

What schools have learned (or relearned) as a result of the pandemic

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Since the inception of “common schools” in the 18th century, many events have shaped the landscape of public education in our country over the last 300 years. We are now in the midst of another seminal moment.

As we in Walla Walla stand on the precipice of returning middle school students back to our classrooms, I am of the firm opinion that the current pandemic will prove to be one of the more significant turning points in our system’s history.

While the systemic inertia of our public education system may attempt to nudge us back to our pre-pandemic “old ways of doing things,” I have no doubt that our nation’s schools will forever be influenced by the events that have transpired over the last 11 months. Moreover, I firmly believe that this experience will undoubtedly improve our ability to better educate and serve the youth and families of our communities.

Let’s look at past moments that changed education.

Horace Mann’s influence in the mid 1800s in Massachusetts, establishing universal, free public schooling laid the groundwork for the modern educational system we enjoy to this day.

In the early 1900’s the widespread birth of high schools and vocational instruction greatly improved the overall education and skill level of our nation’s future citizenry. The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954 began the essential efforts towards school desegregation.

Some two decades later, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, one of the most comprehensive educational laws in our nation’s history, paving the way for the subsequent Disabilities Act and the critical access owed our children with disabilities.

Then, for better or worse, came the standardized testing movement, born out of the 1983 Nation at Risk report, and further bolstered by the 2000 No Child Left Behind law.

Each of these events, and others alongside them, have shaped and molded the fabric of our nation’s public education system, a system that is often skeptical and sluggish to respond to reform and influence.

So, what have we learned, or in some cases relearned, as a result of the pandemic?

From preschool to high school, we have witnessed how incredibly creative and nimble our staff and systems can be. We quickly pivoted in-person classrooms to virtual “Zoom rooms,” delivered athletic practices remotely when face-to-face activities could not occur, and even converted school busses into mobile hot spots to support families without internet at home. Districts across our nation have shown that we can be remarkably flexible and inventive when called upon.

The pandemic has reminded us the critical partnerships that we can, and must develop with parents — a relationship that had deteriorated over time prior to school closures. The virus’ wake has served to renew communication and collaboration between schools and families.

Whether holding parent teacher conferences over video chat, convening virtually to support PTA and other school meetings, or school staff knocking on doors of families to support home visits, all have served to reinforce the essential partnerships that have been bolstered between the family and the school.

Out of necessity, the utilization of technology across our systems has taken a monumental leap forward. We have experienced the constructive impact by leveraging this asset, getting devices and connectivity in the hands and homes of our students. While a powerful tool, we have also come to appreciate that technology does have its limitations, witnessing first-hand the digital divide around family internet accessibility and at-home circumstances.

Finally, we have affirmed the incredible role that schools play in supporting the social-emotional wellbeing and health of students. The lack of campus access to mental health services, nutrition, counseling and physical education reveal how essential schools and their services are to students and families. While learning can occur remotely, the experiences in the classroom, on the courts, across the fields and on the stages have reinforced the incredible public school asset and influence that Mann helped establish over 200 years ago.

As a superintendent, I remain both hopeful and optimistic that our schools will capitalize on these experiences and learn from both the triumphs and tribulations of the pandemic. Let us not revert to our old ways of doing business. Rather, let us apply these lessons learned to make today's pandemic an opportunity for marked improvement across our public education systems. Our children and communities are counting on us.