



# AT-HOME EDUCATION & DISTANCE LEARNING: EDUCATORS RESPONDING TO COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES

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## A Research-Based Approach to Distance Learning

### *Research on homeschooling and online learning should inform educators' practices*

In March 2020, schools across the country closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, school districts have moved to create distance learning plans to keep children learning and engaged.

Children at home due to school closures are still enrolled in school, and as such their teachers and schools are still responsible for their education. However, there are many commonalities between the new paradigm of distance learning and the past and present practice of homeschooling, as well as online charter schools and other forms of virtual education.

Research on homeschooling and online education should inform educators' practices during this time.

### **This white paper will cover:**

- 1. Research on Online Education and Distance Learning**
  - a. The racial and income achievement gap**
  - b. Differences between subjects and program structures**
  
- 2. How Teachers and Schools Can Support Students**
  - a. Protecting students from abuse and neglect**
  - b. Supporting students' mental health**
  - c. Internet use and peer interactions**
  - d. Providing access to school services**

## Research on Online Education and Distance Learning

### ***Students enrolled in online charter schools showed weaker growth across every demographic category (2)***

The research on K-12 online education indicates that it is not a good substitute for in-person learning. In its report, “Virtual Schools in the U.S., 2019,” the National Education Policy Center of the University of Colorado-Boulder found that only 48.5% of virtual schools were rated “acceptable” by the states where they operate, while 51.5% were rated “unacceptable.”<sup>1</sup> The report recommended that policymakers “slow or stop” the growth of virtual schools “until the reasons for their relatively poor performance have been identified and addressed.”

In a similarly pessimistic report, Stanford’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2019) surveyed Pennsylvania’s charter schools and found that students enrolled in online charter schools showed weaker growth across every demographic category in both reading and math when compared to matched peers who remained in public schools.<sup>2</sup>

### **District-Run Remote Learning Programs May Perform Better**

The National Education Policy Center’s report found that for-profit virtual schools had the lowest “acceptable” rating (40.8%) while district-run schools had the highest “acceptable” rating (59.3%). The Stanford study, with its bleak findings, looked only at online charter schools, and not at district-run programs.

A forthcoming study by the Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE), which examines Alaska’s largely district-run public “correspondence” programs, finds that students enrolled in these programs score worse in math but better in reading compared with students who attend brick-and-mortar public schools.<sup>3</sup>

Taken together, these findings suggest that:

<sup>1</sup> Molnar, A., ed. (2019). Virtual Schools in the U.S. 2019. National Education Policy Center, School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder, May 2019, <https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Virtual%20Schools%202019.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Charter School Performance in Pennsylvania. (2019). Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), Stanford University, June 5, 2019, [https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/2019\\_pa\\_state\\_report\\_final\\_06052019.pdf](https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/2019_pa_state_report_final_06052019.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> McCracken, C., & Coleman, R. (2020). A meaningful measure of homeschool academic achievement: Statistical analysis of standardized test performance in Alaska public correspondence schools. *Other Education*, to appear.

- 1) Students in district-run distance learning programs may perform better than students in other distance learning programs due to their connection to a specific school district or some other factor yet to be explored.
- 2) Distance education may be more successful when parents have more active involvement. Alaska's distance learning programs differ from Pennsylvania's online charter schools in that most of Alaska's programs expect parents to be students' primary instructors, with an active role in both selecting and implementing curricula. This situation is more similar to ideal homeschooling than to typical virtual schooling; when it comes to distance learning programs, parent involvement and input may be a key factor in student success.

During COVID-19 school closures, district-run programs are well-positioned to support students by maintaining students' connections to their school.

***Higher reading proficiency was concentrated entirely among low-income and minority students while lower math proficiency was concentrated among white students (3)***

### **Parsing the Racial and Income Achievement Gap**

Many legitimate concerns have been raised about limited access to technology for students in low-income families and students who belong to racial and ethnic minority groups. There is also concern that school closures may result in an amplified "summer slide."<sup>4</sup> Data on online schooling and remote learning may offer some cause for optimism.

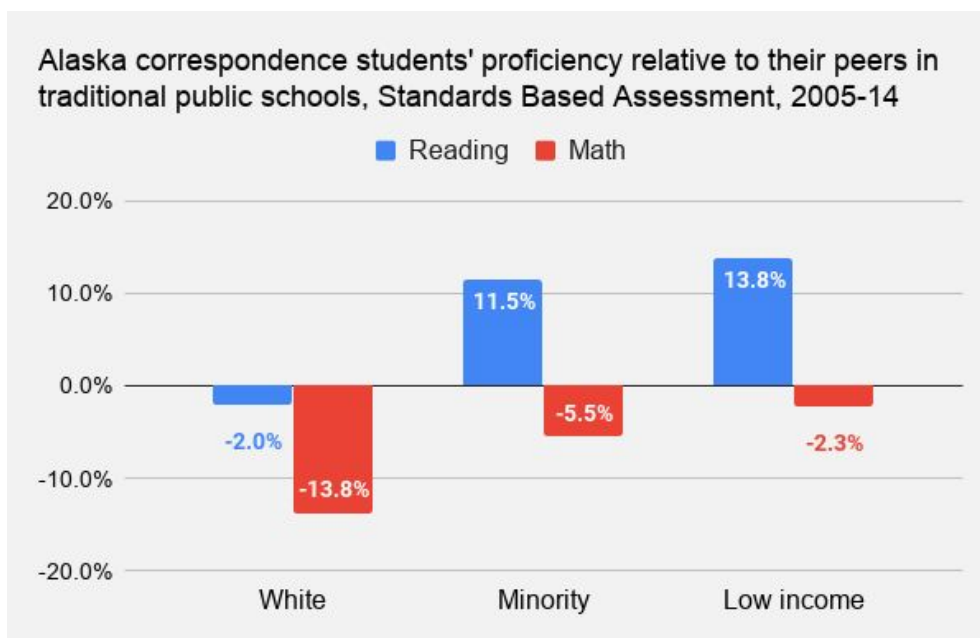
In the Stanford study of Pennsylvania's online charter schools, white students and students not in poverty showed the *lowest* levels of growth relative to their matched peer control groups. While nonwhite and low-income students also showed lower growth than their matched peers who remained in school, the difference was less pronounced.

CRHE has found similar results: while students enrolled in Alaska's largely district-run public correspondence programs outperformed traditional public school students in reading and underperformed them in math, these students' higher reading proficiency relative to their peers was concentrated entirely among low-income and minority students,

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<sup>4</sup> Megan Kuhfeld and Beth Tarasawa, What summer learning loss can tell us about the potential impact of school closures on student academic achievement, Collaborative for Student Growth, April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2xTXID9>.

while their lower math proficiency relative to their peers was most concentrated among white students and students who were not low-income.



These findings should be viewed with some caution, as students enrolled in Alaska's correspondence programs have parents who chose to enroll them in these programs, a factor that sets them apart from their peers and may play a role in differences in proficiency.

However, taken together with the Stanford study, these findings suggest that online schooling and distance learning may not exacerbate racial and income performance gaps to the extent that some have feared. Teachers and school districts should work to understand and overcome technology gaps, and to recognize and address other gaps that might affect minority and low income students.

### The Homeschool Math Gap

The existence of a math gap is one of the most reliable and robust findings in the research on homeschooling; children who are

***The existence of a math gap is one of the most reliable and robust findings in the research on homeschooling (4)***

homeschooled score worse in math than they do reading.<sup>5</sup> This “math gap” is present in the scores of students enrolled in largely district-run public correspondence schools in Alaska, as well as in the Stanford study of Pennsylvania's online charter schools.

A math gap is also apparent in homeschool graduates’ SAT scores, and in these students’ choice of college major: studies of homeschooled students’ college performance have found that these students are less likely to major in STEM fields or to take STEM courses than their peers.<sup>6</sup>

When asked about math deficiencies, formerly homeschooled young adults point to parental math phobias and to the limits of their ability to self-teach.<sup>7</sup> “My mother wasn’t good at math and told me I wasn’t very good at math either,” said one. Another reported that her parent “had anger issues, and would yell at me and my sister if we got problems wrong.”

### **More Structured Programs May Have Better Outcomes**

A 2011 study found that homeschooled children whose parents provided more structured educational environments outperformed relative to students whose parents provided less structured educational environments.<sup>8</sup> This finding suggests that some degree of educational structure and routine may be beneficial to students who are schooled at home. In the case of children being schooled at home due to COVID-19 school closures, routine may involve things like daily school assignments and contact with teachers.

<sup>5</sup> Kunzman, R., and Gaither, M. (2013). “Homeschooling: A Comprehensive Survey of the Research,” *Journal of Other Education*, Vol. 2, No. 1, <https://othereducation.org/index.php/OE/article/view/10>

<sup>6</sup> On SAT scores, see Belfield, C. R. (2005). Home-schoolers: How well do they perform on the SAT for college admissions? In B. S. Cooper (Ed.), *Home schooling in full view: A reader* (pp. 167-178). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing. On students’ choice of college majors, see Phillips, L. (2010). Homeschooling as an art, not a science: The impact of homeschooling on choice of college major. *Sociological Viewpoints*, 6(2), 19-25; and Wheaton, J. (2010). Homeschoolers: A snapshot. Institutional Research and Assessment, Austin College.

<sup>7</sup> The Homeschool Math Gap: The Stories, Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-12j>.

<sup>8</sup> Martin-Chang et al., The impact of home schooling on academic achievement: Evidence from homeschooled and traditionally schooled children, *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2011), 195-202.

## Research-Based Recommendations for Educators During COVID-19 School Closures

- **Maintain a sense of connection between teacher and student and between students and classmates. Create organized distance learning programs that maintain a sense of structure. Provide parents with age-appropriate assignments and materials.**
- **Online learning is not an effective replacement for in-person instruction. Teachers should ensure that children's education involves some synchronous learning, whether that is live interaction with their parents or remote interaction with teachers and classmates through video conferencing software.**
- **Treat parents as partners in their children's education and encourage their active participation and involvement. Allow parents to supplement or replace specific subjects or assignments with activities of their own design.**
- **Approach all parents as capable partners. Avoid making assumptions about families based on demographic factors.**
- **Actively encourage math learning and attainment. Take steps to ensure that parents do not communicate negative messages about math to their children, even unintentionally.**

## How Teachers and Schools Can Support Students

COVID-19 school closures have created an artificial level of social isolation that differs even from the day-to-day lives of many longtime homeschooling families. However, some homeschooled children are socially isolated; we can glean a number of lessons from their experiences that may help teachers provide students who are isolated at home due to COVID-19 school closures with support and foster student well-being.

### Protecting Students from Abuse and Neglect

#### Social isolation can exacerbate abuse

***Social isolation is associated with increased risk of child fatality (10)***

In a study of child abuse so severe it could be termed torture, researcher Barbara Knox wrote that when the school-age child victims she examined were removed from school, their isolation “was accompanied by an escalation of physically abusive events.”<sup>9</sup> Children isolated today due to COVID-19 school closures are isolated as the result of public health measures and not with malicious intent. However, social isolation is associated with increased risk of child fatality.<sup>10</sup>

Several young adults who were removed from school to be homeschooled have reported that the physical abuse they experienced was worse when they were schooled at home.<sup>11</sup> “Every abuse had a magnified effect on us because there was no escape from our home environment,” wrote one.<sup>12</sup>

#### Online teachers can play a protective role

Access to an online teacher can prove essential to helping children in need. The following two cases are illustrative of the protective role of online teachers.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara L. Knox et al., Child Torture as a Form of Child Abuse, *Journ Child Adol Trauma*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2014), pp. 37-49. <https://www.rimaregas.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Knox-Torture-as-a-Form-of-Child-Abuse-article.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Within Our Reach: A National Strategy to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities, Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities, 2016, [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cecanf\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cecanf_final_report.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Jessica A., “Homeschool is an abusive parent’s dream,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-11R>; Jane N., “We were completely cut off from the outside world,” *ibid.*, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-2fD>; Elizabeth W., “I am a survivor,” *ibid.*, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-183>.

<sup>12</sup> Kimberly R., “Every abuse had a magnified effect on us,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-18w>.



- Three children enrolled in Ohio Virtual Academy emailed their online teacher and asked her to call 911 because they were being “tied to the beds and beat.” The children’s mother and her boyfriend pled guilty to child endangerment and other charges. The children were 8, 9, and 11.<sup>13</sup>
- An online teacher administering an 11-year-old girl’s required homeschool assessment noticed that she was acting odd and asked if she was okay. The girl reported that she was hungry and not being fed. Authorities found her locked in a trailer, so malnourished she had to be hospitalized.<sup>14</sup>

While there are some technology constraints, most children isolated at home due to COVID-19 have access to an online teacher through distance learning programs. The impact online teachers can have on socially isolated homeschooled children suggests these teachers may play a similar protective role during school closures.

### **Effective followup by school districts is important**

School districts can also play a crucial role in protecting children. The following two cases are illustrative of the role played by school districts:

### ***School districts can play a crucial role in protecting children (15)***

- 10-year-old Janiya Thomas died after her Florida school district failed to adequately follow up when her mother did not submit a required homeschool assessment. More timely followup might have identified Janiya’s abuse.<sup>15</sup>
- When the family of an 11-year-old Ohio girl failed to submit an assessment, their school district persistently followed up. The family hired a teacher to administer the assessment online, leading to the identification of the girl’s abuse.<sup>16</sup>

Because children at home due to COVID-19 are still enrolled in school, school districts are both required and empowered to keep track of these children. Effective followup is important to protect child well-being.

<sup>13</sup> “Email for help leads to 3 Ohio child abuse arrests,” Associated Press, February 12, 2014, <https://news.yahoo.com/email-help-leads-3-ohio-child-abuse-arrests-184610321.html>.

<sup>14</sup> “Authorities find malnourished girl after online teacher tip,” Associated Press, November 14, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/11/14/authorities-find-malnourished-girl-after-online-teacher-tip/>.

<sup>15</sup> Kate Irby, “Mother of missing Bradenton girl Janiya Thomas charged with aggravated child abuse,” Bradenton Herald, October 19, 2015, <https://www.bradenton.com/news/local/crime/article40081161.html>.

<sup>16</sup> “Authorities find malnourished girl after online teacher tip,” Associated Press, November 14, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/11/14/authorities-find-malnourished-girl-after-online-teacher-tip/>.

## Supporting Students' Mental Health

### Social isolation magnifies the effects of emotional abuse

Social isolation can exacerbate emotional abuse by making it more totalizing. A young adult who was homeschooled beginning in the 4th grade reports that her parents' emotional abuse felt worse when she was homeschooled because there were no contrary voices:

"When I was in regular school, I had several adults telling me that I was smart, that I was kind, that I was capable of producing good things and of being a good person. When I was homeschooled, the main voice I had in my life was telling me that I was nothing, that I was 'too stupid to do anything right,' and that I was bad just because I happened to be alive."<sup>17</sup>

"My mother ... was unpredictable and frequently intrusive, hypercritical, and explosively angry," another individual wrote of being homeschooled with an emotionally abusive parent.<sup>18</sup> "My dysfunctional and emotionally abusive home was my school, and vice versa," a third recalls.<sup>19</sup>

In some cases emotionally abusive parents may grow frustrated while supervising their children's education: "When a person with a hair-trigger temper places themselves in the position of trying to teach something they aren't qualified to teach, to a frustrated child who isn't understanding the lesson ... you have a powder keg waiting to blow," an individual homeschooled in an explosive and emotionally abusive home noted.<sup>20</sup>

Students need positive feedback and encouragement during COVID-19, both from teachers and from parents, as well as from others both inside and outside of the home. In addition to providing children with positive feedback themselves, teachers should encourage parents to be supportive and understanding of their children during this time.

***"You have a powder keg waiting to blow" (19)***

<sup>17</sup> Rai Storm, "There was no gratefulness. There was no escape. It just went on and on," Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-2ep>.

<sup>18</sup> Lana Martin, "I suffered severe depression, suicidality, and disordered eating," Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-18l>.

<sup>19</sup> Joan T., "My dysfunctional and emotionally abusive home was my school," Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-2LE>.

<sup>20</sup> Lillie S., "I was never once asked if I felt safe at home," Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-1Pj>.

***“Doing nothing day after day, having nowhere to go, and having no real direction in life only made me feel more hopeless” (21)***

## **Students need access to mental health care**

One individual who was socially isolated while being homeschooled reported that: “As a teenager I was depressed. Doing nothing day after day, having nowhere to go, and having no real direction in life only made me feel more hopeless.”<sup>21</sup> Another wrote that she “had intense social anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem my entire growing up years.”<sup>22</sup> A third stated that she “was punished, shamed, and manipulated by my parents until I hated myself so much that I truly wanted to die.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite their elevated need for mental health care due to social isolation, these individuals frequently report a lack of access to mental health care while being homeschooled.<sup>24</sup> One young woman reported that she had a mental health crisis in her late teens, brought on by isolation and abuse, but had “no access to counselors or any other sort of help.”<sup>25</sup> She added that her parents treated mental health issues “as demonic.”

Most students at home due to COVID-19 have access to teachers and other school district personnel online. School districts should ensure that this access includes school counselors. Teachers should ensure that students are aware of and have access to these services.

## **Internet Use and Peer Interactions**

### **Internet access may be a mitigating factor**

A study of formerly homeschooled LGBT young adults found that “internet access appeared to be a significant protective factor” and that “in the

<sup>21</sup> Sierra S., “My mom was obviously overwhelmed,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-19l>.

<sup>22</sup> Kimberly R., “Every abuse had a magnified effect on us,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-18w>.

<sup>23</sup> Lynne A., “I wasn’t protected at all,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-1ye>.

<sup>24</sup> Lana Martin, “I suffered severe depression, suicidality, and disordered eating,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-18l>.

<sup>25</sup> Jane N., “We were completely cut off from the outside world,” Coalition for Responsible Home Education., <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-2fD>

absence of in-person peers and school-based supports, access to internet resources and communities becomes even more essential.”<sup>26</sup>

**“Internet access appeared to be an important protective factor” (26)**

Many children now learning at home due to COVID-19 have turned to online gaming platforms and other ways to connect over the internet. While children should be taught the importance of internet safety and parents should keep up with their children’s online activities, students may benefit from a relaxing of family screen time requirements.

### **Maintaining student friendships while apart**

Children who are educated at home have fewer friends than children who attend school, but the friends they do have become extremely important to them.<sup>27</sup> Homeschooled children frequently sustain friendships with children they do not see regularly, often communicating with them via email or, in some cases, through written letters. It is important to keep in mind that every child’s need for social interaction is different; what works for one child may not work for another.<sup>28</sup>

Children at home during COVID-19 school closures need help maintaining their friendships in ways that meet CDC-recommended social distancing practices. Teachers may be able to foster children’s sense of connection with peers and friends through online video conferencing platforms or regular virtual meetings with small groups.

## **Providing Access to School Services**

### **Older students need access to academic counselors**

Students who are homeschooled frequently lack access to academic counselors and other professionals who could help prepare them for their

<sup>26</sup> Sloan Okrey Anderson and Benjamin J. Lough, Sexual and gender minoritized youth in Christian homeschools: Perceptions of climate and support, *Journal of LGBT Youth*, Dec. 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Richard G. Medlin, Homeschooling and the question of socialization revisited, *Peabody Journal of Education*, vol. 88, no. 3 (2013), pp. 284-97, <https://www.stetson.edu/artsci/psychology/media/medlin-socialization-2000.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Homeschooling and Social Interaction Q&A, Coalition for Responsible Home Education, <https://wp.me/p3NoZi-Xk>.

next steps in life. Students at home due to COVID-19 school closures, particularly those preparing to graduate, may face similar challenges.

Homeschool graduates appear to be less likely than other graduates to attend college.<sup>29</sup> While there are likely many reasons for this and further research is needed, lack of access to academic counselors may be one reason. This finding makes it all the more important that school districts find ways to provide high school seniors with support from academic counselors during COVID-19 school closures, in order to avoid similar problems with access to higher education. Such contact should meet CDC-recommended social distancing practices.

### **Students with disabilities need access to supports**

Educating children with disabilities at home can be challenging both for parents and for students. While many parents who homeschool children with disabilities work to find their children the accommodations and services they need, social isolation can also render disabled children more vulnerable. A disproportionate number of entries in the Coalition for Responsible Home Education's database of severe and fatal homeschool abuse and neglect cases involve children with disabilities, suggesting that disability may be a risk factor for abuse in homeschooling.<sup>30</sup>

Disabled children at home due to COVID-19 school closures have not only lost access to service providers and trusted teachers but also the routines they were used to. School districts should ensure that children with disabilities are provided with support and services at home, in keeping with CDC-recommended social distancing guidelines.

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<sup>29</sup> Homeschooling in Kentucky, Office of Educational Accountability, Legislative Research Commission, Research Report No. 454, Sept. 18, 2018. <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/lrc/publications/ResearchReports/RR454.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Disabilities, Homeschooling's Invisible Children, <https://hsinvisiblechildren.org/themes-in-abuse/disabilities/>.

## Recommendations for Supporting Students during COVID-19 School Closures

- Teachers and school districts should maintain contact with and keep track of children and families during the COVID-19 crisis. Teachers should create private feedback channels that allow students to communicate with them directly.
- Students at home due to COVID-19 school closures need positive feedback and verbal encouragement from teachers and others. Teachers and schools should encourage parents who are supervising their children's education at home to be supportive with their children and understanding of their needs.
- School districts should ensure that children who are at home during COVID-19 school closures have access to mental health care, academic counselors, and disability supports.
- School districts should ensure that children have access to the internet in their homes, and that both children and parents receive instruction on internet safety.

*The Coalition for Responsible Home Education empowers homeschooled children by educating the public and advocating for child-centered, evidence-based policy and practices for families and professionals.*