

Homeschooling during the coronavirus will set back a generation of children

By Kevin Huffman

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March 27, 2020 at 10:10 p.m. GMT+9

As the coronavirus pandemic closes schools, in some cases until September, American children this month met their new English, math, science and homeroom teachers: their iPads and their parents. Classes are going online, if they exist at all. The United States is embarking on a massive, months-long virtual-pedagogy experiment, and it is not likely to end well. Years of research shows that online schooling is ineffective — and that students suffer significant learning losses when they have a long break from school. Now they’re getting both, in a hastily arranged mess. And the kids who suffer most from the “summer slide” are the low-income students, the ones already struggling to keep up.

Schools and teachers are mobilizing to roll out instruction. Many are showing entrepreneurial spirit and creativity, and the ad hoc home-school universe is awash in ideas and resources. District leaders are working long hours, trying their best to serve kids. While larger districts have at times struggled with communication and rollout, some schools and districts are showing a more nimble and collaborative approach. Achievement First, a charter network with schools in multiple states including Rhode Island, has jumped in and offered to share all resources with the Providence Public School District, which is under a state takeover for low performance. And Chiefs for Change, an organization of state and local education leaders, is hosting a virtual forum for school districts to share how they are collaborating with charter schools during this crisis. Hopefully, in the coming weeks, those jurisdictions struggling to support online coursework will catch up and find workarounds for students without access to technology, learning from the more entrepreneurial players.

But the barriers they face are daunting.

First, research shows that even with great planning, a willing audience and lots of effort from teachers well-schooled in distance learning, results for K-12 students are lackluster. The author of one study of virtual charter schools (which have more online offerings and thus more to study than public institutions) noted that “challenges in maintaining student engagement are inherent in online instruction,” in part because of the limited student-teacher contact time. “Years of evidence [is] accumulating about

how poorly these schools are performing,” the author of one multiparty report held in 2016. That report concluded, “Full-time virtual schools are not a good fit for many children.”

Those studies looked at schools specifically designed to teach coursework online, frequently with huge sums of money invested in research and planning. If they can’t make it work, “it seems unlikely that parents and teachers Googling resources will” do any better, says Stanford economist and education researcher Eric Hanushek. Second, the “summer slide” has been studied for decades, and researchers know that students fall backward in learning from where they were at the end of the school year. Typically, they lose between one and two months of progress after a 10-week break. This “ ‘wastes’ so much of the knowledge students have gained during the school year” and forces teachers to spend time “ ‘re-teaching’ last year’s content, likely contributing to the repetitiveness of the typical U.S. curriculum,” according to a Brookings Institution report. And learning loss seems to grow as children move up into more difficult content. A massive analysis of testing data by NWEA, a nonprofit research and assessment company that works with millions of students, found that, “in the summer following third grade, students lose nearly 20 percent of their school-year gains in reading and 27 percent of their school-year gains in math. By the summer after seventh grade, students lose on average 36 percent of their school-year gains in reading and a whopping 50 percent of their school-year gains in math.”

But now children face six months without the structure offered by a classroom; the time off, Hanushek says, could erase a half-year of achievement.

The lowest-income families will bear the brunt. “The risk is that in some schools next year, you are going to have a kid with parents who were able to provide high-quality supplemental instruction at home, sitting next to a kid who hasn’t received meaningful instruction since February,” says John King, president and chief executive of the Education Trust and a former U.S. education secretary. Poorer children don’t just have less access to technology; they’re also more likely to be home alone, because their parents do not have the privilege to telework during the quarantine.

As Sarah Carpenter, executive director of the Memphis Lift, a parent advocacy organization, puts it: “The lady next door has seven kids and no computers. The family up the street has no Internet. I’m afraid some families aren’t going to do anything because some families simply can’t do anything.”

There is no research to measure what the effect of this massive break will be. In our lifetimes, Americans have never canceled so much school for so many children. But we know one thing for sure: The impact will not simply disappear. It will linger into next school year and beyond. Indeed, Hanushek and others have found that the effects of a single great teacher or a single substandard teacher can be measured into adulthood. And the negative effects of chronic absenteeism (typically defined as missing at least 15 to 18 days in a school year) on student achievement are clear – and dire.

One obvious solution is to add more instructional days next year and beyond. This could be done by opening schools in the middle of the summer, lengthening the school day and the school year, or potentially eliminating summer vacation for the next couple of years. Schools with more instructional days are shown to improve students gains. This could help compensate for the losses from this year. While the stimulus package passed by the Senate this week included a formula for funding education, it aimed to partially backfill a growing fiscal catastrophe for states. For the next round of stimulus, appropriators could send significant funding to districts and schools with the most low-income students to make up lost instructional time.

Schools also will need resources for more socio-emotional support. King notes that for students in difficult home situations, the time away from school could be “a total disaster.” Schools will be dealing with students who have faced trauma (from financial crisis to domestic violence) and potentially students grieving the loss of loved ones because of the contagion. Students of color and low-income students already are disproportionately underserved by counseling, and a significant body of evidence suggests that lower ratios of school counselors to students improve student outcomes across a broad range of domains, including student grades, attendance, behavior and graduation.

Finally, since states are losing standardized testing this spring, they’ll need to administer tests at the start of the next school year to see what students know after the crisis. Assessments should be informative and not used to measure or rate schools or teachers. Without this, it will be impossible to know the extent of the challenge and where resources should be deployed to deal with it.

Our expectations for the remainder of this school year should be low. Our teachers are trying their best, but their hands are often tied by bureaucracy, limited student access to technology, the lack of lead time to prepare for this situation and the limited effectiveness of delivering school remotely. Results will range from lackluster to catastrophic, with the largest burden falling on the poorest kids.