

Teachers must lead schools' response to Covid-19

One of the world's leading educationalists outlines 17 points that may have been overlooked by system-leaders in the rush to react to coronavirus

By Andy Hargreaves
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Schools are [doing extraordinary things around the world in the face of the coronavirus onslaught](#). They are our invisible heroes, supporting health services and reinventing the way they provide education.

They are achieving miracles in the most challenging circumstances.



I work with education ministries and teacher-leaders around the globe (as president of the [Atlantic Rim Collaboratory](#)), and in the continuous white-water world we are all navigating at the moment, it's just not possible to see everything ourselves all at once, especially what's ahead.

So here are a few additional things (17, to be precise) that may have been overlooked by school systems and politicians in their rush to do the right thing by students and teachers.

Some will surely need to be revised as the crisis develops, and the list by no means covers everything. I'm in the white water too, so please bear with me.

1. Don't send parents heaps of worksheets

Instead, encourage and support them to learn with what they have available – kitchens, gardens, paper etc. Give them ideas on how to do this. The most important thing in the next two months is not keeping up, step-by-step, with a prescribed curriculum, but keeping kids engaged with learning and the idea of learning. My 5- to 7-year-old grandkids just sent a video of a puppet show they have created using cut-out coloured paper, and chopsticks to hold them up with. For secondary school students consider enquiry questions and how students might be able to access resources that are already available (Ted Talks, interactive museum tours, Kahn academy, free applications and platforms, family and/or community members they might connect with by phone/online, etc).

2. Treasure the fact that some kids are escaping from hours of test preparation and examination cramming each day

This could be a chance to engage in wider learning, make up stories, memorise epic poems, sing karaoke with YouTube, make things, play outside, write letters (on paper) to friends they can't have playdates or get-togethers with, etc. In other words, for these kids, this could now be a time for more learning, rather than less. They can try and learn a new skill – juggle, play a musical instrument, pick up a modern or classical language, knit, skip, bake, garden (including indoor plants), help parents hang pictures and fix things in the house. I'm coming to the end of two-weeks of self-isolation and I've just ordered a set of clubs for juggling. Next week, my wife will teach me and our three grandchildren together how to knit. Getting on to another level on a video game isn't the best way for teenagers to occupy themselves. Starting another interest while they've time will not only occupy them now, it will impress their friends later.

3. Make Covid-19 an opportunity for learning and not just an interruption to it

Help parents to do science experiments with soap so kids can understand how it kills Covid-19. When you can make Covid-19 an opportunity for learning and not just an obstruction to it, loads of work can be done in maths with graphs, probabilities and equations of how it spreads under different conditions. Kids can study the history and effects of the Spanish flu. Geography can examine the patterns of Covid-19 spread and create hypotheses explaining those patterns. Politics can look at the relationship between government anti-Covid-19 measures and protecting the principles of democracy. Ethics and religion studies programmes can consider what principles should guide decisions about who should live or die when resources are scarce.

4. Distinguish between online learning and on-screen learning

Online may sometimes be continuous on-screen interaction – a maths game, for example. But it could also be setting up an activity involving making collages from pasta, or models from mud, or doing origami, or constructing a robot from Lego.

5. Get materials to parents that don't have them

For some, this means digital tablets. But for many others with few resources, this could also mean pencils, colouring pens, Playdough, glue, paper, Scotch tape, books, magazines etc.

6. Develop strategies for children who are just above the line

These are children who are not vulnerable enough to be sent to school, but in the group just above – they are often most at risk as they are not explicitly targeted. Such children may have parents who can't or don't read, separated parents in conflict, or be part of families that live in cramped spaces with no room for outdoor play etc.

7. Concentrate teacher resources and time on children who need it most

Many middle class professional and managerial parents will be able to self-organise home-schooling with some online help. So instead of always doing whole classes online, concentrate disproportionate amounts of teacher online instructional time and support with smaller numbers of high-risk children who are struggling learners.

8. Target support for students with learning and emotional difficulties

This can happen by teachers and learning support teachers calling parents and students one-to-one, emailing, going through individual education plans, maintaining personal relationships by Skype where possible (vital with vulnerable children), giving structured feedback on work done online (it can be handwritten, coloured or constructed, then photographed on a smartphone and sent) or other ways online where possible to ensure these students don't struggle more than they need to and fall behind.

9. Think about how communications can be inclusive of all kinds of students and their families

Canadian TV had an item on how parents are dealing with home-schooling – the family was a mixed-race lesbian couple with a single child. Include students and student voice in communications on national TV – Norway, Canada and New Zealand have done this especially well. Don't just pitch to the same median middle-class white students all the time. This is a time when our values come alive. Being inclusive in our communications isn't just something we should do when things are going well and we have extra time, but it also should define how and to whom we communicate, all the time, unless it creates distraction and delay regarding the urgency of the message itself.

10. Consider an early, phased start to the new school year (in the northern hemisphere) or school term (in the global south)

Children will have had a long time away from classroom routines. Many will have spent months being in close quarters with parents plunged into poverty, hardship and stress. They will have had fewer learning supports than modal middle-class families. So, school in the northern hemisphere at least may need to start earlier in the calendar. Some professional development days should be sacrificed and the rest redirected to dealing practically with the issues of the vulnerable and the left behind. Students who are known to be more vulnerable through contacts that teachers will have kept with families over the isolation period may need to start school before the rest. This will be hard on teachers, but for a few months they may need to be as turbo-charged in their professional approach as health workers have had to be.

11. Promote positive family and friendship relationships

Part of being at school is feeling safe and being cared for. The most important thing in stressed-out families, now, more than rushing through planned lessons, is making children feel loved, safe and reassured. So, communicate the importance of simply spending time with children for part of the day, hugging them, talking and listening to them, enjoying some moments of silliness and laughter, and doing

things together like cooking or reading. Remind parents and other carers about this on a regular basis. Help children communicate with their friends by writing them a postcard, skyping their grandparents and showing them what they've been doing, etc. Now, more than ever, kids, especially younger vulnerable kids with emotional or learning difficulties who are in stressed-out families, need to see and hear their teachers as part of their distance experience by Skype, phone, smartphone pictures, or email. Be patently empathetic about and supportive towards how parents themselves are feeling and about what they have to cope with now. Understand they may be dealing with family illnesses, their own work demands, loss of income and other problems. Let them know it's OK to lower their standards a bit for their kids sometimes in terms of tidiness and other things.

12. Value play

Play, especially outdoor play in the garden or the driveway (if families have them), is always a vital part of learning – a way to develop the imagination, engage in conversation, build relationships with others or work through anxieties. Many education systems in the past few years have tended to play down "play" in favour of more work, test preparation, and downloading serious study to younger and younger age groups. Older kids have also been spending more and more time indoors on their smartphones in a world where even before the crisis, that was already too much. This is actually an opportunity to reverse the cycle for some kids at least – to let them make up their own activities with perhaps just a few materials thrown their way, like balls of wool, or pebbles, or cardboard boxes, to get them started. Play is a way we learn, and, at its best, also a kind of work. Play can work for teenagers too – singing online together, making up ridiculous skits, building things from junk around the house, and so on. More play, less work, might actually be a good direction to take in these unique circumstances.

13. Protect teacher wellbeing

Teachers are under stress too. They'll be worrying about how to prepare and deliver lessons at a distance. They'll be anxious about those kids for whom home is not usually a safe haven. They'll be uncertain sometimes about how much initiative they can take in communicating with homes and families without guidance from principals, school districts, governments and their unions – and this guidance may not always be clear or consistent. They'll be working flat out but not always sure about the impact of what they are doing. They'll be missing their kids and their colleagues. And many will be looking after kids of their own at home. Unlike health workers whose heroic efforts are publicly very visible, what they're doing is less visible, and the public may start to wonder about and criticise what they're actually doing. So, supporting teachers now is critical – providing counselling to teachers who are stressed, anxious and depressed; ensuring there are virtual forums for teachers to collaborate – not just to plan and prepare but also to provide moral support; and ensuring there is strong public communication supporting teachers alongside other public sector workers.

14. Underline the value of expertise

This crisis has elevated the importance of expertise in the public imagination. After years when some governments have cast aspersions on professional expertise in favour of popular opinion and common sense, all kinds of leaders are having public health professionals stand alongside them to explain and legitimise scientific expertise as a basis for decision making. We need to ensure the same thing happens in teaching and learning. Many parents and other carers will do a heroic job with home-schooling in the coming weeks and months. The job of teachers and leaders is to support and guide what parents are now doing based on the science and expertise of effective learning, and to communicate this when it is

asked for and needed, clearly, and without talking down to people. Teachers must be confident in their own professional expertise, share that collaboratively with other teachers to strengthen that confidence, and communicate it clearly to others.

15. Keep up collaborative professionalism

Working together collaboratively is always important and never more so than now. Try to ensure that time is built in for professional collaboration, department planning, learning teams and so on within the school. Also leverage networks of ideas and support across schools at this time, especially where those networks already exist. There'll be a temptation to think there's no time to collaborate with adults or engage in existing networks because everyone is too busy churning out stuff for their kids. The role of all kinds of leadership here is not to abandon networks and meetings but to ensure they are used to provide the best possible learning and caring at a distance for all students in these unprecedented circumstances.

16. Promote public professional leadership

Many parents are unsure and unclear about so many issues concerning their children now. Will there be quality support, ideas and activities for them to help their children with? How long will this go on? Will their teenagers be able to graduate and get to college? Will their children fall behind in their reading, their mathematics and other areas? Many governments have provided excellent public communication about health and the economy, standing alongside experts in those fields as they do so. The same needs to happen in education – regular public announcements about education, learning and home-schooling, and about what teachers are and will be doing from political leaders working with and standing alongside leading education professionals from teacher unions, heads' organisations, and so on.

17. Let teachers take the lead

In the early days of the crisis, there's been a lot of unavoidable confusion about what kinds of online platforms and resources can be set up for all teachers to use in a district or an entire system. This can be frustrating for teachers and for parents and kids too. Let's not show the worst face of school district and national bureaucracies. Let's not have the teacher wait for the principal, and the principal for the ministry, before anything gets done. Teachers need to be allowed to be the heroes of learning, like our health workers are being the heroes of combatting infectious disease. Teachers are professionals. They know where they are in the curriculum. They know their kids, what point each of them is at, which ones have greater needs than others. So with just a few basic guidelines – keep kids learning and interested in learning, actively care for and support them, and communicate with them personally, individually and collectively, as often as possible – unleash teachers as professionals to use whatever platforms they can to get things started and get connected as fast as possible. And then give them platforms where they can connect with each other as colleagues as they move forward together.

Don't make teachers wait. Let them go, go, go.

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