

Preparing all students to succeed during COVID-19 pandemic

Schools must deal with months of lost learning because of virus, and achievement gaps



A teacher wearing protective face mask as she teaches close to pupils at a primary school in Morges, Switzerland, Monday, May 11, 2020. Swiss primary and secondary schools reopened with half of the students during the ongoing coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic. ... more >

By Eric Hanshek - - Thursday, June 25, 2020

All education discussions today have a time horizon of three months. What will we do in the fall? Will we mix at-home with in-school? Does everybody have a digital hookup? Should we have police in schools? As important as these issues are, they have the unfortunate effect of pushing more fundamental issues that could have much greater impact out of the discussion.

The single most important way to ensure that everybody can participate in the modern economy is to ensure that they have the skills that are demanded by the economy. If in September schools miraculously return to what they were in February, the current cohort of students would see their lifetime earnings reduced on average by 3% to 6%. Moreover, disadvantaged students would face an even larger loss, because their experiences over the past several months have been worse than those of more advantaged students.

The current protests across the country and around the world, while supporting a moral imperative for social re-design, have not touched on the deeper issues of how to deal with the underlying disparities that foster broken cities and dead-end jobs. Sadly, the virus is pushing the schools to focus on ever smaller issues that will in the end not produce the change we need or the outcomes we desire.

None of the current discussions suggest a way to ameliorate the lost learning. Schools are largely treating the fall return primarily as a logistical problem. How do we ensure appropriate social distancing in the schools, with partial in-person and partial Internet instruction, with disparities in availability of devices? They have focused more on surface problems and less on treating the fundamental problems of delivering quality education to a very needy population of students.

Most return scenarios under discussion note but effectively ignore the gaping achievement gaps that will be faced in September. The digital divide has compounded existing differences in families' ability to support and guide their children, but this situation is not amenable to any quick technological fix.

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It is amenable, however, to immediate policy improvements that proceed from where we are currently starting and lead us to better long-run solutions. There are two policy imperatives that stand out after this external disruption in the schools.

The shutdown since March has underscored that some teachers and some schools are better able to adapt. It has taught us that unsurprisingly some people are better at dispersed education, and some are better at in-person delivery. The simple lesson is that we cannot treat all teachers as equally able to deal with any new configuration of schools. We simply cannot avoid making sure that teachers are deployed in a manner that lines up their job placement with their skills.

But that does not go far enough. If we are going to ameliorate the unfortunate learning losses, we actually have to make schools better than they were. The only way we know how to do that is relying more on the best teachers and less on the ineffective teachers.

We also know that some kids will come out of this lock-down period better positioned for the next grade than others. The obvious policy imperative for the fall is aligning instruction to meet each student where he or she is. Instead of teaching to the average preparation, based on prior grade in school, it will become apparent that we must focus on true capacity, where students are placed at the learning level appropriate for them.

Variation in the quality of teachers on the one hand and variation in the preparation and needs of students on the other have long been recognized. COVID-19 has exacerbated the prior conditions. Unfortunately, we just never previously felt compelled to make significant changes in order to deal

Civil outrage over existing disparities may be the catalyst for true change by galvanizing the public to consider urgent new actions. Perhaps now we can focus strategically on the immediate needs of our students, particularly those most vulnerable to the instability of the schools.

Current financial stress on schools along with the palpable harm to current students necessitate allocating resources differently. Doing it right now can lay the foundations for change that brings greater equity and opportunity, while doing it wrong will likely lead to more future protests because the disparities are real and big.

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