# The educational and social impact of global school closures

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**9 April 2020**

An unprecedented number of schools have been closed throughout the world in an attempt to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Global statistics reported by UNESCO reveal that since the last week of March roughly 1.7 billion students from pre-primary to tertiary education levels are out of school, affecting 91.3 percent of all enrolled learners and including every student in 188 countries that have mandated nationwide closures. With most schools set to remain closed through the rest of the current academic year, the scale of these closures is unprecedented in the history of world capitalism.

In several countries, including the United States, Australia, Russia, Canada, and Greenland, school closures have been localized. In the US, the Trump administration has punted the decisions on school closures to state governors and districts to decide on a piecemeal basis, resulting in only 17 states issuing orders to close schools through the end of the academic year, with others being closed through April, May, or "until further notice."

Schools are major centers for COVID-19 transmission, and from an epidemiological perspective school closures are imperative to reduce the spread of the virus. This was proved most starkly in New York City, the current epicenter of the pandemic in the US, where the delayed closure of schools and the continued use of the mass public transit system have greatly exacerbated the crisis. The number of confirmed cases in New York City alone now stands at over 81,803 with 4,571 deaths. So far, there have been at least two deaths of educators as well as over 1,100 cases and 33 deaths of transit workers.

Educators in schools that remain open face one of the highest risks of infection amid this crisis aside from health care workers, and government negligence around the world is putting at risk the lives of thousands in order to protect the interests of profit over public health. While promoting a social Darwinist "herd immunity" conception, Prime Minister Boris Johnson refused to close schools in Britain until there was mounting opposition among teachers. Similarly, regional governments in Australia have been forced to shut down schools, facing incipient teacher rebellions breaking outside the control of the trade unions.

While a necessary precaution, school closures throughout countries both rich and poor have already had major ramifications for students and will compound deeply entrenched inequality in education for years to come.

All students will experience some form of trauma from this unprecedented catastrophe, but for the working class and poor, the impacts will be far greater and long-term—affecting everything from an interrupted education, to mental and social isolation, lack of access to teachers, counselors and positive adult figures, and hunger and potential abuse.

The impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans students gives a small glimpse into the immense ramifications the pandemic will have on youth globally. In response to the devastation wrought by the hurricane in August 2005, the city closed most public schools for the entire fall term.

According to Doug Harris, a Tulane University researcher and author of a study that looked at the effects of Hurricane Katrina on academic outcomes of students, it took students two full years on average to make up for lost learning. Harris argues that such a lapse in learning is not due solely to an interruption in class time but is compounded by economic impacts and emotional trauma stemming from the crisis event. The present global school closures and economic dislocation will magnify these educational impacts, affecting an exponentially larger number of students.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unfolding within school systems that are already in desperate conditions, having faced decades of unrelenting austerity. Where forms of online "distance learning" are beginning to be patched together, students' access and availability are starkly determined by the material conditions in their homes. Many private schools closed well before public schools and were able to transition to online learning more easily, to an extent lessening the negative impacts for these students.

The private online tutoring industry is also an option only for families who can afford it. Oneclass.com, an online tutoring service that charges $80 per hourly interactive

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session, has seen its number of students double amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Worldwide, hundreds of millions of students face a total halt to their education due to the school closures. The Telecommunications Development Sector (ITU) reports that in 2018, 51 percent of the world's population lacked computers and 41 percent did not have access to the internet. Before the crisis, millions of young people relied on cafe or library internet services for internet access, and many families in rural or remote areas have no internet access whatsoever.

For those who do have access to the internet, the speed of their connection is dependent upon wealth, with the fastest and most reliable connections available only to the wealthy. Based on Microsoft data from 2018, 162 million internet users in the US don't have access to high-speed broadband internet. A Pew Research Center survey found that adults from households earning less than $30,000 annually are far more likely than the most affluent adults to not use the internet at all (18 percent versus 2 percent).

In the US, many public school districts are waiting to roll out an online teaching format, causing not only a break in learning but compromised learning for students. In major metropolitan cities such as Detroit and Philadelphia, students have missed three weeks of school. In San Diego, most students will begin distance learning April 20.

Behind the backs of educators, the teachers unions and local schools districts are working to circumvent the immense amount of equity issues that the crisis exposes, in the process redrawing all of teachers' traditional job duties and demanding that they rapidly shift to teaching online.

Special education has largely fallen to the wayside as the closure of schools removes necessary support for this population of students. Moderate to severe special education students can be guaranteed they will have little to no access to the teachers and resources once available for both physical and academic learning and progression. Further lack of attention will be experienced by vulnerable populations who need specific support in a classroom setting. As part of the misnamed CARES Act stimulus package, Congress provided Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos with the ability to provide waivers to states for the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

The Trump administration, along with state governments run by Democrats and Republicans, see the pandemic as an opportunity to dramatically undermine public schools nationally and implement even deeper cuts to public education. Undoubtedly, the ruling elites will use the chaotic and difficult shift to online education as a means to justify its future expansion, at the cost of tens if not hundreds of thousands of educators' jobs.

The economic consequences of the crisis will fall most heavily on students with parents or guardians who live paycheck to paycheck and have no savings to deal with any additional expenses. Twenty percent of the global population lack adequate housing, which will increase as more family members become unemployed. Economic uncertainty will also increase conditions of domestic violence. Already one in five students in the US experience domestic violence, and the growth of spousal and child abuse among quarantined groups facing economic ruin is of grave concern.

The 30 million students in the US who receive lunch at school, and the 14.7 million that also receive breakfast, must now scramble to find "pick-and-go" bag lunches at a few distribution points, in many cases miles from their homes. Even in the wealthiest country in the world, the degree of food insecurity was already at crisis levels, and there is every reason to fear that millions of these students will simply go hungry. Worldwide, hundreds of millions face a looming food shortage that will fall most heavily on the poor.

With schools closed, children have also lost access to school counselors, school-provided health services, and myriad forms of social support. Students face an overall lack of socialization with peers and adults, further exacerbated in situations where students don't have access to the internet. Sports and extracurricular activities, which provide students with necessary outlets and means for building self-esteem, have also been canceled.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened preexisting crisis conditions facing students across the globe, a nightmarish reality of poverty, malnutrition and vast social inequality. The experience of the pandemic, which is radicalizing millions of people internationally, will leave an indelible mark on the consciousness of youth, who will increasingly recognize the need for a radical transformation of society to secure a future free of mass deaths, starvation and want.

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