



## ETC

### **Striving from the Margins During COVID-19: One Family's Experience Advocating for their Middle School E-learner.**

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#### **Abstract**

In order for children to succeed, access to quality education is an imperative. Education can be used as a means of changing or challenging the problems of the world. Many countries support with legal force the notion of education as a human right. COVID-19 brings to the surface and spotlights a history of educational inequities in the United States. This article highlights one family's struggle to ensure their middle schooler receives a quality education. In spite of Covid-19, the marginalization that is a daily part of a Black child's life should not impede the educational progress of the student. Middle school can be a challenging time for many students and can be fraught with additional struggles or barriers for marginalized children. It is incumbent upon school systems to work with families to mitigate the adverse consequences of learning during COVID-19; in particular, for a marginalized child, the costs could be catastrophic and far reaching.

#### **Introduction**

During the spring of 2020, public schools across the United States closed temporarily due to the pandemic as social distancing was encouraged to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Viner et al., 2020). The sudden shift from face-to-face instruction to remote instruction, as noted by Cohen and Kupferschmidt (2020), left many schools, teachers and family members ill prepared for this challenge. This change forced family members into a role of learning facilitators, a role many were ill equipped to implement. According to Selwyn et al. (2011), some family members see remote education as an additional burden for them to bear. Taxpayers depend on public school systems to deliver quality education to their children. Being compelled to take on what may seem like most of the burden for educating their children can be extremely challenging for many families, especially when accustomed to entrusting this responsibility to the school systems. Who is responsible for providing quality education to America's students?

### **Education as a Human Right**

The right to education is not part of the United States Constitution or Bill of Rights as penned in the late 1700s. After existing for more than 200 years, this right to an education is still missing from the Constitution (The Constitution: How Did it Happen, n.d.). According to Lindseth (n.d.), the responsibility of education is provided to the states by the Tenth Amendment; the Fourteenth Amendment targets equality in education. Mandating the right to education using the Constitution has been denied by the U.S. Supreme Court. According to Lawler (2018), not only does the United States fail to grant the right to education through the Constitution but does not support international law governing the right to education. Lawler (2018) goes on to suggest that the United States is not equal to other countries in placing value on the right to education and supporting this standard with legal force.

Lawler (2018) points out that the three international documents that affirm the right to education include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); the Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), with the UDHR widely accepted as accustomed international law (Digital Record of the UDHR). The United States, along with 47 other countries, signed the UDHR when adopted in 1948, with Article 26 setting forth guidelines for education. Article 26 states that everyone has a right to free elementary and fundamental education and that education must be compulsory (United Nations, 1948). Even though these standards are not legally binding, the international community expects the United States to adhere to these customary standards (Lawler, 2018). Although the United States signed the Convention on the Right of the Child in 1995, it has yet to be ratified. Therefore, there is no legal obligation to follow the standards contained within the treaty. The ICESCR provides legal force to standards in the UDHR. This treaty was signed by the United States in 1977, but again, failed to be ratified (ICESCR, 1966). Other countries acknowledged education is a right and included this right in their constitutions and ratified treaties governing this right (Lawler, 2018).

Lawler (2018) argues in order to provide every child with the right to success, a federal right to education is needed, one that can be enforced through the federal court system. This sentiment was echoed in *Brown v. Board of Education* when Chief Justice Warren implied that it is not reasonable to believe that a child would be able to succeed without the opportunity to be educated (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). Additionally, Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (cited in Chitsamatanga & Rembe, 2020, p. 99).

### **Transitioning to Middle School**

Successfully transitioning from elementary to middle school is a key component to academic success. However, as Crockett et al. (1989) point out, there are limited studies indicating that students blossom during this transition. Instead, the literature describes this period as being a time of stress for many students. Developmental changes evidenced links to the stress experienced during this period (Chung et al., 1998; Crockett et al., 1989). Moreover, Alspaugh (1998) suggests a link between poor educational outcomes and the transition to middle school.

After transitioning to middle school, girls tend to experience psychological stress while boys indicate a significant decrease in academic achievement (Chung et al., 1998).

Elias (2001) posits that a difference in the middle school environment could contribute to the stress experienced when transitioning from elementary to middle school. For example, the middle schooler does not spend the day with a primary set of students nor a single teacher. Instead, students move to different classes hourly, experiencing different sets of behavioral and academic expectations. Further, students may be required to take notes, study independently, and make new friends (Alspaugh, 1998). And all these school challenges occur at a similar time when children experience significant developmental changes.

During early adolescence, students attempt to understand their varied experiences in school whether there is ease or difficulty in their academic and social lives, and, additionally, attempt to determine how these events impact who they become in the future (Oyserman & James, 2009). Students report that they are not as engaged in schoolwork and expend less effort during adolescence. This lack of engagement and effort can result in poor academic progress (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Roeser et al., 1999; Seidman et al., 1994). Fiske et al. (2007) discuss the negative stereotypes regarding the potential of low income and minoritized students; these students remain at higher risk for these negative behaviors.

### **Marginalized Students**

It is not a new phenomenon for Black students to experience obstacles to receiving a good and equitable education (Diemer et al., 2016). As noted by O'Connor, et al. (2007), research tends to focus on the disparities in educational outcomes instead of examining the context of family and community and does not offer ways to improve the achievement of Black students. Some barriers confronting Black students include attending low achieving schools, accessing few community resources, living in poverty, and experiencing limited social and community opportunities. Another important barrier generates from teachers, as Black students can be negatively impacted by teachers who hold racial biases (Lumpkin, 2008). Teachers maintain a critical role toward supporting the success of students. Because young people can be easily influenced, teachers serve as a significant educational guide for students.

History is replete with examples of the barriers that Black females face that are different from Black males or White females because of their double marginality of race and gender (Ford et al., 2018). This double marginality impacts Black females on many levels, including educational, social, and economic. Some of these barriers include institutional and structural barriers along with stereotypes, (Greenberger et al., 2014) and may involve exclusion based on race and class (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010).

Antonio et al. (2004) and Tam and Bassett (2004) suggest that diversity within the school system aligns with the mission of schools by affording the opportunity for young people to grow cognitively which leads to learning and achievement. Increased racial and ethnic diversity can lead to a more positive attitude concerning a greater connection to school according to Goldsmith

(2004) while also promoting fewer feelings of isolation and maltreatment (Benner, 2011; Seaton and Yip, 2009). However, as schools become more segregated racially and ethnically, they are increasingly more segregated based on socio-economic status which leads to students who are low-income and who are minoritized racially and ethnically experiencing a dual disadvantage (Crosnoe, 2005). When gender is taken into consideration, these students experience a triple disadvantage.

There is evidence that the achievement gap is increasing along income levels and racial lines (Reardon, 2013). Moreover, Fryer and Levitt (2004) and Rothstein and Wozny (2013) point to evidence that the primary contributor to the achievement gap is the differences in race regarding socioeconomic status. Although the United States spent between 10 and 20 billion dollars on Head Start and nutrition programs for children during 1990 to 2000, the achievement gap remains (Barton & Coley, 2010). According to Alexander (2012), there are other sociological challenges such as few opportunities in early childhood education, the economic and social capacity of communities, and social forces that disrupt the structure of the Black family as possible factors for the sociological issues experienced by students. Moynihan and Barton (1965) discuss how these factors can maintain the disparity in the achievement gap.

The disparities in achievement start prior to the child beginning elementary school which aligns with research focused on how subpar early childhood education impacts low-income children's preparedness for school (Lee & Burkum, 2002; Duncan & Magnuson 2005; Duncan et al., 1994). Even though low-income students are half the student population, they are 28 percent of the first-grade students who are top achievers (Wyner et al., 2007). Economic barriers confronted by low-income students impede their achievement from the beginning of their formal education. Moreover, during their elementary and high school years, low-income students do not become high achievers as frequently as students from upper economic levels.

Efforts to make educational opportunities equal have not been successful in reducing the educational disparity as anticipated (Hung et al., 2020). Because the increase in spending is ineffective, it is critical that United States educators consider targeting inequality outside the classroom as an underlying issue. In addition to considering other inequalities, acknowledging the societal challenges that lead to achievement gaps provide a more complete picture of the lack of equity in education.

### **Equity in Education During COVID**

According to Giannini (2020), in mid-April 2020, 191 government shutdowns of schools in the K-12 system affected more than a billion students. Such closures were implemented in schools across the United States as an approach for containing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Li, Harries, and Ross (2020) reported that school-aged children across the United States were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic with low-income students and others as most at risk for adverse effects to their well-being and education. Students belonging to more than one at-risk group, to include racially and ethnically minoritized groups, position them at even greater risk of learning and basic needs deficits during this time.

Having schools closed long-term can result in negative consequences for students, more so for those who are already disadvantaged. Significant learning deficits can take place when remote learning is used for long periods, as many low-income families may not have access to a computer in the home. Additionally, many students may experience food insecurity without access to free and reduced meals at school (Bauer, 2020). Using the COVID Impact Survey, Bauer (2020) also notes that 34.5 percent of the households with children under 18 experienced food insecurity as of the end of April 2020. Data reveal these high rates of food insecurity are not comparable in contemporary time. Moreover, parents who work not only depend on schools to educate their children but also as a resource for childcare.

Attending school provides children with opportunities for socialization and to participate in physical activity (Li et al., 2020). Schools also provide students with other services such as speech therapy and mental health counseling. Closing schools can prohibit access to many much-needed services but may also prevent the reporting of child abuse. In late March, half of the victims receiving assistance from the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network were reported as minors, which never occurred in prior data (Faden et al., 2020). Balancing these types of equity concerns against the possible spread of the virus can be a major decision-making challenge for families.

### **Our Family's Experiences with e-Learning during COVID-19: A Personal Reflection**

For fall 2020, it was decided that the middle school student in our family would not attend in person classes. So, we joined the many families that opted for e-learning to keep everyone safe from COVID-19. Unfortunately, this option was laden with problems. Because most of the family members work during school hours, our student's learning environment was her grandparent's home, a grandparent who was not prepared to assist our e-learner in the online environment or troubleshoot technology issues.

On August 24, our middle schooler reached out to her principal in email using the school's learning management system and expressed confusion and a lack of understanding of what to do. There was no response from the principal to the request for help. In another email exchange between our middle schooler and one of the teachers, a request for help with the course content was made. This teacher used capitalized words in her response, indicating she was "yelling" at the student for not attending class via Zoom. Our middle schooler informed the teacher of the problems with gaining access to the platform. However, the teacher ignored this and told the student that access to the platform was required. Regrettably, these email exchanges were not discovered by our family until approximately two months later. The teacher was confronted about the inappropriate "yelling" and tone in the emails; the teacher apologized indicating that frustration played a role in the response.

When electing to participate in the e-learning option at this school, our family was led to believe that there would be minimal differences in direct instruction for those who were e-learners and those in the physical classroom, as all students would meet with their teachers each day. However, we discovered that this claim was not realized by the students using remote learning.

The teachers working with our middle schooler did not hold class via Zoom on a daily basis. Consequently, our student struggled and failed in providing self-instruction. Moreover, the new platform, heralded better and more student friendly, did not substantiate these claims. The bulk of the assignments were uploaded as PDF documents; this did not allow for many students without access to special software or a fillable document to access them. For our student, the PDF documents became an unnecessary barrier; a more accessible alternative could have been used such as Word documents.

Once we discovered that our middle schooler was failing many courses and had low grades in others, the family decided that attending class face-to-face would be the better option, essentially forcing the choice between the potential health risks for several family members and the education of our student. Unfortunately making the change from e-learning to face-to-face instruction was not a simple endeavor. One family member personally visited the school to ask when our student could switch to face-to-face instruction and was told that the school would contact parents in the upcoming weeks. This information was never communicated to our family. Therefore, another family member contacted the principal, who said that the district had to approve an e-learner's return to the classroom environment. Hence, a call was placed to the school district office resulting in more promises being made about allowing our student to return to face-to-face instruction. While these decisions were being made, our middle schooler continued struggling to perform in the online environment.

After numerous visits and phone calls to the school and the district, our middle schooler was allowed to attend face-to-face instruction. Unfortunately, this change did not happen before our student either failed or received low grades for the first quarter of school. Although the principal insisted that progress reports were sent to the family via email, the principal later admitted that no reports were sent for our student. With the first quarter in the rear-view mirror, our family committed to taking a more assertive approach to our middle schooler's education. Access to the school's portal allowed consistent monitoring of grades.

Additionally, teachers were encouraged to contact the family if there were any issues with our student. Frequent contact with teachers now showed the school that our student is not without support and the earlier treatment our middle schooler received during the first quarter is no longer acceptable. The same teacher who earlier "yelled" online at our student needed to be confronted, again. This teacher continued to require our middle schooler to do online work even after being informed that the student did not have consistent access to a computer or the internet. And even though the teacher knew how much our student struggled to complete work as an e-learner, the teacher gave grade recovery work to do online. These frequent battles against the marginalization of our student were exhausting but a vital necessity.

## **Discussion**

As Crockett et al. (1989) noted, middle school children are in a period of transition, some on the cusp of being a teenager and everything that comes with this developmental period. Added to this challenging period has been the difficulties of attending school during the COVID-19

pandemic. For our family, navigating the school system's bureaucracy and experiencing the school's lack of concern for the success of our middle schooler were disappointing. Taxpayers trust school systems with their most precious gifts, their children, and based on the outcome of the first quarter for our middle schooler, our family's trust was not honored. Teachers and administrators ignored cries for help, "yelled" at our student, and shifted blame. It is hard to delineate the number of ways in which our middle schooler experienced educational harm. We had to apply pressure for the school to lay out a plan to mitigate the damage done to our student's educational progress and to remediate the knowledge deficits that may have impact beyond the current grade level. The family informed the administration that our expectation moving forward would be that teachers must do everything in their power to help our middle schooler make up the knowledge missed because of the school's failure to provide appropriate instruction, as anything less was wholly unacceptable. In the future, the family would take on a more proactive and intrusive role in our middle schooler's educational progress. It was imperative that our family forge a productive relationship with all stakeholders for the benefit of our student.

It is paramount that schools are aware of, and are sensitive to, the challenges that marginalized students are experiencing while attending school during COVID-19 and avoid placing unnecessary obstacles to their academic success. Schools can lessen some of these barriers by providing an online environment that is engaging and supportive with built-in flexibility (Garbe et al., 2020). Developing relationships with parents in addition to students, teachers can aid school systems in understanding the family struggles early and seek ways to assist them before the student fails a quarter or semester. Accessibility for parents can be improved by increasing their knowledge of content and pedagogical practices. Another way to target accessibility is to assign learning coaches for students to guide them through the learning process as well as to help them complete assignments. Borup (2016) suggests the use of scaffolding for students in the virtual environment. Some of these scaffolds (Garbe et al., 2020) include helping students create and maintain schedules, providing encouragement to students, and implementing appropriate instruction.

It is a most critical responsibility school systems bear in educating youths during the unprecedented and fluid Covid-19 situation. However, these systems must not allow the learning of our children to become casualties of the times. Everything must be done to mitigate knowledge deficits that are a result of thousands of students engaging in self-instruction. While families also have a responsibility to help their children with their education, teachers, administrators, and districts cannot abdicate their obligation to provide quality, equitable and accessible education to all students. To do so, will result in catastrophic consequences for our children and our society. Working with families instead of against them will be crucial in ensuring the success of all students, but especially those already marginalized by a system that may not be supportive of their unique needs.

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