

## What's in an Education?

*As back to school approaches, can perspectives from March 2020 help ease educators' burden?*

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If anything good were to come from this pandemic, I hope it is that society will realize how much burden is placed on the school system to support the health, safety, and education of children. Teachers are on the front lines daily, making sure that students are fed, clothed, clean, rested, and ready to learn, as we check for bruises or sad eyes as kids walk through the door every morning. I'm listening to the hospitals talk about the lack of supplies, and think, "I can relate." How often have teachers spent their own money buying basics for their classrooms? Forever. I hope that America respects teachers more after this, and that parents learn that education begins at home.

*- Sally Griffith, veteran teacher of 35 years*

Toward the latter part of March, our lives were turned upside down. Schools were shut down and shifted online, WFH became everyone's new and favorite forced acronym, and many poor souls lost their jobs, or worse, their lives, due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The most tumultuous things for me to take in were the fact that I would no longer be living on Stanford's campus, all my classes would be online, and my stream of measly income from my job at Stanford's academic advising office now ceased to exist. In reality, my sheltered existence really didn't face that much dire change as I had a safe, rent-free place to go home to, but it definitely still rocked me at first, showing me that my life has truly been one of privilege.

COVID-19 has uncovered some of the ancient and ugly disparities in healthcare, wealth, and equality in the United States. *How are we going to fix it?* I often wonder in the dead of night. Time and time again, my heart and mind stumble upon the same answer: The dissemination of knowledge. Knowledge is power. Power in the hands of good-nature people wanting to make a difference changes the world.

When I think about what's critical to changing a society, education is at the very heart of that. K-12 education seems particularly important to me just because shaping the people who inhabit our world is really the only way we meaningfully change it on the long-term.

But with the change in how K-12 education has been structured during this outbreak, I began to become curious about how this shift from in-person instruction to online classes would impact students' ability to learn and influence teachers' opinions about the current education system.

As the new school year rolls around, with many schools fully online, others a blend of in-person and remote learning, and some even fully in-person, can we possibly learn from the perspectives on the new remote learning model gathered from teachers and parents at the start of the pandemic?

In March, I deployed a snowball survey via Facebook and email to gather 5 parents' and 15 teachers' thoughts—what's the deal with the rush to leave the classroom and take up remote learning? Most of my participants hailed from southern California, but I did capture some insights from parents and teachers in Kentucky, Florida, and Arizona. My survey consisted of the following questions:

- 1. In your opinion, how was the transition to evacuate schools and continue education made equitable to students within your institution? (e.g. how was a lack of internet addressed, food insecurity, home insecurity, disability, etc.)**
- 2. Are you seriously concerned about some of your students' or children's ability to thrive in their current home environment while accessing their education and/or educative services remotely?**
- 3. How has this transition been for you? What personal and professional challenges have arisen?**
- 4. Do you think this experience will spark change in the current American education system? If so, how?**
- 5. What are your predictions about the long-lasting effects of this change in education structure on your students/children? Do you think this will impact your students'/children's lives in the long term?**

This is what I discovered.

Eighty-six percent of my participants said that they were “seriously concerned about their students' or children's ability to thrive in their current home environment while accessing their education and/or educative services remotely.”

Some schools made an effort to be equitable during this tumultuous time by continuing to provide a free pick-up food service for those who qualified for free lunches and arranging for free hotspots and Wi-Fi for students with no current service. Other schools took the initiative to provide loaner laptops or tablets, but some schools were only able to provide technology to those who responded to a survey accessing need; funds were not available to put a device in every students' hands as the district did not deem the school a Title 1 (a Title 1 school is a schoolwide program is available to schools with a student base where at least 40% come from low-income families—the funds that the government provides for these schools are allocated by the districts).

One teacher commented that they have had students taking 4-6 classes all online from their cell phones. Some schools have tackled the issue of equity by proving “packets” for students to do rather than set up online experiences. This decision arose when districts decided not to do any type of new, “remote” learning or teaching due to it not being equitable across the board. Teachers were instead instructed to provide review packets or online review program platforms for students to use.

However, the process of taking on remote learning opportunities has most definitely not been streamlined.

“It is not at all equitable,” said Lisa Williams, a public-school elementary teacher. “We're two weeks into it and I still haven't heard from some students. We offered Chromebooks, but they had to return to school during specified times to pick them up. We still don't have the Wi-Fi hotspots we promised to families and wait times to even talk to the internet provider about free internet is a couple of hours. Many students are babysitting siblings, sharing devices and bandwidth among family members, or are struggling with a range of other issues at home.”

Piggybacking onto that, another teacher commented that the “[District provided] free hot spots have been taking a long time to distribute, time during which kids from more affluent households are already receiving instruction. Adding onto that, when I reached out to the students' families I was most concerned about, my email bounced or I didn't get a returned call.”

On top of this, there are also students who are in neglectful and abusive situations who normally would be safe at school but are now stuck in these conditions 24/7. A college professor shared their sympathy, “I have had numerous students reach out and share their experiences trying to find a quiet place to study with up to 11 people in a small house or time to do the work as they are now homeschooling kids or picking up extra work shifts or looking for new jobs due to the pandemic.”

Several teachers and parents expressed frustration with working from home and also managing children at the same time. Dealing with their family’s concerns, disappointments, health, and generally conducting normal life has become much harder.

Some took the stance that, “Kids will have to become more independent and take charge of their own education during this time.”

It must be noted there has been some positive news. One school district began to offer free tutoring, provide English learner resources, and make material in multiple languages available to help its students adjust to the online platform and to keep multilingual families in the loop. As always, many teachers are trying to continue to support social and emotional relationships with their students through posting questions, games, activities that students can connect to the outside world from their home. Some have even made bitmoji classrooms!

Sally Griffith, a kindergarten teacher in Orange County, California, remarked how the remote learning model has actually inspired her! “I’m about 2 years from retiring, and with this online learning I’m like a brand-new teacher! It’s rather exciting, and daunting, as well. I realize, though, that my life’s blood is the joy of a child’s face when finally understanding something, or the furrowed brow of a student as he tries to form his letters correctly...”

While untraditional classroom settings are a thing of the present, restructuring education in the form of policy reform has become a heated topic as of late. Amongst those surveyed, the board was split on how the switch to remote learning would impact the current education system and children’s futures.

Hillary Iffrig, a kindergarten teacher, shared her hope. “Academically speaking, I believe the kids will be just fine. They are resilient. I’ve told so many friends and families that literally the whole country (world) is in this together. When school returns next year, whenever that may be, teachers will spend more time reteaching and reviewing content than they would have any other year. This is a short time in the grand scheme of their academic career. They will still go to the next grade level, they will still

graduate, they will still go to college if that is in their path. Kids are much smarter and more capable than they're often given credit for. I am not terribly concerned about what they will or will not learn during this lapse in time away from the physical classroom. At least right now.... who knows if my opinions will change over time?"

Contrastingly, others seem far more concerned. "I'm not prepared to create rigor and hands-on successful activities from an online format. I think we are going to see "easy grading" for the sake of our concern for the environments the students are working in. We all know that what we're doing is not enough for students to progress forward in all their skills. We are hoping that they can at least maintain. The reality is that in most cases, students will backslide."

It seems that when children do return to regular classroom instruction, teachers will need to take the toll of quarantine and remote learning into consideration and understand that probably for the next couple of years, many students will be behind in everything. Unfortunately, many teachers believe it will drive a bigger wedge between the haves and the have-nots. Students with educated parents and good resources will usually be okay. Students who are struggling for any reason—financial, emotional, developmental, language—are the ones who will be hurt the most.

"Unfortunately, my biggest concern is that the achievement gap will only widen. Students with supportive parents who were already achieving will continue to learn. On the other hand, students whose parents cannot or will not support their education at this time will only fall further behind."

A handful of college professors shared their concerns as well. "I think some of my students won't pass this semester because they're not prepared for this (as if anyone is). They may drop out because of it, affecting their lives forever."

"How could it not affect my children and my students to not interact with their peers?" says Keith Taylor, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. history teacher who is also a parent. "Human interaction is a vital part of life. I fear that if school closures and distance learning continues for several more months, there will be a negative impact on us all. The district has a mental health page available to all of our students and their families, but if people don't utilize it, what good is it? The district sends out parent newsletters on a weekly basis, and the mental health resources are always highlighted to try and help our students and their families."

### **So, will this change the education system?**

Some teachers are hopeful, others not.

“The classroom model is passed its purpose or need. The model we currently use is geared for factory work. It is not as applicable in the 21st Century. However, I have yet to see another style that would be feasible and equitable for all students. Especially due to the large number of students who are enrolled in California's public-school system. I feel that what will emerge is a sort of a hybrid model that blends traditional schooling with online and/or distance learning. I would not be surprised if in the near future I could have students physically in my class and have a webcam that would livestream my classroom to students who are distance learning. Those students would probably rotate in class and distance learning days to reduce class sizes,” Taylor predicts.

On the contrary, one teacher wrote, “I don't think it will spark really big changes because most people just want to get “back to normal” but I think it will for some. I think maybe more people will consider homeschooling a possibility, especially for those who had considered it previously and weren't sure they could do it. I think more college students will decide they like online classes.”

Perhaps some parents will have a better understanding of the challenges educators face, some will have a new appreciation for the work that educators do, and some will feel negatively and will only focus on the challenges that arise and will blame the educational system. As for educators, the first online learning platforms will give some the push that is needed to bring them into this digital world.

When it comes to this next school year, is it important to not only have concerns about the health of students pertaining to Covid-19, but how these changes in education structure will impact the next generation of learners and leaders for better and for worse.

**\*\*All identities of teachers and parents surveyed are to remain anonymous unless permission has been given. Thank you all for your participation! You are appreciated.**