

Pandemic Closures Affect Academic Growth Less Than Expected

Research released by NWEA in November 2020 says that students are making steady gains in reading but experiencing modest setbacks in math resulting from school closures related to COVID-19.

The follow-up to a study released by NWEA in April 2020 comparing the potential academic impact of COVID-19 and summer learning losses, “Learning During COVID-19: Initial Findings on Students’ Reading and Math Achievement and Growth,” analyzed the results of nearly 4.4 million U.S. students’ fall 2020 MAP Growth assessments.

Key findings include:

- Average scores for math were 5 to 10 percent lower for students in fall 2020 when compared to same-grade students in fall 2019.
- In almost all grades, most students made some learning gains in reading and math since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. But gains in math were smaller, on average, in fall 2020 than in prior years, resulting in more students falling behind relative to their prior standing.
- Some differences emerged from fall 2020 data when sorting students according to racial and ethnic background, but NWEA says it is too early to draw definitive conclusions.

“Preliminary fall data suggests that, on average, students are faring better than we had feared, with continued academic progress in reading and minor setbacks in math due to COVID-19-related school disruptions,” says Beth Tarasawa, executive vice president of research at NWEA. “While



there’s some good news here, we want to stress that not all students are represented in the data, especially from our most marginalized communities.”

Mitigating the Impact

NWEA’s recommendations to mitigate the impact of school closures include:

- **Continue federal and state funding to school districts impacted.** A safe return to classrooms and additional interventions will require more funding; federal and state policymakers are urged to continue to provide such funding to address the lingering impacts of COVID-19 on children and school systems.
- **Report data transparently to target resources effectively.** School leaders, districts, and states should collect and transparently report data on students’ learning opportunities, academic achievement, and social and emotional well-being to inform a broader understanding of unmet needs.
- **Equitable access to high-quality math teaching and learning.** NWEA advises a continued focus on meeting students where they are in their learning, not where they normally would be. In math, that might mean figuring out how students think about math rather than how well they perform math procedures.

“While our research highlights concerns, especially for math, the results show signs of optimism that is a reflection of a strong determination to serve our students,” says Chris Minnich, NWEA CEO. “Since schools initially closed in March [2020], we’ve seen educators and families step up and pull together in new collaborations to meet the challenge of instruction during COVID. But data shows that school isn’t working for all students, so we must continue to provide support.”

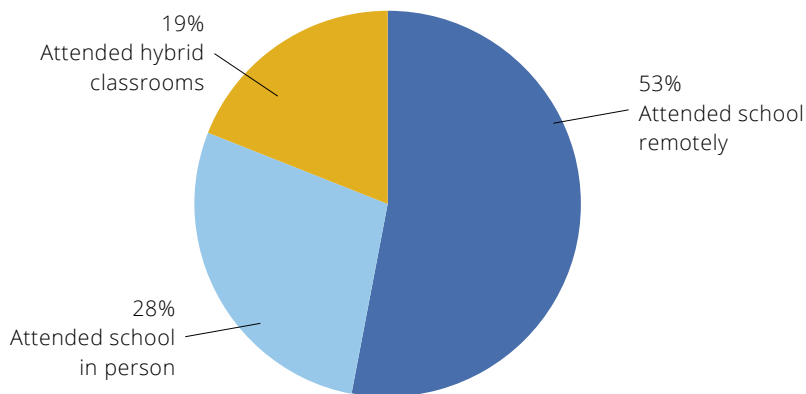
Visit nwea.org/covid-impact to access the full report. ●

Half of Students Went All-Remote in 2020

Education Next surveyed a representative sample of 2,155 American parents with children in K-12 schools in November and December about their children's experiences in school, finding that more than half (53 percent) received instruction entirely remotely last year. About 28 percent of students received instruction fully in person, while 19 percent learned in hybrid settings with in-person instruction one to five days per week.

Most parents were satisfied with the instruction their children received, but 60 percent said their child was learning less than they would without pandemic precautions in place. Satisfaction levels were highest among parents of students attending school in person, and about two-thirds of parents who were offered a fully in-person option for their child took it. ●

Students by Educational Setting, November-December 2020



Source: Education Next

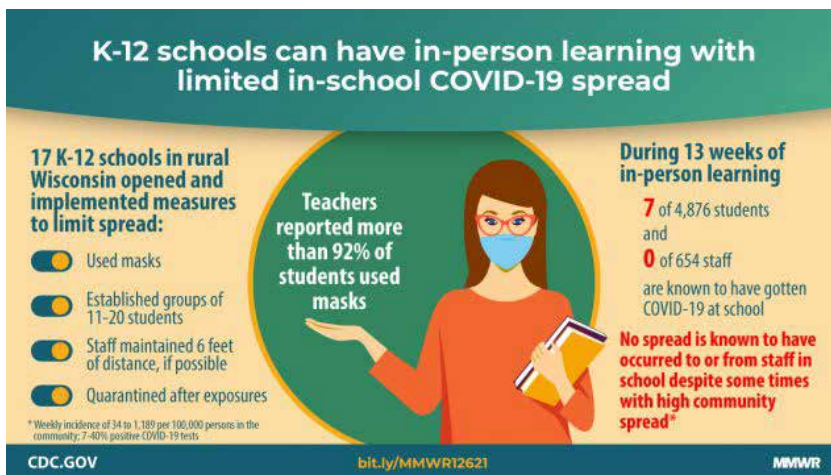
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Preliminary Research Says COVID-19 Can Be Mitigated in Schools



Mask Usage Found Effective in Wisconsin Schools

Separately, 17 schools in Wood County, Wisconsin, participated in a study of COVID-19 transmission and mask usage.

Districts provided three to five cloth face coverings to all students, asking them to wear the masks within 6 feet of another person outdoors and at all times indoors; classroom cohorts of 11 to 20 students avoided mixing with other students. Staff members observed similar preventive measures and tracked the number of students attending in person and mask compliance weekly. About 12.4 percent of Wood County's 4,876 students attended virtually.

During the 13-week study period (Aug. 31–Nov. 29, 2020), Wood County reported 3,393 COVID cases, including 191 in participating schools (133 students and 58 staff members). Researchers attributed only seven cases (3.7 percent) of the cases to in-school transmission—a rate 37 percent lower than that of the community. Observed student masking compliance was above 92 percent throughout the study. ●

Duke University researchers say that measures designed to limit the spread of COVID-19 in North Carolina public schools proved effective in 11 districts that offered in-person instruction during the first nine weeks of the 2020–2021 school year.

The study found 773 community-acquired infections among more than 90,000 students and staff, with just 64 secondary infections transmitted in schools. Six cases of secondary spread occurred in preschools, 11 in elementary schools, six in middle schools, and four in K–12 settings. The study discovered no cases of in-school child-to-adult spread.

Preventive measures included collaboration with local health departments, daily screenings of students and staff, mask-wearing mandates, public reporting and contact tracing, and a hybrid learning option that combined in-person and remote learning. Principals were responsible for maintaining adherence to safety measures and updating students and staff on policy.

“Our cohort study demonstrated that enforcing SARS-CoV-2 mitigation policies such as masking, physical distancing, and hand hygiene resulted in minimal clusters of infection and low rates of secondary transmission in schools [without] a larger community infection burden,” the preliminary report says. “Our data indicate that schools can reopen safely if they develop and adhere to specific SARS-CoV-2 prevention policies.”

TNTP Updates Acceleration Guide to Address Learning Loss

In November 2020, New York City-based educational consultancy TNTP (formerly The New Teacher Project) updated its Learning Acceleration Guide to help schools pursue instructional strategies that can help students keep up with grade-appropriate content during the pandemic.

“Our work across the country in recent months has shown that schools still need help ensuring students have access to the grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers with the high expectations they need to minimize learning loss this year—and ultimately accelerate back to grade level,” the guide says.

The guide suggests that schools take the following steps to ensure that students are taking advantage of high-quality instructional materials:

- 1. Develop a short-term implementation plan.** Set goals to increase access to grade-appropriate assignments, including targets for the proportion of assignments students should experience that are grade-appropriate.
- 2. Communicate clear expectations for the materials’ use.** Employ a PLC session for school leaders and teachers to ground school expectations “in the purpose of high-quality instructional materials as a tool that will support teachers to provide access to grade-appropriate assignments.”
- 3. Develop teacher and leader skills.** Provide teachers and leaders with the supports they need to offer access to grade-appropriate assignments.
- 4. Monitor the quality of assignments, and make adjustments as needed.** Consider whether assignments address content priorities. Connect data to classroom demographics to determine if there are gaps in equity, and measure your progress.

“After you’ve ensured that teachers and students have equitable access to grade-appropriate assignments, you’ll want to focus on ensuring that your instruction supports students to master the rigorous culturally and linguistically responsive content those assignments contain,” the guide says.

To access the guide, visit bit.ly/36pj1ov.

Text Messaging Effective Against Absenteeism

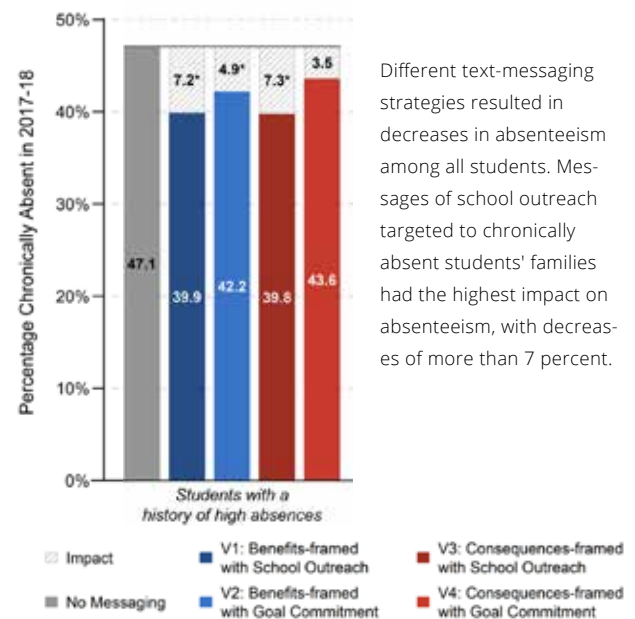
A report released in September 2020 by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) suggests that texting parents might be an effective way to counter chronic absenteeism in elementary school. Starting out with basic messages in the fall semester, the study adapted to provide additional, intensified messaging for families whose children had more absences in the spring.

Using four versions, the study found that all messages improved attendance, lowering an expected chronic absence rate of 20.5 percent by as much as 3.6 percentage points. Messages targeted to students with prior histories of frequent absences lowered the expected chronic absence rate of 47.1 percent by 3.5 to 7.3 percentage points, the study says.

“Texting has been an effective strategy for changing behaviors in public health and other areas of society,” says Jessica Heppen, senior vice president of AIR and the lead author of the report. “Our research shows that text messages can be an effective, low-cost way for schools to confront the challenge of chronic absenteeism among its youngest students.”

The study was funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the independent research and statistics arm of the U.S. Department of Education, and conducted by AIR during the 2017–2018 school year in partnership with the University of Chicago, North Carolina State University, and 2M Research Services.

To download “Can Texting Parents Improve Attendance in Elementary School? A Test of an Adaptive Messaging Strategy,” visit ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/2020006.



Percentage of Students Who Were Chronically Absent During the 2017–2018 School Year by Messaging Group

Source: IES