



COVID-19 Crisis Presents Opportunity for Real Education Reform

The spotlight that has been cast on the challenges of educating children in equitable and meaningful ways during the COVID-19 school closure reinforces the value of community and the power of public schools. We are better when we all work together - students, parents, teachers, and members of the community.

While educators around the world have received words of appreciation from beleaguered parents thrust into the role of teacher in the course of this school closure, we have an opportunity to embrace real education reform in the state of Michigan.

We are best when teachers, as dedicated professionals and advocates for the well-being of our children, have a voice in education policy at local, state, and national levels.

There was no question that all standardized test requirements should be waived for this year as Secretary DeVos announced last week.

There is also no doubt that the state legislature should get back in session and change state law to permit days out of school for this public health emergency to be counted as instructional days, as state superintendent Michael Rice has asked. Furthermore, it is imperative that all school employees - from bus drivers and secretaries to paraeducators and teachers continue to be paid throughout the school closure. Both issues are linked.

But what about real education reform? What about the kind of reform that will create a more just and equitable access to quality public education for all students throughout our state?

Nancy Flanagan, education advocate and Michigan Teacher of the Year 1993, calls for a [national teacher plan](#) that wrests control for the needs of students from the hands of policy makers and places it where it belongs, in teachers' classrooms.

Let's begin by rethinking how we use standardized testing. Assessments should not be weaponized to instill fear of teacher job loss and school defunding. This only stifles creativity and creates a climate of dread. Rather, assessments must be used to enable teachers to determine what their students know so educators can tailor instruction appropriately and give students feedback that they can use to learn and grow. That is the highest and best use of any assessment anywhere.

Assessment questions also speak to the notion of grades in general. With the COVID-19 school closure, families have seen what real learning looks like when students are motivated and engaged. We have been reminded that the best student work transcends simply getting grades. Creativity and innovation hinges on students' curiosity, thirst for knowledge and our collective need to improve the quality of life for everyone. This is the highest and best use of education after all.

Additionally, it's critical that we stop comparing testing data across school districts. The levels of inequity in our country are so stark that standardized test data simply correlates poverty rates. Instead, let's fund schools equitably according to need. Governor Whitmer has proposed a weighted funding plan that merits continued consideration. Districts in financial need - whether in urban or rural areas throughout our state – require different levels of funding to meet the needs of the students and families they serve. This has been made very clear through the need for ongoing food service programs that have sustained countless children throughout the school closure.

While technology tools and their use are an integral part of a global education, nothing can replace the need for the face-to-face interpersonal relationship between educators and the students they serve. Additionally, the equity gap around device access and the mixed results of online education call for a prioritization of reinvestment in brick and mortar schools.

We have a teacher shortage in our state and across the country. The money saved by right-sizing standardized testing could be used to make education a more attractive career by increasing teacher salaries and raising the esteem of educators. All teachers in kindergarten - 2nd grade should be reading specialists charged with instilling a love of reading in every student they serve. We must make education an attractive career option to the best and brightest students among us. Only then will students view education as they view law, medicine, business and engineering. The most talented graduates must be enticed to work in the most challenging educational settings and receive the support and compensation that these placements require.

The threat from COVID-19 will not last forever. Let's use this trying time to begin a true transformation of lasting reform for education in Michigan.

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