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SEVEN | REBUILDING EDUCATION | By Kimberly Weisul

Rebuilding Education in the Midst of COVID-19

A massive **educational disruption provides an opportunity** to reconsider the links between school and work.

In 2020, 1.5 billion students in 188 countries were locked out of their schools, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, delivering an unprecedented shock to educational systems worldwide. Whereas a tuberculosis pandemic in the 1900s saw New York schoolchildren being taught outside, some on roofs and even a ferryboat, the coronavirus has seen schools distributing hot spots, laptops, SIM cards and lunches to children who needed them.

For all their inventiveness, courage and work, it's been difficult for schools to claim success. The U.N. estimated that globally, COVID-19 would cause 101 million children to fall below minimum reading thresholds. **Birgitta Rabe, professor of economics** at the **Institute for Social and Economic Research** at the **University of Essex**, says evidence from around the world is starting to show that "mental health problems are quite probably more important than learning loss." In addition, older students lost connections to the workforce that are crucial to opportunities upon leaving school.

That's pushing researchers to look anew at the value of internships and other work programs, and the importance of partnering with employers to bring young people into the labor force.

But before schools, researchers and industry can work together on behalf of students, >>>

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3.5 million

Best estimate of **kids in the U.S., many of them high school students**, who left school during the pandemic, according to Bob Schwartz at Harvard University's School of Education.

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it's important to understand the effects of COVID-19-related school closures, which is more difficult than it might seem. Schools across countries, states and even districts have had vastly different experiences. Many completely lost touch with a large number of students, even in places where closures were comparatively brief. In France, teachers said they lost contact with 6% of primary school students and 10% of secondary school students, according to an OECD report on the period of March through June 2020. The same report says that through June 2020, schools in the Czech Republic had lost contact with more than 20% of upper secondary school students in vocational education.

Bob Schwartz, a **professor emeritus** at **Harvard University's Graduate School of Education** and **founding board member** at the **STEM Opportunity Fund**, says accurate data is lacking in the U.S., but best estimates are that about 3.5 million kids, many of them high school students, left school during the pandemic. One key to getting them back, he says, will be to integrate work opportunities with formal education. That could help students better envision what their working lives might look like, and better understand the relevance of their high school education. Otherwise, he asks, "Why in the world would they want to go back to classrooms that were boring, where they couldn't see the relevance between what they were being asked to study and a life they could envision for themselves?"

1.5 Billion

The number of **children prevented from attending school** in 2020.
Source: Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development

In an online event co-hosted by the OECD and the American Educational Research Association, **Fabienne Rosenwald**, **director for Evaluation, Forecasting and Performance Monitoring** at the **French Ministry of Education**, said that during the school closure in France, the groups that had the most difficulties were at opposite ends of the educational spectrum: Those in primary school and those in vocational training.

Restructuring Education

At the same event, **Rukmini Banerji**, **CEO** of the **Pratham Education Foundation**, said the pandemic presents an opportunity to rethink the structure of education, and that grade-level curricula, in particular, haven't been working well in India. "It's time to put aside our grade-level curriculum and really focus on how to build these [reading and math] skills," she said. "If you do focus on teaching children at the level at which they are, you can make big progress in a short amount of time."

"Post-pandemic education provides a wonderful opportunity to bring breakthrough and innovation to the field. What is the problem we are trying to solve?" asks **Jon Kleinman**, a **partner** at **Insigniam**. "Get in the world of the end users—students, parents and educators—and prototype possible solutions that add value."

With older students, says Mr. Schwartz, the goal should be not just academic achievement but getting kids more attached to the workforce. While he cites the millions of students who've lost touch with the school system under an extended regime of school closures, he points out that the best vocational schools have long waiting lists. "The district superintendents are complaining that vo-tech is taking their best kids," he says.

Mr. Schwartz takes the Swiss educational system as inspiration. From about the age of 15, many students there are in programs that blend work, coaching and classroom learning. "As a way of getting kids through

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"Post-pandemic education provides a wonderful opportunity to bring breakthrough and innovation to the field. Get in the world of the end users—students, parents and educators—and prototype possible solutions that add value." **—Jon Kleinman**, partner, Insigniam

adolescence and helping them see the light at the end of the tunnel, it's very powerful," he says. About 70% of Swiss students choose apprenticeships, and about 40% of Swiss companies participate.

Such a program is a tough sell in the U.S., because it requires schools to restructure their programs, and teenagers have to be willing to trade extracurricular activities such as sports and band for work. But there is a payoff: Students get debt-free college credit, industry certifications and work experience, and they still graduate on time. Business partners, of course, get a leg up on talent acquisition.

CareerWise Colorado, a Denver nonprofit, has successfully adapted the Swiss system to a U.S. framework, graduating its second cohort of apprentices in 2021. CareerWise Colorado has also supported the launch of affiliates in other U.S. cities: Ascend, in Indianapolis; Horizons Education Program in Elkhart, Indiana; CityWorks in Washington, D.C.; and Here to Here in New York. In Denver, apprentices might work at Plante Moran or HomeAdvisor; in New York, business partners include Amazon and JPMorgan Chase & Co.

Mr. Schwartz is currently working on a project in Boston to help high school kids get exposure to both the world of work and higher education before they graduate, so that they're better prepared to make fitting choices after high school. Kids need to be better engaged if they're going to come back to school, he says, and for many, work may be a better way to do that than classroom learning. The sweet spot, he says, are middle-skill jobs, many of which are found in manufacturing and health care. These are jobs that require education beyond high school, and often a strong background in STEM fields, but not a full four-year degree. "The employers are desperate, and you've got something like 10 million jobs going begging, and people are unemployed and not willing to take those jobs," he says. He says that technology companies, in particular, are looking for a more diverse talent pipeline. "They're running out of people with four-year degrees and feeling a lot of pressure to have a more diverse workforce."

That could be good news for high school students who don't feel a strong sense of attachment to their classwork. Districts should be looking for ways to get kids out of the school for other forms of learning, such as service projects or apprenticeships, says Mr. Schwartz: "This really is about preparing kids for careers." **IQ**34

IBM and the New-Collar Job

Like other large employers, IBM is always looking for the right candidates to work in some technology roles. While some applicants to these jobs have four-year degrees, many of the jobs themselves are more likely to demand a particular combination of skills than the completion of a traditional degree program. IBM started to refer to these roles as "new-collar jobs," and, in January 2021, the company removed four-year degree requirements from more than half of its job openings. With its P-TECH program, IBM has also been a leader in combining high school and community college coursework with internships and mentorships. P-TECH now works with about 600 business partners in 220 schools in 28 countries, reaching approximately 150,000 students. **IQ**

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