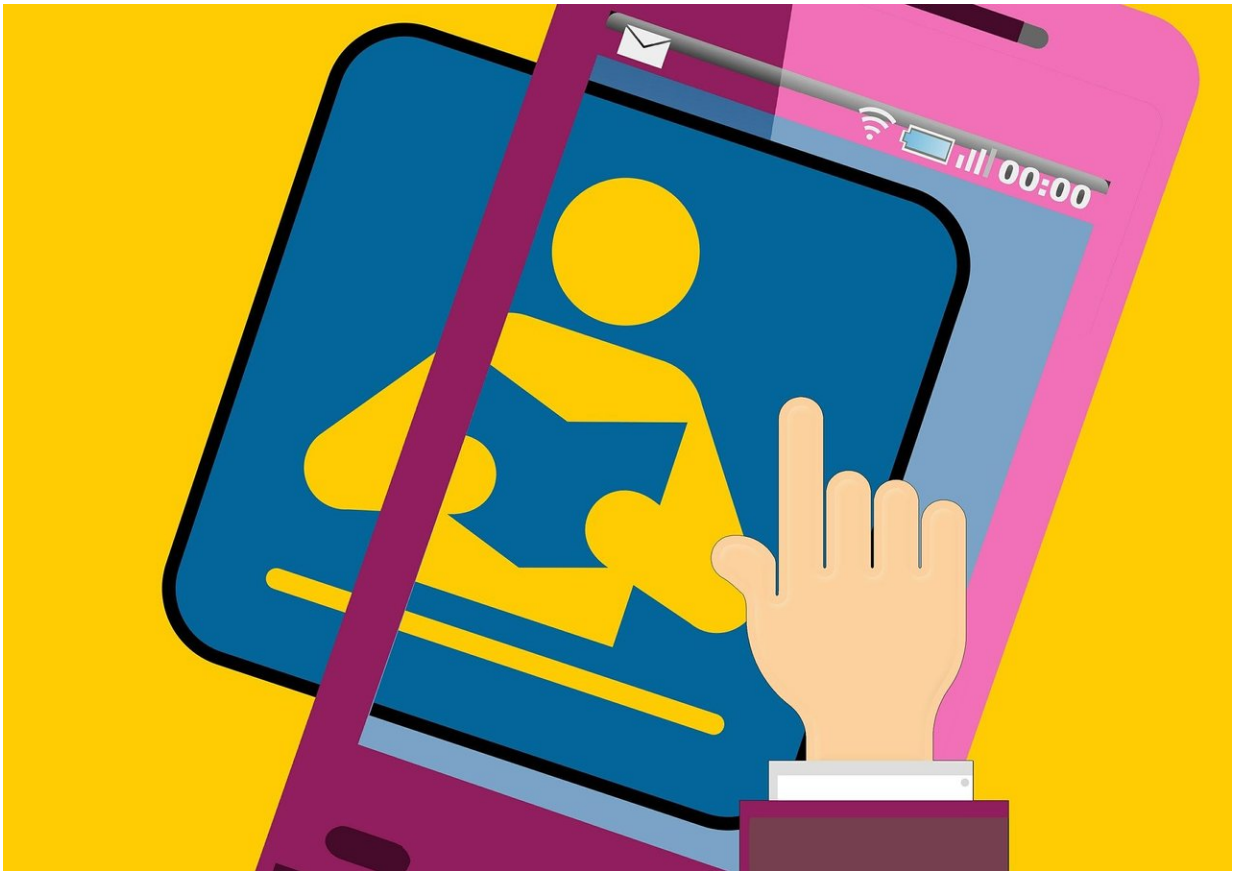


Massive inequities in education exposed during pandemic

April 6 2020, by Elizabeth Birr Moje



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Gov. Whitmer's difficult decision to close schools in Michigan for the remainder of the school year is a necessary precaution in our current

crisis. We applaud the teachers and administrators who are working with great ingenuity and skill to serve students and families, and we have been in touch with many Michigan teachers to support their transition to online education. For our own School of Education students, we are grateful to be working closely with the Michigan Department of Education to ensure that our teacher education students are certified and ready to begin their careers in schools next fall.

Many people are asking what the impact of closing schools for the remainder of the year will be. It is difficult to say with precision, but we all have to admit that there will be losses—big losses. We created a system of compulsory [education](#), offered by certified professionals, because we know how important high-quality education is for societies to thrive. We know that schools matter, and research tells us that good teaching is the single most important ingredient in school-based learning. We have heard many parents comment (sometimes humorously, but always with sincerity) that they never appreciated their child's [teacher](#) as much as they do now.

Although there can be no doubt that taking children out of school will have an impact, we also know that children are resilient. Although the research on the losses that stem from gaps in formal education is not extensive, we do have some evidence from situations in war-torn countries or in regions hit by natural disasters. And what we know is that children bounce back. As long as we continue to support them with care, love, and as many learning opportunities as we can provide, they will return to their schools ready to learn and grow.

That point about resources does, however, remind us that opportunities to learn are not equitably distributed in our society. Inequities in access to education, to technology tools, and to the [basic needs](#) required for all to thrive (housing, food, safety) have always been present in our society. The current pandemic is laying bare those massive inequities. Some

schools are able to continue to reach out to the majority of their students through digital technologies; others have very few students who are able to access learning opportunities on a regular basis. And some school districts have students at both ends of the economic spectrum, so that even when the district itself has the resources to provide tools, some students may not have the home resources to use the tools to their fullest. It is important not to exacerbate these inequities, which is why the decision to close schools and to move students forward in the coming year without requiring additional seat time makes sense. And now is a good time for us to examine these issues and commit ourselves to redressing them. We need to plan now for education reform that will make it possible for all students to learn when they return to school.

And that's why our PreK-12 grade teachers are diligently working to develop and deliver online and hard copy resources that will enrich our state's children in their time away from [school](#). As I touch base with our teaching alumni throughout the state, I hear their stories of the sense of loss they feel over not being with their students every day. I hear them talk about setting up home-based classrooms to give their students a sense of connection when they hold video conferences. They talk about reading stories to their students and helping them with their mathematics, science, and social studies lessons. They are a truly dedicated group of professionals and they are called upon today to use their training, skill, and expertise to serve students in these exceptional circumstances. We all should remember to thank them for their continued service to our children.

Here in the School of Education, we are considering ways that our teaching candidates can continue their own learning by helping with these activities, connecting with children in online tutoring, or developing materials that their mentor teachers can use for remote enrichment activities now and in the future. Our faculty is working tirelessly to support our teaching candidates and all of our students (and

each other) as we take on the challenge of a new world of teaching and learning online.

Our [faculty members](#) who were already scholars in the area of distance learning have stepped up to offer collaborative sessions for teachers, provide usable guidance, and listen and respond to the concerns of educators and parents. Although we may be physically distancing, we are cautious to remember that we must work together now more than ever.

Unless one is a physicist or a science fiction fan, time moves only in one direction. We will not return to the world we knew in February, but perhaps we can try to imagine how our experience during this time can strengthen education in our country. Powerful education for all can be a beacon of hope as our world emerges from this crisis.

Provided by University of Michigan

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