

The Pandemic Pivot

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Turning Temporary Changes into Lasting Reform

By Alfie Kohn

You know you really should walk or bike more often, but the car is just so darned convenient. Then one day it breaks down and the replacement part won't be available for quite awhile. The fates have conspired to get you some much-needed exercise while also reducing your carbon footprint! But what happens when the repair can finally be made? Will this serendipitous carfree interlude become a permanent change, or will you once again be driving everywhere?

Here's the analogous choice that educators will soon face: Amid all the awfulness, the pandemic has yielded a few accidental benefits, such as the suspension of state exams, college admissions tests, and conventional grading. But will we cement these changes into place for the long haul?

That outcome is far from certain because of a fundamental truth: *What people do matters less than the reasons they do it.* That applies to individual behaviors: Kids, for example, are much less likely to act generously over time if they had been rewarded earlier for helping. It also applies to social

policies: If, say, early-childhood education is justified primarily as an economic “investment,” then our commitment to it will prove fragile. Thus, it won’t be easy to pivot to a deeper rationale for eliminating something that we stopped doing only while – and because – regular schooling is on hiatus.

Of course, much of what the shutdown has done to education has been far from desirable. It would be worrisome if we continued to lean on online instruction – an all-too-plausible scenario since it’s cheaper for school districts and irresistible to those who are overawed by technology. Similarly, the benefits of having students learn in small groups may be jeopardized not only by their being stuck at home but by social-distancing requirements even after they’re back in classrooms.

However, let’s focus on those three recent shifts that I believe *are* beneficial (for reasons I’ve explained at length elsewhere) but that have been triggered by a temporary situation. Once that situation has changed, can we avoid returning to practices that never made sense in the first place?

1. State and district testing

The problems with standardized tests aren’t just a function of overusing or attaching high stakes to them. By their very nature, they fail to capture the intellectual proficiencies that matter most. High scores are either meaningless (because they are highly correlated with socioeconomic status) or actually worrisome (because of all the time diverted from meaningful learning to teach test-taking skills).

After testing was essentially halted last spring for logistical reasons, the *Washington Post*’s Valerie Strauss expressed hope that we were finally “seeing the collapse of the two-decade-old bipartisan consensus among major policymakers that testing was the key lever for holding

students, schools and teachers 'accountable.'...States are learning they can live without them." Indeed, legislators in several states are pushing to extend the moratorium on at least some of their tests – or to strip them of punitive consequences. Unfortunately, these efforts are typically still driven either by pandemic-based concerns, which will eventually evaporate, or by financial considerations. (Whenever saving money is the primary reason for doing something, chances are it will be done badly, temporarily, or both.)

Worse, other states, like Texas, committed early to a resumption of testing, and some policy makers are actually proposing even more tests to measure the (testable facts and skills) that students supposedly forgot during the lockdown. Others suggest shifting to online exams, which solves none of the problems associated with testing itself and may actually create new ones since this mode of administration further handicaps vulnerable students.

We need to stress that, given the availability of better strategies, standardized testing was never necessary for assessing learning; that we've known for two decades how such tests are particularly harmful to students of color and those from poor neighborhoods; and that many of the uses to which standardized testing has been put – for example, serving as the basis for teacher merit pay or for forcing struggling students to repeat a grade – are objectionable in their own right.

2. Admissions testing

Even before the coronavirus struck, more than a thousand colleges and universities had stopped requiring applicants to take either the SAT or the ACT – and for good reasons. These tests privilege the privileged and are poor predictors of academic performance, particularly after freshman year. The good news is that still more colleges hopped on the bandwagon

when the lockdown started last spring. In fact, a few schools have now gone “test blind,” which means they won’t even look at these scores.

Many prestigious schools and large state universities, however, are still requiring the SAT or ACT. Moreover, as Education Week reported, “The vast majority of new college [test-optional] policies cover only the graduating high school Class of 2021, and others have set the policies as pilot programs, limited them to in-state students or those with minimum GPAs, or added other caveats.”

3. Grades

There were excellent reasons, based on fairness, for both K-12 schools and colleges to shift to pass/fail grading – or suspend grades altogether – during the pandemic. There are equally excellent reasons, grounded in research about learning and motivation, to eliminate grades permanently: Students led to focus on snagging an A or 100 tend to think less deeply, avoid challenging tasks, and lose interest in the learning itself as compared to students in a grade-free environment.

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In short, we need to demonstrate that doing without testing and grading isn’t just possible but preferable, that alternatives to them work well, and, most important for ensuring lasting change, that the primary argument for halting these practices is neither new nor situational: We’ve always been able to do better. This is an actionable as well as a teachable moment – a chance to turn a epidemiological crisis into an educational opportunity.

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