

The background of the entire page is a photograph of students in a library or study hall. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. In the foreground, a young woman with long dark hair is smiling and looking down at a laptop. To her left, a young man with glasses is also looking down at a laptop. In the background, other students are visible, some looking at their phones. Bookshelves filled with books line the walls.

The Kids Are All Right? What Parents Really Think About How COVID Affected Children

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Executive Summary

We and others have noted an apparent gap between parents and experts about the magnitude of COVID’s effects on children’s academic performance. This disconnect has important implications for COVID recovery efforts. In this report, we probe on this “parent-expert disconnect” to understand whether it is real and what its causes are.

The report draws on qualitative interviews with 40 caregivers drawn from a nationally representative sample of households that we have been surveying throughout the pandemic as part of the Understanding America Study. We chose our interview sample to ensure variation in terms of caregivers’ level of concern about their children, children’s grade level, and children’s current academic performance. We asked about children’s educational performance, their experiences during COVID, and caregivers’ views on the broader phenomenon of COVID learning loss.

Our study supports the conclusion that caregivers have relatively low levels of concern about their children’s wellbeing post-COVID, though some respondents shared concerns about both academic and social/emotional wellbeing. Respondents mainly noted that children suffered in various ways during the pandemic but returned to normal shortly after being back in school. However, caregivers broadly agreed with experts that COVID learning loss was a serious issue, if not for their own children, then for children more generally.

We uncovered several possible explanations for this parent-expert disconnect. First, though tests are the measures experts use to highlight learning loss, caregivers in our sample virtually never mentioned standardized tests, relying instead on grades, teacher reports, or their own perceptions of children’s performance. Second, caregivers reported that student learning expectations had been lowered since COVID, perhaps resulting in them receiving less clear signals about student performance. Third, caregivers did report concerns about COVID’s effects, but often for “other” children (demographically or in terms of location) than their own. And fourth, caregivers simply believe children are resilient.

The report presents evidence from interviews, contextualized with survey results, to substantiate these claims. In the conclusion, we discuss the implications of these findings for education systems seeking to get children back on track post-COVID.



Introduction

By all accounts, American schoolchildren experienced substantial hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic, and those experiences caused pronounced negative effects that have persisted across the more than three years since school doors were shuttered in March 2020. The difficulties students experienced were wide-ranging, occurring both in school and out. The school closures themselves and the lack of live instruction in the early days of the pandemic left many students behind, and unequal access to technology exacerbated these challenges. Out of school, there were substantial economic shocks throughout the pandemic, not to mention widespread illness and death that affected so many families (largely, but not exclusively, before vaccines became widely available).

All these negative experiences were felt unequally, with students from low-income families and students of color substantially more likely to experience both in-school and out-of-school hardships. For instance, low-income students, as well as Black and Brown students, were considerably less likely to have in-person learning opportunities during the 2020-21 school year, and also were much more hesitant about returning to school in person. Low-income students especially were unlikely to have access to reliable internet to participate in virtual learning.

The consequences of these experiences have been considerable. Certainly, the phenomenon of “learning loss” has been well documented, with students’ test scores across grades and subjects declining relative to pre-pandemic trends. While evidence suggests some recovery in scores, this upturn is incomplete as of the end of the 2022-23 school year. Beyond scores, there has been a dramatic increase in student absenteeism across essentially all jurisdictions, with some districts seeing rates of chronic absence well over 50%. Other outcomes also have been affected: student course completion, qualitative measures of student engagement, and even college enrollment.

Despite the magnitude of these effects and the considerable reporting about them during the last three years, educational researchers have noted a disconnect between the concerns of experts/researchers and parents about the severity of these issues. We and others have written about this disconnect before, offering hypotheses and potential remedies. While this so-called parent-expert disconnect about COVID’s effects on children may seem like an academic issue, it can have important real-world consequences. For instance, many COVID-recovery interventions implemented over the last few years (e.g., after-school tutoring, summer school) have relied, to at least some extent, on parent opt-in, which is much less likely if parents are not concerned about their children’s academic progress. More broadly, with less parent concern, there is likely

to be less external pressure on schools to address COVID's academic and nonacademic consequences.

As a research team that has led nationally representative surveys throughout the pandemic to document and understand these phenomena, we wanted to understand the disconnect issue in greater depth. Leveraging the [Understanding America Study](#)'s (UAS) longitudinal panel, we identified respondents whose children varied in their grade level (elementary vs. secondary), reported grades (Bs and above vs. Cs and below), and level of caregiver concern (moderate or high vs. none or low). We sampled respondents in each of these eight cells (see Appendix A), inviting 124 respondents to participate in a voluntary interview. Ultimately, we completed 40 interviews with adult household members about the school-aged child in their home;

35 reported they were the child's parent, three identified as a grandparent, one was a sibling, and one identified as an "other" type of family member, such as an aunt or cousin. We asked about children's educational performance, their experiences during COVID, and their views on the broader phenomenon of COVID-related learning loss. We provide our full interview protocol in Appendix B. Here, we present our answers to two main research questions:

- 1. How concerned are parents about children's wellbeing post-COVID?**
- 2. Why is there a parent-expert disconnect about the impact of COVID on children?**

In what follows, we report on general themes, provide direct quotes from our UAS respondents, and provide counts where appropriate. We also draw on UAS survey data to lend additional evidence to the themes observed. We conclude with thoughts on the importance of the parent-expert disconnect moving forward and recommendations for how to think about addressing this gap.

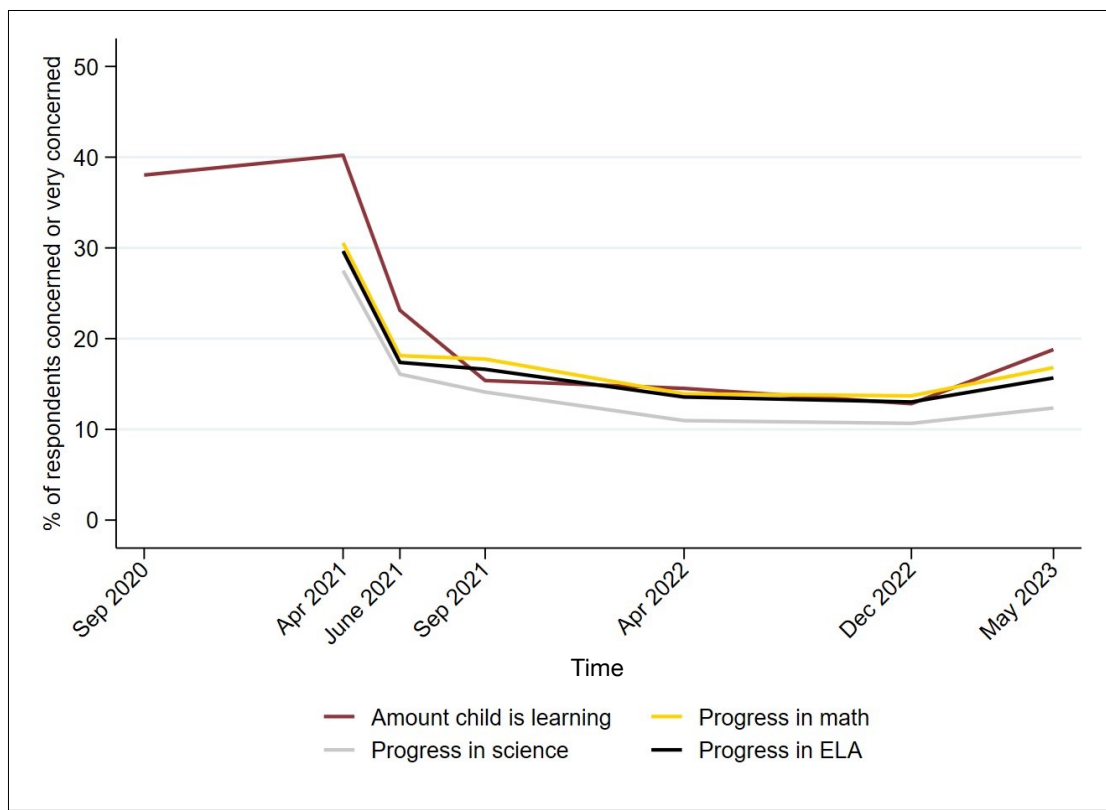
As a research team that has led nationally representative surveys throughout the pandemic to understand and document these phenomena, we wanted to understand the “disconnect” issue in more depth.

How Concerned Are Parents, Really?

Most Parents Truly Are Not Very Concerned About Their Children's Academic Wellbeing Post-COVID

Over the course of the pandemic, we regularly asked the UAS sample of parents about their concerns around their children's wellbeing, including their academic and mental health. While concerns were higher earlier in the pandemic (approximately 30-40% of respondents reporting concern about their students' academics), the most recent nationally representative data from the UAS found these concerns have dropped, and mostly stayed low, with only about 12–18% of respondents reporting concern (Figure 1) during the 2022-23 school year.

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS CONCERNED OR VERY CONCERNED ABOUT STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WELL-BEING



Our interviews shed light on why parents report low levels of concern, despite evidence from tests and other measures that trouble researchers. We heard many statements like, “Everything is fine. She’s on track socially, academically. It’s kind of like way in the past. I don’t see any ... residual effects of it.” Some respondents specifically praised the efforts of their local schools, expressing no concerns because “teachers (went) above and beyond to be sure all students were grasping material and had individualized attention... Students really benefitted.” Another caretaker noted “the school is pretty lenient with us as parents asking for help academically for our children. They do try and either offer after-school or the interventions for after-school as well.”

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Certainly not all caretakers who expressed being unconcerned were uniformly positive about students’ experiences over the past few years. Often, they described concerning events, only to go on to explain why the child is now doing better. Guardians described various hardships over the last few years, including depression and being withdrawn socially, and one said online school was “ridiculous and frustrating for everybody,” among other negative experiences. One parent even described 2020-21 as “a wasted year.”

However, often, parents reflected that those hardships had eased over time—sometimes incredibly quickly. One guardian, who described remote-school frustrations leading their child to feel uninterested, even dropping a grade in both English and math, explained that everything reversed once the child was back in school in-person: “It set everything back to how it was before the pandemic... She bounced back in about two weeks.” Another guardian described remote school as “miserable for the boy,” and how it was a struggle re-motivating the child when in-person school resumed. But this parent now feels their child is “over the pandemic issues,” and back on track with satisfactory report card grades, and their school is “doing a good job.” Another guardian described the pandemic as affecting his grandchild’s learning “a great deal,” suddenly no longer caring about school or whether he pursued college. But in the end, the student “pushed hard,” got himself back on track, graduated from high school. and is now in college “learning strong.” Similarly, another parent described issues her child had during COVID—slowing down and falling

“... [H]onestly, the school is pretty lenient with us as parents asking for help academically for our children.”

behind academically, with an “emotional return” to the classroom—but expressed no concerns now “because, honestly, the school is pretty lenient with us as parents asking for help academically for our children.” One respondent who also is a teacher reflected on all children they work with: “I feel like (the students) bounced back pretty well.”

Recalling that we had oversampled caretakers who expressed concern on the survey—precisely because we wanted to hear about their concerns

and learn about long-term negative impacts from COVID disruptions—we were surprised at the extent to which caretakers felt their children were doing well and on track. In fact, the proportion of respondents who described ongoing concerns in our interviews (approximately one-third) was considerably lower than the proportion indicating they had some concern about their student (academically, socially, or behaviorally) on the surveys in spring 2023 (approximately half). Though many caretakers noted various struggles that students experienced during COVID—social isolation, falling behind in particular subjects, fear of illness—overwhelmingly, these guardians felt that these issues were in the past or that they soon would be.

A Minority of Parents Are Quite Concerned, Just As Much About Academics as Social-Emotional Wellbeing

While two-thirds of our sample did not express much in the way of ongoing concern, some did voice serious apprehension about their children’s wellbeing. Often, though not always, parents worried about their children’s academics also expressed ongoing concern about their children’s social or emotional wellbeing. One parent recounted her daughter’s “traumatic” experiences during COVID related to weight gain and depression, exacerbated when she returned to school in person, and her grades deteriorated. This was the most severe situation described by our respondents, culminating in the student feeling “very depressed to the point of wanting to take her own life.” Another discussed their young child being “stressed-out, emotionally” by COVID, then returning to school only to be behind academically and increasingly bullied. A particular challenge for some children was their lag in foundational skills, with implications for development

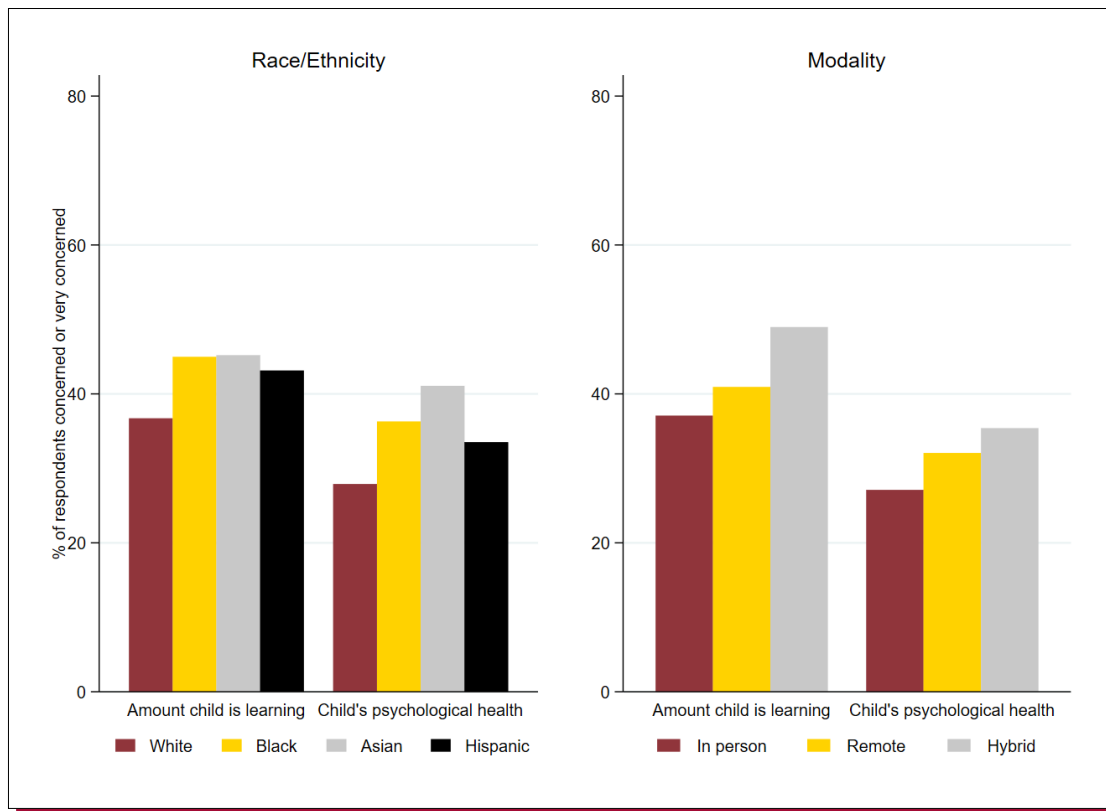
of emotional skills as well. As one parent explained, “Reading was such a struggle for him that he would always cry because he struggled so much with it, and he couldn’t get the words, or he couldn’t grasp the sound and the phonics ... Letter blending ... he really struggled with it.”

Some caretakers also noted disabilities or other challenges their children struggled with. One described their child’s epilepsy, seizures, and language disability, noting apparent developmental delays in their ability to write. Another child needed extensive speech therapy after COVID to begin approaching grade level. A third had issues relating to other students, not wanting to be around them, and as a result being assigned to a functional-skills class. For these students, COVID may have exacerbated developmental issues already present. What is notable about our findings is that in 32% of cases where an adult expressed ongoing concerns, the conversation revealed that the student struggled with some sort of disability (including physical and/or emotional) or other pre-existing challenge. This was not something we anticipated, and we did not ask about it explicitly, so the true prevalence may be even higher.

Finally, there was a group of concerned parents who reported their children seemed to be doing fine, but nonetheless the caretaker expressed anxiety. For instance, one parent noted that her child was aiming to attend a four-year college, but she had concerns about the rigor of the school’s college prep program. Another expressed that though their child was performing at an “average” level and had earned an 86 on a recent math test, the parent “knows he can do better.” A third expressed concern because, though their own child was doing well, the children they were hanging out with were not doing as well. A fourth said their child was in advanced classes but increasingly finding school—especially English class—boring, blaming poor-quality reading materials that were assigned. These less-extreme forms of concern were a minority in our data, but nonetheless present.

These findings help paint a portrait behind the quantitative survey results we’ve collected since 2020. Throughout the pandemic, we repeatedly asked caretakers about their level of concern, not just about academics but also about social/emotional wellbeing. As we reported in a [September 2021 Brookings article](#), parents of remote and hybrid learners were more concerned than parents of in-person learners (Figure 2). Also, parents of Black and Asian American children were more concerned than parents of white children.

FIGURE 2. ACADEMIC AND EMOTIONAL CONCERNS IN 2021, BY RACE AND BY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE MODALITY



Note: Data in this figure collected April-May, 2021

Most Caretakers Think Concerns About Child Wellbeing Are Not Overblown

Despite most caretakers not being overly concerned about their own children post-COVID, we found that guardians are concerned about the impacts of COVID on children more broadly. This result also aligns with our survey research, in which we find nearly double the proportion of adults with children living in the household are concerned about children in general versus their own children.

Before we described the learning-loss phenomenon, we asked caretakers whether they had heard “on the news or in social media about how children in the US today are doing worse in school compared to before the pandemic.” With just this description, approximately half of our interviewees reported they heard of learning loss, naming various sources—from the news, local teachers/school leaders, a religious magazine, social media—with no one source of information dominating. We acknowledge that there may be social desirability in reporting that you are informed about a current issue, but that would imply our results are an *overestimate* of how informed caretakers are.

Certainly, these findings suggest that COVID learning loss is a widely, but far from universally, familiar phenomenon. Notably, self-reported awareness of learning loss was approximately equally likely between caregivers who did or did not express concerns about their children moving forward.

Next, we read respondents a brief blurb about learning loss, which we wrote ourselves, including quotes from [Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona](#)

“There’s evidence from across the country that students have lost a lot of learning since the pandemic. So, for example, fourth graders today are doing worse on math and reading tests than fourth graders before the pandemic. And there’s evidence that fourth graders are losing more learning per year rather than gaining back their losses. So, education experts are really worried about this and concerned about today’s students and their academic progress. Some experts have said that today’s children have lost over a decade of progress, that the latest test results show a lost generation of learning and that the devastating impact will take years of effort and investment to reverse. Economists estimate wage losses over children’s lifetime compared to what they would’ve been without COVID will be substantial.”

We then asked caretakers whether they thought these concerns were overblown. Though most caretakers had not expressed concern about their own child, as we reported above, two-

[A]pproximately half of our interviewees reported they heard of learning loss, naming various sources ... with no one source of information dominating.

thirds of the sample (26 of 39 respondents¹) felt the worry we described was *not* overblown. Some respondents simply “trust the reporting,” believing the arguments of experts. Others said they had seen the damage of COVID in one form or another. As might be expected, all but one respondent who had expressed ongoing concern about their own children also believed that fears of learning loss were **not** overblown. Some caretakers were quite despairing in their assessments of the situation: “How could it be overblown if a child is not doing well in fourth grade? What makes you think they’re going to turn around and become doctors later? ... I just feel like if these kids aren’t even taught the basics, what makes you think in the future that they’re going to do better, or get good jobs, or anything like that?” We heard these caretakers’ anguish, often about their own children, though sometimes expressing just as much anguish about the effects of COVID on other children.

Among the minority of respondents who stated that experts’ concerns **were** overblown, they gave a range of explanations for this viewpoint. One was simply that the magnitude of learning loss was not as big or persistent as the experts quoted in our blurb, though almost all respondents acknowledged some COVID-related harm to educational experiences. It is important to note that the technical language in our blurb—including “*losing more learning per year rather than gaining back their losses*” and “*decade of progress*”—may have tripped up some respondents. This nuanced language may have conveyed that individual children had lost a decade of learning or that children were still going backwards. Perhaps different wording would have elicited slightly different responses, though we note that the direction of potential bias from our language would have inflated the number of respondents thinking learning loss concerns **were** overblown—the minority viewpoint even with this strong language.

Among the minority of respondents who stated that experts’ concerns were overblown, they shared a range of explanations for this viewpoint.

Another common belief expressed was that learning loss was a serious issue in some places or for some children, but not overall. (We return to this point in more detail.) For instance, one respondent said it might be a serious issue in “certain areas, especially bigger cities,” while another

¹One interview ended prior to this question.

pointed out that it was probably a serious issue only for older children. Other respondents raised the possibility that some students may have benefited during COVID, or learned skills in other areas that were untested: “I’m wondering what the children are gaining in relation to the loss. ... Are they learning other things that are going to be more helpful in their lifetime and to their actual lives themselves versus traditional learning?” And still others simply noted the resilience of children, arguing that whatever was lost could be quickly regained: “Students at such a young age can absorb information much easier, so it shouldn’t take that long.” In contrast, others felt that recovery had taken a bit longer but was still mostly complete: “The talk amongst the teachers I’ve been hearing is that this school year, they feel like is the first that they’re getting kind of back into normal ranges of both social and academic [performance] for their certain grade levels.”

Taken together with the previous section, these results reinforce our [survey findings](#) that caretakers are somewhat more concerned about *other children* than their own children. By a two-to-one margin, respondents who said experts’ concerns about learning loss were not overblown outnumbered those with concerns about their own children moving forward. This ratio aligns with the proportions of parents concerned about other children versus their own, as we learned through our survey earlier in the pandemic. We examine this issue in greater depth below.



Is There a Parent-Expert Disconnect? And If So, Why?

We think it's possible to look at our survey and interview data as demonstrating there *is* a disconnect between parents and experts—just as it's possible to look at the same data and conclude there *is not*. For the former position, we would cite the low overall levels of concern in our survey data and among interview respondents. It seems clear that a relatively small proportion of caregivers is especially troubled about the impact of COVID on their own children. But for the latter position, we'd point to the much greater proportion of respondents alarmed about effects of COVID on other children (as seen in their responses to the question of whether experts' concern was “overblown”). Clearly, many our respondents, including many caregivers who mostly do not have ongoing anxieties about their own children, are still worried about other people's children, in many cases because of things they've heard or directly observed. How can we make sense of these complex findings, and what explanations are there for any disconnect that does exist?

Caretakers Don't Think About Test Scores Much; Experts Do

One of the clearest findings from our interviews is that caretakers, when making judgments about students' performance, overwhelmingly rely less on standardized test scores than they do grades, other school-reported measures of student progress, and their own observations of their children's work and work ethic. We asked caretakers what type of student their child was, as well as about their academic and social-emotional wellbeing during the pandemic and now that they're back in person. Of the 40 caretakers, just five mentioned their child's performance on tests, whereas all mentioned grades. Clearly, standardized tests simply were not the most salient data points for caretakers thinking about their children's wellbeing. Obviously, this is in stark contrast to experts' judgments about the academic impacts of COVID, which are overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, based on declines in standardized test scores.

Among the five caretakers who mentioned their child's performances on standardized test, two expressed skepticism about the scores. For instance, one caretaker mentioned her child's percentile on the [NWEA MAP](#) mathematics test, but then argued, "His knowledge is much greater than that," noting the discrepancy between the child's mathematics grades (a grade of 3 on a 1-3 scale) and the percentile rank. Another caretaker voiced concerns about the accuracy of test grades generated by the school's online curriculum. Of the remaining three caretakers who mentioned tests at all, each simply noted disparities between the messages they were getting from grades and teacher feedback versus those from tests, with two noting that the child's grades were better than their test scores, and the third saying the child's test scores were better than her grades.

Beyond the general absence of comments about standardized test scores, we noted a complete absence of comments about changes in test scores over time. Not one respondent said anything like, "My child's state test scores have gone down since COVID," or "My child used to score 'proficient' but now does not." In other words, the very kinds of comparisons experts use to highlight learning loss—changes in performance on standardized tests over time—simply were not a marker of student academic progress or academic wellbeing for the 40 households in our sample.

In contrast, many interviewees talked about changes in their child's academic performance over time; they just used non-standardized test outcomes, either grades or more qualitative statements, to make their points. For instance, caretakers talked about how their children were A or B students before COVID, but then got Cs and Ds during COVID, which they found concerning. Or they talked about behavioral changes, like students procrastinating or spending more time on their electronic devices. They also spoke of their children's social/emotional struggles and how those had changed over time, with some specifically citing depression and anxiety. In sum, our sampled caretakers did focus on changes they observed in their children over time, but they did not use standardized test scores as the information source calling attention to the changes.

Beyond the general absence of comments about standardized test scores, we noted a complete absence of comments about changes in test scores over time.

We did not follow up to probe on why caretakers did not emphasize standardized test scores, though there are several reasonable hypotheses. One, which a few caretakers mentioned, is that some caretakers think grades have greater validity than test scores. We heard this belief from the two caretakers who seemed to question the students' standardized test scores as being accurate measures of their knowledge (though, as could be expected from non-researchers, they did not use the word "validity").

Another reasonable explanation is that parents/guardians and researchers are looking to results from standardized tests for two very different purposes.

Another reasonable explanation is that parents/guardians and researchers are looking to results from standardized tests for two very different purposes. For parents, annual state standardized tests are a marker of whether the student learned the content they were supposed to learn the year before, whether this is interpreted explicitly or implicitly. For example, state tests often report results in terms of "meeting standards" and "not meeting standards," and parents are told that scores are used to make grade-promotion decisions. In contrast, researchers lean on these standardized tests as a marker for whether children are keeping pace with year-to-year learning trajectories. For example, researchers and policymakers use standardized test scores to measure change over time in the proportion of students meeting standards as a signal for how schools are doing overall (e.g., comparisons between pre- and post-COVID cohorts). Both are legitimate uses of the data—but the interpretations of performance through those two lenses are quite different. A given student might decline from "exceeds expectations" in one year to "meets expectations" in the next year—or, even more likely, might decline a few percentage points but stay at "exceeds expectations." This might not necessarily concern a parent, if they even notice. But if the percentage of students *across the nation* who meet a performance threshold declines from pre-COVID to post-COVID, or if the national average goes down by a few percentage points, those trends are seen as having important implications. Though we did not specifically ask parents why they do not turn to standardized test performance to monitor their child's academic wellbeing, their lack of mentioning standardized tests during a deep conversation about their child's academic standing is an indicator of the extent to which this data source is simply not a flag or indicator for them.

Caretakers Do See Problems Caused by COVID, But Often Among “Other” Children

As mentioned previously, there were quite a few caregivers who responded to questions about COVID learning loss by acknowledging the damages done among “other” children—meaning children of another demographic group or other kind of school than their own child’s. We heard this message repeatedly:

- A caregiver of a kindergartener said they thought learning loss would be worse for middle or high schoolers because they are **“expected to learn more and more quickly.”** One other parent of a younger student also said the same.
- A parent of an older child said the problem was worse for younger children: **“Older children are a little bit more resilient just because the younger ones, their attention span is much, much less. ... I think it’s much more difficult.”** Two other caregivers of older children said the same.
- A caregiver of a child living in a rural area said they thought learning loss would be worse in **“certain areas, especially bigger cities.”**
- A parent of a student enrolled in a Catholic school said they thought the problem was **“worse in public schools than private schools.”**
- Three caregivers who were not from the lowest income groups said that learning loss was more of an issue for students who were less well resourced (e.g., **“kids in the lower”**), sometimes noting the resources they had—Wi-Fi and other technology, for instance—that facilitated their students’ progress.
- One caregiver who was able to work at home and keep their child on task felt learning loss was likely worse for families where caregivers had to be out of the house.
- One caregiver of a native English-speaker suggested learning loss was worse for children learning English.

Of course, in some of these cases, the caregivers are correct: Learning loss really has been a greater issue for low-income students. But we found it striking that so many caregivers seemed

to locate the problem of learning loss in groups other than their own. Again, this could partially explain the disconnect of concerns between experts and parents, as parents typically are asked about their own children on surveys rather than about children from other groups.

Caregivers Have Noted That Expectations Have Been Lowered

Though we did not specifically ask caregivers whether they felt school-based expectations for their children's academic progress had changed during or after COVID, several organically raised this issue when describing their child's academic experiences over the last few years. Some gave the opinion that expectations seemed like they were lowered during COVID school closures, which may have had lingering effects. Others noted that expectations still hadn't been adjusted back, and worried about motivational effects.

One caregiver who was concerned about their child's attitude and approach to school since their negative COVID experiences said, "The bar got set so low for completing work and turning things in that the kids kind of got an idea—at least (my child) did, that she didn't have to do as much. She got so used to that that year ... and then she goes back, and I don't think it's as rigorous as it was before. Everyone's a lot more strict—but it's not academically more rigorous at all, and it's just so boring." Another concerned parent echoed these arguments of lowered expectations leading to disengagement: "It really feels like things have been dumbed down. ... The curriculum overall has been really kind of dropped down to the lowest kind of denominator." Because she felt like standards had been lowered in secondary school, this family decided to accelerate the student into community college. A third guardian focused on changes in take-home work as a marker of lowered expectations: "The kids don't even get homework anymore. When have they ever done that? We've always gotten homework when we (were) young."

We heard a variety of critical concerns related to this general category of "lowered expectations." Some caregivers believe students who did not master the work still were promoted on to the next grade, just leading to further struggles down the road. One specifically mentioned the college transition: "If (child) doesn't do homework in math this week, her school will allow her until next week to turn it in. In college, it doesn't work like that," implying that her child was in for a rude awakening. Relatedly, we heard that lowered expectations around testing—open notes, reduced rigor—means that students won't master the material and would forget it again.

Some remarks we heard were even more critical of various aspects of the education system. One caretaker argued that COVID had made both teachers and students more “lazy,” and that the quality of teaching had declined, perhaps because of lowered barriers to entry into the profession. Another caretaker shared that a family relative recently became a math teacher even though she was never good at it and still doesn’t understand it: “How are you going to teach 12th-grade algebra when you don’t even know the first thing about a subject you failed?” A third respondent specifically blamed the amount of instructional time students got during remote learning: “I don’t think they were learning at all. I don’t see how you can learn through a couple assignments throughout the day when they’re in school a full six, seven hours throughout a day.”

While we did not ask caretakers directly, more than a quarter volunteered comments about the lowering of expectations and their effects on student learning and engagement. Given well-documented concerns about [“grade inflation”](#) and the recent sharp spike in absenteeism (which might be driven in part by more lax standards around attendance), it seems clear that lowered expectations in schools are a reality experienced by some families. If it is indeed true that expectations have been lowered or made more lenient (e.g., around grading and other practices like due dates and re-test policies), parents may not be getting a signal from their school or teacher that their child is not succeeding academically.

Caretakers Think Children Are Resilient

A final insight our data provides into the parent-expert disconnect is that caretakers often, and very explicitly, noted that children are resilient. As discussed earlier in this report, there were many instances where caretakers described specific traumas or negative experiences that students had during COVID, but ultimately concluded that children had “bounced back.” Certainly, some of the explanation for the perceived gap between parents and experts in terms of the severity and long-term implications of COVID learning loss may be due to this sense among caregivers that children can (and are!) recover(ing). Not to be overlooked, adults themselves are also in the midst of, or went through, their own recovery process. We heard loud and clear from caretakers that both children and adults are finally moving on.



Discussion and Implications

Since the onset of the pandemic, our team has been surveying American households about their COVID-related educational experiences, and we have learned a great deal. This interview project, narrowly tailored to address specific research questions about learning loss and the parent-expert disconnect, nonetheless gave us new insights into the experiences of the households regularly participating in our surveys. Beyond the specific findings reported here, we heard about the struggles and successes of children throughout the pandemic, the ways schools and teachers met and failed to meet students' needs during these difficult times, and the very real and persistent ongoing challenges facing some families in the wake of COVID. The interviews gave us a very powerful window into what happened to American children during COVID, and what continues to happen to them as we all work together toward recovery.

Broadly, our interviews confirmed that caretakers have experienced concerns about their children throughout the pandemic, though in many cases they feel that the negative impacts of the pandemic resolved themselves after students got back to school in-person. Some caretakers did still have concerns (sometimes substantial, other times more typical) about children's wellbeing along both academic and social lines. Sometimes, these concerns were related to new or preexisting disabilities or special needs. While not all respondents had heard of the learning-loss phenomenon, we found that most respondents were concerned about it and its implications.

It seems clear from our work that there really is a disconnect in concern between experts and caregivers about student wellbeing, and our interviews uncovered several possible explanations for this gap. At a minimum, we learned that the standardized tests used by experts to highlight students' COVID-related learning loss simply do not factor into most caregivers' thinking in the way that grades and subjective assessments of student wellbeing do. We rarely heard about tests at all—and when we did, it was often to question the results. In contrast, we heard repeatedly about grades and students' social and emotional wellbeing. Caregivers also noted ways in which expectations for students had been lowered over time, such that schools are not sending them signals that students are struggling. Where caregivers did express concerns, they were often about “other” children—children of different demographics or from different kinds of schools than their own children.

Moving beyond our work, we think there is a tremendous need for research that humanizes the experiences of COVID and COVID-recovery efforts, with a focus on those for whom recovery is still in progress. We also believe there is a need for research that carefully tracks the lingering effects of educational disruptions from March 2020 through the 2020-21 school year and beyond. It is human nature to want to put what happened behind us and move forward, but that sentiment ignores the realities of child development and changes that have been absorbed into school systems. We hope these efforts to more carefully understand what families experienced, what parents are thinking about their children now, and how educational practices have shifted—more than 3½ years after the pandemic first shuttered schools—create more urgency to solve problems that COVID caused and exacerbated.

The results have several implications for educators and parents. On the positive side, most parents interviewed perceive their children to be resilient, and that parent concerns about their children’s wellbeing do genuinely seem to be relatively low. However, our results are providing voices to the primarily quantitative results (i.e., from analysis of survey and standardized test score data) demonstrating the pervasiveness of lowering expectations through grade inflation, relaxed rules around due dates and retaking tests, and other means. As grades and standardized tests [drift apart](#), we think there is a renewed need for educators to consider the information provided by standardized testing and to communicate with parents about the value of standardized test scores among data points describing a child’s academic standing.

At the same time, the overwhelming sense we had in listening to parents and other adult family members was that children went through a great deal of trauma throughout the pandemic: social isolation, lack of in-person education, and altered school routines, among other disruptions. Some bounced back upon return to in-person schools, but many did not. It is somewhat obvious, but nonetheless important, to be aware of the variation across families and how the long echo of the pandemic continues to affect children differently. Some kids are all right. Not all of them are.

**Some kids are all right.
Not all of them are.**

Appendix A.

Interview Sample

TABLE A-1. INTERVIEWS COMPLETED (n=40)

SAMPLE SUBGROUP	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
<i>School level as of Spring 2023¹</i>	
Elementary (K-5)	19
Secondary (6-12)	21
<i>Reported grades in Spring 2023</i>	
Bs and above (Mostly As, Mostly As and Bs, Mostly Bs)	20
Cs and below (Mostly Cs, Mostly Cs and Ds, Mostly Ds or lower)	20
<i>Level of caregiver concern in Spring 2023</i>	
Moderate or high in at least one area	19
None or low across all areas	21

¹ Respondent identified their children in Spring 2023 and reported their grade level at that time. If they had more than one school-aged child in the household, we randomly selected one for them, and they answered only about that child. For interviews, we sampled based on the age of the selected child in Spring 2023. At the start of the interview, we clarified that we were asking questions about this specific child using the nickname and grade they provided in Spring 2023.

TABLE A-2. INTERVIEW SAMPLING DESIGN (n=40)

	GRADES OF B OR HIGHER	GRADES OF C OR LOWER
20 Elementary students (K-5)		
Higher concern	5	5
Lower concern	5	5
20 Secondary students (6-12)		
Higher concern	5	5
Lower concern	5	5

TABLE A-3. INTERVIEWEE CHILD GRADE LEVEL DURING THE 2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR (n=40)

SCHOOL LEVEL DURING COVID ²	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
Preschool	5
Elementary (K-5)	21
Secondary (6-12)	14

² We inferred the grade of the child who was the subject of the interview during COVID by subtracting two years from the grade reported in Spring 2023.

Appendix B.

Interview Protocol

“For the past three years, we’ve been asking people questions about their child’s school experiences during, and then after, the pandemic. Thank you for helping us with that important research. *(If R has multiple children, tell them some more information about the one that is their ‘selected’ child, so this interview is about the one for which we have data.)* We’d like to learn more about this child and his/her experiences today.”

1. “How would you describe the type of student this child is?” *(prompts only if needed: “What is his/her learning style? Does learning/school come easily or is it more difficult?”)*
2. “Tell us about his/her attendance experience during COVID—was his/her school mostly open or closed? Did he/she attend mostly in-person or remotely?”
 - a. “And how did this go for him/her?”
3. “How do you feel the pandemic affected his/her learning during that time?”
4. “And now, in what ways is child is back on track? In what ways is he/she struggling academically?” *(prompt for evidence of being on track or struggling: “What grades do they get?” “How do they do on tests?” “Has your child been recommended for intervention?” “Do you hear from the teacher or from your child about these things?” “Are there differences by subject area?”)*
5. “Do you have any worries or concerns about your child’s learning going forward?”
(If no, skip to 6)

IF YES:

- a. “What are those worries or concerns?”
- b. “In what ways do you think this is related to what happened during COVID? In what ways is it unrelated?”

- c. “What could your child’s school do or offer that would be most helpful to your child?”
 - i. “Do you know if they offer this?”
 - ii. “Does your child participate? Why or why not?”

- 6. “Have you read about or heard on the news or in social media about how children in the US today are doing worse in school compared to before the pandemic, on average? This is often referred to as ‘pandemic learning loss.’ Tell us what you’ve heard or read about.” (*probe for where they get this information*)

IF HAVE NOT HEARD ANYTHING/CAN’T ANSWER THE QUESTION START WITH:

“That’s ok! So basically,…”

IF HAVE HEARD SOMETHING/CAN TALK ABOUT IT A LITTLE BIT START WITH:

“That’s right! Just to recap/expand a bit on what you recall…”

“...There is evidence data collected across the country that students have lost a lot of learning since the pandemic. So, for example, fourth-graders today are doing worse on math and reading tests than fourth-graders before the pandemic. If anything, after the pandemic, fourth-graders are losing even more learning per year rather than gaining back their losses. Education experts are really worried about this and concerned about today’s students and their academic progress. They’ve stated that today’s children have lost over a decade of progress, that the latest test results show ‘a lost generation of learning’ and that the ‘devastating impact’ will ‘take years of effort and investment to reverse.’ Economists estimate wage losses over children’s lifetimes, compared to what they would have been without COVID, will be substantial.”

- 7. “Do you think these concerns are overblown? Why or why not?”

- 8. “In what ways do you feel this level of concern reflects your experiences/matches your concern? In what ways does it not reflect your experiences/match your concerns?”