

# Op-Ed: State's Covid-19 Education Policy Sends Mixed Message

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There are a number of words one could choose to summarize 2020. For many parents who were thrust into a role they never imagined they would select: frustration, anxiety and exhaustion.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak in March 2020 led to the initial statewide shutdown of all public schools by Governor Ned Lamont. While some would categorize it as an overreaction to a regional problem, others would laud it as a consistent policy that placed everyone on the same level.

As we made it through the summer, with tremendous efforts around mask wearing and social distancing practices, infection rates statewide hovered at or below 1%. As schools and colleges re-opened in the autumn, the unpredictable roller coaster ride began and is now exacerbated by the current resurgent infection data.

In June, our schools were initially guided by the Connecticut State Department of Education [School Re-Opening Guidelines](#), the reality of actual implementation has been confusing with mixed results. Some schools re-opened for full time, in-person learning, and some designed a hybrid plan that included part-time in-person and part-time remote learning. Private and parochial schools implemented their independent back-to-school criteria and protocols. Some parents opted to keep their students at home full time,

taking classes virtually or even unenrolling altogether to be homeschooled.

The state Department of Education, by not offering updated metrics or guidelines, instead preferring to allow each town or school district to choose their learning models based on differing threshold standards, has created an untenable and unpredictable environment for students, parents, teachers and local administrators. There is an infinite mix of scenarios that can change daily, leaving students and parents on high alert, suspecting that any school call or email could be the one that alters their family's study/work/life balance.

There must be a statewide policy and leadership which includes defined metrics and guidelines for unique community challenges to determine if a district is open or closed or moves to an alternative means of teaching. The absence of such a statewide policy has widened the disparity in the educational experience for Connecticut's students.

In mid-October, the Hartford Courant reported that over 5,000 "Online Only" Connecticut students had not signed in for a single virtual class. For those who are attempting to learn while at home, this stress is spilling over onto the student's home and school lives, which currently lack any degree of predictability. Ultimately, the educational experience and process for all students have suffered.

As the days go on, I have more and more questions for our state education commissioner and other executive branch leaders on the state of schooling in Connecticut.

- How is it that the state Education Department and Department of Public Health can make a decision on sports but cannot give a science-based rationale for why students can or cannot learn in a classroom setting?
- What is the priority and availability of the Covid-19 vaccine for teachers and school personnel?
- Is preserving time in the classroom so crucial that we need to allow non-certified personnel to step in to teach?

Working parents and caregivers need to provide their employers with some sort of dependable availability and accountability to meet the expectation of job responsibilities. Teachers in one district are also parents in another and they need to be able to do their jobs — not at the expense of their own child’s education. These conflicts are making it harder and harder for districts to make daily assessments as to whether or not they are providing their staff and students with risk or reward by staying open or going completely virtual.

I cannot imagine the pressure on local school administrators as they navigate the constant news of an increasing surge of Covid infections along with a complicated roster of state executive orders hanging over their decision-making processes.

I have written and will be calling on Education Commissioner Cardona and Public Health Interim Commissioner Gifford to meet and discuss these critical questions. Our state must put in place protocols and processes to enable us to live and adapt alongside this pandemic instead of waiting for it to blow over. The consequences of mixed messages and avoiding tough decisions today will cause increased mental health complications, students falling behind, and friction and frustration between educators and student/parent/guardian communities.

I look forward to continuing this important dialogue with Commissioners Cardona, Gifford and other critical shareholders. Additionally, I will be sharing an update with my constituents with a public informational forum on Dec. 22 at 4 p.m. via Zoom on Facebook Live. ([fb.com/senatorhwang](https://fb.com/senatorhwang))

*Deputy Senate Republican Leader Tony Hwang was re-elected to his 4th term in the CT General Assembly. He will continue serving the 28<sup>th</sup> District which includes Easton, Fairfield, Newtown, Weston and Westport. Hwang was just appointed ranking leader on Public Health, Insurance and Real Estate and Planning and Development Committees and member of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee.*

*Hwang had previously served as the ranking leader on the Public Safety and Security, Higher Education and Employment and Housing Committees. Hwang is also a member of the Transportation Committee. Hwang also serves as the co-chair of the bipartisan BioScience Caucus.*

*Hwang was appointed to Governor Lamont's Workforce Council on recommendations for supporting economic development. Hwang is a member of Connecticut's Commission on Women, Children and Seniors (CWCS) 2Gen Advisory Council addressing intergenerational poverty.*

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## Easton, Redding, Region 9 Schools Shift to All Distance Learning

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November 18, 2020

Good afternoon, ER9 Families and Staff:

As expected, the number of positive cases across both towns has continued to increase. As of yesterday's review of the leading indicator (the number of new cases 14-day average per 100,000 population) and the secondary indicator (positivity rate), we have

crossed the threshold into the red level. We have also seen increases in staff absences due to district-related quarantines, pending test results and childcare issues as a result of school closures in surrounding towns.

After conferring with our local health directors from Easton and Redding and discussing the anticipated uptick in positive cases following Thanksgiving, we have decided to shift all five schools to full distance learning starting tomorrow, Nov. 19. We will remain in this model at least through Friday, Dec. 4, and I will continue to review the health data in collaboration with our local health officials to determine next steps. Principals will send additional information regarding school-specific details.

My hope is that we will be able to return to the hybrid model on Monday, Dec. 7. During this period, I will continue to monitor our local health data in collaboration with our health officials, and share regular updates with our families. While we all anticipate increases in the number of positive cases stemming from holiday gatherings next week, I want to remain consistent in my commitment to making data-driven decisions.

As you can imagine, this was a very difficult decision. We can all agree that students learn best via face-to face learning. However, I believe that shifting to distance learning is the best next step in order to promote the health, safety and well-being of our students and staff. Thanks again for your flexibility and support during this tough time.

Best,

Rydell Harrison

Superintendent of Schools

Easton, Redding & Region 9 School Districts



person.”

When it comes to teaching an appreciation of cultures in elementary school or teaching the different manifestations of racial inequality and injustice in the United States to middle and high school students, online learning can have more of an impact, as it allows for a variety of different formats and modalities. Using visual representation such as pictures and videos of individuals telling their own stories, side-by-side written histories, helps to create a more accurate account and a more engaged connection with other human beings while challenging familiar and preexisting narratives.

Some of the more common visual online resources include:

- eBooks, text and digital images, animations
- Interactive maps, images, and video
- Interactive journals and blogs
- Podcasts

James Prosek, artist and author, challenges the limitations of language when he discusses his exhibit, *Art, Artifact, Artifice* at the Yale University Art Gallery. He says, “We prefer the world as filtered by our minds, where it can be made orderly and intelligible, because then we feel we know it, and knowing brings comfort.”

He goes on to say, “Racism, sexism, religious discrimination, intolerance of myriad kinds emerge from a belief that there is some ideal form or way of being.”

There are certain downsides to online learning, as in any model, such as an inequity in access to technology, which is an important issue and challenge throughout public education. And of course, it is a given that nothing replaces the valuable social interaction that students glean from an in-person classroom experience.

But during a time where the overarching concern and goal is individual and public

health and safety, online learning should not be feared or stereotyped as an inferior method of learning. On the contrary, it can be quite exciting and effective if done properly, with the added benefits of fostering self-discipline, time management and self-agency skills. So as the fall semester approaches, don't be afraid to get right in there and create a multidimensional and interactive experience for all.

Editor's Note: Gale Papageorge has served on multiple higher education diversity curriculum committees and has designed American Diversity Requirement classes at Fairfield University, where she currently teaches. She's been noted as a Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Scholar in Harlem, N.Y., and holds a Master's degree in American and African American Literature and a PhD in Comparative Ethnic American Literature. She is the author of several books including, *New Rhetorical Strategies for Reading African American Texts*, *A Dialogic Approach to Reading and Teaching Ethnic American Texts*, and a contributing author to *Patriarchy in Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mango Street: Social Issues in Literature*.

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## Students Worry About School Reopening

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Barlow classroom set up for limited seating and social distancing. — Chloe Rozendaal  
Photo

When Joel Barlow High School closed in March, most students expected to return after a two-week vacation. Five months later, students are unsure if school will ever return to normal and seniors are wondering if they will get any aspect of the last year they envisioned.

The current plan for reopening has the student body divided alphabetically, with only two days of in-person instruction out of five for the first four weeks. With some colleges shutting down one week into the fall semester, student and parent confidence in returning fully to school has diminished.

“I think that four weeks will keep getting extended like quarantine was,” said senior Reese Costenbader.

Senior Rene Itah said, “I honestly don’t believe that splitting the kids up by last name makes any sense. Nothing short of fully online learning can keep everyone safe.” In order to prevent an outbreak, Itah also said “the school needs to make sure that students feel comfortable staying homesick.”



Barlow hallway divided for social distancing. — Chloe Rozendaal Photo

Even with social distancing and face coverings, will the virus still spread when students are in close quarters? The fear of a mass outbreak is further complicated by the fact that many youths can be asymptomatic carriers who pass along the virus to unknowing family members or school staff.

“I think once schools reopen, cases will surge again with everyone being in the same building,” Reese said.

“Every day staff will enter the school to work and be at the mercy of the lowest common denominator,” said Alisha Gorder, parent of Barlow junior Anya Gorder. “It’s a tremendous leap of faith for all of us.”

Aside from Covid-19 worsening, the fast approaching flu season prompts further concern. According to **Johns Hopkins Medicine**, the 2019-2020 flu season had 39 million cases and 24,000 deaths. Assuming that vaccine numbers remain the same, how many will shrug off potential Covid-19 symptoms as being the flu or a cold, and how many will report flu symptoms as Covid-19? How will hospitals manage this tsunami of patients? The upcoming flu outbreak compounds the likelihood of a return to distance learning.

“Everyone gets sick during flu season, ” said Anya, who will start the school year

completely online. "Add Covid and it just gets bigger."

Another of the many unknowns racing through the minds of students is the prospect of a second wave. Historically, as with the 2009 H1N1 virus and the 1918 Spanish flu, colder weather brings an onslaught of new cases. It is also still unknown if a person can get Covid-19 twice, which could exacerbate the second wave.

"I definitely expect a second wave, but I hope we'll be more prepared this time around," said senior Chloe Rozendaal.

Barlow students will come back to school on Sept. 8 starved for social interaction. After months of not seeing classmates in-person, enforcing social distancing guidelines seems to be an impossible task.

"A lot of kids won't take this seriously," said Chloe. "Everyone my age thinks they either won't get symptoms or they'll recover quickly."

"People are socializing in large groups already," said Anya. "We need our friends. We need to socialize. I want to see my teachers and interact with them and have real conversations. That's just gone."

The overall mindset of invincibility among young people will likely result in a defiance of social distancing during school.

In response to the question of whether or not students will ever fully return to school, Rene sums up the student perspective: "I really don't know. It all depends on how responsible people will be in terms of getting tested and staying home if they're sick."

As summer winds down and the first day of school inches closer, students have much more than first-day jitters to worry about. Regardless of the school year pans out, however, one thing is certain: Students will adapt and persevere.

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# Tutoring Amid the Pandemic

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In the beginning of this pandemic, I wanted to find a way to help others in my community. After researching ideas I read that tutoring younger students during distance learning was a great option for highschoolers, like me, to help during the crisis.

While considering this option, I remembered a younger friend of mine who I thought might have been having some trouble with distance learning. Sure enough, I found that she would appreciate my help, and I began my first experience as a voluntary tutor.



Julia and her tutor, Rebecca Pasto, having fun while social distancing.

My tutee is named Julia. We've been friends for many years and have bonded over our shared love of games and of conversations. I was excited to tutor her, but at the same time, I was also anxious. What also proved to be a challenge was that distance learning was new to both of us.

When the first day of our lessons arrived, I was able to adapt easily into my role as a tutor. During our sessions, we had conversations and laughed about our mistakes. The fun we were having together became our incentive to come back and tackle another day of distance learning.

Tutoring was the way that I continued to learn new experiences, even though most of us have been forcibly isolated from the world we once knew. This pandemic is a new experience, and it can lead us to better understand ourselves.

I was able to learn new skills and develop my sense of empathy, while Julia was able to learn easier with my help. In the beginning, I saw distance learning as a negative experience, but in fact it has taught me a lot.



Julia and her tutor, Rebecca Pasto having fun and laughing at their mistakes.

Because life is an accumulation of experiences that form the basis of our character, the more experiences we gain, the better we understand ourselves and our world. I think that the words of Eleanor Roosevelt put it best when she said, "People grow through experience if they meet life honestly and courageously. This is how character is built."

Tutoring was an experience that has developed me as a person and as a student. I know that there are many more experiences yet to be had that are waiting for the people willing to take them. The world is a playground full of possibilities, and it's only a matter of time until the next one leads me to another great adventure.

## *A note from Julia,*

*Hi, my name is Julia. I'm the girl that Rebecca tutored. Rebecca was a very good tutor, because she is very kind, friendly, funny, and she actually teaches you, so that you can understand what you are learning and not just for you to complete your homework. I had a lot of fun with Rebecca tutoring me, I got to know how to use punctuation in my sentences, my angles and shapes in math, and to understand science better. Even though I miss school, I had a lot of fun studying with her. I miss you Rebecca!*

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# Silver Linings

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Throughout these past few months of quarantine and ambiguity of what our future would look like, it was easy to focus on the negative energy that surrounded us. Each day was filled with concern about our health, livelihoods, and education. We have had to become accustomed to a new type of living. A new normal. One with more solitude, melancholy, and pain.

And as we slowly finish our time in quarantine, we look at this period with annoyance, and a craving to move on. But I would like to consider the good that has occurred in these past few months. I would like to unveil the positive change that happened throughout our time in quarantine.

In my own life, I have had conflicting and surprising emotions about the past months. On one hand, I no longer got to see my friends. I had to continue my education through my computer screen. I wasn't able to leave my own house. And while there were days of frustration, of sadness, of anger, I found a lot of peace within this time.

I no longer had to face grueling social anxiety each day when I went to school; whether it was because I had to see certain people or I was worried about what they would think

about me. I was finally able to take control of my schedule and organize when I wanted to do schoolwork, but also what I should prioritize. I could take time with the assignments that used to be timed and difficult for me to successfully complete. I felt an enormous weight lifted off of my shoulders.

There were also social benefits that I found during quarantine as I was able to reconnect with past friends and talk to those who live in different time zones. I've gotten the chance to spend time with the people that I love and care about.

Furthermore, I've reunited with the hobbies that I love to do but didn't have time for during the first semester of this past school year. I've delved into the world of painting and imagination. I liked to wake up early and begin to sketch before the day began. I got to hear birds beginning to sing, welcoming me to my desk. It seemed to me that their songs were even more vibrant than before. Or maybe it was the first time that I had noticed their flawless melodies.

Now that I think about it, my appreciation for nature has grown exponentially. Because of this, I have paid much more attention to wildlife during quarantine. I found a general trend; as human activity decreased, the wildlife returned. Wandering boars can be found in Barcelona. Baby turtles in Brazil are thriving while they're unbothered by beachgoers. Multitudes of bears have been seen wandering around Yosemite.



This photo was taken in Paris, France about three years ago and serves as a perfect visual of a silver lining. — Julia Krepsztul Photo.

From an international perspective, a decrease in pollution can be seen in Venice's canals. Satellite images show the difference in the water within the Venetian canals from just a year ago. Murkiness and obscurity turned into clarity in a shade of blue. Although this is due to the sediment within the canals finally settling as no boats or gondolas have been traveling, people have commented on the improving air quality due to the lack of engines running; a pattern that can be seen throughout the world.

Our environment has experienced a period of relief over the past months, reaping new benefits for the human race. Due to our inability to use transportation that contributes to air pollution, scientists have noticed the impressive decrease in air pollutants. According to the American Geophysical Union, "nitrogen dioxide pollution over northern China, Western Europe and the U.S. decreased by as much as 60 percent in early 2020 as

compared to the same time last year” .

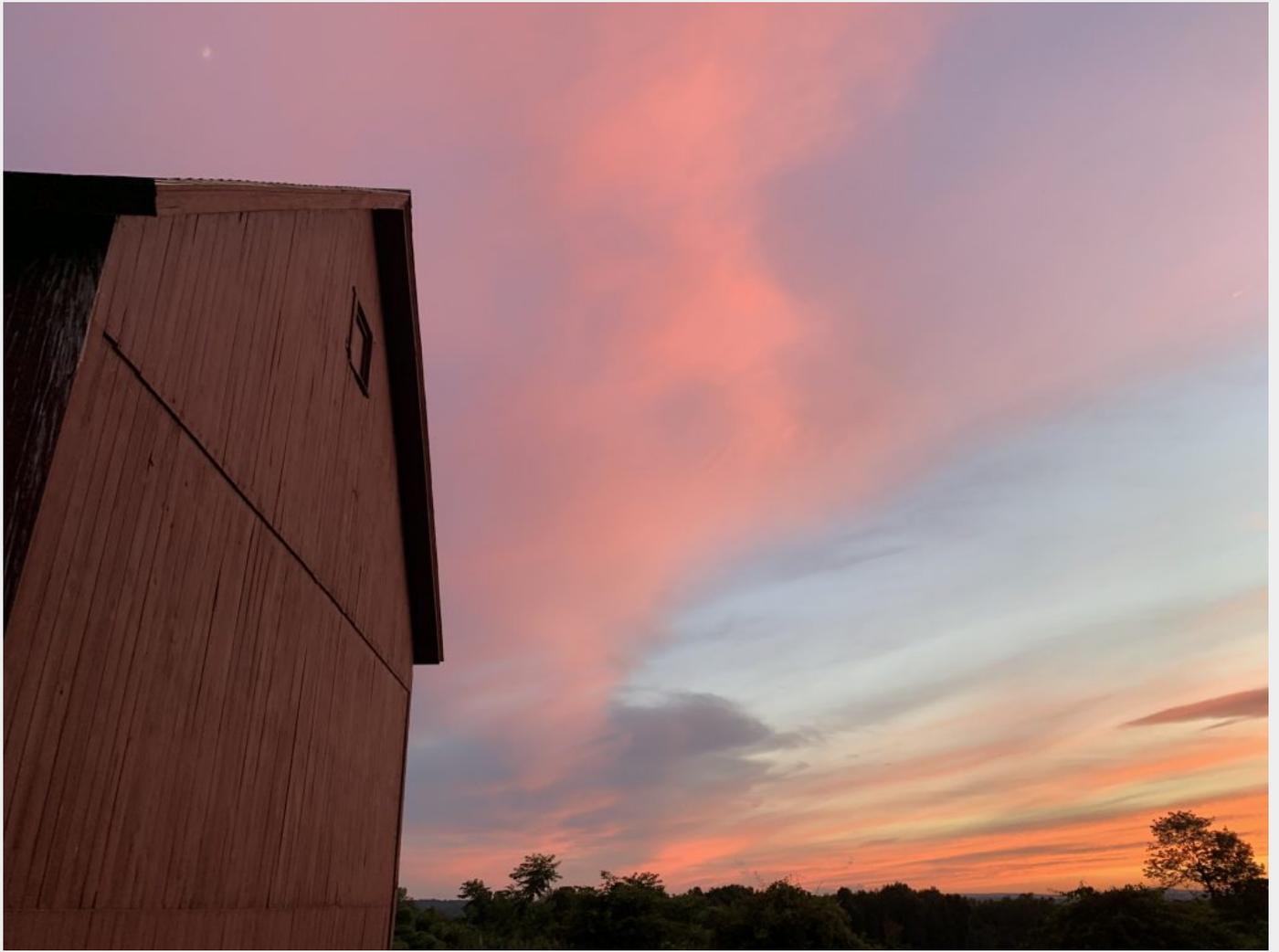
As the AGU continues to explain, nitrogen dioxide is harmful to our lungs and is produced from “vehicles, power plants, and industrial activities.” It’s important to note that, with this decrease, there has been an increase in surface ozone in China.

Air quality has been widely seen as improved since the pandemic began due to our inability to leave our homes. And although these changes are seen as temporary because our quarantine is coming to an end, it shows a promising future that can and should occur when we apply stricter laws and regulations about air pollution. This can be said of the other positive changes that we have experienced during quarantine as well.

The purpose of this article has not been in any way to diminish the horrifying and devastating effects of COVID-19, but to shed light on the positive changes that have occurred within this time. I acknowledge that my experience during quarantine has not been the same as everyone else’s.

That being said I am a strong believer in our unique ability to see the good in dark times such as these. And we should continue to do so. It can bring us some hope, some motivation for the future.

A bright future.









Lonetown Farm Museum in Redding, Conn.: A wonderful place to watch sunsets and explore nature. — Julia Krepsztul Photos