

Westheimer: YEAR ONE – Three essential lessons COVID-19 has taught us about education

During the pandemic, we rediscovered what teachers and students have always known: that schooling is about relationships, learning is a social process, and a deep-dive into a topic of interest is worth more than a stress-filled endurance swim in the shallows.

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Publishing date:

Mar 09, 2021 • March 9, 2021 • 4 minute read • [Join the conversation](#)

Published in ottawacitizen.com



uOttawa Prof. Joel Westheimer draws three main lessons for education out of the challenging year students, teachers and families have faced. PHOTO BY JULIE OLIVER /Postmedia

Thursday marks the anniversary of the first diagnosed COVID-19 case in Ottawa – the same day the World Health Organization declared the virus a pandemic. This week, we share a range of viewpoints on the year that was, and on what lies ahead.

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When did the Assyrian empire's reign over Mesopotamia begin and end? If you don't know, you have a lot of company and you're about to have even more. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, countless nine- and 10-year-olds missed lessons about one ancient civilization or another this past year.

History and geography aren't the only subjects affected. Some middle school students won't learn the three functions of mitochondria. High school math teachers may have skipped lessons in differential equations. And who knows how many missed the opportunity to read about the travels and travails of the lovable Santiago in Paulo Coelho's brilliant allegorical novel, *The Alchemist*.

So what?

The first lesson parents, educators, and policymakers should draw from our collective school experiences during the pandemic is this: ***content matters much more than coverage***. For more than three decades, the school curriculum has become increasingly consumed with all the things students should know before they graduate. That has resulted in an unprecedented global obsession with micro-managing teachers' work to ensure the right information is taught, with standardized testing to find out if they're succeeding.

Every day we read about children falling behind, but the curriculum is bursting at the seams. Falling behind what? Behind whom?

Research in teaching and child development tells us that learning how to think analytically is much more important than cramming in material that students won't remember weeks or years later. We live in an age of instantly accessible information in an infinite number of domains. Living well in the 21st century does not require more information but rather the knowledge and skills needed to sift, understand and assess the quality of information. Teaching content matters, but covering every possible historical event and scientific or mathematical concept does not.

Let's turn our concern over learning loss during the pandemic to focus on what was gained. We rediscovered what teachers and students have always known: that schooling is about relationships, learning is a social process, and a deep-dive into a topic of great interest is worth more than a stress-filled endurance swim in the shallows. What matters are the connections that teachers make, both to students and their families and between subject matter and the outside world.

A second lesson for education I take away from the pandemic is that ***inequality undermines the work educators do***. This shouldn't be a new lesson, but it was a wake-up call. COVID-19 has

functioned like an x-ray, exposing already existing fault lines: poverty and economic inequality, unequal access to high speed internet and computers, and inadequate resources for those most in need.

Calls during the pandemic for parents to make sure their children don't fall behind only increased these already existing inequalities. Some parents have the time, resources and education to demand their kids follow the curriculum, maybe even get ahead. Other parents are front-line workers, or holding down two jobs, or working at home with little time for other activities.

School cannot solve all of society's problems, but they are a place we can acknowledge them. For example, some teachers brought new scrutiny to how they assign grades. Could the way we evaluate students' prospects reflect the fact that students come from such different starting points? As children return to classrooms, let's try — both within and outside of schools — to address inequality in meaningful ways.

A third lesson from the pandemic is that *teaching is essential work*. Remember those amusing memes from last spring when schools shut down?

- Homeschooling, Day 1: And just like that, teachers were appreciated again;
- Homeschooling, Day 2: We should double our teachers' salaries;
- Homeschooling, Day 3: I must apologize to the teacher for insisting that Suzie was “gifted.”

Funny, yes, but also revealing. Psychologists tells us that good humour often points to truths that everyone knows but nobody admits. I hope that we learn a newfound respect and admiration for the difficult and vital work teachers do. Will it be a little bit harder to claim teachers are lazy or have too much time off or that class size doesn't matter? Teachers' working conditions are children's learning conditions and we should do everything we can to assist their efforts.

There are other lessons to take away. At the University of Ottawa, colleagues and I started the research collaborative CHENINE (Change, Engagement, and Innovation in Education) to make sure these lessons don't get lost in the shuffle back to brick-and-mortar schooling. Already we've learned that educational technology can enrich good teaching but can't replace poor teaching; that we could give students less homework and fewer tests; that the outdoors is a vastly underused resource for teaching and learning; and that trusting teachers' front-line judgments is crucial.

When school returns to full swing, let's give teachers latitude in what, how and when to teach any particular subject matter. Their primary job should be to restore a sense of safety, nurture a sense of possibility and rebuild the community lost through extended social isolation.

By the way, the Assyrian empire fell in 609 BC. I had to look it up.

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