

The Challenge of Covid-19: The Role of Education and Private Industry

The Covid 19 crises has upended society on many levels. It has stalled education progress for students in both K-12 schools as well as colleges and universities. It has disrupted the economy and curbed career opportunities for college graduates. It has disrupted the social safety net by threatening the front line not for profits that address the growing needs of those at the bottom of the pyramid. And it has severely impacted the broader economy and especially strained our health care systems.

Had we had a more effective and timely national response to the pandemic, these problems might have in some instances been avoided and especially mitigated, but the lack of leadership at the federal level has enhanced the negative effect of the pandemic. It has put a premium on identifying solutions that are pragmatic and achievable, and that unite all sectors of society, especially government and the private sector in investing in, and implementing the kind of solutions that will make an impact.

Here are a sample of the kinds of actions that would make a real difference:

First, our nation's elementary and secondary schools and tens of millions of students have been disadvantaged as our schools were closed. Reopening schools is one challenge, but once they are opened figuring out how to reinvigorate education for our nation's students is the next challenge. The most effective way to reopen schools is to offer every student five days of instruction a week by having half of the student population attend in a morning session and the other half in the afternoon coupled with a focus on testing, tracing, masks, cleanliness and a host of other public health measures. Federal funding to make this possible is essential. And there must also be a commitment in 2021 to extended day and year efforts, reinvigoration of remote learning, professional development and support for teachers and ways to break down the barriers between schools and community supports.

Second, our nation's college graduates are suffering as employment opportunities have been severely constrained. This is a realm opportunity to expand National and Community Service and carve out specific year-long internship opportunities for recent college graduates to help them engage in community service opportunities that serve those at the bottom of the pyramid. Service opportunities can include mentoring and education enhancement opportunities in schools, as well as service assignments in critical not for profits that serve seniors, the disadvantaged, those with mental health and other human service concerns. A fair wage for such community service opportunities along with other supports will ensure that the

year between graduation and career transition would be used in a way that enhances employability skills and opens doors to the pathway from school to college to career.

Third, our nations not for profit community and human services organizations have been seriously affected by the pandemic. Their philanthropic revenues as well as the size of government support has been severely diminished, just as the demand for such services have increased. This is an opportunity for the private sector to ramp up its donations. Wells Fargo has committed to donating \$400m of what it received under PPP in grants to not for profits. If every large bank and large company that benefited from PPP did the same, they could pump tens of billions into support for front line workers who work for not for profits. In addition, currently about 65% of employers provide incentives for their employees to provide volunteer effort for not for profits. If every company increased the amount of paid time off workers could contribute and the remaining 35% of employers did the same hundreds of millions of hours of service could be provided as well. And companies can double their matching of grants made by their employees as well. All of these efforts together would provide a life line for direct services to those in need and preserve and enhance the social safety net.

Fourth, small businesses have been severely affected by the pandemic as economic stress has threatened the very existence of tens of thousands of businesses, especially those that are women and minority owned. And yet supply chain spending by large companies, totaling over a trillion dollars, hardly ever reaches women and minority owned small businesses. Currently only about 1% of such spending involves them. If large companies were provided modest incentives and recognition to raise their spending target in their supply chains to reach 5% of their total spending, women and minority owned small businesses would benefit to the tune of billions in contracts. Why is this important? Research shows that such small businesses who get these contracts with large companies double their size in two years and double their employee base. Such action would stimulate the economy and do so in a way that benefits those most in need.

Fifth, our nation's investment in research, especially health and environmental research, has been sorely lacking. Significantly increasing the investment in such research will pay for itself in enhanced innovation and economic growth, whether the spending is on environmental sustainability or innovative healthcare research. Doing so in collaboration with our nation's Universities and spurring public private partnerships would advance economic growth and societal benefit.

All of these actions will make a discrete and measurable difference at any time, but in response to the Covid-19 pandemic they would be particularly effective and beneficial. However, done in combination the effect would be maximized and the impact would grow exponentially. In a

series of opinion pieces published in [Barron's](#) each of these efforts have been outlined in more depth with the effects detailed and the next steps provided added clarity.

This is the type of reform agenda that would make a marked difference. And the time to act is now.

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