

Coronavirus opens doors to rethinking education

Advocates of competency-based education, a revised school calendar and blended learning see potential in the crisis

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The coronavirus has forced education leaders to consider a new future for schools. Most are focusing on the near future, when state-imposed social distancing requirements lift and students return to school buildings. They're outlining new cleaning procedures, staggered school schedules, mandatory face masks and an end to school assemblies.

But some educators are thinking beyond near-term logistics and brainstorming more ambitious innovation in schools.

“In any tough time of crisis, there’s always opportunity,” said Arne Duncan, former U.S. secretary of education, in a recent webinar hosted by GSV Ventures, an investment fund that focuses on education.

Duncan has been a longtime proponent of changing the academic calendar. During the webinar, he suggested mandatory summer school for everyone and longer breaks in the winter months when more common viruses like the flu already hit communities the hardest. Educators and even legislators around the country are making similar pitches for year-round schooling in a push to eliminate the negative, compounding effect of summer learning loss, when students forget what they learned the prior year and achievement gaps grow because of vastly different summertime experiences, often based on socioeconomic status.

Beyond school schedules, Duncan said the current crisis should be an opportunity to fundamentally rethink everything: “There’s no better time to do that than now.”

Educators who have long embraced innovation in schools have stepped up in recent weeks to advocate more widespread adoption of models they already see working. One example: proponents of competency-based education, which calls for a laser focus on student mastery of learning objectives and student-specific supports and routes to mastery, have become more vocal. All schools have learning objectives for students based on state standards, but most of them push teachers to move from one lesson to another based on a timeline that doesn't always accommodate students' different learning needs. And most teachers assign grades based on a mixture of how students behave in class and how they perform academically. With school buildings closed and students in need of more flexibility while they work from home, the idea that students should get credit for meeting learning objectives no matter how they prove it or how long it takes them seems like a particularly logical alternative.

Lindsay Unified School District serves a high-needs student population of about 4,100 in central California. The district had a long history of poor performance before transitioning to a personalized, competency-based system that has greatly improved graduation rates and student achievement on standardized tests over the last decade.

Superintendent Tom Rooney knows students like his often aren't held to high standards and many educators don't always think it makes sense to try innovative teaching methods with them, but school closures have forced some experimentation. In another GSV Ventures virtual panel, Rooney said educators are realizing that many more students than they previously thought can handle self-directed or online learning. And they are rethinking their preconceptions about how and where learning happens.

These lessons may set districts up to embrace more community-based learning opportunities and give them the evidence they need to attempt more personalized learning experiences, where students get a greater say over what and how they learn.

"It will forever change what's possible," Rooney said. Many schools will necessarily enter this post-COVID world better set up to mix online with face-to-face instruction. They are exploring new tools for online instruction right now and more widely distributing computers and other digital devices for student use. Advocates of blended learning hope educators will capitalize on these efforts to expand these practices even after students are allowed back into classrooms.

Sal Khan, founder and CEO of Khan Academy, the free online learning hub, acknowledged in the panel with Duncan that coronavirus-related school closures have brought into sharp relief how technology can reinforce and amplify educational inequities. But he said that the changes districts are making right now to deliver remote instruction are building a powerful muscle they can use as an equalizing force in the future.

Technology, he said, can be used to ensure all students have access to more rigorous learning materials, give students the extra academic support they need to catch up to their peers, and let them continue learning when schools are closed – including in the summer.

The coronavirus is wreaking havoc on the U.S. education system, but many educators are finding a silver lining in its potential to be just destructive enough to prompt change for the better.

This story about innovation in schools was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for Hechinger's newsletter.