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## **For Adult English Learners In D.C., Virtual Learning Has Its Pros And Cons**

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## Tyrone Turner / WAMU

With fall classes getting underway, many teachers and students in the D.C. area have made the jump from in-person to [virtual learning](#). But for thousands of adult English learners who largely belong to the area's immigrant community of [1.3 million people](#), the transition to classes held via teleconferencing platforms like Zoom and Google Hangouts comes with particular challenges.

In interviews with DCist, some adult English learners say they're juggling work, parenting, and learning another language — all while adapting to new technology in the middle of a pandemic that [hinders them from interacting with their teachers face-to-face](#). Learning a foreign language remotely also presents potential tradeoffs, including with troubleshooting complex grammatical and writing issues, analyzing body language and situational context, and engaging in immersive experiences such as field trips to museums and theaters.

“When you're at school, it's easier to focus on what's being taught,” says Margarita Galeano, who moved to D.C. three years ago from El Salvador. “But at home, it's much more difficult because there are always distractions. Your spouse, the kids, the house — it's one thing or another.”

When the COVID-19 crisis hit the area in March, Galeano was enrolled at the Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, which has campuses in Columbia Heights and Eckington and focuses on language education and career training for adults. (The school is named after a Puerto Rican immigrant who [founded various programs](#) geared toward the District's Latinx community.) She was learning how to read in English and getting help with citizenship prep when the school — like others across the city and region — transitioned to remote learning halfway through the spring semester.

While Galeano says the overall experience has been great, she doesn't think the quality of education has been quite the same since the switch to the virtual model. “It's a really good school and the learning experience has been too,” she says. “But the quality just feels a bit lower.”

Although remote learning has introduced some obstacles for Galeano, she says it's allowed her to get more comfortable using a computer, something she wouldn't have had the opportunity to do under different circumstances. From home, she can also assist her son with his schooling at a local charter school, which is happening virtually as well.

“It’s helped me quite a lot because I’ve learned more about using a computer and the internet, and all of that has been useful to help my son who’s in school too,” says Galeano, who adds that she’s excited about her own upcoming classes with Carlos Rosario, set to begin Sept. 8.

Like [many other schools in the region](#), Carlos Rosario is starting its fall semester on an entirely virtual basis. The school’s administrators say this move is necessary until it’s significantly safer to conduct in-person classes again. COVID-19 continues to circulate in D.C., having reached a [two-and-a-half-month peak in community spread in early August](#).

“I’m not going to start school [at our campuses] until I am 100% confident that we have the resources, all of the safety protocols, and the masks we need in place,” says Allison Kokkoros, Carlos Rosario’s chief executive officer. Kokkoros says her school is closely paying attention to guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as other authorities.

Carlos Rosario delayed its fall start from Aug. 31 to Sept. 8 because of backlog issues with laptops and tablets that it’d ordered in June. It’s among numerous schools [around the U.S.](#) seeing [delayed starts](#) and [technology shortages](#) on account of the pandemic. In D.C., families also [face longstanding, widespread disparities in digital access](#), now made worse by the crisis.

Kokkoros says the devices Carlos Rosario ordered are currently being shipped to the school, and once they’ve all been set up, they’ll be distributed to students in the first week of classes. “Hallelujah,” she adds. “How in the world are you going to have distance learning if [students] don’t already have access to laptops?”

As of right now, Margarita Galeano and her son share a laptop that she originally purchased for her daughters. “It was theirs, but now my son and I share it for school,” she says. Without it, she believes she and her son would fall behind in their respective educations.

English-learning programs are one of few ways that adult English learners — often low-income immigrant — can receive comprehensive social support. Some programs, such as the nonprofit Washington English Center, assist students with professional development or serve as a hub for community resources, whether public or private.

Marisela Castillo, a student who enrolled at the center after coming to the U.S. from Venezuela, says the nonprofit doesn’t just offer classes: It’s helped her find stability amid the pandemic. “It’s much more than just English,” she says. “They are always

looking for resources to help me. I've been working with them for four months, and I can say that during this quarantine, I have gotten so much better with them.”

In a way, the switch to remote instruction has made learning opportunities more accessible for students and volunteers at the center. While its fall classes don't start until Sept. 21, students have been working remotely over the summer. Some have been able to participate despite not owning computers, since the program carries out some instruction over the phone.

“What we've realized is that it's really allowed us to reach students that previously were not able to attend WEC in person,” says Jessie Ebersole, the center's director of academic programs. “Even if they lived in the D.C. area, the commute was difficult. They had demanding schedules. They might be working multiple jobs, or they had childcare or eldercare responsibilities.”

Although people have still had to balance their personal responsibilities with virtual schooling, WEC student Büsra Nur Arapoğlu says the transition has saved her money and time. “If I was attending classes in person, I would have to drive there and back to my house,” says Arapoğlu, an au pair who immigrated from Turkey. “It doesn't work with my scheduling.”

As the pandemic goes on without a [widely available COVID-19 vaccine](#), teachers like Andrea Veloza believe it's important to prioritize instructing students about technology first, so they can then succeed at learning English—wherever they are.

“It is a shift for all of us,” says Veloza, a teacher at Carlos Rosario. “We all need to really understand that we're all in this together and we need to be patient.”

<https://dcist.com/story/20/09/02/dc-adult-english-learners-remote-schooling-challenges/>