

Coronavirus lays bare inequities in K-12 education

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Credit: Julia Cameron via Pexels

Imagine doing your high school math or history homework while also being the full-time caregiver for your younger sibling.

Sounds tough, right? It's also a challenge that teenagers across the country are facing as schools have switched to online classes, said CU Boulder [education](#) researcher Michelle Renée Valladares.

She points to the case of Sue Suilla Daley, a student from New York who spoke on a media call [organized by several youth activist groups in](#)

[March](#). Daley talked about the challenges of trying to finish her senior year of high school while also caring for her godsister, whose mother was pulling long shifts as a health care worker. As Daley addressed the camera, the child tugged on her hair and chimed in on the conversation.

"I'm still 18, and I get exhausted taking care of her," Daley said in the video.

Renée Valladares, the associate director for the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) based at CU Boulder, has long worked with youth organizers to explore the challenges that K-12 students in the United States face. And she and her colleagues in a CU Boulder-based effort called the Education Research Hub have had their hands full.

In a series of publications, NEPC scholars have described how the coronavirus pandemic is laying bare existing inequities in education. Many children, for example, have not been able to take remote classes because they don't have reliable access to internet or home computers.

"The pandemic has made these inequities a million times worse," Renée Valladares said.

But, she added, many community organizers are also working to turn the current crisis into a teachable moment. Can the pandemic become an opportunity to fix longstanding problems in public education in the United States?

Renée Valladares talked with CU Boulder Today about the trials that come from taking classes in the middle of a pandemic and how [young people](#) are leading the way in addressing inequities.

How has this crisis revealed the inequities in our

education system?

First, I think it's important to really think about the most vulnerable communities out there: immigrant and undocumented families, foster youth and working-class families.

There are a whole bunch of families that schools are serving who are suddenly food insecure, housing insecure and health insecure in a way that they haven't been because they had two working parents up until a minute ago.

I think we're at the very tip of the iceberg of understanding what that means for the education system.

What difficult situations are parents and kids facing?

This pandemic is hitting every aspect of [family](#) life—child care, healthcare, employment, transportation, food access—for all of us. But it isn't hitting every family equally. Some families are losing multiple relatives, others are newly unemployed. Other parents might be able to work remotely, but find themselves juggling childcare and teaching with their work duties. On top of that, none of us know when and how things will change from day-to-day.

How is this affecting immigrant families in particular?

Digital privacy is one concern. If a kid shares a photo or video and someone from their class posts it to social media, sometimes those videos will come with a location stamp. If a kid is undocumented, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) conceivably [could use a public post on Facebook](#) to find that family.

We're leaving it up to 12-year-olds to know that federal data privacy rules are such that they might be putting their families at risk. What is our responsibility as educators in thinking that through?

How are people trying to address these problems?

I am seeing young people fight to release youth who are detained right now. I've also heard very [creative ideas](#) like pausing standardized tests for another year, and then using the testing money to ensure that families' basic needs are met.

Other folks are demanding a huge new investment in our public school system. The argument there is if you can bail out Wall Street, why can't you invest in public education?

Can we use the coronavirus pandemic as a moment to address the rifts in how we educate young people in this country?

These youth organizers and adult organizers have been out in the frontlines of these communities for a long time. They are extraordinarily well-poised to lead their communities through this crisis if we as a nation provide them the resources to do so. Let's follow their lead and find creative ways to invest in our schools, communities and states.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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