Remote Kindergarten During Covid-19 ‘Could Impact This Generation of Kids for Their Lifetime’

Kindergartners normally learn skills valuable for the rest of their education; an estimated 450,000 children may miss the grade this year.

By Valerie Bauerlein / Photographs by Travis Dove for The Wall Street Journal
May 9, 2021 5:30 am ET

HIGH POINT, N.C.—Of all the students who suffered learning loss during the Covid-19 pandemic and remote schooling, one grade level has educators very concerned: the kindergartners.
Kindergarten is where 5- and 6-year-olds learn the building blocks of how to be students, skills such as taking turns and working together that they will need for the next 12 years of formal schooling. It coincides with a critical window for brain development, the time between 5 and 7 years old when neural connections are firing most rapidly for higher-cognitive functions like problem-solving and reasoning.

Kindergarten “can’t be replicated even by the very best teachers in the virtual environment,” said Whitney Oakley, chief academic officer for North Carolina’s Guilford County Schools. A missed, delayed or low-quality kindergarten experience “could impact this generation of kids for their lifetime.”

The most reliable predictor of positive outcomes in adulthood, from educational attainment to mental health, isn’t academic ability but how well students cooperate with peers, help others, understand feelings and resolve conflicts, according to a 2015 study by Mark Greenberg, a professor of developmental psychology at Penn State University, that tracked 750 people from kindergarten to about 25 years of age.

“The skills that we would be teaching in kindergarten? Children have not gotten them this year,” he said. “In the best
case, they’ve gotten a small percentage of them.”

Many parents didn’t enroll their children in kindergarten this year, with enrollment off by roughly 15% in many states. There are typically three million kindergartners, according to federal data, so a decline of 15% nationwide would mean roughly 450,000 missing students.

Most states require that schools offer kindergarten but only 19 require that students enroll, according to the Education Commission of the States, a nonpartisan research organization. Families aren’t legally required to enroll a child in school until ages 6 or 7 in most of states, according to federal data.
Kindergarten students gather in small groups for reading lessons at Southwest Elementary School.

Some children will start first grade in the fall and just skip kindergarten, school administrators predict. Others will be starting kindergarten a year late, leaving the fall’s kindergarten class extra large and filled with students with a wide developmental range.

Many districts are building supplemental summer programs and pushing parents to sign up students who missed kindergarten or were fully remote this year.
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Should schools minimize remote learning, offering it only in rare situations to encourage a return to full-time, in-person learning? Join the conversation below.

School districts have given priority to reopening classrooms for kindergartners because the year is so important, the curriculum so challenging to do online and the growing scientific evidence that small children aren’t spreading the virus. Many districts are teaching kindergartners with hybrid instruction: Students are in school some days a week or partial days and remote the rest of the time. The pace of reopening has increased in recent weeks.

As of April 5, 34% of kindergartners attended districts that were fully in-person and 9% attended districts that were fully remote, with the majority of kids attending hybrid school, according to the Return To Learn Tracker, developed by the American Enterprise Institute. It isn’t clear how many of the hybrid districts offer full-time in-person instruction to kindergartners and a mix to other grades.
In suburban Washington, D.C., freelance writer Jessica Goodwin’s son spent most of the school year in remote learning. He wasn’t developing close friendships with classmates since they spent much of remote instruction time on mute. She spent most days sitting beside him, supervising logins, printing out worksheets, taking pictures when they are complete and scanning them in.

“The most important part of kindergarten is how to make friends, how to solve your own problems and be independent,” said Ms. Goodwin, a former elementary school teacher. “It’s hard to be independent when you’re sitting in a room all day with your mom.”

Her son recently started in-person school and is a different child, she said. He comes home chattering about who he saw on the bus or how during a math lesson he was a “10” and his friend was a “2” and together they made “12.” “There’s something about being in the room,” she said.
Kindergartners play during recess at Southwest Elementary. The school has had to carefully block time for use of common areas so classes don’t commingle.

In an otherwise empty cafeteria, boxes are filled with lunches for students at Southwest Elementary School. During the pandemic, students eat lunch in the classroom at their desks.
Kindergarten started in Germany in the mid-19th century as a hands-on, play-based program that emphasized social and spiritual development. It was championed by American education reformers in the late 19th century, said Jennifer Lin Russell, a University of Pittsburgh professor who has written about the evolution of kindergarten. The focus on academics has increased with the push for national reading and math standards, Ms. Russell said.

Guilford County Schools, a district of 69,000 students in central North Carolina, began offering half-day in-person kindergarten in October and full-day in November, earlier than most peer districts in the state. At Southwest, the district’s largest elementary school, there are 115 children in six kindergarten classes. Five classes are in person; one is remote.

Kindergarten teacher Lynda Reich began the first lesson of a recent in-person school day by switching her cloth mask for one with a clear plastic panel. She said the mask tends to fog up, so she saves it for language-arts lessons when it is important for students to watch her mouth make sounds.
She stood at the front of the classroom and spoke loudly, over-enunciating, to counteract the mask’s muffling.

“We’ve been learning how to use our digraphs,” Ms. Reich said. “What are digraphs?”

“Two letters!” a student responded.

“Awesome,” Ms. Reich said. “Yes, that’s two letters, two letters that come together to make a single sound.”

The students sounded out of “ch” and “sh” in unison, then worked independently to build words using magnets on boards at their desks. Typically they would be seated at tables of four, Ms. Reich said, sharing materials to practice cooperative learning skills. Now they work alone, though Ms. Reich said she
tries to find opportunities to work with a “shoulder partner,” a classmate seated several feet away.

At lunchtime, cafeteria staff members bring individual bags to the classroom. Students pull their masks down over their chins and eat at their desks. They watch an educational video on a screen in the front of the room, in part to discourage talking.

Recess, which research shows boosts social skills overall and concentration during the school day, is abbreviated, to ensure only a few classes are on the playground at a time. Each class keeps to a designated section.

Kindergarten teacher Lynda Reich checks on her students as they work on a reading exercise at Southwest Elementary.
Southwest kindergarten teacher Carmen Longest said that in the past, small trips within the school, such as to visit the library or cafeteria, taught valuable lessons. They provided a break from the classroom, trained students how to line up and move in a group and helped them take direction from someone other than their classroom teacher.

“Our students don’t leave our classrooms except for recess,” she said.

If a student offers to share scissors with a classmate, Ms. Longest said she tries to compliment the instinct but explains sharing isn’t safe right now.

“We say ‘thank you for offering,’ then we give them one of ours,” she said.

Down the hall from the in-person kindergarten classrooms is teacher Kristi Ingram’s all-but-empty one. Ms. Ingram volunteered to teach virtual kindergarten for 14 students whose families kept them home due to health concerns. She toggles between two laptops, one with a screen she could share and one with a grid of four students working in a small group.

She showed a list of numbers on her screen, with one number missing. “How am I going to find that missing number?” she
asked the group.

The students were quiet, then called out responses in a rush. She asked them to count to 10 with her to find the answer, but they counted at different paces, over background noise, including a baby’s cries. The bottom half of one child’s face was off-screen, as was the left side of another’s.

“Am I supposed to be here?” one girl asked.

Teacher Kristi Ingram conducts a counting lesson virtually from her empty classroom for kindergarten pupils learning from home.

After months of remote work, Ms. Ingram said she can recognize each student’s voice and make corrections even if
they talk over one another. She also meets virtually one-on-one with each student during the week. “Building those relationships and connections is very important to me,” she said.

Harvard University education professor Stephanie Jones said she hopes that once all kindergartners are back in the classroom, the emphasis isn’t just on getting them caught up academically to prepare for required testing but also on the intangible habits of thinking and behavior.

“They need to focus attention, be aware of their emotions and interactions, just to understand the words being spoken by the teacher,” she said. “It’s all wound up in the process of learning.”

Dr. Oakley, Guilford’s chief academic officer, is a former kindergarten teacher who has a son in kindergarten. She said she saw firsthand that the remote-learning routine of rotating live instruction with independent work was particularly difficult for young children. Most kindergartners can’t yet read, navigate links or sit still for more than a few minutes at a time, she said.
Dr. Oakley said she sees this year’s youngest learners, including her son, having much ground to cover next year. But she said they have learned skills pre-pandemic kindergartners might not have, like being responsible for a laptop or tablet computer, wearing masks to keep others safe and navigating change.

“This is going to be one of the most resilient groups of students we’ve ever seen,” she said.

A spelling lesson at Southwest Elementary.

Write to Valerie Bauerlein at valerie.bauerlein@wsj.com
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Appeared in the May 10, 2021, print edition as ‘Remote Classes Cost Kindergartners Critical Learning, Development Time.’

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