

The Essentialness of Schools in a Crisis

The research is clear: schools are essential for children's wellbeing in times of crisis. Schools offer children structure, community, and a sense of normalcy. They also provide safe zones for children who are victims of neglect, abuse, and food insecurity – situations that are only increasing as families face unprecedented struggles.

The COVID-19 emergency presents a unique challenge – balancing children's need for structure, normalcy, and support with their health and safety and that of the school and broader community.

In rural Colorado, where COVID-19 cases are significantly fewer than in more densely packed urban areas, we believe the time has come to shift the dialogue from how to improve remote learning to how to restart our schools safely this fall. Although our teachers and administrators have met the monumental challenge of converting entire in-person school systems to online learning and work platforms and distributing school meals to children, the costs of this approach, both in terms of academic learning and the social and emotional wellbeing of our students, are mounting. Telehealth and video conference calls may be reasonable adjustments for adults, but for students who are still learning to read and compute, a device is not an adequate replacement for a teacher.

We are particularly concerned about children in vulnerable households. Many of our economically stressed families lack access to computers – or enough computers when there are several school-age children in a household – as well as to broadband internet. Parents and caregivers may be essential workers, creating challenges with childcare and supervision. In rural areas, where paid childcare is less available, adults are being forced to choose between caring for their out-of-school children or working to put food on the table. Families that are food insecure may also be less able to access meals being distributed by school systems, leading to hunger-related attention deficits among their students who are able to join in remote learning.

These factors are also exacerbating inequality. In addition to the factors above, children with fewer economic advantages are less likely to have supplemental learning materials at home (e.g., children's books) or an adult in the household who can support their learning. This may be because the parents are working outside the home, do not speak English as a first language, or have limited educational attainment themselves.

We have already seen decreased attendance among our more vulnerable students – an outcome that will significantly impact their future success.

We do not take the threat of COVID-19 lightly. However, we do believe that with a well-thought-out strategy and with cooperation among school officials, community health officials, and families, we can create a new normal for schools that better serves students than the current arrangement and that still protects students, teachers, and the community.

For example, we could create regular screening of children for symptoms, work with families to be alerted to sick household members, require temperature checks of all adults in schools, and create plans with local health officials for testing, contact tracing and outbreak response, including ensuring sufficient medical capacity to treat outbreaks. We could also create rigorous school sanitizing protocols, social distancing plans (including some remote learning, especially if outbreaks occur), and limit entrance to schools to only students, teachers, school staff, and parents/caregivers. Schools are also uniquely positioned to communicate healthy behaviors for children to follow in their homes and communities.

State and local officials need to decide whether schools and on-site learning are truly essential. We believe they are and urge our representatives to communicate their critical role in the health and economic wellbeing of students, families, and the broader community and then to start preparing employees, students, and parents to safely return to school in the fall.



Bonnie Aaron
Superintendent
Trinidad School District

Kirk Banghart
Chief Facilitator
Colorado Rural Education
Collaborative

Mike Bowers
Superintendent
Lonestar School District

Brian Crowther
Superintendent
Sargent School District

Kevin Edgar
Superintendent
Sanford School District

Travis Garoutte
Superintendent
Mountain Valley SD

Darcy Garretson
Superintendent
Haxtun School District

Elsie Goines
Superintendent
Las Animas School
District

Merlin Homes
Superintendent
McClave School District

Stacy Houser
Superintendent
Aguilar School District

Stephanie Hund
Superintendent
Walsh School District

Alan Kaylor
Superintendent
Weld Re-8 School District

Trent Kerr
Superintendent
Wiggins School District

Alfie Lotrich
Superintendent
Fowler School District

Mike McFalls
Superintendent
Custer County School
District

Toby Melster
Superintendent
Centennial School District

Lis Richard
Superintendent Dolores
School District

Tonya Rodwell
Superintendent
Arickaree School District

Tom Satterly
Superintendent
Burlington School District

Lisa Yates
Superintendent
Buena Vista School
District

Samantha Yocam
Superintendent
Kim School District

Danielle Van Esselstine
Superintendent
Cotopaxi School District

Carrie Zimmerman
Superintendent
Center School District