

EDITORIAL

Avoiding an educational disaster

With the governor's cancellation of the rest of the school year, Massachusetts districts must do more to prevent severe setbacks in student learning.

By **The Editorial Board** Updated April 24, 2020, 4:44 p.m.



Boston school buses parked in the yard at First Student Inc. after Governor Charlie Baker ordered closure of all schools for the remainder of the school year to curb the coronavirus pandemic. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

By the beginning of every fall semester, children have lost some of their progress from the previous academic year, a phenomenon so familiar to educators that it has its own name: [the summer slide](#). So imagine the [potential setback](#) for homebound kids if they

get what could amount to a five- or six-month loss of learning time this year because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Governor Charlie Baker's decision Tuesday to [close schools for the rest of the year](#) in Massachusetts, with education continuing online only, was the right call, and it provided a timely contrast to other GOP governors recklessly rushing to open their states prematurely. It provides helpful clarity to districts across the Commonwealth so they don't have to make piecemeal decisions. Now the stakes are higher for school districts, which need to ensure that the coronavirus disruption that's certain to last much longer than a summer break does not stunt students' education.

In other words, there can't be a shutdown slide — and, despite the difficulties, teachers, school districts, and the state need to ensure that learning continues as much as possible.

Many school districts and teachers have already adapted to that new reality with impressive speed, creating online learning programs, assigning students projects they can complete remotely, and even [coordinating with TV stations on educational programming synched to school curriculums](#). And parents, often to their [chagrin](#), have become de facto home-schoolers.

But for students, the experience is uneven. Some kids don't have access to broadband Internet, some parents can't tutor their kids, some districts aren't attempting to teach any new material, and the discrepancies appear to be breaking down along familiar racial and economic lines. [Data](#) compiled by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education show that out of the state's 20 largest school districts, only four have been teaching new material during the coronavirus shutdown. Those emerging disparities could exacerbate the state's existing educational chasm between high-achieving suburban schools and underperforming urban districts.

While summer vacation isn't totally analogous to the current situation, research into the summer slide does underscore the dangers. While [studies](#) have found that it affects all children, in particular in math, income-based readings gaps [intensify](#) over the summer.

One group of [researchers warned](#) children could wind up a full year behind as a result of the pandemic.

So what can districts and teachers do? Some of the options that ought to be on the table include continuing some online classes over the summer (sorry, kids). More far-reaching ideas, which would probably require federal funding, include hiring a [vast number of tutors](#).

Here's what's not okay: accepting treading water as the best the state's schools can do during a shutdown of unknown length. As the [Globe reported Thursday](#), the state's guidance emphasizes "reinforcing skills already taught this school year"; language with more specific recommendations was removed from an early draft. That's at variance with Rhode Island, where the state has told schools to continue coursework and also required districts to submit detailed plans for remote teaching.

It's disappointing that the Baker administration watered down its initial proposal. Even worse, though, is the reasoning the state's largest teachers union has offered. Merrie Najimy, the head of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, said that continuing with learning would widen the achievement gap, since affluent districts were better positioned to implement remote learning. Of course, that's true: Not only are they better prepared, they're also likely to keep up the classroom's tempo with or without a mandate from the state. And that's exactly why the state can't allow urban districts to fall behind. The answer to closing achievement gaps can never be to expect high-achieving schools to slow down; it has to be to lift up lower-performing ones. DESE is working on new guidance for learning during the coronavirus, and, hopefully, it will set higher expectations for all the state's schools.

At the same time, the state will need practical health guidelines on how and when to reopen schools. It's safe to assume coronavirus will still be a problem in the fall — the director of the Centers for Disease and Prevention, Robert Redfield, recently warned of a [potential second wave](#) of infections starting later this year — but at some point, in-person schooling needs to resume. Denmark, which has [already reopened its schools](#),

did so with a series of precautions, including spacing desks two yards apart and enforcing frequent hand-washing.

Baker's order closing the schools in Massachusetts was widely expected but still provided a measure of certainty. Districts now have to rise to the challenge of keeping students on track during a prolonged shutdown, while the state needs to figure out how to balance the risks of reopening physical schools with the duty to educate all the state's children.

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