

Back to school: Educators and families confront learning loss and mental health challenges

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Are the kids alright?

The answer is complicated. The usual chaotic back-to-school period is now unusual—marked by a COVID-19 delta variant surge and continued vaccine hesitancy in some parts of the country.

All 50 states closed schools to in-person instruction at some point during the 2019–2020 [academic year](#), and the closures continued for more than a year in many districts throughout the country. Now, some students are returning to full-time, in-person instruction for the first time in 18 months, including nearly 600,000 students enrolled in the Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second-largest public school system. Students in the nation's largest district—New York City—will return to school in mid-September.

While limiting children's exposure to the virus, [school administrators](#), staff and families must also manage educational setbacks and [mental health challenges](#) intensified by lockdowns and remote learning.

How will schools address mental health challenges?

Pedro Noguera, the Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean of the USC Rossier School of Education, studies ways in which schools are influenced by social and economic conditions as well as demographic trends in local, regional and global contexts.

"Beyond the logistics related to opening schools safely, it is equally important for educators to be prepared to respond to the academic, social and emotional needs of their students," Noguera said. "Several studies have shown that many kids experienced significant mental health challenges as a result of the prolonged quarantine and substantial learning loss."

"This is not a normal year, and we shouldn't expect children to adjust smoothly at the beginning of it," advised Erica Shoemaker, chief of clinical services in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center and a clinical associate professor of psychiatry and the behavioral sciences at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.

"We anticipate that children will find the re-entry into school to be anxiety-provoking after so many months at home," Shoemaker said. "Kids are worried about whether their friends will still like them, whether their teachers will be disappointed if they have learning difficulties and about being exposed to COVID."

She said kids may be more anxious, more overwhelmed and more excited than in a usual year, which could result in them being more moody, irritable, clingy or defiant and needing more rest than usual. The response to re-entry may vary based on personality type: Socially confident kids may adjust quickly and thrive, but adjusting to the hustle and bustle of school may be challenging for shy children who preferred being at home.

"Adults should try to be gentle with them—and with themselves—during this transition period, which may last well into the fall of this year," Shoemaker advised.

For back to school concerns, seeking help early is key

Julie Marsh, a professor of education policy at USC Rossier, agreed that the pandemic has tested the limits of children, families and educators alike.

"As we start up a new year amidst unwelcome uncertainty and risk, we must continue to prioritize not only addressing the unfinished learning of

last year but also the social-emotional needs of students, as well as school staff, teachers and administrators who have faced their own critically important yet often overlooked challenges."

Marsh, who specializes in research on K-12 policy and governance, added that the federal government is providing an unprecedented amount of funding to support students' mental health. Research must track these investments, their effects and their sustainability over time, she said.

"Many children have been living under exceptionally difficult conditions including [food insecurity](#), housing insecurity, health issues and loss of family members to the pandemic," said Dorian Traube, an associate professor at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. "We need to expect a greater-than-normal number of students in distress."

Traube, whose research focuses on using technological solutions to provide early childhood health, education and parent support services, said it's critical to seek help right away for kids who are grappling with mental health challenges.

Education was the biggest pandemic hardship for many low-income families

There is increasing evidence that school closures have had adverse impacts on the education and socioemotional well-being of children, particularly in low-income minority communities, according to a new report published by the USC Center for the Changing Family.

Ashlesha Datar is a senior economist at the Center for Economic and Social Research at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences and the co-author of the report, which focused on COVID-19

hardships among Los Angeles families in public housing.

"We expected to see food insecurity and income and job stability to be the biggest challenges in this community," Datar said. "We were pleasantly surprised to see that they were not big hardships, likely due to the federal and local safety net programs. Instead, children's education was the biggest hardship for these families."

Datar explained that children in low-income, minority households "faced critical gaps in the technological and parental support that was needed for the remote learning model to work for them."

"There was no safety net for kids' education," she said.

The digital divide widened during remote learning

At the start of the pandemic, 1 in 4 K–12 households in Los Angeles County lacked both a personal computer and [broadband internet](#) at home, USC research showed—a huge barrier to distance learning required by pandemic-related lockdowns. The problem was even worse among Los Angeles Unified School District students, with 1 in 3 living in households without high-speed internet or a computer.

The USC-California Emerging Technology Fund survey on statewide broadband adoption found that the share of K-12 families connected to broadband through a computer device jumped from 86% in 2019 to 93% in 2021, driven by [school](#) or district programs put in place after the onset of the pandemic. However, the survey found the transition to remote learning was challenging for many families, particularly for Latinx families whose primary language is Spanish.

"There's an opportunity here to leverage the lessons of the pandemic and extend solutions beyond the pandemic," said Hernán Galperin, the

principal investigator of the study and an associate professor at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

"For students to succeed, families need access to computers, reliable broadband and the ability for parents to participate in the learning process," he said. "That participation involves close communication with teachers, supporting students with homework and monitoring their progress. These are key elements for [student](#) success in the digital age."

USC Rossier's Marsh said that along with prioritizing the unfinished learning of last year and the social-emotional needs of students, schools should work to help students who were impacted by the racial reckoning of the past year and a half. Schools should address "long-standing concerns about over-surveillance, low academic expectations and racism," she said.

"In addition to targeting academic and non-academic support to low-income, Black and Latinx communities," she added, "we must also attend to the needs of students with disabilities and English learners, for whom remote instruction by and large did not work."

Provided by University of Southern California

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