



≡ EDUCATION

The Kids Are Not Alright

How school closures became a policy decision that held Minnesota students hostage.

Imagine you are a Minnesota high school student, and this upcoming spring you will graduate. Excitement, nervousness, and even a bit of trepidation fills you. The last years of your high school career have been tough. School closures impacted you academically, socially, and emotionally. Only 36 percent of your 11th-grade class could do grade-level math as of spring 2022. Statewide, fewer than half of Minnesota students are proficient in the subject. Just under 50 percent of students can't read at grade level. As you look to the future, you still don't know how deeply this will impact your life or contributions to society.

Many of us were warning about the potential learning loss and calling for schools to reopen back in September 2020. Since then, state and national data have exposed the consequences of extended school closures.

BY
CATRIN
WIGFALL

What started as a public health intervention soon expanded into a public policy response that brought considerable and unnecessary cost upon our next generation of leaders. And the damage done will not be easily fixed.

In March 2020, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz shut down the state's public education system. Pausing how school normally operated when COVID-19 first began that spring was an understandable precaution. Not much of anything was known about the virus. But throughout summer 2020 and entering that new school year, data quickly emerged showing that prolonged school closures would have devastating effects on students' cognitive, social, and emotional well-being. Data also began showing that children were at much lower risk for contracting the coronavirus and transmitting it to family members.

But this evidence-based picture did not result in meaningful effort to resume in-person instruction. State guidance and pressure from teachers'



unions continued to prioritize a countermeasure with little health benefit — and significant cost — to school-age children. The excessive caution with school reopening decisions has added to the growing awareness of the failing realities of our state’s education system. As the least vulnerable to COVID-19, children have been hit the hardest by state leaders’ public policy responses.

Politics, far more than science, shaped school district decision-making.

The overtly complicated, arbitrary matrix guiding school districts’ mode

What started as a public health intervention soon expanded into a public policy response that brought considerable and unnecessary cost upon our next generation of leaders.

of learning created much confusion for school leaders, caused districts to shift back and forth between learning models out of uncertainty, and did not offer a particularly promising model of how to ensure all students were provided with a free and appropriate public education.

Health concerns or politics?

The significant tradeoffs of school closures that were known for some time outweighed the unknown benefits.

Studies on the severity of the coronavirus in children were coming out as early as February 2020. A report from the World Health Organization-China Joint Mission stated: “Disease in children appears to be relatively rare and mild with approximately 2.4 percent of the total reported cases reported amongst individuals aged under 19 years. A very small proportion of those aged under 19 years have developed severe (2.5 percent) or



This is an adaptation from a longer paper, available at [AmericanExperiment.org](https://www.americalexperiment.org)

critical disease (0.2 percent).”

In March 2020, a systematic review of COVID-19 in children showed milder cases and a better prognosis than adults. Studies from China, South Korea, Japan, and Iran also published in March 2020 on household transmission clusters suggested that children were unlikely to be the source of viral transmission within households.

An April 2020 study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* showed that less than 1 percent of coronavirus cases were in children younger than 10 years of age. Nearly 1,400 children with contact were then investigated, and 171 were found infected with only three requiring intensive care — all of whom had coexisting conditions.

Another April 2020 study looked at data from the SARS outbreak in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Singapore, which suggested that “school closures did not contribute to the control of the epidemic” and that policymakers needed “to be aware of the equivocal evidence when proposing or implementing national or regional school closures for COVID-19, given the very high costs of lengthy school closures during pandemics.”

A systematic review of literature published in May 2020 and one published in June 2020 proposed that children and school transmission are not major drivers of COVID-19 transmission. Another June 2020 study by Institute Pasteur found no significant transmission of the coronavirus among children or from students to teachers.

A July 2020 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention listed children under 18 accounting for less than 0.1 percent of COVID deaths in the United States. A literature review also released in July that year looked at studies published from February 2020 to June 2020, noting that children then accounted for 1.7 percent to 2 percent of the diagnosed cases of COVID-19. Later on, the authors write: “While children are not the face of this pandemic, its broader impacts on children risk being catastrophic and amongst the most lasting consequences

for societies as a whole.”

Data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) & World Bank survey “show no relationship between the extent of school closures and COVID-19 infection rates across countries,” wrote the OECD on July 1, 2022. “This shows



State guidance and pressure from teachers’ unions continued to prioritize a countermeasure with little health benefit — and significant cost — to school-age children.

that school closures were not inevitable but, rather, a policy choice...”

Also noteworthy was the ample guidance available about how to reopen schools safely and the hundreds of schools and school systems that were actually doing so nationwide — including many of the country’s biggest school districts, charter schools, and private schools.

But this didn’t stop teachers’ unions

from blocking school reopening efforts and engaging in political stunts such as fake “body bags” (Washington, D.C.), writing their own obituaries and sending them to governors (Arizona, Iowa), and creating a laundry list of partisan demands in partnership with the Democratic Socialists of America (Minnesota), to name a few.

“Rather than work to open schools safely, the unions are issuing ultimatums and threatening strikes until they are granted their ideological wish list,” wrote *The Wall Street Journal* Editorial Board in August 2020. “Children, who would have to endure more lost instruction, are their hostages.”

National studies released fall 2020 suggested that reopening decisions were driven more by teachers’ union influence than actual safety concerns. Using data on the reopening decisions of 835 public school districts in the United States, Corey DeAngelis and Christos Makridis found that “school districts in locations with stronger teachers’ unions are less likely to reopen in person...when full-time in-person instruction is available as an option to all students.” Additionally, they found no “evidence to suggest that measures of COVID-19 risks are correlated with school reopening decisions.”

Political scientists Michael Hartney and Leslie Finger reached similar conclusions in October 2020, analyzing national data and finding that “politics, far more than science, shaped school district decision-making,” and that “mass partisanship and teacher union strength best explain how school boards approached reopening.”

Learning loss

Data from Minnesota’s reading and math state tests (the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments or MCAs) show



Catrin Wigfall is a policy fellow at Center of the American Experiment. She is the director of Educated Teachers MN and Employee Freedom MN. Catrin spent two years teaching fifth grade general education and sixth grade Latin in Arizona as a Teach for America corps member before using her classroom experience to transition back into education policy work.

school closures have exacerbated academic proficiency challenges among all student groups and much work remains to ensure students acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills. Fewer than half of students statewide are performing at grade-level in math (44.6 percent), and just under 50 percent of students can't read at grade level.

Academic achievement disparities from pre-COVID are largely unchanged — both across racial/ethnic groups and income levels. Nearly 41 percent of white students did not demonstrate proficiency in reading on the MCA, compared with nearly 70 percent of Black and Hispanic students who aren't reading at grade level. Around 53 percent of Asian students, nearly 73 percent of American Indian students and over 51 percent of students who identify as two or more races are not proficient in reading. Math proficiency is even more bleak — nearly 46 percent of white students, 58 percent of Asian students, 78 percent of Hispanic students, nearly 81 percent of Black students, nearly 83 percent of American Indian students, and 60 percent of students who identify as two or more races can't do grade-level math. Low-income white students also significantly trail higher-income white students in academic achievement across Minnesota.

Average American College Testing (ACT) scores among Minnesota's high school graduating class of 2022 are the lowest they have been in at least a decade. Only 28 percent of exam-takers met all four college-readiness benchmarks in math, reading, English, and scientific reasoning, the lowest percentage in at least a decade.

Minnesota student achievement is also measured by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. Minnesota students' scores declined across the board in fourth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, eighth-grade reading, and eighth-grade math compared to 2019 but are also the worst in decades.

National studies have identified the negative impacts of distance learning too. *A Harvard University study found that remote instruction was the primary driver of widening achievement gaps.* Students in districts that were in distance

learning longer suffered worse learning loss. Minnesota's high poverty schools — serving predominantly low-income families — spent double the weeks in distance learning in the 2020-2021 school year than the state's low- and mid-poverty schools. Even at low poverty schools — serving predominantly high-income families — the effects of distance learning were negative, with students falling behind growth expectations when schools entered this learning model.



Minnesota students' scores declined across the board in fourth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, eighth-grade reading, and eighth-grade math compared to 2019 but are also the worst in decades.

A National Bureau of Economic Research study analyzed 12 states — including Minnesota — and found that while learning loss was evident across all included states, students in districts that offered less in-person learning had greater declines. Minnesota students in school districts that switched to distance learning over the course of the 2020-2021 school year had greater declines in math compared to their peers in school districts that stayed mostly in-person. Another national study found that Minnesota students in districts with either little or very little in-person instruction experienced the greatest declines in reading proficiency in both spring 2021 and 2022 compared to spring 2019.

Test scores aren't the only indicator

of success, but they play a key role in evaluating learning and indicating how kids are doing. And based on that indicator, the kids are not alright.

Economic impacts

Without mastery of the basics, children will grow up to be less productive and earn less. This has long-term consequences on the human capital and welfare of impacted students, particularly those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

According to the World Bank, school closures could cost children \$21 trillion in earnings over their lifetimes, or equivalent to 17 percent of 2022 global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), reported *The Economist*. If fewer students are graduating with the skills necessary for today's jobs, the economic impact from this will affect all parts of society.

While restrictions loosened and in-person instruction finally became a reality for more Minnesota students, the learning loss from two years of on-and-off distance schooling remains. Since March 2020, prolonged school closures — outside of the understandable necessity of them during the early uncertain months of COVID-19 — have contributed to significant and profound academic learning loss that risks having long-term impacts.

No matter the level of justification for extended school closures, the effects on K-12 education in a broad sense and on our young and most vulnerable generations are devastating and should serve as a call to carefully weigh future policy choices. Districts are still spending the billions in federal relief dollars they received, of which a good chunk is supposed to be dedicated to learning loss recovery.

Finally there is more voiced agreement that school closures have contributed to higher educational inequality and that potential long-term impacts on students have yet to be fully realized. It's unfortunate it took so many students being left behind for that to happen. Will policy-makers learn from this imposed disaster, or will politics continue to take precedence over our kids' futures as we wait to see if they'll ever fully recover? ★