

# COVID-19 AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUITIES: THE LONG VIEW

*“Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could...and in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality...”*

-- Arundhati Roy  
*Financial Times, April 3, 2020*

## Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across the U.S. and around the world, school systems everywhere are in crisis management mode, hoping to reopen safely while simultaneously making valiant efforts at continuity of instruction via remote technologies and, where possible, “hybrid” models that blend in-person and virtual teaching.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic has exposed deep problems in the content, structure, financing, and governance of schools: although known to education and other social science researchers for decades, the scourge of inequality has now become apparent to a wider public. Indeed, the coronavirus crisis coincides with what many describe as three additional pandemics – America’s reawakening to realities of racial injustice and violent extremism, an economic recession that shows no signs of significant recovery in the near term, and a climate crisis as experienced by victims of California wildfires and record-breaking Gulf Coast hurricanes.

An abridged version of the powerful words of Arundhati Roy (Man Booker Prize winner) would be to ask ourselves to imagine returning to something better than this unacceptable status quo.<sup>2</sup> In the education context, can we visualize – and work toward – a *structural reset* of American education, in which historical inequality and the “deficit” model of teaching and learning are supplanted with an array of programs and processes to maximize opportunity for and potential of all students? For the most vulnerable students – those with special needs, English learners, members of historically marginalized groups, and indeed all students disconnected from their existing support systems by the pandemic, the reset is most urgent: returning to “normal” for them would mean tolerance of low proficiency levels in literacy and math, high rates of suspension and expulsion, over-identification (and misclassification) of students for special education, and low rates of high school completion. In this light, to reimagine what *could* be – and to not resign ourselves to what *has been* – can be an inspiration to refocus efforts of the policy, educator, and research communities on principles of equity, fairness, and expansion of opportunity.

And as so aptly stated by Governor Bob Wise, now, with a “multigenerational COVID class,” we may have the public will needed for “a reset in education.” Since February 2020, 50 million k-12 students and 20 million higher education students have been pulled from their physical classrooms and many of them have not returned or not fully returned. Ninety to one-hundred million adults were suddenly turned into homebound teachers and caregivers. Three and a half million k-12 teachers and 1.7 million postsecondary faculty and instructors as well as another 2 to 3 million administrative and non-academic support personnel were forced to engage with students and their work in a completely different manner. In October 2020, 26 million persons were claiming some form of unemployment benefits (the highest numbers since record keeping began in 1948), and these persons were placed in the position of not only having to assist in the homebound education of their children but to also seek personal educational opportunities to position themselves for new employment. This multigenerational COVID class impacted by educational upheaval is inclusive of half of the U.S. population and spans all racial, economic and political groups. And while it is clear that, for instance, those across the economic continuum experienced and continue to experience this crisis differently, they all share commonalities, including a better understanding and appreciation for the physical roles of schools, the vital roles of teachers, and the necessity of technology. While recognizing that this multigenerational COVID class spanning half the U.S. population does not share a common view of the future, the shared experiences of this COVID class around COVID’s implications for education can be the impetus for long-term change.<sup>3</sup>

## The Long View

To explore this proposition for “the long view,” while at the same time acknowledging and respecting the immediate needs of educators and children and their families to recover from the disruption of the pandemics, the National Academy of Education (NAEd) convened a public forum with expert panelists. Building off prior work addressing COVID-19 and inequities in the specific areas of mathematics, reading, and social-emotional learning, the NAEd engaged with three scholars and a distinguished policy expert, whose work has centered on understanding – and reducing – fundamental barriers in fulfilling the American vision of equitable education: Deborah Loewenberg Ball (University of Michigan), Gloria Ladson-Billings (University of Wisconsin-Madison), Louis Gomez (University of California, Los Angeles), and former Governor of West Virginia Bob Wise (Global Science of Learning Education Network).

In a discussion moderated by Michael Feuer (The George Washington University), the panelists were asked to address a framing question: *What strategies do you believe are best bets to advance us in the direction of a meaningful reset to our nation’s educational system?* From their remarks, and from comments and questions of participants in the forum, a set of “takeaway” messages emerged, which are summarized below.

## Best Hopes for a Reset in American Education

Best Hopes	Strategic Principles
<p>Teaching and learning require a student-centered, problem-centered approach.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem solving and real world problems must be at the center of learning. Students and teachers should be enabled to address issues confronting all children and communities in the learning process.</li> <li>• The learning process must be redefined to reflect the lived experiences of students beyond school, apply interdisciplinary knowledge, and construct a domain for understanding and investigating real-world issues.</li> </ul>
<p>Students, parents, caregivers, community partners, and educators need to be active participants in the development of content and reform of school structures.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning environments need to be inclusive of all stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, caregivers, community partners, educators); listening across communities is needed for successful education.</li> <li>• Learning environments need to encompass not only schools, but learning and experiences that occur in communities and homes.</li> <li>• Schools should become the social and intellectual hub where students can bring their voices to be part of the planning and execution of their learning.</li> <li>• Educators must be able to empathize with people and understand their situations and lived experiences, which means more than just imagining how they would react in those situations.</li> </ul>
<p>Teacher preparation must encourage culturally responsive problem-centered instruction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers, to provide problem-centered instruction, will need to be trained to ground their teaching in the environments in which students live.</li> <li>• Expectations of teaching must also include helping students become genuine problem-solvers.</li> </ul>
<p>A whole-child equity approach requires equitable access to infrastructure and funding.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Federal funding must guarantee, at a minimum, equitable access to computer and related devices, broadband connectivity, and services.</li> <li>• A stimulus package is necessary – but insufficient – to help sustain families and communities impacted by the pandemic. There is also an urgent need for federal funding for systemic, equitable change.</li> <li>• The federal government should explore the funding of a flexible career workforce training account for each student that provides continued learning opportunities beyond k-12.</li> </ul>

## Panelists

***COVID-19 and Educational Inequities Forum Series***  
**Institutional Changes: The Long View**  
*Tuesday, October 13, 2020*

**Deborah Loewenberg Ball**

Arthur F. Thurnau Professor  
William H. Payne Collegiate Professor of  
Education  
*University of Michigan*

**Gloria Ladson-Billings**

Professor Emerita, Department of Curriculum &  
Instruction  
*University of Wisconsin-Madison*  
President  
*National Academy of Education*

**Louis Gomez**

Professor of Education  
*University of California, Los Angeles*

**Governor Bob Wise**

Former Governor of West Virginia  
Education Consultant and Coordinator  
*Global Science of Learning Education  
Network*

**Michael Feuer (Moderator)**

Dean and Professor, Graduate School of  
Education and Human Development  
*The George Washington University*  
Immediate Past President  
*National Academy of Education*

## Steering Committee Members

### **Michael Feuer (Chair)**

Dean and Professor, Graduate School of  
Education and Human Development  
*The George Washington University*

### **Hyman Bass**

Samuel Eilenberg Distinguished University  
Professor of Mathematics & Mathematics  
Education  
*University of Michigan*

### **Dorothy Espelage**

William C. Friday Distinguished Professor of  
Education  
*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

### **Gloria Ladson-Billings**

Professor Emerita, Department of  
Curriculum & Instruction  
*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

### **Susanna Loeb**

Director, Annenberg Institute at Brown  
University  
Professor of Education and International and  
Public Affairs  
*Brown University*

### **Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar**

Chair of Educational Studies  
Jean and Charles R. Walgreen Jr. Professor of  
Reading and Literacy  
Arthur F. Thurnau Professor  
*University of Michigan*

### **William F. Tate IV**

Provost and Executive Vice President of  
Academic Affairs  
Distinguished Professor of Sociology and  
Family and Preventive Medicine  
*University of South Carolina*

### **Frank Worrell**

Professor and Director, School Psychology  
Faculty Director, Academic Talent  
Development Program  
Faculty Director, California College  
Preparatory Academy  
Affiliate Professor, Psychology  
*University of California, Berkeley*

### **Stanton Wortham**

Inaugural Charles F. Donovan, S.J., Dean  
*Boston College*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lieberman, M. (2020, November 11). How Hybrid Learning Is (and Is Not) Working During COVID-19: 6 Case Studies. *Education Week*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/11/11/how-hybrid-learning-is-and-is-not.html#:~:text=Most%20U.S.%20school%20districts%20are,in%20person%20and%20online%20instruction.&text=Many%20students%20chose%20to%20learn,and%20the%20rest%20at%20home>.

<sup>2</sup> Roy, A. (2020, April 3). The pandemic is a portal. *The Financial Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

<sup>3</sup> Presentation of Governor Bob Wise (October 2020), available at <https://youtu.be/zI9YONuY-E0?t=1582>.

## Additional Information

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For inquiries, contact Amy Berman, Deputy Director ([aberman@naeducation.org](mailto:aberman@naeducation.org)), or Dian Dong, Senior Program Officer ([ddong@naeducation.org](mailto:ddong@naeducation.org)).

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