

## 11. The Rebirth of K-12 Public Education: Postpandemic Opportunities

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*Given the challenges we face, education doesn't need to be reformed—it needs to be transformed.* —Sir Ken Robinson

What can the future of education be for every student? The opportunity to urgently respond to and act upon this question is perhaps the silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the last several decades in education, there has been “so much reform and so little change” (Payne 2008), almost as if equity-based reform efforts have been on a treadmill with advocates working tirelessly while gaining limited traction. This lack of progress in ameliorating inequities in K-12 education is due to many factors, including (1) the inability to sustain reforms—even those that show promise—due to lack of adequate resources, a desire for a “quick fix,” and/or the inability to scale-up the reform effort; (2) other education reform initiatives (i.e., school choice, standardized testing) that serve to counter or cancel the impact of equity-based education reform initiatives (Selig 2020); and (3) structural fragmentation and a lack of coherence that has prevented widespread institutionalization of equity-based reforms (Fullan 2000).

While the literature base is replete with examinations of the issues surrounding equity and access issues in education, the aim of this chapter is to present a path forward by detailing a systematic process (in phases) by which a new education model can be born with equity at its heart. It is important to

note that the proposed “rebirth” process is not meant to merely “tweak” the current education paradigm but is presented to support efforts to completely reconceptualize how an equity-focused, K-12 education should look moving forward. The goal is to leave the past system behind and begin anew, to vigorously challenge existing education paradigms, and to audaciously think and plan for the future of K-12 education in the United States.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic’s Impact on Students and Learning**

In mid-March 2020, when COVID-19 spread across the United States, school districts, concerned about the health and well-being of students and staff, shifted to remote learning. This decision impacted almost fifty-one million public school students, all of whom had no other option but to learn from home (Decker, Peele, and Riser-Kositsky 2020). Teachers immediately began modifying their lesson plans and teaching methodology to begin teaching remotely, often using technology they had never used before. However, despite these efforts, many educators were dismayed by technology glitches, poor attendance in virtual classes, and the lack of student participation—especially from nonwhite students and those with low-income backgrounds.

Teachers grew frustrated when they were unable to get into contact with their most vulnerable students. Some students were absent because they did not have access to the technology or WiFi to participate in virtual classes. Others were unable to complete their school work because they had to take on additional familial responsibilities, such as becoming the primary caregivers for younger siblings stuck at home while their parents worked. Students also expressed to their counselors that their parents or family members had fallen ill and that they were just trying to survive and, as a result, could not focus on school (Strauss 2020). Richard Rothstein (2020) highlighted the experiences of families as follows:

Many white-collar professionals with college degrees [were operating] home schools, sometimes with superior curricular enhancements. . . . Meanwhile, many parents with less education have jobs that even during the coronavirus crisis cannot be performed at home—supermarket clerks, warehouse workers, delivery truck drivers. Even with distance learning being established by schools and teachers—many of whom are now busy with their own children at home—too many students in low-income and rural communities don’t have internet access: 35 percent of low-income households with school-aged children don’t have high-speed

internet (Anderson and Perrin 2018); for moderate-income families it is 17 percent, and only 6 percent for middle-class and affluent families. When measured by race and ethnicity, the gap is greater for African American and Hispanic families.

The catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the inequities of schooling, not just to those who participated in K-12 schooling efforts but also to the entire nation.

#### **LEARNING LOSS AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

In the midst of the pandemic, research projected that students nationwide would return to school in the fall of 2020 with roughly 70 percent of learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year and less than 50 percent gains in math (Kuhfeld et al. 2020). However, most students did not return to traditional, face-to-face instruction in fall 2020 as anticipated. Educators, parents, and others feared that learning losses would continue to expand the longer schools remained closed. Both the lack of assessment data and wide variances in learning loss projections among researchers have complicated the process of quantifying the pandemic's effect on student learning progress.

There is no precedent for the extended absences from school that the COVID-19 pandemic has created. The largest span of time that has been studied previously is the traditional summer break. Harris Cooper and his team were among the first to prove that extended periods away from school and learning can produce an average of one-tenth of a standard deviation reduction in test scores—and that around two months away from school can equal one month of learning regression (Cooper et al. 1996). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as “summer slide.” As mentioned previously, the effects of summer slide are more detrimental for low-income students, as they may not have access to academic enrichment over the summer months. Conversely, students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds gain approximately one month of reading skills because of their participation in summer enrichment opportunities (Cooper et al. 1996). The data regarding summer learning loss have been reproduced time and time again, proving that when students experience extended periods of absence from school, it can be detrimental—especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, because of their lack of access to resources and opportunities to practice school skills over the summer break.

As more data are collected, academics are convinced that the impact of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic will be much more significant than a traditional summer slide. Using the framework from Cooper and colleagues

(1996), if students have a learning loss accounting for approximately half of the time they are away from school, this would mean that students may have potentially lost nearly an entire academic year of learning during the pandemic. However, educational researchers from Brookings reported that COVID-19-related learning loss (coined “the COVID slump”) may be even more detrimental than previous estimates because of the psychological tolls accompanying the pandemic (Golinkoff et al. 2020). Neuroscientists have long studied the impact of toxic stress on certain areas of the brain, specifically the amygdala, which assists in retaining long-term memories. The Brookings team projected that the toxic stress associated with living in a pandemic will exacerbate the usual rate in which the summer slide is typically calculated. As can be assumed, these extra stressors will have an even greater effect on low-income students who, being disproportionately nonwhite students, have an even higher stress level because of uncertain financial status and unpredictable housing, and whose family members may have higher exposure to COVID-19 through their duties as essential workers (Golinkoff et al. 2020). The impacts of the COVID slump can only be tabulated once schooling resumes in a stable, traditional sense, but it can be reasonably inferred that the results will be concerning and detrimental for these students in the long term.

Even in instances where learning resumed remotely, learning loss is expected. McKinsey and Company created a statistical modeling estimate to analyze three different scenarios of remote learning: (a) students with an average-quality remote instruction; (b) students with lower-quality remote instruction; and (c) students with inconsistent or no remote instruction. The estimate shows that in any of the epidemiological scenarios, whether in person, remote for one semester, or remaining remote for the entire school year, all three types of student learning environments led to students experiencing “significant” learning loss, with students with inconsistent or low engagement losing over one year of learning (Dorn et al. 2020, 4).

Low-income students and students of color are projected to feel the effects of the learning loss the most, stemming from poorly funded schools and inadequate teacher preparation paired with a lack of resources at home. An average student with remote learning for approximately one year will experience an average of seven months of learning loss, but a black student will have 10.3 months of loss; a Hispanic student 9.2 months of loss; and low-income students (a category overly represented by black and Hispanic students) will lose 12.4 months of academic learning. With these contrasting remote-learning environments, the achievement gap between white students and nonwhite students is projected to widen (Dorn et al. 2020, 4).

Although the United States spends more than almost every other country on public education—over seven hundred billion dollars per year—disparities of opportunities and outcomes remain, especially between white students and students of color (Hussar et al. 2020). The achievement gap—“the statistically significant difference between the average test scores of white students compared to other groups, such as black or Latino students”—varies by state and subject but exists in essentially every academic area across all regions of the United States (Phillips 2019). Student performance on assessments reveals that only 18 percent of black fourth graders scored proficient or above in reading, compared to 45 percent of their white peers who scored at this level, with similar gaps in reading proficiency existing between eighth-grade black and white students (McFarland et al. 2019).

McKinsey and Company estimate that learning loss resulting from remote learning will “exacerbate existing achievement gaps by 15 to 20 percent” (Dorn et al. 2020, 6). The gaps have expanded because remote learning requires many assumed physical and environmental materials such as personal computer devices, hotspots, and dedicated work spaces, as well as assistance from others in the home. Furthermore, a blaring digital divide exists.

#### **THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

Perhaps the most visible access challenges that were magnified during the pandemic were those dealing with technology. Regardless of how a student was performing prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, projections indicate a greater learning loss for “minority and low-income children who have less access to technology” (Hobbs and Hawkins 2020). The disparity in access to technology is often referred to in education as “the digital divide.”

The sudden shift from face-to-face to virtual learning revealed the real consequences of the digital divide. Suddenly, many students lacked access to education because of the absence of devices and internet access. New York City and Philadelphia were two cities already aware of the large number of students with no computers or internet access. New York City cited approximately 300,000 students without computers (Rothstein 2020), and the Philadelphia School District stated that “many” of its 200,000 students “lack computers or high-speed internet at home” (Dale 2020). Both cities were hesitant to provide any online instruction when the pandemic shifted learning because of these technological inequities. Philadelphia’s school superintendent stated, “If it’s [online instruction] not available to all children, we cannot make it available to some” (Dale 2020).

In order to accommodate students and proceed with learning, Philadelphia and New York City schools decided to provide weekly work packets for students to pick up until relief could be provided to families in the form of free devices and internet access. However, the majority of school districts across the country did not pursue such an approach. Most decided to try to continue with as much normalcy as possible, with teachers teaching lessons online via Zoom, Google Meet, and similar software, and assigning work via Google Classroom or Canvas. As Tawnell Hobbs and Lee Hawkins succinctly summarize, “problems began piling up almost immediately. In many places, lots of students simply didn’t show up online, and administrators had no good way to find out why not. Soon, many districts weren’t requiring students to do any work at all, increasing the risk that millions of students would have big gaps in their learning” (2020). Without even measuring academic progress, but in just tracking attendance and work completion, disparities could be seen between students with adequate digital access and those without such access—exposing the potential for learning gaps to widen. Essentially, the digital divide “show[ed] the cracks in the system between the ‘have-nots’ and the ‘haves.’” (Dale 2020).

The digital divide existed long before the pandemic, but COVID-19’s arrival merely amplified these disparities in access. Data from the 2013 census, and further investigation from the Pew Research Center, revealed that, on average, one in five teens do not have reliable access to the internet when at home, a share that increases for low-income students. One out of three students whose parents earn \$30,000 or less annually do not have internet or technology access at home, compared to less than one in ten students who live in households that earn incomes of \$75,000; as Monica Anderson and Andrew Perrin (2018) state, “these broadband disparities are particularly pronounced for black and Hispanic households with school-age children—especially those with low household incomes.” Black students are overrepresented in the low-income category, as one in four black students have reported not being able to complete their homework because of a lack of technological resources.

The pandemic not only provided an opportunity to proactively address the digital divide, but it also served to adjust the role technology plays in schools moving forward. Some school districts found ways to provide resources to students and families to ensure that every student had access to the needed technology to maximize their education (i.e., supplying every child with a laptop, tablet, hotspot, etc.). Such initiatives to remedy existing technological disparities, though born out of necessity, now provide opportunities for how schools and learning might be structured in the future. Lifting the barrier of access to

technology can encourage the exploration of innovative instructional practices that may never have been fully realized without the pandemic.

### **ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES**

Along with technical challenges, students and families face many practical challenges that have been exacerbated by COVID-19. The loss of family income, food instability, disrupted schedules, changes in household responsibilities, separation from peers, and the sharing of work spaces within the home can all impact a child's learning. As students engage in virtual learning from home, the role of the parent/caregiver in their child's education has intensified.

Parents/caregivers must balance their own work responsibilities while also supporting their child's academic and social-emotional needs. Parental engagement has long been a goal of educators and should be even more of a priority during a pandemic. If parents are to support their child's education at home, they must be equipped with the knowledge and resources to do so effectively; otherwise, educational inequalities will deepen. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a critical opportunity to reset the relationship between teachers and parents to reveal the true power of parental engagement in helping students learn (Seale 2020).

The pandemic has also given rise to emotional challenges that impact student learning. Stress, anxiety, and trauma-induced depression are expected during times of unprecedented change in a student's life; a pandemic, then, provides an ideal ecosystem for an emotional tsunami to hit. Adverse experiences also negatively impact cognitive functioning, and the more trauma that is experienced, the greater the deficit in learning (Blodgett and Lanigan 2018). The adverse conditions created by COVID-19's arrival have presented an opportune time to strategically develop partnerships between schools and mental-health providers within the community. This is particularly critical given that prior to the pandemic, the average student-to-counselor ratio (430:1) was nearly double the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) recommended ratio (ASCA 2020).

### **From Catastrophe to Opportunity**

One of the few benefits of the COVID-19 pandemic was the opportunity it facilitated for many to get a glimpse into institutional inequities. More than just the oft-suggested "band-aids" of additional summer school or increased early childhood education will be needed to solve the problems exacerbated by COVID-19.

The challenges that have arisen and/or intensified as a result of COVID-19's arrival are difficult to navigate, but they also present a unique opportunity to reimagine what the US educational system could be if racial, ethnic, and economic disparities were eradicated. Of course, educational policies alone cannot remedy these inequities; massive, systemic social reform must occur in tandem. As the general public comes to recognize the K-12 education system as essential to the success of the country's economic recovery, perhaps it will finally become a national issue of high priority.

Change will not be easy, as current educational paradigms are deeply rooted and the status quo is a strong inertial foe. Nonetheless, reforms must be bold, as the current educational system was based on supporting an industrial model and was born out of segregation. Creating a new education system designed to align with the needs of the future is daunting, especially since we can only make predictions about what lies ahead for the next generation. However, it no longer makes sense to keep renovating an increasingly inequitable system—especially since the overall infrastructure has weakened considerably under the strain of competing ideologies. The system must be rebuilt upon a foundation with a sturdy frame designed to shepherd all students equitably into the twenty-second century.

### **Toward a K-12 Education Rebirth: A Plan Forward in Phases**

Following is a plan for moving substantive education change forward in phases. Each phase toward a K-12 education rebirth must be thoroughly and thoughtfully considered to ensure every student has an equitable and accessible education.

#### **PHASE 1: RECLAIMING**

In recent years, education reform has become of great interest to a variety of political actors. From businesses to think tanks to entrepreneurs, many new voices have entered the K-12 education landscape to promote their ideas for transforming education. Noticeably absent from many of these conversations are teachers. While teachers have been marginalized within the education policy dialogue, their critical role as change agents in school reform efforts is beginning to receive some traction (Imants and Van der Wal 2020; Robinson 2012). This renewed focus on the value of teachers is most likely due to increased insight into the valuable role teachers play in the change capacity of schools, and their role as advocates for students who have frequently been abandoned by the system. The professional judgment of teachers must be restored, as they



are best positioned to respond to localized needs by “strategically embracing, reframing, and resisting educational policy as necessary” on behalf of their students (Dover, Henning, and Agarwal-Rangnath 2016, 466)

Albert Bandura (2001) acknowledges that beliefs about one’s own efficacy are foundational to agency; however, the efficacy of teachers has been consistently challenged in recent years by politicians, parents, and other education stakeholders. As a result, teachers, to some degree, have lost their agency within their own profession. Their voices must be reclaimed as schools need social justice warriors who stand in direct opposition to those policies and practices that have marginalized children of color. If teachers are not heard or choose not to engage in this important dialogue, then they simply become props in a system that continues to perpetuate inequities (Khan 2016).

Educators must reclaim their voices and agency within the education policy arena. According to social cognitive theory (Bandura 2001), there are three forms of agency:

1. personal, or one’s own efforts to influence;
2. proxy, or enlisting others with expertise to influence; and
3. collective, or acting with others on a shared belief to prompt change.

While it seems that educators have been most successful in using collective forms of agency (i.e., unions), in order for substantive equity-based reform to take place, they must employ all three forms of agency. Teachers must find their points of personal power and not underestimate their individual value to education reform efforts. In addition, teachers should seek formidable and influential community, state, and national allies to promote an equity-based education agenda.

In order to reclaim the voices of teachers in education decision making, it is important to consider the structure of the educational system that has contributed to the silencing of teachers. From a sociological perspective, the design of schools has greatly contributed. The lack of classroom autonomy, isolation during the workday, and the use of silence to protect against insubordination have all been cited as reasons for why the voices of teachers have been suppressed (McDonald 1986). In addition, teachers have been recipients of education policy rather than active participants in the policy-making process (McDonald 1986). Often there is the illusion that those in power are sympathetic to teachers, but these sympathies are often disingenuous and result in perceived tokenism. For example, policy makers may speak and write about the important role that teachers have in educating K-12 students but, in practice, fail to obtain testimony and/or insight from teachers when crafting and enacting education

policy. In turn, teachers resent and become wary of those who consistently patronize and undercut and exclude them (see Boyer 1983).

Moving forward, it is important to eliminate those factors that constrain teacher agency and support those designed to enable and empower educators (Robinson 2012). Educators are vital benefactors to students who have been neglected by the system. The following recommendations will support teacher agency and assist teachers in reclaiming their critical voice in the education policy arena.

1. *Break the silence.* Build a culture of collegiality and collaboration in schools. The structural design of schools physically separates and isolates educators from one another (McDonald 1986). Schools must be transformed—both in physical space and climate (i.e., interpersonal relationships)—to support and encourage conversation and collaboration among educators around equity and access issues.
2. *Listen.* As internal actors, teachers are intimately connected with the day-to-day functions of the school. As such, they must be repositioned as a central voice in policy making to ensure continuity of policy implementation and the realization of desired results (Ellison et al. 2018; Priestley, Edwards, and Priestley 2012). Teachers must have a “seat at the table,” and policy makers, as external actors, should listen and proactively engage with teachers in developing education policy as “externally initiated educational change . . . is highly problematic” (Priestley et al. 2012, 210).
3. *Prepare.* It is essential that preservice and in-service teachers are prepared for “active and constructive roles in education policy” (Heineke, Ryan, and Tocci 2015, 392). Teachers must learn about education policy and understand how policies have historically perpetuated equity and access issues in education. Teachers must engage with policy makers and advocate for those policies designed to counteract deeply rooted practices that have contributed to these persistent inequities. In other words, teachers must be equipped to be active and ardent contributors rather than “passive targets” as schools are revisioned toward equity.

## PHASE 2: REFOCUSING

“What is the purpose of education for *all* children?” This purpose has evolved and will continue to fluctuate based on societal needs, but as the world continues to change—more rapidly than ever—the revisiting of this purpose must occur with greater frequency, and the education system must be able to pivot

and adapt nimbly as the needs of our country, our communities, and broader humanity shift.

The new purpose of K-12 education should be considered within the context of equity. The purpose should not only consider civic knowledge but also address the dispositions and skills needed to effectively contribute to the well-being of the populace. The purpose should also go beyond meeting workforce needs and seek to improve the human condition (see Strauss 2015).

The public isn't in agreement as to the purpose of education. Roughly 45 percent of citizens indicate that academic achievement is the primary purpose of education followed by citizenship and workforce preparation (both cited at approximately 25 percent; Walker 2016). When Magdalena Slapik (2017) asked students their thoughts on the purpose of education, more profound responses emerged. Students stated the role of education is to broaden one's mind and learn about other cultures, empower students, assist students in finding their passion, and help advance the human race. These student perspectives are more in alignment with what a refocused purpose of education should be moving forward. An equity-focused purpose must extend beyond consideration of the "mind" and also encompass the desired outcomes for the "heart" and "soul" of K-12 students—capturing our hope for the future of humanity.

A collective purpose of education must be grounded in equity. For decades, schools have been working to remedy equity and access issues in education. When the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 spurred national protests and broader actions to address racism and racial inequalities, schools were already hard at work to overcome legacies of inequality. However, the pandemic certainly set schools even further behind on these equity goals. Our current educational system exists within our country's unjust realities; therefore, our education system continues to reflect the broader injustices of society. Inattention to inequities in schools only serves to exacerbate inequities within our broader social systems. Any postpandemic plan for the rebirth of schools that lacks a resounding purpose to eradicate existing inequities will be inherently flawed.

In her 2019 book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, renowned education professor Bettina Love offers the opinion that our schools today are "spaces of whiteness, white rage, and white supremacy, all of which function to terrorize students of color" (13). Perhaps in response to this view, and in recognition of ongoing events and persistent student achievement gaps, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) announced that "the work on equity must go further to become actively antiracist. . . . Leading a system-wide effort requires that we

ensure that cultural responsiveness permeates all levels of a district” (Brown, Lenares-Solomon, and Deaner 2019, 88). For some, this might sound like a tenable response in the wake of a tragic injustice; however, for most, it comes with the task of accepting the fact that we’ve all been raised in a society that elevates white culture over others. Thus, a new purpose of education must exude anti-racism. It’s not enough to eliminate racist practices; we must also champion antiracist policies (see Kendi 2019).

Antiracism means more than “equal treatment and respect.” It is an all-encompassing ideology that should enact the constant questioning of one’s own actions, motives, and implicit biases along with the actions, motives, and implicit biases of others (Nielsen 2020). Therapist Resmaa Menakem suggests that the process is similar to going through the stages of grief (Farber 2019). Likely, education will go through the same pains of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance, as a paradigm shift is made to reimagine schools that work for the most marginalized populations.

The following considerations will support the articulation of a new, equity-focused purpose for education.

1. *Focus on mind, heart, and soul.* If the purpose of education is to improve the human condition, a new purpose for education must harmoniously coalesce all aspects of the human experience, as knowledge alone cannot solve equity issues. Compassion; perspective taking; hope; understanding of how privilege, oppression, and power operate; and an awareness of one’s own identity, assumptions, and biases should all be foundational components to a refocused purpose of education.
2. *Champion antiracism.* As protests unfolded around police violence against African Americans in Ferguson, Minneapolis, Louisville, and other communities, many education organizations released statements from their leadership calling for solidarity and critical conversations around racism, power, privilege, and oppression (Barnum and Belsha 2020). These support statements often call for the deployment of anti-racist and trauma-informed education practices. The attention to such practices needs to expand beyond a reaction to “a moment” and become a proactive and consistent focus of our education system.
3. *Revisit.* As the world continues to change at unprecedented speeds, the purpose of education needs to be revisited with greater frequency to ensure it accurately reflects our aspirations. As systems, policies, and demographics shift, the purpose of education should be assessed and recalibrated as needed to ensure a constant vision toward equity.

### PHASE 3: REVISIONING

How do we imagine our ideal K-12 education system with equity at the heart rather than on the periphery? First, we must both ensure alignment between K-12 education's stated purpose and the overall structure and design of the education system and clarify its relationship between and among other societal systems. By all accounts, the structure of K-12 education has largely been created in a vacuum reflective of a deterministic system; as a result, we have primarily relied on one way of thinking about educational challenges. While the pandemic has further exposed the importance of essential workers and the pernicious flaws within our social, civic, and economic systems, it has also given birth to new debates and insights regarding just how much schools do to support these other public systems.

Schools have served as a staunch safeguard, delivering students warm meals, mental-health support, and instruction while also supervising children as parents and caregivers work (Jesso 2020). The absence of a robust social welfare system in the United States means that schools have become the de facto primary alternative. Listening to political education debates, one would conclude that there is nothing more important to this country than educating our children. However, bureaucrats continue to shoulder K-12 schools with the responsibility of eradicating systemic inequities, often at the expense of the primary task of educating students. While resources wane from year to year, the education system is still expected to do it all. Furthermore, as societal inequities persist, the education system is the convenient scapegoat for deeper, systemic problems that perpetuate inequities.

As schools are newly envisioned, it is imperative that we audit all of the responsibilities that schools have been tasked with and make decisions about which ones are sustainable within the new structure and which ones might be transferred to the responsibility of other community organizations and entities. Presently, educational systems are overtasked with additional roles and responsibilities; in serving those roles, they allow those who should be responsible for tackling systemic racism to remain both blameless and unaccountable.

Revisioning a system of education can level the playing field for all students if we can agree that remedying inequities is nonnegotiable and will require sustained will and resources. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted several realities regarding face-to-face versus remote learning, and, moving forward, reconsidering the role of technology in education will be central to any discussion pertaining to educational transformation. As we plan for the future of K-12 education, we must acknowledge these realities: that digital platforms are here to stay, but they are incapable of functioning equitably without large

investments in teachers and instructional development; that teachers are irreplaceable and that a highly trained teacher can make a big difference in the lives of students; and that a hybrid delivery approach to schooling isn't just about the reliance on dependable technology and highly qualified personnel but also about a constant desire for innovation and a steadfast appreciation for flexibility.

The teaching and learning process has completely been transformed as a result of COVID-19's presence. Hybrid learning models should become part of the modern education vernacular as well as a component of systematic design for transformation. In a future scenario, schools should be designed to provide a variety of learning options that support unique, individual learning plans—whether instruction is delivered within brick-and-mortar settings or virtually, as well as synchronously or asynchronously.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools made unprecedented pivots in policy and eschewed traditional practices that, for years, had been foundational to our educational system (most notably, grading practices and testing). As we move out of this phase, some of these amended policies should be continued and become the new standard (Pandey 2020). Consequently, as tough as the pandemic has been for families and schools, for many disenfranchised students of color, it has provided an opportunity to shift focus away from targeted compliance and toward equity-driven initiatives.

With the broadening of the conceptualization of the teaching-learning process, the inflexibility of past education paradigms can be challenged. For example, any or all of the following might be considered:

1. Restructuring (or deconstructing) the school day, week, and/or calendar year.
2. Shifting from reliance on high-stakes tests where students solve contrived problems toward performance-based assessments, where students solve relevant, authentic problems.
3. Eliminating grading systems that are purely quantitative and summative (provided at the end of a learning experience) toward use of qualitative, formative measures that provide students with constructive feedback throughout the duration of the learning experience and encourage continued progress and growth toward expertise.
4. Integrating a combination of innovation and flexibility that allows for multiple instructional designs to accommodate diverse learners (face-to-face/synchronous remote; asynchronous virtual/synchronous remote; face-to-face/asynchronous virtual; work site/synchronous remote;

- asynchronous virtual/face-to-face and project-based learning [PBL]; work site/face-to-face/asynchronous virtual and PBL, etc.).
5. Reallocating local education agency (LEA) funds to increase or support the reconstitution of school personnel to ensure that every child has a dedicated instructional team (teachers, counselors, instructional coaches, and other support staff). This cluster focus would provide a sustainable model for individualized support that includes both academic instruction and prevention and intervention of student emotional learning (SEL).
  6. Allocating federal funding to public and private teacher preparation (undergraduate and graduate) programs that specifically target innovative recruitment and retention efforts to increase black and Latino teachers in classrooms.

### **Rejuvenation: What We All Gain from Eliminating Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Inequities in Our Pre-K-12 School System**

A rejuvenated education system with equity at its heart would greatly improve all our lives. First, a new era of education would ensure that every student's individual learning path is acknowledged, by providing an appropriate range of learning options, methods, and resources. There should be no linear "one size fits most" approach, a dynamic that has held education hostage for decades (Reimers 2020). A true, individualized design could foster a culture of mastery that also increases intellectual, social, and emotional competencies without impending barriers.

Another benefit of an equity-focused education system is that students and families will have increased options within the structure of the public education system. Additionally, school environments will become spaces of expression and pleasure rather than control and regulation (Kirkland 2018), thereby ensuring that every student's individual learning path is acknowledged via options for learning that are as diverse as the students that the system is tasked to serve.

The rebirth of the pre-K-12 education system will mean a different role for government: one that restores public confidence by deeming education as an essential component to a community's infrastructure. Of the sixteen infrastructure sectors identified by the Department of Homeland Security (i.e., agriculture, communications, electricity, financial services, healthcare, transportation systems, water, etc.), education is notably neglected. The aforementioned sectors are defined as those that are "so vital to the United States that their incapaci-

tation or destruction would have a debilitating effect on security, national economic security, national public health, or safety” (Kayyem 2020). Based on this definition, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused education to be considered as essential infrastructure by Americans, elected officials, and communities. This renewed commitment to education could result in a designation of resources, financial and complementary, necessary to reinvent education. Fundamentally, doing what is right for education will require substantial civic mobilization.

We are currently at a crossroads that has provided America with an opportunity to make an ambitious choice. We cannot be deterred by either the existence of deepened tribalism or the push to silence and discredit progressives and social-justice education warriors (see Freedberg 2020; Mac Donald 2018). A true reinvention of how this country educates students goes far beyond the scope of distributing Chromebooks and issuing Zoom links. Public schools deserve a plan that requires a critical and systematic deep dive into its fissures. It is only through this effort that we can design a system that is not only resilient but equitable for all.

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