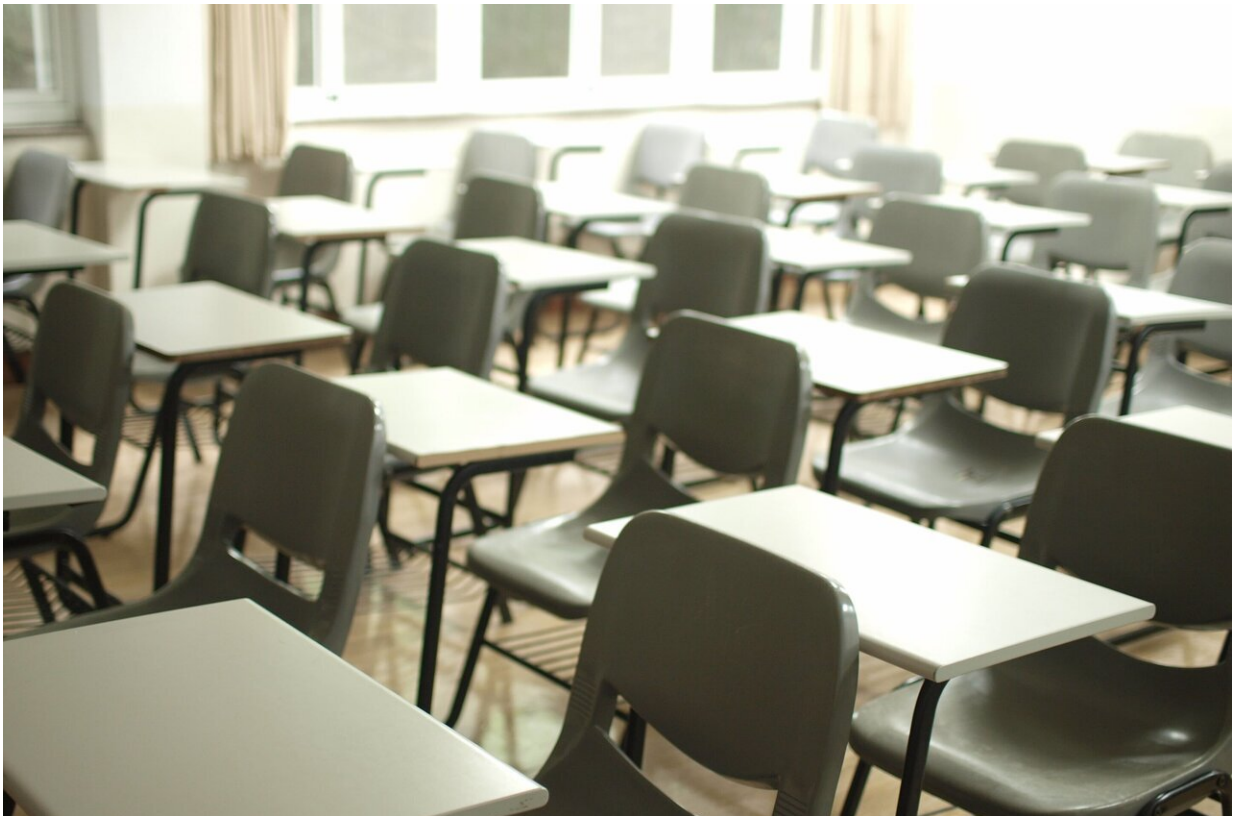


Expert strategies to mitigate the educational impacts of the pandemic

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Parents, students and decision-makers are dealing with more challenges as we move closer to another pandemic school year. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development characterized COVID-19

school closures as the "greatest disruption in educational opportunity worldwide in a generation," affecting 90 percent of the world's student population. Sociology professor Janice Aurini, an expert in schooling and education inequality, explains the challenges and recommends strategies to mitigate the educational impacts of the pandemic.

As students and teachers move back to in-person teaching after five months away from classrooms, what do we know from previous research into school disruptions?

The unprecedented nature of COVID-19 [school](#) closures defies a straightforward comparison. However, there are lessons from [education research](#) that we can draw on. Numerous studies demonstrate that 'non-school time' can be a key generator of achievement gaps. For example, the years leading up to kindergarten prime children for content-based learning and positive interactions with peers and teachers (also referred to as 'school readiness'). Gaps in school readiness tend to persist as children progress through school and predict various longer-term inequalities, such as education and employment). Research on school absenteeism and [summer](#) setback also point to the potency of non-school time and environments.

How does online learning factor into educational setbacks during the pandemic?

Research is continuing to trickle in, but the initial results are not good. At this point, I am unaware of Canadian data that would allow us to directly measure learning online and compare it to in-class learning or pre-pandemic learning more generally. To compensate for these data shortfalls, researchers have had to find creative ways to make reasonable

estimates. My colleague and I extrapolated from our summer learning research to estimate likely shortfalls in literacy and numeracy during COVID-19 school closures. We predict learning shortfalls that range from zero to 3.5 months among typically performing students and up to one full year among lower-performing students.

Can we learn anything from other countries' research?

Research from other countries has been able to answer questions about remote learning more directly. They have found that students made little to no learning progress with online schooling. These data are troubling, and education and health leaders will have to balance the potential risks of COVID-19 with emerging research about the negative impacts of school closures and remote learning on not just learning but also children's wellbeing. Parents whose children have fallen behind are more likely to express concern about their children's mental health. We shouldn't be surprised by their observations. While some try to characterize the promotion of academic achievement as in tension with or opposed to children's wellbeing, there is a reciprocal relationship between the two.

What can we do to make up for learning shortfalls and prepare for the upcoming school year?

A wide range of targeted strategies will be needed to help children catch up. Summer programs are one strategy. Pre-pandemic, my colleague and I evaluated free literacy and numeracy summer camps offered by the Ontario Ministry of Education. These programs not only slowed or stopped summer setbacks, but in some cases, closed skill gaps. And they are very popular with families and students. To be clear, these camps are not the same as summer school. School boards did an excellent job

fostering a fun camp-like atmosphere that included recreation and [field trips](#) as well as opportunities for parents to do activities with their children. Building on this success and expanding these camps strikes me as a viable way to offer a targeted intervention. These high-quality free summer programs support existing efforts already in the works, such as targeted reading programs, and generate other benefits for families and students.

What else are researchers recommending?

Other researchers also suggest that schools will need to embrace extra programs aimed at re-engaging students, such as free summer programs, high-dosage tutoring and "vacation academies."

In terms of future school closures, we are more prepared. Even the fall and winter of 2020-2021 looked very different from the first pandemic spring. School boards have resources and training to quickly 'pivot' between remote and in-person options. The focus among educators has shifted to questions about improving online teaching and learning, [student](#) engagement, and assessment methods.

Provided by University of Waterloo

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