

Florida TaxWatch

ECONOMIC COMMENTARY

Beyond the Pandemic: Long-Term Changes and Challenges for K-12 Education in Florida

COVID-19 LEGACY SERIES PT.2

JUNE 2021

Note: This economic commentary is one of a multi-part "COVID-19 Legacy Series" discussing the long-term changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges facing the state of Florida in the years to come. Each installation will examine a particular focus area and describe how the changes will impact the Florida economy.

FOR STUDENTS, LEARNING IS A CUMULATIVE PROCESS WHEREBY KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ARE DEVELOPED OVER SUCCESSIVE YEARS. As such, any sudden and large disruption to in-person instruction can have a cascading effect on student learning and life outcomes beyond formal education. Due to COVID-19, the unprecedented disruption in learning, especially for K-12 students, raises concerns about what unfinished learning may mean for academic achievement, mental health, and social development in the future. The seismic shift from the classroom to the computer has also illuminated challenges with educational disparities and students unaccounted for, further posing long-term economic and societal risks to students, families, and communities in Florida.

THE LONG-TERM COST OF DISRUPTION TO IN-PERSON LEARNING

From kindergarten to 12th grade, students across Florida have faced extraordinary disruption to traditional in-person learning during the pandemic. Much like the rest of the nation, Florida's more than 2.7 million K-12 students had to finish out the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year through remote learning.¹ By the spring semester in 2020, more than 79.2 percent of Florida households with school-age children reported using some form of online learning.²

The collective weight of school shutdowns, distance learning, and outside stressors had an immediate impact on student learning. An early study estimated that students would return to class in fall 2020 with around 70 percent of the learning gains in reading and 50 percent of the learning gains in math relative to previous years.³ When testing data became more readily available during the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic school year, researchers found student achievement to be a mixed bag. Nationwide, performance in reading appeared rather consistent when compared to fall 2019; however, student performance in math was markedly lower than in previous years, averaging between five to ten percentile points lower.⁴

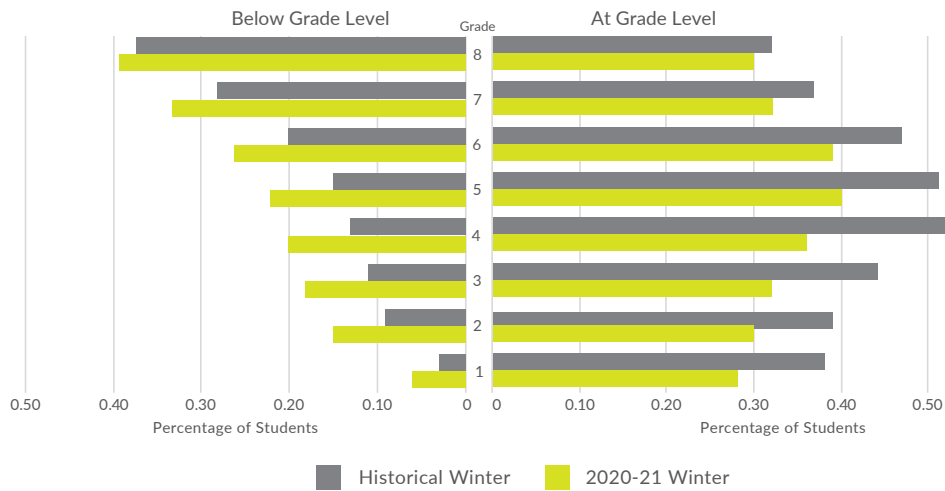
¹ K-12 student enrollment data comes from the Florida Department of Education, PK-12 Enrollment (EDStats Tool), Accessed on June 14, 2021.

² U.S. Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey for Week 5: May 28 to June 2 – Education Table 2: COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on How Children Received Education, by Select Characteristics: Florida. Originally Published on June 10, 2020.

³ NWEA, "The COVID-19 Slide: What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement," April 2020.

⁴ Brookings Institute, "How is COVID-19 Affecting Student Learning?" Dec. 3, 2020.

Fig. 1. Unfinished Learning—Math



Supplementing this finding, national exam data from Curriculum Associates,⁵ which included Florida students in the sample, found the percentage of students ready for grade-level work declined during the 2020-2021 school year by an average of 9.1 percentage points for math and 4.8 percentage points for reading (See Fig. 1). Concurrently, the percentage of students learning below-grade level increased during the 2020-2021 school year, especially in math. Unfinished learning was particularly pronounced for students in grades 3-5 where the percentage of students on grade level for math was around 13 percentage points lower. Findings in Florida paralleled national trends. In Miami-Dade County, for example, the state’s largest school district, officials reported that around 43 percent of students tested in pre-K to third grade were below grade level in reading and around 54 percent of students were below grade level in math.⁶

Unfinished student learning in the short-run, if not made up for, can potentially turn into long-term economic losses. Learning disruptions can lower lifetime educational attainment, affecting employability and productivity.⁷ According to the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, by 2045, there may be a 2.7 percent decrease in the number of college-educated workers ages 29 to 39 due to education disruptions in 2020.⁸ Studies vary in their economic forecasts, suggesting students’ lifetime earnings may fall anywhere from \$16,000 to \$82,000 (in 2020 dollars) depending on the magnitude of learning disruptions.⁹ In aggregate, this equates to more than \$173 billion in U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) losses by 2040, absent any efforts to accelerate learning.¹⁰ It should be emphasized that these forecasts are rough estimates and can be greatly reduced by concerted efforts to address unfinished learning during the present.

THE ADDED COST OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ISSUES

More than just affecting academic achievement, the pandemic has also taken a toll on the mental health of many children. For many students, school closures and the accompanying psychological trauma from the pandemic gave way to growing rates of behavioral health issues. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that between March and October 2020, mental health hospital emergency department visits rose by 24 percent for children ages 5 to 11 and by 31 percent for students ages 12 to 17 when compared to the same time in 2019.¹¹ Rising rates of behavioral health issues can also have negative long-term consequences for students. Pandemic-induced loneliness is predictive of future mental health problems for students—such as anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress—which can increase the incidence of substance abuse, job loss, and economic insecurity at later stages of life.¹²

5 Curriculum Associates, *What We’ve Learned about Unfinished Learning: Insights from Midyear Diagnostic Assessments*, Mar. 2021.

6 Miami Herald, “For Miami-Dade’s Youngest Learners, 43% Are Below Grade Level in Reading, 54% in Math,” May 14, 2021.

7 Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, “Future Output Loss from COVID-Induced School Closures,” Feb. 16, 2021.

8 Ibid.

9 Brookings Institute, “Learning losses due to COVID-19 could add up to \$10 trillion,” July 30, 2020 / McKinsey & Company, “COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime,” June 2020.

10 Ibid. It should be emphasized that these figures represent rough guess estimates before more accurate data in the fall of 2020 on unfinished student learning. Additionally, the potential for educational initiatives to accelerate learning for these groups can mitigate long-term potential economic costs to society.

11 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), “Mental Health-Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, January 1–October 17, 2020. Published Nov. 13, 2020.

12 Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, “Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19,” Nov. 1, 2020.

Furthermore, given the centrality of social interaction to child development, prolonged social isolation can simultaneously hurt relationship building, cognition, and maturation among students.¹³ Due to all these problems, behavioral health issues compound the potential long-term costs to students.

CONCERNS OVER EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES AND UNACCOUNTED STUDENTS

A key challenge going forward will be addressing educational disparities. Throughout the pandemic, students in low-income communities have been especially disadvantaged relative to other students. In Broward County, as an example, daily attendance at schools in high poverty areas fell by nearly 12 percent, whereas for high income areas, attendance increased by 2 percent after switching to online formats.¹⁴ Education disparities were eventually reflected in fall 2020 assessment data—K-5 test scores for low-income students were about 59 percent of the historical average in math and 77 percent in reading, whereas for higher-income students, the scores were about 69 percent of the historical average in math and 90 percent in reading.¹⁵

Two issues underpin many of the learning disparities present during the pandemic and offer further avenues for research and policymaking to address educational gaps. First, insufficient internet connectivity has had a pronounced effect on low-income students. Even before the pandemic, roughly 35 percent of low-income households in the U.S. with school aged children lacked access to high-speed internet connection, leading to reduced student outcomes.¹⁶ Investing in efforts to ensure affordable and equitable internet access across Florida would help prevent student disengagement prevalent in low-income areas and rural parts of Florida. Second, many low-income students belong to families with working parents who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, either working as essential workers or being unemployed. In either case, parental involvement, supervision, and support was limited for their children relative to higher income groups.¹⁷ Promoting safe in-person schooling is an important priority and yields the dual benefit of providing students with direct access to support systems (e.g. teachers and counselors) while also allowing parents to return to work without being restricted due to childcare needs. Since public school funding is directly tied to enrollment, another foreseeable challenge ahead will be re-engaging students who may have fallen into truancy or dropped out of school in the last year. During the 2020-2021 school year, initial state estimates suggested there were 88,000 fewer students in classes when the year began—a figure that eventually declined as local administrators discovered some students opted for homeschooling, private school, or waited to enroll.¹⁸ Still, there may be tens of thousands of students who may not show up for class in the upcoming school year, not only reducing local school district funding but also endangering long-term educational, economic, and developmental outcomes for students.

CONCLUSION AND STEPS TO ADDRESS FUTURE CHALLENGES

The future changes and challenges in the K-12 space are daunting but not insurmountable. For Florida, there are multiple solutions to countering these challenges. First, using data-driven methods to identify local characteristics can help educators and policymakers understand student-specific needs, address educational disparities, and re-engage students who are unaccounted for. Longitudinal studies on learning outcomes can help researchers assess whether COVID-related problems were due to individual student experiences, teaching methods, technological shifts, or a mix. Second, meeting behavioral health needs among students, especially for online students without access to in-person school resources, will be crucial to preventing downstream costs to students and society. Third, positioning students and families for future education disruptions will be quintessential to future resilience. Since disruptive events, such as hurricanes and cyberattacks, may occur with more frequency in the future, ensuring students are prepared for any potential disruption can minimize future adversities and help plan for future shifts to educational models.

Overall, beyond the pandemic, Florida's K-12 education will remain changed due to the growing use of remote learning and the inevitable challenges relating to unfinished learning, behavioral health, and educational disparities. It is therefore imperative to confront these challenges today while empowering students and families for the future of education.

13 The Hunt Institute, "Mental Health for K-12 Students During the Pandemic," Apr. 9, 2021.

14 The Markup, "Remote Learning During the Pandemic Has Hit Vulnerable Students the Hardest," Aug. 14, 2020.

15 McKinsey & Company, "COVID-19 and Learning Loss-Disparities Grow and Students Need Help," Dec. 2020.

16 Pew Research Center, "As schools close due to the coronavirus, some U.S. students face a digital 'homework gap,'" Mar. 16, 2020.

17 Brookings Institute, "COVID-19, the educational equity crisis, and the opportunity ahead," Apr. 29, 2021.

18 Florida Phoenix, "Florida is starting to understand where tens of thousands of 'missing' kids have gone," Mar. 24, 2021.

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