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## LEARNING LOSS WHILE OUT OF SCHOOL —IS IT NOW TIME TO WORRY?

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Early in the pandemic, [teachers expressed worry](#) that COVID-19 school closures were widening inequalities and achievement gaps. Parents also worried about learning loss. With the recent school closures in Ontario, this worry has grown to a fever pitch among some educators, parents, and students. But is it warranted?

At the beginning of the pandemic [some of us](#) argued that “learning will not be lost for most Canadian children, even if we continue with a non-traditional teaching model”. This prediction was offered with the idea that school closures would be short-term and uncommon. They have now proven to be extended and widespread.

So what do the data say about learning loss in the context of the pandemic?

Unfortunately, Canada lacks high-quality and large-scale data that directly measure any impacts of these types of closures on student achievement. This problem was compounded when provinces, like Ontario, cancelled their planned standardized testing in 2020 and 2021, thus precluding the possibility of comparing achievement shortly before and after the school closures. In cases where data are available, they tend to be limited to single school boards or a small number of schools. Although not ideal, these studies paint a worrying picture. For example, a [study](#) of eight Edmonton area schools found that students’ reading test scores were lower in September 2020 compared to previous years, with learning losses particularly pronounced among younger children. The [Toronto District School Board](#) also found that many students’ early literacy had been harmed by a periodic or continual absence of in-person classroom reading opportunities caused by the school closures.

Learning loss is expected when there are lengthy periods of time out of school. Indeed, studies show just that— school closures generally create losses of literacy and numeracy skills and widen student achievement gaps. However, in these studies, children typically caught up. In the context of the pandemic, it is no longer clear if the same resilience will be found. Davies and Aurini, two education research scholars, used [data](#) from 14 cohorts of Ontario primary-grade students collected between 2010 and 2015 in which 3,723 students attended summer programs and 12,290 served as controls, to create two plausible scenarios. In their best-case scenario, students would fare as they did in years before the pandemic, typically gaining 3.5 months of learning per school year, with a gap of about 6.5 months between students in the lower and upper quartiles. However, their worst-case scenario, average students would experience a 3-month learning shortfall due to COVID-19 school closures when compared to a regular school year, with gaps between the quartiles growing up to 1.5 years. A recent [American study](#)

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found results closer to the latter scenario, as did a recent [Dutch study](#), which concluded that “students made little or no progress while learning from home”. In this study, the learning loss was most evident for students from disadvantaged homes.

The learning loss estimates by Davies and Aurini do not factor in things like pandemic-related family stress and trauma that have led to increases in mental health problems in children and youth. In one [Canadian study](#), 67-70% of children and youth “experienced deterioration in at least one mental health domain” because of the pandemic. The levels of deterioration were greatest for those with a pre-existing diagnosis and among children who perceived greater stress as a result of being socially isolated. Because mental health problems tend to have a collateral [negative effect](#) on learning such as lower academic achievement, lower school engagement, and higher school drop-out, the worst-case scenario may in fact be even graver than projected.

Given what we are learning, what can be done to address these challenges?

Assuming these predictions are broadly accurate, educational authorities should fund or continue to fund high-quality and targeted summer programs. These programs must not only offer instruction in literacy and/or numeracy, but also provide healthy food and recreation. Ideally, in high-need areas provinces should adopt 6-week programs as these have been found to generate greater gains, at least in the short run. These could bring positive, if modest benefits, often halting learning losses and reducing achievement gaps. Furthermore, if offered in-person, they can shift some of the load of children’s learning off from parents and guardians, many of whom may need to work extended hours to compensate for any income losses.

We recognize how unpopular these recommendations will be for some. Teachers are burned out and students are keen to return to the pre-pandemic status quo, a routine that does not include summer learning. These concerns are legitimate and need to be considered. Our worry however, is that without intervention, we may not be able to return to our pre-pandemic performance levels, which were the [exemplar of the world](#). Moreover, this loss may prove to be one that is shouldered not only by students, but by all Canadians for years to come. Education is directly [linked](#) to greater productivity, adaptability, innovation, and health, the very characteristics of resilience that are integral for a country to be globally competitive.

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