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Oxford Scholars Essay

5 January 2021

Back to School

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced students of all ages to attend school virtually via Zoom or other online learning platforms. Many have debated how and when to reopen. Meanwhile, students have struggled to varying degrees. For example, visual learners may struggle more than auditory learners who adjust more easily to virtual platforms. Aside from COVID-19 concerns, proponents of distance learning argue that society, higher education, and business increasingly rely on online collaboration, so students could benefit from this experience. Others advocate for increasingly blending online and traditional instruction. Despite the benefits of distance learning, it is not a legitimate replacement for the traditional classroom. Students learning exclusively through online platforms will experience lasting effects. These include technology addiction, a result of habitually spending more time on screens and devices, academic underperformance due to insufficient accountability and oversight, and poor mental health stemming from stunted social and emotional development.

Distance learning has exacerbated technology addiction among children and teens. Before the pandemic, parents across the country attempted to restrict screen time. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than two hours of screen time for children and teenagers. Researchers have found that children who spend more than two hours a day on screens score lower in language and thinking tests. Now, children restricted to distance learning spend at least 5 hours a day on devices for school, not to mention screen time spent on homework and entertainment. The Internet provides numerous avenues of distraction. Without

adults supervising computer use, children “are left to their own devices, and the impetus isn’t to do homework but play around,” said Jacob L. Vigdor, an economics professor at Duke University. Children already fill their free time with video games, television shows, and social media. One study by Apple found that the average amount of time a person spent on their phone equated to about one month out of a year. It has health drawbacks, such as deteriorating eyesight, diminished physical activity, and reduced attention span. Duke University researchers found that on days where students used devices more, they exhibited difficulty paying attention. Students in the Zoom age will likely be more prone to screen-centered lifestyles, relationships, and interactions.

Virtual learning during the pandemic has led to decreased academic standards and achievement worldwide. Nationwide, schools have dumped letter grades, extended deadlines, and canceled tests. This is in part because teachers face significant challenges with implementing online instruction and oversight of students. Zoom learning makes it difficult for teachers to track students with the Internet and smartphones at their disposal, leading to widespread cheating. One El Paso high school teacher reported increased plagiarism and cheating amongst his students, stating, “grades are abysmal.” The Office of Student Conduct at Penn State reported a 17 percent increase in plagiarism since the school went online. Meanwhile, students’ motivation to learn has diminished amid lowered academic standards and minimal interpersonal interaction with teachers and peers. In the Bay area, for example, school districts reported a growing number of students with at least one failing grade. Freshman college classes in the U.S. shrank from 16.1 percent nationally to 22.7 percent at community colleges due to the pandemic, according to one recent study by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. When

students have an instructor looking over their shoulder, encouraging, correcting, and pushing them, they perform better than they would on their own.

Students have missed an entire year of social and emotional growth from attending school and interacting with peers and administration. It is easy to view school from a purely academic standpoint and overlook the emotional and social competency students gain from brick-and-mortar schools. When students are closed in their rooms with only their phones and computers, they have little opportunity for face-to-face interaction with their peers. This lack of interaction has led to increased depression and suicide. A study by America's Promise Alliance found that nearly one-third of teenagers reported feeling depressed in recent months. The proportion of children's emergency room visits on account of mental health issues increased significantly during the pandemic, according to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Those findings call attention to concerns about the psychological effects of lockdowns and social distancing for adolescents. Further, young people in 2020 aged 18 to 24 reported increased suicidal thoughts, from 10.7 percent to 25.5 percent. While only about 100 children and teens have died from COVID-19 in the U.S, at least 6,000 have died from suicide. Separating children from their peers, teachers, coaches, counselors and other adults who can encourage and motivate them will impact their future careers and lives.

For many students, the COVID-19 lockdowns and virtual learning have led to significant educational setbacks, detrimental technology habits, and increased mental health issues. The Zoom experiment is fraught with problems, and it is time for school districts, and local and state authorities to ask whether the health risk of keeping schools closed is worth the cost.

“This is not simply about making sure our kids are learning and advancing academically,”

Republican Vice President Mike Pence said in a July Department of Education coronavirus task

force meeting. “For their mental health, for their well-being, or their physical health, we have to get our kids back to school.”

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