

RESTART & RECOVERY: DECLINING KINDERGARTEN ENROLLMENT IN 2020-2021: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES

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According to the recent study, *What We're Learning: COVID 19 and Education: Notable Findings and Data Sources*,¹ over 38 percent of U.S. families with children in the K-12 grade range have “disenrolled” their children from their local public schools.² This unplanned drop in 2020-2021 enrollments is having a negative impact on public education in multiple regards—most concerningly, by causing or exacerbating deep educational inequities in terms of missed learning opportunities, especially for vulnerable student populations, leading to long-term disparities in academic outcomes.

Reduced enrollments also hamper the effectiveness of the U.S. public education system by:

- potentially diminishing enrollment-based federal/state/district funding;
- necessitating budget cutbacks via teacher/staff layoffs;
- complicating enrollment-based budgeting plans for 2021-2022; and
- complicating enrollment-based academic plans for 2021-2022 (i.e., class sizes, instructional programming, etc.)

Enrollment declines have been especially marked among the youngest students. In a recent *Education Week* survey, 58 percent of district leaders and principals reported that the pandemic has caused a decline in kindergarten enrollments.³

¹ What we're learning – COVID 19 and education: Notable findings and data. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (May 26, 2020) <http://k12education.gatesfoundation.org/blog/what-were-learning-covid-19-and-education-notable-findings-and-data-sources/>

² COVID-19 Impact Research. Civiis Data Science (Sept. 24, 2020). <https://www.civisanalytics.com/blog/covid-19-impact-on-the-american-population/>

³ Kurtz, Holly. Teacher Morale and Student Enrollment Declining Under COVID-19, Survey Shows. *Education Week* (Sept. 16, 2020). <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/09/01/teacher-morale-and-student-enrollment-declining-under.html>

WHY KINDERGARTEN?

Enrollment declines are not altogether surprising. Even before the pandemic, federal statistics had been projecting a decline in K-12 enrollments across a number of states—particularly in the Northeast, where student enrollments have been predicted to drop by 3.7 percent from 2016 to 2028.⁴ Nor is it surprising that, if the pandemic was going to spur non-enrollments, the highest rates would be seen in kindergarten, given that it is the only grade for which school attendance is not universally compulsory.

Only 17 states and the District of Columbia require parents to enroll children in kindergarten,⁵ and there is often some flexibility regarding the child’s age at entrance. Even in a normal school year, approximately 4 percent of children who are eligible to start kindergarten are held back by their families⁶ (aka “red-shirting”). Moreover, nine of the 17 mandatory-kindergarten states and D.C. have an “opt-out” policy, whereby parents can apply for a waiver to skip kindergarten altogether and enroll their child commencing with first grade.⁷

Nonetheless, the declining kindergarten enrollments being seen this fall are unprecedented, unplanned-for, and precipitous. They also are occurring across school districts of all sizes, as found in a survey by *Education Week*:

SY 2020-2021 KINDERGARTEN ENROLLMENT ⁸					
	DISTRICT ENROLLMENT: LESS THAN 2,500	DISTRICT ENROLLMENT: 2,500 TO 9,999	DISTRICT ENROLLMENT: 10,000 TO 29,999	DISTRICT ENROLLMENT: 30,000 TO 74,999	DISTRICT ENROLLMENT: 75,000 OR MORE
Decline	49%	73%	68%	73%	50%
No impact	40%	23%	28%	18%	50%
Increase	11%	3%	4%	9%	0%

⁴ Kennedy, Mike. States projected to have the greatest percentage public school enrollment decline, 2016 to 2028. *American School and University* (June 16, 2020). <https://www.asumag.com/research/top-10s/article/21134063/states-projected-to-have-the-greatest-percentage-public-school-enrollment-decline-2016-to-2028>

⁵ Table 5.3. Types of state and district requirements for kindergarten entrance and attendance, waivers and exemptions for kindergarten entrance, by state: 2018. National Center for Education Statistics: State Education Reforms (SER). https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_3.asp

⁶ Hollingsworth, Heather, Associated Press. US parents delaying preschool and kindergarten amid pandemic. ABCNews (Sept. 24, 2020) <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/us-parents-delaying-preschool-kindergarten-amid-pandemic-73217858#:~:text=Thousands%20of%20parents%20around%20the,so%20much%20lost%20early%20education>

⁷ State K-3 Policies: What age exemptions or waivers exist for kindergarten entrance? Education Commission of the States (Sept. 2020) <https://c0arw235.caspio.com/dp/b7f93000864d22bf657641b68a6f>

⁸ Data obtained with permission from the Education Week Research Center, (11/13/2020).

WHY KINDERGARTEN? (CONT.)

Most states, to this point, have a paucity of hard data enumerating the causes, but in general educational leaders attribute the declines to all the school disruptions caused by COVID-19. State education agencies (SEA) across the nation have found themselves in an untenable position this fall, in which every approach to reopening school triggers its own concerns and consequences. According to *Education Week*,⁹ parents have not enrolled children in school for reasons as varied as the reopening scenarios themselves:

- They are concerned that, despite the implementation of health and safety precautions, their children's health will be at risk if they attend in-person classes.
- If schools offer online kindergarten, parents (and some education experts) are skeptical about the value of online-only learning for children at this age.¹⁰
- Families (primarily from higher-income populations) have found alternative ways to educate their children via home schooling, paid tutors, learning pods, or private/charter schools that offer in-person or hybrid instruction.
- Families in which all adults work full-time have declined remote kindergarten (especially half-day K), because it does not meet their childcare needs.
- Many families, especially in rural districts, lack access to broadband or Wi-Fi; still others (living in poverty) cannot afford it.
- The family has moved and could not be found, or has become homeless, due to the pandemic.¹¹

ANOMALY OR TREND?

Regardless of the reasons for declining enrollments, the question is: Will the lower numbers last? It would appear the answer is: ...it depends. The What We're Learning study found that nearly 82 percent of surveyed K-12 parents who have disenrolled their children intend to re-enroll them once it is safe to do so.¹² (It is important to note that the research methodology employed online web panels.)

Moreover, even assuming that 82 percent of these Web-connected parents do re-enroll their children next fall, it will not alleviate the looming budget crisis many schools are facing now. It may even cause further complications down the line. Many districts receive funding based on their October enrollment numbers, meaning they could face budget blows that continue to reverberate into next year that may well be based on a pandemic-induced anomaly.

Thus, the boomerang effect could be even harder to navigate. What if schools end up in SY 2021-2022 with both larger enrollments and smaller budgets? How can school administrators predict what next year's staffing needs will be? How can kindergarten and first-grade teachers prepare lesson plans for students whose learning readiness may vary widely after they have spent so many months away from school?

⁹ Samuels, Christina A. Will Kindergarten be Empty this Fall? *Education Week* (July 7, 2020). <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/07/07/will-kindergartens-be-empty-this-fall.html>

¹⁰ Kamenetz, Anya, Bakeman, Jessica. Enrollment Is Dropping In Public Schools Around the Country. Hawaii Public Radio. (Oct. 9, 2020) <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/post/enrollment-dropping-public-schools-around-country#stream/0>

¹¹ Jacobson, Linda. Report Estimates 1 to 3 Million Students Missing From School Since March, But Data on Disrupted Learning is 'At Best a Moving Target.' The 74 Million Newsfeed: Pandemic (Oct. 21, 2020). <https://www.the74million.org/report-estimates-1-to-3-million-students-missing-from-school-since-march-but-data-on-disrupted-learning-is-at-best-a-moving-target/>

¹² COVID-19 Impact Research. Civis Data Science (Sept. 24, 2020). <https://www.civisanalytics.com/blog/covid-19-impact-on-the-american-population/>

3 MILLION “MISSING” CHILDREN

To further complicate matters, many schools have encountered a “wild card” when trying to forecast their enrollments. In spring 2020, the pandemic shuttered school buildings across the country, cancelling events traditionally used to inform parents and communities of kindergarten enrollment processes and deadlines. In an effort to track down prospective students, schools began making phone calls, sending text messages, writing emails, even knocking on doors—but many families could not be found. In the crisis and chaos of school building closures, community lock-downs, widespread unemployment, and pandemic fatalities, some kindergarten-bound students and older students had simply “gone missing.”¹³

As an Education Week report recently observed: “There have long been gaps in the contact information districts maintain on students and their parents, particularly for vulnerable children, but never before has that information proved so critical on such a large scale. The cracks in the formal systems meant to protect children have become chasms. Some students have disappeared into them, and educators have limited resources to find out where these children and their families might be.”¹⁴

According to a Bellwether Education Partners report released in mid-October 2020: “For approximately 3 million of the most educationally marginalized students in the country, March might have been the last time they experienced any formal education — virtual or in-person.”¹⁵ This is an educational equity crisis affecting students of all ages, with perhaps the worst repercussions on the youngest children. According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering & Medicine,¹⁶ “young children in particular will be impacted by not having in-person learning and may suffer long-term academic consequences if they fall behind as a result. In grades K-3, children are still developing the skills to regulate their own behavior, emotions, and attention, and therefore struggle with distance learning.”

For this reason, the National Academies report recommends: “Schools should prioritize reopening for grades K-5 and for students with special needs who would be best served by in-person instruction.”¹⁷ In addition, the report suggests that larger school districts reopen schools by zones, starting with those that serve students from the most vulnerable and historically marginalized populations.

THE NEW SCHOOL FUNDING CRISIS

States and school districts use a broad range of techniques to collect, analyze, and use enrollment data to plan their education budgets and determine funding needs. No matter how they calculate it, though, a significant number of school systems may be facing budget cuts due to plummeting enrollments—at the same time they are making substantial, unplanned expenditures on technology, infection-control measures, and other pandemic-related interventions.

¹³ Sawchuk, Stephen, Samuels, Christina A. Where Are They? Students Go Missing in Shift to Remote Classes. *Education Week* (April 10, 2020) <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/10/where-are-they-students-go-missing-in.html>

¹⁴ Sawchuk, Stephen, Samuels, Christina A. Where Are They? Students Go Missing in Shift to Remote Classes. *Education Week* (April 10, 2020) <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/04/10/where-are-they-students-go-missing-in.html>

¹⁵ Korman, Haily T.N., O’Keefe, Bonnie, Repka, Matt. Missing in the Margins: Estimating the Scale of the COVID-19 Attendance Crisis. Bellwether Education Partners, Boston, MA (Oct. 21, 2020). <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/missing-margins-estimating-scale-covid-19-attendance-crisis>

¹⁶ Schools Should Prioritize Reopening in Fall 2020, Especially for Grades K-5, While Weighing Risks and Benefits. National Academies of Science, Engineering & Medicine. (July 15, 2020 news release) <https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2020/07/schools-should-prioritize-reopening-in-fall-2020-especially-for-grades-k-5-while-weighing-risks-and-benefits>

¹⁷ Schools Should Prioritize Reopening in Fall 2020, Especially for Grades K-5, While Weighing Risks and Benefits. National Academies of Science, Engineering & Medicine. (July 15, 2020 news release) <https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2020/07/schools-should-prioritize-reopening-in-fall-2020-especially-for-grades-k-5-while-weighing-risks-and-benefits>

STATE LEADERS AS CHAMPIONS

Amid this perfect storm of lost enrollments, absent students, and shrinking funds, what is a state education leader to do? The following recommendations outline possible steps state education agencies (SEA) can take to address the crisis—including raising awareness, pushing for funding adjustments, making the most of available funds, and forming an enrollment task force.

1. Raise Awareness

SEA leaders, accompanied by district and local school representatives, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders, can become outspoken advocates and gain legislative and public attention. For instance, in Anchorage, Alaska, school district leaders appeared on the nightly newscasts and morning radio shows to talk about the enrollment crisis and urge families to register their children.¹⁸ New Mexico Education Secretary Ryan Stewart asked the state's education study committee to pass legislation that would freeze funding based on pre-pandemic numbers.¹⁹

2. Push for Funding Adjustments

A number of SEAs already have taken action. At least three states (California, Illinois, and Michigan) have successfully adjusted their funding formulas by factoring in last year's enrollment to stave off budget cuts for low-income districts.²⁰ State education officials in Texas have agreed to fund school districts for the first 12 weeks of school based on projected, not actual, attendance figures; they also extended their deadline for budgeting decisions by six weeks, effectively covering all costs for the entire first semester in most districts.²¹

Note: To help states develop flexible approaches to spending, CCSSO has published a three-part series on how make the best use of federal education funds (such as Title I, Title II, and IDEA) during the pandemic and beyond. These practical guides include examples of allowable costs and strategies to support LEAs in using federal funds to meet current needs:

[Restart & Recovery: ESEA & COVID-19 - State Strategies for Supporting Local Educational Agencies in Confronting the Effects of the Pandemic](#) discusses ways states can guide LEAs in adapting ESEA programs and spending to meet to new and evolving student needs during the pandemic.

[Restart & Recovery: IDEA & COVID-19 - State Strategies for Supporting Local Educational Agencies in Confronting the Effects of the Pandemic](#) discusses ways states can guide LEAs in using IDEA funds to meet the needs of special education students during the pandemic.

[Restart & Recovery: Federal Funds & COVID-19 A System Workbook for States](#) outlines specific system actions an SEA can take to maximize LEA spending options for federal formula funds.

¹⁸ Burnette II, Daarel. Fewer Kids, Less Money: How the Pandemic Puts Districts in a Bind. *Education Week* (Sept. 17, 2020) <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/09/17/fewer-kids-less-money-how-the-pandemic.html>

¹⁹ Enrollment drop could hurt funding for New Mexico schools. *Education Week* (Sept. 24, 2020). https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/09/23/enrollment-drop-could-hurt-funding-for_ap.html

²⁰ Attanasio, Cedar. Enrollment drop could hurt funding for New Mexico Schools. APNews (Sept. 23, 2020). <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-new-mexico-legislation-archive-albuquerque-8078789d7b80a30687e538eae5425e#:~:text=He%20said%20that%20if%20his,higher%20student%20population%20next%20year>

²¹ Swaby, Aliyya. With Texas schools struggling to find lost students, state offers temporary financial reprieve. *Texas Tribune* (10/1/2020). <https://www.texastribune.org/2020/10/01/texas-schools-enrollment-funding/>

STATE LEADERS AS CHAMPIONS (CONT.)

3. Form an Enrollment Task Force

SEA leaders could create a network of school districts to institute the rolling collection and analysis of enrollment data; coordinate updates and available support from local health professionals; and help establish community-based enrollment task forces (ETF).

To be most effective, ETFs should be widely representative (i.e., including members of local school boards; health and social services departments; district offices of accountability, school safety, technology, transportation, and communications; school nurses, teachers, and administrators; and parent/neighborhood groups).

While each state's ETF would develop its own list of priorities and goals, in general such a task force could:

- keep track of changes in enrollment numbers
- document causes for enrollment changes
- identify school districts with the least/greatest loss of enrollment
- collect data from high-loss districts on problems causing enrollment declines
- collect data from low-loss districts on way to maintain or increase enrollment
- involve representatives of both low-/high-loss districts in developing interventions
- develop strategy and timeline for implementing interventions
- implement, track, and evaluate success of interventions, in real time
- replace or adapt enrollment interventions as needed, in real time

Note that states will need to periodically reassess their ETF's priorities and interventions in keeping with the pandemic's evolving impact on local districts.

Tips from the Learning Policy Institute

PUSH FOR INCREASED FEDERAL ASSISTANCE:

A 30% reduction in state education funding over each of the next 2 years could result in cuts to public P-12 systems of almost \$200 billion. This kind of massive state funding cuts would require a federal investment to allow districts to weather the economic downturn without dramatically impacting the education of our country's neediest students.

PROTECT VULNERABLE STUDENT GROUPS:

Unfortunately, services for students who are English language learners, those with disabilities, or those from low-income families tend to feel the brunt of education cuts. State and district leaders should ensure that any cuts made to education do not fall disproportionately on these high-need student groups.

INCREASE FLEXIBILITY:

If states have to cut education funding, they can at least provide districts with greater flexibility in how they spend their dollars.** After the last economic downturn, states such as California changed their funding systems to a weighted student formula, in lieu of a bevy of categorical programs, to allow districts greater financial freedom while focusing more on pupil needs. States may want to take this opportunity to create more flexible, equitable, and responsive funding systems.

From: COVID-19 and School Funding: What to Expect and What You Can Do. Michael Griffith (Updated Oct. 7, 2020) The Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/covid-19-and-school-funding-what-expect-and-what-you-can-do>

CHASING A MOVING TARGET

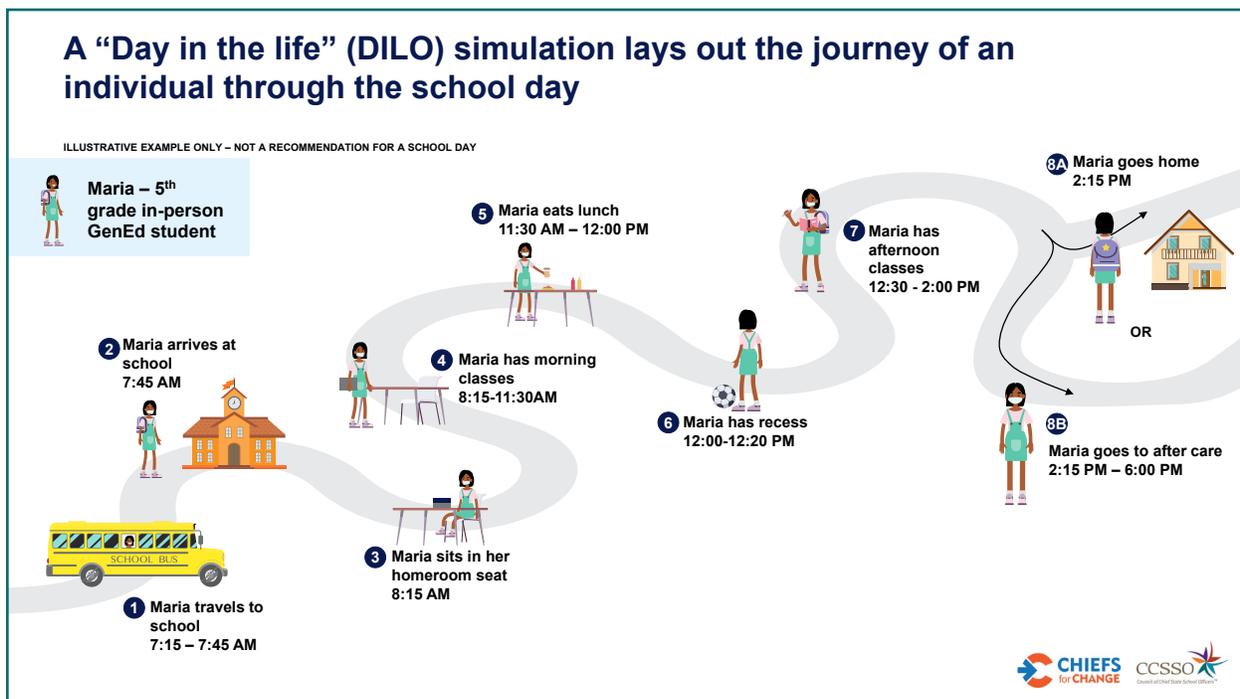
Parents evidently base their enrollment decisions on what school “reopening” looks like at any given time — which makes the enrollment crisis somewhat of a moving target. As the National Academies report asserts: “The decision to reopen schools should be iterative, and schools should be prepared for future school closures based on the progress of the pandemic.”²² Indeed, some schools already have reopened in person, only to transition back to remote learning. Others have implemented a hybrid instructional model — which, with regard to kindergarten at least, is likely to satisfy neither the parents who fear in-person infection nor those who have eschewed remote instruction.

The best way to recapture lost enrollments may be to reopen in-person kindergarten as soon as it is safely feasible. According to the *What We’re Learning* study, most parents of K-12 students would be more willing to send their children to school if safety measures are taken (between 55.0 percent – 62.8 percent for each measure). Clearly, taking all recommended precautions, then proactively publicizing what those precautions are, will be essential.

²² Schools Should Prioritize Reopening in Fall 2020, Especially for Grades K-5, While Weighing Risks and Benefits. National Academies of Science, Engineering & Medicine. (July 15, 2020 news release) <https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2020/07/schools-should-prioritize-reopening-in-fall-2020-especially-for-grades-k-5-while-weighing-risks-and-benefits>

WHEN “REOPENING” MEANS GOING BACK TO SCHOOL

All decisions related to physically reopening schools must hinge on the safety and well-being of students, educators, and families – first and foremost. State leaders can help LEAs decide whether/when to reopen school in person and also support their outreach to families, by sharing decision-making tools such as the “[Day in the Life](#),” which was cocreated by CCSSO and Chiefs for Change. This tool is an interactive methodology for making school reopening decisions, by walking users through all foreseeable outcomes. It also results in a user-friendly map that can be used to help families feel more comfortable about enrolling their children in onsite classes. (See *sample below*.)



Once states and districts make the decision to resume in-person schooling, SEA and LEA leaders should raise public awareness through news releases, speaker appearances, radio interviews, TV spots, public service announcements, print and online advertisements, blog posts and podcasts, social media posts, etc. Messaging should emphasize the importance of in-person schooling for children’s cognitive, socio-emotional, and mental health development, especially in the early grades. It also is important to remind parents that they can enroll their children in onsite classes even after the school year has begun.

For instance, in Colorado, SEAs were supported by policy and health leaders in spreading the message. Gov. Jared Polis urged families to enroll their children in school, explaining: “This is a message that doesn’t expire... and if families are not enrolled this week, we want them enrolled next week, next month, as soon as they can for the benefit of their kids.” The superintendent of Aurora Public Schools asserted that the loss of school for pre-K and kindergarten children could have “an incredibly life-changing impact.” Child psychiatrist Dr. Chris Rogers explained how school is critical to children’s healthy development.²³

As these examples show, states and school districts need a [strong family-engagement strategy](#) that goes above and beyond their typical approaches. They also need to make sure they hear, understand, and respond to parents’ concerns as they arise. Proactive approaches might include individually contacting families with kindergarten-eligible children to answer their questions; providing options to address parents’ concerns; and setting up regular office hours when families can personally communicate with school leaders.

²³ Nieberg, Patty. Colorado governor encourages school enrollment amid decline. APNews (Sept. 29, 2020). <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-jared-polis-education-colorado-eef902186502bf140aa7257aa0323863>

UNPRECEDENTED & COMPLEX

The school enrollment crisis caused by COVID-19 is unprecedented and complex. This pandemic has exposed and deepened pre-existing educational inequities. Fully appreciating and resolving the problem will require commitment, creativity, and collaboration. CCSSO will do its part to support state leaders by staying abreast of new developments and continuing to provide relevant data and useful resources as the situation evolves.

OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES

[*Restart and Recovery: Considerations for Teaching and Learning*](#)

[*Restart and Recovery: Considerations for Teaching and Learning:
Pre-K to Third Grade Recovery in School Year 2020-2021*](#)

[*COVID-19 Parent and Community Engagement Resources*](#)

APPENDIX A

Attendance Works has produced a free, downloadable resource with strategies and approaches to improving attendance rates, which could be adapted to address the current enrollment crisis: [Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting A Course for School Success](#) (Sept. 2015).

Examples of replicable, state-based programs include:

CALIFORNIA

made early childhood schooling a priority by cultivating a cross-section of state champions who are now working together to cultivate awareness and action:

[Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting A Course for School Success](#)

RHODE ISLAND

reduced chronic absences in the early grades by combining pioneering local work with an effective “inside/outside” partnership at the state level:

[Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting A Course for School Success](#)

UTAH

developed a successful intervention by beginning with one sector (in this case, the afterschool community) and expanding to engage a range of key stakeholders statewide:

[Mapping the Early Attendance Gap: Charting A Course for School Success](#)