

By Robert Pondiscio

Schools Are Improvising, Innovating, and Scaling Good Ideas



Those of us with parents or grandparents who lived through the Great Depression and World War II sometimes envy their experience and how it shaped them. No sane person wishes for hard times and deprivation, but there's a sense of purpose that overtakes us when normal life stops. How remarkable — how clarifying — to have been alive in such times.

Events are conspiring, as they sometimes do, to make us feel purposeful again. Perhaps for a few weeks, perhaps quite a bit longer, even the simple act of staying home, forgoing the pleasures of a ballgame, a drink with friends, a church service, a hug or a handshake, is a matter of national urgency. Our collective action and attentiveness are demanded. Don't feel ashamed if you feel a tingle of excitement about all this. You were made for this. It feels good to feel necessary.

Before COVID-19 canceled school nationwide and turned America overnight into Social Isolation Nation, I'd been on the road, visiting far-flung schools, meeting

with educators, and recharging my batteries. One memorable stop was in Sullivan County, a small rural school district in eastern Tennessee. My visit was little more than a drive-by, just a few hours on a February morning. However, it didn't take long to notice that this small rural district had a cohesive culture of learning and caring for kids.

When schools closed in mid-March, the immediate concern in Sullivan County, as in so many districts, was ensuring that thousands of kids who rely on school meal service could still be fed. With a tiny district staff, the logistics of organizing such an effort were daunting. The leadership team posted a call for help on [Facebook](#). In less than 24 hours, 125 teachers had volunteered, and "Sullivan Serves" was up and running. On the first Monday, 6,000 meals were distributed — school meals for children, plus donations from food banks and community groups for other family members. School cafeteria staff prepared the meals, which were distributed entirely by volunteer teachers.

It's a simple act to show children that the people they love and depend on are still here and still care.

The first two weeks of the crisis spanned a scheduled spring break, buying the district time to get its remote learning plans in place to launch April 1. Neighboring districts pooled resources to “build the train tracks of content,” as Robin McClellan, supervisor of elementary curriculum and instruction, put it, and to get teaching materials in the hands of all 600 Sullivan County teachers. Digital devices are being made available to families who need them, but it's all being offered both digitally and in print. McClellan is adamant: “We are not going to teach only the children who have resources and devices,” she told me. “So any child who needs print can either pick it up at the school or it will be delivered to them.” That means a lot of making copies — and a lot more volunteers organized by the district's principals. “I wasn't going to put that on them,” McClellan said. “But they were like, ‘No, you're not doing that. We're doing that.’”

I tell this story not because it is remarkable, but because it is unremarkable. Stick a pin in a map, and there you will find similar tales of teachers and administrators doing what needs to be done, whether it's feeding families, creating educational videos or live online lessons and activities, or just checking in on kids. One South Dakota sixth grader needed help with her math homework; her teacher showed up at her home with a whiteboard and taught from the other side of her porch door. Social media is awash with posts from parents grateful for the efforts of their child's teacher, even if it's simply reaching out to make sure kids are safe, connected, and reassured.

Those of us who work in education policy gnash our teeth in frustration at our inability to get best practices to scale. Yet one idea that sprang up organically, and that is now being replicated dozens of times a day all across the country, involves motorcades of teachers parading down the streets where their students live, while gleeful kids stand curbside, holding signs and waving at the teachers they haven't seen in weeks. These humble little processions are not contractually required, a response to accountability demands, or an “innovation” hatched at a think tank or conference. It's a simple act to show children that the people they love and depend on are still here and still care. I doubt many teachers view it as

burdensome. They probably get as much from it as the kids. It feels good to feel needed.

This is not to suggest that efforts to transition American education on the fly to remote learning are a fool's errand. If we feel necessary right now, it's because the things we value and that sustain us are at risk and need protecting: the lives and health of our family and friends. Our jobs and businesses. Continuing with school in any shape or form is one way in which we signal to our children what matters, even in hard times, even if the conditions for learning are less than ideal. The effort matters. It's necessary.

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Trust me on this: There's a good chance that, years from now, you will feel a bit sentimental for these weeks spent in social isolation. We're built for challenging times. We are writing the stories we will tell our children and grandchildren. Driving down a suburban street waving to elementary school children may not have the historical gravity of landing on Omaha Beach or working on a wartime assembly line. However, when the children of the pandemic are old and gray, they will reminisce about the time their teachers paraded past their houses because all the schools were closed. It will be a warm memory, even though so many people got sick, lost their jobs, and were afraid. They don't have the vocabulary today to describe it, but the lesson will stick and become clearer in the retelling. It's about social cohesion, love and loyalty, and how good people step up when we need them to. ■



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Member Reflections – From Preparedness to the New Normal

We're all learning a new language, new ways to manage our days, how to balance family needs, and a multitude of platforms and avenues to engage with our students and continue the learning process. No matter what the term, distance learning, virtual instruction, remote learning, learning from home, video office hours, everything is "at a distance" — our classrooms are no longer four walls or even "flipped" — they've been upended. However, the learning is continuing. We asked some members to share their experiences and reflect on this time that is like no other for the nation and the world, and how this may forever change education as we know it. Here are some of their comments (abridged for space):

“ Many of the students at my school cannot process what is happening. They do not understand why they can't see their friends and the staff members from the school. **My students, like most students, require personal connections to feel comfort and ease.** While I know that we are doing what's best to keep our students, staff, and community safe, I truly hope that I can soon return to my classroom and greet all of my students with a real hug or high five because **nothing can ever replace real human connections.**”

Amy Goldberg-Tseng



“ I'm sure many of my middle school students were excited that there wouldn't be school for a few days. Once they realized all the work that has to be done and the toll the virus is taking on our New Jersey community, they looked to get back to normalcy. **I thought I worried about them when I saw them at school Monday through Friday. Now, I worry more than ever.** So many more questions cross my thoughts. I hope my students will be able to get through these troubling times and we will see each other soon. I miss them so much. I miss my colleagues and all the things that made me want to be a teacher.”

Roseangela Mendoza



“ As a special education teacher one of my main concerns from day one has been the social emotional learning aspect. I began sending parents "daily check-in" emails. SEL activities help my parents communicate with their children about their feelings in ways they may never have considered and help me better communicate with families. The best advice I can offer is to place the needs of the families we serve above the need for meeting attendance requirements, obtaining assignment submissions, and entering project or assessment grades. **Let's practice self-care, stay connected with other educators** — AAE is a great place to do this, and push ourselves to find new ways to engage our students.”

Jessika Olivares-Rodriguez



“ As I facilitate a middle school from my breakfast table, I am extending my priorities to prepare for next school year by setting up interviews to fill three positions and revising the budget for a possible shortfall given this health crisis. Hopefully, I do not have to eliminate positions but time will tell. **Supporting staff, scholars, and families virtually remains a remarkable work in progress.** Therefore, we will continue to analyze, discuss, and revise as needed to enhance the teaching and learning community.”

Christian Harden



“ I don't know if I could do this type of teaching full time but for right now I can. I will take a ray of hope out of this, I had several students that were struggling in a traditional classroom, and with distance education, they have really started to come into their own. To all the teachers out there reading this, **its ok to be struggling with this, our students are going to be ok, as long as we are ok.** It's ok to take time for yourself to process what you have been going through, then to pick yourself up and carry on.”

Patricia Stewart



“ I am blessed to be in an educational community where everyone is trying to do their best and what is good for the students. Many students are doing well as they already knew how to use technology. I am proud of them. Initially though, some students faced problems as they did not have Chromebooks. Our administrators were gracious to distribute them. **I am overjoyed when I hear that students are learning and happy.** To add to this, during parent-teacher conferences, several parents said that their child enjoyed doing a science experiment at home that I presented online.”

Pratima Roy



Educators Speak – Survey Analysis



EDUCATORS SPEAK

Statistics from the AAEF COVID-19 Educator Survey

84%

of survey respondents agreed with the decision to close their school, including 25% who want it closed longer

SCHOOL CLOSURES



STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS 46%



of respondents felt that there were not sufficient plans put in place to support students with special needs, while 20% felt plans were sufficient

75%

of respondents felt their preparation to deliver virtual instruction was at least average, including 35% who felt they were above average

READINESS



EDUCATION COMMUNITY 42%



of respondents felt that their broader educational communities were unprepared for school closures, while 28% felt they were prepared

TEACHERS' PRIMARY CONCERN



52%

of all respondents shared their primary concern was that students would struggle to learn in a virtual environment or fall behind academically as a result of school closures



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*THE AAEF COVID-19 SURVEY CONSISTS OF RESPONSES FROM 735 EDUCATORS, WITH 96% SERVING DISTRICT AND PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS. SCHOOL CLOSURES INCREASED DURING THE TIME THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED WHICH MAY HAVE IMPACTED EARLY RESULTS.

The Novel Coronavirus pandemic has proven to be an unparalleled time for education. School closures have had a direct and immediate impact on millions of American children and their families. Suddenly, the way we all perceive education and execute the delivery of instruction has changed and will remain altered for the foreseeable future. Many educators were tossed into the deep end of distance learning.

Across the country, educators are now required to innovate quickly to meet the needs of students who were no longer within the four walls of their classrooms. Students are scattered across community and county lines, and applications like Google Classroom, Zoom, or Schoology are just a few of the new platforms used to engage with students from afar. As a result of school closures, educators needed to adapt and respond to the “new normal” of COVID-19 and distance learning; and many educators are still on a steeper-than-expected learning curve today.

The 2020 COVID-19 Educator Support Survey was an immediate response to this rapidly changing ecosystem of teaching and learning. The survey, conducted online, was open to all AAE members, and the perspectives of 737 respondents informed its results. Classroom teachers made up the majority of survey respondents, with 88 percent of educators surveyed identifying as teachers or instructors. The majority, 81 percent of survey respondents, represented traditional public schools, while 13 percent of respondents represented public charter schools. At the time the survey was conducted in early March 2020, 58 percent of respondents agreed that their schools were closed for an appropriate length of time, and nearly 26 percent of respondents felt their schools should remain closed for an even more extended period in response to the spread of COVID-19.

Arguably, much of what felt like scrambling to transition lesson plans and execute instruction electronically could be traced to the issue of initial preparation for swift closures. On the 2020 COVID-19 Educator Support Survey, only 28 percent of educators surveyed felt that their educational communities were prepared or very prepared for their schools to close. Educators shared that while some correspondence had taken place, there was still the great challenge of getting community members to “return emails or phone calls.” One member responded, “We are doing the best we can. Originally, we posted work on Google Classroom and had paper copies available for pick up. Now, [we are] just online...”

30 percent of my students have no internet at home or are simply not responding,” highlighting some of the issues of equity and access to technology as potential barriers to learning for some American families.

Access to technology was not the only major concern expressed by educators in the survey. Student achievement and students’ ability to learn in a new virtual environment were also major areas of concern. When asked how prepared educators believed their students would be to perform on standardized tests after learning in a virtual environment, a slim 12 percent of respondents felt that their students would be prepared or very prepared for testing. When asked about their primary concern related to school closures, 33 percent of respondents worried that students might struggle to learn in a new virtual environment and 19 percent worried students would fall behind. Only 6 percent of educators chose their ability to teach in a virtual environment as their primary concern. In the open-ended portion of that question many respondents raised issues of limited student accountability, new pressures imposed on parents to become home-educators or co-educators, and limited internet access in many American homes.



As America shifts from initial school closure response to preparation for the reopening of schools, many educators’ early concerns are now overshadowed by other significant obstacles within school districts. In the Association of American Educators’ second member survey *Educator Survey on Distance Learning*, we asked members to share their opinions on how district and school administrators are keeping them informed, what their primary obstacles are, and if they plan to incorporate distance learning into their instruction this fall. The second survey will finish after this newsletter has gone to print, but preliminary data suggest student attendance, participation, and access to distance learning remain

significant obstacles. Our initial analysis also indicates that many educators feel varying levels of increased stress as a result of distance learning.

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Still, amid ever-changing and increasing responsibility, all hope is not lost for educators. On the 2020 COVID-19 Educator Support Survey, members also shared reflections of hope and optimism. On average, 76 percent of educators felt that they were average, above average, or far above average in terms of preparation for distance learning and virtual instruction, and many educators shared a “whatever-it-takes” attitude toward meeting the needs of their students. One member replied, “[We are] trying to carry on with what was planned. I am not worried about testing. That isn’t important right now. Making sure my kids can do the work and connecting with them is most important.”

The Association of American Educators is confident that with the right people engaged for the right reasons, we can make this right for our children. Our educators are the right people. Our children are the right reasons, and we acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of all educators for their continued service during this challenging time. AAE looks forward to supporting you as we leverage our collective innovation and optimism for our nation’s students. ■



Kira Tookes is the director of advocacy for AAE Foundation. In this role, Kira is responsible for recruiting, training, developing, and empowering teachers to make strategic and impactful policy advancements for the benefit of all children.

Summer Resources

For many educators, summers are typically a time for unwinding, reflecting, and essential self-care. As this summer approaches, there will likely be little typical about it from start to finish, but there is still hope for a summer of growth, opportunities, collaboration, and personal fulfillment. Even with the unknowns, fears, and anxieties that loom over our recent weeks, summer can still be a time to recharge and be a positive experience for you, your family, and your students. It is important to be realistic with ourselves that this is not easy—but you are not in this alone! Here are some tips and resources to help make the most of your summer transitions.

As discussions turn from school closures for the remainder of this school year, to what next school year will look like, now is also a good time to find materials for your students to stay in touch with learning throughout the summer. Toward the end of every school year, I would put together a summer survival kit for my students so they could continue practicing their skills. If you do something similar for your students each year, this summer you can still provide that opportunity. Even though the materials may be adapted for this summer, maintaining the routine of creating summer survival kits will be as good for you as it will be for your students and their families.

Keeping in Touch with Your Students

During the last weeks, you have continued to adjust to distance learning as needed. When the school year is declared over in your area, whether you use technology, staying in touch with your students this summer may ease the transition for many of them. Find some creative ways to keep in touch with them—within the parameters of district policy and parental permission—including morning meeting calls, check-in times through office hours perhaps a couple of days a week, creating show and tell opportunities, and sticking with some of the ideas you have already implemented to provide social interactions as social distancing continues. Your students are still dependent on you, as you have provided a learning environment and their education community, and they have created friendships throughout the year. Consider providing your students the opportunity to connect with you and other students; chances are you will appreciate that time spent as well.

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SELF CARE

Self-care is essential for survival! Think about when traveling on a plane; the flight attendant always reminds you during the safety instructions, “Be sure to put your mask on first before assisting others.” This holds true for being the best version of yourself every day. Make sure that you are taking care of yourself first and taking time out of your day to check in with how you are feeling. These ten tips and tricks can help you:

1. Journal — note three positives/ moments of gratitude in your day
2. Meditate — find your groove, as meditation can look different for everyone
3. Learn something new
4. Listen to some good tunes, your favorite playlist, audible book, or podcast
5. Monitor your screen time — implement a reading goal challenge!



6. Work out — walk, run, do yoga, move for at least thirty minutes a day
7. Eat healthy meals — your brain will thank you!
8. Call or spend time with a loved one
9. Learn a new hobby (take up that old one that you miss!)
10. Set a routine

ACTIVITIES TO KEEP STUDENTS ENGAGED AND LEARNING

Summer can provide many opportunities for students to continue to learn. Depending on your school district and how summer plans might shift due to COVID-19, your summer may or may not be as structured as the distance learning schedule you have in place now. However, there are lots of ways to keep your students engaged in a less structured way throughout the summer. Below you can discover ideas to keep your students engaged, and to help you brainstorm different approaches that would work for you and your students.

WRITING

Pen Pals: Match your students up for snail writing (with families' approval for sharing home addresses) or even email to check in with one another.

Letter to Author: Have students write a letter to an author about thoughts on one of their recently read books.

Journal Prompts: Give students different journal prompts that they can pick and choose from throughout the summer.



READING

Host Book Clubs: Have students choose from a list of appropriate grade-level books and coordinate two to three book clubs. With every book club now meeting virtually, this could be something they might want to continue during the school year.



Reading Challenge: Have students complete reading challenges involving setting a goal for the number of books they will read for the summer. There are even opportunities for students to win free books through Scholastic Summer Read-a-Palooza and others.

Movie and Book Comparisons: Have students choose from a variety of books that have been made into a film or series and compare/analyze the two.

MATH

Personal Finances: Have students plan a dream vacation including researching a destination, balancing a checkbook, including a budget, itinerary, and timeline.

Become an Entrepreneur: Challenge students to imagine becoming entrepreneurs. Ideas might not be feasible to actually do right now but think of all the concepts they could come up with such as: an online tutoring service, jewelry design, or sewing face masks. Make the rules as detailed as you think your students would like, from creating a map (perimeter and area can be applied), naming the product or service, creating a logo design, and item costs — the more details, the more “real” it becomes.



This list offers an overview of different ideas to drive your thinking as an educator. Many subjects and subject areas are not included in the example activities provided, but they are just as relevant and important. The activities listed above can be intertwined, tweaked, and infinitely adapted to your needs and your students' interests. You are the master in the subject area you teach, so believe in yourself to create even more learning opportunities for your students. However, as Brene Brown says it best, “We don't have to do it alone. We were never meant to.”

At Association of American Educators, we are here for you now, and we will be here for you through the summer months, in the fall, and for your entire teaching career. You are not in this alone and have an association that applauds your professionalism, and we'll support

you with resources, encouragement, and more. We appreciate you as teachers and all that you do for our students. We acknowledge that the end of this school year might not have been the easiest, and we may not know what the new school year holds, but we are in this together, one day at a time. ■



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Privacy and Online Learning

While millions have been sheltering at home to help avoid the spread of COVID-19, teachers have been forced to dramatically shift how they interact with students. The familiar setting of normal classroom and school routines have been replaced with spending hours online teaching and conversing with students. In the rush to provide services and support to students, teachers and their privacy rights are often forgotten.

Some of you have asked how you can protect yourself in the online learning environment we are currently experiencing.

Here is some guidance:

1. Review all of your school's policies regarding social media use, surveillance, and bullying to see if any apply to the current learning situation. If they do, remind students as they enter the virtual classroom of those policies either by having them visible upon entry or by discussing them with students and reminding them that we all deserve privacy and respect.
2. Ask your administrators if you are allowed to display a statement, either in your syllabus or online materials, that says you do not give permission for anyone to use your image elsewhere for any reason. Even if students ignore this statement, it gives you a basis for taking legal action if the conduct is sufficiently egregious.
3. Discuss with your school and/or IT department how best to secure your privacy during these times. Take any and all steps necessary to lock down your online learning environment so that only students can enter during instruction time.
4. Documentation is important even in a virtual setting. If a student or third party misuses your image, document it and do something about it. Follow up with your administration and the student.
5. Don't be afraid to ask for help. These are unfamiliar times and your privacy concerns are valid and understandable.

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Your commitment to students has been unparalleled and continues to highlight the importance and necessity of teachers in our daily lives. We are here to help support and protect you. ■



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COVID-19 Educator Resources, Services, and Support



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The full list of AAE Coronavirus Response and Resources are available at <http://aaeteachers.org/cv>

The Seedy Side of Supplementals

It's no secret, we all do it. We sit up late at night or early in the morning with our textbooks and files and laptop open in front of us, and we say to ourselves, "Why reinvent the wheel? Surely the perfect lesson is out there."

So instead of the arduous task of creating our own worksheets, defining our own essential questions, or creating the perfect group project, we fire up Google and search the web for a premade, plug-and-play lesson. It may not actually save us much time, but it feels easier. Perhaps we end up on websites where teachers swap lesson plans, or on some individual teacher's blog, or maybe we end up on a glossy and official-looking organization's website. No matter where we end up, we're convinced the end product is better than the other options.

What the Research Says

Not so fast. Most of the supplemental materials on the internet are of low quality. On one hand, this isn't very surprising. The lack of quality lesson material has been well known for decades. What Works Clearinghouse was started as a way to help educators identify which professionally produced curriculum materials were of high quality.

More recently, researchers at the Fordham Institute have analyzed materials on popular lesson sharing websites including Teachers Pay Teachers, ReadWriteThink, and Share My Lesson. The study found that the materials were well written and professional looking but often were not well aligned with the standards and provided tasks that were below grade level. They also didn't give enough support on how to work with students with diverse learning needs or in evaluating student work. While this evaluation looked only at language arts materials, it is a confirmation of similar research that tracks other subjects and grade levels.

How to Use This Information

This realization seemingly puts teachers in a difficult position. Official curriculum materials often do not provide enough support for lesson planning, creating the need for teachers to find supplemental materials. These

materials are often of low quality themselves, so what is an educator to do?

We can begin by narrowing our searches. Instead of looking for entire units or lessons, look for elements of a lesson or an activity that fills a specific need, and then ensure that the other lesson elements give it structure and substantial meaning.



We can also rely on those who have evaluated materials before us. On lesson sharing sites, if other users have given materials a poor rating, it should serve as a warning to us and give us pause before purchasing. We can also look to those organizations that have a vested interest and reputation at stake in providing quality materials, and have editorial control over the material that is released.

At the very least, whenever we are looking at supplemental lesson material, we should look at the claims by the author with skepticism and use our own knowledge of our curriculum, the standards, and our students' abilities to carefully examine whether the materials are worth using, or not. ■



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AAEF Scholarship Winner Takes Students to the Skies by “Chair Flying”

Students... [Check](#)
 Curriculum... [Check](#)
 Teacher... [Check](#)
 Classroom... [Classroom?](#)

COVID-19 has put life on hold, including traditional classroom instruction. I never imagined having to teach aviation classes without a classroom. Then again, I had never heard of “chair flying.”

Chair flying is merely pretending to fly an aircraft while seated in a chair. Chair flying helps pilots memorize procedures. Chair flying includes the physical movements, like reaching for the flight controls, to build muscle memory. It is often done with eyes closed or in front of a cockpit poster. Chair flying is beneficial because it occurs in a relaxed and safe environment without the stress or expense associated with training in the actual aircraft.

Teaching from home is a bit like chair flying.

Teaching from home is a bit like chair flying. It occurs in a relaxed and safe environment. We close our eyes to the distractions around us to focus on the needs of our students. The difference is that we are not just going through the motions. We are teaching the same content, but we have had to adapt our means of delivering instruction. The global pandemic has reinforced the need for us all to be flexible, whether you are a student pilot

without an aircraft or a teacher without a traditional classroom.

The way I usually teach students includes hands-on activities. My aviation students love to demonstrate what they have learned using flight simulators in our classroom. Without access to these simulators, we have had to be creative. For example, students would typically fly the simulator and explain to me the cockpit instrument readings. Now, I give the student a scenario, and then they draw for me what the instruments would look like. For the summative assessment, students will draw a cockpit poster, illustrating all of the primary flight instruments. The students will then be able to use their poster for... you guessed it: chair flying.

I learned about chair flying during professional development last year, paid for by an Association of American Educators Foundation (AAEF) scholarship. This training included what is commonly known as “ground school” for pilots, which prepares me to be a certified ground instructor. Becoming a ground instructor is necessary to teach specific dual-enrollment courses in high school. Thank you AAEF, for being instrumental in my development as a teacher. ■



Doug Adomatis teaches courses in science and aviation at Greenville Technical Charter High School. He recently received the Association of American Educators Foundation Scholarship to attend professional development for becoming an FAA Certified Ground Instructor.

Why America's Schools Should Stay Open This Summer

Let me stipulate that I love summer. I love the warm weather, the sounds at night, the lazy long days, and seemingly endless evenings. I paddle, fish, hike, camp, and cycle — all activities that are best in the summer. I ride my bike across Massachusetts in August and plan vacations around Cape Cod League baseball and lobster rolls. I make a point to go to the same Delaware beach every summer my entire life. Even decades later, I can distinctly remember the feeling of freedom as I headed out the door on the warm last day of school.

Why am I telling you all this? To establish my lazy-day bona fides so you'll understand how much it pains me to suggest that we cancel summer this year.

Not all of it, of course, and hopefully not the great weather and some fun times. However, education leaders need to have a conversation about keeping students in school — remotely, most likely — for part of this coming summer.

I get how unpopular this idea will be. Believe me, if my kids knew I was writing this, social distancing would not be a problem in our house.

But the unavoidable fact is that school leaders have two choices. One is to essentially throw up our hands and say the novel coronavirus is just an act of God — what can you do? Let's just muddle through. The other is to say that, yes, this is an unprecedented and remarkable situation in modern American education, but despite that, schools are going to live up to the warranties they make to students.

The first approach is seen in the blanket canceling of school with little thought as to what students will be doing between March and the fall, when the next school year starts. There was a rush to cancel all assessments rather than to parse which ones could be given, how, when, and why. There was also an impulse to close schools for multiple months rather than wait and see what happens one month down the road.

The warranty approach, by contrast, is seen in the districts and schools that are scrambling to figure out how to give all students the education they deserve despite this crisis. That's not just about ensuring hot meals and food for children who need it; it's also about making sure

kids are learning even at this unprecedented time — and some districts, charter networks, and schools are leading the way.

In March, schools closed across almost the entire country. Normal operations won't resume until August or September — almost half a year. Even if that happens, cluster containment will likely be the public health strategy for addressing the novel coronavirus, so schools will have to contend with short-term closures until a vaccine is available, something experts say isn't likely until early 2021.

This isn't tenable, absent a real plan to continue the cadence of learning for students and to mitigate the effects of what is happening now and will continue this spring. It's not tenable if we mindlessly adhere to an archaic school calendar. And it's not tenable if everyone is even half as concerned about equity as they claim to be.

Much of the discussion about education in the wake of these school closures centers on online learning, a fixture in the places most national education leaders inhabit. Lost in the conversation are all the kids who were sent home with packets to work on because there is no online learning plan, or with nothing at all, and all the students for whom online learning isn't an option because of their own lack of access to the internet, computers, or both. Districts that are employing innovative strategies like giving families portable internet devices or using school buses to deliver Wi-Fi are a credit to the sector. However, these are not comprehensive solutions, and without a real plan and real leadership, American students — especially the least advantaged — will lose incalculable learning this year, and maybe next year too.

Keeping school open also has economic and political benefits. From an economic standpoint, operating schools in some form — if not in-person instruction, then ongoing distance learning — keeps a lot of people working and puts dollars into the economy. Millions of jobs are tied to our schools, so more school time means more economic activity of all sorts.

Politically, education advocates will be playing a stronger hand if they can say schools did absolutely everything they could to rise to this challenge and serve kids rather than just play defense. It gets harder to justify

Continued on page 12

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Continued from page 11

Why America's Schools Should Stay Open This Summer

sending big dollars to schools when the sector lacks bold leadership and big ideas, as the federal stimulus bill shows. It has money for schools but not an amount sufficient to meet the challenges that seem increasingly likely to unfold this year. There were no big ideas, and there was little leadership. People were more concerned with firing up old fights about special education and accountability requirements than with making a run at boldly leading this sector into the unknown. Let's not repeat that mistake on the next stimulus.

Finally, keeping kids in school — again, virtually or in person, depending on how this situation evolves — gives young people structure and organization. As this crisis wears on and the novelty of our national adventure in homeschooling wears off, that seemingly statist idea will look better and better for millions of families.

Given the likely economic pain, concerns about travel, and real risks from this novel coronavirus, this probably won't be the summer when families take their epic vacation. Anyone want to go on a cruise now? And for most Americans, summer is a season, not a verb, anyway. So keeping schools open longer and having sufficient time off for family vacations is achievable. That's why, if there ever was a year to hit pause on a full-throated

summer, this is it. And it might be what we have to do to live up to the promise we made to students what seems like an eternity ago now, last fall, when this school year started. ■



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Have a different opinion than what you read in the newsletter?



We want to hear it. Let us know what you thought of the arguments made in "Why America's Schools Should Stay Open This Summer" (or any other item in this newsletter or previous issues) by mailing us at editor@aaeteachers.org.

We appreciate your feedback!