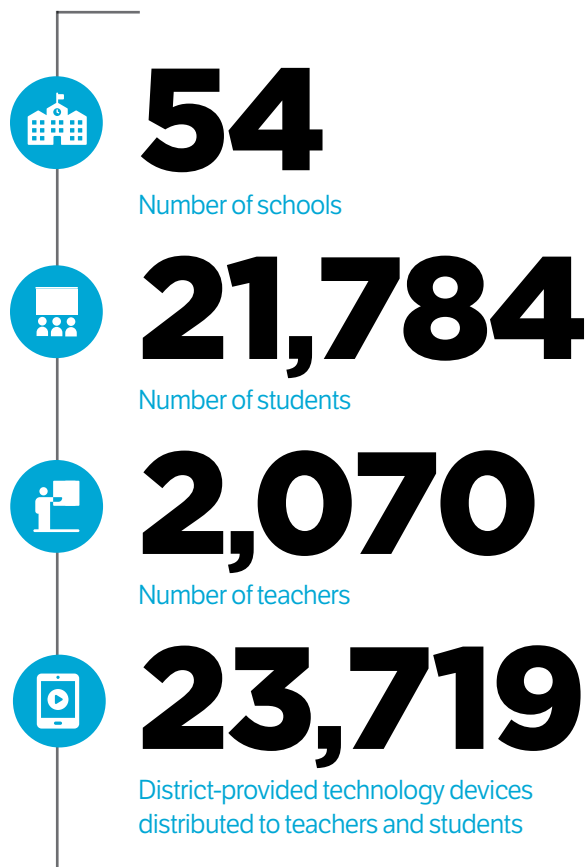
She was less impressed with the district's response to the pandemic, which she described as "abysmal" and rife with confusing messaging and a lack of proper preparation.

"They were not prepared when they could have been," she said. "It was not thought out well and I feel like time was wasted. ... At the end of March, that is when they should have been planning."

As a parent to children with disabilities, Ms. Foster explained that she's seen how much her children needed better planning and organization by school officials to help make their adjustment to online learning less difficult.

"There should have been one place where the kid logs on and everything should be there. You should not have to go to several different things to get what you need," she said. "That is not only a problem for my kids, but for many children who have learning disabilities, behavioral issues."

While PPS, the county's largest district, faced challenges to secure technology, some school districts in the Allegheny Intermediate Unit "have the very same issues Pittsburgh Public



### NO SMALL TASK

Getting Pittsburgh Public Schools students—and many teachers—up to speed to work from home meant that the district had to distribute nearly 24,000 technology devices such as laptops and tablets.

was having without necessarily having all the same benefactors that Pittsburgh Public had,” said Rosanne Javorsky, assistant executive director of teaching and learning at the AIU, which provides educational services to 42 Allegheny County districts outside of Pittsburgh.

The AIU received a \$200,000 grant from the Endowments and used it to purchase more than 1,000 technology devices and other technology for families in under-resourced school districts, including McKeesport Area, Sto-Rox and Clairton.

Educators and families also have leaned on their neighborhood, familial and other communities to transition students to a virtual learning environment. This includes getting technology and Wi-Fi connections for students who need it most.

Vanessa Buffry heads the digital inclusion department at Neighborhood Allies, which has been calling attention to the digital divide and working to close the gap. Throughout the spring and summer, Neighborhood Allies worked to get new

devices to families and help them connect to the internet. The nonprofit community organization received \$50,000 in the spring from the Endowments to provide refurbished technology devices to PPS for its students still without technology.

“People could get by with daily functions without having digital access before. You could go face-to-face to a store . . . all of those businesses and services were open with personnel who could walk you through the process,” Ms. Buffry said. But the coronavirus pandemic flipped that on its head.

“There was just this spiraling effect where people were literally cut off from the world. They’re cut off from their daily functions. They’re cut off from their ability to do schooling and at the same time we’re looking at the possibility of an economic recession.”

She worries that with the pandemic, “we’ll see an even steeper effect of [students] who are falling behind academically in a way that their maybe white and more privileged peers are not falling behind because they have computers at home and they can access content remotely.”

Ms. Foster doesn’t worry too much about her kids falling behind. She’s found hope in “the connections that we are still able to have with other families.”

“Even though we are all different and in different situations, we’re having some of the same struggles and some of the same successes,” she said. “We’re hopeful that the kids are going to be resilient and, when all of this is over, be able to pick up the pieces and continue on with their education and their friendships.” **h**

**“We’re hopeful that the kids are going to be resilient and, when all of this is over, be able to pick up the pieces and continue on with their education and their friendships.”**

**Kendrah Foster**, Pittsburgh Public Schools parent



Kendrah Foster, who is raising her nephew DeVonte, right, and nieces Winter, far left, and Stormy, center, as her own, helps them with classwork in a makeshift classroom in the basement of their Observatory Hill home.