

## COVID and the Class of 2030

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The transition from second grade to third grade during elementary school is considered by many to be the most important transition year in K-12 education. It is during the third grade year that students shift from simply learning to read to reading to learn (Robinson, 2014). It is during this year that students use more complex reading strategies and apply foundational writing skills. Reading proficiency during the third grade is such a significant milestone that it can often predict a student's future educational success.

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010), students who do not demonstrate proficiency in reading by the end of their third grade year are four times more likely to drop out of high school than their peers who are able to read on grade level. In addition, struggling readers tend to exhibit more social and behavioral problems (Morgan et al., 2008). While the long-held belief that prison developers in the United States of America utilize third-grade reading scores to determine future prison projects is not actually true, there is evidence to suggest that there is a strong connection between non-proficient student readers and the likelihood of future incarceration. Hernandez (2011) found that one in six children who are not reading-proficient in the third grade do not graduate from high school on time. For struggling readers who live in poverty, the outcomes are even more dismal. Impoverished students who do not read on grade level are more than 10 times less likely to graduate from high school than are their wealthier, reading-proficient classmates (Hernandez, 2011).

High school dropouts are more likely to be incarcerated than their high school graduate counterparts. According to Sum et al. (2009), approximately one of 10 young male high school dropouts is incarcerated, while less than one of every 33 young males with a high school credential is institutionalized. This statistic, while staggering in all of the major ethnic groups in America, is particularly impactful in the Black community. Based on this statistic, approximately 23% of young, African-American male dropouts are incarcerated, while the percentages of institutionalized Whites, Hispanics, and Asians in the same category are roughly 7%, 6%, and 7% respectively. The impact of dropping out of high school is significant, particularly for young, Black males (Sum et al., 2009). Any factor that prevents the development of reading skills and leads to increased dropout numbers for the Black male population can have a substantial, negative, generational impact on scores of families.

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is the factor that most people did not envision. Most did not predict that the disease would remain as long as it has or that it would be as devastating as it has been. Often, when we hear of COVID-19, it is being discussed in terms of its impact on public health, and rightly so. More than 517, 000 individuals, mostly adults, in the United States have died from the virus (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Certainly, more individuals will meet a similar fate. However, COVID is the cause of many negative outcomes, in addition to those surrounding public health.

Many children enrolled in public schools have been away from the physical classroom for approximately one year. While schools have attempted to implement virtual learning, this method has not had overwhelming success. The ineffectiveness has been due to many issues including lack of technological access, teachers with limited virtual learning experience, and unavailable parents (Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020). Many children in public schools cannot afford to experience the gaps in learning that this COVID year has caused. Minority children are at even higher risk for negative outcomes due to academic gaps than are their White peers. Where is the coordinated and energetic plan to address COVID-19 and public education?

The response to the impact of COVID-19 on public schools has been abysmal. The very individuals and organizations that purport to care so much about minority children have failed them. However, instead of owning that failure and implementing effective change, they continue to play a sad game of politics and children continue to suffer. While most students overall have experienced learning setbacks due to COVID-19, the pandemic has been especially hard on children of color. Traditionally, minority students have experienced lower achievement than their White peers and the pandemic appears to have exacerbated that achievement gap (Dorn et al., 2021). Many minority families cannot afford to send their children to private schools, hire a private instructor, or participate in pandemic pods. Black parents also are more likely to be employed in essential job roles such as nursing assistants, food service workers, bus drivers, and maintenance (Lagasse, 2020). Consequently, they are less likely to be able to work from home and less likely to be afforded the opportunity to assist with and monitor their children's educational activities. As a result, these parents wait. They wait for politicians to prioritize them. They wait for school boards to come up with viable, effective alternatives. They wait for someone in power to care enough. They wait for much-needed relief.

The COVID-19 relief bill has been touted as the legislation that will provide relief to the American people. On some levels, it will. However, the bill has provisions for a Silicon Valley subway system, a bridge connecting New York to Canada, environmental justice grants, and cultural preservation projects (Litke, 2021). While all of these things actually may be needed, none of them mitigate the painful circumstances in which so many families find themselves. It may absolutely be necessary to keep schools closed for now. In the meantime, where is the national disaster plan to help students recover what they've lost over the last year? Where are the alternatives that will truly help children on a local level? Where is the national movement to implement viable and effective options for struggling students? Where is the true relief for parents and students?

There is an adage in the African-American community that states, "When White America catches a cold, Black America catches pneumonia." Unfortunately, the results of this "pneumonia" will continue to be seen years from now. Although the COVID-19 pandemic eventually will end, some casualties will be just beginning. Some minority students will not be able to catch up academically. Some will be lost to the streets. Some will drop out of high school. Some will enter the criminal justice system. Years from now, COVID-19 will continue to claim livelihoods and legacies. Not every precious 2021 third-grader will walk across a graduation stage nine years from now as a part of the Class of 2030. Empty slogans, catchy hashtags, and campaign promises won't save them and

never could. It is going to take the real work of a dedicated team of educators, parents, and community partners who are committed to student success and who refuse to let them slip through the cracks. A coordinated, compassionate, targeted, student-focused response can make the difference. I truly hope it will.

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