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**Coronavirus**

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## A complete list of what to do — and not do — for everyone teaching kids at home during the coronavirus crisis

By **Valerie Strauss**

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With most of the world's schools shut because of the coronavirus crisis, you can now find a lot of advice on the Internet about the best ways to carry out distance learning at home, where more than 1.5 billion students are now supposed to be getting their lessons. I've even published some, from a teacher and former home-schooler, which you can see here.

But if you want a thorough rundown of what to do and not to do, read the following 19 strategies from renowned master educator Andy Hargreaves.

Hargreaves, a research professor at Boston College and visiting professor at the University of Ottawa, has been working for decades to improve school effectiveness. He has been awarded visiting professorships in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Sweden, Spain, Japan, Norway and Singapore. And he is past president of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement.

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Hargreaves founded and serves as co-president of the Atlantic Rim Collaboratory, or ARC, a group of nine nations committed to broadly defined excellence, equity, well-being, inclusion, democracy and human rights. He has consulted with numerous governments, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, universities and professional associations. He has written more than 30 books — and received numerous awards for them — and he was the founding editor in chief of the *Journal of Educational Change*.

A different version of this piece was published in the *London Times Supplement*.

## By Andy Hargreaves

Educators are doing extraordinary things in the face of the coronavirus crisis. They are our invisible heroes, supporting health services and reinventing the way they provide education. They are achieving miracles in the most challenging circumstances.

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I work with education ministers, secretaries of education and teacher-leaders around the globe (as president of the ARC Education Project), and in the continuous white-water world we are all navigating at the moment, it's just not possible to see everything ourselves all at once, especially what's ahead.

So here are 19 things for covid-19 that may have been overlooked by school districts and politicians in the rush to do the right thing by students and teachers.

Some will surely need to be revised as the crisis develops, and the list by no means covers everything. I'm in the white water, too, so please bear with me.

**1. *Don't send parents heaps of worksheets.***

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Instead, encourage and support them to learn with what they have available — kitchens, gardens, paper, etc. Give them ideas on how to do this. The most important thing in the next two months is not keeping up, step-by-step, with a prescribed curriculum, but keeping kids engaged with learning and the idea of learning.

***2. Treasure the fact that some kids are escaping from hours of test preparation each day.***

This could be a chance to engage in wider learning, make up stories, memorize epic poems, sing karaoke with YouTube, make things, play outside, write letters (on paper) to grandparents, or friends they can't have playdates or get-togethers with, etc. In other words, for these kids, this could now be a time for more learning, rather than less. They can try to learn a new skill — juggle, play a musical instrument, pick up a modern or classical language, knit, skip, bake, garden (including indoor plants), help parents hang pictures and fix things in the house. I'm at the end of two weeks of self-isolation, and I've just bought a set of clubs for juggling. Getting on to another level on a video game isn't the best way for teenagers to occupy themselves. Starting another interest while they have time will not only occupy them now, it will impress their friends later.

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### **3. Make covid-19 an opportunity for learning and not just an interruption of it.**

Help parents to do science experiments with soap so kids can understand how it kills covid-19. Teach them all about germs. When you can make coronavirus an opportunity for learning and not just an obstruction to it, loads of work can be done in math with graphs, probabilities and equations of how it spreads under different conditions. Kids can study the history of polio, smallpox and the Spanish flu (including the fact that it started in Kansas).

Geography can examine the patterns of covid-19 spread and create hypotheses explaining those patterns. Social studies can look at the relationship between government anti-covid-19 measures and protecting the principles of democracy. Ethics and religion electives can consider the principles that should guide decisions about who should live or die, or get treatment first, when resources are scarce.

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### **4. *Distinguish between online learning and on-screen learning.***

Online may sometimes be continuous on-screen interaction — a math game, or Minecraft, for example. But it could also be setting up an activity involving making collages from pasta, or models from mud, or doing origami, or constructing a robot from Lego. In fact, this is better viewed as distance learning. I started my university career at the Open University in England when it was the first distance learning institution in the world. We wrote materials by building in tasks and activities (think workbooks delivered to kids), and we also made TV programs on the BBC. (The BBC has now launched a whole new schedule specifically for kids in this crisis). Not all online learning is screen learning, and not all distance learning needs to be online.

### **5. *Get materials to parents who don't have them.***

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For some, this means digital tablets. But for many other families with few resources and no Internet connections, this could also mean pencils, coloring pens, Play-Doh, glue, paper, Scotch tape, books, magazines, etc. Some school districts are doing things like having teachers deliver materials in plastic boxes on families' doorsteps, or having school bus drivers drop off stashes of materials instead.

### **6. *Develop strategies for children who are just “above the line.”***

These are children who are not vulnerable enough to have a formal special education identification, but are in the group just above. They are often most at risk as they are not explicitly targeted and don't usually qualify for a lot of extra support. Such children may have parents who can't or don't read, parents whose first language is not English, separated parents in conflict, or families that live in cramped spaces with no room for outdoor play.

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### ***7. Concentrate teacher resources and time on children who need it most.***

Many middle-class parents will be able to self-organize learning at home with some online help. As a middle-class grandparent for example, I can support my grandchildren and their parents with knowledge of where resources and platforms are, which ones are most relevant, and how to navigate them and make specific selections once they find the website. But many people don't have this knowledge. So instead of always trying to do whole classes online, concentrate disproportionate amounts of teacher instructional time and support on smaller numbers of high-risk children who are struggling learners.

### ***8. Target support for students with learning and emotional difficulties.***

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This can happen by teachers and special education resource teachers calling parents and students one-to-one, emailing, going through individual education plans, maintaining personal relationships by Skype or other platforms where possible (vital with vulnerable children), giving structured feedback on work done online (it can be handwritten, colored or constructed, then photographed on a smartphone and sent back where possible) to ensure these students don't struggle more than they need to and don't fall behind.

***9. Think about how communications can be inclusive of all kinds of students and their families.***

Canadian TV had an item on how parents are dealing with learning at home — the family was a mixed-race lesbian couple with a single child. Include students and student voice in communications on national TV — Norway, Canada and New Zealand have done this especially well. Don't just pitch to the same median middle-class white students all the time. This is a time when our values come alive. Being inclusive in our communications isn't just something we should do when things are going well and we have extra time, but it also should define how and to whom we communicate, all the time, unless it creates excessive delay regarding the urgency of the message itself.

## **10. *Consider an early, phased start to the new school year.***

Children will have had a long time away from classroom routines. Many will have forgotten how to line up, sit in a circle, listen to others and wait their turn. Some will have spent months in close quarters with parents and siblings plunged into poverty, hardship and stress. They will have had fewer learning supports than modal middle-class families. So, school may need to start a bit earlier in the calendar. Some “normal” professional development days may need to be sacrificed and the rest redirected to dealing practically with the issues of the vulnerable and the left behind. Students who are known to be more vulnerable (through contacts that teachers will have kept with families over the isolation period) may need to start school before the rest — as often happens when phasing in arrivals in kindergarten or junior-kindergarten. This will be hard on teachers, but for a few months they may need to be as turbocharged in their professional approach as health workers have had to be, because this will save a lot of disruption later on.

## **11. *Promote positive family and friendship relationships***

Part of being at school is feeling safe and being cared for. Socio-emotional learning is definitely looking like a need that's fundamental right now; not an indulgent frill. The most important thing in stressed-out families, at this time, more than rushing through planned lessons, is making children feel loved, safe and reassured. So, communicate the importance of simply spending time with kids for part of the day, hugging them, talking and listening to them, enjoying some moments of silliness and laughter, and doing things together like cooking or reading. Remind parents and other caretakers about this on a regular basis. Help children communicate with their friends by writing them a postcard, Skyping or face-timing their grandparents and showing them what they've been doing, etc. Now, more than ever, kids, especially younger vulnerable kids with emotional or learning difficulties who are in stressed-out families, need to see and hear their teachers as part of their distance experience. Be empathetic about and supportive toward how parents themselves are feeling and about what they have to cope with, too. Understand they may be dealing with family illnesses, their own work demands, loss of income and other problems. Let them know it's also okay to lower their standards a bit for their kids sometimes in terms of tidiness and other things.

## **12. *Value play.***

Play, especially outdoor play in the garden or the driveway (if families have them), is always a vital part of learning — a way to develop the imagination, engage in conversation, build relationships with others or work through anxieties. During nature study, for example, my grandchildren have named natural objects as their friends — like sticky and buddy — cute, of course, but also a possible sign they are missing their friends. Many education systems in the past few years have tended to play down “play” in favor of more work, test preparation and downloading serious study to younger and younger age groups. Older kids have also been spending more and more time indoors on their smartphones in a world where even before the crisis, that was already too much. This is actually an opportunity to reverse the cycle for some kids at least — to let them make up their own activities with perhaps just a few materials thrown their way, like balls of wool, or pebbles, or cardboard boxes, to get them started. Play can work for teenagers, too — singing online together, making up ridiculous skits, building things from junk around the house, and so on. More play, less work, might actually be a good direction to take in these unique circumstances.

### **13. *Protect teacher well-being.***

Teachers are under stress too. They'll be worrying about how to prepare and deliver lessons at a distance. They'll be anxious about those kids for whom home is not usually a safe haven. They'll be uncertain sometimes about how much initiative they can take in communicating with homes and families without guidance from principals, school districts, governments and their unions, or without getting sued for failing to provide for every student equally. And this guidance may not always be clear or consistent. They'll be working at full tilt but not always sure about the impact of what they are doing. They'll be missing their kids and their colleagues. And many will be looking after kids of their own at home. Unlike health workers whose heroic efforts are publicly very visible, what they're doing is less visible, and the public may start to wonder about and criticize what they're actually (not) doing. So, supporting teachers now is critical — providing counseling to teachers who are stressed, anxious and depressed; ensuring there are virtual forums for teachers to collaborate — not just to plan and prepare but also to provide moral support; and communicating clearly, accessibly and transparently what it is that teachers are doing for parents and kids rather than disguising everything with bureaucratic edu-speak.

#### **14. *Underline the value of expertise.***

This crisis has elevated the importance of expertise in the public imagination. After years when government has cast aspersions on professional expertise in favor of popular opinion and common sense, state and federal leaders are having public health professionals stand alongside them to explain and legitimize scientific expertise as a basis for decision-making. We need to ensure the same thing happens for teaching and learning. Many parents and other caretakers will do a heroic job with learning at home in the coming weeks and months. The task of teachers and leaders is to support and guide what parents are now doing based on the science and expertise of effective learning, and to communicate this when it is asked for and needed, clearly, without talking down to people. Teachers must be confident in their own professional expertise, share that collaboratively with other teachers to strengthen that confidence, and communicate it clearly to others.

### **15. *Keep up collaborative professionalism***

Working together collaboratively is always important and never more so than now. Try to ensure that time is built in for professional collaboration, department planning, learning teams and so on within the school. Also leverage networks of ideas and support across schools at this time, especially where those networks already exist. There will be a temptation to think there's no time to collaborate with adults or engage in existing networks because everyone is too busy churning out stuff for their kids. The role of all kinds of leadership here is not to abandon networks and meetings but to ensure they are used to provide the best possible learning and caring at a distance for all students in these unprecedented circumstances.

### **16. *Promote public professional leadership.***

Many parents are unsure and unclear about so many issues concerning their children now. Will there be quality support, ideas and activities for them to help their children with? How long will this go on? Will their teenagers be able to graduate and get to college? Will their children fall behind in their reading, their mathematics and other areas? Many governments have provided excellent public communication about health and the economy, standing alongside experts in those fields as they do so. The same needs to happen in education — regular public announcements about education, and learning at home, and about what teachers are and will be doing. These announcements need to be made by state and federal leaders standing together with accredited education professionals from teacher unions, boards of professional standards, leadership organizations, and so on.

### **17. *Applaud our educators.***

Within a couple of weeks, after the initial scramble to get resources up and make connections with families, parents and the public will start to understand the many extra miles teachers have been going during lockdown — sometimes literally, door to door to give out and collect resources and paper — to keep their kids learning, engaged and well. Parents at home trying to fulfill their demanding job responsibilities while their kids run riot in the background will be figuring out pretty fast that online learning is often overrated, that it can't keep the undivided attention of kids unable to self-regulate, or concentrate, and that those darned teachers go the extra mile all the time and deserve every cent they make — and then some. So by the time we hit May 1, the day the international community celebrates the value of people's labor, let's open our windows, and lean off our balconies, to give three cheers and three minutes of applause for all our teachers — in districts and charters, schools and colleges, public and private — for all the work they've been doing for all our students and their families.

### **18. *Beware: perfect is the enemy of good.***

One of my favorite books on school leadership is “Imperfect Leadership” by Steve Munby. Imperfect leadership, Munby says, is not the leadership of superheroes. It’s “messy leadership, trial and error leadership, butterflies in the stomach leadership.” It’s about stepping up to lead even when you feel completely out of your depth. It’s about being unafraid to admit you don’t know what to do sometimes. And it’s about being ever ready to ask for others’ help. In these times that are without parallel, imperfect leadership doesn’t and can’t wait until everything is perfectly mapped out, where all risks have been eliminated, and every student is guaranteed equal access to the same curriculum. Perfect is the enemy of good. Educators will make some mistakes right now. They won’t be perfect with everybody, all the time. But that is better than waiting for the perfect plan, holding off and doing nothing at all until it’s ready.

### **19. *Let teachers take the lead.***

In the early days of the pandemic, there has been a lot of unavoidable confusion about what kinds of online platforms and resources can be set up for all teachers to use in districts or entire state systems. This can be frustrating for teachers and for parents and kids, too. Let’s not show the worst face of school district and national bureaucracies. Let’s not have the teacher wait for the principal, and the principal for the state department, before anything gets done, in those outdated hierarchies of top-down control. Teachers need to be allowed to be the heroes of learning, like our health workers are being the heroes of combating infectious disease. Teachers are professionals. They know where they are in the curriculum. They know their kids, what point each of them is at, which ones have greater needs than others. So with just a few basic guidelines — *keep kids learning and interested in learning, actively care for and support them, and communicate with them personally, individually and collectively, as often as possible* — unleash teachers as professionals to use whatever platforms they can to get things started and get connected as fast as possible. And then give them ways to connect with each other as colleagues as they move forward together.

## Don't make teachers wait. Let them go, go, go.

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