

A Critical Look at the US Education System Through the Lens of Parent Concerns During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The US education system is struggling to serve families. Parent concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic shed light on what needs to change. This paper lays out several parent concerns found in news and media outlets during the first few months of the pandemic and shows how those concerns can lead to a formula for change. Analysis of these concerns shows practical methods that can be put into place immediately that will continue to work for families after the pandemic concludes. It is recommended that those involved in the US education system take the very important step to work together to make these improvements. Not altering course could have a detrimental impact on the education of an entire generation.

Keywords

education reform, COVID-19 pandemic, parenting, K-12 education

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a great tragedy with a global death count that increases daily. Bearing in mind this fact, it has also provided a new lens through which to examine various areas of US society. News and information moved fast as the pandemic reached its initial peak in the Spring of 2020 (See Appendix). With miniscule scientific information

and most knowledge based on speculation, decisions by lawmakers, governors, schools, and families were made with little regard to future planning. Some decisions have proven to be detrimental, even fatal, while others have proven to be helpful, even restorative. Most parties involved made the best decisions they could for everyone involved. However, the pandemic exacerbated many flaws already apparent, especially those in the US education system. One of the most evident flaws was a heavy reliance on achievement tests instead of on the skills and expertise of teachers. Reliance on testing has prevented teachers and schools from providing the best educational experience possible for children and families.

Parents have been one of the most vocal groups making known their concerns to anyone who would listen. They have taken to news outlets and social media for assistance and compassion for what they have gone through not just during the pandemic, but leading up to the pandemic, regarding the education system. The pitfalls and failures of the US education system have become glaringly obvious in the world of the COVID-19 pandemic. Families who often suffered in silence are now finding that there is a widespread community of people all over the country dealing with the same concerns. As these concerns are brought to light, society must follow with change. The education system is the harbinger of our future. Every child, in some way or another, steps into the education system and steps out transformed, expected to meet the challenges of adulthood. Without the proper support, the education system is unable to provide the best opportunities for these children. The concerns parents are expressing are the sounding of an alarm. Society must listen, take heed, and change course. A look into parent concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a blueprint for change in the United States education system.

Educational Options

To discuss parent concerns, there must first be a comparison of educational options. It must be abundantly clear, however, that not all of these options are available to every parent. Some options are absent due to

not being available in all school districts or states. For example, a map on the website *Education Week* (2020) shows four states that require school districts to open in person and seven states requiring at least partial closures, while the remaining states leave options open to local jurisdictions. In addition, some options will be absent due to socio-economic barriers and other issues that will be addressed in more detail later in this paper.

Homeschooling is an option that has been around well before the pandemic. This is an option that over one million families around the United States were already choosing for their children before the COVID-19 pandemic (Grady, McQuiggan, & Megra, 2017, p. 3). Homeschooling is educational instruction that is given primarily by a member or members of the family without involvement or support of a professional educator or a public institution.

The next option, pod or group schooling, was not as popular before the pandemic. Pod schooling refers to a small collection of families who have hired a professional educator to be the main provider of educational instruction for their small group of children. This phenomenon grew during the pandemic as a way to provide social interaction and professional instruction while continuing to keep contact with the outside world to a minimum. This method, though well-intentioned on the surface, has received some extreme backlash calling out its inherent privilege and inequity (Moyer, 2020).

One option, public virtual school, has been offered in many states long before the pandemic. This is an option mainly used by families who wanted or needed public education, but whose children were unable to or preferred not to attend at a physical building for a multitude of reasons. These online public schools are typically ran without involvement from the school district where the family resides.

Once a previously uncommon option, remote or distance learning became widespread during the pandemic. Remote instruction, typically online, is provided by teachers employed by schools or school districts that have traditionally instructed in person. Discussion of education

options most often surrounds this type of instruction. When schools began closing for in-person instruction in early March, they rushed to provide an alternative method of instruction, typically an online version (See Appendix). A survey cited in *Forbes* magazine by journalist Derek Newton (2020), showed that more than half of the teachers felt they were unprepared with almost half being solely responsible for how they would teach remotely. Many parents remembered the difficult experience they had in the Spring of 2020 when weighing options for the Fall of 2020 even though teachers may be slightly more prepared for the new school year.

Another option that has emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic is the hybrid model, which is found in both private and public institutions. Although the hybrid model can look very different from school to school or district to district, it contains complementary components: part time remote instruction and part time in-person instruction. Many schools are using this method to provide some of the benefits of in-person instruction while keeping contact between students to a minimum to hopefully avoid major outbreaks.

The last option was most widely chosen before the pandemic: in-person instruction. This option is available at both private and public institutions. It is typically offered in the same manner as before the pandemic. Although some of the details of the school day are slightly different now with social distancing and mask requirements, students return to their classrooms for their full schedule of hours and days, receiving no remote instruction. This option is the most likely to change mid-year with localized increased risk of COVID-19.

With this list of options, it is no wonder parents are anxious about their child's education for the 2020-2021 school year. They might see that they have even more options than ever, still none of the options fit with their current needs and concerns. Now, add in many of the worries they already had at the beginning of the last school year that have been compounded by the pandemic, and that is a recipe for even more distress.

Parent Concerns

Understandably, health was the most talked about parent concern when making educational decisions for the 2020-2021 school year. This concern can be split into two categories: physical health and social-emotional health. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a focus on student health like there has never been before. It is still uncertain how the virus will impact children, their families, and the greater community around them. In the last few decades, most diseases and outbreaks have been well studied, giving families and schools guidelines for how to deal with them. This pandemic lands families in a precarious and unfamiliar situation. It was not until July 7th that the World Health Organization (WHO) finally acknowledged that the virus is spread through airborne transmission (Kantis, Keirnan, & Bardi, 2020). This was mere days before some school districts would start the new school year. Schools were expected to start making decisions based on an ever-changing cycle of recommendations while parents were expected to make choices based on these decisions.

Physical health concerns weigh even more heavily on certain demographics. According to a report released by the CDC in early September, most school-age deaths from COVID-19 are among the Hispanic, Black, and Native American population even though they account for a minority of the school-age population (Yancey-Bragg, 2020). This very same population group widely overlaps with the population group that most needs in-person schooling due to financial concerns and are more likely to choose the in-person option for the 2020-2021 school year.

Concerns about the physical health consequences of COVID-19 pushed some parents to choose options outside of traditional in-person schooling or new hybrid models. On the flipside, there are concerns about children's social-emotional health. An important educational feature of the traditional model of schooling is peer interactions which is more difficult, yet not impossible, to achieve outside of that model. This is what makes the pod or group schooling option so enticing. In these models, families limit their exposure and potentially their risk while also

providing social interactions with other children. However, this option is usually only afforded by those with higher income and can be detrimental to the school systems they are leaving behind (Moyer, 2020).

Interestingly, there are a small number of school districts who have taken to the pod learning model to assist the most disenfranchised families in their communities. The Indianapolis Public School District chose to return to the Fall 2020 semester completely online, knowing that this would leave its most vulnerable students without an opportunity for education (Washington, 2020). They combated this deficit by forming their own method of pod schooling called learning hubs. These learning hubs provided peer interaction under the guidance of a publicly-funded facilitator at a publicly-funded facility while the students continued to perform their online class responsibilities similar to what their peers were doing at home.

The next category of concerns is financial, including but certainly not limited to, job insecurity and childcare needs. On April 9th, less than a month after the national emergency was declared, over 17 million people had filed for unemployment (Taylor, 2020). As of November 2020, many of those same people are still without work or have had to find other employment due to COVID-19 repercussions. This does not account for the people already contending with unemployment and poverty before the start of the pandemic. According to a United States Census Bureau Report, 10.5 million children were living below the poverty level in 2019 (Semega, Kollar, Shrider, & Creamer, 2020).

Parents that had jobs as the schools started to close for in-person instruction in the Spring found themselves juggling childcare responsibilities while working. Some of these parents, deemed essential workers, had to continue working in person, away from their homes. Others found themselves at home, working remotely as their children were also home learning remotely. Many of these families could not find, nor could they afford, childcare from people outside their home. Some were forced to leave their jobs or faced demotions and missed promotions (Miller, 2020).

This responsibility disproportionately impacted mothers. A study conducted by the University of Southern California showed a drop of 11% in the employment of non-college educated men while there was a 15% drop in non-college educated women in April (Miller, 2020). The same study showed that, in April, 44% of women were the sole caregivers while only 14% of men claimed the same position (Miller, 2020). College educated mothers did not fare well either, with 64% reporting that their hours were reduced in March versus 36% of fathers (Miller, 2020).

The last major category of concern is education. This includes a wide variety of issues ranging from lacking access to the internet for remote learning to having in-person services cut off. When many schools went fully remote in the Spring, it was painfully obvious how many families had no access to the internet, from families that physically could not obtain an internet connection due to location to families who could not afford to be connected to physically available resources. In the United States, 12 million children live in homes with no internet connection (Broom, 2020). This disconnect completely cut them off from their education in the Spring of 2020 unless their schools offered print materials or provided wireless hot spots. Internet access by itself is not always enough. For synchronous instruction, each child in the household would also need an electronic device like a tablet or laptop to complete their schoolwork.

One state and federal guideline that plays a major role in the US education system is achievement testing. Achievement testing influences everything from deciding curriculum content to school management (Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008). It is seen by legislatures as the best option, though, and continues to be the gold standard to determine school funding and teacher pay (Thompson, 2018). At the beginning of the pandemic almost all achievement and standardized testing came to a grinding halt. State testing was unable to be completed in many schools because they were no longer holding classes in person. There are methods for online testing, but these would be unable to be set up quickly due to legislation, previously mentioned technology concerns, and financial constraints within school districts. By April, all states had request-

ed and received waivers from the federal government for missing the required state testing (Gewertz, 2020). Some states, like Michigan, are already requesting testing requirements be dropped for the 2020-2021 school year (Higgins, 2020). Families and schools are calling the guidelines cruel in a time when everyone is already working their hardest.

Many teachers report that doing away with state achievement testing was the best thing that happened in the 2020-2021 school year. The #PandemicTeacherTag started by fourth grade teacher Mr. Kyle Cohen (2020) on YouTube asked the question, “What changes do you hope to see in our education system as a result of this pandemic?” By the end of the first week of tagging, every teacher who had responded said, no more achievement testing. The reasons they gave all focused on how not needing to teach to the test in the Spring gave them more time and freedom to help the children where they were, and provide them with the best education possible. Even in the middle of a pandemic, teachers felt more freedom to provide for the needs of their students than they do during a regular school year because of testing requirements. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that there should be a major overhaul in achievement testing standards, allowing for a greater freedom in the classroom to provide for the needs of the children instead of the needs of the government.

Attendance is one more guideline that has many parents and schools concerned. With schools closed for in-person instruction at the beginning of the pandemic, school leaders found themselves trying to figure out how to take attendance and deciding whether it even mattered. Teachers ended up taking attendance by a variety of means including phone calls, check-in forms, and virtual meetings. Many of these methods resulted in losing track of students no matter how hard they tried. Responses to this were mixed – some school districts stopped requiring formal tracking while others redefined what tracking meant as they were still required to take attendance by the state (Belsha & Barnum, 2020).

Even with a more structured system in place in the Fall of 2020, schools have already seen a significant drop in attendance when compared to the previous year. In Chicago, 49,000 out of 300,000 students

missed the first day of virtual school in September (Kunichoff, 2020). In Denver, only 88% of students attended virtual classes the first two weeks of school, compared to 93% attendance for in-person school the same week the previous year (Asmar, 2020). There was even a disparity between the 94% of attending white students and 85% of attending Black and Hispanic students (Asmar, 2020). It is obvious from parent concerns that they are facing barriers to keeping their children in school during the pandemic.

On a final note, there are some services, like occupational therapy, speech therapy, and physical therapy, that are more effective in person, or are necessary to perform in person. Many of these services are offered through local school districts. When the pandemic started and schools closed, these services came to an abrupt halt. Parents and children with special education needs are usually protected by several laws, mainly Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Title I and the No Child Left Behind Act, and The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) which provides for Individual Education Plans (IEPs) (Trix, 2020). However, many of the plans that schools and families had in place were unable to be fulfilled with school buildings closed. In addition to not receiving services, the online learning model did not work for many of these children who needed the structure of face to face interaction (Engel, 2020). Parents trying to assist with their children's education at home were left frustrated with the lack of support they received.

Blueprint for Change

The COVID-19 pandemic has made evident the lack of support and resources that families and schools receive, not just during the pandemic, but even before. It would do an extreme disservice to everyone to continue the same trajectory post-pandemic. The most important fact through all of this is that when it comes to the US education system, families must be met where they are. During the pandemic, parents have provided a list of concerns that lays out exactly what changes need to be made to accomplish this.

The first major change that can be made based on parent concerns is to reduce class sizes overall. Smaller class sizes can provide more meaningful peer interactions as well as allowing the teacher to act as a mentor and not just a disseminator of information (Lynch, 2017). More meaningful peer interaction will lead to better social emotional health and learning. As a mentor, teachers will be better able to support all student needs and will be better able to see red flags and concerns. Smaller class sizes are often the calling card of private and charter schools, drawing in parents with a more optimal learning environment. These opportunities should not be restricted to the elite or the lucky. Instead, they should be standard in every classroom and school.

Another component that ought to be a basic component in all schools, and not just those in areas with higher income levels, is technology access. It would be beneficial to have a federal education standard that would grant all students with the technology resources to keep them connected to their education. With the ever-increasing dependence on technology, families and schools that cannot afford internet access or electronic devices like tablets and laptops are often left behind.

The lack of preparation for the COVID-19 pandemic was highly evident during the first weeks of school closures and persisted when schools reopened the following Fall. Schools began closing just nine days after the Center for Disease Control (CDC) warned them to make plans (Decker, Peele, & Riser-Kositsky, 2020). Well defined contingency plans for alternative education procedures are recommended not only during a pandemic but for a great number of emergencies. The educational impact of the pandemic is being compared to the 2005 natural disaster emergency of Hurricane Katrina. During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many Louisiana students were unable to attend school and there were serious concerns about the long-term consequences of the extended absences from school (Lussier, 2020). Instead of using this as a warning that could have prepared the US education system for the impact of the pandemic, the populace is left with this instructive comparison. The United States cannot repeat this crucial mistake.

Another mistake that has gone on too long in the US education system is the heavy reliance on achievement testing. Removing heavy-handed testing requirements in favor of a more holistic performance evaluation would provide a multitude of benefits for schools and students. Focusing on qualitative evaluations of student growth and wellness, as well as teacher and school involvement, would provide better accountability and outcomes. The current achievement testing system is costly, not just in terms of money, but in terms of what it takes from children who could instead be afforded better educational opportunities.

Along the same line, there is a large portion of the student population who should qualify for special services based on special education laws that are underserved. An analysis by the Advocacy Institute (2015) of demographic data of students covered by Section 504 collected by the Civil Rights Data Collection database showed that students with 504's are typically and disproportionately white males. Another comparative statistic shows a gap in students who receive services. Only 1.5% are covered by Section 504 while 12% of students are covered by IDEA (Samuels, 2015). The federal government is not mandated to provide money for these services, leaving the responsibility to the school districts even though they are not the ones mandating the services. This means that a large portion of students needing services are not receiving them even under current laws. Returning to the benefits of smaller classrooms, this could allow teachers greater access to evaluations and assistance for children currently being missed.

All of these methods of change have something else in common: they all require funding. Better working relationships between lawmakers and those in the education system would allow for better solutions and more funding. Ensuring lawmakers, state superintendents, and the US Secretary of Education understand, in a personal way, the impact of their decisions on what happens to children and educators would help them understand and have a greater stake in educational outcomes. Teacher unions and other educational organizations must continue to take a hands-on approach when dealing with lawmakers both locally and federally.

Conclusion

The US education system has long needed a great overhaul. Practices of the past should not continue into the future without adjustment. Even standard procedures that were well suited for children at one point might not work for children today and tomorrow. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought parent concerns for safe and equitable access to quality education to the forefront, and they are demanding that the US education system fix this now. It would be a grave mistake not to jump on this opportunity for change. Parents are calling out for an education system that works for their children and not against them. Parents, teachers, and concerned community members are already working on change by contacting lawmakers, being involved in their school districts, and voting. This must continue, and in increasing numbers, for change to happen. Children need an education system that looks at each of them as a unique individual in a whole community.

The goal of education is not memorizing facts and meeting arbitrary requirements. Those measurements barely scratch the surface of what education can be. The goal of education is to foster a love of learning that continues well into adulthood. The US education system must stop basing its foundation on surface level criteria. Instead, it must begin to rebuild a strong foundation built on sound educational principles that are responsive to the students in their care at this significant moment in history.

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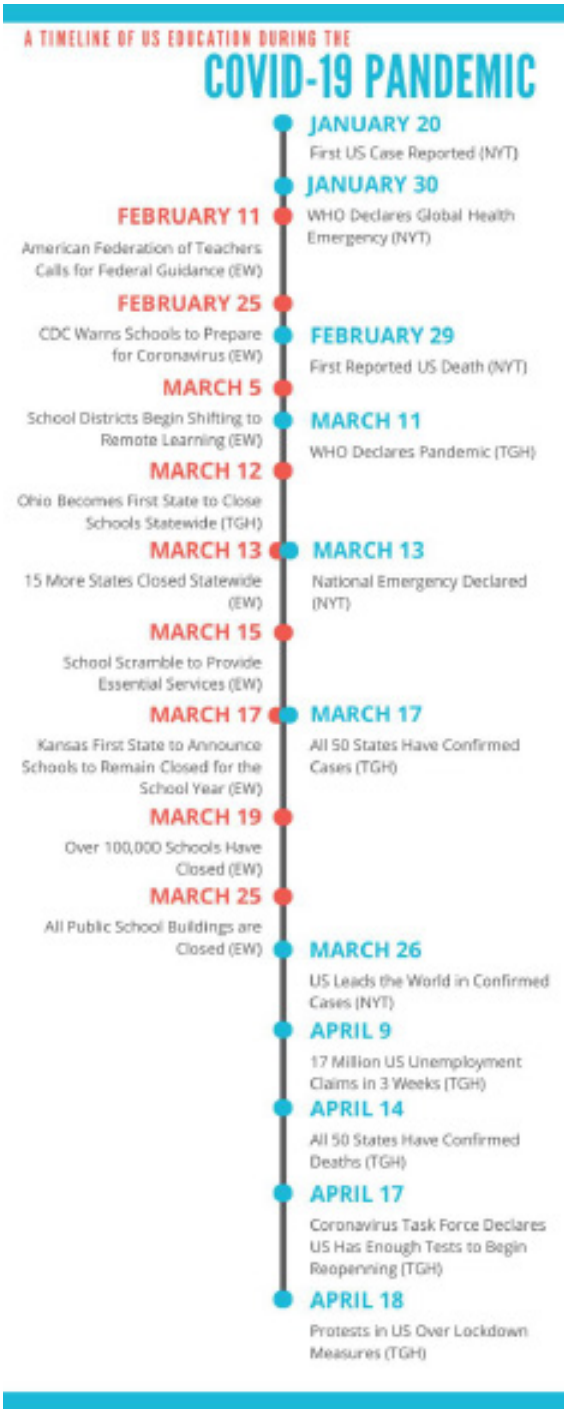
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APPENDIX:

A Timeline of US Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Created by Falen Pope from information identified on image 2, on page 93.



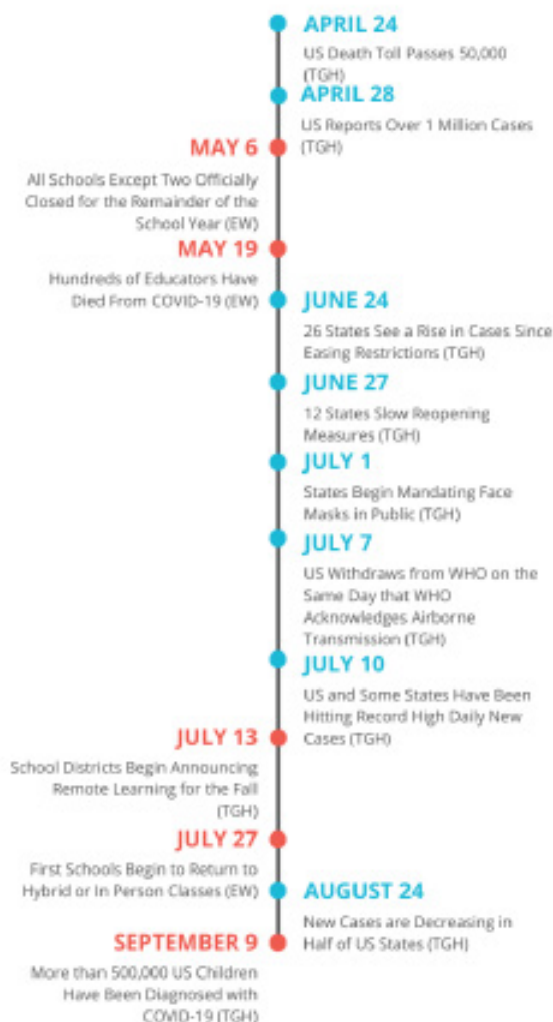
APPENDIX: cont'd

Decker, Peele, &
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