



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

Executive Summary

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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 are to blame for the academic setbacks students are experiencing.

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 has presented enormous challenges for public educators and students in Minnesota. In the spring of 2020, Minnesota's educators had only a handful of days to move the entire birth-to-12 education system in the state to new platforms, primarily distance learning offered through computers and personal tablets. Educators successfully rose to this challenge even though they were provided little, if any, resources or financial assistance. Parents, politicians, and the public praised Minnesota's educators for being nimble enough to both protect the health of students and prevent as little disruption to public education as possible.

The public adoration for educators was short-lived. As the fall of 2020 approached, two competing realities led to new problems for educators and students. First, the COVID-19 pandemic showed no sign of slowing down and infection rates continued to climb each day. Second, weary parents and misinformed politicians began publicly calling for all schools to open for a new school year, despite the risk of infection and community spread.

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President Donald Trump and U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos only amplified the call to open schools with both a misinformation campaign and public threats. The federal government also failed to provide resources and funding to allow public education to continue in ways that protected the health and safety of students and educators.¹ The Trump administration forced an already overburdened school system "to do more with less" even as a deadly virus decimated communities across the nation.

Minnesota schools were given the freedom to select in-person instruction, hybrid learning, or distance learning. Most opted for some form of a hybrid model which meant students would be receiving their education, at least partially, via mediated tools. Because of this, political leaders are now asking if students

¹ In the spring of 2020, the federal government allocated approximately \$2.8 trillion dollars in public assistance to struggling families, industries, and government services. The Trump administration earmarked only \$13 billion of that money, less than one percent of the overall relief package, for education.

are suffering learning loss. Academics and politicians have coined the phrase “the COVID slide²” to refer to the learning loss many predict students are experiencing at this moment. Educators are now being regularly asked, “How are the students doing? Are they falling behind in subjects like reading and math?”

In this paper, we push back on these public narratives and offer a list of policy recommendations that can help educators curb some of the inequities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. We emphatically argue that 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 students being “so far behind.” Federal and state governments have been slowly divesting from public education for decades creating problems that have certainly been magnified by the pandemic, but COVID-19 has most directly lifted the veil to show the public what educators and students have known to be true for too long.

This is the moment for Minnesota to not simply restore our public schools; this is the time to transform all schools into spaces that equitably meet the needs of all children, regardless of their race, ability, or home address.

The COVID slide is not simply an academic problem and any examination of what is happening in Minnesota must start from what we know to be true before COVID-19³ and must also include an analysis of the social-emotional well-being and physical health of students and educators. There are interventions we can provide now to stop some of the harm that will come from this pandemic, but legislators will need to find the political will to provide funding for these measures. This is the moment for Minnesota to not simply restore our public schools; this is the time to transform all schools into spaces that equitably meet the needs of all children, regardless of their race, ability, or home address.

In the remainder of this summary, we answer three questions: (1) what is the current state of public education in Minnesota? (2) what we can learn from previous disruptions to public education? and (3) how we can begin to repair the damage caused by COVID-19, systemic racism, and decades of government divestment in public education?

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

We have data that helps us create snapshots of what is happening with students and educators during the pandemic, but the current political climate in Minnesota and the United States challenges our traditional approaches to studying issues like learning loss. However, education scholars have started to produce a partial picture of what is happening in public schools.

² The COVID slide is typically defined as the academic learning loss experienced by students as schools have shifted education from school buildings to computer screens. The concept has been compared to the “summer slide,” a topic education researchers have long tracked and analyzed. We use the term COVID slide in this paper because it is the new policy buzzword, but we also question the accuracy and appropriateness of this term. The COVID slide is about much more than losses in reading and math. In addition, students were already struggling before the pandemic.

³ See our EPIC report: *Building an Equitable School System for All Students and Educators*, May 2019.

However, everyone must acknowledge a simple fact before any accurate account of public education can be conducted. COVID-19 is not the only collective trauma impeding learning loss. In 2020, educators and students have (1) witnessed a presidential impeachment trial, (2) watched the murder and abuse of Black citizens by police officers, (3) participated in a historic presidential election that challenged the very foundation of the nation's democratic institutions, (4) experienced horrific displacement and destruction at the hands of fires and storms caused by climate change, (5) saw the balance of the U.S. Supreme Court tilt farther right, (6) learned the President and First Lady had contracted the deadly coronavirus, and (7) watched mass destruction and tragedy ravage other parts of the globe.⁴ It was, by any measure, a year of many disruptions that will have lasting impacts on all students and educators.

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).

Systemic racism and political stagnation have plagued public schools for too long. 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 and colleagues (2020), in one of the few national surveys with a statistically significant representative sample, found that “1 in 4 young people reported an increase in losing sleep because of worry, feeling unhappy or depressed, feeling constantly under strain, or experiencing a loss of confidence in themselves” (Margolius et al., Doyle Lynch, Pufall Jones, & Hynes, 2020). In addition, researchers with Education Week conducted a national survey in the spring of 2020 and found “76% of students and 66% of teachers reported having a low morale” (Kurtz, 2020). It is safe to predict that the mental well-being of educators and students is in a state of crisis.
- Many students, especially students that were at-risk of dropping out before the pandemic, have completely disengaged from school. Lieberman (2020) reported that “Educators...reported an average of 5 percent of their students were absent on a typical day before the pandemic...that average has increased to 10 percent. That means double the number of students are absent on a typical day compared with normal circumstances.”
- The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how stark the digital divide is in Minnesota. 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.

⁴ Unfortunately, President Trump added an insurrection and attempted coup to this list by encouraging and supporting the efforts of a violent mob to storm the United States Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 as the U.S. Congress met to certify the Electoral College tally. Trump encouraged the insurrection and refused to denounce the violence until after innocent people were murdered and mass destruction had occurred to the Capitol. This led the United States House of Representatives to impeach President Trump for a second time, making him the only president in the history of the United States to be impeached twice.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has unfortunately grown the wealth gap between white Minnesotans and BIPOC Minnesotans. Minnesotans of color have borne the vast majority of the economic pain caused by COVID. This in turn complicates the educational opportunities of children of color in Minnesota.
- Finally, we draw attention to the racism and hatred that has been directed at Minnesotans of Asian descent. Many politicians, including President Trump, have consistently used the term “China virus” to refer to the pathogen that causes COVID-19. This has led many people to incorrectly assume all Minnesotans of Asian heritage have the virus and are to blame for its continued spread.

Policymakers need to account for these concerning trends as they debate proposals to help educators and students during this pandemic.

What Can We Learn From Previous Learning Interruptions?

Researchers have long studied learning loss over summer vacation, often termed “the summer slide,” as well as ways to curb the damage that can come from interruptions to education. Many have looked to this work to predict what types of learning loss may be occurring during the pandemic. Unfortunately, the research on summer learning loss is not a perfect comparison because there is a stark difference between summer vacation and disrupted learning brought by a global pandemic. In addition, Kuhfield and colleagues (2020) have noted that “the biggest difference between school closures examined by previous studies and those of COVID-19 is that most school districts are now providing online instruction. Many districts have offered remote learning plans, which may include formal curriculum, assignments, and/or progress-monitoring as well as access to general educational resources” (Kuhfield et al., May 2020, p. 10). However, here are some of the findings from previous research on summer learning loss that might help us predict what is happening currently with students:

- Most researchers argue that students lose “about one month of skill in reading and math during summer recess” (Cooper et al., Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996; Borman, Benson, & Overman, 2005; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007; Quinn & Polikoff, 2017; Heyns, 1978; Atteberry & McEachin, 2019). We know that learning loss in the summer is more acute in areas requiring memorization and less in areas requiring conceptual thinking.
- Scholars have shown that a lack of supplemental resources during summer vacations can exacerbate summer learning loss (Borman, Benson, & Overman, 2005, p. 133).
- Researchers have shown that “children from higher-SES 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).
- Students identified for special education services are most likely to experience academic regression during the summer months (Jones, Vaughn, & Fuchs, June 2020, p. 2).
- Most researchers have confirmed that unaddressed learning gaps may grow bigger for students from “high-poverty” contexts during summer recess but quality interventions can reverse these trends (Borman, Benson, & Overman, 2005, p. 146). Students show the most growth in summer school programs with high amounts of collaboration between home and school (Borman, Benson, & Overman, 2005, p. 149), and summer reading programs can help slow learning loss in students from low-income

families (Kim & Quinn, 2013, p. 34; Soland et al., May 2020; Cookson, May 2020, p. vii; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007, p. 26-27).

Comparing learning loss during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years to learning loss in summer vacation is fraught because the reasons for the learning interruptions are incredibly different, and students are still in school, the delivery method is just different. A few researchers have studied the educational setbacks caused by natural disasters, and this body of work may be a better indicator of what we can expect to happen to most students during the pandemic. Picou and Marshall (2007) found that “students displaced by Hurricane Katrina...had difficulty concentrating and often manifested symptoms of depression in the months following the hurricane.” Additionally, other scholars who examined the impacts of Hurricane Katrina and the Christchurch, New Zealand earthquakes found that disruptions following natural disasters on student development was long lasting, with some students continuing to show psychological distress and trouble concentrating for several years afterwards” (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 way to provide supports to struggling students (Kuhfield et al., May 2020, p. 27).

Scholars have used the summer learning loss research and the studies on disruptions caused by natural disasters to predict student growth in reading will most likely decline (Kuhfield et al., May 2020, p. 2). In addition, experts predict students will show smaller gains in mathematics “returning with less than 50% of the learning gains and in some grades, nearly a full year behind what we would observe in normal conditions” (Kuhfield & Tarasawa, p. 2). However, policymakers should take note that previous research also shows “students who lose the most during the summer tend to gain the most when back in school” (Soland et al., May 2020). However, this will require the state and federal governments to fund quality interventions to help students regain losses.

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. The following six areas are good starting places for policymakers and elected officials:

1. Provide funding for districts to offer quality, extra-time programming. This will include extended school day programming as well as summer school. Districts will need money to increase transportation to and from these programs. In addition, researchers have shown that extended programming only works when it is conducted by quality, trained educators. Thus, districts will need funds to compensate the teachers and education support professionals (ESPs) needed to run these programs.
2. Educators will need financial resources and the freedom to create equitable, restorative, and transformative returns to school. Experts have shown that academic growth can only happen after the social-emotional needs of students are met. Students will return to in-person learning with unprecedented levels of trauma, and educators will need the time and resources to create individually-appropriate interventions that meet the unique needs of their population of students.
3. Minnesota policymakers must endorse a “do no harm approach” to student assessment. This will require rethinking the purpose and means of measuring student successes as well as revisiting the

utility of standardized assessments. Educators also feel statewide standardized testing should be put on pause for the remainder of the school year because the data will only show what we already know to be true, learning loss has affected some more than others.

4. Minnesota must encourage districts to start preparing for future disruptions now. Districts that had distance learning plans on file, particularly school districts in parts of the country that are often disrupted by hurricanes and storms, were better prepared to transition to distance learning. We can predict climate change will cause more disruptions to public education. Districts must start planning for this reality now.
5. Minnesota lawmakers must provide funding to close the digital divide. This includes expanding broadband access to all communities in Minnesota and providing funding to low-income families who lack access to computers or electronic tablets.
6. This is a moment to look for silver-linings and 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. Early research indicates that smaller class sizes have increased learning for certain age groups and have led to a decline in the use of exclusionary interventions for misbehavior.
 - convene a group of education experts to examine the traditional school calendar and the traditional school day. Learning does not have to only happen between September and May. In addition, COVID-19 has shown that some students thrive better when allowed to complete course work later in the day.
 - consult educators working with students identified for special education. Many groups of students, particularly students with autism or an emotional-behavioral disorder diagnosis, have thrived in online learning.
 - ask researchers to look at any correlations between distance learning and decreases in bullying and harassment directed at specific populations of students, especially students who identify as LGBTQ+.
 - provide more funding for full-service community schools. The pandemic has shown us that public schools provide communities with much more than education services. This is the moment to build schools that will lift up entire communities and help them overcome the inequities caused by systemic racism and chronic underfunding.

Finally, this is an important moment to ask, “What is the purpose of public education?” Yosso (2005) has reminded us that white middle-class communities are “the standard by which all others are judged” in public education in the United States. It is time for the state to direct resources to reexamining the benchmarks and standards we set for students and finally acknowledge the “cultural wealth within communities of color” that have too long been ignored (Yosso, 2005, p. 82). We should build learning and growth standards that account for the linguistic, social, and cultural capital students of color bring to classrooms across Minnesota as we rebuild public education after the end of pandemic.

Minnesota’s public school system was already plagued by systemic racism and underfunding before the introduction of COVID-19 to the state, and the pandemic will most definitely exacerbate inequities

that have long existed. But, all is not lost. 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?" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020, p. v).

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