

Testimony of Mary Katharine Ham

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Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis  
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Thank you for having me. I'm here as a couple of things— I'm a mom of three, I'm a commentator and public figure, I'm someone who cares about the education of kids and the well-being of parents, and I'm someone who watched, wrote about, and worked with a generation of parents, particularly moms, as they fought tooth and nail for months on end to get access to one of the most basic, legally required public goods there is— school.

In 2020, American mothers were called upon to parent in crisis. One day in March, I was a newly married working mom of two, with a first-grader in my local public school. By a Friday of that same week, the school we had walked the 1/2 mile to from our home every day closed its doors. It did not reopen them until more than a year later. My life changed. My career shifted.

Sometimes people don't believe me when I say the schools were closed for a year. If you didn't see it up close, it seems absurd, impossible even. But more than 6 million students in this country, mostly concentrated in America's bluest metro areas and their suburbs, were deprived of in-person instruction for more than a year. They got the worst of it. But some 30 percent of American students missed more than four months of school. That is another 15 million kids.

The length and breadth of school closings are important to remember because, as you might imagine, functioning schools are quite important to the participation of moms in the workforce. According to on Brookings publication, between February and August of 2020, "mothers of children 12 years old and younger lost 2.2 million jobs compared to 870,000 among fathers." A 2021 McKinsey study showed among parents of kids under 10, the number of women considering leaving the workforce and downshifting their careers was 10 points higher than men in the same demographic. In the month of September 2020 alone, 1 million people left the workforce. Eighty percent of them were women, with large losses among working moms, Latina and Black women.

The pandemic had a way of exacerbating whatever tensions the job market and home life already carried for women. Women worked disproportionately in low-wage, face-to-face service, retail, and hospitality jobs? Their jobs carried disproportionate risk of disappearing. Women did more work caregiving and housekeeping at home? They did even more when they had to become Zoom butlers to their children. Childcare was expensive and hard to come by for young children before the pandemic? It became worse as daycares closed in many states and large cities obliterated the one stable source for older children as schools shut down for the foreseeable future.

While private schools functioned with safety and success just blocks from shuttered public schools, the children of those most in need of both the structure and education public schools formerly offered languished in virtual school. It amounted to a giant social experiment with

millions of families, one teachers unions lobbied for, with the worst results for those who were already at a disadvantage. A recent, rigorous Harvard study of virtual school showed high-poverty schools "were more likely to go remote and they suffered larger declines when they did so," losing about a half a year of normal progress during remote school.

The bad effects are compounding as those kids who missed most school have both emotional and academic tolls that make school harder on students and teachers alike. The consequences are devastating and long-lasting. It didn't have to happen. Schools in the rest of the country, Europe, Scandinavia opened their doors with modifications shortly after the pandemic closed them.

But in America's cities, while children weren't getting an education, their moms were. They learned about teachers unions and that their first priority wasn't students. They learned how to FOIA. They learned that if they asked for the public good that unions and school boards claimed to value, they'd be accused of being racists ,or just wanting their babysitters back, or wanting to sacrifice children. They learned federal law enforcement might look into them for the sin of attending school board meetings.

I am not overstating the rhetoric in these areas, where a mix of political conformity, social pressure and exaggeration of risk of Covid-19 to children created a fear spiral and bureaucratic inertia that has lost schools more than 1 million enrollees and counting.

One Alexandria, Va. school board official asked parents if they'd like their children "to be alive or educated?" A friend of mine who advocated for children with disabilities being able to access their legally required aides and IEPs was told by a school official that she just wanted to be able to go to brunch.

Some moms learned they could be swing voters, something they never imagined, certainly fueling in part the win of Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin in Virginia, who made concentrated appeals to frustrated parents.

A lot of talk about the pandemic has been about the opportunity it presents for big change, in the economy, in public services, in the way tax money is spent. One expert told NPR's "Consider This" in October 2020, "if we don't see structural change, we're going to see the inequalities we're experiencing right now" increase. Certainly, disruption of this extent breeds opportunity for creativity and new solutions.

But we are two years into the pandemic and the most consequential structural change has been the vast and long closing of public schools, which was ironically spearheaded by public school's and equity's biggest advocates. Yet it actively and predictably hurt those with least advantages most. There was no creativity or new solutions in these places, even as billions and trillions were handed out to foster them. Those who experienced the bureaucratic debacle of the last two years in America's public schools were failed dramatically by the public good closest to their homes.

They will look elsewhere for solutions. They already are, as homeschooling increased by more than 60% in the 2020-21 school year, with minority families taking up a larger and larger portion of that statistic. So much goodwill was lost.

If you want to make structural change that makes life easier for working moms, the first step would be winning back trust by acknowledging the giant mistake made by keeping schools closed for millions of children for more than a year. If you have creative solutions, apply them to this generational problem. Quite understandably, moms won't be quick to trust those who caused the problem to solve it.