

Pandemic-related school closings likely to have far-reaching effects on child well-being

February 14 2022, by Sandra M. Chafouleas



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A global analysis has found that kids whose schools closed to stop the spread of various waves of the coronavirus [lost educational progress and](#)

are at [increased risk of dropping out](#) of school. As a result, the study says, they will [earn less money from work over their lifetimes](#) than they would have if schools had remained open.

Educational [researchers like me](#) know these students will feel the [effects of pandemic-related school closures](#) for many years to come. Here are four other ways the closings have affected students' well-being for the long term.

1. Academic progress

At the end of the 2020–2021 [school year](#), most students were about [four to five months behind](#) where they should have been in math and reading, according to a July 2021 report by McKinsey and Co., a global management consulting firm.

When the researchers looked at the data from fall 2021, though, they found [students attending majority-white schools are catching up](#). But students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds—including those attending majority-Black or low-income schools—are falling further behind. As a result, students attending majority-Black schools are now estimated to be a full year behind those attending majority-white schools.

Differences also can vary by grade level. High schools have been [closed more total days](#) than elementary schools. According to a recent news report, [2021 graduation rates dipped](#) across the country, and some education leaders fear future graduating classes may be hit even harder. Schools have scrambled to provide options such as credit recovery to boost [graduation rates](#), leaving concerns about the quality of learning.

College and university leaders have been [preparing](#) for first-year students with less knowledge, weaker study habits and more difficulty

concentrating than new college arrivals in past years.

2. Social-emotional development

Even early in the pandemic, [school closings were harming students' social and emotional well-being](#), according to a review of 36 studies across 11 countries including the U.S. By summer 2021, [teachers and administrators in the U.S.](#) said students felt more emotional distress, disengagement, depression, anxiety and loneliness than in previous years.

When schools resumed in fall 2021, large numbers of children in the U.S. had [lost a primary caregiver](#) over the previous year to COVID-19. A colleague and I raised concerns about the anxiety and grief those students would likely feel.

In addition, [28% of all parents](#) of children in grades K-12 are "very concerned" or "extremely concerned" about their child's mental health and social and emotional well-being. That's down from a high of 35% in spring 2021, but is still 7 percentage points higher than before the pandemic. Parents of Black and Hispanic students are 5 percentage points more likely to be worried than parents of white students.

Schools and organizations have focused resources on supporting students' social, emotional and mental health. The [U.S. Department of Education](#), for example, recommends, based on research, that teachers integrate lessons around compassion and courage into classroom activities, and that schools establish wellness teams to help students.

States have said they plan to address these needs with [federal funds meant to help schools respond to the pandemic](#). In [Connecticut](#), for example, school districts will hire additional mental health support staff, offer social-emotional programs and partner with local agencies to increase access to supports.

3. Behavioral habits

The return to in-person learning has been accompanied by school leaders' [reports](#) of increasing [student](#) misbehavior and threats of violence. These increases were more likely to be reported in larger districts and where most students had engaged in remote or hybrid learning—rather than in-person instruction—during the prior school year.

Viral social media "challenges"—like memes on TikTok suggesting students "[smack a staff member](#)" or skip school on a particular day—certainly aren't helping educators provide safe and supportive environments.

Parents' distress is also affecting their children. Students whose parents are depressed, anxious, lonely and exhausted are [more likely to misbehave in school](#)—and [that connection grew stronger](#) during lockdown periods when schools were closed.

Meanwhile, news reports show students are [missing more school](#) than they were before the pandemic, with more kids out for more than 15 days of a school year. Given [links](#) between chronic absenteeism and increased high school dropout rates, [researchers warn](#) this increase in missed school could lead between 1.7 million and 3.3 million students in eighth through 12th grade to not graduate on time.

4. Physical health

Adults have suffered [hair loss, sore eyes, irritable bowels and skin flare-ups](#) as a result of the pandemic. One study found that Chinese preschool children whose schools closed during the pandemic [were shorter than preschoolers](#) in previous years, though the researchers did not observe

noteworthy differences in weight change.

Schools can be a primary place for children to access physical activity and healthy food. Amid school closures, researchers are exploring the effects of losing out on these benefits. During lockdowns in Italy, [children with obesity engaged in less physical activity](#), slept and used screens more and increased their consumption of potato chips and sugary drinks.

In the U.S., [1 in 4 families](#) with school-age children don't have reliable access to food. Abrupt school closures cut off [more than 30 million children](#) from free and reduced-price lunches and breakfasts delivered at school.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees school food programs, provided waivers to [let schools provide meals](#) in ways that fit their students' needs. In Connecticut, for example, researchers found that letting families know about wider availability and pickup sites for to-go school meals [boosted the number of students who received food](#) during the pandemic.

Time will tell if the costs of school closings will be [worth the benefits](#). These early indicators show that decisions are not as simple as reducing the physical health risks of COVID-19. A full assessment would consider the effects across all aspects of child well-being, including how diverse populations are affected.

Connection, collaboration and positive interaction are fundamental to [healthy childhood](#) growth and development. Working together, schools, families and communities can [assess and address every child's needs](#) to reduce the lasting effects of [school](#) closings.

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