

July 2, 2020

Underinvestment in Education – The COVID-19 Story

Your blogger (YB) and his wife/partner/lover are both university professors. Like many, we observed the COVID-19 jolt in the way universities are run and the move to online, off-campus education. We have seen the federal government pledge to rebuild the airline industry (“Boeing is a great company”), the cruise ship industry, and other parts of the private economy.

By the time classes start on September 1, YB + partner will have spent over \$2,500 out of pocket to get themselves ready to teach. Both have bought new computers, professional-grade earphones and microphones, and we have upgraded our home wi-fi system to handle the 24 hour per day use at over double the intensity. Shed no tears for us – we can afford it, and we owe it to our students. Many colleagues in the private sector have had their employers purchase them more powerful machines, and help move their “office offices” to their homes. Shed no tears for them either.

The states and the cities are seemingly being left to fend for themselves. In particular, the education sector has been told to plan for:

1. Teaching as usual;
2. Teaching as usual, with plans to go online at a moment’s notice;
3. Teach online, and depend on students/parents/caregivers to shoulder major burdens of the teaching.

YB is not a betting man, but he would put 99 percent of his chips on #3.

Over the last several decades, there have been chronic reports of public-school teachers who must buy supplies for their students, finance trips, out of their own pockets, or bring in supplies to clean filthy classrooms. This was IN THE SCHOOLS. When COVID-19 hit the public schools, they too went online. Have the public-school teachers been supplied with new computers, enhanced wi-fi, or professional grade earphones and microphones? Hardly. Instead they are all being told to hunker down in the face of eviscerated state and local education budgets. There may be furloughs and there may be lay-offs.

Even if they go back to school, are the buildings set up for social distancing, masking, or appropriate meals? Think about where you went to school, or where your children go to school. YB’s office building at his own university is totally unfit for use in the COVID-19 economy. There are common halls, common comfort facilities, common stairways, and common elevators. There will be a common outbreak of COVID-19 when we reopen.

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The lack of investment in our educational system reflects economic insanity now more than ever. Our future depends far more on the creation of human capital among those ages 21 and under, than whether Boeing can get their 737-MAX out three to six months earlier (and for what ... no one is traveling).

So, let's get the priorities straight. We have deferred the maintenance on our educational systems for decades. Economic sanity dictates that we remedy these deficits ... now.

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