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BRIEFING BEFORE THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS

House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis

CHALLENGES TO SAFELY REOPENING K-12 SCHOOLS

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August 6, 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Parents, teachers, school personnel, and elected officials across the country are facing a difficult decision about how to begin the 2020-21 school year during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The prospect of any child, teacher, or school employee contracting COVID-19 and facing the possibility of death or long-term illness should weigh heavily on all policymakers involved in decisions affecting schools' plans. But it is critical that policymakers also recognize the serious risks associated with prolonged school closures, particularly for children and parents from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

Researchers studying the educational effects of school closures on students' learning warn that school closures will lead to months of lost learning. This academic regression will be most acute among economically disadvantaged children, who have fewer resources and opportunities to learn outside-of-school than their more affluent peers. As a result, we risk expanding the academic achievement gap for a generation of American children.

Beyond the educational impact, prolonged school closures create significant risks for children's health and welfare. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics recently warned:

> Lengthy time away from school and associated interruption of supportive services often results in social isolation, making it difficult for schools to identify and address important learning deficits as well as child and adolescent physical or sexual abuse, substance use, depression, and suicidal ideation. This, in turn, places children and adolescents at considerable risk of morbidity and, in some cases, mortality.[1]

The nation's K-12 schools are on the front lines of state child welfare systems. The media has reported a spike in severe child abuse incidents during the pandemic.[2] But overall reports of abuse are down raising serious concerns about whether abuse is going unreported.[3] For example, in New York, reports of child abuse were down 51 percent as of June compared to last year.[4] The National Sexual Assault Hotline has reported a record demand during the pandemic, and half of the calls are from minors.[5]

It is clear that prolonged school closures harm children. But they also create real challenges for parents, especially for single parents, many of whom lack alternative forms of child care.

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[1] American Academy of Pediatrics, "COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Reopenings," June 25, 2020.
[2] Candy Woodall, "As hospitals see more severe child abuse injuries during coronavirus, 'the worst is yet to come'," USA Today, May 13, 2020.
[3] William Brangham, "During the pandemic, reports of child abuse have decreased. Here's why that is concerning," PBS, May 13, 2020.
[4] Nikita Stewart, "Child abuse cases drop 51 percent. The authorities are very worried." New York Times, June 9, 2020.
[5] Alia E. Dastagir, "National Sexual Assault Hotline sees record demand during the pandemic. Many reaching out are children," USA Today, July 11, 2020.

Many parents have effectively been forced to choose between their jobs and their children's care. This burden is being felt disproportionately by single mothers. A May Pew Research Center analysis found that single mothers' employment rates fell by 22 percent compared to 2019, compared to a 9 percent decline among all parents.[6]

EVIDENCE & EXPERIENCE INDICATE SCHOOLS CAN SAFELY REOPEN

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that "all policy considerations for the upcoming school year should start from the goal of having students physically present in school." The AAP bases this recommendation on the clear risks of prolonged school closures and also to the mounting evidence about the limited health risks of COVID-19 on young children and adolescents:

> *"Although many questions remain, the preponderance of evidence indicates that children and adolescents are less likely to be symptomatic and less likely to have severe disease resulting from SARS-CoV-2 infection. In addition, children may be less likely to become infected and to spread infection."* [7]

For example, children are at very low risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19. Indeed, children aged 5–14 are seven times more likely to die of influenza than of COVID-19. Children aged 1–4 are 20 times more likely to die of influenza. Overall, Americans under the age of 25 represent 0.15 percent of all COVID-19 fatalities in the U.S.[8]

The American Academy of Pediatrics' guidelines for safely reopening include the following recommendations:

- "Physical distancing"
- "Utilizing outdoor space"
- "Cohort classes to minimize crossover among children and adults"
- Face covering for elementary students, when possible, and "universal face coverings in middle and high schools when not able to maintain a 6-foot distance. [9]

The Academy also recommends that schools remain "flexible and nimble in responding to new information," and urged school leaders to prepare to adapt strategies depending on the level of virus transmission in the area.

FREOPP published a working paper last month providing our recommendations for reopening the nation's schools and providing options for students and teachers who cannot go back to school due to age or other risk factors. My coauthors Avik Roy, Bob Kocher, and Lanhee Chen reviewed public health evidence and risks to children, adolescents, and

[6] Tim Henderson, "Single Mothers Hit Hard by Job Losses," Pew, May 26, 2020.
[7] American Academy of Pediatrics.
[8] Avik Roy, "Estimating the Risk of Death from COVID-19 vs. Influenza or Pneumonia," FREOPP, May 18, 2020.
[9] Ibid.

school personnel and provide additional recommendations, expanding upon the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines.[10]

Our overarching recommendation for reopening American schools and continuing K-12 education during the pandemic is to provide parents, students, and educators with greater flexibility to make decisions based on their personal risk preferences and to provide access to high-quality learning options.

As of today, many school systems are attempting to reopen. For example, the Department of Defense Education Agency operates 160 schools serving 69,000 children of military personnel in 11 countries and 7 states across the country. These schools are reopening providing in-person instruction while offering virtual learning for children whose parents prefer that they stay home.[11] About 13 percent are choosing the virtual option.

Many traditional public school districts are also planning to reopen with in-person instruction or a hybrid approach to begin the school year. According to a new analysis from the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, 41 percent of school districts in rural areas and 28 percent in suburban areas plan to provide in-person instruction this fall.[12] (Many of these school districts are offering parents the choice to keep their child at home to participate in remote instruction.) Overall, University of Washington researchers report that more than 50 percent of school districts sampled will open with in-person or hybrid learning this fall. The school districts are showing a path forward for the rest of the nation.

THE MAJORITY OF THE NATION'S LARGEST PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE NOT REOPENING WITH IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION

As of today, the majority of large school districts in the United States are beginning the school year providing remote instruction. I reviewed the current reopening plans of the 120 largest school districts in the United States. 71 of these school districts are scheduled to start the year with remote instruction and no in-person learning.[13]

Altogether, these school districts that will not open in-person serve more than 7 million children. Based on poverty rates within these districts, more than 1.4 million low-income children will begin the year learning from home. And the risk is great that they will fall academically behind every day.

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[10] Lanhee Chen, Preston Cooper, Bob Kocher, Dan Lips, and Avik Roy, "Reopening America's Schools During COVID-19," FREOPP, July 16, 2020.
[11] Karen Jowers, "About 9,000 children are signed up for virtual option as DoD schools reopen," Military Times, August 4, 2020.
[12] Center for Reinventing Public Education, "Current reopening plans vary by district locale," University of Washington, August 5, 2020, at: crpe.org.
[13] Dan Lips, "A List of the 71 Largest COVID-19 School Closures," FREOPP, August 5, 2020.

This analysis is consistent with other reviews of large school districts' current plans for the 2020–21 school year. For example, Education Week established a database tracking school district reopening plans, which shows that a majority of large school districts are providing remote learning only.[14]

The spring 2020 experience with virtual learning, especially in the K-12 setting, has not been encouraging. In Boston's public schools, one in five students became virtual dropouts; i.e., they did not log into class when schools moved to all-virtual learning.[15] There are wide disparities in children's access to computers and broadband internet due to closures in the 2019–20 school year. Many parents reported that their children received limited instruction and individual teacher interactions.

ADDRESSING INEQUALITY IN OUTSIDE-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING OPTIONS MUST BE A PRIORITY

The pandemic's impact on school districts has exposed one of the significant barriers to equal opportunity in American education. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more dependent on in-school learning and have fewer resources to learn when schools are closed.

For decades, researchers have studied differences in outside-of-school learning opportunities based on children's socioeconomic status. A common view is that these differences and the "summer learning slide" contribute to the academic achievement gap between poor and nonpoor children.

Many factors likely affect differences in outside-of-school learning rates between poor and nonpoor children, such family structure, parental education levels, and time spent with adults. One significant difference is that low-income families have fewer resources for outside of school learning. According to Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane, the richest 20 percent of American families spent approximately $9,400 on enrichment for their children compared to $1,400 spent by the poorest 20 percent, as of 2006.[16]

Across the United States, families with the financial means to do so are working to create other learning options for their children in addition to the virtual learning provided by their public school. Many are exploring alternative options to the public school's remote learning for their children, such as homeschooling. Many are choosing to homeschool their children. Others are partnering with other parents to form pandemic pods, or groups of children that will learn together outside-of-school, with the help of tutors or part-time teachers as well as

[14] Education week, School Districts' Reopening Plans: A Snapshot, Updated August 5, 2020.
[15] Bianca Vazquez Toness, "One in five Boston public school children may be virtual dropouts," Boston Globe, May 23, 2020.
[16] Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane, "Rising Inequality in Family Incomes and Children's Educational Outcomes," Russell Sage Foundation, May 2016.

online instruction. Many are seeking placements in private schools that are reopening and providing in-person learning while public schools are closed.

But these flexible alternatives to traditional public schooling and remote learning during the pandemic generally require families to have resources. The growing interest in pandemic pods, for example, has been met with rising calls of inequality. Atlanta Public School Social and Emotional Learning Specialist Clara Totenberg Green discussed this issue of equity in the New York Times:

> At face value, learning pods seem a necessary solution to the current crisis. But in practice, they will exacerbate inequities, racial segregation and the opportunity gap within schools. Children whose parents have the means to participate in learning pods will most likely return to school academically ahead, while many low-income children will struggle at home without computers or reliable internet for online learning.

Policymakers could address inequality in outside-of-school learning opportunities by providing funding assistance directly to parents.

As policymakers consider providing aid for education during the pandemic, Congress and state government need to be focusing on ways to provide direct aid to low-income families, children with disabilities, students who are learning the English language, and others who are at risk of falling behind.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN TO LEARN WHEN SCHOOLS ARE CLOSED

If schools cannot reopen to provide in-person learning, Congress, states, and school districts should take steps to promote equal opportunities to learn outside of school when schools are closed.

- ***Provide funding directly to parents in the form of education savings accounts or micro-grants to support their children's outside of school learning needs.*** Before the pandemic, several states offered state-funded education savings account programs which allow parents to use a share of their school funding to purchase tuition, tutoring, and other educational services. Several states—including Oklahoma, South Carolina, and New Hampshire—are using a share of the federal funding under the CARES Act to provide grants directly to families to support outside of school learning. (In addition to CARES Act funding, federal and state policymakers could use 529 savings programs which allow tax-free saving for certain K-12, postsecondary, and job training expenses through state-managed investments, as an existing vehicle for distributing aid directly to families while maintaining proper oversight to ensure that funds are spent appropriately.)

- ***Close the digital divide by supporting access to hardware and reliable internet to the extent possible and access to high-quality virtual instruction.*** States and school systems

should take steps to close the digital divide in at home information technology by supporting access to hardware and reliable internet to the extent practicable. Many families live in areas without access to high-speed Internet and mobile internet including cellular devices may be the most practical option. States and school systems should invest resources to ensure that all students, particularly children living in low socioeconomic households, have access to necessary technology to learn at home.

- ***Enable the creation of microschools and "pandemic pods" for all children who wish to learn with other children in smaller settings, not just families who can afford it.*** At a microschool, a child could learn in a variety of ways including through teacher instruction, virtual learning, or hybrid-homeschooling. Importantly, microschools would provide the child care that many families may require to work outside of the home in addition to in-person instruction. Policymakers can initiate reforms to allow education funding to follow children to microschools to make this learning option available to all children.

- ***Relax licensing requirements for tutoring, distance learning instruction.*** Enabling widespread homeschooling and distance learning with public support during the pandemic will require significant flexibility. Relaxing licensing rules to allow teachers to provide tutoring and distance learning services would benefit students and teachers.

- ***Prioritize the needs of children with serious learning disabilities, English language learners, foster children, homeless children, and other groups of students with a high-risk of falling further behind to provide in-person learning even if schools are closed.*** Congress, states, and school districts should prioritize the needs of at-risk student groups. Some public school districts are providing options for children with learning disabilities to return to school even if schools are closed for other students.

CONCLUSION

Since 1965, the focus of federal education policy has been to promote equal opportunity to children at-risk of being denied a high-quality education. Decades of federal laws and programs have focused on providing assistance to disadvantaged student groups—including children from low-income households, students with special needs, and other student groups often underserved in public education. During the pandemic, disadvantaged children who cannot attend school in-person should be the focus of any federal aid to ensure that they receive an equal opportunity to learn while schools are closed.