

Parents Are Watching Like Never Before. ‘Trust Us’ Isn’t Enough

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Since March, when the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered schools across the country, district leaders and educators have worked to navigate the challenges of this “new normal” in education. And nowhere have the challenges been steeper than in districts like the one I lead in Baltimore.

Like other districts already battling historic and systematic disinvestment in our schools and communities, Baltimore schools have advocated for everything that our educators and students need. We have zeroed in on the digital divide, using precious funds to connect students with devices and hotspots, while rallying for free internet for our students and families. We have called on our state leaders and Congress to pass legislation to ensure sorely needed emergency funding for public schools.

These efforts are critical. But if we focus all our attention outward, we educators will miss the real opportunity of our new reality: a once-in-a-generation chance to turn our attention aggressively inward, using the crisis upon us to accelerate the unfinished work of repairing the flaws and deep systemic inequities of the “old normal” in American education.

At a time when nearly everything is on the table, we can choose to address head-on our tendency to disproportionately assign our teachers still honing their craft to our students who need expert instruction. We can attend to the uneven quality and rigor of assignments across classrooms and schools. We can replace excessively rigid formulas for everything from class size to bell schedules with more nuanced approaches that vary according to student needs and staff expertise. And, while we’re at it, we can surely push back on the notion that what’s best for some kids is academic challenge while others just need more social-emotional learning, especially when we know that all young people need—and deserve—both.

COVID-19 has blown the doors off our schools and the walls off our classrooms. It has Zoomed educators into homes and parents into classrooms, providing the transparency that parents have long deserved. No longer are our practices hidden behind doors or buried in the pages of policy and collective bargaining agreements; they are now in full view on a screen. And our parents are watching.

Parents in every community and ZIP code have always cared deeply about their children's education. The difference now is that we are seeing it in both more intimate and more public ways.

We are seeing it in long lines of parents, with children in tow, taking days off work and braving multiple buses to get laptops. We are seeing it in the calls from parents and students flooding our hotlines at all hours to get help logging into remote learning. We are seeing it in classroom Zoom sessions, where parents and other caregivers sit with their students to support their learning and ask clarifying questions.

I have been struck by the number of principals telling me about staff who have said they were wrong about this parent or that grandmother, now seen more as a vital ally rather than an unwanted adversary.

No longer can we dust off the welcome mats for back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences and then swiftly roll them back up, shooing parents away and telling them, "Trust us." We are now guests in their homes.

For the first time ever, parents can see what exactly we're giving their children— and what we're not. They are hearing how we talk to students. They are coming to know, through all that we do, what we believe about their children.

Watching their children engage in remote learning, Zooming from one class to the next, parents note the differences across classrooms—differences we in education have long noted but have too often sought to minimize when trying to allay parents' concerns. That worrisome thing parents couldn't quite put their finger on—they can see it now.

They can see why their child, once so reluctant to practice math, hungrily attacks quadratic equations after their new teacher engages them in high-quality, live instruction over Zoom. Conversely, they understand why their child drags their feet to the kitchen table for an English class where the work is tedious exercises requiring little brainpower.

That simple "trust us" is not going to fly anymore.

My former colleagues at the Education Trust often referred to the critical combination of "heat and light" needed to spur change. The pandemic has lit the fire that schools need.

We leaders have a choice. We can seize this moment to take a hard, honest look at our policies and practices and our rate of speed in dismantling long-standing systemic inequities—and use it as a catalyst for change. Or we can sit on our hands and pretend they are tied by forces beyond our control.

I have seen, in my own district, what is possible when school leaders choose to seize the moment. I have witnessed firsthand, as I visit our small, in-person learning sites, leaders advancing efforts to match teacher strengths with student needs.

At one of these sites, the principal strategically tapped his most effective teachers to deliver high-quality, upfront instruction, while assigning those teachers still developing their skills to smaller pods of students for individual and small-group work. Here, students benefit from high-quality instruction and ongoing support while teachers still perfecting their craft benefit from observing their high-performing colleagues. Educators at sites like these are not just managing the pandemic but turning it to everyone's advantage.

As pundits debate the impact of this historic moment on American public education, school districts across the country are writing the actual story. Our actions in this unprecedented moment could do much more to dismantle inequity than to exacerbate it.

We have a choice about this crisis. As educators, we can make our “new normal” better than the old, engaging parents as the partners they are. Or we can wait for parents to lose whatever faith in us remains. They cannot unsee what they have witnessed so vividly in their own living rooms.

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