

Disrupted Learning, COVID-19, and Public Education in Minnesota

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has forced educators to move most instruction to distance learning. Now, lawmakers are asking about learning loss and some have coined the phrase “the COVID slide” to refer to the academic setbacks students are experiencing at this moment.

We challenge the faulty premise on which questions about learning loss during the pandemic are based. **COVID-19 is not the cause of the inequities within the public school system; it is merely the flashlight that is illuminating the problems we always knew existed. The pandemic is certainly intensifying the structural problems that disadvantage too many students, especially students of color, but neither it nor educators are to blame for all the setbacks students are experiencing.**

What is the State of Public Education in Minnesota During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

COVID-19 is not the only collective trauma impeding learning loss. In 2020, educators and students witnessed the murder of BIPOC citizens at the hands of police, watched political turmoil, and experienced horrific displacement and destruction at the hands of fires and storms caused by climate change. We are particularly concerned about the following trends:

- The COVID-19 pandemic and the other collective traumas of 2020 have exacerbated the mental health crisis facing students and educators (Margolius et al., 2020 Doyle Lynch, Pufall Jones, & Hynes, 2020).
- Many students, especially students who were at-risk of dropping out before the pandemic, have completely disengaged from school (Lieberman 2020).
- Many Minnesotans, especially BIPOC Minnesotans, are disadvantaged by the digital divide¹.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has grown the wealth gap between white Minnesotans and BIPOC Minnesotans².
- Minnesotans of Asian descent have experienced new levels of racism because many incorrectly assume all Minnesotans of Asian heritage have the virus and are to blame for its continued spread.

What Can We Learn From Previous Learning Interruptions?

Researchers have long studied learning loss over summer vacation, but there is a stark difference between summer vacation and disrupted learning brought by a global pandemic. Thus, we need to look at summer learning loss studies and research on disruptions caused by natural disasters to predict what is happening currently with students. Researchers have shown that:

- Students lose about one month of skill in math and reading over summer vacation and learning loss in the summer is more acute in areas requiring memorization and less in areas requiring conceptual thinking

¹ Researchers with Common Sense Media recently reported that “in Minnesota, 249,845 students and 6,379 teachers lack adequate internet access” and “about 22% of the students who lack access are Black, Latinx, or Native American” (Common Sense Media, 2020). Like other inequities, lack of access to digital tools and internet often fall hardest on communities of color.

² Francis and Weller (2020) estimated that nationally, “54.8 percent of Black workers said that they had lost incomes due to a job loss or cut in hours from late April to early June, compared with 45.8 percent of White workers.”

(Cooper et al., Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996; Borman, Benson, & Overman, 2005; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007; Quinn & Polikoff, 2017; Heyns, 1978; Atteberry & McEachin, 2019).

- Children from wealthier families “learn more over the summer than do their less advantaged counterparts” and experience less “learning loss” (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007, p. 15; Godsey, 2020, p. 3; Borman, Benson, & Overman, 2005, p. 146).
- Students identified for special education services are most likely to experience academic regression during the summer months (Jones, Vaughn, & Fuchs, June 2020, p. 2).
- Students impacted by Hurricane Katrina and the Christchurch, New Zealand earthquakes showed psychological distress and struggled with concentration for many years (Kuhfield et al., May 2020, pp. 11-12).

Thus, we can assume that educators will need to understand the emotional toll caused by the global pandemic, and then strategize the best ways to provide supports to struggling students (Kuhfield et al., May 2020, p. 27).

What Policy Interventions Can Help Repair the Inequities That Have Been Exacerbated by COVID-19?

Minnesota’s leaders can start accounting for the inequities within public education by providing much needed funding. In addition, the state should:

1. Provide funding for districts to offer quality, equitable extra-time programming.
2. Give educators the time and resources needed to address the unprecedented levels of trauma caused by the pandemic and other moments of collective trauma experienced in 2020.
3. Endorse a “do no harm approach” to student assessment. This will require rethinking the purpose and utility of standardized assessments.
4. Encourage districts to start preparing for future disruptions now.
5. Close the digital divide.

This is also a moment to completely reimagine public education. In particular, lawmakers should:

- direct state agencies to study how reduced class sizes during hybrid learning impacted student learning and classroom management.
- convene a group of education experts to examine the traditional school calendar and the traditional school day.
- consult educators working with students identified for special education on how some students, particularly students with autism or an emotional-behavioral disorder diagnosis, thrived in online learning.
- ask researchers to look at any correlations between distance learning and decreases in bullying and harassment directed at LGBTQ+ students.
- provide more funding for full-service community schools.

Minnesota’s students and educators are strong and resilient. Lawmakers should equip them with the resources they need to “reinvent our systems of education.” It is time to provide an answer to the foundational question of this moment, “How can we transform what has not been working for children and for our society into a more equitable and empowering future?”³

3 Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A., Edgerton, A. K., Badrinarayan, A., Cardichon, J., Cookson Jr., P. W., . . . Wojcikiewicz, S. (2020). *Restarting and reinventing school: Learning in the time of COVID and beyond*. Palo Alto: Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from <http://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/restarting-reinventing-school-covid>. p. 5