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The last day of school was barely school. I fielded complicated questions from students who braved public transit to attend, I wiped down every desk between classes and reminded myself to breathe. I held it together so hard when students said goodbye, with a strange, scared weight on that word. Colleagues and I exchanged glances in the hallway, at once tense and comforting. We were in this together, even if we were about to part ways for several months. And when school as we know it stopped, we all took a long minute just to process that. It seemed impossible. 400,000 students in Chicago now needed to learn from home, and we would need to make that happen, both as the third-largest school district in the country and as the human beings who constitute it. But the seemingly impossible keeps becoming reality really fast lately.

01:00

So teachers jumped and adapted. We learned to host online meetings, we hung whiteboards on our living room walls. Many teachers struggled just reaching out to see if their students were alright. And in addition to making remote learning plausible, teachers have also been organizing food drives and housing resources. They have made and donated masks by the thousands, and they've never stopped reaching out.

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But this isn't new. This isn't dramatic heroism in the face of a pandemic. This is teaching. This is being invested in our communities. As parents, we've had to adapt too, because our working lives and our family lives and our mental health have all collided and coagulated. Well-intentioned color-coded schedules speckled the internet. Everyone has cried at the kitchen table, at least once. Some of us several times.

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And then, there are the students. I've seen students participate in class from the breakroom at work, where they are frontline for minimum wage to help their families. They've attended a makeshift funeral in the morning and a Google Meet in the afternoon. They are childcare providers, they are experiencing housing insecurity, they are scared, they are stressed, and they are children. When my son's teacher asked a screen full of nine-year-olds if everybody was OK, it almost broke me. "How are you?" "What do you need?" "Is your family safe?"

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School without school has been traumatic, it's been makeshift, it's been messy. Parents, teachers and students have fumbled with tech, fumbled even more with expectations. And we've lost so

much. And maybe, just maybe, stripped bare like it's been, we can see more. When words like "rigor," "grit" and a half dozen other educational hashtags don't seem to matter, we can see what's in front of us with new clarity. And that includes the gaps, the inequities, the failures. They're all heightened. But so are the successes. So what's working? What do kids need from their schools? And what do we really mean when we discuss, frame and fund education?

03:21

As both a parent and a teacher, I keep coming back to four big ideas. None of them are new, all of them are necessary. And in them, I'm hoping other parents, other teachers and students will hear echoes of their experiences and outlines of what's possible. We can, and we must, engage parents, demand equity, support the whole student and rethink assessment.

03:51

First and foremost, engaging the parents. Historically, we've isolated parents and teachers, schools and neighborhoods. We say otherwise, but the influential forces in a kid's life rarely intersect with any depth. We have parent-teacher conferences, a STEM night, a bake sale we all immediately regret agreeing to do. But the parents are here now, every day, inadvertently eavesdropping on class, because we're also making lunch or sharing a workspace. We are tutors, we are coteachers, we are all relearning algebra, and it's awkward. But maybe it's exactly what we needed, because parents are seeing how school happens, or doesn't, what excites their kids and what shuts them down, whether there's a rubric for it or not. And we're watching our kids learn empathy and balance and time management and tree-climbing and introspection and the value of a little bit of boredom.

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We might not want this to last, but we can learn from it. We can keep parents engaged, beyond bake sales. We can take this time and ask parents what they and their kids need. Ask again. Ask in every language. Ask the parents who haven't been able to engage with their kids' remote learning. Meet parents where they are, and many will tell you they need us to prioritize their children's wellness, support diverse learners, protect neighborhoods from housing instability and attacks on immigrant communities. So many parents will tell us right now that they can't support their children's learning if they can't support their families.

05:29

So next, we demand equity. Our school system currently serves a student population that includes 75 percent low-income households and 90 percent students of color. The fight for equity in Chicago is as old as Chicago. So what do we need right now? For starters, we need equal tech

infrastructure for all. This isn't an option anymore. We have to close the tech gap. These are choices, and we don't have to keep making them. We can refuse the isolation and competition for resources that pits schools and neighborhoods against one another, get rid of rating systems and budgeting formulas that punish kids for their zip codes in a city that's been segregated since its inception.

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The fight for equity in Chicago did not become life or death in the pandemic -- it's been life or death for a long time now. We need to care about other people's children, and not just as data points alongside our own.

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Third, we need to support the whole student. As much as parents might be exhausted by remote learning and can't wait to get the kids back to school, or teachers can't wait to get back into our classrooms and do some real teaching, chances are the kids miss the playground more than the classroom, the activities as much as the academics, that social emotional peace that forms the core of human learning. We will need social workers, nurses and counselors in every school, so much. We will need them as we try to help our students feel safe, process their trauma and their grief and find their way back to school. To support our students, we will also need smaller class sizes and adequate staffing across the building, something teachers have demanded again and again, with the overwhelming support of our students' parents. We will need art class, more than ever. And physical education and music programs and computer science. And if wading through conspiracy theories on the internet for the last few months has taught us anything, it's that we need to put a librarian back in every school, right now.

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Finally, let's rethink assessment. We can dial down the testing a lot. Elementary school students in Chicago spend up to 10 percent of their school year just taking standardized tests. We don't know how many hours of learning are lost preparing for those tests, but we know the test-prep software alone costs Chicago about 10 million dollars a year. How much more could we do if we got that time and money back? And do we have to go back to obsessively quantifying everything a student attempts, weaponizing grades as a means of compliance and reinforcing inequity at every grade level? Or can we keep considering alternative models, like proficiency-based grading programs, and stop making school about scoring better than the kid next to you? 150 colleges and counting are now test-optional for admissions, including NYU, the University of Chicago and the entire California State system, because they know there's more to a student than a GPA and an SAT score.

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You know who else knows that? The students themselves. If we are having conversations about any of this, and not authentically including and empowering students every step of the way, we're not having conversations about any of this. We have a moment now -- a short moment, and so much to get done before the comforting choruses of "back to normal" get too loud, when we can take what we've seen and experienced, plant our feet and demand better. We can make a system as massive as Chicago pivot to better serve our students, their families and our communities. If 3,000,000 teachers can relearn their jobs in a weekend, we can change school systems to better fit what we know, and what we've known for a while now. And if we can set clear expectations for our students, we can do the same for our school districts and our cities.

09:38

I want to go back to school. I can't wait to go back to school. I miss the hum of the hallways and the weird energy of a room filling up with sophomores, and a better kind of exhaustion from putting my heart and my guts into what I love doing every day. But we can't miss this moment. We can't let go of the mantra that we are in this together. So don't tell us what is or isn't possible, don't tell us it's too hard or too expensive or too aggressive. It's been our job since the start of this pandemic -- no, it's been our job since always to make what seems impossible really happen. And when the stakes are this high, and the evidence is this clear, it's our only option.