

BEYOND LEARNING LOSS

Prioritizing the needs of **Black students** as public education emerges from a pandemic



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INTRODUCTION

“I feel like I’ve lost a lot of people, of course, due to COVID[-19]. Parts of me feels like I lost a little piece of the sanity especially during COVID[-19] and having to grapple with people you know dying of a disease and then just the craziness of seeing other Black people being slaughtered down your Instagram timeline. I feel like I’ve become desensitized to people dying in my personal life, and then like there is now just, I think anger and sadness comes from those things. And I don’t know how to describe that, but I just feel like I’ve lost.”

These are the words of a Black high school student in Detroit, Michigan speaking about how the COVID-19 pandemic, deaths of loved ones, and racialized police violence against Black Americans have impacted their emotional and mental health.¹ This student is one of the nearly eight million Black K-12 students in the U.S., about 94% of whom are enrolled in a public school.² The experience of this student is not isolated, and likely reflects a trend of increasing socioemotional and mental health needs among school-aged children and adolescents across the country that were heightened by the traumas of the pandemic.

The period of 2020 through 2022 was defined by several crises: of course, the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting economic crisis, but also the increased visibility of racialized police violence, unprecedented threats to our democracy, and natural disasters resulting from climate change. Together, these traumatic events have severely

disrupted the lives of school-aged children and adolescents. Black students, in particular, have been disproportionately impacted by each of these crises. As soon as data became available in the early months of the pandemic, it was clear that Black families were disproportionately suffering from COVID-19: Black Americans had higher age-adjusted rates of infection, hospitalization, and death than white Americans.³ Racial disparities in COVID-19 case and death rates have widened and narrowed over the course of the pandemic as overall infection rates have fluctuated and as the COVID-19 vaccine was rolled out.⁴ Yet, age-adjusted data still suggest that Black Americans have experienced higher rates of infection and death than white Americans over most of the pandemic.⁵

Black families were also disproportionately impacted by the economic fallout from the pandemic. Black households were 29% more likely than their white counterparts to report pandemic-

Natasha Greaves holds her daughter, Laila Greaves, 5, after Laila received a COVID-19 vaccine on November 3, 2021 in Shoreline, Washington.
Photo by David Ryder/Getty Images

related loss of employment income.⁶ Additionally, Black renter households were already twice as likely as white renter households to report being at risk of eviction prior to the pandemic, and these racialized disparities were exacerbated during the pandemic, with evictions taking a disproportionate toll on Black renter households.⁷

Racialized police violence, threats to democracy, and environmental disasters are not new exposures for Black Americans, but they have been amplified over the past four years, pervading the lives of Black students, and must be taken into account when assessing how Black students have been faring during the pandemic. The opening quote connects the dots for how the overlapping impacts of the pandemic and the barrage of cases illustrating the ubiquity of racially-biased police violence created feelings of anger, sadness, and hopelessness for this one student, and likely many other Black students.⁸ As the public education system emerges from the pandemic, with the help of record-breaking investments through COVID-19 relief funds, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make equitable investments in public schools that, as noted above, the vast majority of Black students attend.

To date, attention to the impacts of the pandemic on Black students has focused heavily on “learning loss,” which refers to declines in student academic performance relative to historical trends.⁹ Much of the conversation concerning racialized learning loss has focused on critiquing teachers, school administrators, and policymakers for closing schools and implementing remote learning during the period of the pandemic before widespread vaccine availability.¹⁰

There is no doubt that the severe disruption of the pandemic and the closure of schools impacted students’ access to education, and Black students again likely bore the brunt of these impacts. School districts that serve predominantly Black students

had fewer resources to implement quality remote learning environments, creating disparities in distribution of basic technology to facilitate remote learning, synchronous access to teachers, and delivery of school meals.¹¹ Still, the narrow focus on learning loss that has dominated educational equity conversations is short-sighted.

First, a narrow focus on learning loss shifts our attention backward, retrospectively critiquing how schools responded to the pandemic rather than encouraging forward-looking thinking around solutions to promote educational equity. Second, a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the pandemic (and other coinciding crises) on Black students should not be limited to academic achievement outcomes. It should also include assessments of student socioemotional well-being, mental health, and experiences of school discipline. A student’s social and emotional needs must be met in order to create a safe, supportive environment for learning because health, safety, and learning are deeply intertwined.¹²

Lastly, the focus on learning loss and the need to catch up to pre-pandemic academic performance overlooks the ways in which the public school system has historically underserved Black students. Some Black students found that remote learning offered them new opportunities to thrive because they had less exposure to daily microaggressions and were less emotionally and cognitively drained from trying to navigate a space where they had felt

(clockwise from top left) A protester holds up her hands in front of a row of police officers during a demonstration against the death of George Floyd at a park near the White House on June 1, 2020 in Washington, DC. Photo by Olivier Douliery/AFP

Pro-Trump protesters gather in front of the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 in Washington, DC. Photo by Brent Stirton/Getty Images

A mother and her child are rescued by boat from the Lower Ninth Ward during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina August 30, 2005 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images

Members of Progressive Morningstar Baptist Church direct people to get bottled water following a Sunday morning service in Jackson, Mississippi, on September 4, 2022. The city of Jackson, where 80 percent of the population is Black, has experienced water crises for years. But this one was particularly severe, with many residents lacking clean running water for nearly a week. Photo by Seth Herald/AFP





report does not involve any original data collection or presentation of new data. It is, however, the first time such a broad range of student outcomes has been collectively presented and synthesized to illuminate the complex ways in which students have been impacted by the pandemic and other coinciding crises, and how those impacts may vary by student race. To learn more about the key data sources used in this report, see the *Key Data Sources* section. It is important to note that changes in student outcomes are not necessarily attributable directly to a lack of in-person schooling during the pandemic, but instead are likely due to an amalgamation of disruptive and traumatic exposures tied to the pandemic and other coinciding crises. The third and final part of the report discusses the opportunity presented by new COVID-19 relief funds for education and presents recommendations to improve educational equity as schools emerge from the pandemic.

Overall, the evidence presented in this report demonstrates that all students have experienced serious disruption to their health and educational experience. However, Black students have experienced unique and severe outcomes over the past few years that must not be overlooked as the public education system emerges from the pandemic. Those outcomes include the persistence—and in some cases exacerbation—of opportunity gaps, attacks on inclusive curricula, more severe physical health impacts from COVID-19, higher rates of caregiver loss due to COVID-19, higher rates of attempted suicide, higher rates of hunger and homelessness during the pandemic, and the persistence of racialized disparities in school discipline practices. Together the report's findings confirm that Black students will not be well served by a return to normalcy. Instead, educational leaders must explore this moment as an opportunity to address structural drivers of educational inequity.

unwelcome.¹³ Additionally, many Black parents were hesitant to send their children back to in-person schooling because they had witnessed the public school system fail Black students for years.¹⁴ In fact, over the first year of the pandemic, Black household homeschooling rates increased 6.1 percentage points compared to increases of 2.1-2.5 percentage points among white, Hispanic, and Asian households.¹⁵ The public school system's return to normalcy after the pandemic brings with it a return to all of the foundational problems that have plagued public schools for years, such as inadequate building conditions, teacher shortages, racialized violence and harassment, and police in schools.¹⁶ All of these foundational problems must be addressed if public school systems aim to better serve Black students.

This report examines a broad range of outcomes to describe how Black students have been impacted by the upheaval of the first few years of the pandemic. The report is composed of three parts. The first part provides context and framing by discussing the structural forces that have shaped historic and ongoing education inequity. The second part of the report presents and synthesizes existing recent empirical evidence of changes to 1) student health and well-being and 2) educational experiences. Impacts on student health and well-being include physical health, mental health, caregiver loss, and substance use. Impacts on educational experiences include changes in academic performance, attacks on truthful and inclusive curricula, exposure to white supremacy and racialized violence, and school discipline. The empirical section of this

Teacher Keshawna Edwards zips up the coat of Montana Mason, 3, before recess at Little Flowers Early Childhood and Development Center in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of Baltimore, Maryland on January 12, 2021. Crystal Hardy-Flowers, owner and founder of Little Flowers Early Childhood and Development Center, died from COVID-19 complications December 31st. She was 55. Her daycare, located in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of West Baltimore, re-opened from winter break Monday January 11th, with her absence felt by staff and the older students.

Photo by Matt Roth for The Washington Post via Getty Images

Structural causes of historic and ongoing inequity in education

The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first instance of the U.S. public school system poorly serving Black students. Since well before the start of the pandemic, the public school system has been characterized by stark racial gaps in educational opportunity where Black students experience significant disparities in academic outcomes compared to their white peers. For example, in school districts across the country, Black students have lower average standardized test scores, grade point averages, and high school graduation rates than white students.¹⁷ These academic disparities have often been referred to as achievement gaps. However, “achievement gap” framing fails to recognize how Black students are less likely than white students to live in neighborhoods with high-quality, appropriately resourced public schools because of intersections between racial residential segregation and systematic disinvestment in majority-Black neighborhoods.¹⁸ Other forms of structural discrimination in access to high-quality educational opportunities include economic inequality, school pushoutⁱ and discipline practices, lack of access to same-race teachers, “tracking” practices that shape access to advanced classes, racialized over-identification of conduct disorders, and under-identification of and lack of responsiveness to learning disabilities.¹⁹ As a result, education scholars are increasingly reframing disparities in educational outcomes as “opportunity gaps.”²⁰

While the framing of opportunity gaps is relatively recent, the structural forces that shape educational inequities are not new. Black students have long sought a quality education from the public schools they attend. Nearly 70 years after the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, in which the Supreme Court ruled that racially segregated

schools were unconstitutional, schools have remained largely segregated with systematic disinvestment and under-resourcing of schools serving predominantly Black students. In the years following the *Brown* decision, there was active, widespread opposition to school desegregation that resulted in high rates of public school closures, the large scale firing of Black teachers, the rise of school privatization, and a lack of federal funding to support integration efforts.²¹

School segregation persists today as a result of these efforts to oppose integration and because of intersecting forms of structural racism, such as residential segregation and economic inequality,

SCHOOL SEGREGATION PERSISTS

43%

of schools today have a student body that is

75%

or more the same race/ethnicity.

ⁱ School pushout refers to exclusionary discipline practices like expulsion and suspension, but also includes a broader set of practices that exclude students from the classroom or discourage school engagement (e.g., informal classroom removals or publicly shaming students).

as previously mentioned. According to a recent report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, 43% of schools today have a student body that is 75% or more the same race/ethnicity.²² This school segregation is not limited to the South, rather the regions with the highest percentage of schools that are predominantly the same race/ethnicity are the Midwest and Northeast. Because local property taxes are the primary source of local funding for public schools, wealthier communities have more public education funds to invest in their schools.²³ Even within school districts, there are often stark funding disparities where schools that serve wealthier students receive more funding to pay for things like specialized programming (e.g., magnet programs) or more experienced teachers.²⁴ Black students are systematically shut out from well-resourced, high-performing schools in white, affluent neighborhoods, and there are few adequately resourced public school options in many Black neighborhoods.²⁵ Research demonstrates that these racialized disparities in educational opportunity and school quality cannot be fully explained by class: even wealthy Black students attend lower quality schools than poor white students.²⁶

In addition, since the 1990s, the U.S. public school system has experienced a rapid increase in police presence in schools and zero-tolerance policies.²⁷ These changes have led to dramatic increases in school surveillance and securitization, the use of exclusionary school discipline (suspension and expulsion), school pushout through informal classroom removals and treatment that discourages school engagement, and referrals to the criminal legal system.²⁸ This phenomenon is widely known as the school-to-prison pipeline.²⁹ Just as the criminal legal system is characterized by stark racial disparities, the school-to-prison pipeline also disproportionately impacts Black students.

Estimates suggest that Black students are more than three times as likely to be suspended or expelled from school compared to white students, even after controlling for socioeconomic status and alleged misbehavior.³⁰ Boys experience exclusionary school discipline at higher rates than girls regardless of race, but Black boys and Black girls experience disproportionately high rates of exclusionary discipline.³¹ Additionally, racialized disparities in suspensions and expulsions arise as early as preschool: Black preschoolers are suspended at 2.5 times their share of preschool enrollment and are expelled at 2 times their share of preschool enrollment.³²

As a result of these stark racialized disparities in school discipline practices, Black students face a higher risk of being excluded from school and falling behind academically as well as a higher risk of contact with the criminal legal system. Black students also face a higher risk of school referrals to law enforcement and school-based arrests.³³ Finally, an emerging body of evidence suggests that school discipline has important public health consequences for students, including increased risk of adverse mental health and substance use outcomes.³⁴

All these systems — school segregation, residential segregation, economic inequality, and the school-to-prison pipeline — intersect to create serious risks for Black students with academic, public health, and criminal legal consequences. The pandemic and other coinciding crises have further exacerbated these risks. Efforts to emerge from the pandemic and prioritize the needs of Black students must address the structural factors that give rise to educational inequity. The following section reviews a broad range of student outcomes to explore the pandemic's disruptive impacts on students, with a focus on disproportionate effects on Black students.

KEY DATA SOURCES

1. Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey

In January-June 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted a one-time nationally representative survey of more than 7,700 participants examining the health and socioemotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on U.S. high school students. The survey covered mental health, suicide, substance use, experiences of racism, and disruptions to daily life. This report presents aggregate and race-stratified results from this survey.

2. Black Education Research Collective research study

In 2021, the Black Education Research Collective (BERC) at Columbia University's Teachers College published the results of a research study titled "Black Education in the Wake of COVID-19 & Systemic Racism." The study involved a national online survey of 440 participants and 19 focus groups with 82 participants among Black high school students, parents, teachers, educational administrators, and community leaders. It offers rich qualitative data on the impacts of COVID-19 on the education of Black students. This report presents some of the findings from the surveys and focus groups.

3. National Assessment of Educational Progress

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a congressionally mandated, nationally representative assessment of student academic performance that is overseen and administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences. Commonly known as the Nation's Report Card, the NAEP is considered the best available national source of student test scores. This report relies upon the results from the 2019 and 2022 mathematics and reading assessments from about 220,000 4th and 8th graders, as well as results from long-term trends assessments from about 7,400 9-year-olds.

4. State school discipline data

Because national data on school discipline (suspensions and expulsions) for the 2021-22 school year had not been released at the time of analysis, the report relies upon discipline data from the five most populous U.S. states that had publicly available school discipline data disaggregated by race/ethnicity from the 2017-18 school year through the 2021-22 school year. Those states are California, Georgia, Illinois, North Carolina, and Texas.

5. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System

The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System involves a nationally representative school-based survey administered by the CDC every two years. It monitors multiple categories of health-related behaviors among adolescents and presents trends over time. This report presents national results from the most recent 2021 survey and historic trend data related to mental health, substance use, and feelings of safety. The 2021 survey included data from more than 17,500 students.

Recent changes in student outcomes by race

STUDENT HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

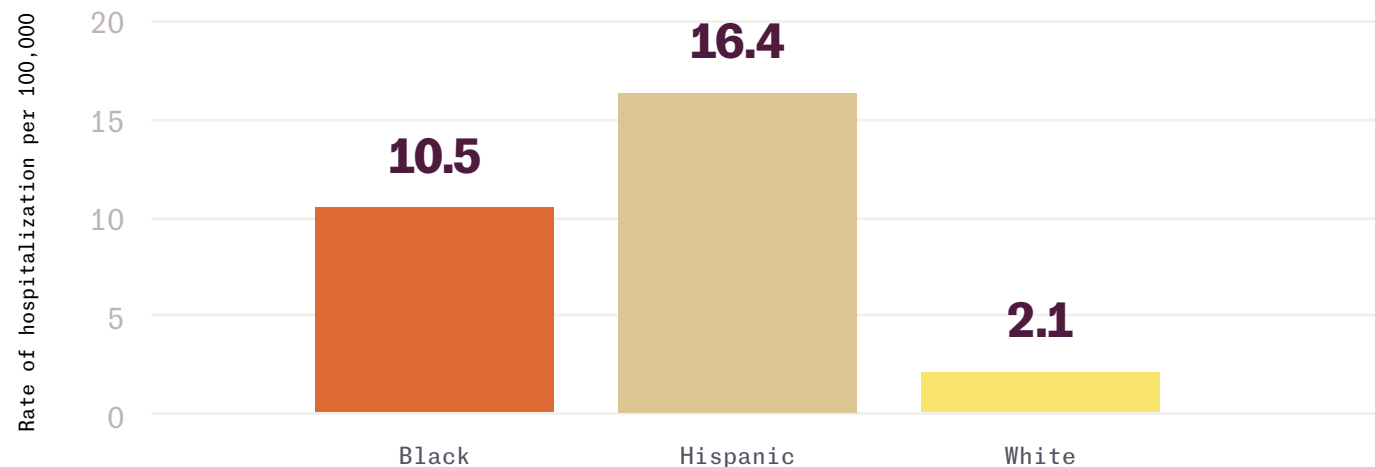
A restricted focus on the academic impacts of the pandemic and other sociopolitical crises on students fails to consider the student as a whole person, beyond their academic performance. The COVID-19 pandemic was a public health crisis, so it is critical to evaluate its impacts holistically on the physical, mental, and socioemotional health of students and consider how it may have produced or exacerbated racialized health disparities among students. Additionally, student health impacts student learning, so understanding impacts on student health and well-being is necessary to inform how the public school system emerges from the pandemic.

Overall, the data presented in this report demonstrate that Black students suffered many of the same consequences over the past few years as other students, including overall declines in adolescent mental health. However, the data also show that Black students have experienced unique and heightened health and well-being consequences compared to other students, including more severe physical health impacts from COVID-19, higher rates of caregiver loss due to COVID-19, higher rates of attempted suicide, and higher rates of hunger and homelessness during the pandemic. These findings demonstrate that, as the public school system emerges from the pandemic, educational equity strategies cannot be narrowly focused on “learning loss.” Instead, policymakers and school administrators must prioritize the mental health of all students, and the unique health and socioemotional experiences of Black students. A return to normalcy will not sufficiently address adolescent health disparities.

Severe COVID-19 outcomes

It is well established that the COVID-19 pandemic has been characterized by pronounced racialized disparities among adults: throughout much of the pandemic, age-adjusted COVID-19 rates of infection, hospitalization, and death were highest among Black Americans.³⁵ These racialized disparities in disease were driven by structural factors, including the overrepresentation of Black Americans in essential worker positions,³⁶ the lack of sufficient access to testing and high-quality health care in Black communities,³⁷ and the higher burden of preexisting chronic health conditions among Black Americans.³⁸ It is perhaps less well known that, while children often experienced less severe health outcomes from COVID-19 infections than adults, Black and Hispanic children were more likely than white children to experience severe COVID-19 outcomes. For example, in August 2020, the COVID-19-Associated Hospitalization Surveillance Network (COVID-NET), which tracked COVID-19 hospitalizations in 14 states, reported that Black and Hispanic children (<18 years) had much higher rates of COVID-19 hospitalizations than white children.³⁹ As shown in Figure 1, Black and Hispanic children had a cumulative rate of 10.5 and 16.4 hospitalizations per 100,000, respectively, compared to a rate of 2.1 per 100,000 among white children.

FIGURE 1. Cumulative rate of COVID-19-associated hospitalizations among children in 14 states (March 1-July 25, 2020)



SOURCE: Kim, L. et al. (2020). Hospitalization Rates and Characteristics of Children Aged <18 Years Hospitalized with Laboratory-Confirmed COVID-19 – COVID-NET, 14 States, March 1–July 25, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep*, 69(32).”

Multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) is a serious condition associated with COVID-19 that can cause inflammation of the heart, lungs, kidneys, brain, skin, eyes, and gastrointestinal organs.⁴⁰ Surveillance data from New York City show that Black children faced a disproportionate burden of MIS-C.⁴¹ Black children (<20 years) represented 22.2% of the NYC child population but 34.4% of patients with MIS-C.

Caregiver loss due to COVID-19

In addition to the direct health consequences of COVID-19 infection, school-aged children and adolescents can also face mental and emotional health consequences from losing a caregiver due to COVID-19. Given the racialized disparities in COVID-19 deaths and heightened burden among Black adults, it follows that Black children have

faced higher rates of caregiver death during the pandemic. Two studies estimating COVID-19 caregiver loss by race/ethnicity have provided confirmatory data. First, researchers employed a modeling approach using fertility rate, excess mortality and COVID-19 mortality, and household composition data to estimate the number of children affected by the death of a caregiver due to COVID-19.⁴² The researchers estimate that, during the first 15 months of the pandemic, 120,630 U.S. children experienced the death of a primary caregiver, and 142,637 children experienced the death of a primary or secondary caregiver. Black and Hispanic children account for 26% and 32%, respectively, of all children who lost their primary caregiver although they comprise 15% and 26% of the U.S. child population, respectively (Figure 2).⁴³

Second, in a report from the COVID Collaborative, researchers estimated that, as of March 2022, 203,649 children in the U.S. had lost a parent or other in-home caregiver to COVID-19.⁴⁴ They also estimated that Black and Hispanic children lost caregiving adults at nearly twice the rate of white children, and American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander children lost caregivers at about 3.5 times the rate of white children.

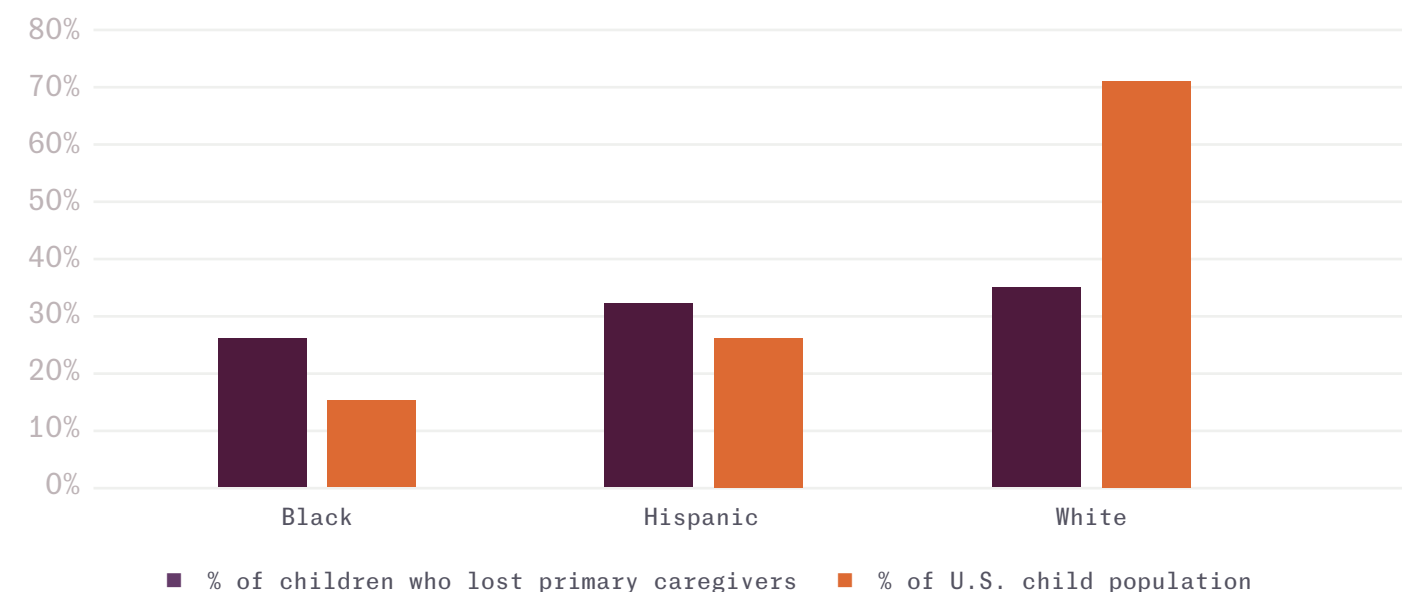
A July 2021 study conducted by the Black Education Research Collective at Columbia University, which included surveys and focus groups with Black students, documented some of the impacts that caregiver loss and illness due to COVID-19 has had on Black students. In focus groups, Black high school students spoke about the intersection of disproportionate exposure to COVID-19 and police violence, and how they were grappling with the death of loved ones while also seeing videos

of Black people murdered by police. In the survey of Black students, parents, teachers, and school administrators, 60% of participants had a member of their household working in unsafe conditions as an essential worker during the pandemic, and nearly one-third of participants lost a family member (11%) or a friend or community member (20%) to COVID-19.

Mental health

Recent nationally representative data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, reflecting more than 17,500 adolescents, demonstrate that adolescent mental health is steadily declining over time and continued to worsen during the pandemic, with record high rates of sadness and suicidal thoughts.⁴⁵ Given the disruption and trauma wrought by the pandemic, serious mental health consequences, in addition to physical health consequences, are to be expected for school-aged children and adolescents.

FIGURE 2. Percentage of children who lost primary care caregivers to COVID-19 compared to percentage of U.S. child population



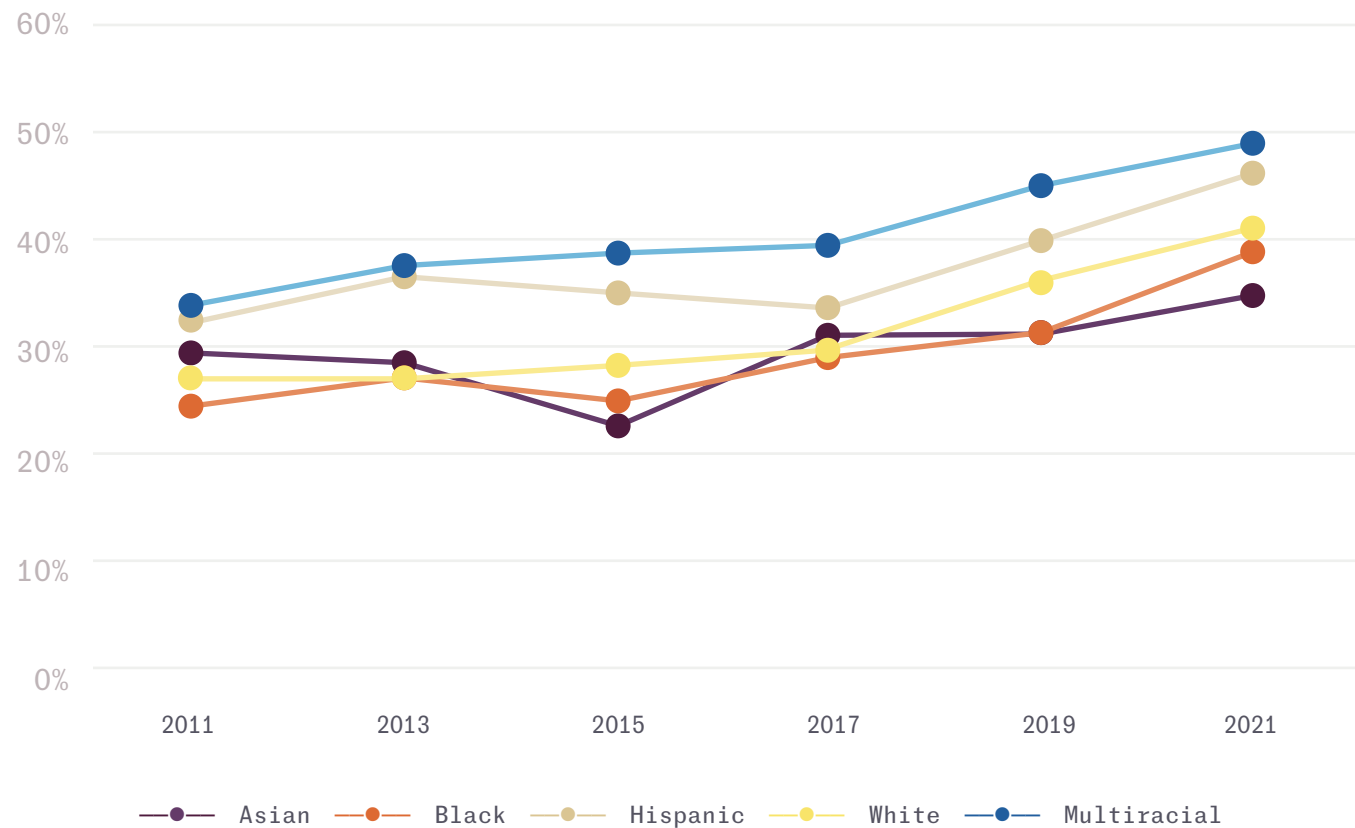
SOURCES: Hillis, S.D. et al. (2021). COVID-19-Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States. *Pediatrics*, 148(6) and ChildStats.gov

However, the negative trend in adolescent mental health predates the start of the pandemic, so this current adolescent mental health crisis cannot be attributed to the pandemic alone.

All students, regardless of race/ethnicity, are experiencing declines in reported mental health. For example, the percentage of high school students who experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased among all racial/ethnic groups from 2011 to 2021 (Figure 3).⁴⁶ There are also some unique patterns that arise by race/ethnicity. Black high school students report similar levels of sadness and poor mental health compared with students of other racial/ethnic groups (Figure 4). However, a higher percentage of Black high

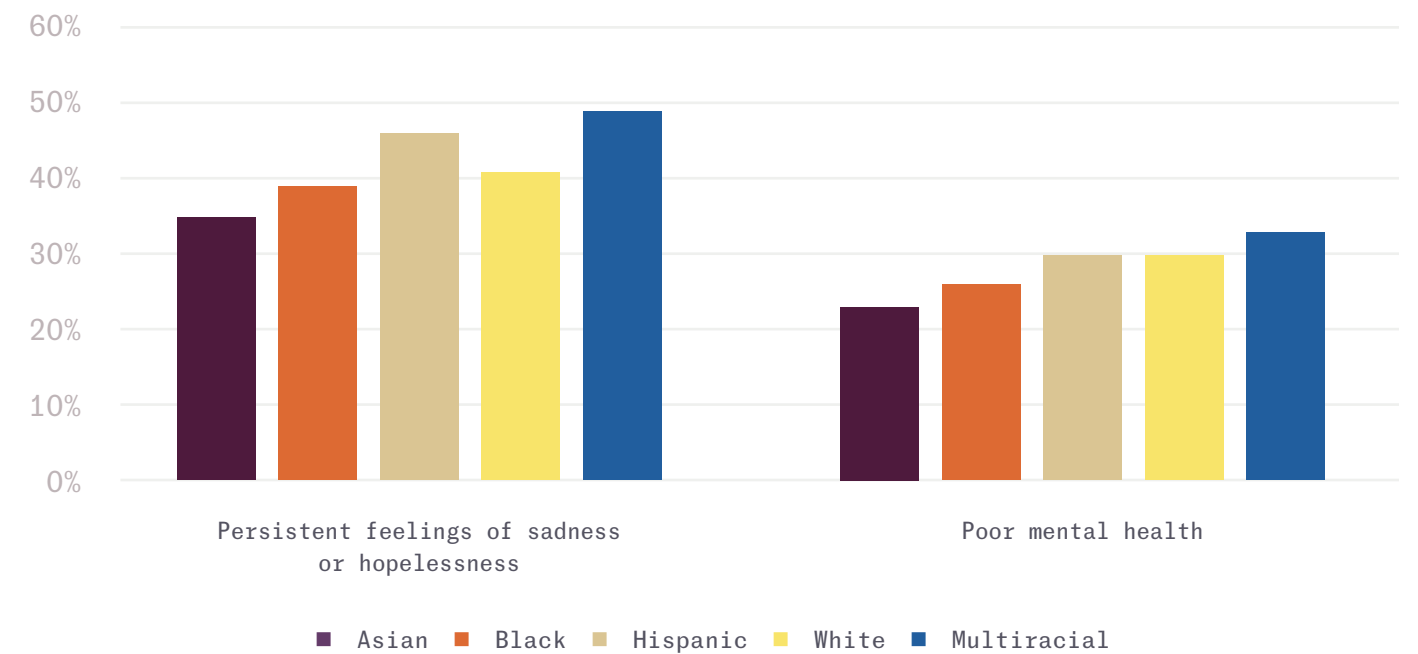
school students report attempting suicide (14%) compared to white students (9%) (Figure 5). These findings may suggest that Black students are less likely than other students to report existing mental health symptoms or feelings of sadness but are still at high risk of poor mental health as evidenced by the relatively high rate of attempted suicide. The findings may also suggest that the mental health needs of Black adolescents are under-observed and going unmet. Notably, prior to the pandemic, the suicide rate among Black children and adolescents had been increasing faster than among any other racial/ethnic group, and the disruption caused by the pandemic and increases in racialized violence may continue to exacerbate this trend.⁴⁷

FIGURE 3. Self-reported feelings of sadness (2011-2021)



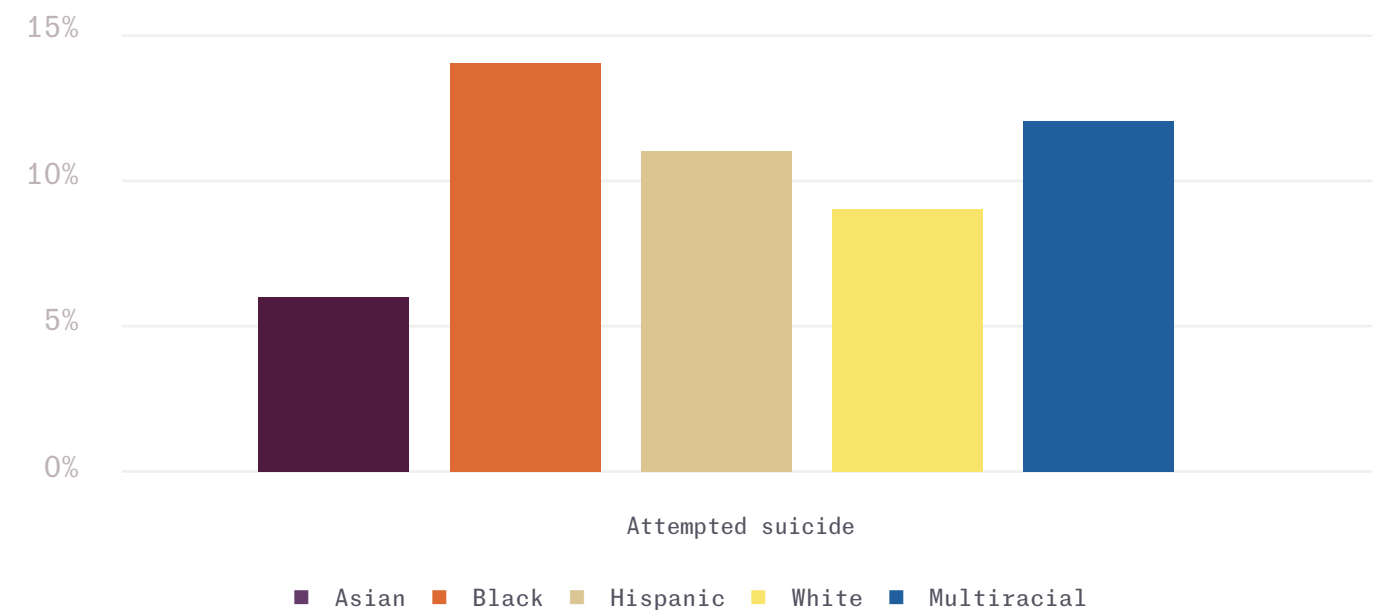
SOURCE: CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary & Trends Report 2011-2021. Note: the multiracial category reflects students who select one or more responses when asked “what is your race?”.

FIGURE 4. Self-reported feelings of sadness and poor mental health (2021)



SOURCE: CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary & Trends Report 2011-2021. Note: the multiracial category reflects students who select one or more responses when asked “what is your race?”.

FIGURE 5. Self-reported attempted suicide (2021)

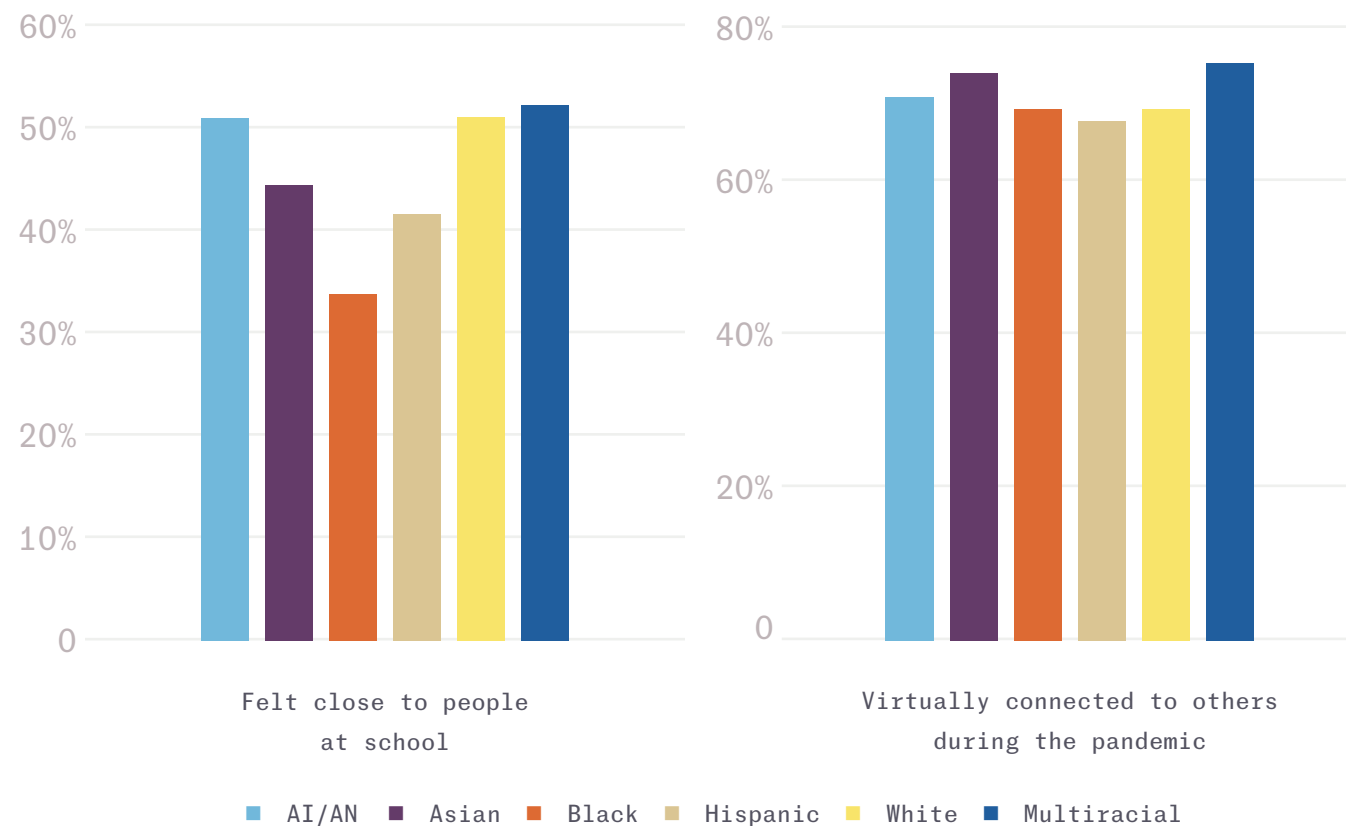


SOURCE: CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary & Trends Report 2011-2021. Note: the multiracial category reflects students who select one or more responses when asked “what is your race?”.

Additionally, nationally representative data during the pandemic (January-June 2021) reflect racial/ethnic differences in self-reported connectedness (at school and virtually).⁴⁸ Compared to most other racial/ethnic groups, Black students were more likely to report feelings of social isolation. Just 33.5% of Black students reported feeling close to people at school, the lowest percentage of any racial/ethnic group, compared to the overall rate of 46.6% (Figure 6). Similarly, just 68.9% of Black students reported feeling virtually connected to others during the pandemic (i.e., spending time with family or friends using a computer or

phone) compared to the overall rate of 71.8% for all students (Figure 6). Negative effects on social connectedness for adolescents appears to have been especially strong for Black students. This may be driven in part by disparities in access to a computer and/or internet at home and disparities in school funding for remote learning.⁴⁹ The survey results demonstrated that these measures of connectedness were strongly associated with mental health, where students who did not feel close to people at school reported worse mental health than students who did feel connected to others at school.

FIGURE 6. Self-reported connectedness (January – June 2021)



SOURCE: CDC Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey. Note: the multiracial category reflects students who select one or more responses when asked “What is your race?”.



Remote learning location during COVID-19 pandemic at Boys and Girls Club in Pennsylvania. Photo by Ben Hasty/MediaNews Group/Reading Eagle via Getty Images

Substance use

Many of the exposures that adolescents faced during the pandemic period, such as stress, trauma, boredom, and isolation, are risk factors for substance use. Adolescent mental health problems often co-occur with substance use.⁵⁰ Thus, given the rise of adolescent mental health problems during the pandemic period, public health experts suspected that adolescent substance use may also have increased.⁵¹ On the other hand, students often obtain access to substances through social sources, so school closures may have led to declines in adolescent substance use. Understanding how the pandemic and other coinciding crises may have impacted student substance use behaviors is important in informing the types of behavioral health services schools may need, because substance use behaviors can impact health, school engagement, and learning.⁵²

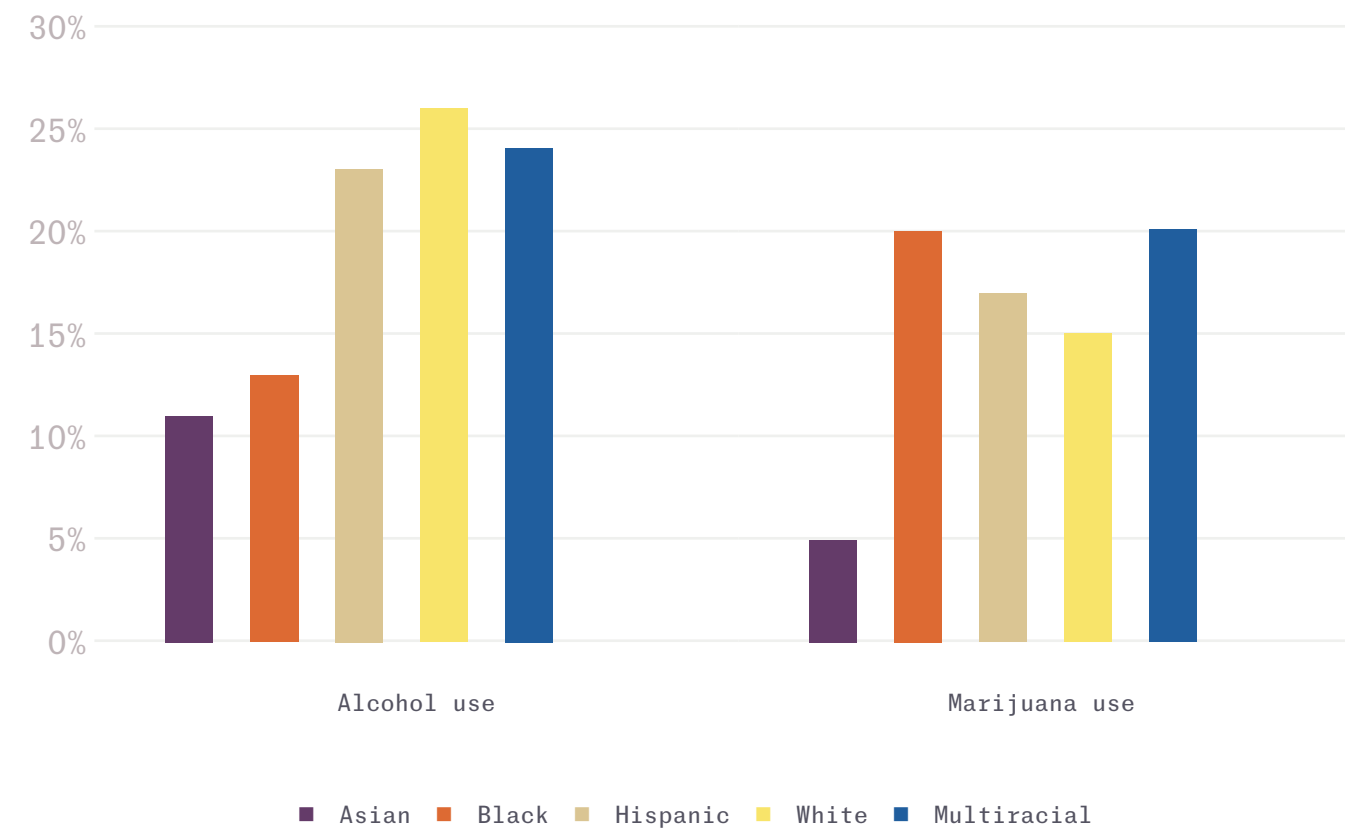
Nationally representative data from high school students suggests that the prevalence of substance use has declined since 2020 and has been steadily declining over the past decade.⁵³ However, survey data from during the pandemic (January-June 2021)

demonstrate that about one-third of students who had reported ever using substances said that they used those substances more during the pandemic, suggesting that substance use may have increased among those already using substances.⁵⁴

Compared to all high school students, Black high school students were less likely to report drinking alcohol and were more likely to report using marijuana (Figure 7).⁵⁵ Overall alcohol and marijuana use has declined over time for students of all race/ethnicities.⁵⁶ Black students reported similar rates of use of other substances compared to other students, such as electronic vapor products, illicit drugs (e.g., cocaine, inhalants, heroin, methamphetamines), and prescription opioids.⁵⁷ In terms of increased usage during the pandemic, Black students were less likely than other students to report that they drank more alcohol during the pandemic (17.5% vs. 29.6%) and just as likely as other students to report using more drugs (i.e., marijuana and opioids) during the pandemic (31.6% vs. 31.4%).⁵⁸ Overall, the data do not suggest that the pandemic had more pronounced impacts on substance use behaviors among Black students compared to other students.

BLACK STUDENTS WERE THE MOST LIKELY OF ANY RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP TO REPORT EXPERIENCING HUNGER AND HOMELESSNESS DURING THE PANDEMIC

FIGURE 7. Self-reported substance use (2021)



SOURCE: CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary & Trends Report 2011-2021.
Note: the multiracial category reflects students who select one or more responses when asked “What is your race?”.

Other adverse health and well-being experiences

Lastly, nationally representative data have provided insight into additional disruptions to school and home life that high school students may have experienced during the pandemic, including hunger, homelessness, and receipt of telemedicine.⁵⁹ Most notably, Black students were the most likely of any racial/ethnic group to report experiencing hunger and homelessness during the pandemic

(Figure 8). Nearly one-third (32.0%) of Black students reported going hungry because there was not enough food in their home compared to 18.5% of white students, and 2.5% of Black students reported housing insecurity during the past 30 days compared to 2.1% of white students.⁶⁰ In addition to being places of learning, schools are often places of stability and security for students where they have access to at least two meals a day. When schools were forced to close during the pandemic, access to school meals was inconsistent and inequitable with

BLACK STUDENTS EXPERIENCED HEIGHTENED DISRUPTIONS TO LEARNING.

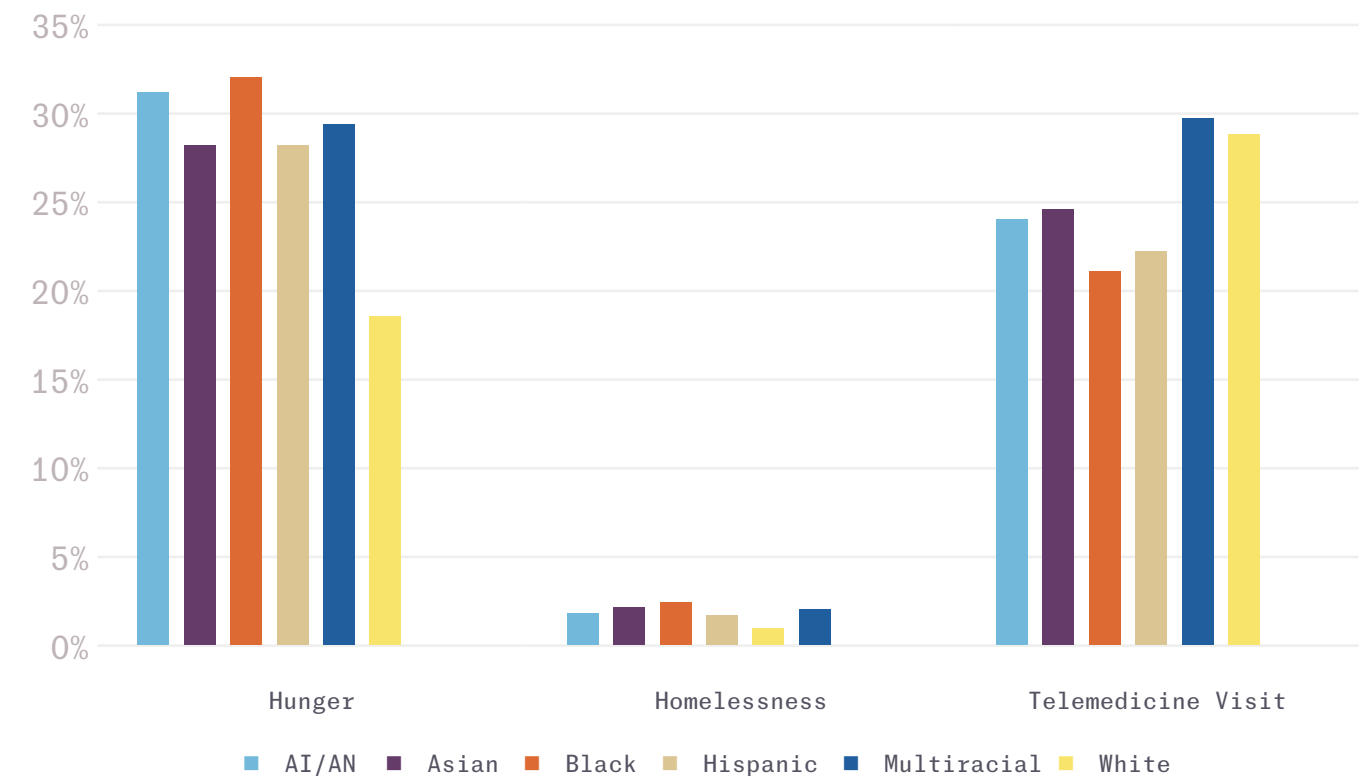


some children having no access to school meals at all, being unable to sign up for remote meal delivery due to lack of internet access, or having to walk more than an hour to a meal pick-up site.⁶¹ Analyses of the locations of school meal pick-up sites in Louisiana documented clear racialized disparities in the geographic distribution of sites, with majority-Black neighborhoods having few or no sites.⁶² Black students were also the least likely of any racial/ethnic group to report receiving medical care from a doctor or nurse via telemedicine during the pandemic (Figure 8).⁶³ This finding suggests that health care was more severely disrupted for Black students during the pandemic.

Research from the University of Maryland based on interviews with 52 Black and Latino parents, students, and educators in Montgomery County, Maryland from July-August 2020 revealed that many Black and Latino students had to take on new home and family responsibilities during the pandemic, which had consequences for educational equity.⁶⁴ Many Black and Latino students had to negotiate competing demands between remote learning, homework, caring for young children, caring for sick family members, and household maintenance. One student described the challenge of juggling these responsibilities:

“The thing for me was that my mom got sick with the virus and my brother got sick with flu. Both of them were weak and I was the only one who was well, so I had to take care of them. I was in virtual classes, and I couldn’t take care of my mom, she told me to do everything normally. I also had to take calls from my worried relatives. At that time, I was also scared and depressed, my mom was also depressed because she was being told not to go to work anymore. Things also happened with the house because of the rain, things with the economy. Well, it’s still happening. We’re getting ahead of it, but a lot has happened.”⁶⁵

FIGURE 8. Self-reported hunger, homelessness, and receipt of telemedicine (January – June 2021)



SOURCE: CDC Adolescent Behaviors, and Experiences Survey. Note: the multiracial category reflects students who select one or more responses when asked “What is your race?”.

STUDENT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

In addition to understanding changes in student health and well-being, it is of course important to consider how the disruption of the pandemic period may have impacted student educational experiences. This section reviews existing data on traditional measures of learning and academic performance (e.g., test scores, attendance, course grades) along with less traditional measures of student educational experiences (e.g., access to inclusive curricula, experiences of white supremacy and racialized violence, and school discipline).

Overall, the data demonstrate that all students experienced serious disruptions to learning, and that Black students experienced heightened disruptions to learning. Academic opportunity gaps widened between Black and white students, as measured by test scores, attendance, course grades, and grade retention. Black students also faced unique harms to their educational experience such as increased attacks on accurate, inclusive curricula; increased visibility of white supremacy and racialized violence; and the persistence of stark racialized disparities in exclusionary school discipline.

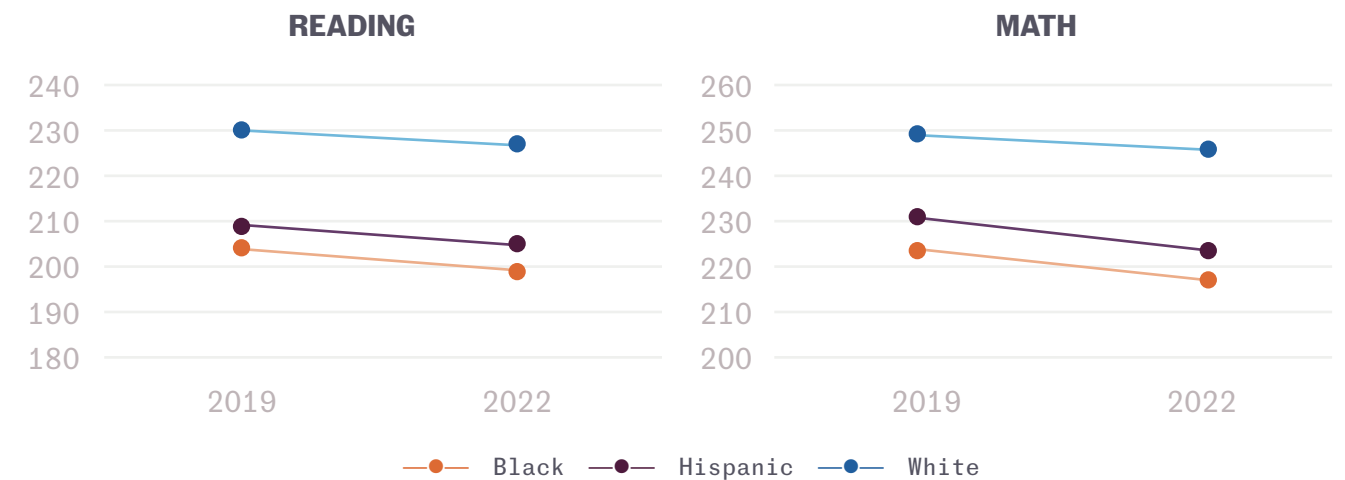
Test scores

One of the most common measures of academic outcomes for K-12 students is standardized test scores. Before reviewing the recent evidence in test score changes by race, it is important to critically examine the limitations of standardized testing as a measure of academic achievement. The use of standardized test scores as a measure of academic ability or student learning promotes a deficit narrative of Black students and other students of color.⁶⁶ Emphasis on standardized tests has reinforced harmful narratives that lower test scores reflect student inferiority (e.g., asking, “What’s wrong with these students?”) rather than recognizing how lower test scores reflect inequitable access to quality education (e.g., asking, “What’s wrong with our educational system?”). Standardized test scores are also tied to funding for schools. Under federal policies, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act, schools that perform better on standardized test receive more funding, perpetuating and exacerbating education inequity.⁶⁷ There are a number of reasons why Black students perform worse on standardized tests on average than white students, none of which reflect innate ability, including inadequate school funding, cultural bias, poverty, and stereotype threat.⁶⁸ When the pandemic led to changes to admissions policies for highly selective high schools in New York City, including less emphasis on standardized test scores, the number of Black and Latinx students admitted increased.⁶⁹ This is a prime example of why framing disparities in academic performance as opportunity gaps rather than achievement gaps is more reflective of how unequal access and opportunity shapes educational outcomes.⁷⁰ Therefore, in this section focused on academic outcomes, test scores should be interpreted as measures of access and opportunity and not measures of ability or learning.

The Nation’s Report Card presents the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is a congressionally mandated, nationally representative assessment of student academic performance in reading and math. The overall findings presented for 4th and 8th graders demonstrated that average scores in both subjects declined from 2019 to 2022.⁷¹ These declines occurred in all regions of the country. For reading, average scores for U.S. 4th and 8th graders declined by 3 points. Declines in math were larger: average scores for 4th graders declined by 5 points and average scores for 8th graders declined by 8 points. The declines in national average math scores were the largest recorded declines since the first assessment in 1990. These overall findings demonstrate the disruptive impact of the pandemic and coinciding crises on academic access and opportunity.

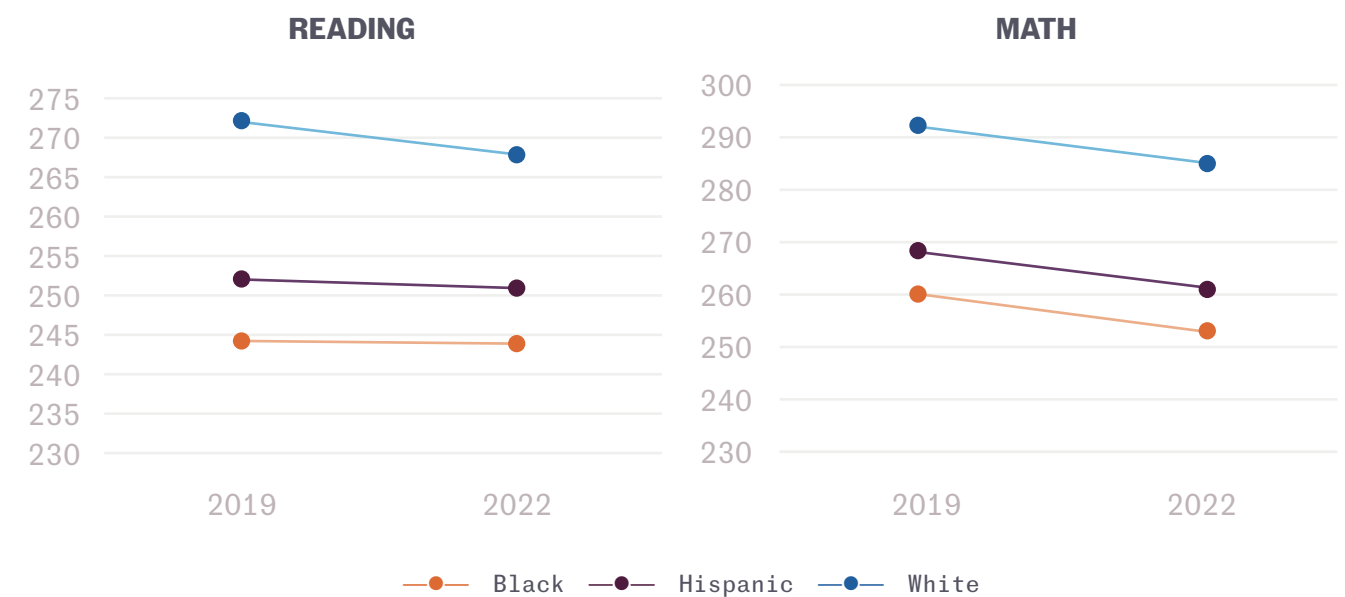
Figures 9 and 10 present changes in reading and math scores from 2019 to 2022 by race/ethnicity for 4th and 8th graders.⁷² Figure 9 shows that, for 4th graders, the gap between Black and Hispanic student average scores compared with white student average scores widened slightly for reading and more notably for math. For reading, Black student average scores declined by 5 points, Hispanic student average scores declined by 4 points, and white student average scores declined by 3 points. For math, Black and Hispanic student average scores both declined by 7 points, while white student average scores declined by 3 points. This slight widening of test score gaps was observed across measures of socioeconomic status. For all race/ethnicities, students eligible for free or low-cost lunches had lower test scores than students not eligible for the federal lunch program. Black and Hispanic students eligible for free or low-cost lunches experienced larger declines than white students eligible for free or low-cost lunches, and Black and Hispanic students not eligible also experienced larger declines than white students not eligible.⁷³

FIGURE 9. Changes in fourth-grade NAEP reading and mathematics scores (2019-2022)



SOURCE: NAEP Report Card: 2022 Reading and Mathematics Assessments.

FIGURE 10. Changes in eighth-grade NAEP reading and mathematics scores (2019-2022)



SOURCE: NAEP Report Card: 2022 Reading and Mathematics Assessments.

Figure 10 shows that, for 8th graders, the gap between Black and Hispanic student average scores compared with white student average scores slightly narrowed for reading and math. For reading, Black and Hispanic student average scores remained unchanged, while white student average scores declined by 4 points. For math, Black and Hispanic student average scores both declined by 7 points, while white student average scores declined by 8 points.

These findings by race/ethnicity suggest that the disruptive impact of the pandemic and other coinciding crises during 2020-2022 on academic access and opportunity was more pronounced for younger Black and Hispanic students compared with younger white students (4th graders). As a result, racial disparities in test scores widened for this age group. However, this racially disproportionate impact was not detected for older students (8th graders).

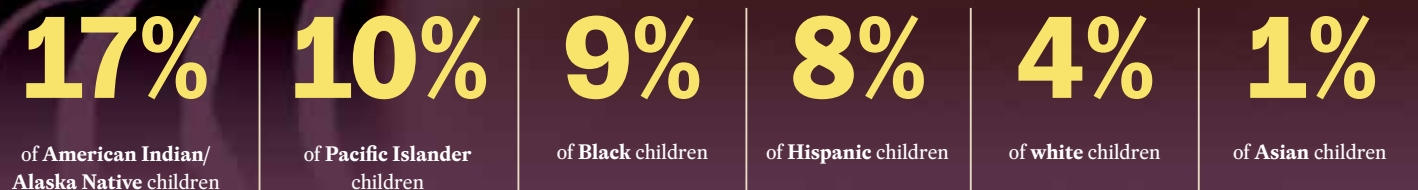
Additional findings from the NAEP further demonstrate inequities in access and opportunity. First, within most student population groups, the gap between higher-performing students and lower-performing students has widened since the start of the pandemic. For example, Black 9-year-olds performing at the 75th percentile experienced smaller declines in reading and math than Black 9-year-olds performing at the 25th percentile.⁷⁴ Thus, those students who already faced barriers to academic opportunity were more strongly impacted by the disruption of the pandemic. It is important to note that racial opportunity gaps persisted across performance quartiles in math: Black 9-year-olds performing at the 75th percentile still experienced larger declines in math than white 9-year-olds performing at the 25th percentile.⁷⁵ This effect was not observed for reading scores. This suggests that Black students, regardless of performance quartiles, were disproportionately denied access to remote learning resources.

Findings from the NAEP reinforce the fact that these test scores are more reflective of access and opportunity than academic ability. NAEP scores were strongly associated with measures of access, including having a desktop computer, laptop, or tablet; having a quiet place to work; and having their teacher available to help with schoolwork. For example, 80% of 4th graders performing at the 75th percentile in math had a desktop computer, laptop, or tablet all of the time compared to just 50% of 4th graders performing at the 25th percentile.⁷⁶ As previously discussed, reporting on the rollout of remote learning documented stark racialized disparities where schools serving predominantly Black students had fewer remote learning resources, resulting in a lack of access to basic technology, internet, and synchronous instruction for Black students.⁷⁷

National data from prior to the pandemic indicate that many racial/ethnic groups are less likely than their white and Asian counterparts to have internet access at home. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that, in 2019, 17% of American Indian/Alaska Native children, 10% of Pacific Islander children, 9% of Black children, and 8% of Hispanic children did not have home internet access compared to 4% of white children and 1% of Asian children.⁷⁸ Put another way, Black, Hispanic, and Native American students represent 55% of students without internet access while representing just 40% of total students.⁷⁹

Overall, it is clear that student academic performance was negatively impacted by the pandemic and coinciding crises. The data suggest that factors like student age and inequities in access and opportunity mediated some of the disruptive impacts of the pandemic on learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the overall pattern of racial opportunity gaps has remained unchanged, suggesting that what Black students need most is not a return to pre-pandemic normalcy but rather structural changes to promote educational equity.

HOUSEHOLDS WITHOUT INTERNET ACCESS



Attendance, grades, and grade retention

Recent national data including race and ethnicity for academic outcomes beyond test scores, like attendance rates, course grades, and grade retention are more limited. A University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill study of the impacts of the pandemic on student absences, grades, and grade retention among all students in North Carolina public schools provides insight into additional measures of learning.⁸⁰ The UNC researchers found that chronic absenteeism rates increased overall from pre-pandemic (2017-18 and 2018-19) to 2020-21, but Black and Hispanic students experienced larger increases in chronic absenteeism than white and Asian students. Chronic absenteeism more than doubled for Black and Hispanic students.⁸¹ These disparities in absentee rates may be a reflection of the increased home and family responsibilities that Black and Hispanic students often took on during the pandemic, as discussed previously.⁸²

The UNC researchers additionally found that all students experienced increases in course failure rates during the pandemic, but Black and Hispanic students experienced larger percentage point increases in course failure rates compared to white and Asian students.⁸³ Pre-pandemic, 28.5% of Black students failed at least one course compared to 12.9% of white students. These figures increased to 48.7% of Black students and 26.2% of white students in the 2020-21 school year.⁸⁴ Finally, the researchers assessed changes in grade retention (i.e., the percentage of students who were retained in a grade rather than moving on to the next grade). Again, students of all race/ethnicities experienced an increase in grade retention, but Black and Hispanic students experienced larger increases than other students. Pre-pandemic, 6.0% of Black 9-11th graders were retained compared to 2.1% of white 9-11th graders.⁸⁵ These figures increased to 14.1% of Black 9-11th graders and 5.4% of white 9-11th graders.⁸⁶ Together, these academic data supplement test

score data and provide additional evidence that Black and Hispanic students experienced more significant disruptions to learning than their white and Asian counterparts.

Educational equity in curricula

Beyond academic outcome data, an important indicator of academic success and educational equity is whether students are being taught an academic curriculum that is accurate, engaging, and inclusive. In addition to the pandemic and other coinciding crises described previously, our schools have also been facing anti-truth mania — the latest version of ongoing efforts to prevent schools from accurately teaching U.S. history and discussing race and racism in the U.S.⁸⁷ Attacks on truthful and inclusive education have been a long-standing issue in the U.S. For example, after the Civil War and the start of Reconstruction, white supremacists published inaccurate school textbooks to promote a racist, revisionist retelling of slavery and the Civil War.⁸⁸ Similar efforts to prevent students from receiving a truthful education and prevent accurate discussions of race and racism have continued to reemerge over time. The most recent anti-truth movement emerged after the Trump Administration created a “1776 Commission” in 2020 to promote a “patriotic education” in direct opposition to efforts like the 1619 Project, which shed light on our nation’s history of slavery and contributions of Black Americans in our nation’s founding.⁸⁹ Since January 2021, 42 states have introduced bills or taken other actions to restrict how teachers can discuss racism, sexism, or other “divisive concepts” in the classroom.⁹⁰

This attack on truth and accuracy in education is harmful for all students and exacerbates issues of educational equity. In order to be well-equipped to participate in a diverse, multi-racial society, all students must be given the opportunity to accurately learn history and current events and be exposed to diverse perspectives.

Research demonstrates that engaging students in a curriculum that reflects cultural and racial diversity increases student academic engagement and achievement.⁹¹ For example, evaluations of culturally responsive educational programs that carve out class time for students to explore their racial identity or learn about social movements in U.S. history show that they can improve academic outcomes like attendance, grade point average (GPA), and graduation rates.⁹²

Banning conversations about race and racism in the classroom can hinder the development of students’ racial identity.⁹³ Learning about one’s race/ethnicity and developing a racial-ethnic identity is considered an important developmental step for adolescents of all races and ethnicities.⁹⁴ For example, research among white, Asian, and Hispanic students suggests that encouraging students to explore their ethnic identity can lead to improvements in feelings of warmth toward members of their own ethnic group as well as warmth toward other ethnic groups.⁹⁵ Efforts to block exploration of ethnic identity for all students has the potential to foster racial/ethnic animus or prejudice.

Anti-truth mania also has directly harmful consequences for Black students who are prevented from seeing themselves and their history reflected in their education, thereby exacerbating educational inequity. In the Black Education Research Collective study, students expressed frustration with the lack of education they received about Black people and their history beyond displays of tokenism during Black History Month.⁹⁶ One student said, “*When it’s Black History Month, they teach you about Martin Luther King, and that’s it. I’ve only heard one African that they’ve ever said probably, Nelson Mandela. So they really don’t teach you a lot about your own people. As a kid, nobody really can get mad at you for not knowing your own people because the place that’s supposed to teach you about the stuff, they don’t teach you anything about it. So it’s really a false education.*”⁹⁷

FRUSTRATION WITH LACK OF EDUCATION

“When it’s Black History Month, they teach you about Martin Luther King, and that’s it.”

In addition to producing an incomplete and inaccurate education for all students, this erasure from academic curriculum can detrimentally impact Black students' psychosocial health and academic success. Racial/ethnic affirmation and identity development, including racial pride and affirmation, is associated with higher self-esteem, fewer depressive symptoms, and increased engagement in positive coping strategies among Black adolescents.⁹⁸ The development of racial identity is also associated with higher academic achievement (higher GPA and test scores), academic engagement, and academic self-esteem among Black adolescents.⁹⁹

Exposure to white supremacy and racialized violence/harassment

Black students are always at risk of racialized violence and harassment in the classroom, and the increased visibility of white supremacy and racialized police violence in recent years may have exacerbated safety concerns with consequences for mental health and learning among Black students. National data suggest that white supremacist violence is on the rise.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, research has documented that Black students who live in close proximity to the location of a police killing of a Black person experience higher rates of absenteeism, decreases in GPA, and lower graduation and college enrollment rates.¹⁰¹ Qualitative and quantitative data from the past few years, presented below, confirm that Black students face unique safety threats at school and that these safety threats impact their academic success and their mental health.¹⁰²

First, qualitative data from the Black Education Research Collective surveys demonstrated that 91% of Black survey respondents reported being negatively impacted by the increased visibility of white nationalism and police violence, with over one-third indicating they were “extremely impacted.”¹⁰³ Additionally, 93% of Black survey respondents reported that they were worried about

the January 6 riots at the U.S. Capitol and increased visibility of white supremacy. Finally, nearly one-third of Black survey respondents indicated that they were “extremely worried” about their safety and the safety of their loved ones.

These findings are corroborated by nationally representative quantitative survey data from the Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey (N=7,705) that demonstrate the risk of racialized harassment that Black students face at school and the consequences of that harassment for their academic success and mental health. In the survey data from 2021, over half (55.2%) of Black students reported being treated badly or unfairly in school because of their race or ethnicity, which was labeled as “perceived racism.”¹⁰⁴ Rates of perceived racism were higher among Black girls than Black boys, where 58.1% of Black girls reported perceived racism and 52.5% of Black boys reported perceived racism.¹⁰⁵ Black students who reported perceived racism also reported worse mental health during the pandemic and difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions because of a physical, mental, or emotional problem.¹⁰⁶ Finally, national data demonstrate that Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic students are more likely to not go to school because of safety concernsⁱⁱ compared with students of other racial/ethnic groups.¹⁰⁷

While Black students continued to face racialized violence and harassment throughout the pandemic, school closures and the halting of in-person schooling may have had some unique benefits for Black students, such as eliminating in-person exposure to racialized harassment at school.¹⁰⁸ Again, this suggests that a return to normalcy may disproportionately harm Black students. The harms of racialized violence at school can be further exacerbated when school staff are ill-equipped to

ii The wording of the survey question was, “During the past 30 days, on how many days did you not go to school because you felt you would be unsafe at school or on your way to or from school?”



(TOP) Vice President Kamala Harris and Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff pay their respects at a memorial at Tops Friendly Market, which was the site of a mass shooting, on Saturday, May 28, 2022 in Buffalo, NY. Ruth Whitfield, whose funeral the Vice President and Second Gentleman attended earlier in the day, was one of ten people killed during a shooting at a supermarket committed by a white man in a historically Black neighborhood of Buffalo in what federal officials called an act of racially motivated violent extremism. Photo by Kent Nishimura / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

(BOTTOM) About two thousand New Yorkers marched in Manhattan bringing traffic to a halt for many hours demanding police accountability and to remember Delrawn Small, Alton Sterling, and Philandro Castile, the three men shot dead by police in the three days preceding the protest. Photo by Erik McGregor / LightRocket via Getty Images

discuss or are prevented from discussing issues of racism and other forms of harassment. The ability for school staff to discuss important topics like racism and discrimination in an accurate and supportive manner is essential for an inclusive education.¹⁰⁹

School discipline

As previously described, the use of exclusionary school discipline practices (suspensions and expulsions) dramatically increased in the U.S. public school system from the 1990s through 2010s, alongside the rise of police presence in schools and zero tolerance policies.¹¹⁰ More recently, there has been increased recognition of the academic, mental health, and criminal legal harms of exclusionary school discipline for students and concerted efforts to reduce the use of exclusionary school discipline practices, especially for younger students.¹¹¹ However, suspensions and expulsions are still extremely common, and Black students are disproportionately targeted by these exclusionary school discipline practices.¹¹²

The most recent national data from the Civil Rights Data Collection demonstrate that 101,652 students were expelled from public schools across the country in the 2017-18 school year, and students missed 11,205,797 school days due to out-of-school suspensions.¹¹² Additionally, Black students were suspended and expelled at rates that were more than twice their representation in student enrollment,¹¹³ and Black boys specifically were suspended and expelled at rates that were three times their enrollment.¹¹⁴ Similar racialized disparities are present in rates of school-based arrests and referrals to law enforcement, clearly exhibiting the school-to-prison pipeline. In the

iii Informal removals from the classroom that are not recorded as formal suspensions are also common disciplinary actions, but the full scope of the issue is unknown because these informal classroom removals are often not documented.

2017-18 school year, Black students accounted for 28.7% of all students referred to law enforcement and 31.6% of all students arrested at school—about twice their representation in school enrollment (15.1%).¹¹⁵

Existing research demonstrates that these racialized disparities in school discipline are not explained by differences in student behavior. For example, multiple experiments using hypothetical vignettes have documented how teachers perceive Black students as more “blameworthy” and deserving of punishment than white students who have committed the same hypothetical misbehavior.¹¹⁶ Additionally, research on school discipline and student behaviors that zero-tolerance policies were ostensibly created to prevent (substance use at school, weapons at school) demonstrates that substantial racialized disparities in school discipline persist even after controlling for student behaviors and sociodemographic factors like parental education and family structure.¹¹⁷ Together, a large evidence base has established that Black students are more likely to be punished for subjective offenses (such as “disrespect” or “defiance” vs. truancy or fighting), are punished more harshly, and are less likely to receive a warning compared to white students.¹¹⁸

Figure 11 presents school discipline data from the five most populous U.S. states with race-stratified data available for the 2021-22 school year: California¹¹⁹, Georgia¹²⁰, Illinois¹²¹, North Carolina¹²², and Texas¹²³. The charts in the left-hand column of Figure 11 the rate of suspensions and expulsions per 100 students by racial/ethnic group. Two very clear trends are apparent across all five states. First, Black students have the highest rates of suspensions and expulsions compared to all other student groups. This disproportionate impact of school discipline on Black students was present before the pandemic and is present again in the 2021-22 school year. Second, all five states saw a sharp decline in suspensions and expulsions in the 2020-

21 school year (and to a lesser degree in the 2019-2020 school year) due to school closures caused by the pandemic. Students were less exposed to the negative consequences of exclusionary school discipline during this hiatus from in-person schooling. However, in the 2021-22 school year, all states saw their suspension and expulsion rates return to pre-pandemic levels. This demonstrates how a return to normalcy brings with it a return to preexisting negative exposures for students, especially Black students.

The data suggest that, at the height of the pandemic, school closures served as a reprieve for all students from exclusionary discipline practices and the threat of police in schools: suspension and expulsion rates dropped dramatically in the 2020-21 school year. However, it is important to note that Black students and families were not free from surveillance, criminalization, and exclusionary discipline during this time. Even during remote learning, Black students were disproportionately disciplined for behavior in virtual classes.¹²⁴ In one particularly egregious case, a 15-year-old

Black girl was incarcerated in a juvenile facility for not completing her online schoolwork.¹²⁵ Remote learning also facilitated surveillance and criminalization of Black families. For example, in New York, educators made hundreds of reports of educational neglect to child protective services after parents chose to keep their children in remote learning.¹²⁶

Furthermore, a return to in-person learning brought a return to exclusionary discipline practices. The data demonstrate that rates of suspension and expulsion returned to pre-pandemic levels by the 2021-22 school year. Racialized disparities in suspensions and expulsions also returned to pre-pandemic levels, with Black students again experiencing 2-3 times the discipline rates of white students.

Students gather for a rally calling on the passage of the Solutions Not Suspensions Act at Tweed Courthouse on February 23, 2022 in New York City. NYC students with the Urban Youth Collaborative were joined by State Senators Robert Jackson, Jabari Brisport, and Cordell Cleare demanding that Gov. Kathy Hochul and leaders in Albany pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Act to end New York’s discriminatory school discipline practices that they say affect Black students and students of color disproportionately. Photo by Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

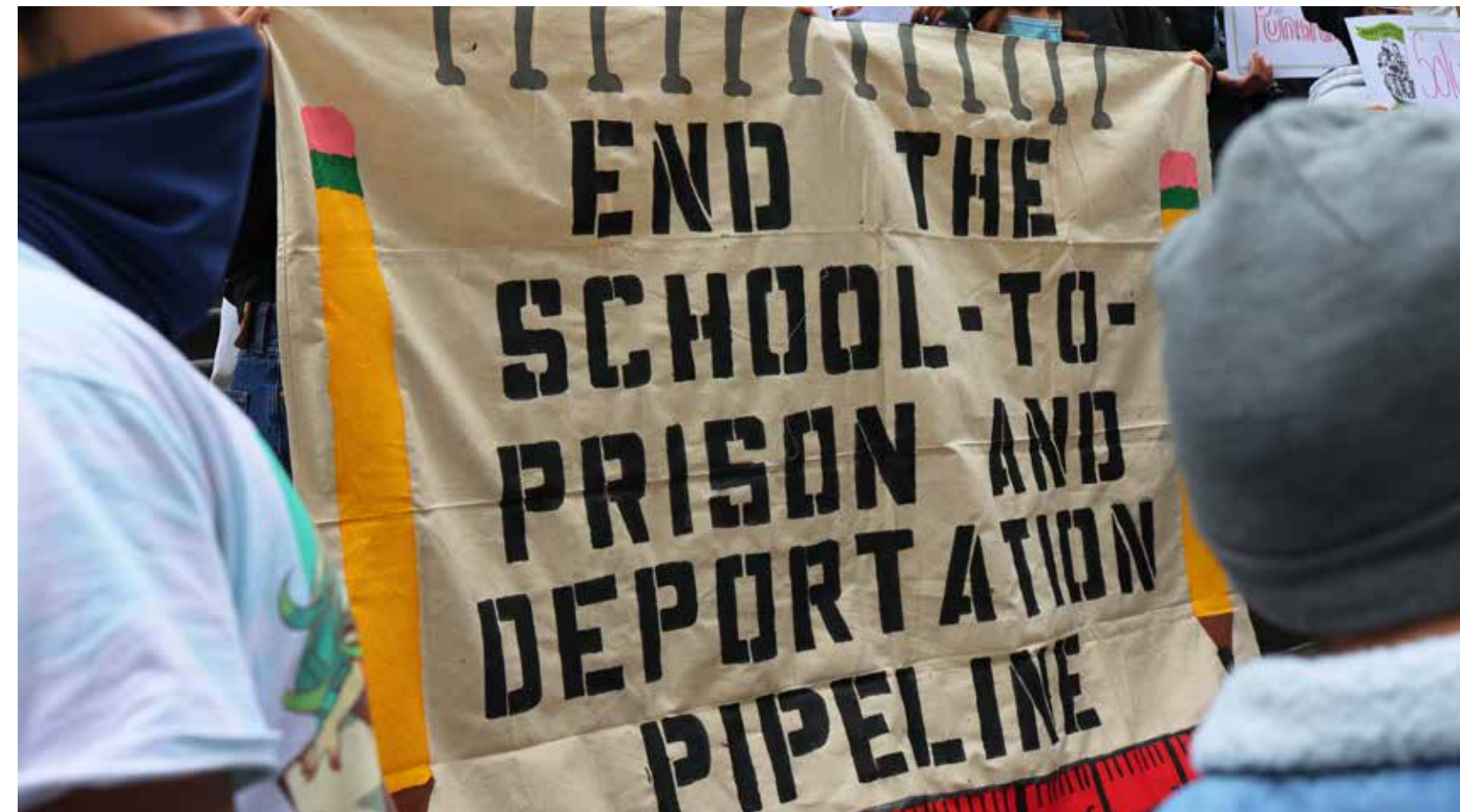
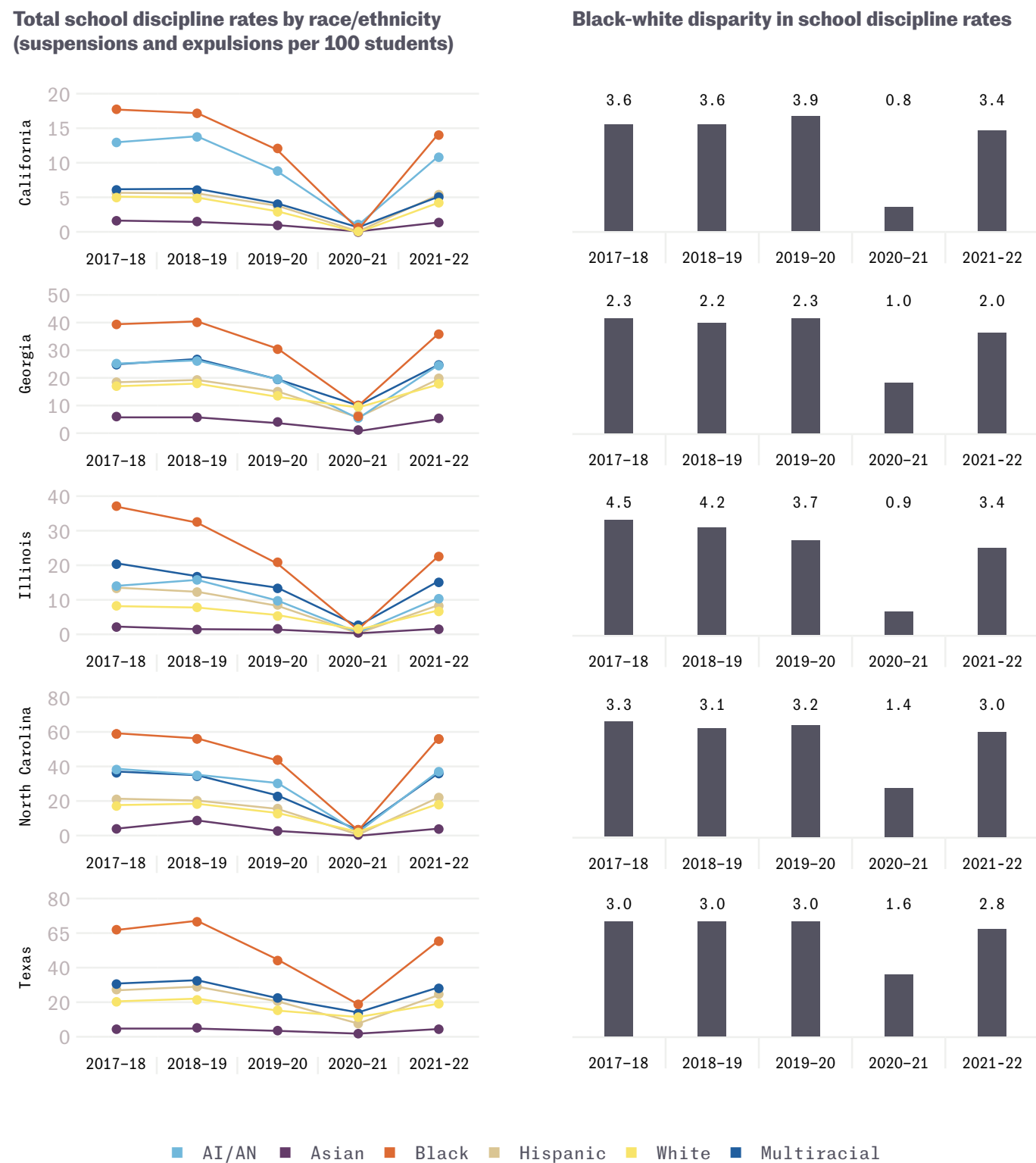


FIGURE 11. Analysis of total school discipline rates (suspension and expulsion) by race/ethnicity and Black-white disparities in five large U.S. states (2018–2022)



The charts in the right-hand column of Figure 11 the Black-white disparity in suspension and expulsion rates. This disparity estimate is calculated by dividing the Black suspension and expulsion rate by the white suspension and expulsion rate. For example, the disparity of 3.6 in California in 2018-19 means that the rate of suspensions and expulsions among Black students was 3.6 times the rate of suspensions and expulsions among white students.

Again, clear patterns emerge. Before the pandemic, the Black suspension and expulsion rate was 2.2 to 4.5 times the white suspension and expulsion rate. In all five states, the drop in suspension and expulsion rates for all students also resulted in a drop in the Black-white school discipline disparity. Black students particularly benefited from the reduction in

suspensions and expulsions because they had been disproportionately impacted by school discipline pre-pandemic. However, the return to normal school discipline rates in the 2021-22 school year also resulted in a return to stark disparities between Black and white school discipline rates. In the 2021-22 school year, the Black suspension and expulsion rate ranged from 2 to 3.4 times the white suspension and expulsion rate.

Again, these data confirm that a return to normalcy means a return to educational inequity and disproportionate harms for Black students. Prioritizing the needs of Black students as the public education system emerges from the pandemic will require addressing the racialized harms of exclusionary school discipline.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

All of the data analyzed on student outcomes in academic performance, mental health, caregiver loss, psychosocial impacts of white supremacy and racialized violence, substance use, and school discipline provide important insights on how students have been impacted by the upheaval and disruption of the pandemic and other coinciding crises. It is clear that significant investments in the public school system and adolescent mental health infrastructure are needed to help all students catch up academically and to address the current adolescent mental health crisis.

Importantly, these data also shed light on the unique pressures and adverse outcomes that Black students have faced over the past few years, extending over and above the narrow frame of “learning loss.” Black students are facing an erasure of their culture and identity from academic curriculum through anti-truth laws and book bans. They are

facing strikingly high rates of health consequences from COVID-19, caregiver loss due to COVID-19, attempted suicide, feelings of disconnectedness, hunger, and homelessness. And Black students continue to face disproportionately high rates of exclusion from school through suspension and expulsion. These new threats to Black students receiving a quality educational experience exist on top of the long-standing structural racism that has made our educational system unequal since its inception.

It is imperative for policymakers and public school administrators to seize the current opportunity to make significant investments to address the structural factors that have produced inequities in educational outcomes over the past several decades, rather than simply aiming to return to a pre-pandemic status quo.

Opportunities to advance educational equity moving forward

COVID-19 RELIEF FUNDS FOR EDUCATION

In March 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) was signed into law and included \$122 billion for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund to help schools recover from the disruptions and setbacks caused by the pandemic.¹²⁷ This is the single largest federal investment in U.S. schools to date and presents a critical opportunity for the public education system to improve the way it serves all students, especially Black students who have historically been underserved by public education.

Local educational agencies have significant flexibility in how they spend the funds. Many school districts have spent ESSER funds on academic interventions, increased mental health supports (e.g., hiring additional school counselors and school psychologists), mobile hotspots to increase at-home internet access, and increased educator

compensation.¹²⁸ This flexibility in spending allows local agencies to tailor decision-making to local needs, including school infrastructure or staffing needs that predate the pandemic.¹²⁹ It additionally allows for quick and efficient spending of funds.¹³⁰ However, the flexibility also means that funds may be used in ways that do not promote educational equity and monitoring of how funds are spent is limited. Billions of federal ARPA COVID-19 relief funds have been spent on interventions that are incompatible with public health, such as increased funding for police and prisons.¹³¹ Thus, there is a real risk that ESSER funds could be used on interventions that do not promote educational equity, such as increased hiring of police officers in schools. Federal monitoring by the Department of Education of how ESSER funds are used is critical to ensure this once-in-a-generation investment in public schools is not squandered.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As evidenced in this report, student life was severely disrupted by the pandemic and other coinciding crises between 2020 and 2022. In many cases, Black students experienced more intense consequences than other students, such as widened opportunity gaps for younger Black students, more

severe health outcomes due to COVID-19, higher rates of caregiver loss to COVID-19, and more. The following recommendations reflect steps that schools can take to improve educational equity and better serve the needs of Black students as schools emerge from the pandemic.

Walking through the early morning streets of East Oakland on August 25, 2022, a former Parker Elementary School student walks to another neighborhood to their new school since the Oakland Unified School District School Board voted to close Parker, a historic school that has served East Oakland for close to 100 years. Photo by Melina Mara/The Washington Post via Getty Images

Invest in material school and home resources

Due to decades of disinvestment in public schools, school facilities are physically crumbling and students are exposed to poor air quality, lead in the drinking water, diesel fumes from school buses, and inadequate heating and cooling.¹³² In a 2020 report, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that over half (54%) of school districts need to update or completely replace multiple systems (e.g., heating, ventilation, HVAC, or plumbing systems) in their school buildings and an estimated one-third of schools needed updates to their HVAC systems, specifically.¹³³

The deteriorating physical infrastructure of our nation's schools has clear negative health consequences for students, as well as negative consequences for learning, as made apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. A large body of research has documented the potential health benefits for students (and teachers) of improving school air quality, electrifying school buses, and ensuring safe drinking water.¹³⁴ For example, there is evidence that improvements to school ventilation can reduce the risk of children contracting COVID-19 and other infectious diseases.¹³⁵ A safe and healthy environment is also a prerequisite for learning. Poor school infrastructure is associated with declines in attendance and academic performance. For example, a recent study of public school students in Florida found that air pollution from highways was associated with decreased test scores and increased behavior problems and absences.¹³⁶ Some schools are leading the way by investing in sustainable infrastructure changes that improve ventilation, temperature regulation, and access to shade during recess, while also mitigating emissions and increasing energy-efficiency.¹³⁷

Although school infrastructure is the nation's second-largest infrastructure sector, federal infrastructure spending has largely excluded public

1 Invest in material school and home resources

2 Implement high-impact tutoring

3 Eliminate police from schools and the overreliance on exclusionary school discipline

4 Recruit and retain high-quality Black educators

5 Protect the right to a truthful, inclusive education

schools.¹³⁸ As a result, states and local districts have had to rely primarily on local property taxes to fund school infrastructure improvements and regular school operational costs. Schools in poorer districts that generate less funding from local property taxes often cannot rely on local funds to operate the school and also invest in infrastructure spending. As a result, low-resource schools, which often serve predominantly Black students and other students of color, are often most in need of material improvements. For example, in 2014, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that the lowest-income schools in the U.S. have the highest repair needs.¹³⁹ Specifically, 60% of schools where 75% or more of the student body is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch were in need of repairs compared to 48% of schools where fewer than 35% of the student body is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Almost half (46%) of

Black public school students attend a school where more than 75% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch compared to just 8% of white students, so Black students are more likely to attend schools in serious need of repairs.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, a study of school conditions in Maryland revealed that Baltimore City Schools were in the worst condition in the state, and Baltimore public school students had lost about 1.5 million hours (or 221,000 full days) of learning because of dangerous school conditions like inadequate heating or air conditioning over a 5-year period.¹⁴¹ Significant federal investment is needed to ensure that all students are learning in a school environment that is not harmful to their health.

In addition to investments in school infrastructure, educational equity demands closing the digital divide and ensuring that all students have access to high-speed broadband internet at home. Since the use of computers and the internet have become a larger part of school in the U.S., unequal access to technology at home has been a prominent issue, exacerbating education inequity. The digital divide became an even more glaring issue during the pandemic when students were relying on high-speed internet to participate in class. The NAEP test scores data presented earlier make clear that access to a computer, laptop, or tablet is strongly associated with academic performance. During the pandemic, many states and school districts have made efforts to close the digital divide and increase broadband access for families. However, many of these efforts were temporary and are set to expire.¹⁴²

Permanently closing the digital divide and ensuring all students have access to high-speed internet at home and in community spaces is a feasible, effective strategy to improve educational equity. Additional federal investments are needed to advance broadband equity, including ensuring that there is stable, short-term, and long-term funding for the Affordable Connectivity Program

(ACP), which allows low-income households to receive discounted broadband. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) must use the authority created by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to adopt strong rules banning digital redlining, which has left many neighborhoods of color to pay more for slower Internet access.¹⁴³

Policymakers should: increase federal, state, and local funding for school infrastructure improvements and remote learning resources.

School administrators should: prioritize investments in school infrastructure and investments in closing the digital divide when allocating ESSER funds and other funds.

Implement high-impact tutoring

Given that academic performance and test scores are more reflective of access and opportunity than innate ability, as previously discussed, investments to improve school infrastructure and close the digital divide are expected to address some of the losses in academic performance wrought by the pandemic. Additionally, at least 20% of the COVID-19 relief funds must be spent directly on academic catch-up for students. One of the only proven, evidence-based strategies to help students catch up is high-impact tutoring.

High-impact tutoring involves frequent (at least three times per week) and consistent (students have the same tutor throughout the school year) tutoring sessions in small groups (two to three students) that occur during the school year with well-trained tutors.¹⁴⁴ While high-impact tutoring is likely not a panacea for academic recovery, there is a strong body of evidence to suggest that it is one of the most effective strategies to close gaps in learning.¹⁴⁵ A systematic review and meta-analysis of 96 experimental studies of pre-K-12 tutoring found that it produced consistent, positive effects on learning outcomes.¹⁴⁶ A recent University of Chicago study of

high-impact tutoring found that it could double or triple the amount of math learned in a single school year.¹⁴⁷

As noted above, test score data from the NAEP demonstrated that not all students' academic performance was impacted by the pandemic equally. Students who were already underperforming experienced larger declines in test scores than students who were performing at or above average.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, racial gaps between younger students of color and their white counterparts widened during the pandemic (Figure 9). Evidence suggests that high-impact tutoring is particularly effective for students in earlier grades.¹⁴⁹ While it is not a sustainable, long-term strategy for educational equity, targeted high-impact tutoring for the students who need it most could make a significant impact in helping students recover academically from the disruption of the pandemic.

School administrators should: allocate ESSER funding dedicated to academic catch-up to be used for evidence-based high-impact tutoring programs with well-trained tutors and prioritize resources for students with the highest needs for academic recovery.

Educators should: advocate for students with the highest needs for academic recovery to be prioritized for receipt of high-impact tutoring.

Eliminate police from schools and the overreliance on exclusionary school discipline

As previously discussed, the rapid increase of police presence in schools has led to the rise of the school-to-prison pipeline which involves the surveillance and push out of students, especially Black students, from schools into the criminal legal system. Students all over the country are treated like criminals when they enter school, facing airport-like

security and police officers patrolling the hallways. New York City public schools have a school police force of about 5,500 officers, which is larger than the entire Boston Police Department.¹⁵⁰ The ACLU estimates that 10 million students in the U.S. are in schools with police officers but no social workers.¹⁵¹

The dramatic increase of police stationed in schools full-time was ostensibly spurred by efforts to increase school safety in the wake of school shootings.¹⁵² However, police do not create safety in schools and instead create a hostile environment, particularly for Black students.¹⁵³ Arrest rates and criminal legal contact increase when police are assigned to schools, and Black students disproportionately suffer the consequences of law enforcement referrals and school-based arrests despite the fact that Black students do not generally have higher rates of misbehavior than other students.¹⁵⁴ Students require a safe and nurturing environment for learning, and police in schools are incompatible with this goal.

Federal government funding has played an important role in promoting police presence in schools, such as through the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) in Schools grant program, which provides up to \$125,000 per officer stationed in a primary or secondary school over a three-year period.¹⁵⁵ Since 1999, the COPS in Schools program has provided over \$750 million in funding, resulting in the hiring of more than 6,500 police officers in schools.¹⁵⁶ The Legal Defense Fund (LDF) supports removing all police from schools and opposes federal grant support for hiring and training of school police officers.¹⁵⁷ Given the relative flexibility in how states and school districts can spend their ESSER relief funds, there is a risk that some of those funds may be used to hire additional police officers in schools. Additionally, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which was signed into law in June 2022, allows additional federal funding to be used to increase police presence and surveillance in schools.¹⁵⁸

In order to create a safe learning environment for students and ensure the safety of Black students, it is critical that COVID-19 relief funds and funds to improve school safety are not used to hire additional police officers and that schools move toward being police-free spaces. Funds could instead be used to train and hire supportive staff, such as counselors, social workers, nurses, and mental health professionals, who could better respond to the needs of students as they recover from pandemic-related disruptions. There is a particular need for high-quality, clinically-trained mental health staff in schools given the current adolescent mental health crisis and the particularly high risk of attempted suicide among Black adolescents. However, these supportive staff should not rely on exclusionary school discipline approaches, given the demonstrated harms of school exclusion and its disproportionate impacts on Black students.

Schools should also move to end the current overreliance on exclusionary school discipline practices (suspension, expulsion, and informal classroom removals) in order to promote academic success and well-being among all students, and educational equity. Given how exclusionary school discipline has systematically excluded Black students from the classroom and pushed them into the criminal legal system, moving away from exclusionary school discipline is expected to result in less pushout of Black students and a more racially inclusive school environment. Research has clearly established that exclusionary school discipline is associated with reductions in student academic performance, lower educational attainment, school dropout/pushout, and contact with the criminal legal system, especially for Black students.¹⁵⁹ Exclusionary school discipline is also associated with greater risk of several health conditions, including depression, drug use disorder, borderline personality disorder, and death by suicide.¹⁶⁰ Emerging research provides promising evidence that replacing exclusionary school discipline practices with restorative practices

(e.g., reconciliation conferencing, mediation) can improve student attendance, grades, graduation rates, and school climate.¹⁶¹

Policymakers should: end federal, state, and local funding for police officers in schools.

School administrators should: remove police from schools, end overreliance on exclusionary school discipline practices, and offer trainings for educators to replace exclusionary discipline practices with restorative practices.

Educators and school staff should: receive training in restorative practices as alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices with the goal of replacing exclusionary discipline practices with restorative practices.

Recruit and retain high-quality Black educators

Black educators are an invaluable resource for improving educational equity and closing opportunity gaps among students. Overall, teacher quality, experience, and behavior have a sizable impact on student educational and behavioral outcomes.¹⁶² Black teachers, specifically, have measured positive impacts on Black students' test scores, attitudes toward learning, school engagement, and graduation rates.¹⁶³ And the positive impacts of Black teachers also extend to students of other races. For example, having Black teachers can increase white students' critical thinking skills, expand their perspectives, and increase their understanding of social justice issues.¹⁶⁴

Despite the demonstrated benefits of Black educators and racially diverse classrooms, there has been a historic and ongoing effort to push Black educators out of schools. According to most recent estimates from the National Center for Education Statistics, just 7% of public school teachers are

Black.¹⁶⁵ Thus, the pool of public school teachers in the U.S. is much less diverse than the student population, which is approximately 15% Black.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, as school districts across the country face a teacher shortage, new survey research suggests that Black teachers are more likely to leave their jobs than teachers of other races.¹⁶⁷ Black teachers face all of the challenges that all teachers face, such as low pay, burnout, lack of administrative support, and navigating ever-changing COVID-19 protocols, and they also face additional challenges like racially hostile school environments.¹⁶⁸ The recent spate of anti-truth attacks often target Black educators in uniquely harmful ways by limiting their ability to talk about their own lived experiences in the classroom and making them feel like their own identity is a liability that places their jobs at risk.¹⁶⁹ The U.S. public school system has a responsibility to invest in efforts to recruit and retain Black educators so that the diversity of public school teachers at least reflects the diversity of public school students. Efforts should focus on making teaching attractive as a career for Black people, including through increased salaries, housing subsidies, student loan repayment, and anti-discrimination policies.

Policymakers should: increase federal, state, and local funding for school staffing, including increased salaries and benefits.

School administrators should: implement recruitment and retention policies and practices that prioritize diversity in hiring, foster a workplace culture that is inclusive and welcoming of Black educators, provide mental health support services to school staff, and increase spending on teacher salaries and benefits.

Educators and school staff should: foster a workplace culture that is inclusive and welcoming of Black educators and assist with recruitment efforts to attract Black educators.

Protect the right to a truthful, inclusive education

Over the past few years, public education has suffered the consequences of the pandemic as well as the consequences of growing efforts to restrict students' access to an accurate and truthful education. These efforts have involved tactics such as anti-truth legislation, sweeping book bans, and attacks against educators and school administrators.¹⁷⁰ This anti-truth mania is yet another coordinated effort to deny the history and current lived experiences of Black people in the U.S.—this time in the classroom—and all students are suffering the costs. Denying students an accurate education that reflects diverse perspectives has negative consequences for student engagement and academic achievement, including student attendance, GPA, and graduation rates.¹⁷¹ Giving students the opportunity to engage with history and current events in an accurate, inclusive way will equip them to fully participate in our multi-racial society.

LDF fights for the right of students to receive an accurate and truthful education through litigation and advocacy, including challenging harmful anti-truth legislation and supporting local efforts to protect discussions of race in the classroom.¹⁷² Additionally, local actors, like school board members and school administrators, have a responsibility to combat anti-truth tactics and defend students' rights to a truthful education in their local school districts. Efforts to help Black students recover the educational losses wrought by the pandemic and other crises should include a focus on protecting and expanding the accurate, inclusive, culturally responsive education that is proven to improve academic engagement and success for all students and for Black students, in particular.

Policymakers should: challenge legislative efforts to ban discussions of race, racism, and discrimination in classrooms and efforts to ban or censor books and textbooks.

School administrators should: implement policies that protect diversity and inclusion in education, protect educators who face backlash for teaching students accurately, and protect student access to culturally responsive educational resources and books.

Educators and school staff should: organize to challenge harmful anti-truth legislation and book bans, document how inclusive education benefits their students, and protect student access to culturally responsive educational resources and books.

State Boards of Education should: protect students' rights to an accurate and truthful education when making state-level decisions concerning textbook selection and educational standards.

The College Board should: protect students' rights to an accurate and truthful education when designing AP course curriculum, rather than stripping down curriculum in response to anti-truth mania, as was done with the AP curriculum for African American studies.¹⁷³

CONCLUSION

The past few years have been characterized by disruption and upheaval for people of all ages, given the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic and other sociopolitical crises. School-age children and adolescents have faced unique threats to their academic and socioemotional development. Notably, Black children and adolescents have been uniquely and severely impacted. To date, discussions on how the public education system can emerge from the pandemic and better serve students' needs has been narrowly focused on the concept of "learning loss." However, as this report demonstrates, the needs of Black students extend far beyond the scope of recent declines in test scores. With unprecedented federal funding, the current moment poses a unique opportunity for the public education system to truly prioritize the needs of Black students. We all stand to reap the benefits of investments to eliminate structural barriers in educational equity, and we all stand to lose if the public education system returns to business as normal.

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