

# Balancing learning loss against social and emotional harm

Victoria McDougald

8.5.2020



Getty Images/Halfpoint

In light of the troubling surge in coronavirus cases across the nation in recent weeks, many educators and school leaders are revisiting or canceling plans to reopen schools this fall. Education Week recently reported that, “As of July 28, ten of the fifteen largest school districts are choosing remote learning only as their back-to-school instructional model, affecting over 2 million students.”

While few parents are thrilled by the prospect of more distance learning, recent polls show that a majority of adults are concerned that reopening daycares, K–12 schools, and colleges this fall will contribute to a further surge in coronavirus infections.

Parents and educators are also understandably concerned about children falling behind academically, as well as the social and emotional consequences of protracted isolation from peers and other adults. For low-income students of color, children with disabilities, and those in unstable or vulnerable home environments, the effects of continued school closures will be all the more damaging.

Regardless of whether schools plan to operate in-person, online, or some combination of the two, after so many months of closures (and in light of recent social unrest and continued racial inequality), teachers and school leaders need to carefully consider how students’ social and emotional needs, in addition to the significant learning

**Are you looking for great online educational resources?**

**Check out our COVID-19 page, which provides parents, teachers, and others the best ideas for remote learning.**

[LEARN MORE](#)

have incurred. For advice on how to balance the two, I turned to Juan Cabrera, Superintendent of the El Paso Independent School District (EPISD), and Eva Moskowitz, Founder and CEO of Success Academy Charter Schools—two leaders featured on a webinar co-hosted by Fordham earlier this summer. As Cabrera emphasized, “Covid-19 has contributed to a significantly larger learning gap than we are accustomed to mitigating with the traditional summer slide. We are also keenly aware that students will need extensive social-emotional support upon the resumption of the school year.”

While El Paso will kick off its school year online, it plans to reopen schools as soon as health officials approve. Students should eventually be able to choose among online, in-person, or hybrid schooling models, but balancing academic instruction with social and emotional learning (SEL) will be at the forefront of the district’s priorities, Cabrera stressed, noting:

*We cannot expect to simply return to business as usual once school resumes. There is a valid sense of concern and urgency to address the learning gaps that have been exacerbated by the months-long absence of teaching and learning. The temptation will be to spend most of our time and energy focusing on the academic gaps at the expense of attending to our students social-emotional needs. Social-emotional learning doesn’t get measured in the sense that we measure academics and creates the sense that it is an expendable option. However, we have a responsibility to provide social-emotional supports to students and staff. Learning at the highest levels cannot take place when the mind preoccupied with managing the effects of persistent stress and unreconciled traumas.*

Similarly, Moskowitz plans to offer partial in-person instruction at Success Academy as soon as she’s able. Due to city guidelines, her schools will open remotely in August, but she intends to transition to a hybrid plan whereby students alternate between online and on-campus instruction.

And like Cabrera, Moskowitz views social and emotional wellbeing as “very important, now more than ever.” As she sees it:

*Educators are naturally frantic about lost learning. Everything about schooling—from safety to academics to emotional health—is challenging during a pandemic. We have to keep it simple and prioritize. Reading is critical. But we also have to make time for recreation to help reduce stress and connect students, even if we have to do so in a virtual environment.*

What might this look like in practice? EPISD is developing training for administrators and teachers focused on integrating academic and SEL. It will also provide dedicated time at the start of each school day for relationship and community-building, and plans to set aside time every Wednesday for students to engage in explicit SEL instruction via evidence-based programs differentiated by school level.

Success Academy will have a psychologist or social emotional specialist based in every school, and is looking at additional online sources of therapy for children. They also aren’t waiting until fall to reconnect with students. To make it possible for older students to connect and socialize, Success Academy offered an online program called SA Summer Together, where students were able to take online classes together, ranging from cooking to kickboxing to anime classes, and even observing surgery. Once they can reopen schools, Moskowitz says, “We will prioritize electives, or what we call ‘Scholar Talent.’ It’s very important for kids to be able to do things they truly enjoy—sports, art, chess, dance. We have limited time on

campus, but we've made sure to build in time for these electives, which we feel strongly support the whole child and social-emotional wellbeing." In the meantime, online exercise classes and virtual board games can help students de-stress and connect, she noted.

Safely reopening schools is one of the great challenges currently facing the nation. And in this unprecedented moment of distance learning and hybrid schooling, it's critical to get SEL right. But as Cabrera underscored, "Integrating social and emotional learning and academics presents a path forward; one that is worthy of the time, thought and energy that the effort requires. It is the right thing to do. The result will be a proactive and equitable approach to schooling that will facilitate a sense of empowerment and a return to normalcy sooner rather than later."

*(To learn more about how school leaders plan to provide social and emotional supports for students throughout the Covid-19 crisis, check out our latest webinar [here](#).)*

---

*POLICY PRIORITY: HIGH EXPECTATIONS*

---

*TOPICS: CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION    TEACHERS & SCHOOL LEADERS*

---