

Education is at Risk: A National Crisis

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The rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, posed the most dangerous threat in the history of U.S. public education. It has undoubtedly left a lasting impression on our future generation by changing the way children learn in a virtual world. As the pandemic swept across the country devastating our economy, health, and educational system, public schools shut down nationwide for the first time in American history. Unemployment rates skyrocketed, medical healthcare providers were swamped with treating a new virus, and schools were forced to move to remote learning. While federal lawmakers primarily focused their efforts on saving the economy and healthcare system, millions of K-12 students, including those who receive special education services and who are English Language Learners, were neglected. Needless to say, America's education was on the verge of a major collapse as school age children waited, our most precious commodity, for what would unfold as a national crisis. The pandemic prompted a paradigm shift of the public education system, a magnitude to which neither policymakers nor government officials would have anticipated. U.S. educational policies never dealt with or anticipated a need to be agile and swift in changing its focus. Equity became a major concern.

How can public education provide equal access to high-quality remote learning when students do not have the same Internet access, laptops, computers, or other technologies at home? The United States managed to bridge the digital divide allowing children to continue their education from home using various technologies, but it wasn't the same. Remote learning only exposed our socioeconomic disparities. For example, our underprivileged children in the U.S. do not have the basic infrastructure at home to foster an effective remote learning environment. This includes access to 5G Internet, up-to-date laptops with adequate processing power, or even a quiet learning space. Given these disparities, it is concerning the probable increase and continued learning gaps amongst disenfranchised students. As schools move to remote learning, low-income, English Language Learners, and ethnic minority students are *lagging behind thereby left behind*.

Apart from its infrastructure, remote learning also requires a higher level of independent learning, intrinsic motivation and a support system at home that can supplement the learning process. American households with working parent(s), who may have more than one child, may be non-native English speakers, and with lower parental education attainments, face obstacles to help their children learn. We want all children to be given the opportunity to reach their potential and not *taken backward*. We know remote learning faces many challenges; we must identify and understand areas of challenges and address them appropriately in order to provide equitable education solutions for all students regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, English proficiency, immigration status, socioeconomic status, or disability.

The pandemic has changed how we work and learn, consequently, we need a new paradigm shift in education meaning education may never be the same again. With the start of the new academic year, educators and policymakers have to be prepared for the new normal in education. Blended or hybrid learning approach seems to be suited for the new norm in education. With my research, I learned that the new norm with the blended learning requires a comprehensive

understanding of a myriad of critical issues encompassing the eight dimensions of learning environment, including: pedagogical, technological, interface design, evaluation, management, resource support, ethical considerations, and institutional (<http://www.uwgb.edu/witecne/>). Now, more than ever before, we need our country's leadership to lay the groundwork for reinventing public education in a blended learning environment. We cannot stay silent about the nation's education. Our public education struggled with lockdowns and a sudden transition to remote learning initiated this past spring! School systems nationwide are reporting that online learning attendance and academic achievement have embarrassingly plummeted. School systems were caught flat-footed and unprepared – a system that was never equipped with contingency plans in the event of a long-term national lockdown. In order to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic on our education system, we need to act with urgency and focus. We, as a nation of vibrant problem-solvers and innovators, must find a better way to address this unmet challenge and need.

Now is the time to innovate and address this national education crisis. Effective remote learning encompasses an array of factors beyond what teachers and students do behind the computer screen. It requires leaders with significant understanding surrounding the planning, designing, developing, evaluating, implementing, maintaining, and marketing of remote learning. If the United States can create a national strategy for Blended Learning, it can position itself to become a global model.



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