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## Education Challenges During a Global Pandemic

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## Education Challenges During a Global Pandemic

Colleen Ahern

With the transition into the season of fall, another American institution succumbs to the uncertainty of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Education systems across the country are adapting to the new normal: weathering a school year during a global health crisis. Without a uniform back-to-school plan, school districts in one state can have a drastically different agenda than their neighboring town, let alone the surrounding area. As a result of not going to school in person, the economy will remain stalled. Families will continue to lack significant support, students will fall further behind, and inequality will deepen. This fall, approximately 50 million American children enrolled in public schools are almost certainly confined within their homes for part of the school day.<sup>1</sup> Students would be responsible for switching back and forth between their independent work, and real-time teaching streamed on their devices in a Texas school district.<sup>2</sup> While some schools only reopened remotely, some fully reopened, and others took a hybrid approach. As a result, parents are struggling to decipher what's best for their children and what's best for themselves.

One solution many parents are resorting to is the concept of learning pods. Parents are juggling working from home while simultaneously becoming their child's live-in teacher, and as a result, the emergence of "pods" has offered an enticing solution to the shift to at-home learning.<sup>3</sup> Families are teaming up with their neighbors for a tutor-style group instruction in their pod.<sup>4</sup> A mother in Austin, Texas, joined an online group of parents looking for learning pods and discovered families estimated they would pay around \$700 per month for teachers to navigate their distant-learning pods.<sup>5</sup> That mother sadly realized

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<sup>1</sup> David Zweig, *\$25,000 Pod Schools: How Well-to-Do Children Will Weather the Pandemic*, N.Y. TIMES, (July 30, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/nyregion/pod-schools-has-tings-on-hudson.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Jackie Mader, *Parents are panicking, giving up their careers and spending thousands of dollars on piecemeal solutions for the school year*, THE HECHINGER REP. (July 22, 2020), <https://hechingerreport.org/parents-are-panicking-giving-up-their-careers-and-spending-thousands-of-dollars-on-piecemeal-solutions-for-the-school-year>.

<sup>3</sup> Katie Reilly Middletown & Molly Ball, *As the School Year Approaches, Education May Become the Pandemic's Latest Casualty*, TIME MAG. (July 23, 2020, 06:08 AM), <https://time.com/5870132/schools-coronavirus/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Mader, *supra* note 2 at 1.

that her family would not be able to afford to do such a thing.<sup>6</sup> Even more astonishing is the cost of pods across the country, but especially in big cities like New York City. A single semester at the Hudson Lab pod north of Midtown, Manhattan will cost about \$13,000.<sup>7</sup> The Hudson Lab pods will consist of parents forming groups of three to ten children, likely in the same grade, meeting each day from around 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. with a teacher provided by Hudson Lab.<sup>8</sup> A single mother from the Bronx with a limited income seriously considered joining a Hudson Lab Pod for the sake of her five-year-olds education.<sup>9</sup> Another mother faces a difficult decision; either she quits her job while she looks after her sons at home or remains working and depletes any savings they had to pay for the pods.<sup>10</sup> That mother noted this was her emergency fund, and this was their emergency.<sup>11</sup>

The emergence of learning pods as a resource for parents to maintain their jobs while their children also receive a structured education during the day has proved to be a popular route for families that can afford to do so. A stay-at-home mom in New Jersey stressed about her daughters' conflicting in-person learning schedules put it simply, "I cannot be both a teacher and a parent."<sup>12</sup>

However, not everyone is fortunate enough to consider a learning pod. Maryland's largest public school district distributed 70,000 Chromebooks and Wi-Fi spots, as well as 3.6 million free meals since the closure of in-person school in March.<sup>13</sup> When schools abruptly closed in the spring, millions of children struggled to follow classes online because of a lack of internet access or computer equipment at home. Public health officials expressed increasing concern over the higher likelihood of potential abuse and food insecurity for children who used school as a safety net.<sup>14</sup> Many disadvantaged students were forced into positions their peers were not, for example caring for siblings while their parents worked essential jobs.<sup>15</sup> Educational inequalities are indeed another casualty of the virus, as one study suggests that the average student will fall behind seven months if schools were to remain closed until 2021; nine

<sup>6</sup> Mader, *supra* note 2 at 1.

<sup>7</sup> Zweig, *supra* note 1 at 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> Middleton, Ball, *supra* note 3 at 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> Middleton, Ball, *supra* note 3 at 1.

months for Latino students, and ten months for black students.<sup>16</sup> Before the pandemic, low-income students scored lower on national exams and failed to graduate at the same rates as their higher-income peers.<sup>17</sup> Again before the pandemic, 82% of Black students and 77% of Latino students could not reach a “proficient” score on fourth-grade reading-level exams, while their white peers failed at a lesser 56%.<sup>18</sup> It is already apparent that Covid-19 is disproportionately impacting the Black and Latino communities, with many in low-income and rural areas lacking access to virtual classrooms or facing other obstacles at home.<sup>19</sup>

Paul Reville, former Secretary of Education for the state of Massachusetts and current Administrator at Harvard Graduate School of Education, discussed the unprecedented times and the new-shed spotlight on inequities with the *Harvard Gazette*. He highlighted how larger gaps in disadvantaged students’ learning opportunities outside the classroom, like after school, on the weekends, and in the summers, have always been around.<sup>20</sup> He went on to articulate a realization many Americans were seemingly unaware of that “schools themselves are not uniform in their operation or impact on children, and the students, therefore, vary greatly from one another.”<sup>21</sup> Because students’ learning environment and physical environments are outside of school, the differences and disparities have come into a much more vivid view.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Reville emphasized how the pandemic will have little to no impact on some students who will still have high-quality learning opportunities like formal schooling, informal homeschooling such as pods, and an array of enrichment opportunities.

On the other hand, some of their peers won’t have the same access to anything of quality; the most economically challenged in America will remain the most vulnerable in the ongoing pandemic, and the most advantaged will remain nearly un-phased.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, America is aware now more than

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<sup>16</sup> Middleton, Ball, *supra* note 3 at 1.

<sup>17</sup> Mader, *supra* note 5 at 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> Liz Mineo, *Time to fix American education with race-for-space resolve*, The Harv. Gazette (April 10, 2020), <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/04/the-pandemics-impact-on-education/>.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> Liz Mineo, *Time to fix American education with race-for-space resolve*, The Harv. Gazette (April 10, 2020), <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/04/the-pandemics-impact-on-education/>.

ever of the inequities in children's lives outside of schools, such as food deficits, inadequate access to health and mental health, problems with housing stability, access to educational technology, and internet access.<sup>24</sup> Those who work in education know how these problems have existed forever; however, Rivelle hopes the newfound public awareness of the inequities creates a more urgent need for corrections.<sup>25</sup> He suggests a shift in looking at a more broad understanding of what children's success and education looks like beyond just school.<sup>26</sup> Children's success during school hours means much more than just the classroom; it requires communities and society to support equal access to health care, food, clean water, stable housing, and outside of school enrichment programs.<sup>27</sup> Rivelle hopes that perhaps the silver lining to the ongoing pandemic's uncertainty is that education inequity will finally receive the attention it needs.

Here in Chicago, students, families, and teachers are struggling to adjust to the reality of remote learning. A Chicago Public Schools teacher said that her biggest challenge in accomplishing an effective lesson plan while remotely teaching her students is student participation.<sup>28</sup> She expressed that in the neighborhood she teaches in, compared to areas with increased resources and funds such as Lincoln Park or Gold Coast, internet access is not a given, and students may not have an adult in their home. Further, other students may have to care for their siblings, and others are suffering from housing instability. These circumstances create a much more significant challenge for teachers to keep the students engaged, focused, and participating in her lessons.<sup>29</sup> She struggles with getting students to 'show up' to their classes, let alone participate.<sup>30</sup> Often students type their answers, rarely verbally respond, and barely share their screen.<sup>31</sup> These challenges have affected her ability to foster impactful relationships with her students, and the overall lesson planning, work completion, and assessment of whether the student understands the material are all greatly hindered by these obstacles.<sup>32</sup> The teacher also reiterated concern with the widening education gap as a result of the pandemic forcing remote

<sup>24</sup> Mineo, *supra* note 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> Interview with CPS Teacher (Oct. 16th, 2020). (Hereinafter CPS Interview).

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> CPS Interview, *supra* note 28.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

learning. She sees the achievement gap only growing wider for those already behind, especially because Covid-19 significantly impacts minorities living in low-income areas.<sup>33</sup> She and her students are quite literally living out the reality of remote learning challenges discussed previously.

As the first half of the 2020-2021 school year comes to a close, students across the country have experienced widely different learning approaches. Families, teachers, and students were forced to navigate a deadly pandemic while also maintaining their studies. It readily became apparent that well-to-do families shifted toward pod learning or personalized tutors to assist with their children's at-home schooling. Yet, some of their peers, who were already historically marginalized when it came to education equity, were not afforded the same luxuries. Simple resources like computer technology, Wi-Fi, or even just a quiet place in the home to study are few and far between for millions of American students. The ongoing pandemic has exasperated how America's education system is just another institution riddled with significant inequalities. As Americans grapple with the constant changes coronavirus has forced, one area that needs serious consideration is our approach to educating our youth.

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<sup>33</sup> CPS Interview, *supra* note 28.