

POLICY BRIEF

The effect of emergency-ordered school closings, learning loss and mask mandates on children

Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

August 2022

Key Findings

1. The governor's decision to close public schools for nearly two years in response to COVID-19 significantly affected Washington's 1.1 million public school students.
2. Research shows many students suffered long-term learning loss and psychological and emotional harm, resulting in limited future opportunities in life.
3. State test scores show public schools failed to adequately educate 70 percent of students in math and 52 percent of students in English.
4. Low-income students were most severely affected, with 8,700 fewer such students applying for state-funded college scholarships.
5. Some public schools have dropped standard grading and are automatically passing all students, regardless of the true level of learning they have received.
6. High school students suffered academic, mental and social harms due to enforced isolation from normal community, athletic and school-related activities.
7. Public health findings show the negative educational and social effects of shut-down orders were greater for this very low-risk group than the limited risk of exposure to COVID-19.
8. The 1.1 million students who attend public schools are being automatically promoted to the next grade.



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Introduction

Governor Inslee responded to the national COVID health crisis by closing the public schools in Washington state to in-person instruction from March 2020 to September 2021, and allowing them to re-open sporadically the fall of 2021. Governor Inslee also mandated the use of masks and other face covering, and implemented social distancing rules in daycares and schools from March 2020 to March of 2022.

As a result of these three policies – school closures, masks mandates and social distancing, the 1.1 million students attending Washington’s public schools had their education disrupted for nearly two years.

The stated reason for imposing these policies was to slow or stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Recent studies have raised questions about whether or to what extent these extreme measures provided a public health benefit. There is no question, however, that these policies had a severe impact on children. This study reviews the human outcomes of school closures, mask mandates and social distancing and the impact they had on the social and learning losses experienced by children in Washington state.

Learning loss and social promotion

The data show Washington students have suffered significant learning loss as a result of these COVID rules. Governor Inslee and State superintendent Reykdal have acknowledged that the remote instruction provided in place of in-person instruction was inadequate, and failed to educate students to the minimum standards set by the state.

The teachers union fought to keep schools closed.¹ When Washington’s schools finally reopened in September 2021, the 47th state in the nation to reopen, students were automatically promoted to the next grade without any assessment of whether they had actually advanced in learning.

Social promotion, rather than advancing a grade based on actual gains in learning, has existed in public schools for decades. The decision by education officials in 2021 extended social promotion to all 1.1 million public school children.

1 “Inslee says he will require schools to offer some in-person instruction in April,” by Ashley Gross, KNKX Public Radio, March 12, 2021, at <https://www.knkx.org/youth-education/2021-03-12/inslee-says-he-will-require-schools-to-offer-some-in-person-instruction-in-april>.

Public schools have ample funding

Budget data show Washington’s public schools have plenty of funding. On March 27, 2020 Congress passed the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act. This Act included funding for Elementary and Secondary School Relief (ESSER). Washington state received \$216 million in immediate ESSER I funds. Washington later received \$824.9 million in ESSER II funds, and \$1.853 billion in ESSER III funds, for a total of \$2.894 billion.²

Overall, Washington public schools received operating funding at the highest levels in history during the COVID crisis. In 2021-22, total state, local and federal funding, not including ESSER funding, reached \$18,175 per student, on average statewide.³ This is more than the yearly tuition at most private schools in the state.

Mostly spared from this disruption were the 80,000 students enrolled in Washington’s private schools and 4,000 students enrolled in public charter schools. Their schools largely reopened to in-person instruction the fall of 2020, just a few months after the COVID crisis started and a whole year earlier than traditional public school students.⁴

One result of the long-term closure of public schools is severe learning loss experienced by Washington’s public school students. This study describes how the education of children has been harmed by the governor’s emergency orders closing the public schools. In particular, this study uses official data to report on student academic delays that lasted many months longer than in private and charter public schools.

Timeline of school-closure emergency orders

In February 2020 Governor Inslee declared a state of emergency in response to COVID-19. Under state law the governor is the sole authority to declare that an emergency exists and he has the sole authority to decide when it ends.⁵ As of June 2022 the emergency declaration is still in effect, lasting to date more than 825 days.

Following is a timeline of official orders and their effect on children’s education in Washington.

- 2 “Washington’s public K-12 schools will receive \$1.853 billion from ARP Act (on top of the \$1.042 billion previously appropriated by Congress), by Emily Makings, *Washington State Wire*, March 15, 2021, at <https://washingtonstatewire.com/washingtons-public-k-12-schools-will-receive-1-853-billion-from-arp-act-on-top-of-1-042-billion-previously-appropriated-by-congress/>.
- 3 “Workload, Staffing, Finance, Statewide Report,” Washington State K-12 School District Finance Data, at <http://fiscal.wa.gov/K12.aspx>.
- 4 “Opinion: Washington’s students are losing in this power struggle,” by Keri Ingraham, *Puget Sound Business Journal*, March 16, 2021, at <https://www.bizjournals.com/seattle/news/2021/03/16/keri-d-ingraham-classroom-closures-affect-students.html>.
- 5 Revised Code of Washington, Chapter 43.06.210, Proclamations—Generally—State of Emergency, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=43.06.210>.

- February 29, 2020 -- Governor Inslee declared a State of Emergency exists due to COVID.⁶
- March 13, 2020 -- Governor Inslee closed all public and private schools to in-person instruction.⁷
- March 23, 2020 -- Governor Inslee closed all non-essential businesses, prohibited people from leaving their homes, and from participating in any private and public gatherings, except those needed to conduct “essential business.”⁸
- June 11, 2020 -- Governor Inslee suggested phased reopening of K-12 schools because “the science suggests that by ensuring safe social distancing and hygiene practices, and modifying procedures and facilities, many school functions can be conducted with limited risk of exposure and spread of COVID-19.”⁹ Yet this order prohibited all public and private schools from reopening unless they implemented health safety measures issued by the Washington State Department of Health, including social distancing and cloth masking requirements.¹⁰
- July 15, 2020 -- The National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine concluded that, in weighing health risks against educational risks of banning in-person instruction, schools should reopen in September 2020 to in-person classroom instruction in grades K through 5, and for special needs children.¹¹
- Summer 2020 -- Washington state’s Superintendent of Public Instruction threatened to withhold funds from districts if they refused to comply with

6 “PROCLAMATION BY THE GOVERNOR 20-05,” Office of Governor Inslee, February 29, 2020 at <https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/20-05%20Coronavirus%20%28final%29.pdf>.

7 “PROCLAMATION BY THE GOVERNOR AMENDING PROCLAMATIONS 20-05, 20-06, 20-07, and 20-08 20-09 Statewide K-12 School Closures,” Office of Governor Inslee, March 13, 2020, at <https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/20-09%20Coronavirus%20Schools%20Amendment%20%28tmp%29.pdf>.

8 “PROCLAMATION BY THE GOVERNOR AMENDING PROCLAMATIONS 20-05 and 20-25 et seq. 20-25.7 ‘SAFE START – STAY HEALTHY’ COUNTY-BY-COUNTY PHASED REOPENING,” Office of Governor Inslee, July 24, 2020, https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/proc_20-25.7.pdf

9 PROCLAMATION BY THE GOVERNOR AMENDING PROCLAMATIONS 20-05, 20-08, 20-09, and 20-09.1 20-09.2 Phased Reopening of K-12 Schools,” Office of Governor Inslee, June 11, 2020, at https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/20.09.2%20COVID19%20Phased%20Reopening%20of%20K12%20Schools_0.pdf

10 “K-12 Schools – Summer 2020 Guidance,” Washington State Department of Health, June 11, 2020, at <https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/DOH%20Guidance%20K-12%20Schools%20Summer.pdf>.

11 “Schools Should Prioritize Reopening in Fall 2020, Especially for Grades K-5, While Weighing Risks and Benefits,” by National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, News Release, July 15, 2020, at <https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2020/07/schools-should-prioritize-reopening-in-fall-2020-especially-for-grades-k-5-while-weighing-risks-and-benefits>.

the Governor's health and safety requirements, including the mandatory use of masks.¹²

- September 2020
 - Public schools stay closed to in-person instruction.¹³
 - Private and public charter schools mostly reopened to in-person instruction, with health and safety measures in place.¹⁴
 - Public schools in Wyoming, Arkansas, Florida, South Dakota, Utah, Nebraska, Texas, and many other states reopened to in-person instruction.¹⁵
 - The schools in 20 countries, including Denmark, Britain, France, Italy, Finland, Australia, Japan, and China, safely reopened to in-person instruction.¹⁶
- Fall of 2020 -- Districts told families schools would not reopen to in-person instruction in September, but would reopen in October. When October arrived, they were told that schools could not reopen, but would reopen in November.¹⁷ This pattern continued throughout the winter of

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- 12 “Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance and Resources, School in Fall 2021, Health and Safety Requirements and Guidance,” by Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction at <https://www.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/press-releases/novel-coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-resources>, specifically: “OSPI will follow the process and timeline described in WAC 392-117-070 through WAC 392-117-085 to provide notice and time to come into compliance, and eventually withhold funds if noncompliance continues.”
- 13 “Back to school news updates, September 2: What to know about in-person and online learning in the Seattle area and Washington state, and the U.S.” by Michelle Baruchman, *The Seattle Times*, September 2, 2020, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/back-to-school-news-updates-september-2-what-to-know-about-in-person-and-online-learning-in-the-seattle-area-washington-state-and-the-u-s/>.
- 14 “Opinion: Washington’s students are losing in this power struggle,” by Keri Ingraham, *Puget Sound Business Journal*, March 16, 2021, at <https://www.bizjournals.com/seattle/news/2021/03/16/keri-d-ingraham-classroom-closures-affect-students.html>.
- 15 “Burbio’s K-12 School Opening Tracker, 2020/2021 School Year In Review, School Learning Mode by State,” updated April 22, 2022, at https://cai.burbio.com/school-opening-tracker/?utm_medium=email&_hsmi=2&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--BBgDAIEnTKr4WwdByEAMvz7CQjsFSYyVYTPc2vHunTvDD9tx4j3x3KI5872rt8U0C8UAbvhCRW6eYU6tJOOmqfN-K6g&utm_content=2&utm_source=hs_email.
- 16 “Education Systems’ Response to COVID-19, Brief: December 3, 2020,” by The World Bank, at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/search?q=Education+Systems%27+Response+to+COVID+19+December+3%2C+2022+3%2C+2¤tTab=1>. See also “Shocking Data Shows School Closures Caused Severe Learning Loss for Children Around the Globe,” by Helen Raleigh, *The Federalist*, March 24, 2022 at <https://thefederalist.com/2022/03/24/shocking-data-shows-school-closures-caused-severe-learning-loss-for-children-around-the-globe/>.
- 17 “Washington schools are reversing course on reopening plans as coronavirus surges,” by Hannah Furfaro, *The Seattle Times*, November 2, 2020, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/as-case-counts-rise-washington-school-districts-are-reversing-course-on-reopening-plans/>.

the 2020-21 school year, with most schools in the state remaining closed to in-person instruction.

- December 2020 -- State superintendent Chris Reykdal told *The Seattle Times* that Washington's students are receiving a "sh—tty" education right now, saying the mandatory remote instructional model "doesn't work for a lot of kids."¹⁸
- February 3, 2021 -- The national Centers for Disease Control said there is increasing data that showing that schools can safely reopen.¹⁹
- February 12, 2021 -- The Center for Disease Control (CDC) bowed to political pressure from the American Federation of Teachers and the Biden administration and changed its recommendation to allow schools to stay closed.²⁰
- February 2021 -- Washington state provided in-person instruction to only 19 percent of students, making Washington 47th last in the nation on re-opening public schools.²¹
- March 15, 2021 -- Governor Inslee ordered schools to provide 30 percent of average weekly instructional hours in-person, starting on April 19, 2021.²² He cited skyrocketing mental health and suicide rates among Washington's youth caused in part by closed public schools.
- July 30, 2021 --- Governor Inslee required schools to comply with mandates from the Washington State Department of Health (DOH), the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), and the Department of Labor and Industries (L&I).²³

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- 18 "Washington state schools chief says his hands have been tied in pandemic," by Dahlia Bazzaz, *The Seattle Times*, December 15, 2020, at https://www.seattletimes.com/education/lab/washington-state-schools-chief-says-his-hands-have-been-tied-in-pandemic/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=article_inset_1.1.
- 19 "CDC Director says schools can safely reopen without vaccinating teachers," by Berkeley Lovelace Jr., *CNBC.com*, February 3, 2021, at <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/03/cdc-director-says-schools-can-safely-reopen-without-vaccinating-teachers.html>.
- 20 "Powerful teachers union influenced CDC on school reopenings, emails show," by Jon Levine, *The New York Post*, May 1, 2021 at <https://nypost.com/2021/05/01/teachers-union-collaborated-with-cdc-on-school-reopening-emails/>.
- 21 "Washington ranks 47th state in the nation in opening public schools (while private schools have been safely open for months), by Liv Finne, *Washington Policy Center*, February 24, 2021, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/detail/washington-ranks-47th-state-in-the-nation-in-opening-public-schools-while-private-schools-have-been-safely-open-for-months>
- 22 "EMERGENCY PROCLAMATION OF THE GOVERNOR 21-05 Children and Youth Mental Health Crisis," Office of Governor Inslee, March 15, 2021, at https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/21-05_Children%27s_Mental_Health_Crisis_%28tmp%29.pdf.
- 23 PROCLAMATION BY THE GOVERNOR AMENDING PROCLAMATIONS 20-05, 20-08, and 20-09, et seq. 20-09.4 K-12 Schools, Office of Governor Inslee at <https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/20-09.4-COVID-19K-12Schools.pdf>

- July 30, 2021 -- OSPI's guidance states: "OSPI, the Department of Health (DOH), and the Governor's Office expect all K-12 students to have the opportunity to attend school in-person full-time in the 2021-22 school year."²⁴
- September 2021 -- Public schools reopened to in-person learning. At the same time, private schools and charter public schools had already been open for nearly a year.
- October and November 2021 -- Frequent school closures again interrupt in-person learning.²⁵
- January 2022 -- Teachers' union officials sporadically insist on closing local schools, often with little notice to parents.²⁶
- March 11, 2022 -- Governor Inslee rescinded his mask mandate.²⁷
- March 11, 2022 -- Washington State Department of Health removed the mask mandate, but strongly encouraged maintaining masking guidance on 2, 3, 4 and 5 year-olds:

"...Children younger than five years old are exempt from the requirement to wear a face covering.

- Children who are younger than two years old should never wear face coverings due to the risk of suffocation.
- Children who are two, three, or four years old, with the assistance and close supervision of an adult, are strongly recommended to wear a face covering at all times in public settings when around non-household members..."²⁸

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- 24 "Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance and Resources, School in Fall 2021," by Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction at <https://www.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/press-releases/novel-coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-resources>.
- 25 "Seattle and Bellevue schools cancel class for students Friday due to lack of staff," by Monica Velez, *The Seattle Times*, November 18, 2021, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/education/lab/no-school-for-seattle-students-friday-due-to-staffing-issues/> and "Seattle schools to remain closed Monday to test all staff and students for COVID," by Dahlia Bazzaz, Monica Velez, and Jenn Smith, *The Seattle Times*, December 30, 2021, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/education/seattle-schools-closed-monday-to-test-all-staff-and-students/>
- 26 "Two Seattle schools cancel classes. Are schools going back to remote learning?" by Monica Velez and Nina Shapiro, *The Seattle Times*, January 10, 2022, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/education/lab/two-seattle-schools-cancel-classes-are-students-going-back-to-remote-learning/>.
- 27 PROCLAMATION BY THE GOVERNOR AMENDING PROCLAMATIONS 20-05 and 20-25, et seq. 20-25.19 "WASHINGTON READY," Office of Governor Inslee, March 11, 2022, at <https://www.governor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/proclamations/20-25.19%20-%20COVID-19%20Washington%20Ready%20%28tmp%29.pdf>.
- 28 "ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH AMENDING ORDER 20-03 20-03.8 Face Coverings – Statewide," by Imair Shah, MD, MPH, Secretary of Health, State of Washington Department of Health, https://doh.wa.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/Documents/1600/coronavirus//Secretary_of_Health_Order_20-03_Statewide_Face_Coverings.pdf.

Learning losses caused by long-term school shutdowns

As early as June 2020 university researchers and experts in child development warned state officials that children would pay the highest cost in terms of lost learning because of the school shutdowns.

For example, in June of 2020, researchers at McKinsey and Company warned that closing schools through January 2021 (seven months) would inflict on students “a hurt that could last a lifetime,” particularly on low-income Hispanic and black students, increasing existing achievement gaps by 15-20 percent. This report also predicted that two to nine percent of high school students would drop out, that social and emotional isolation and anxiety would increase, and that U.S. students may lose, on average, a year’s worth of full-time work in lifetime earnings as a result of COVID-relating learning losses.

McKinsey estimated that the earnings losses for this entire K-12 cohort of students would translate to \$110 billion annual earnings losses, a GDP loss of \$173 billion to \$271 billion a year, a 0.8 to 1.3 percent reduction.²⁹

In November 2020, researchers at the University of Washington and the University of California at Los Angeles found that children who do not graduate from high school may experience a lifetime of lower wages and disadvantage, and that prolonged, missed instruction may reduce life expectancy.³⁰

In January 2021, two Yale economists published a study for the National Bureau of Economic Research. The study found:

“...One year of school closures will cost ninth graders in the poorest communities a 25 percent decrease in their post-educational earning potential, even if it is followed by three years of normal schooling...

“The richest 20 percent wouldn’t experience such extreme losses.

“Children living in the poorest 20 percent of U.S. neighborhoods will experience the most negative and long-lasting effects of school closures.

“Students will recover some of these learning deficits by the end of high school, but more than half of the education gap accrued during the crisis will persist.”³¹

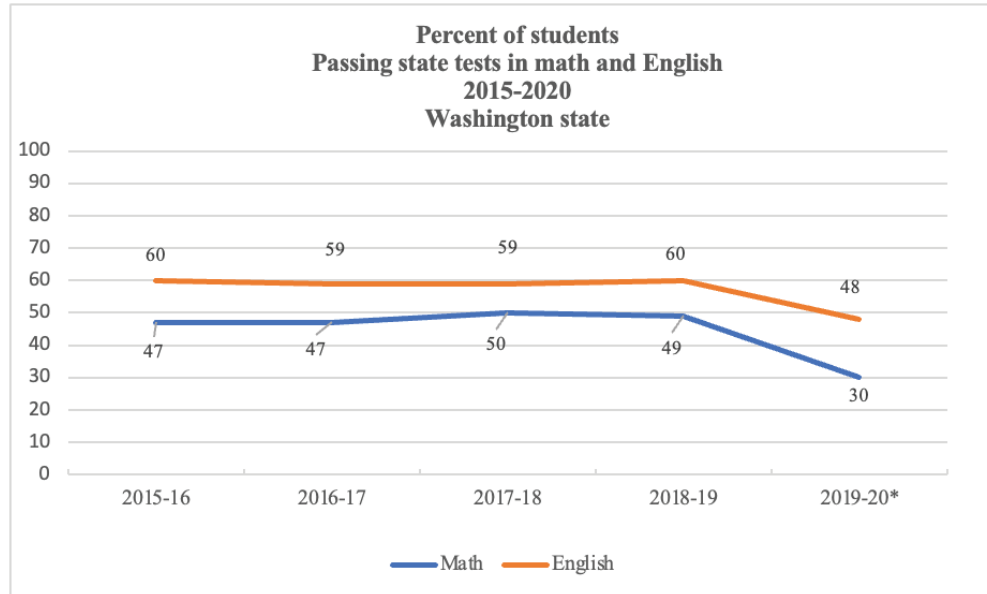
29 “COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime,” by Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, June 1, 2020, *McKinsey and Company* at <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>.

30 “Estimation of US Children’s Educational Attainment and Years of Life Lost Associated with Primary School Closures During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Pandemic,” Dimitri A. Christakis, MD, MPH, Wil Van Cleve, MD, MPH, Frederick Zimmerman, PhD, November 20, 2020, *Jama Network*, American Medical Association, at https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2772834?utm_campaign=articlePDF&utm_medium=articlePDFlink&utm_source=articlePDF&utm_content=jamanetworkopen.2020.28786.

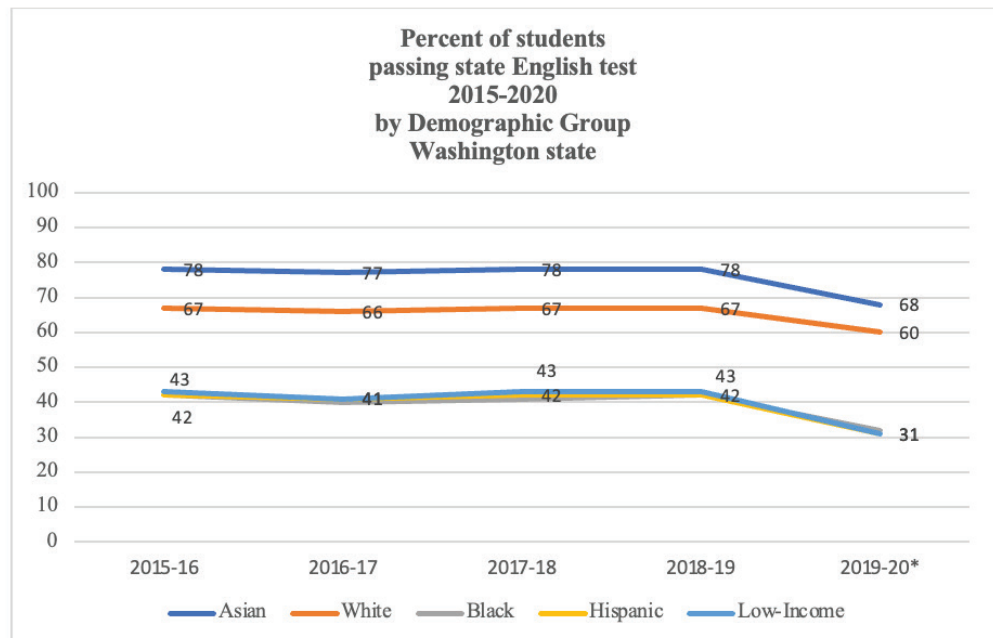
31 “COVID school closures most harm students from poorest neighborhoods,” by Mike Cummings and Fabrizio Zilibotti, *Yale News*, January 5, 2021 at <https://news.yale.edu/2021/01/05/covid-school-closures-most-harm-students-poorest-neighborhoods>.

Decline in academic test scores

In January 2022, OSPI released November 2021 test scores that show public schools failed to provide 70 percent of Washington students adequate instruction in math, and failed to provide 52 percent of students adequate instruction in English.³²



*Administered November of 2021



*Administered November of 2021

³² “Washington State Report Card, 2021,” by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, at <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300>.

Impact on children in daycare

For two years, Governor Inslee's policies maintained mask and social distancing requirements on very young children in child care centers.

Early development researchers report that babies, toddlers and preschool children between ages zero and four are especially vulnerable to adversity and disrupted social conditions. Child mental and emotional development depends on maintaining close and caring relationships with caregivers. COVID mandates requiring daily masking and social distancing put at risk the formation of these critically-important human bonds.

Experts in public health and early childhood development severely criticized the mask requirements as bad public health policy, warning the harm to children exceeds any possible public health benefit:³³

“The importance of early childhood for the rest of a person's life is now well understood; what happens in those early moments really matters, and changing the beginning has the potential to change the whole story- including learning, earning and happiness.

“In addition, the centrality of responsive caregiving and interaction such as that between peers and with caregivers in the home and childcare settings is increasingly well appreciated, affecting language and social-emotional development and IQ.”³⁴

Researchers at Brown University found a 23 percent drop in IQ for very young children caused by mandated mask and social distancing requirements. In a study released in August 2021, scientists at Brown University and the Warren Alpert Medical School at Brown University report:

“We find that children born during the pandemic have significantly reduced verbal, motor, and overall cognitive performance compared to children born pre-pandemic. Moreover, we find that males and children in lower socioeconomic families have been most affected.

“Results highlight that even in the absence of direct SARS-CoV-2 infection and COVID-19 illness, the environmental changes associated COVID-19 pandemic is significantly and negatively affecting infant and child development.”³⁵

33 “Commentary: Making pre-school children wear masks is bad public health,” by Robert C. Hughes, Sunil Ghopal, Mark Tomlinson, August 13, 2021, OSF, Center for Open Science, at <https://osf.io/65tdh/>.

34 “Commentary: Making pre-school children wear masks is bad public health,” by Robert C. Hughes, Sunil Ghopal, Mark Tomlinson, August 13, 2021, OSF, Center for Open Science, at <https://osf.io/65tdh/>.

35 “Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Early Child Cognitive Development: Initial Findings in a Longitudinal Observational Study of Child Health,” by Sean CL Deoni, Jennifer Beauchemin, Alexandra Volpe, Viren D'Sa, the RESONANCE Consortium, *medRxiv, The Preprint Server for Health Sciences*, August 11, 2021, at <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2021.08.10.21261846v1>.

In this study, students from ages three months to three years showed a large drop in IQ, down 23 percent, from a high of just under 100 in 2019, to around 80 in 2020, and finally 77 in 2021.³⁶

The Brown University scientists wrote:

“... concern for child development stemmed principally from the known impact that family and home stress, parent and child anxiety, lack of stimulating environments, and other economic and environmental adversities can have on the developing infant and child brain.”

The home stress, child anxiety and denied access to daily exercise and stimulating play environments cited in the study were all child-impact factors caused by school closure, mask mandate and social distancing policies.

Impact on children in preschool

Early learning activists often claim putting three and four year-olds in preschool will lead to higher test scores, higher graduation rates, and greater success later in life. However, in January 2022, a study of the Tennessee voluntary preschool program showed preschool actually harms child development. Children who participated in this program performed worse on standardized tests, were more likely to be referred to special education services, and were more likely to have disciplinary problems. The children who attended preschool had not learned to read by third grade.³⁷

State data show that during the period of mandated public school shutdowns, fewer low-income preschoolers were enrolled in public programs and preschool in Washington state. Here are the reported details:

1,247 fewer low-income infants and toddlers received public services.³⁸

2,991 fewer low-income three, four and five year old children participated in Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP).³⁹

36 “Children Born During Pandemic Have Reduced Cognitive Skills, Finds New Study Led by Brown Professor,” by GoLocalProvNewsTeam, GoLocalProv.com, August 15, 2021, at: <https://www.golocalprov.com/news/children-born-during-pandemic-have-reduced-cognitive-skills-says-new-study>.

37 “Researchers see potential negative impact from public pre-K programs,” by Stephen Loiaconi, KOMO NEWS, The National Desk, January 26, 2022, at [https://komonews.com/news/nation-world/researchers-see-potential-negative-impact-from-public-pre-k-programs#:~:text=Researchers%20see%20potential%20negative%20impact%20from%20public%20pre%2DK%20programs,-by%20STEPHEN%20LOIACONI&text=WASHINGTON%20\(TND\)%20%E2%80%94%20State%2D,federal%20universal%20pre%2DK%20program..](https://komonews.com/news/nation-world/researchers-see-potential-negative-impact-from-public-pre-k-programs#:~:text=Researchers%20see%20potential%20negative%20impact%20from%20public%20pre%2DK%20programs,-by%20STEPHEN%20LOIACONI&text=WASHINGTON%20(TND)%20%E2%80%94%20State%2D,federal%20universal%20pre%2DK%20program..)

38 “Common Schools Enrollment,” Washington State Caseload Forecast Council, February 11, 2022, page 14: <https://www.cfc.wa.gov/Documents/ForecastNarratives.pdf>

39 Ibid, page 16.

Given the new research from Tennessee, these children may have actually benefited from not having to attend preschool, giving them more time to develop constructive relationships and positive interactions with caregivers at home.

Elementary school children fell behind in reading

A November 2021 study of nine million children by Curriculum Associates found that students in elementary school have been detrimentally affected by pandemic-related mandates, particularly for students in 2nd and 3rd grade learning how to read. The percentage of 3rd graders two or more grade levels behind in reading increased by seven percentage points, from 31 percent to 38 percent. The percentage of 2nd graders two or more grade levels behind in reading increased by nine percentage points, from 24 percent to 33 percent.⁴⁰

Becoming a strong reader is critically important for later success in school. A child not reading proficiently by third grade is four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma than a child who is a strong reader at that age.⁴¹

Mandated mask-wearing made learning to read far more difficult for children. Learning how to sound out letters and words is fundamental to learning how to read. Students learn to decode verbal language by listening and watching the facial expressions and lips of their teachers.

Researchers in France demonstrated how important it is for students to see the faces of their teachers. The researchers gave a syllable-counting test to five and seven year-olds. They showed that the children weakest at identifying syllables at age five failed to make progress by age seven when prevented from seeing the lips and facial expressions of their teachers.⁴²

Elementary school children fell behind in math

Curriculum Associates research shows students also lost ground in math. The largest losses in math are in grades 4, 5 and 6, when students move from basic number sense and fluency to critical problem solving and algebraic thinking. For example, the percentage of students two or more grade-levels behind in math in the fall of 2021 increased by 10 points, for 4th graders from 27 percent to 37 percent, for 5th graders from 27 percent to 37 percent, and for 6th graders from 32 percent to 42 percent.

40 “Understanding Student Learning, Insights from Fall 2021,” by Curriculum Associates Research Brief, November 2021, at <https://www.curriculumassociates.com/-/media/mainsite/files/i-ready/iready-understanding-student-learning-paper-fall-results-2021.pdf>.

41 “DOUBLE JEOPARDY, How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation,” by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, January 1, 2012, at <https://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy>.

42 “Difficulties in learning to read caused by teachers’ masks,” LORIA (Laboratoire lorraine de recherche en informatique et ses applications, Agnès PIQUARD-KIPFFER, Thalia CAVADINI, Liliane SPRENGER-CHAROLLES & Edouard GENTAZ, *L’Annee Psychologique, Topics in Cognitive Psychology*, March 2022, pages 3-18 at <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-annee-psychologique-2021-2.htm>.

Teachers face considerable problems in bringing students up to grade level after state-ordered mandates closed their schools. Many students with gaps in their knowledge from two years of interrupted learning will likely fall further behind as teachers are unable to meet their individual needs. Teachers need to move through the next year's curriculum, so they often cannot focus on individual children.

The public school solution to this problem is to socially promote children. Some children, with the help of their families and teachers, will recover from their learning losses, but many other children will not.

Low-income, black and Hispanic students are at risk of not catching up

A February 2022 report from Amplify warns the damage to children resulting from mandated masking, school closure and social distancing policies, particularly to low-income, minority children, will compound over time:

“It’s really an all-hands on deck moment. But aiming for recovery is the wrong goal, because pre-pandemic literacy rates were already a problem. Literacy instruction for the K-2 age group has always been critical. Now we’re seeing second grade students who have spent their entire school lives in the pandemic losing the most instructional time at the most important moments for learning to read.”

“The struggles of students who have fallen behind are not going to go away on their own. If we don’t address them, those struggles will compound. The older these students become, the longer it will take them to catch up.”

This report shows that the gaps nationally between black and Hispanic students and their white counterparts are now greater than they were before the imposition of COVID-related mandates. According to Amplify, the gaps are most serious in kindergarten, grade 1 and grade 2. In kindergarten, 37 percent of low-income, minority students are far behind in reading. In grade 1, 36 percent of these students are far behind. In grade 2, 35 percent are far behind.⁴³

Special needs students were negatively affected the most

The education of students with special needs relies especially on caring in-person instruction. These personal interactions cannot be replaced by a computer. Special needs students have vision or hearing loss, Downs syndrome, autism, dyslexia, ADHD and other handicaps that require direct personal attention from educators to overcome.

Closing the schools caused many special needs children to suffer significant developmental setbacks. The children depend heavily on the structure and daily routine of the school environment, and on the skilled assistance of their teachers

43 “Amid academic recovery in classrooms nationwide, risks remain for youngest students with least instruction time during critical early years,” by Amplify, February 2022 at https://amplify.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/mCLASS_MOY-Results_February-2022-Report.pdf.

to make progress in learning how to speak, read and interact with their peers. The mandate policy that closed schools long term caused many children with special needs to regress and lose what they had learned in the past.

Seattle Public Schools, the largest district in the state, has about 7,250 special needs students. For years, parents have highlighted the shortcomings in the services school officials provide to their special needs children. The COVID school shutdown underscored this particular failure of the Seattle schools.

Media reporting in October 2020 revealed that Seattle Public Schools was serving only one special education student. In contrast, neighboring school districts were successfully serving hundreds of students in-person.⁴⁴

Seattle's failure to serve its special education students was so egregious that in early January 2021, the U.S. Department of Education launched a federal investigation.⁴⁵ Nearly a year later, in June 2021, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction ordered Seattle Public Schools to make up for excessive delays to in-person instruction and medical care that the district had denied its special needs students.⁴⁶

The parents of many special needs students are so angry and upset at being abandoned by their schools during COVID that they have filed lawsuits. Federal law gives special needs students the right to a free and appropriate public education, and it is likely these families will win large monetary settlements against Seattle Public Schools and other districts.

The harm to high school students

Mental and psychological damage

Numerous studies are showing the COVID school closures have had an adverse impact on the mental and physical health of children. Isolating teenagers from social contact with peers for nearly two years increased their levels of anxiety and

44 "Only 1 Seattle Public Schools student is receiving special-education services right now," by Joy Resmovits, *The Seattle Times*, October 29, 2020, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/only-1-seattle-public-schools-student-is-receiving-special-education-services-in-person-right-now/>.

45 "Federal probe opened into whether Seattle Schools failed special ed students during pandemic," by Ann Dornfeld, KUOW Radio, January 14, 2021, at <https://www.kuow.org/stories/feds-launch-probe-into-seattle-public-schools-special-education-services-during-pandemic>.

46 "State orders fixes at Seattle schools after finding special education violations during pandemic," by Dahlia Bazzaz, *The Seattle Times*, June 21, 2021, at <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/education/state-orders-fixes-at-seattle-schools-after-finding-special-education-violations-during-pandemic/>.

stress. These psychological problems may persist, with long-term consequences in their lives.⁴⁷

Even officials at the federal government are concerned. In June of 2021, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported:

“In May 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Emergency Department visits for suspected suicide attempts began to increase among adolescents aged 12-17 years, especially girls. During February 21—March 20, 2021, suspected suicide attempt Emergency Department visits were 50.6 percent higher among girls aged 12-17 years than during the same period in 2019; among boys aged 12-17 years, suspected suicide attempt Emergency Department visits increased 3.7 percent.”⁴⁸

Lowered academic standards

In April of 2020, State Superintendent Chris Reykdal prohibited teachers from assigning failing grades to students who failed to receive adequate instruction to meet state standards.⁴⁹ Grades are a tool used by teachers and parents to assess a student’s true progress and help students establish good study habits and self-discipline. Cancelling “F’s” undermined the efforts of teachers and parents to help their high school students set high goals and expectations. Cancelling “F’s” sent a strong signal that the state of Washington was responding to COVID by lowering academic standards.

Superintendent Reykdal also lowered high school graduation requirements. He cancelled credit requirements for students graduating in 2020 and 2021.⁵⁰ He has continued the low-standards policy for students in the graduating classes of 2022 and 2023 and 2024.⁵¹

47 “School Closures May Have Long-Term Impact on Children’s Mental Health,” by Nick Morrison, *Forbes*, January 18, 2022, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nickmorrison/2022/01/18/school-closures-may-have-long-term-impact-on-childrens-mental-health/?sh=2efad8491703>.

48 “Emergency Department Visits for Suspected Suicide Attempts Among Persons Aged 12-25 Years Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic –United States, January 2019—May 2021,” Ellen Yard, PhD, Lakshmi Radhakrishnan, MPH, et al., *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, June 18, 2021 at <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7024e1.htm>.

49 “Student Learning & Grading Guidance” Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, April 21, 2020, at https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/communications/OSPI%20Student%20Learning%20and%20Grading%20Guidance_4-21-2020.pdf.

50 “Bulletin 024-21, Office of System and School Improvement, Regarding Guidance for Supporting Class of 2020 and 2021 Seniors,” by Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal, April 20, 2021, at <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/bulletinsmemos/bulletins2021/B024-21.pdf>.

51 Washington Administrative Code (WAC), Chapter 180-111-050, Emergency waiver of certain graduation requirements in response to novel coronavirus. See also WAC Chapter 180-111-040, School District Implementation of the emergency waiver of certain graduation requirements. Accessed June 27, 2022 at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=180-111>.

A major long-term effect of mandated masking, school closure and social distancing policies is that many students will graduate from high school lacking adequate knowledge and skills that state officials once said are critically important to future success. Lowering academic standards is easy for school officials, by reducing officially-reported drop-out and academic failure rates, but decisions to lower standards simply shifts the true cost to students, and to the broader society.

Cancelled sports activities

The school shutdown mandate included cancelling all high school sports activities, including practices, sports training and competitions.⁵² Athletes skilled in soccer, football, volleyball and other sports were unable to demonstrate their skills on the field and in the gym, a ban that resulted in fewer opportunities to win a college scholarship. The Governor's COVID school shutdowns denied some of these athletes the chance to attend college on an athletic scholarship.

The harm to college-bound low-income students

College attendance rates of low-income students fell by seven percent during the mandated school shutdowns. The number of low-income students using state need grants to attend college also declined sharply, as reported by the state Caseload Forecast Council:⁵³

7,315 fewer low-income students receiving the Washington College Grant (WCG) with financial aid awards to college.

1,411 fewer low-income high school students enrolling in Washington's College Bound Scholarship program.

Governor Inslee and state lawmakers often express concern about wanting to increase the number of low-income children able to attend college. Yet emergency shutdown orders and similar mandates sharply curtailed these college-access opportunities.

Conclusion

Early in the pandemic, many scientists, including The National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, warned that the educational and social risks of closing schools far outweighed the health risks of keeping schools open and adopting health protocols.

52 "Four Washington high school football teams cancel preseason games after positive COVID tests," by Steve Soliz, *KING5 NEWS*, August 27, 2021, at <https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/high-school-football-teams-cancel-preseason-games/281-a4a33c5a-1de2-49c1-b526-30b615e02413>.

53 "Common Schools Enrollment," Washington State Caseload Forecast Council, February 11, 2022, pages 9, 10, and 11, at: <https://www.cfc.wa.gov/Documents/ForecastNarratives.pdf>.

The McKinsey report warned that closing school is a “hurt that could last a lifetime.”

The Economist magazine put it like this:

“The immense harm this has done to children’s prospects might be justified if closing classrooms were one of the best ways of preventing lethal infections among adults. But few governments have weighed the costs and risks carefully. Many have kept schools shut even as bars and restaurants open, either to appease teachers’ unions, whose members get paid whether they teach in person or not, or to placate nervous parents.”⁵⁴

Governor Inslee’s COVID-related mask mandates, school closures, social distancing and broader shutdown orders severely damaged the education of Washington’s 1.1 million public school students and limited their opportunities in life. This damage will tragically compound over the lives of these children, as they are socially promoted through the schools. The negative impacts are much less for children in private and charter public schools, since these schools were closed for a much shorter period of time.

By closing traditional public schools for such a long period of time, many children in public education, especially low-income, minority children and children with special needs, will experience a greater failure rate in high school and beyond. The full extent of the damage suffered by Washington’s students will reveal itself in more detail over time. The evidence now shows there is no question that two years of closures, social restrictions and other mandates will have a lasting negative impact on the lives of children in the communities across the state.

54 “Closing the world’s schools caused children great harm,” by the Editorial Board, *The Economist*, June 26, 2021 at <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/06/24/closing-the-worlds-schools-caused-children-great-harm>.

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