

# Did America's Schools Rise to the Coronavirus Challenge?

This spring, the coronavirus pandemic blindsided America's schools with a staggering, unforeseen problem. On March 12, Ohio governor Mike DeWine announced that he was closing all of his state's schools. Within two weeks, more than 40 states had followed suit, upending the lives of nearly 50 million students. Schools were suddenly forced to find ways to feed millions of children and reinvent methods for educating kids and supporting families. It was easy to find tales of heroic efforts by local teachers and stories of hair-rendering frustration from overwhelmed parents. On the whole, did the nation's schools rise to the challenge? If not, what will be the legacy of their failure? Weighing in with opposing opinions are Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, and Chris Stewart, chief executive officer of Brightbeam, a nonprofit network of education activists.

## SCHOOLS WENT TO EXTRAORDINARY LENGTHS TO SERVE THEIR STUDENTS

by MICHAEL CASSERLY



**AT THE CLEVELAND HIGH SCHOOL FOR DIGITAL ARTS**, principal Jasmine Maze and colleagues created an “Instaschool,” allowing students to complete assignments focused on the pandemic just by using their phones and a private Instagram group. Cherry Malaque, a special-education teacher in Albuquerque, made home visits to her students as they completed their assignments. She showed up on each student's doorstep, at some risk to herself, dressed in her superhero uniform with a toy in hand to remind her students (*continued on page 74*)

## A MEMORABLE, MISERABLE FAILURE WITH THE POTENTIAL TO CHANGE PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS FOREVER

by CHRIS STEWART



**JUST HOW BADLY DID TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS FAIL** at meeting the challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic? So memorably and miserably badly that it has the potential to reset expectations going forward. No longer can parents expect the government, on its own, to educate our children. And no longer can public schools expect to educate children without partnering with parents in a meaningful way.

Before examining the future implications of the Covid-19 education breakdown, though, (*continued on page 75*)



Joanne Collins Brock, a 2nd-grade teacher at St. Francis School, teaches online in her empty classroom in Goshen, Kentucky. Schools were closed to students because of the pandemic.





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that they were missed and important—and to do their homework. Francine Lazarus, an elementary-school principal in Tampa, created a food pantry at her school with donations of shelf-stable food and

cash from neighbors. The pantry provided an alternative for parents who had difficulty picking up district-provided meals at the scheduled times. Linda Webb, a high-school principal in Austin, marshaled her quilting group to make hundreds of masks for workers in the school district and elsewhere.

Isolated examples? No. At the Council of the Great City Schools, a research and advocacy coalition of urban public-school districts, we hear them every day. Staff and teachers in big-city public schools went to extraordinary lengths this spring to serve their students in ways that went well beyond teaching. The scale of this support is mindboggling. Television news shows like *60 Minutes* have reported on how corporate giants Amazon and Ford Motors (turning to the manufacture of medical supplies) have mounted crash production and distribution efforts during the coronavirus crisis. Viewers marveled at their capacity and expertise.

in parks and public libraries and elsewhere, to shrink digital-access gaps. The Atlanta Public Schools launched a major initiative with its Internet provider to create access throughout the city. Dallas and Miami did the same.

School officials in Cleveland, Austin, Tulsa, Anchorage, Broward County, and other urban areas also set up call centers and help lines in multiple languages to deliver counseling and mental-health supports to children experiencing stress and abuse. In Chicago, educators worked on lessons focused on the study of the coronavirus and on student discussions about their experiences during the outbreak.

In all of the Council's 76 member districts, educators loaded up instructional devices with classroom lessons before distributing them to students, or issued accompanying printed materials, or did both. Broward County convened teams of elementary school teachers by grade level to develop lessons, provide professional development, and ensure consistent quality. Teachers in many places banded together using crowd-sourcing tools to create lessons and teach live classes. School systems in Los Angeles, Albuquerque, Orlando, and other cities arranged instructional lessons through their public broadcasting systems. Oakland provided weekly webinars

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None of it, however, comes close to what our nation's urban school districts produced or delivered throughout this challenging time.

The Council estimates that the nation's largest city public school systems delivered upwards of 150 million meals to children and families in need, and they supplied as many as 3.2 million instructional devices to students who lacked such technology at home. The New York City Department of Education alone served more than 8.5 million meals from mid-March, when schools closed, to the middle of May. At one point, it was delivering some 475,000 meals a day. The department also supplied about 430,000 instructional devices to students. The Chicago Public Schools served some 10.5 million meals from 305 sites and distributed about 112,000 instructional devices between March 17 and mid-May. Los Angeles Unified School District provided 18.1 million meals and supplied Internet connections for 464,819 students.

Numerous city school districts purchased mobile hotspots, retrofitted their buses with Wi-Fi, and worked with their Internet providers to help narrow the digital divide in their communities. Kansas City, Missouri, for instance, bought and distributed hotspots and placed Wi-Fi on school and city buses,

for their English-language teachers. Multiple districts partnered with their local libraries to supply reading materials.

City schools even went beyond their core mission during the crisis. Districts such as Charleston, Cleveland, and Wichita gathered up masks, gloves, sanitizer, and other medical supplies from their school clinics to distribute to local hospitals.

**Did It Work?**

How did all of these efforts play out in the delivery of services to students? Not everything went swimmingly, to be sure. The energy and commitment of educators is not always enough to overcome the complications of distance teaching and learning during a pandemic. Many districts tracked the frequency of student and teacher interactions, but others had trouble locating all their students. In Philadelphia and Clark County, the Las Vegas district, staff members repeatedly called students and even went out to knock on their doors if necessary. Student engagement in the academic work was high in some places and lower in others. Meal delivery was sometimes curtailed for short periods when staff became infected with the virus. Labor negotiations went smoothly in some cities but less so in others. (*continued on page 76*)

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it's worth taking some time to review the failure itself in full, gory detail.

Many of these public schools, let's remember, were doing a poor-to-mediocre job of educating students to begin with, before the pandemic,

as measured by standardized-test results, dropout and graduation rates, and other yardsticks. Even the "good" suburban schools, a lot of them, were coasting on the backs of their students and their families, not adding much value. As for the urban public schools, their performance can be summed up by the fact that parents who have the option of a charter school or even a partial private-school scholarship have been eager

teachers to provide meaningful remote instruction." Thirteen of the 82 "do not require teachers to give feedback on student work," CRPE said in an article headlined "Still No Consistent Plan for Remote Learning for Hundreds of Thousands of Students at Some of America's Biggest School Districts."

The American Enterprise Institute, reporting on what it says is a national representative sample collected through May 8, says less than half of schools were offering synchronous instruction, in which a student and a teacher are live online simultaneously. AEI also found that a substantial share of schools, more than 10 percent, had entirely given up on grading student work.

Media accounts highlighted some of the most egregious failures. California stopped requiring educators to take

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to accept any chance that might allow their child to escape.

Once the pandemic hit, the game was up. Way too many of these schools stopped even going through the motions of providing education.

The University of Washington's Center on Reinventing Public Education reported on May 15, two months after widespread school closures went into effect, that 27 of the 82 school districts it tracked did not "set consistent expectations for

attendance, *EdSource* reported. Even without mandatory formal attendance-taking, it was clear enough that many students weren't showing up for whatever instruction was being offered. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in late March that about 15,000 of some 120,000 Los Angeles high school students were "absent from all online learning."

School districts also failed on the technology front. For all the photo opportunities of schools handing out laptop and

tablet computers, the reality was that even districts that offered online classes could not reliably guarantee that students could log on to them. In New Jersey, for example, a month into the school closures driven by Covid-19, about 100,000 students, or nearly 10 percent of those enrolled in the state, lacked the devices and Internet access necessary for distance learning, according to NJSpotlight.com. Technological ineptitude was underscored when virtual school-board meetings or classes in Ohio, Washington, D.C., and New Jersey were "Zoom-bombed" by hackers who used the videoconferencing platform to display pornography.

Rather than struggle through the complications and system deficiencies, some school districts in Georgia, Washington, D.C., and Nebraska officially declared that they were starting summer vacation early. Give them some credit for candor, at least.

Those seeking to measure the effects of the closures on student (*continued on page 77*)



*Garrett Thomas, an 8th-grade teacher, sorts through and organizes homework packets from Paterson, N.J., schoolchildren at Paterson Public Schools district offices.*

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Districts sometimes struggled to provide English-language support to students living in households where no one speaks English. Owing to health and safety concerns during the outbreak, schools found it

impossible to deliver face-to-face services for students with disabilities, but they worked hard to meet individual student goals. And no matter how much progress schools made and continue to make in transitioning to virtual instruction, the research on the efficacy of online learning—the only way we have of reaching students at this point—is unconvincing, at best. There is simply no fully adequate substitute for the face-to-face instruction provided by a skilled teacher.

Still, I have read some harsh criticisms of school districts. At the end of April, Robin Lake of the Center on Reinventing Public Education wrote in *The 74* that there is “no plan to prevent what could be long-lasting academic casualties, particularly among economically disadvantaged children of

In addition to the work that is going on in individual cities, the Council of the Great City Schools has launched several working groups to pool the collective experience of urban-education leaders to help districts tackle the many instructional, operational, and logistical issues they face. School-board members are discussing the best ways to fulfill their monitoring and fiduciary responsibilities under these new circumstances. Chief academic officers are addressing calendar options and the best ways to address unfinished learning without resorting to re-teaching and remediation. Experts on English-language learners and students with disabilities are thinking through the specialized needs of diverse learners.

The Council has also organized a mental-health working group to look at best practices in districts that have led in this area. A group of chief financial officers is working on how to redeploy resources to support new instructional realities and how to handle severe multiyear budget shortfalls. A communications group is devoted to helping to shape

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color in large urban districts unprepared to provide rigorous and effective remote learning.” About two weeks later, Jeanne Allen of the Center for Education Reform asserted on *Forbes.com* that “in the majority of cases, education is still not being delivered at all—remotely, digitally, or any other way.” And in early May, Marguerite Roza of Georgetown University warned in *The 74*, that “asking for more money is an incomplete strategy.” School districts also “need to start work on a Plan B now. They need to develop cost-cutting strategies and should not delay tough decisions.”

Not only were these critiques unfounded and unproductive, they also suggested that the authors were spending too much time on websites, including our own, and not enough time actually talking with school leaders who were doing the work on the ground. Many cities, such as Miami and Dallas, had robust instructional continuity plans that they continued to revise. As pundits and critics were busy decrying the failure of schools, districts were preparing for summer school, working on professional development for teachers and administrators, identifying instructional strategies for addressing unfinished learning, creating resources and programming to attend to the social-emotional and mental-health needs of students and staff, and planning for an upcoming school year that will likely be marked by further shutdowns and disruption.

public confidence; a technology group is focusing on the many online issues that schools will face going forward, and a testing group is dealing with assessment issues. We have operational groups working on options for transportation, food services, security, and facilities. On a broader level, a group of district leaders is re-envisioning what the future of public education could look like.

**A Cohesive Plan**

Ultimately, the work of all these groups will need be integrated to ensure that district staff and leaders can act from a cohesive, unified plan of action rather than relying on the compartmentalized, siloed approaches of the past. While the pandemic crisis has brought urgent challenges, there are enduring issues in public education that still need to be addressed.

Will educators and school leaders get everything right? No, they will not. But the extraordinary efforts, determination, and skill of our urban public schools to meet the needs of their students and families during unprecedented circumstances makes me optimistic about the future. We do not have the luxury—or any intention—of halting instruction or abandoning students. What we do have is an opportunity to rethink and reshape our practices to meet the demands of a new day. And that is what we are doing. ■

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learning using the tool of standardized testing are, like so many of the students themselves, out of luck. The state-based accountability tests were almost universally abandoned amid the pandemic. This “data vacation”

will make it harder to determine where students are academically when the crisis is over. It will be especially troubling for students who went into Covid-19’s upheaval behind in their studies, as attempts to catch them up in the future will be hampered by the absence of information about their learning.

**Systemic Roadblocks**

The pandemic put many of public education’s worst traits on full display.

There was the blame-up, blame-down bureaucratic phenom-

they needed. On the contrary, these were political moves intended to restrict families from accessing education through nontraditional means.

Sure, there have been a few encouraging examples of educators and school leaders rising to the occasion. Alaska took the pragmatic step of contracting across state lines with the Florida Virtual School to provide distance education for Alaskan students. School buses have brought meals to food-insecure families and, in some cases, have been parked in strategic locations to provide Wi-Fi access to households that don’t have it.

But the self-congratulation that has accompanied even the most perfunctory efforts at continuing basic services is so extravagant that one might think school-district employees were volunteers rather than paid government workers. In many cases, the pace of online learning in traditional public schools only picked up after parents demanded it or after

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enon. Some state and local officials froze, claiming to be waiting for guidance from the U.S. Department of Education regarding the demand for equal services for special-education students. School districts called for direction from state departments of education, while state bureaucrats seemed to develop a newfound respect for local control.

There was “equity” paralysis, with at least some districts withholding online instruction for *all* students because, they said, it was impossible to provide the same level of instruction through that medium for special-education students. This ironically inequitable, all-or-nothing approach failed to thoughtfully triage the differing needs of children and left more of them than necessary without schooling. It also angered regular-education parents while leaving some special-education advocates feeling scapegoated by officials.

Children’s needs took a backseat to those of adults, particularly the political agenda of public-employee unions. The unions argued for reduced teacher work-hours at full pay and for blocking charter schools from enrolling students. The Oregon Education Association attempted to prevent the transfer of 1,600 students to a virtual charter school that was capable of serving them. The Pennsylvania legislature, under pressure from unions, defunded students who switched to virtual charter schools. Oklahoma passed legislation that would limit student transfers to virtual charter schools and double the amount of coursework virtual students must complete to be considered full-time. These were not measures intended to support parents and students or offer them the opportunities

school districts were shamed by press stories comparing their schools to better-performing charter or private schools. The traditional public schools weren’t leading the effort to continue learning. They were dragged grudgingly into it.

**Parents as Partners**

In more normal times, lip service is sometimes paid to the idea that parents are the most important determinant of children’s academic success. Traditional public-school systems, though, are often set up to educate children in spite of parents, rather than with us. When we show up too much, we’re helicopter parents. When we don’t show up enough, we’re *the* problem.

Whenever schools open, and in whichever form, the need for educators to see parents as true partners will be more urgent than ever before. Catching children up after the so-called “Covid slide” will be too big a task for the system to achieve alone.

Perhaps the failures of public schools during the pandemic will, once and for all, vanquish the illusion that the government can educate children without parents’ playing a major role. The newly visible reality has certainly been inconvenient for some parents stuck at home with young children for months on end. But it’s been true all along. And while the eventual resumption of in-person school will surely come as a relief, parents may want to pause before returning full responsibility for our children’s education to a system whose underlying, preexisting weaknesses were so embarrassingly exposed by the failed response to the virus. ■