

Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

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Reflections of a Superintendent/Parent during the Covid-19 crisis

In A-B we have generous resources, supportive families, deeply committed educators and above all, amazing students. I have been both a school administrator and parent for the last 15 years. While I have faced my share of challenges in both roles, nothing compares to what we are going through and it's taking an emotional toll on all of us.

Leading up to the day we closed school I had followed the path of Covid-19 with increasing worry. And I remember walking outside my office one day in early March and being taken aback by the warm and sunny afternoon. I had been so engrossed in all things Covid-19, I expected to enter a place that resembled the netherworld from the show "Stranger Things" only to see a world that looked completely normal.

The days of the initial closure bled into weeks. Back in early March, we had been one of the first school districts to close. I remember some of my colleagues in neighboring districts announcing two-week closures and thinking that I would play it safe by making it one-week. We put some initial enrichment plans in place, and off we went thinking we would all be back soon. Our kids and teachers left books, materials, old gym clothes and who knows what else in their lockers and desks.

As time went on, it became clearer that we may be closed for more than a couple of weeks. Our families realized this too, and we started to hear mounting pressure to increase our education services. The state issued some vague "Distance Learning" guidelines, and we all went scrambling to try to figure out how we would continue to teach students while we were closed. The message from our community was "our students were falling behind."

Compounding the stress of the pandemic and forecasts of it extending well into next year, is the prospect that the economic fallout may be even longer and far reaching. We are in a period of extraordinary uncertainty and we are all coping with this in different ways. Some of us need to maintain as much normalcy as possible, and others need to pull back.

As you would expect, I have received hundreds of emails from people since we have been closed. I noticed that between the time of our early closure in March, and a few weeks later early April, the tone of the emails changed. What had started as gratitude for the schools being closed, morphed into frustration, anger, and exasperation:

"You need to drastically increase the work we were giving students!"

"It's too much screen time! My kids are stressed! I am stressed!"

"Our educators are getting paid full time, why can't they be on zoom with the kids for 4 hours a day!"

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“When will we offer a 6 hour day for the kids!”

“It's too much! My spouse and I can't work full time jobs and be at our 1st, 3rd, 6th graders Zoom meetings!”

“I can't teach math!”

“Give me the materials and I will teach math!”

“How could you possibly grade our students!”

“Why would you take away our students' grades!”

I began to feel like the only common thread to all of the feedback was the exclamation point at the end of comment.

Each week, we have faced new challenges: School Closure; Grading; Meal Programs; Chromebooks; Distance Learning; Zoom Security Issues... and more and more stressed out students, families and teachers.

And then we learned that schools would be closed for the remainder of the year.

Rationally, I know closing schools is the right decision. I could see the path of the virus, had struggled with the lack of guidance around what schools should do to bring kids back, and knew in my mind there was no way I would be able to plan for a safe return any time soon. What I didn't fully expect was the grieving process that would unfold over the next couple of days. We had put considerable energy into our learning plans. We have schedules of zoom meetings, asynchronous learning, websites, translations and more. But two more months of this? ...and it will have been six months from the time we said goodbye to our students until the time we can welcome them back? And the seniors...

As a parent I too, have seen “Distance Learning” unfold with my own children. We have had some really nice moments together on our weekends during the closure by taking some family hikes and having lunch together during the week. We have baked bread, done some small home improvement projects, and have been able to spend time together in ways we hadn't in some time. But those Instagram moments feel few and far between when faced with our more personal reality, and those moments often give way to moments of frustration, anxiety, and fear.

Our kids haven't received enough content from school; They have received too much content from school. It has been too much without enough support. I worry about them being behind. I worry about the fact that they haven't connected with peers enough. I also know that I can't stop in the middle of my zoom meeting to help my son figure out why his calculations for Torque were off, or run out to the grocery store and buy food coloring my daughter needs for the science project.

As a parent, my thoughts are: It's too much, it's not enough; my kids are stressed; I can't manage this and I need our teachers to help; my kids are falling behind; and they are missing out on experiences that they should be having right now.

And then I catch myself.

My kids' teachers recognized that they weren't getting enough and tried something new. Maybe they didn't think about the impact on me needing to get to the grocery store; or that my 13 year old wouldn't cope well

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with this answer because she would now be the *only* student in her class not to have the materials (I know it's not true, but try rationalizing that with a stressed 13 year old!).

But my kids' teachers are trying. And here is the reality to all of this: there is no solution my children's school, our schools or any schools will be able to put in place that are going to meet everyone's needs while we are all confined to our houses. Even if schools could come up with a distance learning *design* that somehow pleased everyone, if your family is like mine, circumstances change by the day and sometimes even by the hour or even minute. What might seem to work on Monday, may not work anymore on Wednesday, and what my children (and we) couldn't manage at 9:00 a.m., maybe we would get to later... or maybe not.

I have come to the conclusion that the common thread underlying much of what we are feeling is fear. We know from the research on emotions that anger, frustration and exasperation are all masking emotions and that there is usually some primary underlying emotion driving our responses... and that is often fear.

We have lost control over so many aspects of our lives, and one of the major constants for all of us (students, parents, teachers) with school age children is... school. And we are desperately trying to get back some sense of control. It doesn't seem to be working... at least not all of the time, for all of us.

Not being able to be physically present with people is a challenge for us humans. Email, chats, and Zoom meetings don't foster empathy, and they will not replace real human interaction. They also won't replace what is fundamental to schooling, which is the contact between teachers and students that centers around nurturing and inspiring relationships. There is and always will be magic that happens with teaching and learning between a student and teacher. It isn't always perfect, but it is a foundational element of our growth as humans.

It will be OK.

Our kids are going to miss out on some opportunities.

They will also have new opportunities.

Our kids are resilient.

Our kids will struggle at different times and in different ways.

Our kids will have some learning gaps.

There will be time and opportunity to close those gaps.

We don't have all the answers now.

But we will find them.

It will be OK.

We need to stop trying to replicate our schools online. We need to stop expecting our schools to replicate themselves online. It wouldn't work in the best of circumstances, and it certainly won't work in the middle of a global pandemic. It is not only unrealistic, it is damaging to our children, us as parents, to our institutions, and to our relationships with each other. It is currently estimated by UNESCO that [90% of children worldwide \(c. 1.5 billion\) are out of school](#). The data is staggering, and puts the notion of hitting a 3rd grade benchmark into context. Benchmark against what? The reality is that what was a grade-level benchmark doesn't exist now

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and won't in the fall...but it will come back. Every element of the educational world is in flux from special education to college admissions. All of it will be worked out in time. It will be OK.

Our schools need to put the best plans in place that we can to keep our kids stay engaged during the pandemic, and our schools should also work to improve what we can offer through the rest of the year. But we also need to have an understanding that our schools are serving many students now, all of whom have vastly different life circumstances. I often get questions about how we developed our learning plans and why we don't do more new content. The answer is that we designed our learning plans to work as best they could for all of our families who are experiencing different life circumstances, and for our students who are doing the same. We wanted to provide enough engaging activities and content that our students who were able to go deeper and experience new learning during the closure could do so, but not create insurmountable learning divides for large segments of our population. I know from a parent perspective just how hard it is for students to make up learning due to absences when school *is* in session. For students who can't keep up with online learning, the same task becomes almost insurmountable.

Our schools *absolutely must* focus most of their energy on planning for students to come back, and how we will help students and families recover physically, emotionally, and academically. The recovery process will be far more impactful to our children's long-term education than anything we do right now.

We need to give our kids a break. If we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that we are all living with a level of stress that will likely be among the highest in our lives. If you doubt that... just watch the news for an hour. ***First insider secret: Our kids don't need to complete every assignment the school gives them.*** One day they may be able to, and the next day they can't; the day after, they can't do anything. For the students who are thriving and surviving with the routine, that is great news! But for those who are struggling, it is OK to pause. It will be OK. Our schools and teachers know this and we are preparing for it when our students return.

We need to focus on setting reasonable expectations of ourselves. Just like the airlines say, if you don't put the oxygen mask on yourself first, you won't be of much help to anyone else. As parents, educators and adults, we need to make sure that we are taking care of ourselves, because our kids are watching and taking their cues from us. They see our stress, but more importantly they see our ability to manage stress and be resilient in the face of challenges. ***It is also OK to pause your kids home learning because you can't take it on right now.*** This is not a competition, and your neighbor isn't a better parent because their child did four extra math problems and created a great stick sculpture that was posted to Facebook.

Once we take care of ourselves, then we need to take care of our children. Watch them closely, and understand their limits during this unprecedented time. Many of our children will thrive, or be OK and receive some benefit with structure and some activities, but that doesn't work for all of them. And remember, kids are emotional like we are: what works one minute may not the next. Know your kids, yourself and the limits that are right. Do what is right for your family.

And finally, let's give our teachers a break as well. Seriously. It takes a lot of time to become good at teaching. Our teachers have been thrust into an entirely new teaching environment that was unfathomable 6 months ago. It is not going to be pretty, and it would take most educators years to master their craft in this new

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environment. They are trying, and they are managing all of the same stresses we are on a daily basis. Above all, they care about your kids, so please ***Talk to your child's teacher if something doesn't feel right. They need to know, and they know what to do about it.***

Our schools, students, families and educators are under enormous pressure right now. Let's make sure we keep our eyes on the prize and keep ourselves grounded and healthy both physically and emotionally so our families, communities and schools come out stronger this fall.

It will be OK. We are here for you now and will be again in the fall.

With much respect and gratitude,

Peter Light

Parent & Superintendent of Schools