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COVID-19 proves educational system too rigid

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No one should reach conclusions about an institution based on its struggles with the coronavirus lockdown. The situation is too extraordinary to expect anyone to have a foolproof strategy. But the lockdown's effect on K-12 education has highlighted something we've long known: the age-based system is too rigid.

States and school districts have been reluctant to move to online education that "counts" — for grades, course credit, etc. — because not all kids have internet access, and children with special needs might get insufficient assistance. Basically, for fear some kids will fall behind their peers.

In Michigan, the state Department of Education declared that online schooling could not count toward legally mandated instructional time. Citing disparities in districts' abilities to provide cyber learning, state education board president Casandra Ulbrich said, "It's not fair to allow districts with resources to count days and other districts trying to get resources not qualify to count those days."

This was mooted by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, in this week's executive order closing schools for the remainder of the academic year. It left it to districts to craft how they will carry on.

The Philadelphia school district issued a similar order, with leadership sending a letter to principals, stating, "To ensure equity, remote instruction should not be provided to students, including through the internet, technology at home, by phone, or otherwise." Like Michigan, the district eventually changed its stance.

Meanwhile, officials nationwide feared online instruction would include insufficient support to keep special-needs kids up to speed and satisfy federal law. U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos eventually declared that Washington would not block online instruction.

Worries that kids will be left behind are laudable. But when helping some students keep pace requires withholding education from millions, it does not make sense. And it need not be this way: Our education system need not de facto require standardization that hurts those who learn at different speeds than others.

By law, children are expected to commence formal education when they are five or six years old. In addition, all people must pay for, and therefore they typically use, schools to which they are zoned, so kids are batch-processed. With little regard to their starting point or abilities, a child typically must move at roughly the same pace, on the same things, as everyone else.

This is problematic for "advanced" kids — only about 1% of students are accelerated past their age group, and it can be tough to get schools' permission — but it is especially damaging for

kids behind the average pace. Being held back can impose a crushing stigma, which is why many schools advance students no matter their academic performance.

Education should move at a different speed for every student.

If there is an educational silver lining to the coronavirus lockdown it is that it may be opening people's eyes to the possibility of such a system. Many parents are becoming acquainted with the wealth of instructional material available online, such as the tutoring site Khan Academy, math coaching service Prodigy, and foreign language site Duolingo. They may also be realizing that such resources make it possible to educate at a child's own pace.

Of course, online education is not ideal for many kids. But the virus response is also shining a spotlight on homeschooling generally, which normally involves lots of in-person instruction and socially rich experiences from museum visits to gathering with other homeschoolers.

Then there is private education, with offerings ranging from Montessori to classical education, and Catholic institutions to "free-range" Sudbury schools. If public school funding were attached to kids, each pupil would have roughly \$15,400 (according to the most recent federal data), making private schools more viable for far more families.

We must, of course, try our hardest to educate children with disabilities, or poor internet access. But ending a system with one "right" educational trajectory, and instead having all kids learn at their own paces and times, is a broader solution that would eliminate the stigma of being "behind," and ultimately be consistent with simple reality: All children are different.

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