

OPINION

Coronavirus gives us an opportunity to rethink K-12 education

Could the pandemic be another Sputnik moment?

By Paul Reville

Updated April 9, 2020, 10:48 a.m.



Most schools are closed during the pandemic. CHRISTOPHER FURLONG/GETTY

In 1957, the Soviet Union, to the dismay of the United States, launched mankind's first satellite into space. Our nation was shocked — fearful not only that we had fallen behind in the space race, but that we were suddenly vulnerable to our Cold War adversary's seemingly superior technological talent.

National leaders immediately turned to education for an answer, and the federal government, for the first time in history, passed major K-12 legislation in the form of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). This direct federal intervention in public education, which had historically been the province of state and local government, set a precedent for a much stronger federal role in schooling than ever before. NDEA was followed some years later by the landmark Elementary and Secondary Education Act and then the War on Poverty.

Sputnik was a pivotal moment in the nation's sense of its obligation to children and the development of their talent.

The current coronavirus pandemic, while clearly very different from Sputnik, presents a similar focusing event that has turned public attention to children and education. The widespread, long-term closing of schools has now revealed to the nation the gross inequities that have always existed in the lives of impoverished families and children. Suddenly, we see front page stories and lead editorials on topics like uneven Internet and technology access, food insecurity, and limited access to physical and mental health services. It's as though a tidal wave has pulled back the ocean to reveal the ocean floor and the uncomfortable realities of life beneath the surface.

With some skill and luck, children's advocates may be able to turn this time of heightened public awareness into a Sputnik moment that will generate action at all levels of government to construct some form of Children's Accord, or general agreement on elements of support and opportunity that must be in place to ensure children's well-being and readiness to learn in school. The absence of these prerequisites to learning explains why schools, when in session, have been unable to break the correlation between socioeconomic status and educational attainment in spite of decades of expensive, controversial reforms. The coronavirus crisis with its attendant school closings have now exposed the underlying flaw in our over-reliance on the institution of schooling to create the equal opportunity society that we aspire to.

Schools alone, consuming a mere 20 percent of children's waking hours between kindergarten and high school graduation, are, on average, too weak an intervention to realize our audaciously ambitious education policy goals like "no child left behind." Schools, supposedly focused on academic achievement, don't have magical powers to triumph over hunger, untreated medical problems, lack of technology, and totally unequal access to enrichment in the 80 percent of waking hours children spend outside of school.

The school closings make it obvious, even to casual observers, that the playing field is not close to level for children even before they enter school. When they do start schooling, the impediments of poverty get in the way of children showing up and being ready to learn when they do. Sure, a few children defy the odds, but big data don't lie — the best predictor of your educational success is still your socioeconomic status. That's not what America is supposed to be.

If we want to rectify this gross inequity at the heart of our society when more than 50 percent of the nation's public school students come from low-income backgrounds, then we'll have to come together as civic communities, with state and federal support, to provide all children with the basics that those of us who have privilege take for granted in providing for our children's well being. Mechanisms like local Children's Cabinets,

convened by mayors and composed of leaders of child-serving organizations inside and outside of government, can assist communities in constructing a cradle to career pipeline designed to meet children's needs inside and outside of school.

School leaders, too, have an opportunity as they struggle to meet children's needs in this new Twilight Zone of education to take a moment to step back and consider whether or not this crisis presents an opportunity for reconsidering some of our most basic norms and strategies in public education such as the school schedule and calendar and how we hold ourselves accountable, measure progress, and attend to the whole child. Schools should be in a cycle of continuous improvement but this abrupt halt presents a golden opportunity for redesign. For example, what about a year round calendar and a daily schedule designed differently based on student needs? How about more project-based learning? Or using our newly acquired ed tech tools and skills to break down the artificial school barriers of time and place? The possibilities are endless. If all we do is restore the old order, the status quo ante, then we will have failed to make the most of the challenging situation we now face.

This moment of crisis could be a Sputnik-like opportunity to renew America's commitment to children and equity by capitalizing on the current sense of urgency to take bold action to eradicate childhood poverty and construct a 21st century system of child development that adapts to each child and gives them what they need to be successful inside and outside of school.

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