

Service is beaming teachers into Georgia classrooms amid staff shortage

EDUCATION

By Ty Tagami

Georgia schools grappling with teacher shortages are addressing the issue with something many assumed would go away: remote learning.

This fast-growing alternative to in-person teaching differs from the massive pivot to virtual learning during COVID-19 in a notable way. The kids are in the classroom but the teacher is not.

The education technology company Elevate K-12 projects teachers into classrooms.

School administrators say it's not an ideal solution to the gaps in their rosters but add that a remote teacher is better than an adult lacking subject matter expertise.

"It's a good alternative to a long-term sub," said Kimberly Back, the human resources chief for Rockdale County Public Schools.

"Our No. 1 goal is still a highly qualified in-person teacher," Back said. "But it's comforting to know that we have Elevate in our pocket."

The company says it has teachers in five Georgia school districts, including Douglas and Rockdale counties in metro Atlanta.

Teachers have transferable skills, said Kenneth Dyer, the superintendent in Dougherty County who gave Elevate K-12 its first work in Georgia six years ago. In this tight labor market, teachers realize they can do something else.

"There are other areas in the economy that are growing, and they pay better," he said. "Less stress."

Dyer has had a hard time finding teachers since he became superintendent of that southwest Georgia district in 2017.

He invited Elevate K-12 into a middle school classroom that same year.

This year, he's deploying at least 15 Elevate K-12 teachers of his teaching staff out of about 970. Dyer said he has piloted Elevate K-12 teachers in elementary school classrooms, with possible expansion there. He said he may also deploy their teachers in special education classrooms.

School districts said the overall cost is about the same as an in-person teacher. They don't have to pay medical and retirement benefits, but they do have to pay a paraprofessional — an employee without teaching credentials — to staff the classrooms. Elevate K-12 trains them to work with its teachers.

Districts also said Elevate K-12 teachers have done a good job, but they didn't offer quantitative results. Back, the Rockdale official, said internal testing and surveys last spring after Elevate K-12's first year there confirmed that students learned as effectively with the company's teachers as with traditional teachers.

"Now, I will tell you that we're very selective on which students we place in that platform because it has to be a student who can be successful with that," Back added.

She also said the district has not yet sent the company's teachers into classrooms where students take the state's high-stakes Milestones exams. "We want to ensure that we have a little more control over what those students are getting."

Investors are betting on an enduring shortage.

A Wall Street Journal report last year said a venture capital firm behind the likes of Airbnb was leading a \$40 million investment in Elevate K-12. That was atop a previous round of funding, the report said.

Shaily Baranwal, a former teacher turned Elevate K-12 CEO, said the company she founded in 2015 is not just addressing a teacher shortage. She also wants better quality.

"You could still have a human being in the classroom who's certified in some way and it can still suck," she said, adding a few seconds later, "So what we are doing is we're working on improving the teaching in the classroom."

Dyer and Douglas County Superintendent Trent North have praise for the company.

North, the Georgia superintendent of the year, said through a spokeswoman that Elevate K-12 is a "remarkable" platform with "very strong" teachers. He said he prefers

in-person teachers who are embedded in the community and can help before, during and after school.

Even so, Douglas has about a dozen Elevate K-12 teachers among its teaching staff of 1,800, said Michelle Ruble, an associate superintendent there. Three Elevate K-12 teachers are in high school special education classes, she added.

Jennifer Darling-Aduana, an expert in online teaching, said remote models can be effective. They don't compare to a live teacher, the assistant professor at Georgia State University said. "But this certainly does seem to fill a short-term need if you're getting to August and you don't have a certified teacher for a classroom."

The teacher is usually displayed on a massive touchscreen known as a smart board. There is also a camera and microphone system for two-way communications. The platform includes a chat feature that allows students to communicate publicly or privately with the teacher. Other tools, such as instant online polling, allow the teacher to adjust pacing by asking the students whether they understood what was just taught.

The paraprofessionals help with communication and technical issues.

The flexibility of remote work drew Lori Jones to a job at Elevate K-12. She previously taught at public schools in Florida and New Jersey but left that career track when her aging parents in Delaware needed support. She moved there and eventually found her way to Elevate K-12, where she now teaches students in Arizona — and Georgia.

When she worked in person, she had to teach about a half-dozen classes a day. At Elevate K-12 last year, she was down to four, and this year, she's reducing her load to three.

"It's hard scheduling doctors appointments and things, especially if you work full time," Jones said.

There's another perk of being off-site. Paraprofessionals deal with discipline up close.

Jones has to address fights or other misbehavior "but I'm not dealing with the brunt of that," she said.

It's unclear whether Elevate K-12 is onto a long-term trend.

Fulton County Schools, among the largest school systems in Georgia, was using as many as 80 remote teachers from a subsidiary of staffing company ESS last school year. But as of early October, a district spokesman said, it was down to fewer than 10 of those virtual teachers.