




Forced Isolation in an Era of Inclusion With U.S. K–12 Public School Communities

Cheryl Burleigh, EdD

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2393-5477>

Andrea Wilson, PhD

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1471-654X>

Contact: drcburleigh@gmail.com

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront disparities and inequities in U.S. K–12 public school systems that affected both educators and the students they served—not only during school closures but also after in-person instruction resumed. The purpose of this scholarly essay is to shed light on the levels of isolation that occurred during the pandemic and still affect educators in K–12 public schools as they seek to foster academically rigorous and inclusive school communities. Recognizing, and then quickly responding to, historic events by implementing strategies that take into account the social determinants of learning and health is the starting point to helping the education stakeholders heal, which will then facilitate students to regain their personal and academic confidence and abilities as we move to a post-pandemic world.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, isolation, social determinants of learning, social determinants of health, K–12 public schools, teachers*

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Introduction

As an historic event, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected the landscape of education, how teachers teach, and how students learn. A systemic upheaval, where isolation became a norm as asynchronous learning and living occurred simultaneously during the pandemic, was felt by student and teacher populations regardless of where a person called home (Goldberg, 2021).

Education practices were compromised when teachers and students experienced extreme isolation and disruption during the pandemic. Inequities were exposed and deepened, as demonstrated by the differential effects of school closures (Burleigh et al., 2022a; “New Education Study,” 2022). Public schools did not enact school closures at the same rate or with a prescribed calculated plan to reduce induced stress based on the

unknown. For example, in California, school closures began on March 19, 2020, with the date of April 1, 2020, as the date to close for the academic school year. In Delaware, school closures started on March 16, 2020, and closures for the academic year were to take place on April 24, 2020. In Connecticut, school closures began on March 17, 2020, with the academic year closure announced for May 5, 2020 (“Coronavirus and School Closures,” 2020). **The result was a haphazard and chaotic disruption to the education process (Burleigh et al., 2022a, b).** Teachers were leaving their schools and classrooms with few resources.

School district access to computers and online learning platforms was not adequately established either, which led to accessibility issues for teachers and students. Accessibility, in the context of this scholarly essay, refers to the ability of students and teachers to obtain individual use of laptop computers or tablets; high-speed internet connectivity to online learning platforms and curriculum; or webcam devices to participate in synchronous virtual learning (Breux, 2021).

Modifications to the in-person curriculum also had to be adapted at a moment’s notice. Students who did not have computer access had to complete paper-based learning packets or textbook assignments without personalized instruction or support from their classroom teacher, furthering the sense of social and learning isolation (Burleigh et al., 2022b). Adapting lesson plans and activities to meet the needs of students learning virtually increased the amount of time teachers were planning curriculum (Burleigh et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2022). As a result, teachers had to develop new ways of thinking and approaching traditional teaching practices in a virtual learning environment to support student learning while the lesson was being taught, in many instances (Burleigh et al., 2022b).

Students who required learning support, regardless of their mandated accommodations, experienced hardships at a more significant level than their peers with no proven way to mitigate the effects isolation caused (Burleigh et al., 2022a). Other student populations, including those living in impoverished areas, in households identified as having a lower socio-economic status, or attending Title 1 schools, felt the effects of learning isolation at a greater rate than their peers due to the lack of available resources (Burleigh et al., 2022a; Grant, 2021). The result was an absence of in-person, consistent connections among student peers and teacher colleagues. This global chain of events initiated heightened, stressed populations, where a decline in effective learning processes had occurred—and mental health challenges were brought to the forefront.

Effects of Pandemic Isolation on Students and Families

A universal cry was heard during the pandemic among families with school-aged children. The concern that arose was how students would be able to learn in isolation when in front of a computer throughout the school day. Even though a group of students thrived during the pandemic, the majority did not (Gilman, 2020). These students who did outperform their peers were self-motivated or found distance learning to be a safe haven, a place where they would not be bullied or harassed by their peers (Alkhudiry & Alahdal, 2022; Armelino, 2022).

Although some students did well, the vast majority of students throughout U.S. public schools saw a decline in their academic acuity and achievement (Camera, 2022; Toth, 2022). The pandemic’s toll on student learning, acquisition, and retention of curricular knowledge was demonstrated in a significant decrease in mathematics and reading assessment scores (Camera, 2022). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022) released the Nation’s Report Card findings using a nationally representative sample of students based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments. Their study looked specifically at academic achievement data before and after the pandemic. In mathematics, among fourth graders, there has been a 7-point decrease since 2020. Of these, the lowest-performing students saw a 12-point drop compared to the highest-performing students, with a 3-point decline in assessment scores (NAEP, 2022a). The reading score results with the same population of students were similar (NAEP, 2022b). A significant drop in

assessment results has occurred in the past when there have been large-scale school disruptions, such as those caused by natural disasters (Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

The overarching concerns and issues raised regarding how students were learning in isolation were the lack of in-person instruction, student accountability, and well-being. Numerous school districts throughout the United States did not require students to turn on the computer cameras, attend class, or turn in assignments (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Some students took advantage of those school policies to focus on personal activities, while others dove deeper into isolation (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021).

Students who needed support in processing the concepts and curriculum presented during the school day may not have had access to individuals within their own personal sphere who could assist (Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Nowicki, 2022). Students who needed one-on-one assistance in understanding or completing an assignment or activity may not have had the instructional at-home strategies available to comprehend what was required (Goldberg, 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

Parents or guardians may not have understood the material or felt they did not have the acumen in the subject content area to assist their students when needed (Nowicki, 2022). If the student had adults working at home, there was no guarantee that the adult could take the time from their work obligations or understand how to assist their child with schoolwork. If a student's parents were mandated workers (e.g., firefighters, police officers, medical personnel, food service workers, grocery store clerks, public servants), there was a high probability that the student would not show up for virtual learning or attempt and complete assignments (Goldberg, 2021; Nowicki, 2022).

If older siblings resided in the same household, they might not have had the content knowledge or mental bandwidth to support the student. These older siblings may have been experiencing the same types and levels of anxiety as their younger siblings (Goldberg, 2021). Additionally, older siblings may have been tasked with adult-level responsibilities, as their parents or guardians needed to work outside the household.

Access to health care and social services, food, and social skills also suffered since students who felt isolated did not know where to turn for help. These circumstances took a devastating toll on **students'** mental health. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy noted that students' mental health had been a concern prior to the pandemic. Yet, the pandemic heightened their levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, thoughts of suicide, and feelings of helplessness (HHS Press Office, 2021). Additionally, vulnerable groups who faced challenges before the pandemic also experienced an amplified level of the negative impacts of the pandemic. These groups included low-income students, students from immigrant households, students in rural communities, those with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ students, and students who were homeless or receiving services from child protective services (Goldberg, 2021; HHS Press Office, 2021).

Furthermore, the pandemic affected the safety and stability of students' home lives. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2021) shared a devastating statistic that, during the pandemic, "more than 140,000 children in the United States lost a primary and/or secondary caregiver" (para. 3). Since students' mental health and wellness became a casualty of the pandemic, youth-focused health professional organizations declared a national state of emergency in student mental health and wellness based on the soaring rates of the challenges faced due to the pandemic (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021). Therefore, protecting students' mental health and wellness has received heightened awareness and focus in schools and within organizations that support and serve the welfare of children and adolescents.

Effects of Pandemic Isolation on Teachers

Educators faced instability in effectively teaching their students during the pandemic, and often without the adequate support of their administrators or school districts (Robinson et al., 2022). Personal boundaries became blurred and were a challenge for teachers to define clearly. The absence of distinct boundaries educators noted frequently were those between work and home life (Burleigh et al., 2022b; Leech et al., 2022). Educators additionally faced long hours of teaching virtually and preparing for student distance learning needs, putting in a 10- to 12-hour (plus) workday with very little interaction with colleagues (Burleigh et al., 2022b). Therefore, educators were willing to put in the time needed to support their students at the cost of their own physical and mental health (Burleigh et al., 2022b).

One result of teaching in isolation was that many students forgot how to be students. Classroom rules were minimal, and boundaries could no longer be effectively defined. Teachers having a sense of control and developing personal connections and meaningful rapport among students in the classroom was a challenge (Burleigh et al., 2022b; Leech et al., 2022). The struggle included teachers not feeling connected to their students, including the immediate feedback that could be provided during in-person learning (Burleigh et al., 2022b; “New Education Study,” 2022). **Not only did teachers feel that modifying their curriculum to remote teaching proved difficult when having limited resources, but also that executing lesson plans and activities did not easily translate to distance learning (Burleigh et al., 2022b; Leech et al., 2022).** This encompassed direct instruction with students in academics, student relationships with their peers, and developing social-emotional learning skills (Leech et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2022; Rutgers University Center for Effective School Practices, 2022).

The increased workload and professional demands caused by the pandemic resulted in teachers having higher stress levels, anxiety, depression, and burnout (Robinson et al., 2022; Steiner & Woo, 2021). Additionally, teachers who reported lower self-efficacy experienced more stressors, higher incidences of mental health issues and emotional distress, and a lack of confidence in the system-level supports available during the pandemic (Davis et al., 2022). With the constant changes and challenges of teaching virtually, educators began to question their ability to teach their students effectively in the face of chaos. Teachers reported increased anxiety from teaching, not only based on the demands placed on them by their administration but also from parents, who were also stressed from supporting their students as the at-home teacher (Robinson et al., 2022).

Pandemic-related workplace stress and unrealistic remote teaching expectations caused an unprecedented number of teachers to leave the profession, submit their resignations, or retire (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2021). The pandemic affected not only teaching staff but also school and district leadership. Diliberti and Schwartz (2021) found nationwide that 6% of principals retired or resigned at the end of the 2020–2021 school year and that by the spring of 2022, one in 10 school superintendents planned to leave their positions. Merod (2022) reported that 40% of American Federation of Teachers members stated they would leave the profession in the next 2 years. As surveyed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, nearly half of secondary school principals are considering early retirement or changing careers (Merod, 2022).

Although turnover in the teaching profession is expected yearly, the ability to find licensed or credentialed educators to fill those positions has been a challenge. School leadership has been called to duty, teaching in the classroom to fill the shortages until long-term substitute or full-time teachers can fill those vacancies (Long, 2022). School districts have also relied on university teacher education programs to fill the void by requesting teacher candidates to take on the classroom teacher of record role as a teacher intern (Carver-Thomas et al., 2022).

Staff shortages, loss of instructional time, and increased expectations for the classroom teacher to bring students to grade-level competency have amplified the level of anxiety, thus affecting educators' **mental health** and wellness (Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Long, 2022). The combination of high-stress levels and job demands impacts teachers' social–emotional competence (Greenberg et al., 2016). A 2022 Gallup Poll found that burnout rates of K–12 teachers exceeded those of healthcare workers and law enforcement (Carstarphen, 2022). **The impact of high levels of stress and teacher burnout translates to “an increasing lack of confidence in their own job performance” (Carstarphen, 2022, para. 4). Additionally, teachers who are exhausted and experience low social–emotional competence are then not able to meet the needs of their students; thus, accelerating learning gaps (Carstarphen, 2022; Greenberg et al., 2016; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Long, 2022; Toth, 2020)**

Current Needs to Recover the Lost Time and Skills of the Past

School districts throughout the United States have received Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) investments from the American Rescue Plan (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). These funds were earmarked for school and education-based, pandemic-related needs. School district spending plans indicated that much of the ESSER funds had been allocated for academic recovery strategies, including after-school programs, summer school, and extended school-day initiatives (Blad, 2022; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Turner, 2022). For school districts to successfully implement pandemic-related school initiatives and strategies, constant self-reflection, evaluation, and feedback are needed from all school-based stakeholders, especially teachers.

Measuring student academic achievement is not solely a function of state or federal testing. Instead, school districts must think beyond the expected and build resilient education systems to assist teachers in developing targeted curricula to ensure sustained learning (Blad, 2022; Toth, 2020) that taps into the needs of their students, building foundational skills and pushing students to think creatively and critically. The process is not that of remediating but accelerating student learning (Toth, 2020; Turner, 2022). When teachers know their students and understand their individual aptitudes, student knowledge can be cultivated to help them flourish through intense, diverse, and purposeful classroom activities that bring their academic skill sets up to grade level in core subject-level competencies (Blad, 2022). One such curriculum strategy is extended time devoted to literacy. Once trained literacy teachers and coaches are placed in classrooms to work with students, student performance is boosted at the elementary school level (Blad, 2022). Without a focus on individualized student learning, the pandemic may continue to have lasting and possibly negative consequences on educational equity and equality (Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

Besides a fundamental focus on strategies and programs to address student academic achievement, school district leaders also must pay attention to workplace conditions and the culture within the school community for teachers to succeed in the classroom (Carstarphen, 2022; Thomas, 2022). Building teacher trust and celebrating their work begins with a cultural transformation (Carstarphen, 2022; Davenport, 2018; Shafer, 2018; Wejr, 2017). The process is attainable when education leaders focus on the needs of the entire school community and listen to their teachers by providing a platform of continuous dialogue where trust, compassion, stability, and hope are attainable (Carstarphen, 2022; Davenport, 2018; Thomas, 2022). When teacher voices are heard and opinions valued, those educators are more likely to be re-energized, empowered, and willing to continue cultivating a positive school climate (Carstarphen, 2022; Davenport, 2018) for their students regardless of the obstacles pandemic may have brought to the forefront.

As an additional step to support student educational outcomes, school districts have investigated how to assist students in recovering lost social and behavioral skills due to the pandemic. One program strategy includes the integration of social and emotional learning (SEL) as a school-based cultural transformational curriculum

that is practiced daily within the classroom (Hamilton et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2022). To effectively implement SEL, especially post-pandemic, teachers must first receive training to improve their social-emotional competence (SEC). When teachers exhibit low SEC and high stress, their classroom management and instruction will suffer, which may impact student well-being and academic achievement (Ferren, 2021; Greenberg et al., 2016). Therefore, school and district leaders should invest in—and focus on—providing educators with SEL professional development and support to increase their aptitude to model positive SEL competencies for their students (Ferlazzo, 2022; Ferren, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2020; Yoder et al., 2020).

Integrating SEL-based learning competencies and mindfulness activities can positively impact students' and teachers' well-being, resulting in a more effective and safe learning environment, promoting tolerance, cultivating relationship skills, and encouraging better decision-making (Hess, 2022; Ferlazzo, 2022). To support the assimilation of SEL, school districts are hiring school-site SEL coaches, district coordinators, and social workers, and contracting third-party wellness professionals and mental health staff (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2021). The goal is to increase and modify SEL practices to support student learning across all grade levels within K–12 schools. Some districts have acknowledged the importance of student mental health by integrating support services to champion a range of well-being (Hamilton et al., 2020; Council of Europe, 2022) across their schools, which include safe places for learners, wellness centers, and Zen dens (Goldenberg, 2020; MagicBox Team, 2022).

Recovery From Learning Loss is a Never-Ending Cycle of Redefining Needs

The work of loss recovery is considerable and monumental. Despite efforts by school districts to provide academic interventions, the learning losses will persist as educators can never regain the time stolen by the pandemic to support, encourage, and engage student learning potential (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Even for those students who could “catch up” on paper and fill in some or all of the learning lost, there is still insufficient time during the school day to accelerate their knowledge. Time throughout the school day and within the classroom has now been allocated to rebuilding foundational skills in core subject content areas, such as English, mathematics, social studies, and science (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2022).

In using the classroom time, now, to attempt to recover the learning losses of the past, the same inadequacies of learning skills are perpetuated into the future regardless of whether accelerated learning applications are implemented in the classroom. Some students may never catch up or meet grade-level proficiency as reflected in common core state standards or on the accompanying assessment tests (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). This lack of **academic attainment and struggle to recover previously mastered skills can adversely impact students' mental health and personal well-being**, resulting in lower self-confidence (Zhu et al., 2022).

Educational reform, interventions, and continued research are needed now to change a system whose methods of instruction are antiquated. What may assist in helping students achieve academic confidence and proficiency is the implementation of social determinants of learning (SDOL). The premise is to broadly leverage SDOL and equitability within schools to redefine what is important in student learning, focusing on **students' overall education, psychosocial health, physical and social environment, mental health, and well-being** (Cox, 2022; Rutgers University Center for Effective School Practices, 2022). When looking at the effect **a quality education has on a student's future, other social determinants**, such as mental health and well-being and academic performance, can positively impact self-motivation and psychosocial and protective health-related behaviors (Cox, 2022; Sanderson et al., 2021; Rutgers University Center for Effective School Practices, 2022). Students who do not have or have not attained fundamental academic competency skills and lack proficiency in their coursework are at a higher level of health-related risk behaviors (Sanderson et al., 2021; Rutgers University Center for Effective School Practices, 2022).

By focusing on the broad context of learning and overall health, teachers can attempt to recapture some of the learning that has been lost before those learning deficits become permanent. The process must include creative approaches, resilience, and new norms of solving the issues faced within the classroom, which are unique to each school community (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Nowicki, 2022). When educators are given permission to foster a learning community that meets the diverse learning needs of their students, building upon the foundation of SDOL, students will gain confidence in their academic acumen, thus cultivating resilience in their intellectual and social capital (Sanderson et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2022).

Recommendations for Leveraging the Social Determinants of Health

While the focus of K–12 schools has been on the context of making up for the lost time due to the pandemic, academic attainment and skills acquisition, as well as other aspects of holistic learning in schools, have been neglected—primarily the mental health and wellness of students and educators. The school environment plays a major role in the healthy development of students and the larger community (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion [OASH], n.d.; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Addressing the mental health and well-being of individual students, educators, and other stakeholders is a major challenge, which is evident in school communities across the United States and around the world in the post-pandemic era (Cox, 2022; Dennihy, 2020; Earp, 2020; Sanderson et al., 2021; Wilson & Burleigh, 2021)

To leverage the full spectrum of the social determinants of health (SDOH) and support the full range of SDOL for student and community needs, schools need to set aside a larger portion of their yearly budgets to staff mental health professionals, counselors, and social workers for ongoing support and emergency contingencies (OASH, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, 2023; Wilson & Burleigh, 2021). School staff and administrators should also require ongoing professional development in trauma-informed practices and crisis interventions (OASH, n.d.). Besides increasing services and professional development training, a focus on a healthy campus, inclusive of health care services, would promote a school community that is focused on the overall well-being of students and the community at large. As newly minted experts in remote instruction and engagement, schools can be a forerunner in the provision of virtual and/or distance support services that can supply the school community with much-needed connections to mental health and other wellness resources.

The fact is when students feel cared for and safe within their schools, interventions targeting the full scope of the SDOH have the potential to increase proficiency in reading and math, resulting in higher graduation rates and improved educational attainment (Artiga & Hinton, 2018; Cox, 2022; OASH, n.d.). By expanding focus beyond the four walls of the classroom, the education system can be a key force in the effort to reach the goals of the Healthy People 2030 initiative (n.d.-a). Healthy People 2030 is a national program coordinated by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, based on core objectives to improve the health and well-being of those individuals living in the United States, inclusive of evidence-based resources with a focus on SDOH (“Healthy People 2030,” n.d.-b). During the worst parts of the pandemic, schools and communities were forced to prioritize medical intervention and physical wellness above all other factors. Yet, medical care is only one part of the larger SDOH. Failure to attend to the full scope of the SDOH has widespread, deleterious results.

Schools and education-connected professionals are present in every community and have the ability to influence all people within their reach. Now is the time to expand the scope of intervention and focus on the full range of needs in communities that include SDOL and SDOH. When applied holistically and equitably, the SDOH can be leveraged to support the specific needs of any given community, at any given time. As a result, gaps in coverage and long-standing disparities in access can be closed, thereby producing healthier, better-educated individuals, and stronger communities in service to the greater good.

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