

POLICY BRIEF

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TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference

Planning to Mitigate Academic and Behavioral Inequities in the Coming Academic Year

by Micere Keels, TREP Project

Although there is much that is still unknown about how COVID-19 spreads and what it does to the body, we know that it has magnified racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic cleavages in American society—**those being harmed the most are those least able to bear it.** As noted in a Chicago Teachers Union [report](#): “[Working class Black and Latinx] neighborhoods have suffered from decades of civic disinvestment and institutional racism, with higher levels of low-income workers—thousands of whom are considered ‘essential’ and relying on public transportation to get them to their low-wage jobs as janitors, grocery store clerks and more.”¹

It is too late to prevent the racially disproportionate physical health effects of this pandemic. ***It is however, not too late for schools to act to mitigate the racially disproportionate effects on children.***

First, Reestablish the Learning Community

The academic learning loss is not solely academic. There will be behavioral learning loss, and it will be unequal. Some children are in homes that were able to create a school-like structured learning environment; other children will have had months of unstructured time, and will require considerable behavioral supports to relearn classroom routines.

Research following previous disasters has made clear that the [mental health effects](#) are always deeper and longer lasting than initially expected.² Disaster related loss of supportive and nurturing [parenting](#) or escalation of neglectful and abusive parenting means that schools will be called upon to play an even larger role in attending to the well-being of children and youth.³ For many well-intentioned reasons, many educators will want a quick return to standard classroom procedures and protocols. However, the expectation to push emotional distress aside and quickly resume the intense self-regulation required to sit still for long periods in a classroom in order to focus on academic content and testing does not facilitate recovery. The

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best outcomes for children are observed when schools focus first on social and emotional rather than academic learning. Staff and students need time to reestablish the school community and relearn the self and social skills necessary to be in a collective learning **community**.

Schools must proactively, not reactively, provide support for students and educators who may be coping with traumatic stressors instead of waiting until they exhibit overt signs of distress. This can be done by combining proactive screening for trauma with mental health services delivered at school.

Second, Ensure that All Teachers Plan for Differentiated Instruction

Some sources estimate that children will be returning to school in fall 2020 with [only 70% of the learning gains in reading](#) relative to a typical school year, and returning with less than 50% of the learning gains in math.⁴ However, there is no “average learning loss” some children will gain, others will neither lose nor gain, and some, mostly children in low-income families, will lose a substantial amount of academic knowledge.

A [report](#) published by the Pew Research Center shows that 41% of lower-income parents are very concerned about their children falling behind in school because of Covid-19-related school closures.⁵ In contrast, only 21% of middle-income parents and 17% of higher-income parents are very concerned. An analysis of real-time data for 1.6 million students across 1,364 districts engaged in remote instruction estimates that the [achievement gap](#) between low- and high-income students could increase by as much as 18% for students from low-income schools by the end of this academic year.⁶

Learning loss will also be closely linked with the level of academic proficiency that students were at when schools closed. For example, an analysis of real-time data for 1.6 million students across 1,364 districts engaged in remote instruction show clear evidence that there are widening learning gaps based on students’ level of reading proficiency when schools closed.⁷ Specifically, students who were struggling readers when schools closed have been much less engaged with online learning than those who were advanced readers when schools closed.

The glaring and growing educational inequality of remote learning won’t be fully realized until in-person learning resumes. It is imperative that educators prepare for [differentiated instruction](#) at a higher level than ever before.⁸ All students reentering schools must be assessed for any individualized needs for academic, social, and emotional learning plans. This process will require considerable planning regarding the recruitment and distribution of paraprofessionals to support teachers in the provision of personalized in-class supports.

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Third, Rethink the Distribution of Access to the Strongest Teachers

There are many calls for schools to institute robust testing at the start of the coming academic year, to provide teachers with accurate, valid, and reliable assessment data to guide curriculum and instruction. However, in our current educational system mass grade retention of low-income children would widen not narrow COVID-19 related educational inequalities. One Washington Post op-ed in favor of the idea of mass grade retention openly sweeps aside the fact that it is the “low-income and already low-performing students” who will be the ones not promoted to the next grade and “thousands of Title I schools nationwide, serving upward of 10 million [low-income] students, are full of kids [for whom] ... all of this time away from school is going to be particularly devastating.”⁹

Testing immediately upon return would only serve the needs of vulnerable students if it is associated with access to greater not fewer educational resources. In our current educational system, students who fall behind and are placed in remedial classes often receive lower rather than higher quality educational resources and consequently continue to fall further behind. If we are serious about using testing as a step in the process of mitigating the growing inequality, it must be coupled with policies for placing students who fell the furthest behind with the strongest teachers. Decades of research tell us that [high-quality teachers](#) are the educational resource that has the largest effect on children’s school success.¹⁰

Low-income communities and communities of color have been repeatedly harmed by punitive education reforms that removes resources from schools with poor performance. As we prepare for the coming academic year, this is the opportunity to do things differently by carefully considering how we can support the communities with the educational systems that have been hit hardest by COVID-19.

Micere Keels is the director of the [Trauma Responsive Educational Practices \(TREP\) Project](#), and an Associate Professor in the Dept. of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago.

¹ Chicago Teachers Union. (2020, April 16). COVID-19 cases plague neighborhoods suffering from educational inequality. <https://www.ctulocal1.org/posts/covid-19-neighborhoods-educational-inequality/>

² Reardon, S. (2015, August 24). Hurricane Katrina’s psychological scars revealed. Nature. <https://www.nature.com/news/hurricane-katrina-s-psychological-scars-revealed-1.18234>

³ Pfefferbaum, B., & North, C. S. (2019, June 6). How parent mental health can affect children after disaster. Natural Hazards Center. <https://hazards.colorado.edu/news/research-counts/how-parent-mental-health-can-affect-children-after-disaster>

⁴ Kuhfield, M., & Tarasawa, B. (2020). *The COVID-19 slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement*.

https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/05/Collaborative-Brief_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf

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⁵ Horowitz, J. M. (2020, April 15). Lower-income parents most concerned about their children falling behind amid COVID-19 school closures. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/15/lower-income-parents-most-concerned-about-their-children-falling-behind-amid-covid-19-school-closures/>

⁶ Center for College & Career Readiness. (2020). The impact of school closures on student learning: An analysis of real-time data for 1.6 million students using Achieve3000 Literacy. Achieve3000. https://www.achieve3000.com/media/resources/ImpactofSchoolClosuresonStudentLearning_gJzoDjx.pdf

⁷ Center for College & Career Readiness. (2020).

⁸ Differentiated instruction is a framework and strategies for intentionally attending to the varied learning needs of subgroups of students that make up the whole class rather than insisting on teaching to the whole class as if they were all the same. More information can be found at <https://www.edutopia.org/article/teaching-class-big-ability-differences-todd-finley>

⁹ Petrilli, M. J. (2020, April 6). Schools should consider keeping kids in the same grade this fall. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/06/schools-should-consider-keeping-kids-same-grade-this-fall/>

¹⁰ Goldhaber, D. (2016). In schools, teacher qualities matters most. *Education Next*, 16(2), 56-62. <https://www.educationnext.org/in-schools-teacher-quality-matters-most-coleman/>