

“I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice.” – Arne Duncan

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified inequities in our school system – barriers based within poverty, language, ability, and racism. But Stephen Covey argued that organizations could potentially arrive in a better place after a crisis than prior to it having occurred, a concept he called “opportunity solving” (2004). Will educational organizations make use of this opportunity? Through surveys and representative interviews of 1,668 Canadian teachers while they pivoted to remote learning and then back to the classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw examples of actions by teachers, administrators and parents that set the stage for a better, more equitable kind of Canadian schooling.

Teachers: Beyond an instructional role

Teachers who participated in our study let us know that their foremost concern was for the welfare of their students. The stress caused by the quick pivot to remote learning and public displays of new online pedagogies in front of administrators and parents – along with their early stumbles and self-critique – was a distant second concern. One teacher told us,

“My biggest stress right now is not knowing about the well-being of all the students – how are kids coping, how are families coping? That’s another aspect of it that’s hard. I’m not even really worried about what we’re teaching – that’s the last of my worries in some senses.”

The priority placed by teachers on student welfare above instruction points to two

important foundations of our current educational system. First, the role of “teacher” is much more than one of providing academic knowledge and skills to students, having become conflated with many other functions in children’s lives, such as ensuring they are physically and emotionally safe and healthy. Second, this responsibility is one that teachers and administrators willingly accept and embrace. Of her students’ reliance on her and the classroom community, one teacher said, “It’s nice how much they miss it.” The acceptance by teachers and administrators that they had a role to play in their students’ welfare was evidenced through their actions as well as their stated feelings, as will be shown in the examples below.

Equal but not equitable

It became evident very early in the pandemic that some children’s needs – both in terms of education and well-being – were not being met. Teachers shared with us their concerns about inequities in access to online learning that challenged the sustainability of schooling for some of their students. These included children who lived in poverty, children whose parents were unable to assist due to work obligations and students with lack of access to the language of instruction. Teachers were also worried about students whose additional learning needs required specialized planning and programming, which was difficult to support outside the classroom and school.

All hands on deck

Teachers and administrators organized quickly and creatively to address these needs. One teacher described how school buses in his province were repurposed to drop off and pick up homework. Other teachers participated in delivering hampers to students’ homes to replace the nutrition programs typically offered in their schools: As one teacher from the Maritimes explained, “There are a lot of families who are really struggling, and [the pandemic] has made it extra hard for them. They might not have a meal that day, so we’re reaching out to them and delivering food.” One administrator in Winnipeg quickly put the school division’s tablets into the hands of his students in their homes and then funded \$40,000 for Internet for those homes. “Anything we can do to keep kids on pace with their peers, making progress, and socially engaged with their teachers and peers is just the right thing

to do,” explained Brian O’Leary, Superintendent of Seven Oaks School Division. Additionally, a response planning team of Manitoba educators and administrators worked together with provincial officials to quickly gather resources to create an online repository for parents trying to support differentiated learning taking place at home. One team member said, “These plans, resources, supports, and activities adopted key messaging and practices to guide both educators and families during a time of uncertainty.”

Heroism and hopefulness

These inspirational stories highlight the commitment and partnership of educators, families and communities, and it would be tempting to call them heroes. Indeed, their work is inspirational. However, the need for these “heroic” acts is prompted not by the pandemic, but by inequities revealed within the foundation of the wider social safety net. These “cracks” have for too long been silently filled by educators, and the broadening disparities continue to be addressed by the goodwill of caring education professionals during the pandemic. Nonetheless, teachers are tired. One told us, “I feel inadequate, if that makes sense, in my ability to teach over the phone.” Another said, “I found I was almost getting depressed and felt completely helpless basically – [from] the inability to help the kids like I typically would.” A common sentiment was that teachers just wanted to go back to the way things were before the pandemic: “Just let us go back to school. I miss [my students], and I want them to know that I miss them.” But to return to school as it was before the pandemic would be a mistake. While we collectively yearn to return to our former and familiar systems, we are now called upon to opportunity solve to ensure that the lessons taught to us by COVID-19 are used to build an enhanced, equitable, and more robust Canadian school system.

The challenges of change

The pandemic has provided the opportunity and the impetus to transform our current practices in education. Change is uncomfortable, yet necessary for growth. In his latest book, *The Catalyst*, Jonah Berger (2020) explores barriers to change, and his findings articulate the factors that make it easy for us to be lured back to the past, especially after a worldwide pandemic. They include the endowment of value

we place on what is familiar, our discomfort with the distance from past practice, and the uncertainty of moving forward in a new way. Given these barriers and teachers' current "pandemic fatigue," it just seems more comfortable to restore our former educational system rather than to try something different... once again.

Michael Mindzak (2020) challenges us to "shift our gaze to reconceptualise contemporary education." Rather than looking at how we can return as quickly as possible to the way things were, he suggests we consider how things can be approached differently going forward. Mindzak encourages us to re-examine expectations in the current educational narrative – such as the myth of finite resources resulting in educators having to do more with less, and the belief that formal learning can only occur in a classroom or designated school building. Ultimately, he asks us to rethink the purpose of education within this re-framed context. Navigating a pandemic has allowed us to see first-hand the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness in our current system. Likewise, Fullan et al. (2020) describe the opportunity for Canadian educators to harness this knowledge and move from a period of disruption and transition to "re-imagining" – not restoration. Rather than focusing on ways to return our educational organizations to places that clearly have structural challenges, we are called upon to opportunity solve new systems built on solid foundations of sustainable equity and well-being. With equity as a guiding principle, creating a new Canadian social/school system where every child is safe, nourished, cared for, and has access to technology is an action-oriented pathway.

From crisis to opportunity

The abrupt and disruptive changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have effectively propelled education from a zone of crisis and uncertainty to one involving learning and growth. Fullan et al. say that what has emerged in the process is recognition that we are no longer working on provisional solutions for the short term. Rather, educators are refocused on enduring, student-centred technological innovations that combine the most effective approaches for both classroom and remote engagement – a sustainable and dynamic hybrid learning model. In this regard, the pandemic crisis can be viewed as an opportunity taken for improvement in education, bringing the essential levels of creativity and

inspiration to bear, and ensuring that school communities are in a better place both now and in the future.

“It’s the long game we’re in. And the way it’s played will keep changing. Adapt and respond. Use compassion and the best available science. Pivot quickly when necessary. Accept that life is different now. Keep calm and carry on. Reset not return.”

– Senator Stan Kutcher

READ THE REPORT

Read a more detailed summary of the authors’ research survey here:

<https://edcan.atavist.com/teacher-covid-survey>

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