



CAPITAL IDEAS

SEPTEMBER 2021

The Education Landscape: Where We Are and What the Future Holds

BY LANCE IZUMI

The following is a speech given by Lance Izumi, senior director of the Center for Education at the Pacific Research Institute, to The Parent Union on August 19, 2021.

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.

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 school closures?

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 2020-2021 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.”

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 may earn around \$50,000 to \$60,000 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.

In addition to the learning losses suffered by children, we all know that kids have suffered emotionally and mentally during the pandemic.

Last month, the non-profit organization YouthTruth released a survey of students in 19 states, including California. According to the survey results, the proportion of secondary-school students reporting that the COVID-19 pandemic had affected them rose from 46 percent in Spring 2020 to 55 percent in Spring 2021.

How were students affected by the pandemic? Nearly half of surveyed students—49 percent—reported “feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious.” 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 year and a half 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 solution from government is always more spending.

At the federal level, under President Biden’s massive stimulus plan, public schools received more than \$120 billion.

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According to the 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."

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."

In Los Angeles, for example, in response to the new stimulus dollars, the United Teachers of Los Angeles is demanding thousands of new teachers and support staff as well as on-going salary increases for staffers.

Based on Biden's stimulus plan and several other federal aid bills, California public schools are slated to receive \$24 billion in federal dollars in the next several years.

But, the question again is how these dollars will be spent and will the efforts funded be effective?

I have pointed out several problems that I see with these government remediation programs.

First, even before the pandemic, California schools were not doing a good job of educating our children. In 2019, only about 30 percent of California's eighth graders were proficient in reading and math according to scores on national tests.

So, how can a system that couldn't get most students up to the proficient level in the basic subjects before the pandemic be expected to get them up to proficiency in the wake of the pandemic?

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Second, the key problem with these government remediation efforts is that they are top-down one-size-fits-all solutions to the problems faced by individual students.

Recently, I had a Los Angeles teachers union official attack me for my criticism of President Biden's education spending plan. He said that it was important to hire more teachers, for example, so class sizes could be reduced.

In fact, in the new state budget, there is more than a billion dollars included to hire more teachers in order to reduce class sizes.

I responded to this union attack by pointing out that implementing such top-down priorities of the teachers' unions does not address the individual needs of students. What if, instead of union-supported class size reduction, a student would be better helped through individual specialized outside tutoring? Why shouldn't such a choice be available to that student? Why should the union's priority take precedence over the student's priority?

Just consider the Biden education spending plan. The amount of money in the plan works out to about \$2,450 per student.

The Heritage Foundation has recommended temporary student-centered micro-education savings accounts that "empower parents to spend their dollars on any approved expense, including private tutoring, books, and special education services."

Certainly, the same could be said for the money being spent by the governor and the Legislature here in California.

If you were to take the one billion dollars for more school staff plus the five billion dollars for summer school and afterschool programs in this budget, that alone would work out to around \$1,000 per student.

The point of it is that the learning losses and the other problems suffered by children during this pandemic are individual to each student and require individual bottom-up responses, not one-size-fits-all top-down government-imposed solutions.

That is why we need to focus on school-choice alternatives that will give parents the option to pursue the best way to address their child's individual issues.

But, of course, as we all know, giving parents more choice is directly opposed to what the teachers' unions want, so in the midst of the pandemic the unions' allies in the Legislature have attempted to remove choices from parents.

Charter schools, of course, are always a target for the unions, Governor Newsom, and the Legislative supermajority.

The point of it is that the learning losses and the other problems suffered by children during this pandemic are individual to each student and require individual bottom-up responses, not one-size-fits-all top-down government-imposed solutions.

I detail the fight over charter schools in California in my chapter on charter schools in the new Pacific Research Institute book entitled *Saving California*.

You all probably recall that in 2019, the governor signed into law AB 1505 that made it easier for local school boards to deny the creation and renewal of charter schools for open-ended reasons such as charter schools duplicating existing regular public-school services regardless of whether the public schools are providing those services well.

The rationale for this law is that charter schools negatively impact the finances of regular public school districts.

However, not only has a recent study by the University of Arkansas shown that regular public schools in places like Los Angeles and Oakland receive about a third more funding than charter schools, a study by the University of Washington found that charter schools in California do not drain the finances of regular public schools—that is a myth.

The reason why school districts have experienced financial troubles is not because of charter schools, but because of pension costs, health care costs, special education costs, and the cost of expensive teacher union contracts.

Yet, despite this reality, in the 2020-21 budget, the governor and the Legislature froze online-charter school funding to the level of the previous year, even if those charter schools experienced growth in enrollment.

Janelle Smiley, who is a board member of California Parents for Public Virtual Education, rightly said, “If funding no longer follows the student, school choice will be severely undermined in the state.”

I am sure most of you recall the recent battle this year over AB 1316, which was a California Teachers Association-supported bill that would have torpedoed charter schools. AB 1316 would have discriminated against students in independent study programs at charter schools by reducing their funding, while fully funding similar students at regular public schools.

Therefore, a student at a district-run virtual school, where instruction takes place remotely and online, would have received full funding, but students at non-classroom-based charter schools, who also take their classes remotely and online, would not receive full funding.

We must remember that the proponents of AB 1316 were pushing to cut funding to the very type of school—these non-classroom-based charter schools—that often specialize in the type of remote learning that was so needed during the pandemic.

Why would you want to target these schools at the very moment when you needed exactly these types of schools?

Thankfully, as most of you are aware, AB 1316 was pulled back after a grassroots outcry by charter

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schools and charter school parents. But you can be sure that the teachers' unions are not going to stop. They will be back pushing this bill and others that will target parental choice.

So, given the effects of the pandemic on education, what is the future of parental choice in California and in the United States?

Well, in the immediate future, I believe many parents will be exercising their choice through homeschooling their children.

I have just finished writing my latest book, entitled *The Homeschool Boom*, which looks at the increase 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.

By fall 2020 that percentage had more than doubled to 11 percent reporting homeschooling children.

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. The percentage of homeschooling households in Florida went from 5 percent to 18 percent, while New York went from 1 percent to 10 percent.

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. The latest total shows that 160,000 students have left the public schools here in California.

Where have these students gone? Many are now being homeschooled.

In Los Angeles, the number of parents filing private school affidavits, which parents must file with the state in order to homeschool their children independently, more than doubled.

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

Among African Americans nationwide, the percentage homeschooling families skyrocketed from 3 percent to an amazing 16 percent—a five-fold increase from spring 2020 to fall 2020.

Among Hispanics, the proportion of families who are homeschooling their children doubled from 6 percent to 12 percent.

By fall 2020 that percentage had more than doubled to 11 percent reporting homeschooling children.

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

Further, the Bureau said that from pandemic pods to standalone virtual schools to homeschooling organizations, parents are increasingly open to options beyond the neighborhood school.

So the pandemic and the ineffectiveness of the regular public schools to teach students during the pandemic have led to a real revolution in how parents are viewing how best to ensure the learning of their children.

That is why I think that the next big wave in education will be homeschooling. Even if schools re-open to full in-person instruction five days a week, the mask mandates and other COVID-related restrictions will continue to cause parents to consider homeschooling going forward.

Look at a liberal state like New York. A poll there found that 40 percent of parents would consider homeschooling their children even after the pandemic is over.

Before the pandemic, federal survey data found the most cited reason given by parents for homeschooling their children is concern about the environment of schools. These concerns include safety, drugs, and negative peer pressure. The second most cited reason is dissatisfaction with the academic instruction at schools.

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The academic research on homeschooling shows that homeschooled students perform better, on average, than non-homeschooled children.

My friend Lindsey Burke at the Heritage Foundation analyzed the most rigorous studies on homeschooling and found that the large majority reported that homeschoolers outperformed their non-homeschool peers.

In my upcoming book, 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.

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 allegedly threatened to poke the eyes of one of her daughters with a pencil.

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

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.

Carrie finally 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.

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 was in a regular public school, he would have suffered depression and anxiety.

If he was forced to go through 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 interviewed Alicia Carter, who is the head of the homeschool academy at a 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 a day or two a week. 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 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. She says, “homeschooling has become much more diverse religiously, ethnically, and socioeconomically all over this country.”

My friend Kerry McDonald, who is a homeschool expert and who I interviewed for my book, says that we are at a real moment of educational transformation where disruptive innovation in education is building new learning models and methods that better suit the needs of parents and children in the 21st Century.

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I totally agree with her. The broad spectrum of choice that is available to parents and their children is growing year after year and it will certainly grow exponentially in the wake of the pandemic.

From new forms of charter schools to education savings accounts to homeschooling, the choice revolution is happening on the ground in America.

But especially in homeschooling, with new technology, huge increases in available curricula and other resources, and new homeschool groupings and organizations, you are going to see an explosion in the number of parents who are going to decide to educate their children at home.

The Homeschool Legal Defense Association estimates that there are an amazing 8 million children being homeschooled in America. That number will only get bigger.

My new book will be out next month, so I hope you will take a look at it when it comes out.