

## Missed lessons

The pandemic created an opening for a long overdue rethinking of K-12 education. We squandered it.



**By Charles Euchner**

On Friday the 13th of March, at the order of Gov. Charlie Baker, schools shut down across Massachusetts. No one knew for how long or how schools would respond. Within days, teachers adapted their classes to online platforms like Zoom. Some held classes live, every day. Other teachers uploaded videos and assignments but otherwise had little contact with students.

After the lost spring, educators and parents lost the summer too. State and local officials, teacher unions, and parents debated the logistics of making a return to school safe. How many students could fit in a classroom? How could teachers enforce mask-wearing and social distancing? Could classes be ventilated to avoid stagnant—and potentially virus-laden—air? Where would students eat lunch? How would they get to school?

All were, of course, important questions. But the spring and summer of disruption also offered a once-in-a-generation chance for a deeper, statewide conversation about education. No one, however—not the governor, the teachers unions, or other professional or civic organizations—pushed the kind of wholesale reform that we urgently need for the post-COVID era.

“Necessity is the mother of invention,” said Ronald Heifetz, a globally recognized authority on leadership at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. “But if people don’t realize there is a necessity, they’re not going to be inventive.”

The failure began with a refusal to face up to the persistence of the virus. “We knew in March [that] the virus isn’t going away,” said Heifetz, who is also trained as a physician. “It’s a highly efficient spreading agent.” Despite the dangers of the virus, officials focused on how to return to “normal” as soon as possible.

“We can’t define success as returning to the status quo ante,” said Paul Reville, Gov. Deval Patrick’s education secretary, about schooling after COVID. “That was deficient in a variety of ways.”

Neema Avashia, an activist and an eighth-grade civics teacher at John W. McCormack Middle School in Dorchester, agrees. “We should be blowing up the way we think about school and learning,” Avashia said. “Let’s not replicate the way we do traditional courses.”

Businesses across the state already have begun to reinvent the way they operate. Almost half of the companies surveyed by the Massachusetts Competitive Partnership said they would continue to work remotely, at least part of the time, after the COVID crisis. Could schools do the same? Should they? If so, how?

For years, reformers have called for project-based learning, greater student collaboration, and smarter uses of technology. But classes are still dominated by teachers talking, pushing to “cover the material” rather than engage students deeply in learning. New approaches in recent years—from computers to charter schools to high-stakes testing—have simply been grafted onto the existing system.

The greatest lesson from the COVID spring, educators and reformers say, is the need to abandon the top-down model of schooling. “Learning only happens in relationships,” Avashia said. “This is

potentially a moment for creativity. But we’re not going to get it right if we try to do the same things over the Internet.”

With the old routines blown away by COVID, the best teachers discovered powerful lessons about teaching and learning. The question is whether Massachusetts has the will to use these lessons to launch a once-in-a-lifetime revolution. So far, the answer has been no. But the lessons are still there, waiting to be picked up and used.

### ***Lesson 1: Connect with the community***

When Suzie McGlone heard about the shutdown, she moved quickly to connect with her students’ families.

McGlone, who teaches civics at Orchard Gardens K-8 School in Roxbury, made business cards with her personal cell number and posters telling her students where they can get free meals. She connected with activists, doctors, and community leaders.

Then she got online and started teaching. She invited 10 guest speakers who could inspire her Cape Verdean students. The speakers included the son of the island nation’s president, authors on civil rights, a doctor and qigong master, and members of the Boston City Council. Her reasoning was simple: Only when students feel connected—to their history, to their community, to each other and their teacher—can they learn.

To combat absenteeism, McGlone texted students an hour before their online classes. She also held evening sessions. She got parents to serve as Spanish and Creole translators. Every Wednesday, she checked in with all her students’ families. She also started an evening book club for parents.

Reville, now a professor at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, agrees that reform requires total community engagement.

“We need to emphasize relationships as we have never done before,” he said. “In high school, teachers typically see 150 kids a day. Guidance counselors see 400. One of the biggest crises of this pandemic are peer-to-peer and student-to-faculty relationships. With so much going online, we’re going to have to bend over backwards to build relationships.”

To make that happen, schools must work constantly to connect with families—with advisories,

home visits, regular check-ins, and after-hours consultations. Knowing students' families is often more important than devising a great class project or a zippy Zoom lecture.

"For years we have given lip service" to engaging families, Reville said. "Most schools have treated this as an afterthought if not a nuisance. Now, suddenly, the rhetoric has to become the reality. If parents are going to support their learners, they need help."

Here's one way. In the early days of the shutdown, community organizations in East Boston—schools, faith institutions, libraries, government agencies, barbers and beauticians, health centers, child-care providers, housing developments, homeless shelters, and employers—launched a program called The Basics to give pre-K kids these experiences.

Under the program, devised by Harvard Kennedy School researcher Ronald Ferguson, community partners agree to connect with pre-school kids in five specific ways: providing love and managing stress; talking, singing, and pointing; counting, grouping, and comparing objects; movement and play; and reading and discussing stories.



**Harvard Kennedy School professor Ronald Ferguson. (Photo courtesy of Ronald Ferguson by Kris Snibbe/Harvard University Staff Photographer)**

Without such community "saturation," kids from low socioeconomic backgrounds fall behind more affluent children at exponential rates. In a lockdown, even better-off students fall behind and

struggle to catch up. "If parents can't play their roles, someone else must," Ferguson said. "We need a collective movement to give these children what they need to learn."

The need for community saturation goes beyond toddlers. Advocates of critical thinking and creativity have long argued against the passive old model of learning: lecturing, note-taking, cramming, and regurgitating. To really learn, students need to be engaged, not just with teachers and classmates but people all over the community.

### ***Lesson 2: Keep it simple***

Soon after classes moved online, the routines of eight-period days, with students quickly shifting their attention to new subjects, melted away.

In a time of chaos—in an age when schools wrestle with virtually every social problem, from homelessness and family breakdown to mental illness and abuse—teachers need to give their students focus. Maybe teaching 150 students, whose attention constantly shifts over the school day, is not the best model for deep learning.

To keep students engaged, schools need to embrace a number of practices. To start, teachers need to greet their students as they arrive for the day's activities. Schools need uniform, accessible learning platforms. In Springfield, parents complained that they had to master seven different learning management systems to help their children. "That was well-intentioned," said Paul Foster, the system's chief information officer. "We wanted to give teachers control. But we need everyone on the same platform."

Teachers also need new curricular tools and coaching to meet their new challenges. "Let's make sure, with partnerships and online tools, to create online curricular materials," said Justin Reich, director of the Teaching Systems Lab at MIT. "So when we flip to go online with a surge of COVID or just the flu, instead of every teacher scrambling, there are some curricular materials available. Either way, teachers need a ton of resources."

Schools also need to break free of the tyranny of the eight-period school day and its assumptions about curriculum. "Let's do a few things really well," Reich said. "Let's create smaller communities—almost like a one-room schoolhouse."

"Schools have to decide which [curricular] areas they're really going to take seriously," said

Ferguson. “That’s the anchor. Everything else is related to that.”

Even in the best of times, asking teachers to track 100 or more students doesn’t make a lot of sense. But in a time of uncertainty, teachers need to know their students.

A number of Massachusetts schools adopted, at least temporarily, the use of advisories. Advisories are homerooms on steroids. They bring together a small group of students with a teacher, who gets to know them and guides their development throughout the high school years. Too often, struggling students now get lost in the crowd, grow alienated and frustrated, and see their failures cascade.

When students are part of cohesive “tribes”—with students not just passively learning but also contributing to the group—they thrive. They not only develop social ties but also help each other on academic work. For decades, research has found peer-to-peer tutoring to be one of the best approaches to learning. Students could work together on common projects, from drama videos to programming marathons to mock trials.

Schools also might consider adopting some version of the “block system” of Colorado College, which gives students intensive courses for a month at a time. Under this approach, teachers get to know their students and engage them more personally.

With bigger blocks of time for learning, classes could focus on what matters. Rather than following a traditional lecture-and-discussion model of classroom learning—the “sage on a stage”—teachers could embrace more effective learning activities. They would know their students better and serve as advisors and guides.

Schools might start by experimenting with mini-blocks. Classes in the humanities and social sciences could come together for half the day, for example, while classes in math and science could come together for the other half.

The block approach could make it easier for schools to address the problems of inequality. Schools need to focus on students who struggle because of their low socioeconomic status or learning problems. Otherwise, they could be lost forever. “If we’re in a hybrid situation, they should ask: Who needs to be in the buildings the most?” Reich said. “Then make sure they get it.”

Such a scenario raises alarms about institutionalizing a two-tiered system. A better solution would be to embrace choice for learning models. Some students—not just those needing more help, but also those who thrive in buzzing social settings—might embrace a complete in-school model. Others might choose a hybrid model, with a mix of work in and out of the school building.

### ***Lesson 3: Focus on a common learning challenge***

The day the pandemic shut down Massachusetts, Sue Szachowicz was in Dartmouth to meet with school officials. Her goal was to bring to the town nestled along Buzzards Bay an innovative writing program that she helped to pioneer in Brockton.

Szachowicz was the principal at Brockton High School when the school transformed itself from one of the worst to one of the best-improved schools for MCAS in the state. With an 83 percent poverty rate and diverse population (students spoke 49 languages at home), Brockton had languished at the bottom of statewide rankings for years. Only 22 percent of Brockton High students passed the English and 7 percent passed the math MCAS in 1998.

Ideally, Szachowicz says, a school is a learning community where everyone supports everyone. People talk regularly about their common concerns and strategies to connect with students. The need for a singular focus is especially important in chaotic times.

To confront its achievement crisis, Brockton High School embraced writing across the entire curriculum. All classes—from history to science to math—taught writing, reading, speaking, and reasoning. Some teachers grumbled, but they went along. MCAS failure rates plummeted from 1998 to 2017, from 44 percent to 1 in English and from 75 to 9 in math.

The emphasis on writing gave students skills that they could use their whole lives. “Writing is thinking,” Szachowicz said. “If you can explain something, you understand it.”

Writing across the curriculum also gave students an outlet for expressing themselves and connecting with others. Szachowicz remembers spying on Vincent Macrina’s band class. Before a Veterans Day concert, Macrina passed out copies of John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields,” a poem about the



fallen of World War I. Write down “every emotion you feel when you read it,” he said. Ten minutes later, students discussed those emotions.

“Now, pick up your instruments,” Macrina said. “I better feel every emotion when you play.”



**Sue Szachowicz in the hallway at Brockton High School during her time as principal. (Photo by Frank Curran)**

Especially in a time of crisis, everyone’s minds get scattered. Teachers can’t connect with students online if they bombard them with facts and equations. Instead, they need to create a common challenge. Then teachers need to reinforce that challenge.

Schoolwide focus doesn’t necessarily have to come from writing. Schools could focus on other topics or skills. The ideals of service or justice could be adapted to most subjects. So could history, languages, the environment—or even, *a propos* of COVID, living in a time of global crisis. What matters, says MIT’s Reich, is adopting a focus “big or capacious enough so people in different [subjects] can connect with their own approaches and values.”

Tom Eastabrook, a trainer for workplace safety at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, has a timely idea for focusing teachers and students in all subjects: studying place. “We’ve had to navigate through space, in order to stay safe, in a very conscious way,” he says of the pandemic. “This is

what students are living. They could use it to learn too.” Place could help to frame a variety of school subjects—physics, history, economics, mathematics, health, even the arts and music.

#### ***Lesson 4: Embrace new teaching methods***

During the spring lockdown, schools got a simple directive from state education officials: Don’t worry about attendance, tests, or grades. Just survive till the end of the year.

Using Zoom and other online tools, many schools managed to engage most of their students. Many students got bored with still presentations and drifted away. Others thrived. But few teachers had experience teaching online and it showed.

The summer presented an opportunity for districts to hit the reset button. Some districts used professional development money to get teachers to cut videos for class use or to revise their teaching plans. But most districts focused on health and safety issues until August.

The Milford schools hired the Cambridge-based company Better Lesson to help teachers get ready for 2020-21. The company provides resources, workshops, and one-on-one coaching. Its website offers hundreds of video lessons and teaching strategies, which teachers can fit into their learning “ecosystem.” These lessons guide teachers and students through a three-step learning process: define (problems, concepts, and goals), explore (specific strategies that address the problem), and build (summarize, make connections, and look ahead to new learning).

In the rush to return to normal, educators often embrace a false dichotomy between traditional schooling and everything else. The refrain that “nothing can replace classroom learning” is false for two reasons. First, traditional classroom routines—teacher-driven lectures and discussions, test-driven activities, pushing to “cover” material without deep understanding—are often wanting. Second, while classroom work is vital in creating relationships and engaging learners in discovery with each other, other activities often work better.

To rebuild education, after the pandemic, educators should explore what activities work best in person and online, in real time and asynchronously.

The key is to identify what lessons might be improved with video lessons and exercises and which

ones benefit from live meetings. A video might offer a better how-to statistics lesson on using Excel spreadsheets than a classroom lesson. Students can take their time, view the video over and over, and follow the steps until they get it right.

Across the country, schools report the most success with online collaboration. In Zoom meetings, classes thrive when broken into small groups to work on mini-assignments. As students work on problems in small groups, the teacher can check their progress and nudge them in the right direction. An even more powerful tool is Google Docs. Students can contribute to class projects—data from field studies, feedback from readings, questions from class—around the clock. Students who are normally mum in class and limited in assignments, teachers say, often come alive in their contributions to group documents.

With the right coaching, teachers can create “synergy” with students, said Laura Boothroyd, the director of partnerships and strategy for Better Lesson. Students and teachers can work as teams even when separated. The biggest problem with distance learning, she said, is the feeling of “second-class citizenship” online. “It’s a false dichotomy to separate them,” she said. “We have to pay close attention to both.”

Teaching online need not be bad, says Sarah Marie Jette, a fourth-grade teacher at Thompson Elementary School in Arlington. “The classroom is my happy place,” she said. But after teaching online, she realized she could also connect with students at a distance. “People form relationships online all the time,” she said. “They even find love online. We can do it.”

To master the dozens of online and in-person tools and strategies, the teaching profession needs to overhaul training and career development. Rather than going to conferences or earning degrees or credits, teachers need to be engaged in an ongoing process of improvement—preferably with peers and coaches. David Rosenberg, a partner at Watertown-based Education Resource Strategies, calls for “connected professional learning.”

ERS organizes 90-minute sessions that allow teachers to share experiences and strategies. Teachers collaborate with subject-matter peers across the country, sharing techniques and feedback. Rather than asking teachers to run their classes on their own, the ERS model encourages teachers to get

together and decide on a division of labor. “In middle and upper grades, I can get the best teacher to do the lecture and three other teachers to work in small groups,” Rosenberg said.

But these efforts are scattered and uncoordinated.

Modern learning, says Reville, the former state education secretary, will be built around modular programs—both inside outside school, online and in the community, in real-time and asynchronously. He cites the rise of “coronavirus pods,” which generally have involved more affluent families pooling their resources to hire teachers for small groups of their kids.

Such an approach raises equity issues. Just as SAT tutoring tilts the game in favor of affluent families, so might these pods. But rather than resisting pods as elitist, school systems might consider ways to support pods for all. Why not make these and other enhancements available to all, Reville asks, by creating educational savings accounts?



**A young girl on playground at the Mather Elementary School in Dorchester on October 1, the first day some students returned to in-person classes. (Photo by Michael Jonas)**

### ***A ‘Sputnik moment’?***

When the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957, Cold War America went into a panic and boosted spending on math, science, and language programs to fight back. Paul Reville wants to use the pandemic to create a “Sputnik moment” for schooling.

In the original Sputnik moment, the federal government boosted funding for math, science, and foreign language programs but did not challenge the

basic model of public education. The answer then was more of the same. But the current crisis calls for fundamental change.

The late Clayton Christensen, the longtime Harvard Business School professor and father of “disruption” theory, argued for a complete rethinking of education. Rather than trying to do a better job with old approaches, Christensen called for using technology to redesign schooling from top to bottom—just as Apple disrupted the phone industry, Uber the taxi industry, and Airbnb the hospitality business.

Out of the ruins of the COVID spring, Massachusetts and other states had a historic opportunity to turn the Lost Spring into the Great Pivot. “The summer should have been used to train teachers how to teach online, to figure out the support systems for parents,” said Heifetz, the Harvard leadership expert. “What are the additional support systems [needed] to sustain families and children for the next 12 months?”

Heifetz, who has worked with state education commissioners across the country, quickly ticked off a list of lost opportunities for Massachusetts.

What if, he asks, Gov. Baker had created a statewide commission to rethink education during *and after* the pandemic, with big financial incentives to experiment with different hybrid models? What if Baker had jawboned corporations into providing free WiFi and computers? What if he

offered grants to educators who worked together—across districts—to devise teaching tools for the new reality? What if the governor had worked with unions to devise a new deal for teaching under the pandemic and beyond? What if he had worked with Beacon Hill to pump millions into training, curriculum development, and support services for vulnerable families?

Instead, the state directed districts to come up with plans to teach in the classroom, online, or with a mix of approaches. Week after week, districts debated the health risks of returning to their buildings. They managed pressures from parents as well as possible, without much guidance from the state. They got even less help taking on the ultimate challenge: devising creative and effective plans for teaching and learning.

The assumption was that schooling, for the second phase of COVID and afterward, would look a lot like education before COVID. The pandemic opened a door for sorely needed reform, but no one walked through it.

*Charles Euchner is a former executive director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard University and a former planner for the City of Boston. The author of books on civil rights, baseball, and urban policy, he is completing a book about Woodrow Wilson’s campaign for the League of Nations. Reach him at [charleseuchner@gmail.com](mailto:charleseuchner@gmail.com).*