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The COVID Games: Resilience in the Shadow of a Global Pandemic

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The last few years read like any number of dystopian novels; *The Hunger Games trilogy* by Suzanne Collins (2008–2010) and Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014) come to mind. In both novels, the characters battle common enemies along with each other as they face physical threats, misinformation, limited resources, and the emotional stress of accepting a new normal (Collins, 2008–2010; St. John Mandel, 2014). The COVID–19 pandemic changed the way individuals across the world worked, studied, played, and generally interacted with each other and their environments. While evolving science pointed to significant health impacts on the elderly and individuals with comorbidities, (Dallas County, 2023; Denton County Public Health, 2023; Tarrant County, 2023; The COVID Tracking Project, 2023) our children faced a level of upheaval in their lives that impacted their physical, emotional, social, and academic development (Herbers et al., 2021; Mai et al., 2021). These impacts were, and indeed still are, disproportionately impacting children of color (Dubois et al., 2021; Herbers et al., 2021).

If a pandemic was not enough to force children to grapple with adult challenges, emotions, and decisions, this country is in the middle of a difficult reckoning with our history of racism, misogyny, homo- and transphobia, and religious discrimination that impact education and public health (Krieger, 2019; Smith, 2022; Walker, 2023; Wilcox et al.,

2021). Students are caught in the middle of intense fights among adults about what, where, how, and from whom they learn (Walker, 2023). While many are independent thinkers, minor students have little agency or decision-making power over their own education, healthcare, or socialization, depending on adults with legal authority to make decisions in their best interests (Mann et al., 2021). This extended season of stress and trauma will undoubtedly have lifelong impacts on the children of COVID, especially children of color for whom forced resilience, grit, and adaptability are the consequences of longstanding “othering” and societal inequities (Bollyky, 2023; Krieger, 2019; Wilcox et al., 2021).

This article explores the pandemic era experiences of students in North Texas through existing literature and interviews with students, parents, educators, and nonprofit leaders who leaned into the work of meeting basic needs in an extremely challenging time. I begin with data on COVID–19 infection rates in the community and publicly available data from three school districts and Texas Education Agency on academic achievement to ground the article in the quantitative facts of this experience. The following sections highlight interviews to understand the human impact of the pandemic. Parents and educators share their perspectives on the challenges students faced, unpacking what they wish they had known early in the pandemic, the strengths they saw in the children as they navigated learning in an unusual situation, and their worries and hopes for the future. Nonprofit leaders from organizations addressing children’s mental health, homelessness prevention, food insecurity, and out-of-classroom education share how

their work changed during the pandemic, the importance of supporting students' basic needs for academic and social-emotional development, and how they saw children respond to the pandemic. Finally, students share their own perspectives on learning during the pandemic and the lessons they hope decision-makers learn to transform the educational experience.

COVID Infection Rates in North Texas

Before unpacking the qualitative impact of COVID-19 to certain individuals in North Texas, it is important to understand the quantitative effects of the pandemic on the region. The individuals I interviewed all lived, worked, and learned in the three largest counties in North Texas: Dallas, Tarrant, Denton.

I consulted the United States Census Bureau 2021 data to provide context on these areas of North Texas. Dallas county covers 872.1 square miles of land area and is home to 2,613,539 residents in 940,587 households. The median age is 33.7 years old; school age children between the ages of at least five and under 18 years make up 18.9% of the population. The median household income is \$61,796, 65.5% of residents are employed, 32.4% have obtained at least a bachelor's degree, and 22.9% lack health insurance (United States Census Bureau, 2021^a). Tarrant county has slightly fewer residents and higher income levels than Dallas. The county covers 863.4 square miles of land area and is home to 2,110,640 residents in 727,094 households. The median age is 34.8 years old; school age children between the ages of at least five and under 18 years make up 19.4% of the population. The median household income is \$70,139, 64.7% of residents are employed,

34.1% have obtained at least a bachelor's degree, and 16.7% lack health insurance (United States Census Bureau, 2021^c). Denton county covers 879.3 square miles of land area and is home to 906,422 residents in 305,164 households. The median age is 36 years old; school age children between the ages of at least five and under 18 years make up 28.7% of the population. The median household income is \$90,523, 70.7% of residents are employed, 46.1% have obtained at least a bachelor's degree, and 11.7% lack health insurance (United States Census Bureau, 2021^b).

All three of these counties remained in the highest level of transmission when schools reopened, with a cumulative case load of 1,208,961 and 11,776 deaths (Dallas County, 2023; Denton County Public Health, 2023; Tarrant County, 2023). Transmission rates are now low in all three counties and the pandemic has officially ended, though all three counties have continued to see new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths related to COVID-19. Over a seven-day period in May, the three counties added more than 600 cases and reported at least five deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Dallas County, 2023; Denton County Public Health, 2023; Tarrant County, 2023). Black and Hispanic Texans have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 in both positive cases and mortality rates; in Texas, African American individuals were more likely to contract COVID-19 and Hispanic individuals were most likely to die from the disease (The COVID Tracking Project, 2021).

An early divisive talking point was that children could not get COVID-19, but this was proven untrue as new strands

developed, especially delta and omicron. When schools reopened, 18% of cumulative COVID-19 cases in Dallas County were attributed to children 17 years of age or younger while 14% were attributed to individuals of at least 60 years, previously considered one of the most vulnerable groups (Dallas County, 2023). In Tarrant County, children under 15 had 15% of the share of COVID cases compared to 9% for people over 65 (Tarrant County, 2023). Cases in individuals under the age of 19 in Denton County were more than double the cases in individuals over 60. However, the impacts of the disease were far more likely to lead to death in older populations (Dallas County, 2023; Denton County Public Health, 2023; Tarrant County, 2023). Another challenge was the highly contagious nature of the disease. In Denton County, a strong majority of people with COVID-19 did not know where or how they got infected (Denton County Public Health, 2023). With asymptomatic spread and inconsistent contact tracing, the return to school was likely a key contributor to juvenile COVID-19 cases.

The Academic Landscape

The COVID-19 pandemic also negatively impacted the academic landscape for participants in this study, especially for students of color. The testimonies following this section provide firsthand accounts of this impact. At the time of interviews, schools had reopened but COVID-19 still raged. For context, the Appendix provides detailed data on interview participants' school districts. It is clear from these data that students of color are underserved in North Texas, especially African American and Hispanic students who have much less participation in higher-level coursework and

slightly lower four-year graduation rates than their peers (Murphy et al., 2021). On the Texas Education Agency (TEA) website, Murphy et al. (2021) demonstrated District 1 had a TEA Accountability Rating of B. Most students were economically disadvantaged and considered at risk. District 2 had a TEA Accountability Rating of B. About one third of the students were economically disadvantaged and considered at risk. District 3 had a TEA Accountability Rating of B. Just under half of the students were economically disadvantaged and 4% were considered at risk.

Learning in the Time of COVID

The individuals interviewed represented families of various size, age, economic status, and race. Some were directly impacted by COVID-19 through personal, family, or coworker infection. Most had children in school, several were single parents, many were educators with children in their own households who needed care and instruction, and almost all were tied to the nonprofit community as leaders, volunteers, or support recipients. All had to rethink the way they approached their daily lives once COVID-19 came to North Texas.

In the Trenches: Reflections from Parents and Educators

In speaking to parents and educators about their experiences over the past two years, one interview participant sums up the general feeling, "In the beginning, it was like... it was awful." When local school districts extended Spring Break in 2020 by one week, students rejoiced while the adults in their lives wondered how to keep them occupied for another week of vacation. As more businesses and public places entered

lockdown and schools moved to online learning, the challenge of keeping students occupied expanded to how to keep them safe, on track academically, mentally stimulated, socially connected, and physically active. Parents and educators had to balance the needs of their juvenile charges with their own needs, fears, and anxieties as challenges multiplied and intensified.

One of the biggest challenges during school closures was technology. Schools did their best to provide devices to students who did not have them at home, but they had little control over Wi-Fi access. Even without a pandemic, the technology gap disproportionately impacts Black and Brown students, leaving them less prepared for academic and career success than their White peers (Dubois et al., 2021). They are forced to face adversity with fewer resources, building resiliency as they overcome systemic challenges (Burt et al., 2022; Herbers et al., 2021; Wilcox et al., 2021).

Systemic inequities aside, online schooling presented confusing and frustrating new processes for many parents and teachers in this study. Teachers were not familiar with the various platforms schools employed to serve students at home and parents did not receive proper training to assist their children. All online activity comes with inherent risks of privacy invasion, so many platforms require multiple steps just to log in to access assignments. One missed step could have significant consequences. One parent reported that her son was repeatedly marked absent due to login errors and his school refused to correct the error because it would complicate their required reporting to the state. This

experience did little to build goodwill between the parent and the school during a very difficult time.

For elementary children, some districts tried sending home learning kits with physical manipulatives and paper packets, but these did not solve the issue of connectivity between the teacher and student. Grading became an issue because teachers were afraid to touch packets that might carry the COVID-19 virus, and parents without reliable transportation or time to travel to and from drop-off points could not consistently pick up and deliver the materials for grading. The transportation gap also disadvantaged certain students academically, contributing to a culture of the “haves” and “have-nots.” As one parent educator stated, “Help is not helpful if you can’t get to it.”

Parents also expressed disappointment over the quality of online instruction their children received. While many teachers adjusted their teaching methods to better engage students in an online format, others were unable or unwilling to adapt to the setting. One parent said,

I sat in on some classes to figure out why my kids were having such a hard time. A teacher was writing on the board, and everything was mirrored for the students. She had long nails that were distracting. She had a [bad] attitude when the students had questions. I could tell in person she managed by authority, not by building relationships, and that was intensified virtually.

The teacher was stressed, the mother was angry, and the children were struggling. For

the first time, this mother's children had to attend summer school to make up classes. Due to the pandemic, summer school was only offered online.

Parents had much clearer views into their children's education during lockdown, but several parents reported that teachers were less accessible when they were needed the most. Some educators were quarantined or hospitalized due to COVID-19 infection, others were breaking down and retreating under the pressure of negative stressors (Baker et al., 2021), and almost all were pulled in different directions as they taught their own classes, covered others, and attended to their home lives. Relationships among parents, teachers, and students suffered. One parent noted the difference she saw between experienced teachers and newer teachers, saying,

Inexperienced teachers don't understand the importance of checking in with students emotionally and just asking how they're doing. Yes, you're online, yes, you only have 45 minutes, yes, you have a PowerPoint. But you also have human beings on the other end of the screen and you have to build relationships.

On the other hand, another son benefitted from a teacher who had more classroom experience differentiating learning for her students. She was more patient, attentive, and engaging, focused more on the children as autonomous beings than vessels for knowledge.

Whether or not parents could respond to dissatisfaction was largely impacted by financial stability. Financial stability was an important factor in at-home

education during school shutdowns. Affluent families had more flexibility in how their children engaged with the outside world than families in lower income brackets. When one father in an affluent part of Tarrant County noticed his kindergartener was not responding well to at-home learning, he enrolled his son in an exclusive, low-enrollment private school. Once there, his son began to thrive. This type of flexibility was not available to parents who earned a lower income, including many essential workers and immigrant families without the means to pay tuition and transport their children to and from private schools.

The overwhelming stress of the lockdown was felt intensely by parents who were also teachers. Educators' mental health suffered under the stress of moving learning online, worrying about their students' safety, and attempting to prepare students to meet standard benchmarks (Baker et al., 2021). Parent educators felt pulled in different directions while managing the education and expectations of the children in their classrooms along with the children in their homes. One teacher acknowledged this dilemma, stating, "I'm at home trying to teach other people's kids, but guess what? I have kids at home, too. They have questions, they need help. I want to watch out for my own kids, but I want to help your kids, too. It's two jobs." This pressure on parents and educators certainly impacted the pressure students felt.

Building CommUNITY: Reflections from Nonprofit Supporters

As the community grappled with the challenges of COVID-19, nonprofit organizations struggled and adapted right

along with parents, educators, and students. As a nonprofit leader during this time, I had firsthand experience with the needs in our community and the difficulty of trying to serve increased requests for help with fewer resources. Rather than focusing on building support for our own program, we pivoted to providing funds, volunteers, and back-office support to other organizations directly in the social services arena. Many of us moved services online, lost donations and volunteers, and switched our focus to the immediate needs of the community even if they distracted from our mission. We gathered outdoors in masks and gloves to hand out food, cleaning supplies, and hand sanitizer, no questions asked. All we could do was wake up each day and react. I spoke with four other nonprofit leaders to understand their experiences with the children growing up during the COVID-19 pandemic. One worked in preventing student homelessness, one in food insecurity and emergency assistance, one in mental health, and one in an afterschool enrichment program.

The district served by the organization preventing homelessness reports approximately 1,000 students in insecure housing at any given time. Most of these are students of color who are referred to the organization by school counselors. This was one of the only organizations to describe a positive outcome of moving services online. They reported that more people were willing to ask for help and be honest about their living situation when meeting through the Zoom online platform as compared to meeting in person. This allowed the organization to provide better care and more thorough wraparound services for students in need.

The out-of-school enrichment provider, on the other hand, had different experiences with online services. Moving workshops online allowed her to reach outside the immediate area, but she noted the same issues as parents and classroom teachers when discussing teaching through a screen. It was challenging to address social and emotional issues virtually. Her students of color did not have the same level of access to high-speed internet and technology when compared to their White peers. Their living situations could also be distracting. One Black student joined classes from his mother's closet because it was the only place where he could be alone and away from the noise in his home. Still, he was frequently interrupted by siblings asking if he was done with the iPad, which was shared among all family members. The leader of the organization was impressed with the resilience she saw in the students. She stated,

Race has and will continue to impact students' resilience in this country. COVID is just an added pandemic to racism that has still not fully been addressed and long-term solutions provided. Despite the rising number of deaths, school and business closures, and loss of jobs, our students have continued to excel in our programs which enhances their learning in the traditional school setting. Many of our students could've easily used the pandemic as an excuse but they've continued to show up.

Since the pandemic ended, her workshops have returned to in-person environments, and she has noted that, while internet connectivity is no longer a challenge, her

families of color still struggle with a lack of transportation that negatively impacts attendance and engagement.

The emergency resources provider was deemed an essential worker and remained open during the lockdown. While this was necessary for the community, the program suffered under increased demand with fewer volunteers to distribute resources. Local grocery stores and restaurants continued providing surplus food, but families without access to transportation could not collect provisions in a city with no public transportation. Eating well leads to better overall physical, mental, and academic health, but families in poverty must depend on the salt-laden canned goods and carbohydrate- and sugar-heavy surplus grocery items available (Asigbee et al., 2018). Nonprofit organizations want to help, but there are deep systemic issues at play that prevent them from providing equitable access to fresh food. This organization serves mostly Black and Brown families. Many have multiple generations housed in small apartments without private outdoor spaces for children to get fresh air and play. These same families are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 (The COVID Tracking Project, 2021) due in part to their living situations and lack of health insurance. When they come to the food bank for provisions, there are few fresh items provided because the food needs to have a longer shelf life. Funding is available for rental assistance and medical expenses regardless of immigration status, but many eligible families do not seek help due to the fear of being deported. She said, “Even when we tell them we don’t check their status, they don’t believe us. They won’t take the risk.” For many of these families,

school is the only place students get consistent access to meals.

A counseling center employee noted the difficulty of maintaining mental health during social upheaval. This impacted children and adults alike. There was nonstop pressure on parents to make sure their children were turning in assignments and learning something from home while staying on top of their own home and work responsibilities. On the other hand, many students went unaccounted for because they did not have an adult at home or stable Wi-Fi. They were alone or joining online from daycare with limited supervision. Parents’ margins were stretched because they had to add too much on top of being a parent. As seen at this counseling center, individuals who do not handle stress well can become neglectful and abusive. An employee of the counseling center who also had children in school worried about the educators. She said, “I felt for the teachers. It’s been hard for me to be upset at the teachers because I see what they go through.” As with other organizations, the need for services increased as individuals attempted to cope with an onslaught of unknown variables. She saw children every day who were forced to grow up too fast. The pandemic increased this pressure on children of color. Students were also exhibiting signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and antisocialism. Simple childhood activities such as birthday parties all but ceased, removing opportunities for students to learn to be patient and celebrate others. As one grandmother reported, some very young children did not have traditional opportunities to learn how to organically make friends, so they resorted to buying friends with physical items and favors. On the other hand, some older children,

especially those who had to assume adult responsibilities at home, exhibited mature levels of empathy, responsiveness, and resilience.

The common understanding in these organizations was that children can only focus so much on their learning when they have unmet basic needs like shelter, food, clothing, and love (Mann et al., 2021). Continuing to learn under intense stress and asking for help when needed are courageous acts of resilience. Our community's children needed the leaders in their lives to show resilience by pushing through hard times to continue offering critical social services so that every child had the tools they needed to cope with the stress of COVID-19 (Mai et al., 2021; Mann et al., 2021). These social service providers could collaborate with each other and share resources to model for students what it means to create a culture of acceptance, belonging, and resilience (Mann et al., 2021).

The Kids Are Alright... Right? Reflections from Students

The students that I spoke to about their experiences during COVID-19 revealed that they were more willing to accept the novelty of the pandemic than the adults in their lives. While adults strived to collect, process, and respond to ever-changing stimuli, the children seemed content to react and move forward. While carefully responding may lead to better outcomes and relationships in the long run, reacting gets one through the day. Children look to adults to guide them, keep them safe, and help them manage their emotions. When adults buckle under pressure, children see it. When some children have resources that others do not have, children see it. When

certain children are treated differently because of their skin tone, children see it. They need adults to see these things, authentically reflect on them, and respond (Herbers et al., 2021; Mai et al., 2021; Mann et al., 2021).

Most of the students I interviewed preferred learning at home. They were physically comfortable, got to sleep later, and had less restricted access to their personal possessions. However, this freedom had a negative impact on some because the temptation to check their phone or jump over to a computer game kept them from fully engaging in tasks. Some schools attempted to mitigate this by providing devices that could only be used for schoolwork and requiring students to keep their cameras on, but this came with potential psychological stressors for children who were embarrassed for their living situations to be seen on camera. Students who preferred learning at school recognized their own needs for in-person social interactions. Some were stressed academically because they did not have the same opportunities to get help from their teachers or check for understanding. A boy in preschool struggled without a consistent routine and missed playing with his friends. His brother, a highly gifted fifth grader, cried a lot. In trying to manage a class virtually, his teachers forced rigidity and structure from bell to bell. Students had to raise their hands to get permission to use the bathroom and were required to turn their cameras on without virtual backgrounds. The teachers turned off chat to mitigate side conversations and distractions, but the children quickly worked around this by opening shared Google slides to chat. This workaround shows a certain level of resilience and adaptation, but one sensitive

young man did not perform well under the change from autonomy to control.

One family noted their relationships with each other improved when in-person learning resumed. Home life often dictated whether children returned to in-person learning when schools reopened. Demands at home were different for students of color. They shared more family responsibilities. They were cooking, cleaning, and taking care of siblings because their parents had to go to work. This primarily impacted Latina girls in one predominantly Hispanic district. Many in one district did not return to school because their parents needed them to help at home. Many of these kids were also working, sometimes full-time outside the home, to make up for lost income. Sometimes they were a babysitter at home because, as one district administrator noted, “their parents could not watch them and did not want to worry about what they were doing.” According to the same district administrator, some of these parents had low expectations prior to the pandemic which were only exacerbated by new stressors. Their children did not have to log in on time for virtual instruction, they just had to get home before midnight. These decisions came with potentially long-term consequences.

In one high school career academy, students were removed from their career pathways if they chose to continue online learning instead of returning to campus. This decision upset students, parents, and school personnel who saw a greater impact on marginalized students. Many of the students forced to surrender their pathways were motivated, career-focused young adults who had to stay home to supervise and assist younger siblings while their parents were at

work. The students would have been happy to maintain their pathways at home if they had been given the right tools. One participant shared that community partners stepped up to offer adapted materials and curriculum to serve these students, but high-level district leadership and the school board would not accept the assistance. After sometimes years in their chosen career pathway, students who could not return to their classroom were forced to give up their passion and change schools.

Returning to school from in-home learning was not a seamless transition. One third grader thought he was going back to school as normal, but there was no contact, sports, or hugs. Students were spread out at lunch for social distancing so much that they could not talk to each other. His mother said,

For an eight-year-old with autism, communication and social delays, it was all so different. It took him three months to get somewhat adjusted. There were increased expectations because he started seeing two teachers instead of one, but they didn’t have second grade time to transition.

An older boy missed seeing his friends and noted that learning online was glitchy. His older brother was excited to go back in some ways, but he was not looking forward to unwanted attention on his newly developed physical disability, likely a symptom of a COVID–19 infection. Another boy who was a minority at his school noted that every time he coughed, a group of kids would start pointing at him and yelling that he had COVID–19. The kids did not bully other kids who looked like them. This child’s teacher, who also did not

look like him, did nothing to stop the bullying and did less to help this student academically. All attention is not good attention.

Now that schools are back in session, students and teachers are learning how to interact in person again (Mann et al., 2021). The landscape is different now, and some individuals are doing better than others. The bullied student noted a change in his peers pre- and post-lockdown, saying “Last year I knew everybody there, but they came back different.” He expressed that students came back being rude and unfriendly to each other. Fortunately, classroom instruction improved in his school. Teachers taught differently than they had before lockdown, intentionally including more interaction and connection. In contrast to his charter school, a public school district in the same region responded differently to the return to school. An administrator said, “We haven’t gone back to traditional teaching, [the students are] still on the iPads. The role of the teachers has shifted, but we haven’t responded. They are keeping the digital curriculum even though they’re in person.” There was such fear of a return to lockdown, district leadership defaulted to virtual education in an in-person setting. This did little to help students who returned to the classroom lacking social-emotional skills. It is hard to tell a student to put away their iPad and socialize when they are being trained to be on a device all day.

A parent in this same district noted that since returning to school, children of color were disciplined more strongly than their White peers. She said,

It’s making things worse for kids of color. They’re getting in trouble for

minor infractions and sent to alternative schools, which are busting at the seams. They’re looking to send 60 kids home before break because there’s a waitlist for alternative school.

She noted that district leadership did not investigate the issue.

Children are resilient. Overall, the students interviewed for this paper approached each day of the pandemic with a “business as usual” attitude that allowed them to transition more easily between online and in-person situations than the adults in their lives. In general, they accepted that they still had to learn, even when they were directly impacted by COVID-19. They showed empathy for each other and grappled with mature emotions. They wore masks without complaint, even as adults railed about their freedoms. They were faithful, hopeful, and tenacious.

Resilient children want the adults in their lives to appreciate and trust that resilience. Many schools continue to take a one-size-fits-all approach to learning with minimal differentiation. Something that stood out in the students who greatly preferred online learning was that they had different needs than the average student. They were gifted, or they had a demanding home life, or they lived with a physical or learning disability that caused them to disengage in a traditional learning environment. Adults should learn from their ability to thrive in a virtual environment and start applying more flexibility and autonomy when they are in the classroom. These strong, resilient children have had adult situations thrust on them in a very difficult time, thriving when some adults could not.

They deserve an opportunity to exercise some control over their learning environments.

Worries and Hopes for the Future

COVID-19 was an intense experience in North Texas. Parents, teachers, and students shared similar fears, worries, and hopes. Some of these came from the pandemic, but others are systemic issues that have long plagued communities of color. Adults worried about children's social-emotional development before the pandemic, but the extended isolation we faced collectively has intensified their concerns. One parent asked, "Will these kids ever truly learn how to be collaborative when—take out COVID—I'm on my phone, I'm online, I'm 'being social' on my technology?" He shared that he worries his daughters do not have a strong concept of what it means to have friends. He said, "As older adults, you have networks. I can rely on you, I can go talk to you, we can bounce things off each other. Kids today don't know how to do that." Another parent echoed his concern, saying, "Somebody isn't your friend just because you complain about the same things." Both parents mentioned social media and digital devices as causes of their children's social-emotional decline, noting that kids ask each other about SnapChat, not what their interests are. They communicate through social media channels, not through personal interaction. It remains to be seen whether this perceived social-emotional decline impacts children as they enter adulthood. Are their skills truly declining, or is communication changing with the times?

These concerns extended to academic gaps exacerbated by COVID-19. A parent educator noted that communities of

color are already behind and that districts simply employ "smokescreens" instead of addressing the achievement gap, such as ineffective interventions or special programming that takes up time and resources without much impact. He stressed that Black and Brown students will continue to fall behind because they have never and will never be the focus. As a Black man, this was a personal issue for him and his children. He said,

Can these kids perform virtually? Do they have a device and internet? These kids aren't going to get enrichment programs. They're still going to have to take standardized tests without teaching them what they missed. [Schools] don't bridge gaps, they just make you move forward.

He believes there will continue to be academic gaps and a higher need for remediation for students of color because districts will not do the work to identify and meaningfully differentiate learning based on student needs. He went on,

It's all about money. We haven't learned anything. We keep doing the same things we've always done because they don't want to say they've done something wrong if it's benefitting them financially. They don't question the concepts. We have to stop holding every child to the same standard.

His cynicism was built on his experiences as an educator and parent, but it was reinforced by the inaction he saw from leadership when there was an opportunity to step up for students of color. Sadly, this has left him

questioning whether he wants to continue teaching.

Similar concerns weigh heavily on many individuals, with the added fear of long-term physical, emotional, and social impacts of COVID-19. A grandmother and former educator whose whole family contracted COVID-19 simply wanted everyone to wash their hands, get vaccinated, and listen to the science. She took on an exasperated tone saying, “If you don’t have your health, you don’t have anything.” She celebrated the community that came together to support her family when they were ill. Individuals from her church, the school district, and local nonprofits delivered food, conducted virtual visits to raise the family’s spirits, prayed for their health, and made sure the young boys received their schoolwork. The love and support they received inspired them all to give back to their community after they healed. She recognized that to be resilient, you need a strong support system.

There is hope for the future if we collectively reflect, re-evaluate, and respond to the needs of our students, especially our students of color. Technology might not be a solution on its own, but there are many tools that schools can employ to differentiate instruction, broaden opportunities, and build student choice into classroom assignments. Virtual meeting software, for example, allows connections across the world that are not possible without technology.

The disruption of COVID-19 provided an opportunity to rethink how classes are assigned and facilitated. Parents expressed an increased appreciation for physical education and the arts when these were missing from at-home learning

curriculum. There is great value in physical activity and creative expression to help students burn energy, but these courses are the first to go when funding is cut (Hirt, 2020; Tamer, 2008). Should we find ourselves in another lockdown situation, we now know that COVID-19 is not spread through physical materials. Art kits, sports equipment, and manipulatives could be sent home for students to use with teachers facilitating through an online platform. If internet bandwidth is an issue, lessons could be recorded and downloaded to play back. Even if another lockdown is not on the horizon, these solutions could be employed for homebound students or even as make-up work when students are absent.

Conclusion

The world has changed. How we parent, work, teach, and learn should also change. While this pandemic has ended, there is no guarantee we will not face another global disease outbreak. Educators and parents have an opportunity to apply the lessons of COVID-19 to potential future public crises. There is no excuse for inaction, resignation, or defeat as we move forward. We can all come together to have hope, build communities, and help each other through fear and frustration.

While the focus of this paper was on a specific geographic region, the implications extend beyond this area. Our children have much to teach us about strength, resilience, and adaptability. I hope this paper serves as a call to action on the inequities in education, healthcare, and social services and a celebration of the generation that will lead us through future challenges and transformations. Our kids should not have to fight for equal access to

opportunities because they were born into a certain skin color or tax bracket. If parents, educators, and nonprofit organizations work together to ensure every child has their basic needs met, receives a high-quality education, and knows they are loved and accepted, we will go a long way toward building resilient students who can thrive no matter what adversity comes their way.

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Appendix

School District Statistics

	All Students	American Indian or Alaska Native	Black or African	Asian American	Latinx	Pacific Islander	White	2+ Races
District 1								
Total Population	100%	0.40%	3.30%	17.80%	65.60%	0.10%	10.60%	2.10%
4-Year Graduation	93.40%	77.80%	98.60%	95%	92.60%	N/A	94.10%	97.80%
Dropout Rates	1.50%	0%	0.30%	1.20%	1.60%	0%	2.30%	0%
AP/IB Test Participation	26.90%	11.10%	65.10%	26.30%	23.30%	N/A	35.50%	45.10%
AP/IB Success	24.20%	N/A	35.40%	20.70%	19.50%	N/A	35.90%	43.20%
Avg. SAT	941							
Avg. ACT	0.201							
College Ready Graduate	27.50%							
District 2								
Total Population	100%	0.40%	15%	12.60%	52.80%	0.10%	38.80%	4.20%
4-Year Graduation	95.70%	91.70%	96.80%	94.40%	92.60%	N/A	97.60%	95.90%
Dropout Rates	0.90%	0%	0.40%	1.50%	1.70%	0%	0.40%	1%
AP/IB Test Participation	26.60%	17.20%	58.20%	9.80%	14.70%	25%	27.70%	26.70%
AP/IB Success	78.90%	100%	84.30%	63.30%	64.60%	N/A	80.50%	87.30%
Avg. SAT	1166							
Avg. ACT	24.70							
College Ready Graduate	61.10%							
District 3								
Total Population	100%	2%	1.30%	36.30%	36.30%	0%	20.60%	5.30%
4-Year Graduation	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Dropout Rates	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
AP/IB Test Participation	2%	N/A	N/A	0%	0%	N/A	9.10%	N/A
AP/IB Success	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Avg. SAT	994							
Avg. ACT	18.6							
College Ready Graduate	28.20%							

Appendix created by author using data collected from Murphy et al., 2021.