

OPINION: An open letter to the New Bedford community by High School Upperclassmen: what we need from our educational experience amidst COVID-19

Ashley Cowles is a graduating senior at New Bedford High School and wrote this op-ed on distance learning from a student perspective. To reinforce her own fears about education during COVID-19, she gathered student perspectives on distance learning. Given the inconsistencies in education students are experiencing through distance learning, she believes the community, specifically educators and school leaders, could benefit from hearing their concerns.

"I woke Monday morning to the dreaded but anticipated news: Massachusetts schools would shut down for the remainder of the school year. Learning would continue through remote online platforms. My stomach dropped. Just like that, my senior year had been pulled out from under my feet. After nearly four years of hard work, memories, and musings of the future, my high school experience would remain distantly suspended like a held-in sneeze.

After the initial shock came a sudden and debilitating flood of fears about the remainder of the year. I still have three AP exams in May. While distance learning had kept us clumsily afloat until this point, it in no way replaces the in-person test prep I rely on to be successful. I couldn't handle

another two months of unopened emails, busywork, and ridiculous self-teaching expectations.

Knowing I couldn't be alone in my anxieties, I reached out to my peers to see how they were handling the news. Unsurprisingly, they feel similarly.

In general, students are happy with our district's reaction to the crisis. One junior from my AP literature course explained how the school's initiative to continue providing meals to students helped her family after her mother couldn't grocery shop. Another senior peer praised the school's decision to authorize a "credit/no credit" system, stating, "Pass/Fail offers students who can't prioritize their education right now an opportunity to still get their diploma." As our district is familiar with low-income families, it's no surprise the school department has a grip on broader equity issues.

However, when the conversation turns to our individual learning experience, we have concerns about communication and consistency. We've noticed that while some teachers are still reaching out to students, others have fallen silent. A junior posed that without routine communication from educators, it's easy for students to "fall off the wagon," especially while stuck at home. It's clear that the inability to meet face to face has revealed discrepancies in effort on behalf of individual educators. Here the true responsibility of educators reveals itself; it's up to you to ensure us students are keeping up. In the words of a peer, in a time when it's easier to shut down and "stay in bed all day," we as students rely on that accountability.

In the same vein, you should understand that accountability does not equal busywork. One junior insisted that school was "so much more" than learning content. She protested the massive amount of work one teacher had assigned with barely any guidance and hard deadlines. "I have to watch my brothers," she stated, as her parents were still working and

daycare facilities had closed. She went on to point out that some teachers weren't taking into account the new responsibilities of their students during a crisis. Here, individual interpretation comes into play; while my peer's teacher may assume she's doing the right thing by keeping kids busy, she is actually impeding their ability to safely operate in a crisis.

It seems that COVID is exacerbating issues that had previously plagued NBHS, namely, communication. With no past experience, training, or new guidelines to reference, teachers are at a loss, and many struggle to connect with students effectively. As a result, students are facing inconsistencies in contact and workload that impede learning. One junior argues: teachers are "limited by their own capabilities."

To alleviate the pressure put on educators, students have suggestions. Ultimately, we're calling for school leaders to be straightforward in their expectations of teachers; thus far, any direction has been overly general. One junior suggests that while a large responsibility falls on teachers during this crisis, "clearer guidelines" will eliminate any harmful interpretation of how education should continue, and make sure students are still learning while remaining sensitive about our current situation.

At the end of the day, we recognize that this crisis has thrown us all for a loop and that the district has done what they could given the circumstances. However, educators and department heads have to understand that unless we better coordinate the distance learning experience, students will continue feeling isolated and overwhelmed during an already taxing ordeal. Now more than ever, we need to generate a conversation that is ongoing; one that fosters better communication among student, educator, and school leader, and ensures educators are getting the resources necessary to operate without causing harm.

Some experts anticipate the COVID crisis extending into the fall, along with school cancellations. If we establish a strong foundation now, we can create a more efficient learning model that will prepare us for this possibility.”-Ashley Cowles.