March. We are doing our best to get a rhythm with “remote learning.” The city has promised Wi-Fi enabled iPads that will alleviate the opportunity gap, and some students have received them, but many are still communicating with teachers via cell phone.

I have called all 110 of my eighth-graders at least once. The 27 families in my homeroom are now frequently used contacts in my phone. We have a rapport, via phone. Some families like to chat about the kids’ sadness, others about their own disappointment for canceled events and sources of income.

The phone being my primary mode of contact doesn’t feel great for my work-life balance, but this is an emergency. By now my roles as literacy instructor and history educator are null. My job is to stay in contact with my kids. To make sure they are safe and healthy. That was always part of the job, but now I’m dependent on all of our cell phones working.

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It’s the last week of March, and after weeks of calling dozens of families every day, there is a glaring gap in my work: Haleema still hasn’t logged on
An uncle called me in response to the text message. Grateful to be in contact with him, I implored, “I must make sure Haleema is okay. Please ask her mother to call me.” Within the hour, I received a phone call from Haleema’s mother. She didn’t know why I didn’t have her cell phone number, but in any case, she has been laid off and is home, full time. Thank goodness.

My relationship with Haleema’s mother ended up being one of the greatest successes of parent outreach in my eight years as a NYC public school teacher.

Haleema submitted assignments through her mother’s phone until the city delivered the iPad we had requested for her to continue her schoolwork. The iPad arrived six weeks later, and she was able to use it and excel in her schoolwork for the last two months of the school year.

Haleema’s mother and I texted every day to confirm what assignments had been completed, or to communicate gentle reminders to get them done. In the months of May and June, Haleema was celebrated at our monthly academic awards ceremonies as a student who had perfect attendance, and near perfect scores on all of her work. Those last few months of middle school ended on a high note proved, as most jobs and community settings as text messages, and admiring ties as text messages, and admiring.

Other families, sadly, were not so fortunate. By mid-May, two months into NYC’s shutdown, more and more parents are asking for help with groceries. Some say they already receive one form of food assistance, but it’s not enough. With so many undocumented workers losing their jobs, more families are sharing already strained resources.

Before March 2020, parents had made quick trips to the Caribbean, Central America, and Africa, to visit loved ones, say goodbye to elderly generations, check on family members or homes. All things that immigrants do. But now, with lockdowns, restrictions, loss of income, they can’t come home to New York City. Cell phones are going out of service. A child who was supervised by an older sibling or neighbor for two weeks is now going on the second month without a parent in the house. The students complain of sleep deprivation, inactivity, depression.

The stress is showing on the children. In our Friday social-emotional check ins, they express hopelessness, sadness, and fear for family members who keep our city going as unprotected essential workers. We do our best to continue supporting students through the summer months, connecting families with food pantries and other public health resources. Even as New York City has begun a slow re-opening, the outlook for many families has not improved, as most jobs and community resources are still closed.

It’s now the end of July, and I’m still in regular contact with half a dozen of my homeroom students, sharing income and education opportunities as text messages, and admiring their tech savvy emojis and gifs. The resilience of systemically under-sourced communities is not magic, or even luck — it is the power of continuous collective care. And cell phone continues to be our primary mode of communication and connection.

SVATI MARIAM LELYVELD BELIEVES THAT BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS, FOOD, CLOTHING, SHELTER, AND MEDICINE ARE NECESSARY PREREQUISITES FOR AN ADEQUATE EDUCATION. SHE IS very PROUD OF THE STUDENTS WHO HAVE MADE ACADEMIC PROGRESS AS THEY CONTINUE TO LEARN ABOUT AND ADVOCATE FOR THEIR BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS.