

404 SCHOOL NOT FOUND

A look at one family's day of virtual learning

BY BRIAN HUYNH



An orange T. rex lies on its side at the exact spot on the wooden floor where Skyler and Sofia lost interest in it. Nearby, action figures with missing limbs lie face down on the ground only feet away from the small plastic folding table littered with pencils, an assortment of crumpled paper filled with past assignments and a school-issued Chromebook right in the middle.

For the next few hours, Skyler will stare at the dim screen from the leather ottoman bench tucked under the lip of the white makeshift desk. To his right, his cousin Linda Huynh acts as his tutor behind a cloth face mask she sewed after months of boredom. It's a role she reluctantly accepted along with Skyler's uncle, Vanchhoeng, who is making the best of his freshman year of high school in an adjacent bedroom. He'll have to battle through the constant noise of running water, traffic speeding past the living room windows and, of course, his restless kindergarten student and niece, Sofia. She will run and scream through the house to pass the hours until it's her time to learn. This is what a classroom looks like in 2020.

In homes all across Wisconsin, some version of this scene plays out every school day to varying degrees of success and frustration. Many school districts opted to start the fall semester online or with a hybrid model, giving parents the option of in-person or virtual classes. This choice, however accommodating it might appear on paper, is often not as simple as it might sound for many families like Aylin Sok's. We're cousins and Skyler's tutor is my older sister, so I see and hear this struggle from multiple perspectives.

8:45 a.m.

As a single mother of two, Aylin has to be up at 7:30 a.m. every school day to get her kids ready for their Zoom meetings at 8:45 a.m. Her son Skyler, 8, and her daughter Sofia, 5, sleep for an extra 30 minutes before she makes sure they brush their teeth and change their clothes. She tries to simulate a normal school day — so no pajamas in the virtual classroom.

Aylin starts the school day managing the chaos of two separate Zoom calls, on two separate school-issued Chromebooks, at the exact same time. She wishes there was more time to run from one to the other. Once the

kids are done, they have a cup of milk while their mom heads to the nail salon to start her 8-hour work day.

9:40 a.m.

Shortly after Aylin leaves, Linda arrives to assume the role of Skyler's tutor and Sofia's babysitter. Normally, Linda would only babysit on occasion. But in a pandemic, family roles are redefined and those who are capable, though not necessarily qualified, take on new responsibilities. Linda is a 23-year-old taking a gap year after graduating from UW-Madison with a bachelor's degree in psychology last summer.

ELA

For the first part of the day, Skyler focuses on English Language Arts. He watches an instructional video from his teacher before reading independently for 20 minutes. His current book of choice is the brightly illustrated "Doctor Strange: Mystery of the Dark Magic." Linda helps sound out words and guides him through reading assignments that range from annotating key passages in the story with sticky notes to writing plot summaries to recording videos where he describes the book.

Above: Skyler presses a stuffed animal against his face while working through an assignment at his home in Greenfield.

Opposite, top left: Sofia hugs a stuffed bear named Tomato as she starts her lessons in the virtual classroom.

Top right: Sofia eats a cracker and joins Skyler as he watches a video for class.

Middle: Linda walks her young cousin Skyler through an assignment.

Bottom left: While the kids eat lunch, Linda gets through science class, which usually consists of short videos.

Bottom right: Skyler reads the brightly illustrated "Doctor Strange: Mystery of the Dark Magic" as part of his ELA lesson.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN HUYNH

2020

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A photograph of a modern interior space, possibly a lounge or cafe. The room features a large window with a grid pattern of small, square panes. The window is illuminated from within, creating a warm, orange glow. In the foreground, several colorful chairs (red, orange, green, and black) are arranged around small tables. The ceiling is dark, and the overall atmosphere is contemporary and artistic.

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