

US political establishment seizes on declining test scores to bar remote learning and accelerate attack on public education

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Recent results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a national standardized test conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), showed a decline in scores among age nine students during the pandemic. Preliminary results from NAEP's long-term trend (LTT) reading and mathematics assessments note that in 2022, average scores dropped five points in reading and seven points in mathematics compared to 2020.

The tests have been seized upon by the Biden administration, the political establishment and the corporate media to cynically blame remote learning during 2020–2021 for “learning loss.”

US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said the onus for academic decline should be placed squarely on the Trump administration's “mismanagement of the pandemic.” By this he did not mean Trump's prioritizing of corporate profit over human life and his embrace of the pseudo-scientific theory of “herd immunity,” i.e., the deliberate infection of masses of people. After all, the Biden administration has adopted essentially the same policy, declaring that the population must “learn to live” with COVID-19.

No, Cardona was simply criticizing the temporary shift to remote learning, which was forced on state and local authorities not by Trump, who viciously opposed it, but by the demands and opposition from teachers, students and parents to being herded into dangerous classrooms.

“That's why President Biden, from Day One of his Administration, pushed so hard to get schools reopened and students back into classrooms,” Cardona declared.

Major school districts have also blamed the preliminary results on remote learning. Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Alberto Carvalho stated, “as anticipated, the preliminary state assessment results illustrate that there is no substitute for in-person instruction.”

To the extent that standardized testing accurately measures academic achievement, which many educators and experts reject, there are a number of more profound factors contributing to lower scores than remote learning, none of which the Biden administration or media care to discuss.

First, is the widespread illness of children over the past two years. A nationwide study published in *Nature* in May estimated that close to 51 million children had been infected, or a staggering

70 percent of US children. Nearly 160,000 have been hospitalized and at least 1,790 have died, according to the CDC. The vast majority of pediatric illness and death occurred under Biden's watch during the Delta and Omicron waves, when schools were prematurely forced open amid soaring transmission.

To this must be added the impact of Long COVID, a far-reaching condition which, in children, is known to increase the risk of acute pulmonary embolism, myocarditis, venous thromboembolic events, acute renal failure and Type 1 diabetes, as well as debilitating symptoms, such as smell and taste disturbances, circulatory problems, fatigue and pain.

Second, there is the trauma and grief resulting from the life-altering loss of parents, caregivers and teachers due to the “let it rip” response of both the Trump and Biden administrations. In February 2022, it was estimated that over 200,000 children in the US had lost a parent or primary caregiver, a figure which has only grown. An estimated 8,000 educators in the US have died of COVID-19. Unlike missed school, for a child there is no such “recovering” from a dead mother or father.

Finally, the official response to the pandemic, guided by the principles of private profit and not public health, has led to an economic and social catastrophe for the working class. World governments, led by the United States, seized upon the pandemic to transfer unprecedented sums of money to the major corporations through the CARES Act bailout. The wealth of US billionaires increased by 2.1 trillion dollars, or 70 percent, between 2020 and 2021, while conditions of life for the working class have only grown more dire. Millions have lost their jobs, while wages have fallen far behind the 40-year inflation high.

During Biden's tenure, the Democratic Party has overseen the expiration of pandemic-related unemployment benefits, the federal moratorium on evictions and the Child Tax Credit, which was estimated to reduce child poverty by as much as 40 percent. Most recently, they have allowed the universal free lunch program to expire, which has impacted an estimated 10 million children.

Setting these factors aside and accepting the premise that school closures on their own were a major contributor to academic decline, remote learning was carried out in a haphazard fashion with inadequate funding and resources from the start. Many educators even described the process as “sabotaged” by school districts. The federal and state governments never provided the

resources to guarantee free, high quality internet to every student, adequate training in online technology for educators and students, or the necessary financial support for parents to stay home with their children.

Moreover, these chaotic school disruptions, during which students have been yo-yoed between in-person and remote learning, could have been entirely avoided had the necessary measures been taken to suppress transmission and eliminate COVID. This would have involved the temporary closure of schools and non-essential industries, the provision of basic income and necessities and other public health measures, as was done in China.

In any case, the correlation between testing declines and remote learning is ambiguous at best. The NAEP results showed that declines occurred in every region of the country, including areas that returned to in-person schools in 2020. The declines occurred across urban, suburban and rural settings.

Stephanie Tait, author and disability advocate, compared officially published state testing results from the two states that stayed remote longest—California and Oregon—to the two that were remote for the shortest period—Texas and Florida—which showed no correlation between time schools remained remote and score decline.

Mehring Books, the publishing arm of the Socialist Equality Party (US), is proud to announce the publication in epub format of Volume 1 of *COVID, Capitalism, and Class War: A Social and Political Chronology of the Pandemic*, a compilation of the *World Socialist Web Site's* coverage of this global crisis.

In an opinion piece published Thursday in the *New York Times*, David Wallace-Wells, who asserts that schools should be the “last to close, first to open” and downplays the risk that COVID-19 poses to children, admitted that the correlation between remote learning and score declines was unclear. He even cited state and local level data compiled by notorious COVID-minimizer economist Emily Oster, which showed that scores declined whether schools were remote or not.

Throughout the pandemic, conditions inside classrooms have been crisis-ridden. Last year, amid an historic teacher shortage and widespread absences due to illness, it became commonplace for students to be crammed into cafeterias and auditoriums, or for armed police and national guard to act as “substitutes.” In neither of these scenarios did any learning take place, except perhaps for the broader social lessons drawn by many students, including that their lives and education were of little value to the powers-that-be.

The political manipulation of the NAEP results has multiple purposes. On the one hand, they are being used as a preemptive strike against any future school closures amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which Biden has declared to be “over.” As the recent Town Hall co-hosted by the White House and teachers unions made clear, the political establishment is unified on the demand that schools remain in-person so that parents can be forced into equally unsafe factories and workplaces.

More than this, the tests will be used to justify a broader attack against public education, teachers and students. For decades, standardized tests have been used by the ruling class to cut funding, lay off educators and convert public schools into private

charters, all in the name of “education reform.”

Just as the political establishment has no concern for the actual lives and health of American children, they have proven for decades that they could care less about their “progress and academic well-being,” as Cardona claimed. This is evident in the decades of budget cuts, school closures and the crumbling state of American schools, in which millions of students learn inside buildings with antiquated or broken HVAC systems, mold, even roach and mice infestations, as documented by teachers in Columbus, Ohio, who recently struck.

In addition to these damning conditions, academic achievement, as measured by NAEP tests, was already declining before the pandemic, particularly among the lowest-performing students who typically come from low-income families. Both the NAEP’s main tests and its LTT assessments showed either stagnation or declines in reading and math scores since 2012. Speaking on the 2019 results, NCES Associate Commissioner Peggy Carr stated, “Over the past decade, there has been no progress in either mathematics or reading performance, and the lowest-performing students are doing worse.”

No doubt students’ academic life has been impacted by the pandemic. However, this is the result not of remote learning, but of the wholesale assault by the ruling class against the lives and livelihoods of the working class. Any serious and lasting efforts to overcome academic decline requires ending the pandemic—not in name, but in actuality—through the only scientific means available: a globally coordinated elimination program. More than this, it requires a conscious fight by the working class against capitalism, the social and economic system which has gutted public education and allowed millions of people to needlessly die.

Such a fight depends upon the independent mobilization of the working class, including educators and parents, outside of and in opposition to the treacherous trade unions and the capitalist political parties. The growing international network of democratic rank-and-file committees is leading this fight and must be expanded and built in every school.



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