

The pandemic exodus: Kindergarten enrollment drops ^[1]

As the pandemic took hold, more than 1 million children did not enroll in local schools. Many of them were the most vulnerable: 5-year-olds in low-income neighborhoods.

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EXCERPTS

PHILADELPHIA — On a sweltering July afternoon, Solomon Carson, 6, jumped off the stoop of his family’s tidy rowhouse in West Philadelphia, full of what his father, David, called “unspent energy.”

When a stranger asked his name, he answered brightly, but added that he couldn’t spell it. “I can help you with that,” his father said, patiently pronouncing each letter, with Solomon repeating after him.

Solomon was supposed to have learned the basics in kindergarten this past year, but his first year of formal education was anything but.

When Covid-19 closed classrooms, his parents chose not to enroll him in city schools that they already had doubts about. As they were not working, they decided to teach him at home along with his two older brothers. And they signed him up for a virtual charter school that advertised in-person tutoring — and failed to provide it.

Now, as Solomon heads to first grade, Mr. Carson is cleareyed about where his son stands academically. “I really think we can improve,” he said.

Solomon is part of a vast exodus from local public schools.

As the pandemic upended life in the United States, more than one million children who had been expected to enroll in these schools did not show up, either in person or online. The missing students were concentrated in the younger grades, with the steepest drop in kindergarten — more than 340,000 students, according to government data.

Now, the first analysis of enrollment at 70,000 public schools across 33 states offers a detailed portrait of these kindergartners. It shows that just as the pandemic lay bare vast disparities in health care and income, it also hardened inequities in education, setting back some of the most vulnerable students before they spent even one day in a classroom.

The analysis by The New York Times in conjunction with Stanford University shows that in those 33 states, 10,000 local public schools lost at least 20 percent of their kindergartners. In 2019 and in 2018, only 4,000 or so schools experienced such steep drops.

The months of closed classrooms took a toll on nearly all students, and families of all levels of income and education scrambled to help their children make up for the gaps. But the most startling declines were in neighborhoods below and just above the poverty line, where the average household income for a family of four was \$35,000 or less. The drop was 28 percent larger in schools in those communities than in the rest of the country.

In the Philadelphia school district, where almost all students are from low-income families, kindergarten enrollment declined by more than a quarter between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2020. The drop was three times the national rate, accounting for 2,700 students.

While kindergarten is optional in many states, educators say there is no great substitute for quality, in-person kindergarten. For many students, it’s their introduction to school. They are taught to cooperate and to identify numbers and letters. They learn early phonics and number sense — the concept of bigger and smaller quantities.

And kindergarten is often where children are first diagnosed with disabilities like autism spectrum disorder.

Yet in the country’s poorest neighborhoods, tens of thousands of 6-year-olds will begin first grade having missed out on a traditional kindergarten experience.

“We have to be deeply concerned,” said Thomas S. Dee, a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, who worked with The Times on the analysis.

The data covered two-thirds of all public schools.

It showed that remote schooling was a main factor driving enrollment declines.

Districts that went strictly remote experienced 42 percent more decline than those that offered full-time in-person learning, according to a new research paper by Professor Dee and colleagues, posted Saturday. While some of these schools were losing students before the pandemic, the declines between fall 2019 and fall 2020 were significantly steeper.

City schools, which serve disproportionate numbers of low-income students of color, were the most likely to shutter classrooms for extended periods.

Remote instruction has been among the most divisive issues of the pandemic. It is supported by some parents, policymakers and teachers' unions, who are worried about the spread of the virus in classrooms. But as evidence emerged, as early as last summer, that the health risk could be mitigated, many pediatricians and child development experts warned that school closures would severely affect children and their families, both emotionally and academically.

Interviews in three cities that experienced some of the biggest drops in kindergarten enrollment — Philadelphia, Jackson, Miss., and Honolulu — showed the difficulty of trying to educate the youngest students remotely, and how little parents trusted their schools to make the shift.

Even before the pandemic, the Carsons had concerns about their local public school. When one of their older sons was a student there, Mr. Carson had seen a teacher yelling at a young girl. And the building — with cages on the windows and officers on the grounds — reminded him of a jail, he said. He was willing to try an alternative for Solomon.

Given how many kindergartners went elsewhere, the challenge now is to re-establish relations between the schools and families who left them. That task is made harder by continued anxiety about infection in classrooms as the Delta variant sweeps the nation.

"A lot of Black and brown families kept their children home for good reason," said Kayla Patrick, an analyst at the Education Trust, an advocacy group focused on low-income students and students of color. "They need to know in-person instruction is proven to be better. We want to make sure that schools are rebuilding that trust."

Half the Kindergartners, Gone

In Hawaii, schools operated almost entirely remotely last fall, and they experienced one of the biggest statewide kindergarten enrollment declines in the country — a loss of 14 percent between fall 2019 and fall 2020.

At Linapuni Elementary School, which sits in a large public housing complex in Honolulu, the decline was even more alarming: Kindergarten enrollment shrank by half, from 65 students in 2019 to 32 students in 2020, according to the Times data.

Many of its students are from Pacific Islander immigrant families that do not speak English, according to Tami Haili, the principal. Eighty-five percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

During a typical year, teachers and other staff members go door-to-door in the housing complex, to find children eligible for kindergarten. Many parents need help filling out paperwork and finding medical records and birth certificates.

Last fall, those efforts stopped. "With Covid, we couldn't be proactive," Ms. Haili said.

Families did receive computers for their students, said Ryan Kusumoto, president of Parents and Children Together, a nonprofit group serving immigrant families around Linapuni.

But parents also needed high-speed internet and translation services to get basic information from schools, he said. They had to navigate work, if there was any, and safety, especially those living with vulnerable grandparents.

For many families, guiding kindergartners through online classes was all too much. When Linapuni reopened classrooms in the new year, Ms. Haili said, only 10 or so students missing in the fall enrolled.

When the Local School Won't Work

When schools went remote, many parents needed a safe child care alternative.

In Jackson, Miss., after the school district offered only online education in the fall of 2020, many essential workers had to find someone to watch their kindergartners, remote school or not. They turned to day care.

Single parents, often with jobs at health care centers, fast food restaurants or the nearby Continental tire plant, turned up at Leaps and Bounds Developmental Academy, which cared for seven children who were kindergarten age.

Only two participated in remote learning, said Christi Jackson Payton, the day care's director. But because the center focuses on early reading skills, like phonics, Ms. Jackson Payton said, day care may have been a better choice than online kindergarten.

At the very least, she said, "The children that were here received more direct learning."

But other day care directors were alarmed about the school-age children showing up. At Northtown Child Development Center, 25 school-age children were required to attend online classes, according to the director, Petra Kay.

But for 5-year olds, Ms. Kay doesn't think the instruction was effective.

"The children now know very well how to navigate a computer," she said. "But did they learn anything?"

The kindergarten students at her center will all advance into first grade for the fall, she said. But Ms. Kay believes a third of them are

lagging and should repeat their kindergarten year in person.

For other parents, the issue was trust. Could their local public school deliver a quality online education?

In Philadelphia, some turned to a network of virtual schools, which was set up by the state before the pandemic.

While these programs are not large, the pandemic fueled their growth, despite the fact that these schools have produced “overwhelmingly negative results” for students in both reading and math compared to brick-and-mortar schools, according to a 2019 study. In the states analyzed by The Times, virtual schools added 20,000 kindergarten students. And in Pennsylvania, their kindergarten enrollment tripled, adding 2,000 students.

For Solomon Carson, the virtual charter program proved challenging. His parents registered him in an online school affiliated with a for-profit company, paid for by the state. (Mr. Carson asked The Times not to identify the program, because Solomon is still enrolled.)

The program promised to provide tutors to work with students in person, which the Carsons believed would help Solomon in subjects like phonics and math.

But to their surprise, the program later told them that, because of the pandemic, face-to-face tutoring was unavailable. They were left to manage on their own, with two other children to home-school, as well.

Gine Ramirez, 36, who lives in North Philadelphia, also put her daughter Bonnylin Sapp into a virtual charter school. She would have preferred in-person education, but classrooms were closed. She also had concerns about the neighborhood school. Her older daughter had withered there, before switching to a virtual charter in fifth grade.

At the very least, she thought, the remote charter school already had experience with online instruction.

Bonnylin is thriving academically. The 6-year-old is learning Spanish and sign language, and counts by 5s and 10s. But that’s mostly because of countless one-on-one sessions with her mother, who works occasionally as a babysitter.

And while Ms. Ramirez was impressed with the warmth of her daughter’s teacher, Bonnylin only interacted with her over live video for two hours each week.

On the whole, kindergarten via a computer was tedious and “so sad,” Ms. Ramirez said, before summing up the experience — spelled out so that her daughter could not understand — as “H-E-L-L.”

And yet, despite the frustration of both families, Solomon and Bonnylin will continue in their virtual schools this fall.

Mr. Carson fears infection for his family, and prefers continuity and stability over uncertainty. “So many people are unvaccinated,” he said. “They are going to end up closing it again.”

Ms. Ramirez is no longer acutely afraid of the virus. But she and Bonnylin have mastered the routine of online schooling, she said, and besides, the neighborhood elementary school is low-performing.

Philadelphia began offering several days per week of in-person learning for the youngest students last March. But by the end of the school year, only 20 percent of the missing kindergarten students had come back in any capacity — online or in person.

A spokeswoman for the Philadelphia school district said it was not yet clear whether enrollment numbers would rebound this fall, when the district plans to open classrooms full time. A citywide bus tour will help parents across 31 neighborhoods register their children for school. The tour will distribute school supplies and offer childhood immunizations.

In Jackson, schools opened in January for in-person learning five days per week. But only 129 of the 391 missing kindergartners returned over the course of the year, either in person or online, according to a district spokesman.

In Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and North Carolina, 60 percent of the missing kindergarten students were still absent as the spring 2021 semester began.

Linapuni Elementary started its new year on Aug. 3, but the news there is no better. Even though the staff resumed knocking on doors to register students, as of July 20, only 38 kindergartners and 37 first graders had signed up, compared with 65 kindergarten students and 71 first graders in the fall of 2019.

Low-income and nonwhite families have the biggest concerns about the virus and the safety of returning to classrooms, according to surveys of parents. And the rise of the Delta variant may only heighten these worries.

But the pandemic has also exposed the distance between what parents want, and what schools are delivering. And at least for Ms. Ramirez, that’s the bigger consideration in keeping Bonnylin at home.

“I need a miracle at this point to get out of this apartment and this neighborhood,” Ms. Ramirez said. “My kids deserve so much more.”

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