

OPINION

How to close Boston's achievement gap during the coronavirus pandemic

Some of these ideas may be politically unpopular. We can live with that.

By **Andrea J. Campbell and Yi-Chin Chen** Updated April 28, 2020, 3:00 a.m.



Alexander Hidalgo, 12, helps his 5-year-old sister Angelys with her pre-K studies. Boston Public Schools will remain closed for the remainder of the school year. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Last week, Governor Charlie Baker made official what many have long suspected: Students will not be returning to school in person for the remainder of this year.

Educational success during the coronavirus pandemic requires many factors to work in synchronicity: reliable Internet access, a working computer, regular and predictable access to teachers and support staff, a district-wide criteria for high-quality remote learning, social-emotional supports for students and teachers, and ongoing communication with caregivers who are now responsible for setting the structure and daily learning environment for their children.

In this new reality, many students' academic, social, and emotional development will suffer worse than others — and we know who these students are. They are the third-grader in Roxbury cared for by an elderly caregiver on a fixed income, struggling to learn new technology and pay for Internet; the 10th-grader in Dorchester learning English as a second language and struggling to keep up; the sixth-grader in Jamaica Plain who has to care for her younger siblings because her immunocompromised mother is sick; or the second-grader in Mattapan transitioning back and forth from foster care to living with his biological family.

We know these students because we once were like them and have spent our careers working to help these youth overcome the barriers that society has put in front of them. These are the children who fall through the cracks on a good day but, with the added challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, are even more at risk of falling irrevocably behind.

The Northwest Evaluation Association's [Collaborative for Student Growth](#) projects that students overall are likely to retain only 70 percent of this year's gains in reading compared with a typical school year, and less than 50 percent in math. This "COVID slide" will be more profound for students who are unable to access or fully participate in a robust remote learning curriculum. In Boston, [just 50 percent of students](#) are logging onto remote classrooms, compared with 95 percent of students in Andover.





Closing the achievement gap will require Boston city leaders to propose bold, innovative solutions for whenever students are able to return to school in person.

Here are just a few options the city should consider:

- **Collect better data.** The city needs to collect and share data on the accessibility and quality of remote learning disaggregated by school. Robust and transparent data will allow Boston Public Schools to determine who this virtual system is serving well and which students' needs have not been met; develop a database of remote learning best practices; strategically partner and invest in short-term solutions to ensure equitable access to a high-quality remote learning experience for all; and, proactively plan for a return to in-person instruction and future periods of remote learning.
- **Consider Expanded Learning Time.** Research has shown that a longer school year and/or a longer school day can [make a significant impact on closing the achievement gap](#). BPS should engage all stakeholders, including caregivers, to do a comprehensive review of the school-year cadence and calendar to find places where learning can be enhanced and extended. Boston could implement a one-year pilot program that focuses on some form of extended learning time citywide, allowing students to catch up on critical instructional time they lost during the pandemic.

▪ **Revisit and dramatically shift BPS' initial fiscal 2021 budget.** This is an opportunity to budget with an equity lens, double down on investments in in-school supports like reading and math specialists, require intensive interventions for off-track students, English-language learners, and special needs students, and mobilize a team of paid and volunteer specialists who can come in on a short-term, emergency basis to provide targeted support at the schools with the highest need.

There should also be investments in systems to ensure every caregiver and family is easily and meaningfully engaged. COVID-19 has further exposed significant weaknesses in schools' ability to engage families in solutions and planning, or even communicate the most basic information. In addition to investing in human capital, the city needs to invest in communication tools, systems, and training to ensure every family receives information they can understand and support from schools.

There should also be a priority on counseling and social-emotional needs. Students and teachers will return to school carrying the trauma and stress created by the pandemic, social isolation, and the sudden change in routines. Along with city resources, we should be deploying nonprofit partners now to assist and dramatically staff up for next fall to meet these needs.

Some of these ideas may be politically unpopular. We can live with that. In times of crisis, decisions are often imperfect and demand sacrifice. Our commitment is to ensure that students who grew up like us, students whose futures depend on a world-class education, do not have their dreams derailed by a pandemic.

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