

Summary of Coronavirus Pandemic Education Issues: Conversations with Business, Education, and Thought Leaders

Background

OBC hosted a series of online meetings beginning in the spring of 2020, inviting business leaders, policy partners, stakeholders, and thought leaders to identify the trends, challenges, and opportunities for recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. These conversations included three sessions between May 14 and May 20 focused on the pandemic's impact on Oregon education. Participants were asked to share their perception of how learning has been impacted by pandemic school closures and how Oregon education can emerge from the pandemic crisis stronger, more resilient, and more equitable.

Overarching Takeaways

- Educators, students, and families are experiencing significant disruption as we transition to distance learning. Distance learning offers many opportunities for innovation, especially at postsecondary levels. However, it has serious limitations in providing equitable access, personal connection to teachers and peers, social-emotional support, and hands-on learning.
- The pandemic has magnified and accelerated deep systemic inequities that exist in our education system and society.
- The pandemic disruption presents a unique opportunity to reimagine and rebuild a more equitable and resilient education system with the needs of learners at its center.

Trends, Issues, and Their Implications

Schools will have to do as much as always – or more – with less. With loss of state revenues from the coronavirus economic shutdown, and the resulting recession, the State School Fund and support for postsecondary institutions will be severely curtailed. Implications:

- **Dashed SSA funding plans.** Oregon's K12 schools, which anticipated robust funding from the Student Success Act, suddenly face severely reduced revenues and inevitable cuts in personnel and programs.
- **Uncertainty.** Funding uncertainty is amplified by uncertainty about reopening and how to structure school operations and calendar.
- **Challenges addressing inequities.** The pandemic lockdown has made more apparent the inequities that SSA was enacted to address and it will be a challenge with expected revenue losses to address them. We will have to prioritize our most vulnerable students in budget decisions and resource allocation.
- **Service flexibility beyond learning.** Schools may have to become a different and more flexible resource for students, available for site-based learning in a new configuration with online learning, and as a base for such services as counseling and nutrition.

Distance learning poses both potential and challenges. Distance learning has had a larger role in the pandemic, and likely will in the recovery and beyond, but it isn't enough by itself to meet student needs. Implications:

- **Bigger distance learning footprint.** Distance learning has been elevated by the pandemic and will have a greater role in Oregon education. But it will need to be more flexible, more equitable, and more effective.
- **Lack of education system readiness for distance learning.** Oregon's internet infrastructure and education systems were not prepared for an abrupt transition to distance learning. Postsecondary institutions transitioned online somewhat better, but most K12 school districts were not sufficiently organized for the shift.
- **Educator-family relationships.** The pandemic has demonstrated that education personnel are not adequately prepared for working directly with families in distance learning. However, the work that has been done so far has strengthened the relationship of educators and families.

- ***Inequities in distance learning access.*** Remote learning is hampered by inequities that many families and children face in access to distance learning technology, broadband service, and digital literacy.
- ***Inequitable impacts from distance learning.*** There is evidence that vulnerable students most at risk of not staying in school stopped out or dropped out following pandemic school closures. There is worry that such students will fall off course long term, especially if school closures continue.
- ***Lack of personal influence on students.*** Distance learning can't make up for the personal contact with teachers and peers that students value and that special needs students and ELL students must have. It lacks the effect that teachers in the school setting have in keeping students motivated and on track. It doesn't meet the needs of students who learn most effectively hands-on.
- ***Elevated importance of broadband access.*** Broadband internet access will increasingly be regarded as an essential utility, as necessary for all citizens as are electric and telephone service. Equitable access to robust, affordable broadband services in all regions of Oregon must be a state infrastructure priority.

Inequity. The pandemic has exposed and highlighted inequities in our education system that are likely to continue unless concerted efforts are made to address them. Implications:

- ***Equity and culturally specific practices.*** The inequities among culturally specific and low-income communities exposed by the pandemic underscore the need for education to prioritize equity and the needs of our most vulnerable students.
- ***Diversified workforce.*** The potential impact from budget cuts on our newest hires may reverse the progress we are beginning to make in diversifying the educator workforce. We must support our educators of color.
- ***Trauma and learning loss.*** Homelessness, family instability, health problems, and food insecurity heightened in the pandemic lockdown account for trauma and learning loss for too many students and need to be acknowledged and addressed in a post-pandemic education environment.
- ***Strong leadership.*** Some of the problems that less privileged students face call for strong leadership and advocacy within the education system and across sectors to make sure they get the support and resources they need.

Partnership with Families and Community Organizations. The pandemic has made clear the central role that schools have in student learning and social service delivery. Implications:

- ***Reaching out to home and community.*** Schools should work more closely with families and community based organizations that either provide education services or support services that address what students need in order to be successful learners.
- ***Better information.*** Educators need to better understand the home context of learners, some of that in the form of data, some in outreach and personal contact.

Opportunity for Education Overhaul. Apart from the distance learning and equity issues discussed above, recovery from the current crisis presents a rare opportunity to restructure public education to improve and set the conditions for more equitable achievement and opportunities for students. Implications:

- ***Scaled personalized learning models.*** The disruption of the pandemic presents an opportunity to transform teaching and learning across our P20 education system. One size-fits-all, time-based learning is outmoded and inequitable. Students should be able to learn at their own pace, with greater agency, hands-on, and in a range of settings.
- ***Education-community partnerships.*** The pandemic underscores the vulnerability of schools as the default location for student learning. Schools are essential, but there are more places and ways that students learn than in schools, and schools should recognize and embrace partnerships with community-based organizations for student learning and support.
- ***IEPs for all students.*** Educators have long developed individual education plans for special needs students. The current disruption presents an opportunity to develop IEPs for all students.

Child Care. Child care, already a complex challenge for parents and providers, may become even more challenging in a partial- or post-pandemic environment where child care services or schools are not open. Implications:

- **Child development, family life, workforce.** This will affect not only child development and family dynamics, but also availability, performance, and well-being of parents in the workforce.
- **Effect on parents who can't work at home.** Parents, especially those in essential occupations performed at field or office locations, will be put in a bind if partial or intermittent lockdowns continue.

Reflections

- The pandemic and transition to distance learning has caused significant disruption for students, families, and educators. It has amplified deep, pre-existing systemic inequities that create barriers for our most vulnerable students.
- Educators have applied amazing creativity in their efforts to reach kids and teach remotely. They are strengthening relationships with families in true partnership.
- The crisis has made visible the critical role schools play in social-emotional support and social service delivery. Connecting with families and caring for students' health and safety needs must be a priority.
- This crisis presents an opportunity for Oregon to rebuild a student-centered, equitable, and resilient education system.
- Equity must be at the center of every recovery effort moving forward.