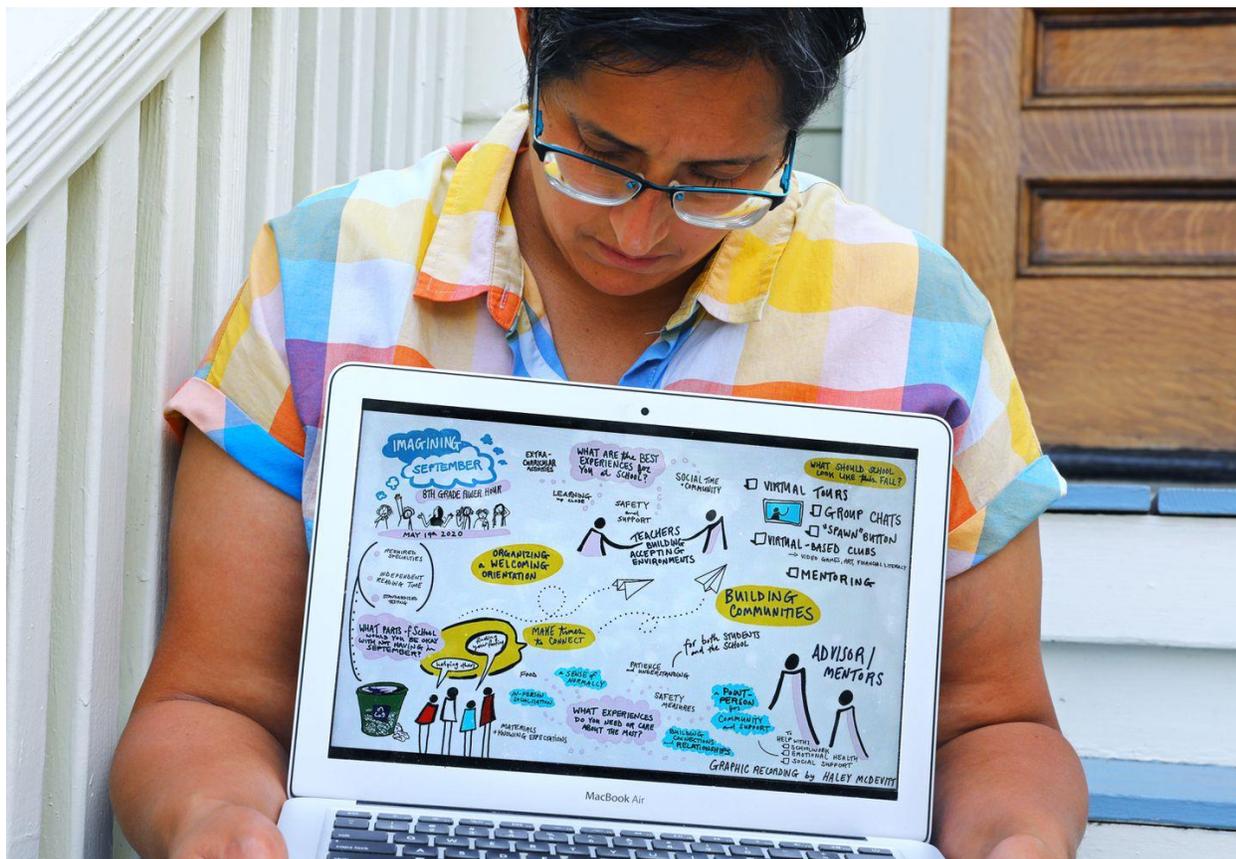


Keep it simple. Discard what's nonessential. Spark joy. MIT and Harvard researchers recommend strategies for teaching this fall

By [Naomi Martin](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 15, 2020, 10:31 a.m.



Neema Avashia, an eighth grade civics teacher at the McCormack Middle School in Boston, showed a "sketch note" on her computer from a Zoom meeting discussion with MIT and Harvard researchers and 15 of her students on how to improve schooling in September. The sketch, by artist Haley McDevitt, is a visual representation of their ideas. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Keep it simple. Discard what's nonessential. Find ways to cultivate joy.

As schools reopen in the fall, they might have much to learn from Japanese organizing celebrity Marie Kondo — at least according to a new [report](#) by education researchers at Harvard and MIT.

With at least some online instruction expected to continue in the fall, the report proposes using limited in-person time in school buildings to streamline the curriculum to focus on the core lessons in foundational subjects. That streamlined approach will allow time for things that “spark joy” (a Kondo-

inspired maxim) in school, such as art, music, and other electives and extracurricular activities.

“There is a temptation because kids missed three and a half months of school to try to cram everything into next year that didn’t happen in the spring of this year,” said coauthor Jal Mehta, a professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education. “I think that would be a mistake.”

To craft the report and a [related guide](#), the researchers from MIT’s Teaching Systems Lab and Harvard Graduate School of Education led four Zoom meetings with groups of students, teachers, administrators, and parents to discuss their thoughts on schooling in the age of coronavirus. Many of the participants were from Massachusetts, including several from Boston Public Schools.

Among the other ideas the researchers offer: Take steps to strengthen bonds between teachers and students, which are more imperative than ever when in-person interactions are limited. And create a mechanism that allows students to contact an adult from school on demand through something akin to a “call a teacher” phone line.

“One of the unrecognized great things about being a student in school is that you can raise your hand almost anywhere in the building and some caring adult will come over to you,” said coauthor Justin Reich, director of MIT’s Teaching Systems Lab.

But at home, he added, caregivers might be unavailable, so students would often get frustrated and give up. “Things that in a classroom would be a two- or three-minute obstacle can become obstacles that take away hours or days.”

The suggestion to streamline to the academic essentials runs counter to some leaders’ instincts, the researchers said, but it’s crucial to carve out enough time for activities that keep kids interested in school. Because time in the school building will likely be limited, the report suggests letting kids spend a significant portion of their time in electives and extracurricular activities such as a murder-mystery forensics class, debate club, Spanish club, and yearbook.

Robert Pondiscio, a senior fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a think-tank based in Washington, D.C., said many of the recommendations make a lot of sense, but he added that education leaders need to focus on returning kids to classrooms if they want to avoid the continued growth of devastating inequities in learning and academic progress.

“We should not goad ourselves into thinking [remote learning] can be the equivalent of in-person schooling,” Pondiscio said. “To be brutally blunt, we’re not very good at getting low-income kids and kids of color to academic proficiency under the best of conditions, and these are not the best of conditions.”

The report suggests that, if necessary, schools should prioritize time in physical school buildings for students who are most vulnerable, including those who are homeless, in special education, or for other reasons struggle more than others to learn at home.

The authors write that, across the board, schools should spend more time than ever helping kids build strong relationships with their teachers, and with each other; they should also take pains to underscore to students the real-life relevance of what they are learning, by tying lessons to timely topics including Black Lives Matter and the pandemic, for instance.

That was a key insight from students, Mehta said. Several reported that since schools closed down they have felt less motivated than ever to do school work — unless they felt connected to the teacher and the subject matter.

“In classrooms that teachers had created where students were interested and found the work meaningful and purposeful, they had much less trouble translating it to an online environment,” Mehta said. “Spending the time to do that in September will really pay off for everybody,” he said, particularly “if over the course of the year kids are working remotely.”

Some ways to foster these stronger bonds include having students continue this fall with their teachers from last year — a practice known as “looping”— or creating small “advisories” where teachers meet regularly with the same group of teens to discuss personal and academic challenges.

Neema Avashia, an eighth grade civics teacher at BPS’s McCormack Middle School, participated in the researchers’ discussions along with some of her students. During the spring, Avashia said, she was constantly texting with her 80 students and their parents to check in. It was a heavy load for her, but it prompted many kids to complete assignments. She doubts they would have stayed in touch, though, if they hadn’t had six months to get to know each other before school closed down.

Now, she's worried about how much time she'll have to form bonds with her new students in the fall — and says that finding ways to do so will be of paramount importance.

“Am I taking a folding chair and sitting outside their house in August, and saying, ‘Hey, let’s talk’ — because how else are they going to learn from me?” Avashia said.



Neema Avashia, an eighth grade civics teacher at the McCormack Middle School in Boston, has been researching how to improve remote learning in the fall, during the coronavirus pandemic. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Sarah Iddrissu, executive director of Educators for Excellence, agreed with the report's recommendation that schools should focus on teacher-student relationships and make the curriculum as relevant as possible. But she questioned whether schools have provided teachers with enough training on relationship-building, particularly in Boston, where 60 percent of teachers are white and 83 percent of students are Black, Latino, or Asian.

“For so long, relationship-building was seen as a soft skill that some have and some don't — there wasn't enough intentional learning about it,” Iddrissu said. “All teachers need to be provided guidance and opportunity to learn from each

other on how to do it well — especially for teachers who don't reflect the identity of their students.”

Boston Public Schools administrators say they are considering some of the suggestions in the report.

They might, for instance, try looping with some classrooms, instead of introducing students to all new teachers, said Christine Landry, assistant superintendent of academics and professional learning. Administrators are also planning to deploy librarians, teaching assistants, and other aides to expand the ranks of adults who can work with students in smaller groups.

“That connection is so important,” Landry said.

While Landry agreed that electives and extracurricular activities must be preserved — “joy is more important than ever” — she stressed that kids also need a lot of time to catch up on academic fundamentals.

“Before COVID, there were concerning learning gaps among our students in BPS where our most marginalized students were farther behind,” Landry said. “Those gaps, here and across the nation, have been exacerbated.”

While the district might not create a “call a teacher” button, she added, it's committed to finding creative ways for students with less support at home to easily access an adult from school. “It's our responsibility to figure out how to close those gaps,” she said.

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