Our new educational blunder: parents can’t even keep their kids home

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I never imagined a point in Coronavirus public policy in which parents would be forced to put themselves, their children, and their communities in danger — even if they would prefer the burden of keeping their kids at home for Remote Learning. In the past week, many parents have been shocked to discover that they cannot opt into Remote Learning for their children. This should be viewed as our newest educational debacle of 2020–21.

Don’t get me wrong — it is as if superintendents and principals are scrambling through Ninja Warrior Obstacle Courses this summer as they put together nearly impossible schedules for schools. Much of the problem, in fact, may be stemming from nebulous guidelines from state departments of education that are leaving everyone confused.

In a [recent piece](https://medium.com/@david.sherrin/how-schools-can-succeed-in-the-fall-4e70e22255ea), I argued that many parents would opt into enhanced Remote Learning for the larger social good and the well-being of their children. After all, a dynamic in which a large proportion of families choose to educate at home, through Remote Learning, is the simplest solution to free-up space in schools and on buses for other children who don’t have that possibility. It also allows a cohort of teachers at high-risk due to age or medical conditions to do their job safely by providing Distance Learning for those students.

This plan certainly doesn’t resolve all our myriad problems, but it is the cleanest and most effective first step to ration our in-person education for those who need it and want it the most. Simultaneously, it builds our capacities gradually to understand what is possible and effective in pandemic education.

My argument, unfortunately, became inexplicably moot after school districts began publicizing their convoluted hybrid plans. It turns out that a 100% Remote Learning option isn’t in the mix in many districts. Instead, to partake of public education, families are required to participate in hybrid schemes, such as those that offer a couple of days in-person and a few days of Remote Learning each week.

While following CDC guidelines in theory, these plans are untested. We are not really sure they are safe in reality, especially when enacted by educators without public health, medical training, or the proper equipment. Moreover, the plans do not allow parents of young children to get back to work as they still require supervision three days a week. Teachers who are also parents will be in the same awful situation of other essential workers: required to report full-time to dangerous on-site locations while their own children are left unsupervised. Remember, hybrid models are part-time for students, but full-time for teachers.

Without the proper preparation over the summer, we have also lost the opportunity to improve the Remote Learning experience. For a couple of days a week, students will be in an even worse Remote situation than the spring — subjected to livestreaming of classroom instruction that is not meant for them and that will be difficult to follow with inevitable audiovisual and technological disturbances and glitches.

**Why would anybody choose Remote Learning for their own children’s well-being?**

Many parents are taking the long-view. If COVID-19 is like a war, then perhaps we just need to survive. In wars, ordinary folks try to get by and make it to the peace without worrying about career advancement or obtaining the best of anything. Parents with this view understand that children are mostly resilient and adaptable. Some parents see their children playing happily at home with siblings and contrast that to the vision of them masked all-day while sitting still at a desk staring at a muffled teacher. They grasp that two hours of Remote Learning and the rest of the day full of play (or even TV) may be a far cry from what education used to be but it will not harm their child’s long-term well-being or opportunities for success. They see Remote Learning as a short-term choice worth making for everyone’s safety and for their children’s happiness.

We need to stop comparing Remote Learning to our remembrances of school in the past. [The measures we need to undertake to make school safe](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/opinion/coronavirus-schools-reopen.html)will rid schools of any semblance of the joys and freedom that existed only a year ago. There will be no group work or use of manipulatives. There will be no free-play or sitting knee-to-knee for storytime on the rug. There will be no choir or clubs or group sports. My own favorite methodology, dynamic D&D style historical role-plays in which students build castles with desks and march across the room, would be strictly prohibited.

Instead, we will have a new iteration of a restrictive school culture that educators often compare to prison using the term “school-to-prison pipeline.” The [complete lack of freedom of movement, expression, and bodily ownership](https://gen.medium.com/i-spent-three-weeks-in-school-with-kids-under-covid-19-21b78c1a9339)for students will be far more traumatic than staying at home and learning through a computer. [Descriptions of our upcoming semester](https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a32973676/penn-state-university-covid-19-petition-professors/) that are [removing Oz’s curtain](https://medium.com/@mjacobwrites/parents-youre-being-lied-to-25646fb8634e) should horrify parents and push those who have the option to do so to keep their kids home.

I understand that many families have no choice but to send their children to school. But many parents *can* make that choice either because they are stay-at-home parents, unemployed, or have flexible work situations. These families should at least have the option to choose safety and freedom for their kids and have their governments’ support to do so — especially when that choice only helps others!

These families are not homeschoolers. They want to remain in the public education system and to continue to have their children learn through their teachers’ Remote Learning support. This is especially crucial for the parents who are working remotely and thus have no hope of developing an effective homeschool program.

**Wasn’t Remote Learning a disaster?**

[Many commentators](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/02/business/covid-economy-parents-kids-career-homeschooling.html) have unilaterally declared Remote Learning a [nightmare](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/29/opinion/coronavirus-school-reopening.html) for a few reasons — one of them being that so many students lacked access. But this is faulty logic. In those cases Remote Learning didn’t fail. It was the government’s lack of support and initiative to ensure equitable access. After all, we don’t declare the health care system or doctors to be failures if people fall ill because of lack of transportation to get to the office — or for just not showing up.

There were certainly many folks who attempted Remote Learning and had an awful experience. I’m sure there were some schools and teachers that did the job poorly. [Efforts to enhance Remote Learning](https://medium.com/@david.sherrin/how-schools-can-succeed-in-the-fall-4e70e22255ea) with the proper planning and collaboration could do much to remedy that problem. Those efforts are nonexistent at the moment as we focus elsewhere.

It should be expected that in our fragmented local educational system there would be wide disparities in Remote Learning effectiveness. Our system isn’t built for equality. And this was, after all, the most drastic and rapid transformation in any profession in history and it took place in an ad-hoc way in less than a week. Teachers reworked their profession without significant training or almost any prior knowledge of best practices. In some ways, we should celebrate this spring as a remarkable success that a system not known for its flexibility adapted so quickly to ensure the safety and continued education of our children.

When students had the means, motivation, and support to access the programs and the educators put together reasonable combinations of live Zoom classes and asynchonous assignments, many families found the experience to be at least “acceptable.” Nobody seems to tell their stories among all the lamentations. Families saw teachers hard at work reinventing their practices on the spot and caring deeply for their kids. They saw some games and some creative activities and of course some busywork. And they realized that in our national catastrophe, an education that was safe AND acceptable was the best option. This was my experience both as a parent and as a teacher.

All we are asking for is the reasonable option to be able to choose another semester of safe and consistent mediocrity for our kids — not to be test cases in a public health and educational experiment. If we are going to end up back in Remote Learning in a month or two anyways, for many parents it is easier to start planning our lives with that reality from the start. We need policymakers to give us that choice.

WRITTEN BY

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