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Student test scores are down, and it isn't just because of COVID shutdowns

BY DAVID J. ARMOR AND ERIC HANUSHEK, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS - 07/26/23 1:30 PM ET

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The entirely expected recent data on COVID-19 learning losses should not be allowed to paper over more fundamental education problems. [Release of the long-term NAEP test scores](#) last month confirmed what we already knew from earlier NAEP releases: that achievement test scores plummeted across the country after COVID-related school closures in early 2020.

But virtually no attention has been paid to the fact that there were major NAEP losses — heavily skewed against disadvantaged students — well before the COVID shutdowns.

The NAEP losses were especially severe math scores among Black 13-year-olds. Black students lost an incredible 13 points due to the COVID shutdowns, compared to 6 points for white students. The Hispanic losses of 10 points were also more severe than white losses.

But Black students lost an average of 8 points between 2012 and 2020, prior to the COVID shutdown that started in early 2020 — four times the average loss of 2 points for white students. Hispanic students were in-between, with a loss of 4 points.

Math scores among Black 13-year-olds have dropped to lows not seen since the mid-1980s, and the Black-white achievement gap has widened to 42 points. How can this be? How has this happened? The COVID shutdown is certainly a major contributor, but it is clearly not the whole story.

Everyone understands that if students are not in school, less learning will take place. But what, exactly, is the mechanism? We believe it is accountability.

When students are in the classroom, a good teacher holds students accountable by ensuring they are listening, reading, doing assignments and generally doing the tasks required to learn. When learning remotely, parents can do this to some extent, if they are at home and are willing to monitor their child's schoolwork. But in many — perhaps most — cases, parents will not be as effective in holding their children accountable as a good classroom teacher.

There is another important type of accountability established by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law of the early 2000s. Schools were held accountable for student test outcomes, and could potentially be re-organized or even shut down if students failed to meet learning targets.

The system was flawed in many ways, but it did lead to learning gains and to closure of racial and ethnic gaps. Black students gained even more than white students nationally between 1999 and 2012 — 13 points compared to 10 points for white students, while Hispanic students gained 12 points. Yet, its unpopularity with school personnel led to NCLB's replacement by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. ESSA turned accountability back to the states and removed a variety of requirements for the evaluation of teachers and schools. And the impact begins to appear after 2012 and accelerates with COVID.

Reporting test scores tends to understate the gravity of the situation. The U.S. rewards

skills more than almost all developed nations — which implies that it punishes the lack of skills more than almost all developed nations. Learning losses over the COVID period will average an estimated 4 percent of lifetime earnings for whites and 8 percent for Blacks. If we go back to before ESSA, the white losses of lifetime income reach 5 percent while average Black losses are 13 percent.

If schools just return to the policies of 2020, these learning losses and their associated economic consequences will be permanent. Allowing these losses to persist is simply unacceptable in a just and equitable society.

It is possible, however, to remedy these losses with policies that could resume the achievement gains produced by NCLB. Schools have unspent funds from the federal COVID relief programs. These funds could be programmed in ways that would raise achievement, but importantly not by spending funds on conventional methods that have proven ineffective such as across-the-board higher teacher salaries or smaller classes.

Rather, they could be used to provide incentives for the most effective teachers to take on more students while buying out the contracts of the least effective teachers. A few systems have shown that this kind of system can work. Washington, D.C., Dallas and now Houston have demonstrated that such an approach is feasible and that it can lead to significant achievement gains.

There is considerable national discussion, peculiarly linked to COVID, about reducing student testing and removing any accountability pressures on teachers and schools. Following such ideas would be a policy disaster, because they would extend the negative trends observed since 2012 and magnify the inequities that exist today.

In sum, COVID was a problem, but the pandemic should not blind us to the deeper-seated problems that preceded the COVID school shutdowns.

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