



# ACTION

Accelerating Change Through  
Innovation & Opportunity Now

series

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*This publication is an extension of the **CER ACTION Series**, virtual conferences addressing the most critical challenges—and opportunities—created by the Coronavirus pandemic.*

## THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL

### STUDENTS, NOT SYSTEMS

With the doors to most of K12 and higher education shut for the rest of the academic year and beyond, it's time to implement a dramatically different way of educating our nation's youth, and make it stick. We can't allow our kids to stop learning and slide back because facilities are closed.

Where you live is no longer relevant right now, and may not be relevant consistently over the next two years as the nation jigsaws its way through possible repeat outbreaks of Covid-19. What is relevant is the ability to deliver education seamlessly, via low- and high-tech tools, with substantive programming, expectations and American ingenuity. Innovation is happening, and it's the innovative institutions we must seek to expand and emulate.

Technology that successfully connects subject matter experts, coaches, educators, and families together removes all barriers to education. There is no longer justification for students to remain "assigned" to their current zip code, an archaic fact of life for over 85% of American students that stems from a 100-year-old concept called a school district, made worse by rapid consolidation through subsequent years. Where we once had over 100,000 districts in the 1940s with each community responsible for

its own schools (and as a result much more responsive to its constituency), we now have fewer than 14,000 powerful, centralized bureaucracies closely resembling feudal states. In short, where districts were created to provide support services and central management of funds and programs for the schools in their “zone” (allowing schools and educators to focus on the students), they now are about controlling services, jobs and the flow of money - and thus consolidating power.

To be sure, there are those who argue that large, consolidated governments are more efficient, though there’s little data to support that claim. Certainly as government support for public education has shifted from communities to state and federal governments, districts are a “natural” locus of financial and other forms of accountability. But that’s in theory. Because while it may sound rational, it simply hasn’t resulted in successful education for the vast majority of students, particularly in large districts.

Today, the failure of districts that educate the majority of students has never been more apparent. When the pandemic closed school facilities, it took weeks for most districts to turn out programs for their kids. They stalled, challenged by their signature inefficiency and ongoing adversity to innovation that left them totally unprepared to take learning online.

Students now limited to their homes became entirely dependent on the decisions of their districts to enable education to be delivered “where” they currently sit. Many districts did indeed begin full-service education for students. Not surprisingly most were already innovators, or are in states that have stimulated competitive behaviors. But in the majority of cases, education is still not being delivered at all - remotely, digitally, or any which way.

The failure of the Philadelphia school district to provide any education - delaying for almost two months the rollout of remote education until May 4! - will result in severe learning loss and possibly irreversible detachment issues for students for whom a connection to their school community is their lifeline.

Even one of the nation’s wealthiest districts - Fairfax County, VA, working with one of the nation’s largest and most successful online education management systems - Blackboard - could not figure out the safe and secure delivery of a modest remote learning program to its nearly 200,000 students. The county-wide school district had to suspend remote learning until April 21st, leaving students without any teaching for more than a month.

# THE UNION FACTOR

Then there's the union factor. Demanding that districts renegotiate their contracts to control how teachers can and should work under unprecedented conditions, unions are leaving students in tremendously volatile situations.

Education in Los Angeles came to a full stop (for students outside of any private or charter schools) while the union negotiated its terms. The result is that teachers were told not to teach online. The contract limits how much time teachers can be working to four hours a day. [San Francisco and others have followed suit.](#)

In Boston, the teachers' union also [negotiated](#) a four-hour work day, and teachers cannot be required to do anything on video, which flies in the face of the data backing in-person teacher engagement as a critical element of social and emotional learning. The district also agreed that "the goal is to provide interested students with opportunities to continue their learning during the school closures and try to mitigate learning gaps as much as possible," rather than actually set a goal of educating students.

Wanting to position themselves as concerned about the care of the students, despite their negotiations that suggest otherwise, the heads of both national unions in a webinar recently argued that the most important role for a teacher right now is social and emotional, rather than them having a duty to their student's academic growth.

There is no question that teachers are wholly unprepared to teach from home, with all the additional stressors that are making life complex and difficult for many. The teachers unions are being perceived as coming to their defense to protect them from unreasonable demands, because they - like so many - are ["working harder right now than they ever have."](#)

The solution is not simply to continue to control time and dependent variables, but to create and deploy new independent variables - methods and new approaches to teaching that change a focus on time spent to education accomplished.

And while it may be new to most traditional districts, there is nothing new about the digital, blended and personalized learning methods that many innovative schools have been using to benefit students for decades. Scores of examples exist now, whose leaders were able to begin educating their students within a short time frame following the first physical school closures. The real solution for the teachers unions would be to move from labor negotiator back to the role of professional teacher association, and work to help schools replicate the models that are working. But they - and school districts - are not set up for innovation.

Theirs is an extraordinary task. Not only are some plagued with complex contract negotiations, but many operate the equivalent of a small city, with thousands of pupils and employees under their charge, who barely see each other on a “normal” day, let alone amidst a crisis.

Isn't it time to admit that with this level of dysfunction and neglect, especially now, we cannot continue to vest them with authority to educate our kids?

## THE NEW NORMAL

We have two choices. We can wait until each district and school in America figures this out - which doesn't seem likely - or we can give every parent the opportunity to avail themselves of education remotely regardless of their current school assignment.

And even without a crisis, why should the challenges of life - a parent's job loss, an illness, or (on the upside) an opportunity to travel or change jobs - get in the way of a student's education?

We must not return to normal, as normal is a nation where fewer than 30% of students - and fewer than 15% in poor communities - read, write, spell, do math or know history, science, or civics on grade level. Normal is an education system which has consistently failed to deliver what students need and isn't permitted - by its very design - to put student interests ahead of rules and contracts.

We must do better, not do normal. We must change the way we educate and in myriad ways strive to deliver education using the very technologies that are tracking and delivering our food, our supplies, and so many other necessities of life.

Most families long for some normalcy. But the response by schools and districts to this pandemic is a wake-up call. Given the choice to go back to “normal,” or to choose a new, different school for their child, in either case most will likely choose to be “in” a school with buildings, people, educators, and other students close by. That doesn't preclude education happening in new and better ways, however, starting now.

Let's start by accepting that education needn't be “place-based,” or dependent on a specific classroom, with a set number of students in order to be learning. Let's also accept the obvious from this crisis - that helping a student master a grade-appropriate level of competency in a subject is more important than whether they're in a classroom for a certain period of time.

And let's absolutely not let a desire for "normal" preclude the ability of a parent to choose a school other than the one to which the student is assigned by virtue of his or her housing pattern.

In fact, if we really care what the data analysts argue, [that the education curve created by COVID-19 will be irreversible if we don't act quickly](#), we must act urgently and differently to ensure every child in America has access to the education they need.

## THE SOLUTION: IN THE BACKPACK

Every student, regardless of city or state, should be able to attend a school that can provide the education that their parents believe they can handle - right now, at this moment in time. Where students have quality education being delivered remotely and well, their existing school assignment may very well not change.

But whether there is one or are 1,000 students who aren't being well served during this crisis, they must be able to go beyond their school, district, or even state lines to obtain that education from a school that can and wants to deliver for them.

We must make the student our only unit of learning and give every student a virtual backpack that contains all they need to be educated. That backpack must include a device, a hotspot, basic supplies, a meal, and a ticket that gains them access anywhere to any school that has room - public, private, or charter. The funds that the student has "earned" for his or her district would be paid to the receiving school. The only requirement, as long as students are remote and until issues of accountability can be determined, is that the students' attendance, activities, and results (grades or otherwise) be reported through the school to the state and isolated for that period of time.

The federal government has for this moment in time already waived spending discrimination based on zip code. No longer must states distribute federal funds according to traditional, fixed categories and formulas. This is a moment to waive location-based assignment entirely.

To make this work well and expand the supply of options, we need to **1)** suspend caps on schools of choice, **2)** make sure states and districts send money directly to schools that are educating, and **3)** ensure education is funded wherever it comes from, just as every health care or food provider - no matter their location - is sending and receiving supplies and commodities from well beyond their boundaries.

To make this work, we need the same kind of emergency waivers the federal government conveyed to states to allow them to flexibly spend federal funds to be enacted on the state level.

While many states cannot waive constitutional provisions that give authority to school districts or allegedly safeguard how public education dollars are spent, they can remove all statutory limitations on school boundaries. If Miami, Florida, is doing a great job now, then students from Collier County should be able to enroll in Miami schools and the district and state should direct the funds Collier spends on that child to Miami. Similarly, if a student from Miami wants to attend a charter school that is doing remote programs in a way that fits a family's interest, the limitations on that charter school's enrollment size should be removed immediately.

This does not require the involvement of Congress or the White House, but both could incentivize the concept, and make it a condition for any future federal stimulus funding. They need not mandate a specific course of action, but they can specify that - in the same way that funds in most states must move with students where choices are legally available - moving funds is an appropriate and legal course of action for states to follow so long as students cannot return to their resident school facility.

The lawyers will balk and argue about arcane interpretations of policy and law but it must be done. There is no just alternative if we are to ensure that our nation's youth are well-served during this crisis. **LET'S GET STARTED.**

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