

## THE GREAT DIVIDE

# Online, but off-kilter: A day in the life of a Boston sixth-grader

Learning at home, 12-year-old yearns for more contact with teachers

By [Bianca Vázquez Tones](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 5, 2020, 5:22 p.m.



Malaki Solo, a sixth-grader, works on his homework in his family's living room on Tuesday morning. Malaki, who is a generally confident student, has been feeling unmoored during this online learning experiment. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

*This is the first story in an ongoing series, [Education Interrupted](#), which looks at how school closures in the wake of the coronavirus crisis are affecting individual students. [Sign up](#) to receive a regular newsletter from the Great Divide team. You can reach out to us at [thegreatdivide@globe.com](mailto:thegreatdivide@globe.com) with story ideas and tips.*

As a sixth-grader at Boston's Lilla G. Frederick Pilot Middle School, Malaki Solo never shied away from raising his hand with a question. What does personification mean? What does an organelle do? Which Egyptian god was responsible for ensuring healthy crops?

But studying on the living room couch in his family's Dorchester apartment these last two weeks, Malaki hasn't yet figured out how to put his hand up, virtually speaking.

Since schools shut down in Boston on March 17, the 12-year-old's direct contact with his teachers has been limited to two online exchanges with his math teacher and a few text messages (from his English instructor, the only teacher Malaki knows how to reach quickly when a question occurs). Most days, he picks up assignments posted online, and completes them alone: no questions asked; no calls from his teachers; and no way to call most of them.

"It would be better if I just had [all the teachers'] phone numbers," Malaki said. "I could call them."



Sixth-grader Malaki Solo sat with his mom, Larae Robinson, last week while he worked on his homework in his family's home in Dorchester. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

A few weeks into a mass school shutdown that has affected millions of students nationwide — and more than 50,000 in Boston — immense, potentially devastating, [inequity](#) characterizes the response across districts, schools, classrooms, and teachers. Top-of-the-line [private and public schools](#) have recreated a [normal day](#) online with lectures, interactive features, and strict attendance expectations; [others](#) have yet to send home much work.

That inequity can be glimpsed even within individual homes and school districts: While Malaki's teachers have been slower to respond, his three school-age siblings' teachers and schools — also part of the Boston system — have regularly called to check in about homework progress, schedule virtual parent-teacher conferences, and offer online personal tutoring.

The family's experience underscores the unevenness of teachers' approach to online learning, some of it unavoidable since teachers themselves are in such different situations at home and bring such different levels of technical training and acumen. Yet some families argue that more consistent guidelines and expectations might help.



Malaki Solo walked to take a bag of groceries back to his home from Joseph Lee K-8 school. BLAKE NISSEN/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Globe spent a school day following Malaki — virtually, via Zoom — to glimpse how one city middle-schooler was faring. Although there have been some bright spots — Malaki has enjoyed learning how to shoot videos of himself doing yoga, an assignment in his yoga class — he would give it all up for some in-person joking with his friends and some real-time feedback from his teachers.

On this Thursday, nine days into the school shutdown, Malaki woke up at 8:15 in the bedroom he shares with his 20-year-old sister, Nychole. While she slept, he donned a tie-dye sweatshirt and wool bomber jacket with leather sleeves. The family of seven — two parents and five children, ages six to 20 — lost their five-bedroom apartment and all of their possessions in a fire last fall. Now, they have squeezed into a three-bedroom apartment with only one bathroom.

Malaki's first task of the morning was breakfast. Before his four siblings started their school day, he walked two blocks to pick up breakfast and lunch for himself and the other kids at the Lee K-8 School, the closest distribution point for free meals provided by Boston Public Schools. His mother voiced concerns about losing hours at the hospital where she works as a medical assistant, so Malaki stepped up to help with food.

From a young age, he had emerged as a leader in the family, consistently watching out for his two younger siblings, family members say. If he made himself a sandwich, he'd offer to make them one, too.

For the first week of school closures, Malaki wore his school uniform — a cobalt-blue polo shirt and khakis — so that he could feel like he was still in school, he says. He wanted to continue but his mom got tired of washing it every day. It's now tucked away in a box, waiting for the morning that Malaki's middle school reopens, whenever that may be.

By 9 a.m. Malaki had returned to his apartment with bags of sandwiches, cereal, and apple slices. Sitting on the sofa, he charged up his school-issued Chromebook laptop and opened Google Classroom, a free platform, where he found his assignments for the day. He started with English, reading one chapter of the young-adult novel "Flush," about a teenage boy in Florida trying to prove that a casino boat is dumping raw sewage into the harbor. Then he planned to dive into math and science. His social studies teacher had not yet posted any assignments (she started doing so a few days later).

Malaki, who wants to be a police detective, approaches his day methodically, checking off his assignments one by one. Malaki's siblings are not always so organized. When schools first closed, Malaki's mother, Larae Robinson, didn't worry about him. "I knew he would be on top of his stuff," she said. "I worried about my other kids."

As Malaki sprawled on the couch reading, his mother sat in a chair nearby splitting her time between a reality television show and loosely monitoring her son. Malaki looked sleepy.

During the first week of the closure, he consistently went to bed by 10. But he had recently started staying up past midnight watching anime on Netflix.

As soon as Malaki finished the chapter, he sat up and moved to the floor, placing his Chromebook on the sofa cushion in front of him. He dug into questions about what he had just read: Identify one piece of figurative language in the chapter. What type of figurative language did you identify? In all, his English classwork lasted 40 minutes.

He turned next to math, his favorite subject. The assignment asked him to determine the ratios of given numbers. He knocked it off in 30 minutes. Well before 11 a.m., only a short science assignment remained on his academic docket for the day.

Malaki enjoys his academic work, but there is so much that he misses about school: roaming the halls, playing tennis. But there are two things he pines after most of all: telling jokes with his friends (a favorite: Who did the chickens vote for for president? Ba-ROCK!) and getting quick, personal feedback from his teachers.

Now that feedback typically comes electronically, and typically with a three-day delay.

Sometimes, the work returns graded: "8 out of 10 correct." Other times, he receives vague feedback, "It's strong, but not strong enough."

Malaki wants to know how his work could be stronger, and why he got an answer wrong. Doing so has proved harder than it ought to be. He has tried to reach out. At one point, the 12-year-old queried one teacher about an assignment through a Google Classroom message; he never heard back. (He was surprised recently when he tried the same method with his math teacher and got a quick response.) The school district requires teachers to give students a way to ask questions.

At times, Malaki craves the more instantaneous, familiar connection of a phone. He has only his English teacher's number, yet he didn't immediately think to use it one day when he couldn't get his head around an essay prompt. "I read it over and over again," Malaki said. "I couldn't understand what she wanted."

Malaki's mother says the communication and support have been much stronger from the teachers of her three other school-aged children, all attending Boston Public Schools. Her six-year-old son Micah's kindergarten teacher texts her every day to check in. At the same school, UP Academy Holland, her fifth-grader, Seriah, texts and Facetimes with her teachers regularly.

Her eighth-grade daughter Anisha's teachers at the Washington Irving Middle School have tried as much as possible to recreate the regular schedule on Zoom, meeting three times a week for live classes. Anisha's math teacher offers her one-on-one virtual tutoring. "They are on top of their game," Robinson said.

Increasingly she worries about what's up with Malaki's instructors. "Wouldn't [they] want to know how the kids are doing?" she said.

Teachers throughout Boston public schools are expected to do a "human/personal check in" with students at least once a week and make sure they have a way to ask live questions, according to a letter the district sent teachers immediately after the closure. The district and the Boston Teachers Union are still negotiating more specifics about teachers' responsibilities.

"Our goal is to provide the necessary resources and support to students to ensure they continue learning at home," said the district's communications director, Jessica Ridlen, in a statement. "We are constantly assessing and shifting how we meet our students' needs."

Administrators at Malaki's school heard from some families that they were overwhelmed by the school's outreach, Ridlen added. So they appointed homeroom teachers to be the first point of contact and answer general questions. The school social worker and grade-level deans have also reached out to families, Ridlen said. (More than two weeks after schools closed, Malaki's mother said she didn't know homeroom teachers were the point of contact, and hadn't heard from the social worker or dean. A dean called only after a Globe reporter shared her concerns with district officials.)

Malaki's English (and homeroom) teacher, Taylor Roberts, says many teachers have been "overwhelmed" trying to find resources to teach online and make sure all staff and families are safe. That has included a considerable amount of time trying to track down missing students. Roberts hasn't heard from nearly a third of her students in weeks.

Roberts, a first-year teacher, is grappling with how best to engage students through a lot of "trial and error."

Last week, she gave her first live class, a "mini-lesson" on some of the common mistakes she saw in recent student essays. She says Malaki is especially good at taking feedback; in fact, he craves it.

Yet Malaki's momentum has started to flag in recent days, something Roberts has seen in other students as well. Some who reliably turned in virtual assignments on time initially have started taking much longer.

“We’re trying to be patient,” she said. “It’s one thing when you’re in the classroom setting, and you have a teacher right in front of you and the encouragement of your peers.”

By 11:15, Malaki’s schoolwork was done and he turned his attention to helping Micah with the six-year-old’s assignment: practicing counting to 20. Most days, he looked forward to a long afternoon of playing Fortnite online with friends, but his mother, afraid that he was playing too much, asked him to refrain this afternoon. Malaki seemed uncertain what to do.

At noon, he glanced at his laptop; the excitement was palpable. “It’s my yoga teacher,” he exclaimed. “We’re going to have a class!”

He hadn’t even liked yoga before, but appreciates the chance to participate in something structured. “It made me feel better,” he said.

The 12-year-old’s excitement evaporated, however, when he learned that they wouldn’t be having a class after all, just a quick chat about the day’s previous lesson.

Malaki’s mother is starting to worry about her son’s waning energy — and his late-night anime viewing.

He has been finding it harder to stay awake during his studies. He recently went several days without checking teacher feedback on an essay, because he was worried that, for the first time ever, he might have received a failing grade.

He still wants to do well, but readily admits: “It’s starting to feel like summer vacation.”

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