



Homeschooling During Coronavirus Crisis Damaging to Children

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A former education commissioner of Tennessee said in an op-ed published Friday that children who are away from their public schools during the coronavirus crisis will suffer “damaging” effects with “iPads and parents” serving as their new teachers.

“Homeschooling during the coronavirus will set back a generation of children,” reads the headline of an op-ed at the *Washington Post* Friday by Kevin Huffman, now a partner at the City Fund, an education nonprofit that says it “partners with local leaders to create innovative public school systems.”

Huffman wrote:

As the coronavirus pandemic closes schools, in some cases until September, American children this month met their new English, math, science and homeroom teachers: their iPads and their parents. Classes are going online, if they exist at all. The United States is embarking on a massive, months-long virtual-pedagogy experiment, and it is not likely to end well. Years of research shows that online schooling is ineffective — and that students suffer significant learning losses when they have a long break from school.

While the sudden coronavirus crisis has caught many public school districts and parents off-guard regarding setting up distance learning for students, Huffman devoted much of his column to denigrating what he claims are “lackluster” virtual learning charter schools:

[S]tudies looked at schools specifically designed to teach coursework online, frequently with huge sums of money invested in research and planning. If they can’t make it work, “it seems unlikely that parents and teachers Googling resources will” do any better, says Stanford economist and education researcher Eric Hanushek.

Huffman also claimed children suffer similar “damaging” effects in academic performance due to long summer vacations:

[T]he “summer slide” has been studied for decades, and researchers know that students fall backward in learning from where they were at the end of the school year. Typically, they lose between one and two months of progress after a 10-week break. This “wastes” so much of the knowledge students have gained during the school year” and forces teachers to spend time “re-teaching” last year’s content, likely contributing to the repetitiveness of the typical U.S. curriculum,” according to a Brookings Institution report.

However, Kerry McDonald, adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and author of *Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom*, observed to Breitbart News, "If students can so easily forget what they have learned over a few weeks away from school, did they ever really learn it at all? Or were they just taught and tested, memorizing and regurgitating information but not really learning it? And if learning loss is so pervasive during school breaks, then what happens after students graduate from high school? Does all the knowledge just disappear, or did they never really learn the content adequately?"

Indeed, even if one abides by standardized test data to measure learning, October's results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation's Report Card, showed U.S. school children have made "no progress" in reading or mathematics over the past decade.

These are the ten years since the Obama-era Common Core State Standards were adopted by most states in the country and remain still, though in many states they have been rebranded to a local flavor name.

Huffman went on to suggest lower income parents are not likely to provide any beneficial schooling at all to their children:

Poorer children don't just have less access to technology; they're also more likely to be home alone, because their parents do not have the privilege to telework during the quarantine.

...

There is no research to measure what the effect of this massive break will be. In our lifetimes, Americans have never canceled so much school for so many children. But we know one thing for sure: The impact will not simply disappear. It will linger into next school year and beyond.

Yet, citing the Nation's Report Card's devastating results showing how poorly America's lower income children are performing while *in* school, Peggy Carr, associate commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), noted:

Over the past decade, there has been no progress in either mathematics or reading performance, and the lowest-performing students are doing worse. In fact, over the long term in reading, the lowest-performing students—those readers who struggle the most—have made no progress from the first NAEP administration almost 30 years ago.

McDonald doubts summer vacations are, and the current crisis will be, causes of such poor student performance.

"Real learning cannot be so easily lost," she observed. "The COVID-19 pandemic can be an opportunity to experiment with a new model of education that fosters deep and enduring learning outside the conventional classroom."

Michael Donnelly, senior counsel at the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), also stresses a "key ingredient" for parents who are schooling at home during this crisis is "motivation to encourage their children to learn." Donnelly said, "Some resources are needed, but many do it without computers. Even parents who can take 20-30 minutes and read to/with their children can have a big impact."

He added, “When parents take time to show that learning is important, kids will take notice. It makes a big difference if parents can take some time (even if it is in between Zoom meetings) to work with their kids. A rigid schedule is less important than having some reasonable expectations and guidelines.”

Donnelly also said evidence shows that homeschoolers in the United States have performed quite well, regardless of their socioeconomic status: “There is no correlation between income or ethnicity with homeschooling children’s achievement scores – unlike other school environments. That’s because, in a home environment, children get some key ingredients in very high concentrations – one on one interaction, high levels of academic engagement and an overall less distracting environment.”

Huffman’s remedy for students being away from their public schools during the coronavirus crisis is more institutionalization and testing. He recommended eliminating some of the annual summer vacation and testing students immediately at the start of the next school year “to see what students know after the crisis.”

He also urged everyone to keep expectations of teachers “low” for the rest of this school year:

Our teachers are trying their best, but their hands are often tied by bureaucracy, limited student access to technology, the lack of lead time to prepare for this situation and the limited effectiveness of delivering school remotely. Results will range from lackluster to catastrophic, with the largest burden falling on the poorest kids.

McDonald, however, advised a more positive outlook, stating, “While we all feel disconnected from our community and unsettled by the pandemic, it has never been a better time to learn together as a family.” Elaborating, she said, “Parents can get to know their children in a more meaningful way, without the daily distractions of our busy, on-the-go lives. Use this time to disconnect from standard schooling expectations and nurture your child’s distinct interests and passions, leveraging the abundant digital resources around us. This could be a time of maximum creativity and discovery—for children and parents alike.”

Veteran Wisconsin homeschooler Tina Hollenbeck, owner of the [Homeschool Resource Roadmap](#) and [The Christian Homeschool Oasis](#), finds blaming “homeschooling” for damaging children’s educational development “irresponsible.”

Hollenbeck observed to Breitbart News that children home from school during the coronavirus crisis are not officially being “homeschooled”:

Actual homeschooling is separate and legally distinct from forced “crisis schooling.” The academic learning endeavors of actual homeschoolers have, by and large, not been disrupted by the virus, and decades of experience and research show that kids who are homeschooled are incredibly successful by every measure.

Hollenbeck added that homeschooling parents are sympathetic to those who have had to cope with the sudden responsibility of “facilitating their children’s educations without any time to plan or prepare,” and many parents who regularly homeschool their children are sharing resources with those suddenly thrust into the situation:

But, in contrast to Mr. Huffman’s insults of them, we know that they actually can educate their kids successfully, without the “help” of any paid strangers. In fact, we encourage them to use this

unexpected situation to leave the factory schools permanently. The best thing that parents can do to minimize the damage of this crisis on their children's hearts and minds is to decide today that they'll move from crisis schooling to real homeschooling and never look back.

Donnelly said that while schools will struggle during the current crisis with their institutional requirements, the situation is actually offering parents and schools the chance "to think big and different."

"I don't think we should think of education as a 'place,' because learning can happen anywhere," he observed. "We can be creative and not just recreate school at home. We can embrace new opportunities to give our kids a more flexible, stable, healthy and low stress learning environment."