



CAPITAL IDEAS

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The 2022 Education Landscape and the Coming Homeschool Tsunami

BY LANCE IZUMI

Lance Izumi, senior director of PRI's Center for Education, recently delivered the following speech to the Northern California Lincoln Club.

There is so much going on in education, both in California and nationally, that I thought I would give an overview of some of the key issues facing us and what the future holds in store, especially in regard to homeschooling, which is the subject of my new book *The Homeschool Boom*.

First of all, I think we should ask where are we right now? What exactly has happened to our children during the pandemic and the ever-changing policies of the public school system?

Thankfully, we are starting to get some real data on the learning losses suffered by children.

For example, the prominent research firm McKinsey & Company released a study in July that not only showed huge learning losses among American children due to the pandemic, but also shocking estimates of the long-term economic impacts these learning losses would have on the United States.

According to the McKinsey researchers, students, on average, fell behind five months in math and four months in reading by the end of the 2021 school year.

More troubling, the researchers found that the pandemic had widened achievement gaps between student demographic groups.

In math, students in schools with majority African-American populations ended the year with six months of unfinished learning, while students in low-income schools suffered a learning loss of seven months.

Further, the study found, “High schoolers have become more likely to drop out of school and high school seniors, especially those from low-income families, are less likely to go on to postsecondary education.”

So, what are the impacts of this learning loss among students?

The McKinsey study said: “Some students who have disengaged from school altogether may have slipped backward, losing knowledge or skills they once had. The majority simply learned less than they would have in a typical year, but this is nonetheless important. Students who move on to the next grade unprepared are missing key building blocks of knowledge that are necessary for success, while students who repeat a year are much less likely to complete high school and move on to college.”

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One of the really troubling findings of the McKinsey study is the impact of this learning loss on the future earnings of students.

The study found that the “fallout from the pandemic threatens to depress this generation’s prospects and constrict their opportunities far into adulthood.”

The study estimated that today’s students will earn tens of thousands of dollars less over their lifetime owing to the impact of the pandemic on their schooling.

The cumulative impact on the U.S. economy could amount up to \$190 billion every year as this cohort of students enters the workforce.

Here in California, student achievement rates during the pandemic have been abysmal.

In the 2020-21 school year, large majorities of California students in most grade levels failed to meet state reading and math standards based on state tests.

For example, about 70 percent of fifth, sixth, and eighth graders failed to meet state math standards.

When kids aren’t learning, then what is one of the most understandable responses of students? Answer: they stop attending school.

During the pandemic, chronic absenteeism in California rose dramatically. Chronic absenteeism is defined as students missing 10 percent or more of school days.

In Stockton, about four out of 10 of students were chronically absent in the 2020-21 school year—more than double the rate two years ago.

Among elementary school students in Oakland, 37 percent were chronically absent, more than two and a half times the rate two years ago.

And even in suburban Elk Grove, here in Sacramento County, a quarter of students are chronically absent, which is three times the rate two years ago.

The state and school districts have sought to hide their failures by changing rules so that students can graduate with fewer units. In some districts you can graduate with about half of the units normally required.

Also, districts are actually eliminating handing out failing grades to students.

Oakland has limited D's and F's. So has Los Angeles and other districts. One Oakland teacher said, "Not reporting D's and F's is the equivalent of lying about a student's progress."

UC Santa Barbara education professor Russell Rumberger says that with lower graduation requirements he's worried that college-bound students won't have the content knowledge to be successful.

In other words, the public schools are perpetrating fraud on its students.

Oh, and conveniently, the California Department of Education doesn't track the number of students who graduate with fewer units.

In addition, we all know that kids have suffered emotionally and mentally during the pandemic. The McKinsey study also reported, "Roughly 80 percent of parents had some level of concern about their child's mental health or social and emotional development since the pandemic began."

So, our students today are faced with having lost a great deal of learning that they should have gotten over the last couple of years and they have suffered a great deal of mental and emotional anguish as well.

The question, then, is what is being done to make this situation better?

Of course, the first solution from government is always more spending.

Our students today are faced with having lost a great deal of learning that they should have gotten over the last couple of years and they have suffered a great deal of mental and emotional anguish as well.

At the federal level, under President Biden’s massive stimulus plan, public schools in the U.S. received more than \$120 billion. California’s public schools received about \$30 billion in federal COVID-related funding.

According to Biden’s plan, 20 percent of the total funding is supposed to address the learning loss of students. But is this money actually going to efforts that will remediate students and get them back to where they should be?

Well, researchers at Georgetown University have looked at Biden’s spending plan and found that there are very few limitations on the use of these funds.

As a practical matter, then, school districts could justify almost anything.

Here is a quote from the Georgetown researchers: “Honestly, we’re challenged to find something that districts couldn’t spend their money on.”

But is this money actually going to efforts that will remediate students and get them back to where they should be?

So where are school districts spending these new federal dollars?

The Georgetown researchers said that so far, they have seen a lot of spending on things such as “thank you payments to staff” and plans to hire more teachers and non-teaching staff. Alarming, they found, “Not much in here for students,” “Lots of ‘as-usual’ spending,” and “Lots of one-size-fits-all vs. targeting to high-needs kids.”

For parents and the public, much of these spending decisions are taking place under cover of darkness, with “very little transparency at this stage into the planning process.”

Further, the Georgetown researchers warn, “We’re hearing it’s ‘Procurement-palooza’ in many districts” and “Contracts are being negotiated with little public visibility.”

Well, that’s Biden, but what about our old pal Gavin Newsom?

In California, Governor Newsom has just proposed his new budget for the 2022-23 fiscal year. He is going to jack up total education spending to a record \$119 billion dollars, which is nearly double what we were spending ten years ago. This funding amount works out to more than \$20,000 per pupil, which is also a record level.

Yet, are we going to get bang for our buck?

Most likely not because a lot of that money will go to fund just more of the same failed policies.

Take, for example, Newsom’s proposed \$500 million to hire and train literacy coaches and reading specialists to address the low reading levels of our students.

Sounds good, but what are these coaches and specialists going to be teaching?

Many California schools use a reading approach called “balanced literacy,” which focuses on context and meaning, and de-emphasizes systematic phonics.

How does “balanced literacy” work? In a revealing article she wrote recently for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Oakland parent Megan Bacigalupi says that a child could look at a picture of a horse in a book, see the word “horse” below the picture, and guess that the word was actually “pony.” Under “balanced literacy” the child would still be right.

David Banks, the new chancellor of New York City schools, says that he is scrapping “balanced literacy” in his schools because it has failed to teach kids to read. Instead, he is going back to a phonics-based reading approach.

So if Governor Newsom’s new literacy coaches and reading specialists just teach reading using a failed approach, then don’t expect much improvement for students, despite all the new spending.

Or take Newsom’s proposal to greatly expand government-funded pre-K education for three and four year olds. He is proposing to spend more than a billion dollars for this expansion.

The governor says that this spending can provide very young children “the skills and tools needed to succeed in school.” But is that true?

Research on preschool programs in other states wave a big red flag on the governor’s claims.

A Vanderbilt University study of Tennessee’s pre-K program found participants scored lower on tests, had a greater likelihood of being diagnosed with a learning disability, and had greater discipline problems than students not in the program.

The study concluded that the results “offer a cautionary tale about expecting too much from state pre-K programs.” That is a big warning that California should consider seriously before pouring in tons of tax dollars into its own government preschool program.

So, if more spending isn’t the answer, what is?

Well, in the immediate future, I believe more and more parents will stop looking to the government school system, which has failed so badly, and will choose to homeschool their children.

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My new book is entitled *The Homeschool Boom: Pandemic, Policies, and Possibilities* and it examines the explosion we are seeing in homeschooling across America.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, at the start of the pandemic, in spring 2020, just over 5 percent of American households reported homeschooling school-aged children.

One year later in spring 2021 that percentage had increased four-fold to an amazing 20 percent.

Importantly, the Census Bureau used clarifying information on the Survey to ensure that households were reporting true homeschooling and not distance or remote learning through a public or private school.

At the state level, the jump in homeschooling was eye opening and these increases occurred in both red and blue states.

Here in California we are seeing this homeschooling phenomenon as well.

Between the 2020 and 2021 school years, tens of thousands of students have left the regular public schools. Where have these students gone? Many are now being homeschooled.

According to a report by the *California Globe*, “Pre-pandemic, California had roughly 200,000 homeschooled students.” “However,” said the publication, “with the pandemic, as well as other factors such as an increase in parents removing students due to issues over what is being taught,” the number of students rose “to 400,000 being homeschooled for at least part of the 2020-21 school year.”

And let me say that the parents who are deciding to homeschool come from every racial, religious, and income background in America.

What is especially interesting is the increase in the numbers of minority parents who have decided to homeschool their children.

Among African Americans nationwide, the proportion of homeschooling families skyrocketed from 3 percent to 18 percent—a six-fold increase in just one year.

Among Hispanics, the proportion of families who are homeschooling their children tripled from 6 percent to 18 percent.

Also, a greater proportion of families making \$25,000 or less homeschool their children compared to families making between \$100,000 to \$150,000.

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In my book *The Homeschool Boom*, I interview many California parents who have decided to homeschool their children. Their stories are eye opening and dispel many myths that have grown up around homeschooling, including the myth that only white parents homeschool.

I interviewed Magda Gomez, who is an immigrant from Tijuana, Mexico.

Magda decided to homeschool her children after they were bullied and attacked at school.

For instance, one student hit one of her daughters every day and threatened to poke her daughter's eyes out with a pencil.

Her other daughter had her pants pulled down at recess multiple times by a boy.

Homeschooling allowed her to take her kids out of a dangerous environment, thus guaranteeing them greater safety.

Further, Magda said that educating her daughters at home gave her children greater scheduling flexibility; allowed her to control their nutrition by giving them healthy meals; gave her the power to customize their curriculum by allowing extra time for subjects that really interested her children; gave her children the opportunity to socialize in a variety of settings with people of different ages, not just their age-level peers; and ensured one-on-one instruction and assistance from her.

Magda is now an activist in the Hispanic community promoting homeschooling and informing parents about the educational choices they have.

I interviewed Demetria Zinga, who has been named one of the top African-American homeschoolers in the country because of the videos she has produced about her homeschooling experience.

Homeschooling has allowed her to choose the curriculum that best suits the individual needs of her two daughters.

For instance, her oldest daughter needed a more structured curriculum, so Demetria chose a classical education curriculum called Classical Conversations, which focused on the classical skills of recitation, logical thinking, and persuasive rhetoric—all within a Christ-centered worldview.

Needless to say, that's the kind of curriculum that she couldn't get in the regular public schools. Demetria's daughter excelled under the Classical Conversations program. She is now in college. Demetria says that homeschooling has "been a tremendous journey and a journey well worth it because I experienced that with my family, my kids."

Their stories are eye opening and dispel many myths that have grown up around homeschooling, including the myth that only white parents homeschool.

“And,” she observes, “I really got to be there for them in a way that I wouldn’t have been any way else.”

Despite such success stories, defenders of the public schools actually argue that homeschooling kids puts them in danger. However, the lack of safety at public schools is precisely what drives many parents to homeschool their children.

I interviewed another mom whose son was allegedly put on a “kill list” created by another student at his public school.

This other student had previously allegedly assaulted her son. Yet, after school officials found out about the “kill list” they did nothing. The student who put together the “kill list” was not arrested, expelled, or even suspended. Literally nothing was done. No punishment was ever imposed.

This mom told me: “That really frustrated me because their idea was, well, he’s already having a hard enough time as it is and so we don’t need to add punishment on top of it. And my thing was, but he needs to know what he did was wrong and the only way for to do that is if he had some sort of punishment. But, he never got any kind of punishment.”

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Not surprisingly, this mom and her husband then decided to homeschool their son.

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I interviewed Carrie Carlson, who is homeschooling her son who has autism and dyslexia. Prior to her son’s diagnosis, he had very visible learning problems, such as having a hard time reading.

His public school’s response was to put him in the lowest performing group in his classroom, which consisted of mostly non-English speaking students.

Carrie asked, “How is this even helping him? It doesn’t make any sense?”

Not surprisingly, her son was very miserable and would pretend to have sicknesses to avoid going to school. For example, one day, her little boy told her that he thought he had prostate cancer!

The school principal finally admitted to Carrie that he didn’t have teachers that could help her son.

Carrie then decided to homeschool her son and she was able to follow their neurologist’s advice in teaching him.

Because her son had trouble decoding, she transitioned him to audio books and he devoured books on tape.

At the age of just eight he went through the complex three-volume epic novel *The Lord of the Rings* on audiotape.

Carrie says that he is now one of the most well-read dyslexic kids out there.

Also, she was able to adjust his learning to fit his individual pace. A slower pace, taking things in smaller chunks, and taking breaks worked.

Carrie believes that if her son stayed in a regular public school, he would have suffered depression and anxiety.

If he was forced to go through a regular public school culminating in a regular public high school, she told me, “I think he would have just continued to spiral down, so keeping him out of that environment allowed him to grow on his own and allowed him to find the things that he loves or that he’s passionate about.”

As a result, “he’s willing to work hard and advocate for himself and I think that’s hugely positive and I don’t think he would have done that in a high school environment.”

I also dispel the myth that homeschooling your children will leave them isolated without social interaction.

For example, I interviewed Alicia Carter, who is the head of the homeschool academy at a Natomas Charter School in Sacramento.

It offers curricula in basic subjects that parents can use for their children when they are learning at home.

Also, her academy is a bricks-and-mortar facility where parents can send their children to take enrichment classes with other children. These classes include art classes, music classes, and other types of workshops such as forensic science.

Alicia has been a homeschool parent, teacher, and administrator for many years and she has seen a lot of change over the years. But what she has seen over the last couple of years has amazed her.

For the first time in her homeschool academy’s history, they had to hold a lottery for admissions in 2021.

Alicia says that part of the reason is COVID, but she also thinks that people are starting to consider homeschooling a viable option, not a fringe option.

I also dispel the myth that homeschooling your children will leave them isolated without social interaction.

She says, “homeschooling has become much more diverse religiously, ethnically, and socioeconomically all over this country.”

The Census Bureau says that it is clear that in this unprecedented environment that families are seeking solutions that will reliably meet their health and safety needs, their child-care needs, and the learning and socio-emotional needs of their children.

And homeschooling is meeting the needs of America’s parents.

That is why I titled my book *The Homeschool Boom* because I believe that this wave of homeschooling that we are seeing today will become the education tsunami of tomorrow.