

Testimony Before the United States House Subcommittee on Consumer Protection & Commerce Regarding “Kids Online During COVID: Child Safety in an Increasingly Digital Age”



Prepared for: United States House Subcommittee on Consumer Protection & Commerce
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Chairman Pallone, Chairwoman Schakowsky, Ranking Member Rodgers, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and Distinguished Members of Congress,

Thank you so much for the opportunity.

There have been substantial costs associated with keeping schools closed in terms of students losing ground academically, mentally, and physically – and many of these negative effects have disproportionately impacted less advantaged groups, leading to inequities. Meanwhile, the evidence has generally indicated that schools can safely reopen for in-person instruction and that school reopenings are not associated with major increases in overall Covid-19 transmission or hospitalizations.

In addition to the science, actions by several teachers’ unions – and the stark contrast in the response to the pandemic from the private versus public sectors – suggest that reopening decisions have had more to do with political partisanship and power dynamics than safety and the needs of families.

Private schools have been open for most of the past year – or have been fighting to reopen in that time. In fact, private schools in Kentucky¹ took the fight to the Supreme Court in an attempt to provide in-person services, and private schools in states such as Ohio² and Michigan³ took similar legal actions. A private school in Sacramento even rebranded itself as a daycare to try to get around the government’s arbitrary closure rules.⁴ But many teachers’ unions have been fighting to remain closed by shifting the reopening goalposts every step of the way.⁵ That’s not because of a difference in intentions or benevolence on the part of the employees between the two sectors. The difference

¹ Danville Christian Academy, Inc., et al v. Andy Beshear, Governor of Kentucky. Supreme Court of the United States. Retrieved from https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/20pdf/20a96_e29g.pdf

² Monclova Christian Academy; St. John’s Jesuit High School & Academy; Emmanuel Christian School; Citizens for Community Values dba Ohio Christian Education Network v. Toledo-Lucas County Health Department. United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. Retrieved from <https://www.opn.ca6.uscourts.gov/opinions.pdf/20a0392p-06.pdf>

³ Justice Department backs Michigan private schools in virus challenge. U.S. News & World Report. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/michigan/articles/2020-12-11/justice-department-backs-private-schools-in-virus-challenge>

⁴ Sacramento County must stop Capital Christian School’s coronavirus ‘day care’ stunt. The Sacramento Bee. Retrieved from <https://www.sacbee.com/opinion/editorials/article245037380.html>

⁵ Teachers’ Unions Make the Case for School Choice. National Review. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/02/teachers-unions-make-the-case-for-school-choice/>

is one of incentives. One of these sectors receives children’s education dollars regardless of whether they open their doors for business.

Several actions by teachers’ unions also raised some eyebrows. Just as school closures hit in March 2020, union groups in states such as Oregon⁶ and Pennsylvania⁷ lobbied the government to make it illegal for families to switch to virtual charter schools that have already been successfully providing students with remote instruction for years. These actions aimed to protect a system at the expense of families at the worst time possible.

Then came the political demands. In their report⁸ on safely reopening schools, the Los Angeles teachers’ union called for things unrelated to reopening schools, such as defunding the police, Medicare-for-All, a wealth tax, and a ban on charter schools. At least ten teachers’ unions similarly joined with the Democratic Socialists of America to hold a “National Day of Resistance” to “Demand Safe Schools” including political demands on two occasions in less than a year.⁹

Other things just didn’t add up: why was it safe enough for public school buildings to reopen for in-person childcare services, but not for in-person learning? Why was it safe enough for teachers’ union officials to travel to Puerto Rico to vacation¹⁰ in person, and to send their own children¹¹ to in-person private schools, but not safe enough for their members to return to work in person? Why have four studies each found that school reopenings are more strongly related to political partisanship and teachers’ union influence than Covid risk?

Why did the Congressional Budget Office estimate¹² that only 5 percent of the \$129 billion in relief funding would be spent this year, while up to 95 percent of the funding would be paid out after the pandemic, if the goal is to reopen schools now? Why did half of the Senate block an amendment that would have made federal relief funding conditional on reopening schools in person if all teachers were vaccinated?

Why has Florida – a state that only spends about \$10,700 per student¹³ – been able to essentially fully reopen¹⁴ its schools, while California – a state that has much stronger teachers’ unions and spends about 38 percent more per student – has kept their doors closed?

It might be because the school reopening debate has always been more about politics and power than safety and the needs of families. The past year has put a spotlight on the main problem with K-

⁶ Oregon’s Coronavirus Education Lockdown. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/oregons-coronavirus-education-lockdown-11585697080>

⁷ Cyber charters in Pa. keep teaching amid confusion in coronavirus shutdown order. WHYY. Retrieved from <https://whyy.org/articles/cyber-charters-in-pa-keep-teaching-amid-confusion-in-coronavirus-shutdown-order/>

⁸ The Same Storm, but Different Boats: The Safe and Equitable Conditions for Starting LAUSD in 2020-21. United Teachers Los Angeles. Retrieved from https://www.utla.net/sites/default/files/samestormdiffboats_final.pdf

⁹ National Day of Resistance. Demand Safe Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.demandsafeschools.org/demands/>

¹⁰ CTU board member facing criticism for vacationing in Caribbean while pushing remote learning. WGN. Retrieved from <https://wgntv.com/news/wgn-investigates/ctu-board-member-facing-criticism-for-vacationing-in-caribbean-while-pushing-remote-learning/>

¹¹ After Leading School Closures, Berkeley Teachers Union President Spotted Dropping Daughter Off at In-Person Preschool. KQED. Retrieved from <https://www.kqed.org/news/11862469/after-leading-school-closures-berkeley-teachers-union-president-spotted-dropping-daughter-off-at-in-person-preschool>

¹² Congressional Budget Office Cost Estimate. Retrieved from <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2021-02/hEdandLaborreconciliationestimate.pdf>

¹³ Table 11. Summary Tables. 2018 Public Elementary-Secondary Education Finance Data. United States Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/econ/school-finances/secondary-education-finance.html>

¹⁴ Burbio’s K-12 School Opening Tracker. Burbio. Retrieved from <https://cai.burbio.com/school-opening-tracker/>



12 education in the U.S.: a long-existing massive power imbalance between public school teachers' unions and individual families.

The only way that we're ever going to fix that messed-up set of incentives that's baked into the public school system is to empower families by funding students directly. Think about it this way: if a grocery store doesn't reopen, families can take their money elsewhere. If a school doesn't reopen, families should similarly be able to take their children's education dollars elsewhere. After all, education funding is supposed to be meant for educating children, not for protecting a particular institution.

Families have been getting a bad deal and they're realizing that there isn't any good reason to fund closed institutions when we can fund students directly instead. The latest nationwide survey conducted by RealClear Opinion Research found that support for funding students directly surged by 10 percentage points between April and August 2020.¹⁵

We already fund students directly in higher education with Pell Grants and the GI Bill and in pre-K with programs such as Head Start. The funding goes to individual students and families as opposed to buildings. With all of these programs – in addition to food stamps, Section 8, and Medicaid – we fund individuals instead of institutions. We should apply the same logic to K-12 education and fund students, not systems.

¹⁵ Support for School Choice Surges as Schools Start. RealClear Opinion Research. Retrieved from <https://www.federationforchildren.org/support-for-school-choice-surges-as-schools-start/>

Students Are Losing Ground Academically, Mentally, and Physically

The negative effects on student learning have disproportionately harmed less advantaged groups, meaning school closures have exacerbated deep, already-existing, inequities in our school system and society. A nationwide analysis by McKinsey and Company (2020b) found that students lost about three months of learning in reading and math from school closures in 2020, and the researchers predicted that the learning losses would continue to escalate. In fact, the researchers predicted that the learning losses would actually increase to nearly 7 months overall, and to about 12 months for students from low-income families, even if schools had reopened for full-time in-person instruction back in January 2021 (see Figure 1 in Appendix) (McKinsey & Company, 2020a).

McKinsey and Company (2020a) further estimated that these negative effects on academic outcomes associated with keeping schools closed for in-person instruction would worsen existing achievement gaps by race by 15 to 20 percent. They also estimated that the learning losses associated with school closures could increase high school dropout rates by 2 to 9 percentage points, which would translate to about 232 thousand to 1.1 million additional ninth to eleventh graders dropping out of high school. They further estimated that the average K-12 student in the U.S. could lose \$61,000 to \$82,000 in lifetime earnings – with larger earnings reductions for Black and Hispanic students – solely as a result of COVID-19-related learning losses.

An analysis conducted by Stanford University’s Eric Hanushek and the University of Munich’s Ludger Woessmann, published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Fall 2020, estimated that learning losses from school closures for students in grades 1 through 12 could reduce their lifetime earnings by around 3 percent. They additionally estimated that the learning losses that had already accrued by the Fall of 2020 could reduce long-run economic output in the U.S. by \$14.2 trillion (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020).

Christakis, Van Cleve, and Zimmerman (2020) similarly found that missed instruction during 2020 could be associated with an estimated 13.8 million years of life lost associated with reductions in educational attainment based on U.S. studies.

The nationwide analysis by McKinsey and Company (2020a) additionally found that students of color fell further behind academically than White students in the spring of 2020. The same study indicated that student engagement with online math coursework dropped 16 percent among low-income students, whereas the drop was about 2 percent for high-income students, suggesting more evidence of widening disparities in learning. A study of over 5 million students in grades 1 through 8 from all 50 states, conducted by *Renaissance Learning*, found evidence to suggest that students in some grades were performing as far as 7 weeks behind in reading and that students in all grades were performing 12 or more weeks behind in math.¹⁶

The same national analysis found that the negative effects were larger for students identified as Black, Hispanic, and American Indian, students who attended schools serving low-income families, and students in public schools as opposed to private schools. Another study of nearly 4.4 million studies in grades 3 through 8, conducted by Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), found that student achievement in Fall 2020 was 5 to 10 percentile points lower in math relative to the previous year (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). The same evaluation found that overall reading achievement in Fall 2020

¹⁶ How Kids Are Performing. Tracking the Impact of COVID-19 on Reading and Mathematics Achievement. Special Report Series. Fall 2020 Edition. Renaissance Learning, Inc. Retrieved from <https://renaissance.widen.net/s/wmjtlxkhbm>

was similar to Fall 2019, on average, but the researchers noted that there was evidence of reading declines that were disproportionately concentrated among students identified as Black and Hispanic. Agostinelli et al. (2020) found that “school closures have a large and persistent effect on educational outcomes that is highly unequal” and that “high school students from poor neighborhoods suffer a learning loss of 0.4 standard deviations, whereas children from rich neighborhoods remain unscathed.”

Harvard University’s Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker further highlights these disparities. Student progress on math achievement, as measured by data provided by Zearn Math, was relatively similar across income groups before the schools started to close after the pandemic emergency was declared on March 13th, 2019. Ever since then, through mid-February of 2021, the data have consistently indicated stark disparities in rates of math achievement progress by income levels (see Figure 2 in Appendix).¹⁷

Several individual school districts have also reported surges in the percentages of students failing their courses in 2020. Fairfax County Public Schools, for example, reported that the percentage of middle and high school students failing two or more courses in 2020 increased by 83 percent overall since the same time in the previous school year.¹⁸ That rate of failing grades increased even more, by 111 percent, for students with special needs. The percentage of students failing classes in St. Paul, Minnesota in 2020 increased by 127 percent for high school students and increased by 222 percent for middle school students since the same time in the previous school year.¹⁹ At the same time, data reported by the Houston Chronicle indicated that nearly 4 in 10 students failed two or more classes in Houston Independent School District in Texas.²⁰

Data from Arlington Public Schools in Virginia revealed that failing grades in 2020 increased by 91 percent since the previous year for middle school students with disabilities and by 81 percent for high school students with disabilities.²¹ Data from Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland revealed that failing grades skyrocketed, with 36 percent of ninth-grade students from low-income families failing the first marking period in English, representing about a 500 percent increase in the rate of failure from the same group of students during the previous year.²²

Learning losses are just the tip of the iceberg. Significant evidence suggests school closures are also contributing to negative effects on children’s mental health (Lee, 2020; Varas, Menon, & Bellafiore, 2021). A national survey of parents with school-aged children conducted by Gallup in May 2020 found that 29 percent of respondents reported that their child was “already experiencing harm” to

¹⁷ Percent Change in Student Math Progress. Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker. Harvard University. Retrieved from <https://tracktherecovery.org/>

¹⁸ Study of Teaching and Learning During the Covid 19 Pandemic. Analyses of Q1 Secondary Marks. Fairfax County Public Schools. Retrieved from [https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/BVJV847F7247/\\$file/Q1%20Marks%20Rpt%20-%20v6%20lzh.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/BVJV847F7247/$file/Q1%20Marks%20Rpt%20-%20v6%20lzh.pdf)

¹⁹ Retrieved from <https://www.twincities.com/2020/12/08/st-paul-district-offers-second-chance-after-hs-students-fail-34-of-classes/>

²⁰ Failing grades spike in Virginia’s largest school system as online learning gap emerges nationwide. Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/fairfax-schools-more-failing-grades/2020/11/24/1ac2412e-2e34-11eb-96c2-aac3f162215d_story.html

²¹ Secondary First Quarter 2020-21 Grade Report. Arlington Public Schools. Retrieved from [https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/arlington/Board.nsf/files/BWDQHQ696B9C/\\$file/D-1%20SY%2020-21%20Update%20-%20Secondary%201st%20Quarter%20Grades%20Rept.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/arlington/Board.nsf/files/BWDQHQ696B9C/$file/D-1%20SY%2020-21%20Update%20-%20Secondary%201st%20Quarter%20Grades%20Rept.pdf)

²² Failing grades double and triple — some rising sixfold — amid pandemic learning. Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/montgomery-county-failing-grades/2020/12/03/913affd0-34fb-11eb-8d38-6aea1adb3839_story.html

their emotional or mental health because of social distancing and school closures.²³ An additional 14 percent indicated that they believed their children could only continue distancing for “a few more weeks” until their mental health would suffer. Gallup additionally found²⁴ that 86 percent of parents said “being separated from classmates and teachers” was a challenge for their children, with 45 percent responding that the separation was a “major challenge.”

A poll conducted by Pew Research Center in October 2020 found that 59 percent of parents were more concerned than before the pandemic about the emotional well-being of their children, with higher levels of concern among parents with children in remote learning environments relative to parents with children who had access to in-person instruction.²⁵ A national survey published in *Pediatrics* found that 14 percent of parents with children reported worsening behavioral health for their children between March and June of 2020 (Patrick et al., 2020).

A study published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association Network Open* compared reports of student mental health problems in China, before and after the pandemic started, and found that school closures were associated with an increase in depression, self-injury, and suicidal thoughts, plans, and attempts (Zhang et al., 2020). Viner et al. (2021) performed a systematic review of 72 studies on the topic and concluded that school closures are “associated with considerable harms to CYP [children and young people] health and wellbeing.” Clark County Public Schools, the nation’s fifth-largest school district, reopened their schools after 18 student suicides occurred over nine months, which was twice the amount from the previous year (Green, 2021).

Some pediatricians have also warned that school closures have led to weight gain among children. A pediatrician from Brooklyn, New York, for example, recently said²⁶ that they were “seeing a lot of elementary school-aged kids who are gaining 20 to 30 pounds in a year.” Rundle et al. (2020) also reported that Covid-induced school closures “may exacerbate the epidemic of childhood obesity and increase disparities in obesity risk.”

There are other unintended consequences of preventing families from having the option of in-person instruction. For example, recent studies have found that closures have disrupted the childcare market (Ali, Herbst, & Makridis, 2021) and that women have disproportionately dropped out of the labor market to school their children.²⁷ Economists from the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco found “significant differences between men and women conditional on their parental status several months into the pandemic recession as schools failed to re-open for the start of the new school year” (p.3) and that “prime aged women with a child at home experienced significant job loss and a weaker labor market recovery” (Lofton, Petrosky-Nadeau, & Seitelman, 2021, p.15). Another study by economists from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis reported that “school

²³ U.S. Parents Say COVID-19 Harming Child's Mental Health. Gallup. Retrieved from

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/312605/parents-say-covid-harming-child-mental-health.aspx>

²⁴ Social Factors Most Challenging in COVID-19 Distance Learning. Gallup. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/312566/social-factors-challenging-covid-distance-learning.aspx>

²⁵ Most Parents of K-12 Students Learning Online Worry About Them Falling Behind. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/10/29/most-parents-of-k-12-students-learning-online-worry-about-them-falling-behind/>

²⁶ Remote Learning During Covid-19 Is Causing Children to Gain Weight, Doctors Warn. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/remote-learning-during-covid-19-is-causing-children-to-gain-weight-doctors-warn-11613298602>

²⁷ How covid-19 triggered America’s first female recession in 50 years. *The Economist*. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/03/08/how-covid-19-triggered-americas-first-female-recession-in-50-years>

closures and child care issues have placed an added burden on parents” and that “mothers have increasingly left the labor force because of care responsibilities” (Boesch et al., 2021).

Some families might have privacy concerns associated with remote learning, particularly if they do not have access to an in-person alternative. Parents might also feel uncomfortable with having their children on virtual classrooms or might have concerns regarding screen time or data collection by third-party apps or other software that could be used to facilitate remote instruction.²⁸

Schools Are Not Major Contributors of Community Spread and Can Reopen Safely

Substantial evidence suggests that schools can reopen in person safely and that schools are generally not major contributors of overall community transmission or COVID-19 hospitalizations (Christakis, Van Cleve, & Zimmerman, 2020; Harris, Ziedan, & Hassig, 2021; Honein, Barrios, & Brooks, 2021; Oster, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). A study published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association Network Open* by researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) concluded that “the preponderance of available evidence from the fall school semester has been reassuring insofar as the type of rapid spread that was frequently observed in congregate living facilities or high-density worksites has not been reported in education settings in schools” and that “there has been little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission” (Honein, Barrios, & Brooks, 2021, p. E1).

Data from Brown University’s COVID-19 School Response Dashboard has consistently found that positivity rates in the schools are generally lower than the positivity rates in their overall communities (Oster, 2020). Harris, Ziedan, and Hassig (2021, p.26) concluded that their “results suggest that school reopenings have not increased COVID-19 hospitalizations, especially for the 75 percent of counties that had the lowest baseline hospitalizations.” For the counties with the highest COVID-19 hospitalizations at baseline, Harris, Ziedan, and Hassig (2021, p.1) found that the “estimates are inconsistent across methods and are therefore inconclusive.” *The Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics* published a study of 11 school districts in North Carolina and found that “no instances of child-to-adult transmission of SARS-CoV-2 were reported within schools” (Zimmerman et al., 2021). Goldhaber et al. (2020) examined data from Michigan and Washington state and found that in-person schooling does not contribute to community transmission of the virus in locations with low levels of pre-existing COVID-19 cases.

Oster (2020) reported that “in-person schooling does not appear to increase the risk of Covid-19 transmission for staff and students, according to data from New York state.” In New York City, the 7-day average of the citywide Covid-19 positivity rate was 6.35 percent²⁹ as of March 3rd, 2021, whereas the positivity rate in their schools was only 0.57 percent through March 4th, 2021.³⁰ New York Governor, Andrew Cuomo, noted³¹ this fact as well, stating that New York is “not seeing

²⁸ Massive Shift to Remote Learning Prompts Big Data Privacy Concerns. EducationWeek. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/technology/massive-shift-to-remote-learning-prompts-big-data-privacy-concerns/2020/03>

²⁹ Daily Cases, Hospitalizations and Deaths. COVID-19: Data. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Retrieved from <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/doh/covid/covid-19-data.page>

³⁰ School Based Testing Report. New York City Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://testingresults.schools.nyc/>

³¹ Audio & Rush Transcript: Governor Cuomo Calls into MSNBC Live with Katy Tur. Governor Andrew M. Cuomo. New York State. Retrieved from <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/audio-rush-transcript-governor-cuomo-calls-msnbc-live-katy-tur>

spread in the schools. You see a very low percentage of positivity in the schools.” At the end of November, 2020, Dr. Anthony Fauci said on ABC that “If you look at the data, the spread among children and from children is not really very big at all” and that we should “close the bars and keep the schools open.”

UNICEF (2020, p. 5) reported that “data from 191 counties collected from February to September 2020 show no consistent association between school reopening status and COVID-19 infection rates.” *The New England Journal of Medicine* published a 2021 analysis of data from Sweden, a country that largely kept schools open in person in 2020, which found that 0.90 children between the ages of 7 and 16 per 100,000 were admitted to an ICU for Covid-19 and that “no child with Covid-19 died” (Ludvigsson et al., 2021) Ludvigsson et al. (2021) also found that the sex- and age-adjusted risk ratio of intensive care among schoolteachers was 0.43 relative to other occupations excluding healthcare workers. Another study from Sweden, published by Stockholm University, noted that “one other finding worth discussing on its own is the low Covid-19 mortality risk of children’s and adolescents’ teachers” (Billingsley et al., 2020).

Politics and Power Dynamics Influence School Reopening Decisions

Private schools have been substantially more likely to reopen for in-person instruction than public schools in the U.S., suggesting that incentives might have something to do with reopening decisions.³²

In the private sector, school leaders understand that families can take their children’s education dollars elsewhere if they are not sufficiently satisfied with the provided services (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Friedman, 1955; DeAngelis & Holmes Erickson, 2018). In the public sector, in general, the school district continues to receive children’s K-12 education dollars despite the desires of individual families, and regardless of whether they open their doors for in-person instruction, because there are large transaction costs associated with switching out of residentially assigned schools – families would have to move residences to access a different public school, pay out of pocket for private school tuition and fees, or pay to cover the costs of home-based private education (Hanushek et al., 2007).

In fact, Hartney and Finger (2020) found evidence to suggest that private school competition was associated with a higher likelihood of nearby public school districts reopening for in-person instruction in 2020.

Some people have theorized that private schools have been more likely to reopen because they believe private schools are more well-funded than public schools, which would support the theory that reopening decisions are explained by resources.³³ However, there is no conclusive evidence that

³² Private schools pull students away from public schools. Axios. Retrieved from <https://www.axios.com/private-schools-coronavirus-public-schools-d6aaf803-d458-4301-a3a7-71364b00a5b0.html>; School reopenings more common in rural areas and in private schools, state data shows. Cal Matters. Retrieved from <https://calmatters.org/education/2021/02/california-school-reopening-divide-public-private/>; In the Same Towns, Private Schools Are Reopening While Public Schools Are Not. The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/upshot/coronavirus-school-reopening-private-public-gap.html>

³³ Private schools pull students away from public schools. Axios. Retrieved from <https://www.axios.com/private-schools-coronavirus-public-schools-d6aaf803-d458-4301-a3a7-71364b00a5b0.html>

private schools, on average, are more well-funded than public schools on a per-student basis. On the contrary, Garet, Chan, and Sherman (1995) estimated that public K-12 schools spent an average of 43 to 52 percent more per student than private schools in the 1991-92 school year. A more recent analysis estimated that public K-12 school funding per student was about 80 percent higher than private school funding per student in the 2016-17 school year.³⁴ Another analysis similarly estimated that, on average, per-student funding was about 89 percent higher in public schools than private schools in 2018 (Van Kipnis, 2020). Moreover, K-12 private schools in the U.S. generally report tuition levels that are, on average, substantially lower than total public school revenues per student.³⁵

An analysis by researchers at the Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University found that public school districts that decided to reopen fully or mostly remote in the 2020-21 school year generally demonstrated financial surpluses, suggesting that resources were not the primary reason that their schools did not reopen mostly in person.³⁶ For example, the researchers estimated that Los Angeles public schools, which opted to reopen remotely, had over a half of a billion dollar – or about a \$1,100 per student – funding surplus in the 2020-21 school year.

DeGrow and Rigterink (2021) noted that the school districts receiving more federal CARES Act funding were less likely to reopen than districts receiving less funding. My latest analysis with MIT's Christos A. Makridis examined nationwide data from over 12,000 school districts, covering the vast majority of school-aged children, and did not find any evidence to suggest that higher levels of revenues or expenditures per student are associated with a higher probability of reopening schools in person (DeAngelis & Makridis, 2021b). Instead, we consistently found that public school funding is either uncorrelated, or even negatively correlated, with the decision to reopen in person.³⁷

As found in a few other studies, we did not find a consistent relationship between Covid-19 risk in the community and the probability of reopening in person – but that school reopenings were instead strongly related to political partisanship in the surrounding area (DeAngelis, 2020; DeAngelis & Makridis, 2021a; 2021b; Flanders, 2020; Hartney & Finger, Valant, 2020). In a peer-reviewed study, accepted for publication at *Social Science Quarterly*, we found substantial evidence to suggest that public school districts with stronger teachers' unions were much less likely to reopen for in person instruction (DeAngelis & Makridis, 2021a).

These results were robust to various analytic techniques, four measures of union influence, and empirical specifications which included controls for district size and several county-level demographics including political partisanship, Covid risk, educational attainment, household income, marital status, gender, age, and race.

In the same study, we found that political partisanship strongly predicted reopening decisions, but that reopenings were not generally related to Covid-19 risk as measured by cases or deaths per capita. In a Brown University working paper, Hartney and Finger (2020) separately found that public school districts with stronger teachers' unions were less likely to reopen in person. Tulane University

³⁴ Public School Funding Per Student Averages 80% More Than Private Schools. Just Facts. Retrieved from <https://www.justfactsdaily.com/public-school-funding-per-student-averages-80-more-than-private-schools>

³⁵ U.S. K-12 Education Spending Comparisons. Educational Freedom Institute. Retrieved from <http://efinstitute.org/education-spending-comparisons/>

³⁶ Financial Turmoil: Open or Remote? What it Means for School District Budgets. Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University. Retrieved from <https://edunomicslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Financial-Turmoil-Webinar-Mar3.pdf>

³⁷ School Isn't Closed for Lack of Money. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/school-isnt-closed-for-lack-of-money-11615332385>

researchers also observed that public school districts with more teachers' union influence were less likely to reopen in person (Harris, Ziedan, & Hassig, 2021).

The stark contrast between Florida and California is a prime example of our overall findings (DeAngelis & Makridis, 2021a; 2021b). The latest data from Burbio³⁸ this month indicates that in Florida, a state that spends about \$10,700 per student per year according to the latest data³⁹ from the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly all public schools offer full-time in-person instruction. In California, which spends about 38 percent more per student and has much stronger teachers' unions, most public school students still don't have access to in-person options.

Several actions by public school teachers' unions also raised some eyebrows and suggested that the school reopening debate was more about politics and power than safety. Just as school closures hit in March 2020, union groups in states such as Oregon⁴⁰ and Pennsylvania⁴¹ lobbied the government to make it illegal for families-in-need to switch to virtual public charter schools that have already been successfully providing students with remote instruction for years.

In their report⁴² on safely reopening schools, the Los Angeles teachers' union called for things unrelated to reopening schools, such as defunding the police, Medicare-for-All, a wealth tax, and a ban on charter schools. At least ten teachers' unions joined with the Democratic Socialists of America to hold a "National Day of Resistance" to "Demand Safe Schools" on two occasions in less than a year. Included in their list of demands, in addition to more funding and staffing, were police-free schools, rent cancelation, unemployment benefits for all, and a ban on standardized tests and new charter schools.⁴³

Other things just didn't add up: why was it safe enough for public school buildings to reopen for in-person childcare services, but not for in-person learning? Why was it safe enough for teachers' union officials to travel to Puerto Rico to vacation⁴⁴ in person, and to send their own children⁴⁵ to in-person private schools, but not safe enough for their members to return to work in person? Why have four studies each found that school reopenings are more strongly related to political partisanship and teachers' union influence than Covid risk?

Why did the Congressional Budget Office estimate⁴⁶ that only 5 percent of the \$129 billion in relief funding would be spent this year, while up to 95 percent of the funding would be paid out after the pandemic, if the goal is to reopen schools now? Why did half of the Senate block an amendment

³⁸ Burbio's K-12 School Opening Tracker. Burbio. Retrieved from <https://cai.burbio.com/school-opening-tracker/>

³⁹ 2018 Public Elementary-Secondary Education Finance Data. United States Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/econ/school-finances/secondary-education-finance.html>

⁴⁰ Oregon's Coronavirus Education Lockdown. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/oregons-coronavirus-education-lockdown-11585697080>

⁴¹ Cyber charters in Pa. keep teaching amid confusion in coronavirus shutdown order. WHYY. Retrieved from <https://whyy.org/articles/cyber-charters-in-pa-keep-teaching-amid-confusion-in-coronavirus-shutdown-order/>

⁴² The Same Storm, but Different Boats: The Safe and Equitable Conditions for Starting LAUSD in 2020-21. United Teachers Los Angeles. Retrieved from https://www.utla.net/sites/default/files/samestormdiffboats_final.pdf

⁴³ National Day of Resistance. Demand Safe Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.demandsafeschools.org/demands/>

⁴⁴ CTU board member facing criticism for vacationing in Caribbean while pushing remote learning, WGN. Retrieved from <https://wgntv.com/news/wgn-investigates/ctu-board-member-facing-criticism-for-vacationing-in-caribbean-while-pushing-remote-learning/>

⁴⁵ After Leading School Closures, Berkeley Teachers Union President Spotted Dropping Daughter Off at In-Person Preschool. KQED. Retrieved from <https://www.kqed.org/news/11862469/after-leading-school-closures-berkeley-teachers-union-president-spotted-dropping-daughter-off-at-in-person-preschool>

⁴⁶ Congressional Budget Office Cost Estimate. Retrieved from <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2021-02/hEdandLaborreconciliationestimate.pdf>



that would have made federal relief funding conditional on reopening schools in person if all teachers were vaccinated?

It might be because the school reopening debate has always been more about politics and power than safety and the needs of students and their families. The past year has put a spotlight on the main problem with K-12 education in the United States: a long-existing massive power imbalance between public school teachers' unions and individual families.

The only way that we're ever going to fix that messed-up set of incentives that's baked into the public school system is to empower families by funding students directly. If a grocery store doesn't reopen, families can take their money elsewhere. If a school doesn't reopen, families should similarly be able to take their children's education dollars elsewhere. As a matter of fact, families should be able to take their children's education dollars elsewhere regardless of the reopening decision. Education funding is supposed to be meant for educating children, not for protecting a particular institution.

We already fund students directly in higher education with Pell Grants and the GI Bill and in pre-K with programs such as Head Start. The funding goes to individual students and families as opposed to buildings. With all of these programs – in addition to food stamps, Section 8, and Medicaid – we fund individuals instead of institutions. We should apply the same logic to K-12 education and fund students, not systems.

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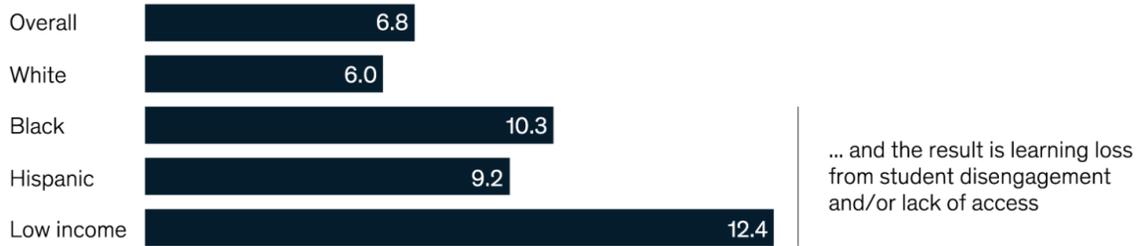
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Appendix

Figure 1: Estimated Months of Learning Lost Overall and by Subgroup

Average months of learning lost in scenario 2 compared with typical in-classroom learning²



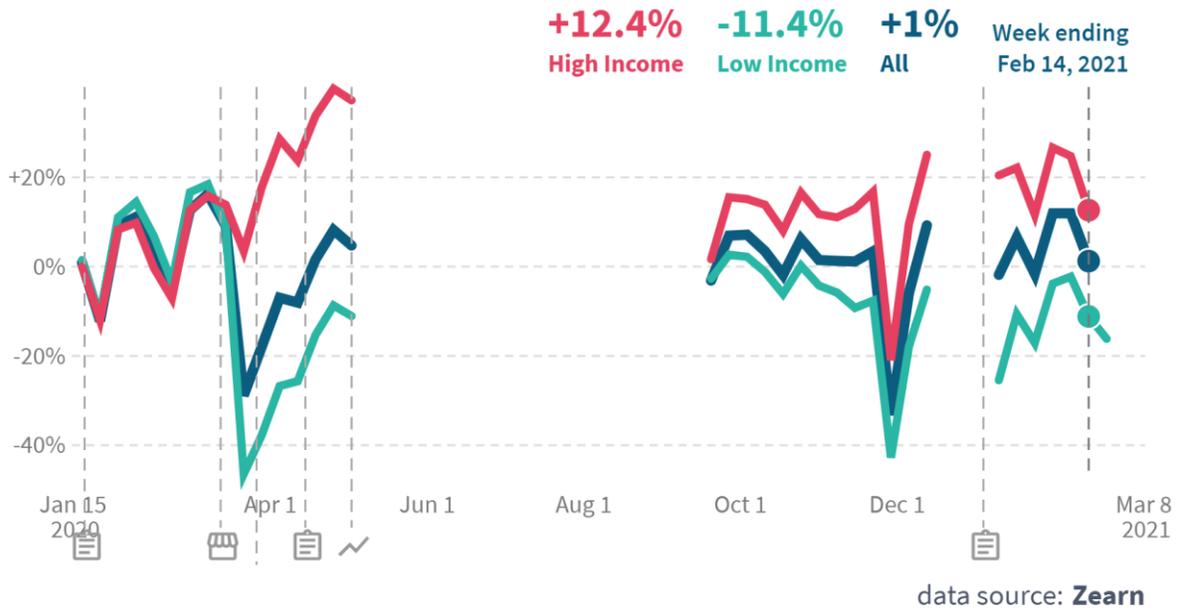
¹Estimates based on income quintiles, with assumption that top 2 income quintiles receive high-quality instruction.

²Includes 0.05 standard deviation reduction for black, Hispanic, and low-income students to account for recession impacts (~1 month of additional lost learning).
Source: US Census 2018

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Notes. – Source: COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>

Figure 2: Percent Change in Student Math Progress Before and After School Closures



Notes. – Source: Percent Change in Student Math Progress. Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker. Harvard University. Retrieved from <https://tracktherecovery.org/>