

EDITORIAL

A welcome step to close learning gap

There were many reasons why the public-private partnership between the state of Connecticut and the Dalio Foundation was not going to work, most obviously the insistence on privacy in an endeavor that involved public money. But there was never any questioning the good intentions behind the project, or the legitimate needs it sought to tackle.

Since that project was proposed and then discarded, the needs have only grown. The prospect of a return to full-time school in the fall has raised a mountain of new questions, with preparations also including the possibility of going back to distance learning, partially or in full, in the event of a rise of coronavirus cases. Either possibility presents problems, but recent reporting has shown the depths of the potential for student disengagement when learning goes online.

About a quarter of Connecticut students did not fully take part in online lessons this spring when schools closed their doors. The number was as high as half in some cities, and the reasons were varied. Sometimes it was a less stable home life that didn't allow time for e-learning. Some children simply drifted away, and teachers were unable to maintain the connections they would normally have.

For many, the problem was technological. The move toward distance learning put a new spotlight on the disparities between well-off and poorer school districts, which are often close geographically but far apart in terms of what they are able to offer. While some students went home from day one with laptop computers in communities where broadband is widely available, others had to go without.

The effect was to push the gap even wider between the haves and have-nots in Connecticut education. Until that technology breach can be filled, there is little reason to expect the fall, should distance learning become necessary, to be any different than the spring.

Relief must come from many places. Part of that effort came this week via Dalio Education, part of Dalio Philanthropies, which announced its latest effort jointly with the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities to work with towns and cities to bring high-speed internet to people who don't have it. The

Dalios have also stuck with their plan to provide 60,000 laptops to high school students around the state who need it most.

The laptops, as proponents of the plan have noted, are welcome but of less use without the connectivity the internet hookup will provide.

There are many details to be worked out, with more specifics expected next month. The school year is fast approaching, but there remains time to help out students in need and get them prepared for what has to be considered a likely scenario where some form of distance learning is required.

This won't solve the problem of inequality between districts. Schools are going to be in a difficult position under any of the scenarios envisioned for this fall and there are many obstacles to overcome, not least of which is funding.

Still, this is a positive step for students in need. Anything that could take some pressure off what is sure to be a trying school year should be welcomed.

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SHENEMAN THE STAR-LEDGER



CHRIS GAFFNEY

Connecticut: Master of distancing since 1636

It's hard to imagine a crisis better suited to Connecticut's character than the novel coronavirus pandemic. The path forward until a proven cure or vaccine arrives is simple: wear a mask and socially distance.

Nothing's hard about those actions. The hard part is adopting the routine then sticking to it.

No state is better suited for diligently sticking to a plan than Connecticut, the "Land of Steady Habits." It helps that the strategy involves social distancing, one of our natural strengths.

How good is Connecticut at social distancing? Our most popular sports team has been in North Carolina since 1997.

Though I've lived in my current town for five years, I don't need to worry about my neighbors infecting me because I still haven't met them. The rule of thumb here is to wait seven years before introducing yourself to new neighbors just to make sure they get settled in OK.

Our natural snobbishness and aversion to outsiders have served us well during this pandemic.

It only took a global pandemic to reverse our decades-long real estate slide. Like empty nesters clearing out their kid's bedroom to create a new home office, wealthy New Yorkers dusted off their driving gloves to re-discover the one thing Connecticut has always promised: to leave you the heck alone.

But a word of warning to our wealthy new transplants: once we know you, we really know you. Connecticut had contact tracing perfected long before coronavirus was a household word.

Any of our Little League Moms can tell you every person that each kid on their team has ever met, who his mother knows, and who his father knows maybe just a little too well.

Our contact tracing records go way back too. In Avon, where I grew up, I went to elementary school with direct descendants of Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln.

Both classmates left for fancy prep schools before high school. We have A LOT of those!

Our prep schools don't only track their students' contacts and movements, they also track each student's genealogy, thoughts, and dreams.

And you don't need to worry about public transportation as a virus spreader because we don't have it! If there's anyone you can trust to avoid mass transportation during a global pandemic, it's a Nutmegger. Most of our kids have never even been on a school bus!

With businesses now working from home, it's easy to trace how many people from the suburbs

have had contact with our cities: none. Finally, our socio-economic segregation is working (in some twisted way) for the public good.

Our suburbanites are so against visiting cities even their Black Lives Matter protesters opted to stay closer to home with rallies in high-end towns such as Simsbury and Westport.

Our tourism industry is well protected too since our most popular tourist spots are empty houses. (Trust me, you don't know Mark Twain until you've seen a statue of him built out of Legos.)

It took quite a bit of training, but the staff is up to speed on proper social distancing protocols at hot spots such as the Noah Webster House (built circa 1750).

That's right, our hot spots are so hot nobody knows exactly when they were built!

While Florida and South Carolina deflect college students raging at all-night parties on the beach,

we just need to manage the crowd jostling to see the desk where America's first dictionary was written.

All kidding aside, I'm very proud of how Connecticut has handled the coronavirus crisis so far. Our proximity to New York made us one of the earliest hot spots in the country.

While we were seeing positivity rates of 40 percent in April, we've been at or below 1 percent every day so far in July except one. My shoulders have stopped tensing up when I reach the obituaries in my newspaper as I'm no longer flipping through page after page.

Everyone in Connecticut stepped up. The people even more so than the hospitals and the government. We wear the masks. Our state never had to close our beaches or our parks because we learned to use them responsibly.

We shut down our schools but have high hopes for reopening them soon. Our summer camps are thriving with new procedures in place.

We are far from over this crisis, but July has provided us some breathing room to prepare for a possible second wave or spillover from the bedlam taking place in much of the rest of the country.

For my many friends and readers in current hot spots such as Texas, Florida, and California: I'm sorry you're going through this right now. The best thing you can do is make smart choices and hold steady.

When in doubt, roll up your shirt cuffs, brush off your khakis and ask: what would Connecticut do? Hint: It's usually to just whatever New York City does but with a nicer lawn.

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LORELEI O'HAGAN

Family misadventures in getting tested

We read a lot about the lack of sufficient testing facilities, test result turnaround, and contact tracing, but it didn't feel real to me until I had to test it out for myself.

Our family was just beginning a new routine that had a sense of normalcy. Our 7-year-old was at camp and our 3-year-old at day care. Drop-off was different and everyone was wearing masks, but mom and dad got to focus on work while the kids were enjoying playtime with friends,

after nearly four months of rarely leaving the house and being together all hours of the day and night. You know what I'm talking about. So, imagine how deflating it was to wake up with a sinus headache, a tight chest, and 10 sneezes in a row. Was it a cold, the flu, the coronavirus? Right now, how would we know?

I kept the boys home and set out to get tested for COVID. I went to the nearest drive-thru, no prescription test facility. It was quick with a swab stuck way in the back of my nose, but the real pain was the lab which was

backed up for 5-7 business days. That would mean I'd have to put life on hold for a full week, and worry. I'd have to ask the sitter who'd come one afternoon last week to get tested, and I'd need to tell the kids' programs.

My kids would need to get tested to get back in, in either case. Obviously, that was too long to wait. Later that day, I went to a local urgent care for another COVID test that came with a maddening 7-10 day result estimate. Without same day results, I had to start the information cascade.

For the next three days, quarantine felt real in a new way. I set up telehealth appointments for the kids who were put on a wait list for Greenwich Hospital. Stamford Hospital requires prescriptions, so we would have had to go additional doctors for ourselves. On the fifth day, we found an urgent care in Stamford, known to have the rapid test. We put our family on a wait list at 9 a.m.; No. 45 with an approximate wait time of five hours. At 4 p.m., we called to check in. We were squeezed in as the last patients of the day; we all got our noses swabbed and received our negative results in just a few minutes. It was a relief, but also a reality check. I had to go unwind that cascade.

Yes, testing will make it possible for us to open for business and get back to school and life. But, for five days, I was out of work. On the honor system, I kept my healthy kids home, and many around town were on high alert, unnecessarily. Eight days later, I got both negative results from the first day. If the tests had been positive there was plenty of time to infect others and the contact tracing would be irrelevant.

Connecticut has been one of the most successful states in getting the coronavirus under control, due in large part to effective governance. We're living the benefits here in Greenwich. But it is very clear why testing must be well-coordinated, easy to access, low to no cost, and instant. It is time to make the connections — we're less than 100 days out from an election where no Republican would get your votes; the party near and far undermines our health care systems and has supported the world's worst leader in the combat of the coronavirus. Vote them all out so we can get back to our lives, safely.

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