



Policy Paper on K-12 School Policy on COVID-19
Produced by the Policy Subdivision with supervision from the Political Director

How should K-12 schools change next year in order to make education available to everyone?

Introduction

The issue on whether public and private school systems should allow students to go back to class during the COVID-19 pandemic has been one where teachers, parents, health advisors, and government leaders have all found themselves involved by default. Students, however, have always had to fight in order to let their voices be heard on issues like these.

With decisions as important as this, there are also consequences that need to be discussed, especially how this could affect the availability and quality of education among students around the country. In our discussion we spoke with youth participants to discuss the following questions:

- Should public K-12 schools reopen?
- What would be the repercussions of K-12 schools not opening?
- Which age groups are more at risk?
- Are minorities or people in lower economic classes at a higher risk?
- How should K-12 schools change next year in order to make education available to everyone?

These questions were carefully selected in order to address particular topics that will be discussed throughout this policy paper. The topics that will be addressed are:

- Role of Public Schools in the Community

- Virtual Education
- Disadvantaged Groups (Minorities and Age Groups)
- Education for Tomorrow (Looking Ahead)

The policy discussion was conducted to find opinions and solutions for policy and problems. This paper is meant to convey the findings of the discussion as well as educate and inform the reader based on independent research of all policy research associates. All policy papers follow the goals of the YACU by informing young Americans about political issues and allowing them to engage in discussion to share their views.

Role of Public Schools in the Community

Public education often creates the foundation for children, young people, and families in a given community. In America, over fifty million students are enrolled in public schools. Educational institutions support and enrich their communities in countless ways. Nancy Kober, editorial consultant for the *Center on Education Policy*, lists six main goals of public education:

1. "To provide universal access to free education"
2. "To guarantee equal opportunities for all children"
3. "To unify a diverse population"
4. "To prepare people for citizenship in a democratic society"
5. "To prepare people to become economically self-sufficient"
6. "To improve social conditions"¹

The services and contributions of public schools extend outside of these specific goals. Schools offer extracurricular activities for students, community events, improve the health of students², and keep students away from risky

¹ Nancy Kober, "Why We Still Need Public Schools: Public Education for the Common Good," Center on Education Policy, 2007, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED503799.pdf>, 7.

² Dana Mitra, "Pennsylvania's Best Investment: The Social and Economic Benefits of Public Education," *Pennsylvania State University*, June 27, 2011, https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/BestInvestment_Full_Report_6.27.11.pdf, 18.

behaviors. Schools improve the welfare of students by providing them with skills in English, as well as means to find work and graduate to higher education. “Many schools offered non-academic services, including school nurses, gyms, playgrounds, and mid-time meals or lunches for poor students.”³ The education system, in large part, is what shapes the leaders, parents, workers, and citizens of tomorrow.

Virtual Education

This pandemic has forced individuals from all over the world to adapt to a new way of life. A year ago it wouldn't have been plausible to imagine that hundreds of schools would close down. Even with the politicization and the push for schools to be re-opened by the president, many school districts have deemed it unsafe.

Virtual education is a means of remote learning best suited for the pandemic. With the technology of today, it should not hinder a student's progress despite the heavy debate over its adequacy.

Education is a human right and the importance of it should not be questioned. However the ability of virtual learning to simulate a proper learning environment is being questioned. The jump into virtual learning was unplanned and many schools found themselves ill equipped in this realm. Students too were unprepared; more than nine million children in the nation lack access to the internet.⁴

Though technology has steadily advanced, high internet expenses serve as an impediment to Americans.⁵ Lack of devices and internet form a barrier to the guaranteed right of education.

The exam prep company One Class conducted a survey where 56% of students expressed a lack of interest in online class.⁶

³ Matthew Lynch, “The Role of Public Schools in the Advancement of the Communities,” The Edvocate, August 24, 2018, <https://www.theedadvocate.org/the-role-of-public-schools-in-the-advancement-of-the-communities/>.

⁴ USAFacts.org. “More than 9 Million Children Lack Internet Access at Home for Online Learning.” USAFacts. USAFacts, April 14, 2020. <https://usafacts.org/articles/internet-access-students-at-home/>.

⁵ Sartori, Rebecca. “Why Do Americans Suffer From Expensive Internet?” FiSci Technologies, March 12, 2018. <http://fisci.tech/?p=1231>.

⁶ Hzdg. “How Do Students Feel About Learning Online in the Wake of COVID?” 2U. 2U, Inc., June 16, 2020. <https://2u.com/latest/how-do-students-feel-about-learning-online-wake-covid/>.

While in virtual class, students are more exposed to distractions. Many feel that e-learning promotes social isolation and a lack of ability to communicate.

Though the situation is less than ideal, educators and administrators had to adapt to the unfamiliar situation they were thrown into and switch to virtual learning.

Along with the disadvantages of online schooling there are benefits. Virtual school through interactive platforms absolves the student from the monotonous routine of a school day. Hours of online school are more flexible and allow students to have more freedom. Asynchronous learning allows students to obtain hobbies and become skilled in time management.⁷ Online learning also limits the cost of education as housing costs aren't incurred.

This field of education is relatively new and educators as well as students are learning to cope with it.

Disadvantaged Groups (Minorities and Age Groups)

With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, countless schools throughout the country have had to completely rethink their methods of in-person instruction. Whether schools have chosen to resume teaching their students over online platforms or open their doors to on campus classes, many people have been affected by their district's decisions.

Schools that have decided to switch to a remote education curriculum have witnessed drastic decreases in attendance and grades for students who have limited or no access to electronic devices. Those affected most by this digital disparity happen to be low-income, hispanic, and black students who are falling behind their peers due to a lack of resources and disruptive or cramped households. This digital divide was amplified during this past spring semester as schools failed to address "serious inequities in access to computers" and/or quiet work spaces.⁸ As the fall semester gradually

⁷ "University of Illinois Illinois Online University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign." 5 Benefits of Studying Online (vs. Face-to-Face Classroom). Accessed September 10, 2020. [https://online.illinois.edu/articles/online-learning/item/2017/06/05/5-benefits-of-studying-online-\(vs.-face-to-face-classroom\)](https://online.illinois.edu/articles/online-learning/item/2017/06/05/5-benefits-of-studying-online-(vs.-face-to-face-classroom)).

⁸ Carey, Benedict. "What We're Learning About Online Learning." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 June 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/13/health/school-learning-online-education.html.

approaches for schools across the nation, the answer to whether administrators will have the funds or capabilities to provide students with online resources is lined with uncertainty. While larger school districts, such as those in New York and Los Angeles, are spending millions of dollars to provide devices and internet access to students, smaller schools are deciding to stick with paper assignments and books due to digital disparity gaps being too wide to solve.⁹

As schools continue to prioritize distance learning, teachers have also had to adapt to more difficult settings and in many cases, have faced several drawbacks. Those with students without access to computers or internet connection, are struggling to find ways to offer instruction as the districts themselves may lack the resources to provide such facilities. For many administrators, it has become harder to teach virtual lessons as students' inattention rates have increased given a less rule-regulated environment. Teachers have reported students misbehaving, refusing to take classes seriously, or failing to attend online instruction regularly. On the other hand, teachers having to return to physical classrooms are faced with a heightened risk of being exposed to the virus.

Although many schools have adapted to online learning environments, a large number of schools have reopened and returned to in-person classes, causing both students and teachers to run a greater risk of either spreading or bringing covid-19 into their own homes. Images of packed hallways and classrooms in some states have sparked polarizing debates over whether in-person instruction is the right choice. Parents have also been forced to pull their children out of schools due to family members at home being more immunocompromised.

Regardless of whether schools have decided to reopen in-person instruction or switch to a distance learning curriculum, many people continue to face the pandemic's effect on the American education system.

Education for Tomorrow (Looking Ahead)

The future of education, as with much of American life, is deeply uncertain going forwards into the fall of 2020. The shape of education going forwards will inevitably be shaped by the course of the pandemic, and responses to it. That being said, the crisis also opens up a vacuum and the possibility of change.¹

⁹ Kinnard, Meg. "School Shutdowns Raise Stakes of Digital Divide for Students." AP NEWS, Associated Press, 30 Mar. 2020, apnews.com/588cc887c8a949c874841ef489c80184.

For many years, politicians from all sides of the spectrum have argued for educational reform. Proponents of reform obviously vary in what they believe is the appropriate solution to our educational system. Some supporters of online education have argued for replacing elements of traditional in-person learning with online lectures and assignments.¹ They often argue this would make schools safer for everyone involved going forward and allow students a greater degree of flexibility in their work schedules.^{1,3} Nonetheless, critics argue in-person learning is the best system available to us and is shown by multiple studies to outperform virtual education.^{2,3}

Alternatively, proponents of a decentralized educational system argue in favor of using this time to strengthen the power of charter schools. Proponents of this view often argue that charter schools can more rapidly adapt to a crisis and changes in education due to a lack of restrictive oversight.¹ Supporters of traditional education would counter that Public schools have far more expertise, and often have greater resources available to them.¹

Others who wish to see a more adaptive and flexible learning environment advocate moving to competency-based learning.¹ In practice, this means that students would focus on one individual learning skill, and need to prove competency in that skill before moving on. Advocates of the system argue that it allows students who have already mastered a skill to move on, and for those that need help to receive it.¹ However, critics will often point out that the process of proving competency most often involves standardized testing.¹

Finally, many argue that a return to relatively “normal” in-person education is the goal. They might concede that education has its flaws in America, but argue that it is more likely caused by disproportionate funding and specific teaching methods, rather than the broader model of education.

To find out whether or not these proposed reforms come to be, we will just have to wait and see. If there is a unifying experience throughout this pandemic, it is uncertainty. Be it in the labor market, education, or everyday life the future is still being determined by our actions.¹⁰

¹⁰ Harris, Douglas N. “How Will COVID-19 Change Our Schools in the Long Run?” *Brookings*, Brookings, 24 Apr. 2020, www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/04/24/how-will-covid-19-change-our-schools-in-the-long-run/.

² [Inside Online Charter Schools](#)

³ Mupinga, Davison M. “Distance Education in High Schools: Benefits, Challenges, and

Conclusion

As these important decisions on education continue to be made, the YACU firmly believes that it is in the best interest of everyone to hear out the opinions of perhaps the biggest stakeholders in this problem; the youth. The YACU hopes that this policy paper has been able to provide enough information for you to consider your own ideas and to continue to advocate for what you believe in. In choosing this topic our intent was to educate more people on how the COVID-19 pandemic has and will continue to affect education decisions as well as how to respond to those decisions.

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