



Messages from the Children

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Setting the Stage

No one could have ever predicted the pandemic of 2020 or the impact that it has had on our society as a whole. The Covid-19 virus has taken its toll on families through illness and death, resulted in the wide-scale shutdown of businesses, led to record-breaking unemployment, and changed our daily lives through isolation and quarantining. Who would have ever foreseen that schools across the country would have been completely closed? And yet, here we are. Much has been written about the struggle schools have gone through to provide continuous learning for our students. In the attempt to provide distance learning, the literature has focused on the struggle by teachers, school leaders and parents to try to set up workable solutions. Social media has been overflowing with praise for the adults who have done a masterful job of establishing protocols that allow learning to continue.

But wait. Author Deb Curreen sees it another way: “Everyone is applauding everyone but our children. These little heroes have stayed indoors more than they’ve ever known in their lives. Their whole worlds have literally been turned upside down and they don’t know why. All these rules they’ve never known. Not being able to see family or give hugs. Vacations, sports and activities, play dates and school canceled. Adults talking about others becoming unwell, news reporting death after death. Our poor children’s minds must be racing. Every day their resilient little bodies get up and carry on despite all that’s going on. So here’s to our little heroes: today, tomorrow, forever.”

In Their Own Words

Across the Internet, and more specifically, throughout social media, there are numerous posts about the impact on students related to the “new normal.” Right now we have no idea when distance learning will end and schools will be back in our buildings. Hearing from students can help educators make wise decisions about how to best meet the needs of our children. Let’s begin with some direct quotes from our young people that represent the different perspectives they embody.



“School is a place for building friendships, learning responsibility, and getting an escape from the house, but it seems as though the Coronavirus has taken that all away from us.”

“Peer-to-peer interactions is a really pivotal part of education at my school, and it feels like it falls short in our distance learning.”

“I enjoy the new schedule the Internet has given me since I finally have time to sleep as much as I need and feel well rested and ready to work.”

“Some of my teachers just keep posting work. I can't learn like that though, so I haven't really retained any of the information. I just spit back at them for a grade.”

“I actually did some research (on the computer) and I found that I was suffering from computer fatigue. Yep, it's a real thing.”

“I have a significant lack of motivation and I miss the thought-provoking discussions I used to have with my classmates during physical school.”

“I am really anxious to get back to school and really foster my love of learning through my peers.”

“The workload... has been overwhelming. The thought process of my teachers seems to be ‘Oh they have all this free time now, so I can assign them more work than I normally would’.”

“At home, I want to get up and go outside and stop staring at my iPad; it gives me headaches and I am tired of looking at it 4-5 hours a day.”

“I miss the loud and crazy lunchroom.”

“I miss seeing everyone, especially my friends, even that teacher who talks too much.”

“Zoom calls and testing and Google Hangouts just can't replace face-to-face interaction.”

“I feel as though I can learn material at my own pace and on my own time, with breaks when I need them.”

“I miss the social aspect most of school, as a social life is impossible to maintain virtually.”

“The work isn't necessarily hard but figuring out how to use the different websites and when a new assignment has been posted takes a while.”

“I find myself getting distracted much easier and find myself procrastinating more and more.”



“All of the hard work for the past four years might get handed to them in the form of a PDF or a document in the mailbox.”

“Personally the main thing I miss is my sports season.”

“I’ve had to become my seven-year-old brother’s teacher. My parents aren’t very fluent in English, so they aren’t able to help him with his school work.”

“For the most part I am on task, but some of the very same distractions I deal with in school, such as receiving texts from friends on my phone still serve as a distraction.”

“There is no structure which is making it hard to get up and be productive. Overall, online school makes time management extremely difficult and I feel like I’m not even learning in some classes.”

“Teachers are doing the best they can but the ones who truly care about their students’ mental health and education are putting in extra time just to help.”

“I’m not really thinking about what I need from my teachers as much as what our teachers need from us. All we have to do is stay on task and take this seriously while they have to change their jobs from in school to online in a matter of days.”

Beyond Academics

As teachers have quickly concluded with distance learning, it is not business as usual. This is uncharted territory. As teachers and students adjust, it is so important to remember not just the subject matter that is being taught but the issues students on the other side of the screen might be grappling with.

Education Week’s associate editors Stephen Sawchuck and Christina Samuels remind us of the variety of problems children might be encountering. They write, “All over social media, teachers are sharing stories tinged with frustration and fear for students who haven’t logged into the learning platforms, participated in threaded discussions, completed an assignment, or returned tests or emails.” They acknowledge that some student groups are especially vulnerable during this crisis, especially the 1.5 million students who are homeless. Additionally, some students are in touch with school staffs and in their writings they mention their fear of dying or the instability of their families, or even suicidal tendencies. The authors point out that some districts are equipping teachers and other staff members to build relationships with individual students who are encountering difficulties. As one teacher has acknowledged, “The only way we can guarantee our kids are well is if we’re in touch with them every day.”

Adolescent isolation can increase psychological distress that will negate any learning that might occur. Some teachers are including opportunities for teenagers to connect with friends and classmates through videoconferencing as part of their learning experiences.



There are other impediments that can have a negative impact on learning. Educator Peter DeWitt provides the following reasons that learning may not be occurring:

- Some students may not have devices they can use or access to Wi-Fi.
- Other students may not have privacy (or a bedroom); there is also the problem of bedlam or confusion in their home environment.
- Some older students have jobs that are necessary to support their families, while others have to care for younger siblings.
- Some kids feel invisible when they are in the classroom so they feel they won't be missed if they are not online.

The Other Side of the Coin

It is important to keep in mind that there are some students who are benefitting from distance learning for a variety of reasons. Here are some real-world possibilities:

- Shy learners, hyperactive learners and creative learners may be thriving
- Fluid schedules allow students to have more choices in how to get their work done
- Students can take breaks or even exercise to alleviate boredom
- Individual students can map out their daily plan
- Some students are no longer overextended
- Victims of bullying or physical harm feel safe at home
- For some, there may be a reduction in social anxiety
- Students do not feel the pressure of passing or failing
- Some are getting more sleep.

Instructional Considerations

Taking all the aforementioned information into account, the question then becomes:

What are some ways teachers can adjust their distance learning to make it more palatable for the children who are on the receiving end?

Here are some thoughts:

- It is all right to slow down. Pace your delivery of instruction to allow students the opportunity to absorb the content.
- Whenever possible, establish routines in the learning environment so that the students have a sense of order and progress.
- Make pausing for processing the norm. Making connections is crucial for learning.
- Having students complete worksheet after worksheet (print or digital) is unlikely to result in learning that will last.
- Determine and apply skills that can help struggling learners be successful.
- Check in periodically with students on their social and emotional state. Ask yourself:
 - Are the students feeling overwhelmed? Confused? Bored?
 - Are any students “beating themselves up” when they do not do better?
 - Am I using supportive terminology as I instruct?
- Take the time to have students summarize what they have learned. This locks in learning and provides formative feedback for you.



- Include open-ended assignments or authentic tasks that allow students to move around, think critically, and be creative.
- Create opportunities for dialogue and discourse...make learning a conversation.
- Include frequent checks for understanding.
- Build in opportunities for journal writing so students can reflect on their experiences and what they have learned. Possible reflective questions might be:
 - What went well today?
 - What could you do differently the next time we meet?
 - How has your thinking changed?
- Make it your goal to maintain student engagement and enthusiasm.
- Forget about trying to replicate the regular school day. Make sure to build in “off screen time” for students.
- Give open book tests. Remember learning is the goal not grading.
- And most importantly, promote kindness and respect.

**Award-winning educator Weston Kieschnick sees it this way:
 “I’m done hearing ‘our schools are broken.’ Point to another industry during this crisis that has more quickly adapted to change, supported our most vulnerable, and served the community at large...without a bailout. I’ll wait.”**

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