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Millions of public school students will suffer from school closures, education leaders have concluded

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Only weeks after the [coronavirus](#) pandemic forced American schools online, education leaders across the country have concluded that millions of children's learning will be severely stunted, and are planning unprecedented steps to help them catch up.

In Miami, school will extend into the summer and start earlier in the fall, at least for some students. In Cleveland, schools may shrink the curriculum to cover only core subjects. In Columbia, Mo., this year's lessons will be woven into next year's. Some experts suggest holding back more kids, a controversial idea, while others propose a half-grade step-up for some students, an unconventional one. A national teachers union is proposing a massive national summer school program.

"We have to have a recovery plan for education," said Eric Gordon, chief executive for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. "I'm really worried that people think schools and colleges just flipped to digital and everything's fine and we can just return to normal. That's simply not the case."

The ideas being considered will require political will and logistical savvy, and they are already facing resistance from teachers and parents. They'll also require money, and lots of it, at a time when a cratering economy is devastating [state and local budgets](#), with plunging tax collections and rising costs. As Congress considers another coronavirus spending package, schools' ability to make up ground may hinge on how much more they can pry from Washington.

The \$2.2 trillion [stimulus package](#) approved last month included \$13.5 billion for K-12 education. In the next round, a coalition of school administrators and teachers unions is seeking more than \$200 billion, citing those depleted state budgets.

In New York state, for instance, schools were poised for deep cuts, with the state anticipating revenue losses as high as \$10 billion. The stimulus package will reverse those cuts, but without more bailout money, schools won't get any extra funding to deal with the crisis.

'An educational catastrophe'

Just a month ago, most American children were attending school as normal. Today, virtually every U.S. school building is closed. [Seventeen states](#) have ordered campuses shuttered through this academic year, another three recommend it, and educators and parents across the country are bracing for a lost spring — and maybe more.

Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said last week that he expects schools can reopen in the fall. But he can't be sure, he said.

Whenever schools return, researchers say, the likely result is a generation of students forced to play catch-up, perhaps for years to come. Most vulnerable are those who are always the most vulnerable: homeless children, those living in deep poverty and [students with disabilities](#). While some students are adapting to distance learning, others are struggling to find quiet spaces to study, lack reliable Internet access or must care for younger siblings during the day, among other barriers.

“This may be the biggest challenge public education has had to face in the four-plus decades I’ve been doing this work,” said [Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools](#), a nonprofit coalition of 76 of the nation’s largest urban public school systems. He said that online learning is likely failing many low-income families and that without “substantial” new spending, schools won’t have the money to reverse the damage. “We are facing an educational catastrophe.”

In some districts, the problem is just getting kids to show up. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, the country’s second-largest system, 1 in 4 students has not logged on at all. Older students were more likely than elementary children to be connected, but on any given day in one recent week, a quarter of high school students didn’t log in.

Before the coronavirus crisis, only about 1 in 4 students in the high-poverty Baltimore City Public Schools had computers. More Chromebooks are on order, but for now teachers are trying to reach families by phone and Instagram, and the district is broadcasting lessons over its television station.

“What we are providing now is not going to make up fully for all of the time lost,” chief executive Sonja Brookins Santelises said.

In Atlanta’s public schools, about 6,000 children still don’t have computers, and about 10 percent of students have not yet logged in to the remote-learning system, Superintendent Meria Joel Carstarphen said.

One recent day, Carstarphen visited the home of a family whose children had not logged in. She found their mother struggling to provide food, and discovered the house was in an Internet “dead zone.” She also realized she knew the family’s oldest child, a “super sweet kid,” from her visits to his high school football team.

“He’s the man of the house and he’s only a junior right now,” Carstarphen said. “He has not been doing his work and neither have his siblings for three weeks.”

Even when students have computers, parents and caregivers fear that minimal learning is underway. Billie Stewart is raising her 8-year-old grandson, Tony, on Detroit’s east

side. She's received little direction from his school, she said, and trying to keep up with the school's online offerings has been "almost overwhelming."

Stewart, 73, has worked hard to lay out a daily schedule for Tony but finds herself unable to keep up. "If I get asked for another password, I don't know what I'll do."

In Philadelphia's public schools, teachers have been told not to teach new material, due to concerns that lessons cannot be equitably provided to all. Philadelphia plans to begin remote education later this month, but for weeks families have been left largely on their own.

"We've been looking for guidance from teachers, but they don't really know what they're supposed to be doing," said Stacy Stewart, who has two children in a North Philadelphia elementary school, plus 1-year-old twins. "Ever since they've been out of school, there's been no structured virtual learning. It's just been flying by the seat of their pants."

The school provided a study packet for Mikail, a second-grader, but no direction for Abdul Malik, who's in kindergarten, other than links to a few education websites. There's only one computer in the house, which Stewart needs for work, and it's been a struggle to keep her kids engaged in anything that looks like learning. "I mean, I'm not really a teacher," she said.

To understand how deep the setbacks may be, researchers are examining data on the so-called "summer slide," in which students, particularly those in low-income families, lose months of reading and math knowledge. Research differs on the magnitude of the loss, but there's broad agreement that this year's losses will be greater than normal.

NWEA, a nonprofit that offers student assessments, used testing data to forecast how much further behind students will fall. In one scenario, it projected that students will return next year having gained 70 percent of what would typically be expected in reading over the course of the previous year, and less than 50 percent of the expected gains in math.

'We have to figure out something'

Some districts are still working to implement and refine remote learning for this academic year. But elsewhere, school leaders are already weighing, planning and in some cases lobbying for a range of ideas to arrest the inevitable academic losses. In Cleveland, the schools are considering an August "jump-start" session to get students ready for school. Gordon, the district CEO, said the schools may also need to consider a pared-back curriculum for a "recovery year" focused on the basics.

The American Federation of Teachers, the second-largest national teachers union, is proposing a one-month summer school for vulnerable kids across the country. "We have to figure out something in terms of the summer to actually nurture kids," said Randi Weingarten, president of the union.

But even such a simple idea has detractors, proving how challenging change will be. “The newest building in our district is 55 years old, and none of them have air conditioning,” said Becky Cranston, who teaches middle-school English in rural Bronson, Mich. “How much learning would happen in a room filled with 30 students when the temperature outside reads 90 degrees? None.”

In Maryland, state Sen. Paul G. Pinsky (D-Prince George’s), chairman of the education committee, has proposed year-round school. Baltimore is considering that for its underperforming schools, along with extending the school day and possibly starting earlier in the fall.

But similar suggestions didn’t go far in Atlanta, said Carstarphen, the superintendent. She floated the idea of a longer school day or school year, she said, but was quickly shut down by middle-class parents who don’t want to give up extracurriculars. Instead, Carstarphen is hoping to channel thousands of additional students into existing summer enrichment programs that focus on topics such as science and the arts. But she said doing so depends on new funding.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools has a more targeted plan: remediation for the most at-risk students, including those who live in poverty or have disabilities, newly arrived immigrants and those learning English. Superintendent Alberto M. Carvalho said it’s possible these students will see “historic academic regression.”

The district plans to use online log-in data to determine who has fallen behind and then target interventions. Some students will see school extend into the summer, and some will come back early. The district plans to redeploy staff members who have less work during the pandemic, forming a new one-to-one digital mentoring program for students who need help.

Michael J. Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-leaning think tank, has a more radical idea: Holding back all students in high-poverty elementary schools.

“All of this time away from school is going to be particularly devastating for poor and working-class youngsters, many of whom are already below grade level,” he wrote in [an op-ed in The Washington Post](#).

That idea was rejected by many educators, who said it was akin to punishing children for being poor and unfair to children at low-income schools who are ready to advance. Still, holding kids back is on the table: Many districts are planning to determine who moves on based on work done before schools closed.

A more modest idea is to create half-grades to accommodate children who are socially but not academically ready to move up, said Keri Rodrigues of the National Parents Union, an advocacy group that has tangled with teachers unions and supports various education reforms.

“Maybe it’s 3.5 until they are ready for fourth grade,” she said.