

Mitigating the Implications of Coronavirus Pandemic on Families

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The emergence of COVID-19 is not just a reminder of the digital divide in our community; it also highlights the inequities in accessing technology and online educational resources. School closures have disproportionately affected rural and ethnic minority families, placing these youths' futures at risk. This issue presents research-informed policy recommendations on how to support students' learning and development amid school closures and virtual learning environments.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the digital divide by creating barriers to high-quality education, especially for youth in rural and low-income communities.

- Amid the pandemic, [21.3 million](#) people in the U.S. face the negative consequences of the [digital divide](#): the gap in access to reliable Internet and digital devices. Youth in low-income and rural areas are especially less likely to benefit from online learning opportunities, placing them at risk for greater academic losses, unemployability, and mental health issues. Prior to the pandemic, youth with access to technological devices and the Internet already [tended to perform better in school than those without](#). Despite ongoing efforts by school districts to loan technological devices to youth in need and thereby provide equal opportunities to engage in online learning, [some districts simply do not have enough devices to go around](#).
- The already existing [academic underperformance and school dropout](#) risks (more than four times relative to non-impooverished peers) for youth in low-income and rural areas may increase with the pandemic. Academic success, therefore, is critical to changing outcome trajectories for youth in poverty. As such, it will be beneficial for educators to identify and connect with youth struggling with a lack of resources and guide them on possible solutions. Raising awareness for [free or low-cost Internet programs](#) and adapting learning materials for students without access to the internet, a computer, or a place to study could be potential solutions.
- Policymakers may consider solutions to increase technological access. For example, [loan or device donation programs](#) for needed technological devices (prioritizing families with less than one device for every two children) could be helpful. It is also important to provide access to technical support to set up various platforms for online learning, such as step-by-step guides or phone support in both English and other languages (e.g., Spanish) for minority families. Finally, internet hotspots made available throughout communities may be helpful for families with fewer resources to continue to access the internet when free programs expire (most last 30 to 90 days).
- Additionally, local public libraries can be leveraged to aid with digital literacy programs, ebooks, and online learning to prevent a deepening of educational disparities based on socio-economic status.

Intersecting axes of inequality may leave minority youth especially disadvantaged in online learning environments.

- Students whose parents may not have completed first-degree education, may not have the first-hand experience with American school systems, and may not be English proficient are likely to be disadvantaged, without access to the same type of educational support parents who are highly educated may be able to provide.

- Policymakers may consider supporting [organizations offering educational resources for distance learning](#). For example, [one television station is airing state standards-aligned educational programming](#); weekly broadcast schedules are provided in English and Spanish.
- Moreover, data collection within racial and ethnic minority communities would aid in determining communities in need and prioritizing resources for them. For example, identifying neighborhoods with fewer non-English speakers would allow for proactive educational planning in response to crises.

Families vary widely in their financial and educational resources for supporting their children’s online education from home. For families with fewer resources, the negative impact of distance learning on youth’s academic progress is likely to be greater.

- Youth living in poverty are more likely to have crowded households that provide little-to-no space for quiet study time, making it difficult to complete assignments or engage in lessons.
- Families with limited access to child care may require older youth to care for their younger siblings while parents continue to work, further interfering with their engagement in virtual learning.
- Students with [disabilities](#) or [learning differences](#) may be especially underserved because online instruction is often not flexible enough to accommodate learning differences. (See COVID-19 and Special Education by Boustani et al.)
- When the pandemic subsides, it will be important to prioritize targeted education and support to begin to [close the learning gap](#) that has been amplified by distance learning, especially for minority and low-income youth.

Additional Resources

- Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center as the hub for COVID-19 resources for children birth through five with disabilities: <https://ectacenter.org/topics/disaster/coronavirus.asp>
- American Youth Policy Reform COVID-19 Resource Hub: [Rural Populations](#)
- State and local policy responses to COVID-19 Lessons from evidence: [Improving Virtual and Online Learning While Schools are Closed](#)
- Child Trends: [How Early Care and Education Providers Can Support Children's Remote Learning](#)
- The New York Times: [Imagine Online School in a Language You Don’t Understand](#)
- American Youth Policy Forum: [Coronavirus Puts Children at Risk by Deepening Inequities](#)
- [Addressing Barriers to Learning](#)