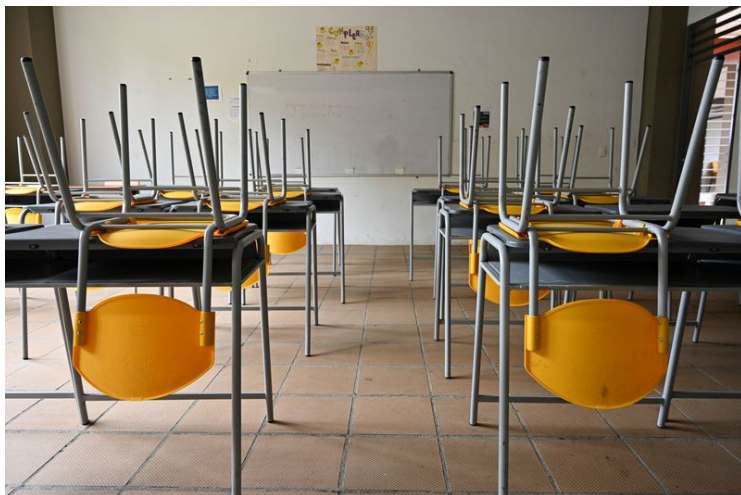


OPINION

# Coronavirus: Don't forget about poor kids

By **AUSTIN L. WRIGHT** and **JACOB N. SHAPIRO**  
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(LUIS ROBAYO/AFP via Getty Images)

The United States is in the midst of the greatest mass mobilization of public health resources in nearly a century. Every day brings new restrictions: social distancing, self-quarantine, and city- and state-wide restrictions on public life, from restaurants to movies. Washington is taking dramatic measures to reduce the economic harm from these measures. Just yesterday President Trump signed a massive bipartisan bill expanding unemployment insurance and paid sick leave.

Sadly, such actions do little to address the disproportionate impact protective measures will have on poor and at-risk children.

These children already face striking inequality in access to quality primary and secondary education. School closures will exacerbate these inequities. Public schools, at their best, can be a gateway to success. Yet students from communities of need are less likely to have access to quality instruction, have fewer accelerated college preparation programs, and typically receive mental health support from overburdened staff. For these students, missing even one opportunity to thrive can be the difference between dropping out of school and going to college.

This was true for Austin, who attended Memorial High School in San Antonio, Tex. Of Memorial's students, nearly 95% are economically disadvantaged and more than 80% are classified as at risk of dropping out. Spending time with teachers and coaches before and after school changed the trajectory of Austin's life, setting him on the path to a college scholarship. After college Austin taught high school mathematics in New Orleans with Teach for America. His students faced the same challenges he had: economic disadvantage, familial dislocation, and the aftermath of personal trauma. For those kids, school was a safe haven from the instability and tragedy of their home life. As we close schools to slow the spread of the virus, we are also taking away those invaluable safe havens.

Don't get us wrong. The coronavirus represents the greatest challenge the U.S. has faced in decades. People over the age of 50 and the immuno-suppressed face a high risk of death if infected, and increasingly so with age. And if we don't limit the virus' spread — flattening the curve — then sick people from vulnerable populations will overwhelm the healthcare system's limited intensive care resources, putting us all at risk. It's hard for a child with severe flu to get a bed in the ICU if it's full of coronavirus victims receiving critical respiratory care.

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While the benefits are clear, less attention is being paid to the certain costs of aggressive action. Near-pervasive school closures (43 of 50 states as of this writing) mean that children in all kinds of households will lose out on formal schooling. The burden of these foregone opportunities will disproportionately burden poor students and those already at risk of exiting formal education. Their parents are more likely to be ill-prepared to step in for trained teachers, and they are less likely to have access to the prerequisites of distance learning: devices, broadband internet, and appropriate places to study. And some unknown number of the 30.4 million children who participate in the National School Lunch Program will lose critical nutritional support.



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The consequences of these “missing months” will be compounded as these children’s options for attending college or seeking vocational training become limited by their parents’ depleted formal and informal savings. Massive layoffs have already started, and as weeks stretch into months, businesses will shutter, forcing eligible employees to turn to unemployment insurance and undocumented workers to informal social safety nets. These financial shocks will reduce access healthcare, increasing morbidity and mortality among the most vulnerable populations and further harming their children.

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We are re-orienting society to avoid harm to those most at risk from the disease. It is a moral imperative that we also take actions to help those most harmed by the response.

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So what should government do? A one-time check from the federal government will help offset some immediate costs. But while cash transfers can ease some of the economic strains of the

crisis, but they cannot address the fact that school closures place a disproportionate burden on poor and at-risk children. All children deserve quality learning opportunities during periods of social distancing.

Getting there won't be easy, but it's doable. Schools could be funded to purchase and distribute tablets to every child who lacks access to a computer and qualifies for NSLP. Schools that already have tablets could receive subsidized insurance, allowing them to relax restrictions on home use without fearing the inevitable loss and breakage. Tax credits could allow expansion of broadband

in low-income communities and enable ISPs to offer free service to households whose children qualify for NSLP.

If we can reshape society to stop the spread of coronavirus, we can surely find ways to mitigate some of the overlooked problems closing schools will create and to serve the educational, nutritional and mental health needs of at-risk children. We owe it to the most vulnerable of our youth to try.

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