

CONFRONTING INEQUITY, THE OTHER PANDEMIC

May 2020

This pandemic continues to expose inequity in many of its gradations. Enjoying a quarantini while exchanging starter dough recipes and Netflix recommendations aren't options for parents trying to replicate the stimulation of preschool between Zoom meetings. Online learning isn't a priority for the tween watching younger siblings as mom takes her shift at the supermarket.

Governments have delayed school openings until the Fall term citing concerns for children's safety, but shuttering schools may well exacerbate another health hazard -- inequity. There is a danger that achievement gaps will become deeply entrenched unless we quickly begin to rethink schooling.

Fears of viral transmission are legitimate but school systems will be better able to implement safety protocols through a staged re-opening rather than during a September rush. Summer is also an opportune time to extend learning to safer outdoor environments allowing educators to develop new pedagogical approaches. Public spaces such as libraries, museums, community centres, parks can be repurposed to provide increased space to maintain physical distancing practices.

Canada's schools can provide a supportive pathway through the pandemic for the children it has most penalized. The following are attainable starting points.

1. **Open schools for the children of essential workers.** Showing our appreciation for those who have sustained us through these awful months needs to go beyond group clapping. Their children should not fall behind because we need their labour.
2. **Resume classes for children with special needs.** Windows for interventions for children with developmental challenges are time sensitive. These children desperately need the consistent, structured support of their skilled educators.
3. **Keep schools open over the summer.** During the best of times children who lack access to the enriched summer activities of their peers fall behind. Many children of essential workers don't have the devices and high-speed internet necessary for online learning. Even more don't have their parents to oversee their at-home lessons. Summer school can help compensate for these deficiencies and should kickstart thinking for a new school calendar.



4. **Extend school hours and activities.** There is no need to shuffle children between school and after-hours care arrangements. Schools can step up to meet both the education and care needs of their students.
5. **Open schools to emergency child care providers.** Schools have more space and larger playgrounds to accommodate the smaller groups of children necessary to stem the spread of the virus.
6. **Develop health and safety protocols with input from educators.** Safety protocols shouldn't further traumatize children. Educators are adept at maintaining classroom hygiene without hindering children's development. Public health officials need to seek their expertise.
7. **Train educators for pandemic learning.** Adversity impacts learning and educators will be first responders for children's mental health. They require the supports to help them act effectively.
8. **Be open to policies changes.** Authentic learning and not standardized assessments need to take precedence. Policy makers, administrators and unions must be nimble and creative.
9. **Technology is with us.** Schools may reopen only to close again in response to new viral waves. School absences will likely increase as children isolate at home if exposed. A blend of in-school and online teaching may be required to avoid classroom crowding. Technology-supported learning is here, and governments should act now to bring broadband access to those areas that don't have it.
10. **Use it appropriately.** Internet access does not ensure high-quality learning. Dispense with the worksheet downloads and encourage children to build on their own experiences to advance their learning. Many governments are increasing investment to public television as a learning delivery tool, while others are providing jurisdictionally wide access to learning platforms that otherwise require membership.
11. **Schools as community hubs.** It is time to replace the fragmented social services labyrinth with a child-focused approach, providing health, mental health, food programs, and family and social services from the school platform where they can be most easily accessed.

12. **Grow early childhood education (ECE).** Early childhood education is a key lever to narrowing achievement gaps that emerge before children even start school. Yet many early childhood programs were in difficulty before the pandemic's onset, unable to recruit qualified staff and struggling financially. Those that make it through the lockdowns will be ill-equipped to compensate children for lost time. ECE needs to be removed from market fluctuations and take its place as education's first tier, supported by a strong public infrastructure and open to all children.

COVID-19 has propelled us into a new epoch for public education. This is a chance to renew the system to meet the challenge, empowering this generation of child survivors to confront the disparities, environmental degradation and the other conditions that gave rise to the pandemic and create a more sustainable and just world.

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