The New Normal Could Be Better Than the Old One. A Learning Scientist Explains Why.

The headlines are alarming:

- Academically Speaking, the 'COVID Slide' Could Be a Lot Worse Than You Think
- Coronavirus Is Causing A 'Learning Loss' Crisis — So California May Cut Short Summer Break
- Homeschooling during the coronavirus will set back a generation of children

Like much of the public discourse around this topic, these headlines frame the closures as setbacks that cause students to fall permanently behind and learning to altogether end. But are we really asking the right questions or focusing on the right problems? Is the handwringing fully warranted?

In this Q&A, learning scientist and NEPC Fellow William Penuel, a professor at CU Boulder's School of Education and the Institute of Cognitive Science, offers a different perspective. For example, he explains that, while test scores will almost certainly decline, it is wrong to assume that all learning ceases because students are at home. His outlook refreshingly identifies opportunities to reimagine education in ways that might better serve all students even after the current health crisis ends.

Penuel leads the National Center for Research in Policy and Practice (NCRPP), a knowledge utilization center funded by the Institute of Education Sciences. Through an equity lens, he studies topics including creating and maintaining research-practice partnerships, implementing Next Generation Science Standards, creating inclusive classrooms that attend to the affective dimensions of learning, and connecting teaching to the interests and identities of learners.

Q: With schools closed due to the pandemic, we hear a lot of concern about "learning loss" and a "COVID slide," especially as it pertains to students from lower-wealth families who are more likely to lack access to the technology or other supports required to fully participate in remote learning opportunities provided by their schools. What should people know and understand regarding this concern? What, if anything can and should be done right now to address it? Are we asking the right questions and pursuing the right solutions?

A: I think a lot of educators are concerned that without opportunities to engage with students in the formal learning of tested school subjects, there's likely a lot of learning loss. And it's true that, based on past research, we know schooling matters for performance on test scores, and days lost are likely to mean lower test scores.

But the term "learning loss" presents what students are learning at home—whether it's learning new ways to care for their own health and that of others, pursuing their interest in a subject not taught in school, or helping out in their families—as less important. We are all learning at this time, as we struggle to make a life in the midst of a pandemic. The question is, how do we support meaningful learning during a pandemic?

This moment presents a tremendous opportunity to reimagine education in ways that center what is important to young people in education, and also to imagine new ways for families, communities, and schools to relate.

This disruption is in some ways an opportunity to see new possibilities as well for what schooling could be without harsh accountability routines, to explore radical new ways to provide students feedback on learning and support self-assessment without grades, to pay closer attention to building compassionate and caring relationships with students. Can we actually try out some new models for public schools now that meet the challenge of the times, but also help us create learning arrangements that we thought were impossible to create?

Q: How, if at all, do these academic concerns relate to concerns about students' mental well-being?

A: A first priority for schools should always be fulfilling their roles as democratic institutions that support a flourishing human community. Right now, our flourishing demands we place an emphasis on protecting health, and that encompasses mental health.

That doesn't mean we can't engage with academic content — the current pandemic provides lots of opportunities for students to engage intellectually with disciplinary content we teach now in schools. The challenge is that the pandemic itself doesn't know traditional school subject boundaries. To teach in the present moment is to embrace an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach to teaching, and one that is going to have to engage fully students' affective responses to what they are experiencing and learning.

Learning has always been an embodied, affective process, bound up with our concerns and with who we are. The present moment just makes that fact harder to ignore and escape. To rise to the challenge means to see students as whole human beings, full of dignity, and capable of great ingenuity and resourcefulness in the face of a world crisis.

Q: If we were to rely exclusively on research to design effective approaches to learning during the closure of school buildings, what might that look like? How, if at all, might it differ for students of different ages and contexts?

A: Lots of folks are turning to research on online learning for guidance in the current crisis. I am not sure that these are the right places to look, though, for guidance in the current crisis. We might need instead to look to moments in history when people invented new models of education in the face of a world crisis, like in Italy after World War II when parents were looking for a new form of child care and founded Reggio Emilia, a model of caring, collaborative learning for young children that still exists today. We need such models now, something that helps us break away from the idea that the way schools look today are what they have to look like in the future.

Researchers can play a role in designing new models, provided they are working alongside of and in support of children and youth, families, community members, and educators in school. Indeed, we need to be doing this, relying on what we can to inform our work but also being humble about what we know and don't know in terms of how to do it. We need to learn together, and that means contributing in ways we can and studying what emerges as it is appropriate. That's the best kind of research, in my view, not one that comes in and says "do what works," but one that says, "let's figure out what will work for us now, together."

I think a lot of us as scholars are wondering: How, if at all, can research help? How can we help? We may not all feel comfortable designing new schools, but it's pretty clear that we should not be maintaining the same study designs and asking the same questions we posed before COVID. Even lines of work that still feel important to us have to be modified. Those could be questions about online and remote learning, but they are just as likely to be about what it takes to maintain a family's health and economic security right now, and what it means to try to go to school in the middle of a pandemic.

Q: What, if anything, do you suggest that schools do this summer to prepare students for the resumption of school in the fall, assuming that schooling will be a hybrid of in-person and remote learning?

A: Educators are going to need a break after this spring! And they'll need a lot of support, first with the task of building relationships with students in unfamiliar ways—when they are in smaller groups, or on Zoom, or by phone. There are so many different situations that educators have to be prepared for.

This means that education leaders need to think about these varied situations as well. On our team of science educators here at the University of Colorado Boulder, we've collaborated with colleagues to create a set of resources to help teachers adapt curriculum materials for different kinds of environments—remote (synchronous), asynchronous, and work with packets. We focused on the norms and routines, that is, the ways that educators and students might be able to interact with each other, with content, and even family members. Importantly, we didn't focus on the specific content—which we know also requires work to adapt—because we wanted to keep the focus on building and maintaining respectful and caring relationships with students. This should always be our priority, but it's increasingly

evident to a wider number of educators it seems right now.

Q: When schools do reopen, what are some research-based approaches that educators should consider taking to help students transition back to (at least partial) in-person learning?

A: I know many students and families will be excited about the possibility of returning to school. This experience has helped many parents realize that the work of teaching is complex, and students have missed what makes school a good place for many of them, their friendships and opportunities to grow them.

But for many students, the worst thing would be to go "back to normal." Normal wasn't working for them; school was a place where their experiences and perspectives were not honored; a place of danger. We need to turn to the research on what it takes to make schools places where students feel a sense of belonging. We need to find examples and models of anti-racist pedagogies so that we can demonstrate how they can be enacted with integrity in schools. We need to turn to initiatives like the Family Leadership Design Collaborative that point to ways to engage parents in working for educational justice.

All of these things are really about building caring and compassionate school communities, not so much about returning to school, and we have a lot to learn about how to create such communities. Research can help us to create caring and compassionate communities and also to study them. I think that could be a powerful response to this moment.

NEPC Resources on School Reform and Restructuring