

50 MILLION KIDS CAN'T ATTEND SCHOOL. WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM?

Based on a recent article in the [New York Times](#)...

The learning setbacks that schoolchildren commonly experience over a summer vacation can easily wipe out one or two months of academic growth. The learning losses that are likely to result from more than 50 million children in the United States being shut out of school for weeks or months because of the coronavirus pandemic could well be catastrophic by comparison.

Consider an alarming new study from the Northwest Evaluation Association, a nonprofit organization that works with school districts to measure student performance. The study projects that students who lack steady instruction during the coronavirus school shutdown might retain only 70 percent of their annual reading gains compared with a normal year. Projections for the so-called COVID-19 slide in math look even bleaker. Depending on grade level, researchers say, students could lose between half and all of the achievement growth one would expect in a normal academic year.

These setbacks would be particularly disastrous for fifth graders, who need to be tooling up for the more complex tasks that will come their way in the upper grades. In addition, this grim scenario will surely yield worse outcomes for students whose families are grappling with hunger, unemployment or homelessness.

A learning reversal of this magnitude could hobble an entire generation unless state leaders quickly work to reverse the slide. Any reasonable approach would include: diagnostic testing to determine what children know when they return to the classroom; aggressive remedial plans and an expanded school calendar that makes up for lost instructional time; an outreach effort, without which many disadvantaged students might not return to school at all; and a blueprint for how states will deliver high-quality instruction the next time an emergency prompts a long-term shutdown of the nation's schools.

Researchers at Michigan State University who are tracking state Covid-19 school closings show that states were utterly unprepared to deal with a crisis that made face-to-face learning impossible. They reported last week that 29 states have suspended face-to-face schooling through the end of the academic year.

A majority of states are requiring districts to plan distance learning options for students but, according to the Michigan State analysis, many districts have yet to begin such plans. Further, no state "was prepared to immediately shift to an online learning platform or distribute computer and internet resources to students statewide." Instead, the onus has been shifted to districts and localities.

Internet access is, of course, fundamental to sound educational policy. Even before the pandemic, an estimated 12 million schoolchildren had trouble completing schoolwork because they lacked internet access at home. Nevertheless, there is significantly more to online education than streaming a lesson designed for the classroom. Effective virtual education requires new styles of teaching as well as

curriculum materials designed specifically for online use. By contrast, the Michigan researchers say, “Even in the best of circumstances, distance learning over the next couple of months will involve hastily planned instruction in unprepared districts from teachers who were expecting to use face-to-face instruction.”

Other research has shown that virtual education as widely practiced in the United States is no substitute for traditional classroom schooling. A scalding 2016 study of full-time virtual public charter schools laid out this indictment in great detail. Researchers found that full-time virtual public charter schools performed worse than traditional public schools in most states and showed weaker academic gains for all demographic subgroups of students. Moreover, the data suggest that students tend to become disengaged from virtual schools, leaving them quickly.

The historical record shows that lengthy interruptions to schooling—during teacher strikes, for example—can undermine student achievement and even success in higher education. Parents affected by the coronavirus shutdown may not be familiar with this history, but they are clearly concerned about the risk that an extended break from school poses for their children.

Recent polls conducted in New York and California show that nearly 90 percent of parents are worried that their children will fall behind because of the closings. Parents in both polls voiced a clear desire for more consistent access to their children’s teachers—an obvious plea for more guidance about how to proceed during the shutdown.

Schools need to do a better job of communicating with these parents, and effective partnership with them will be essential when schools undertake the policy changes that will be required to get students back on track academically.

The country may be stuck with virtual schooling because of the pandemic, but the data clearly show that the method is far from desirable. That makes it even more important that educators sort out how to best catch students up when in-school instruction begins again.

State education officials and policymakers ought to acknowledge that no amount of hard work from dedicated teachers will avert the learning loss crisis. The states should be working right now, in concert with parent groups, on a menu of solutions.

The step of requiring a student to repeat the current grade ought to be taken judiciously—and only after diagnostic tests have shown that the student is too far behind to be promoted. Another option to help all students catch up would be to shorten or skip school breaks, including lengthy summers off, over the next few years to make up for the lost classroom time.

The worst possible outcome would be for state and local officials to shrug and do nothing about a problem that could sidetrack a generation of Americans.