



Remote Instruction Is Bad for Mom and Dad

When schools forced kids to stay home, parents reported an uptick in mental-health issues.

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We've heard a lot about how school closings affect children, but what about parents left scrambling for child care and in-person learning options? In 2020, such disruptions disproportionately caused women to leave the labor market to take care of their children at home.

Using Census Bureau survey data, we found that pandemic-induced remote instruction made several mental-health outcomes worse for parents of school-age children. A 10-percentage-point increase in the share of public school districts going fully remote in a state was associated with about a 1-point increase in the proportion of parents reporting feelings of anxiety most days in the previous week. The same increase in remote instruction was associated with a 0.73-point increase in the proportion being worried, a 0.61-point increase in being depressed, and a 0.55-point increase in losing interest in daily activities.

Put differently, a full transition to remote instruction was associated with an increase of 5 to 10 points in the likelihood of parents reporting mental-health issues most days in the previous week. These negative effects are substantial, translating to about a 33% increase in anxiety, depression and worry, and roughly a 26% increase in a loss of interest in daily activities.

Our analytic models control for factors that might skew these results. It's possible, for instance, that states with more-anxious populations are more likely to close their schools. Our longitudinal data allow us to control for factors such as sex, race, education level, marital status, median household income, unemployment rate, the share of Trump voters from 2016, and Covid-19 case and death rates.

This new report adds to the list of school closures' unintended consequence. And for what benefit? The data have consistently shown that children's mortality risk from Covid-19 is low and that schools are among the safest places in a community. Private schools and daycare facilities were able to open right away. Grocery stores and other private businesses the government deemed "essential" never shut down. So, what was the holdup with many public schools?

Incentives are the main difference. Public schools receive money whether they open their doors or not. By keeping schools closed, teachers unions can effectively hold education hostage to secure a multibillion-dollar ransom from taxpayers.

In fact, at least five studies have found that public school districts in areas with stronger teachers unions were substantially less likely to reopen in person in 2020. On multiple occasions, Freedom of Information Act documents revealed that major teachers unions influenced the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's school reopening guidance. "We need to think about this in the broader context of teacher contract negotiations," a Health and Humans Services Department official emailed colleagues recently.

Some of these unions are still unwilling to reverse course. Teachers unions in places like New York and Baltimore are already hinting at—or explicitly calling for—more school closings after winter break. On Tuesday night, 73% of the Chicago Teachers Union membership voted to take a "remote work action" (that is, a strike) until Jan. 18 unless they can reach an agreement with the district.

We already know how this plays out for children and parents. Don't let them do it again.

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