

A clarion call to rethink what K-12 learning should look like going forward

We're likely entering a period where COVID-19 or perhaps other health crises are a consistent part of life. Learning can't stop because of that. There's no reason why virtual learning should be isolating or academically lax.

January 12, 2022 07:15 AM 2 HOURS AGO

PHYLLIS LOCKETT

Leap Innovations



On Tuesday, more than 330,000 children in Chicago lost another day of instruction—the fifth straight—during a time when so many are already in crisis. No situation better illustrates the need to reimagine our education system than this standoff between the Chicago Teachers Union and Chicago Public Schools, two groups that have a venomous history that has resulted in students being held hostage on the sidelines before. While the two groups have come to a resolution—pending a vote by the union's rank and file—it's not without unnecessary tradeoffs for our children.

To be clear, neither side can completely claim the moral high ground here. The union's notion that all schools need to cease in-person learning, given the varying degrees of impact COVID-19 is having across the city and the disparities in risk mitigations put in place in schools, is unfair to students. Equally galling, as we approach the third year of this pandemic, is CPS' sluggishness to build infrastructure that accommodates the pandemic's myriad disruptions—as evidenced by the lack of both an effective plan for remote instruction and an operational strategy that makes educators, students and their families feel safe.

It is both wholly unacceptable and totally predictable.

But there's a larger lesson to be learned from these two sides at loggerheads. So much of this debate is predicated on the return of "normal" instruction, as if "normal" had been serving all of our students well. As we've seen time and again—through academic performance measures, college admissions and post-secondary success—our "normal" school system left behind the majority of students. Unfortunately, the pandemic has made this abundantly clear: In Chicago and communities large and small across the United States, school districts are pulling students from one untenable situation to another because they have failed to build resilience into their systems.

And speaking of "normal," teachers for far too long have borne sole responsibility for a student's learning. The pandemic has underscored a long-unrealistic concept of the teacher's role—the demand to differentiate instruction for all of their students, while also meeting their social-emotional and cultural needs. And that's on top of the physical protections teachers now are required to put in place to keep kids, and themselves, safe during a global health crisis.

As long as "normal" is the objective, these clashes between CPS and the CTU will continue.

That's why this moment is a clarion call to redesign what learning looks to make K-12 education sustainable for our children. We're likely entering a period where COVID-19 or perhaps other health crises are a consistent part of life. Learning can't stop because of that. In 2022, there's no reason why virtual learning should be isolating or academically lax. It can—and should be—an additive experience that gives students unique exposure to topics or places they may not otherwise have access to in a classroom bound by geography. We must build a system that sustains education no matter what is happening in the world, rather than continue to operate with fits and starts that paralyze instruction.

There's an obvious short-term solution to the current educational crisis in Chicago: Get the kids back in school, and do so immediately. But that moment is merely a first step in the hard work required to create the education system that our children deserve. We must seize this opportunity to rethink the needs of our students and how we can best prepare them for the changes and challenges that lie ahead. We must create a more sustainable education system that meets 21st-century needs, rather than think of learning opportunities outside of the school walls as an "emergency" option. Our children's futures hang in the balance.

Phyllis Lockett is founder and CEO of Chicago-based Leap Innovations, which works with schools to spark innovation and prepare students for the future of work.