



A Year of Harm and Counting: San Francisco's Ongoing Public School Failure

Summary

The San Francisco Unified School District is in crisis. Our public school children have endured remote and hybrid learning far longer than necessary, and the extent of the harm to our children and the system alike won't be fully realized for years to come. Remote and hybrid learning have contributed to significant learning loss, absenteeism, and disengagement in the student population. Math and reading scores are down, particularly in vulnerable populations. Impacts on graduation rates have yet to be reported, but are likely to be significant, [similar to other urban districts](#). Students' mental and emotional health has suffered. SFUSD and the Board of Education have a professional and moral obligation to finally do the work that will assure all students can return to full-time, in-person school by the first day of next school year.

The City and County of San Francisco has been an unmistakable [national leader in its pandemic response](#), credited with quick and decisive actions that enabled it to avoid the calamities experienced in other cities. San Francisco has consistently had lower transmission rates, has had the lowest COVID death rate of any city in the United States, and is currently a leader in getting vaccines into arms. But while San Francisco's city government has set an example, SFUSD took a different path.

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, SFUSD sheltered in place and spent four weeks (three instructional weeks plus Spring Break) adjusting to remote learning for its more than 50,000 students. On April 13, 2020, remote learning started in earnest, though it was minimal, with many students, including SFUSD's youngest learners, only getting an hour of synchronous learning *per week*; SFUSD was asking for more independent study time for its kindergarteners than top universities ask of their graduate students. This problematic schedule continued until summer break. And most unfortunately, education leaders did not learn their lesson. Instead, SFUSD and the Board subsequently squandered precious potential planning time for how to ensure a better solution for its students during school year 2020-2021 over the spring and summer.

The 2020-2021 school year started—100% remote—on August 17, 2020. Although the San Francisco Department of Public Health created a protocol for schools to use to reopen at the beginning of September 2020, the first SFUSD students did not see the inside of a classroom until about 200 days later, April 12, 2021. Most of our students have gone 14 months without in-person education, and even today, not one SFUSD student is receiving full-time school or in-person before- and after-care. The impact of the pandemic, and more specifically, the impact of SFUSD's and Board's failures to center students in its decision-making, have had devastating impacts on children in San Francisco. It would do well to note these failures now, so that these mistakes will never be repeated again.

-
- ***Hundreds of SFUSD students disengaged from school.*** Based on the District's analysis, [more than 950 students](#)—2% of the entire District—had less than 40% attendance, the majority of them in high school. That's less than two days out of a standard five-day school week, every week, from August through May, if they were attending at all. Half of those students were Latinx, and 25% were Black. In all, a third were classified as English Language Learners, and more than two-thirds were classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged.¹
 - ***SFUSD students fell behind in reading and math, particularly Black and Brown students.*** In the Fall of 2018, 70.8% of SFUSD students met math milestone tasks; in the October 2020, after only five months of remote learning, that number fell to 68.6%.² SFUSD also reported [significant year-over-year learning loss](#) in the District's Reading Inventory. Spring assessments suggest that these numbers are only continuing to get worse, with SFUSD instruction failing even more than usual to bring Black and Brown students to target reading and math levels.³ While there is some academic debate about how important learning loss really is, parents will tell you that if a kid can't read, a kid can't read.

¹ [SFUSD Fall 2020 Less Than 40 Pct Attendance Summary.pdf](#) (via BoardDocs)

² [SFUSD Fall 2020 MMT Participation Proficiency Summary.pdf](#) (via BoardDocs)

- **Struggling students fell further behind.** SFUSD saw a [drop in student math proficiency](#), occurring across ALL racial groups, and most significant among Pacific Islander students (down from 61% to 47%) and Black/African American students (down from 47% to 40%). Notably, when SFUSD did begin to partially reopen some schools to a limited selection of students, children in elementary schools with a higher than average percentage of low-income students were nearly twice as likely to have teachers who received medical exemptions, and in-person focal population high school students were even more likely to have remote teachers. Students in special education were also impacted by this to an alarming degree.⁴ If equity was the goal of the adults making the decisions, they have achieved the exact opposite.
- **SFUSD doesn't know how many high school students are at risk of not graduating.** It is alarming that this has not been a priority worth tracking.
- **SFUSD is likely to face significant enrollment reductions, which are likely to exacerbate SFUSD's budget concerns.** Enrollment in SFUSD [dropped 2%](#) from the 2019 school year to the 2020 school year. That trend is expected to continue. While SFUSD will not have an official 2022 school year enrollment count until Fall 2021, staff did report that [kindergarten applications were down 10%](#) from last year. Further, [preliminary budget documents](#) show that SFUSD is anticipating a loss of an additional 3.5% of its students in the 2022 school year.
- **Students' Mental Health concerns predictably worsened, and continue to worsen, during this prolonged learning loss.** Pediatricians warned no later than [June 2020](#) that the educational, physical, and emotional benefits of in-person learning outweighed the risks of COVID-19 in the classroom. That warning was prescient. In November, the [CDC reported](#) significant year-over-year increases in emergency department visits for children's mental health. In February, Dr. Jeanne Noble, UCSF director of COVID-19 response, reported that UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital had seen a doubling over emergency room visits and hospitalizations for mental health issues.⁵

Children are resilient, but they are not reservoirs. Reservoirs can recover from years of drought during one rainy winter. SFUSD and the Board cannot simply provide more education in future years and expect that learning loss isn't permanent. They cannot erase the depression, the suicide attempts, or the trips to our children's hospital's emergency rooms. SFUSD and the Board cannot welcome back families that have left—for private school, or the city entirely. **What they can do is put an end to demonstrably harmful remote learning, and they can begin to once again center students in their decision-making.** We are troubled to see the unblinking acceptance of Zoom in a Room as an in-person learning format this spring for children as young as five. If this is any indication of the direction of SFUSD and the Board for school year 2021-2022, **it would seem the district has yet to learn any lessons.**

We hope to be proven wrong.

³ [Learning Recovery Planning Presentation at 5/4/21 BOE Meeting](#)

⁴ [Analysis Medical Exemptions per School](#) (via Public Records Request)

⁵ "Failing grades. Rising depression. Bay Area children are suffering from shuttered schools." Jill Tucker, *San Francisco Chronicle*. February 17, 2021. [Link](#).