

## School Choice During COVID-19 Outbreaks: Defining Advocacy for Mississippi Students

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One of the most critical issues facing educators, students and parents alike is the question of school choice, particularly during this new outbreak of COVID-19. While some schools have decided to suspend in-person classes, other schools are still conducting class as usual. For Mississippi students who are subjected to wide-spread disparities and a lack of options in rural areas, attending in-person classes helps to reduce the disparities facing some students who are trying to attend virtual classes and face a lack of internet access, no equipment, parents who cannot help them in their coursework and limited interest in online classes leading to numerous emotional and behavioral complications.

During the period when not only America, but the world faces difficulties related to the pandemic. Rapidly spreading infections, super-spreader events and hotspots are just a few of the difficulties related to attending classes during the height of the infections. New variants and the rapid development of variants that are resistant to the vaccine make meeting for class more challenging. Children are highly susceptible to emotional and behavioral issues when they are not attending physical classes. Virtual classes leave those children who do not have a steady access to the internet or parents who can help with assignments behind. And the lack of physical learning has often been associated with increased behavioral issues such as defiance, children skipping classes, poor grades—even from students who normally make excellent grades, as well as depression, the potential for suicide, etc. Children associated with rural areas are also faced with the increased need for associations with classmates and other children because they already suffer from loneliness.

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that a new virus was making its way through the population. This virus, originally known as the SARS-CoV-2 virus caused the disease COVID-19, which typically and originally affected the most vulnerable populations such as the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions such as obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, etc. Children were originally not overtly affected by the COVID-19 virus, yet schools started closing and using a virtual online format for classes across the globe. However, some countries such as Switzerland and a few other European countries, chose to continue their in-person classes. Yet, Mississippi officials continued with the online format for most of 2020. In 2021, the Governor Tate Reeves did announce that schools would return to in-person classes. Now, in January 2022, the presence and proliferation of yet another new variant of the virus has pushed school closings in some areas. The biggest failure, therefore, of the 2020-2021 school year was the lack of in-person classes and the decrease of student achievements as a result of the school closings.

However, not every school system was closed in 2020-2021. In some states, private and parochial schools remained open with in-person class attendance. If the classes were unable to meet, parents and students were provided with materials and resources that assisted the students with achieving their learning marks. So, school choice became the ultimate decision and battle of the pandemic.

According to the research, most parents feel that the money should follow the child so that in complicated situations which are

unpredictable, the child does not lose any time, skills or learning levels. This has led to an incredible political battle among pundits and now, almost three years after the start of pandemic, children are once again being left out of the classroom. And as parents, educators, and stakeholders, we must once again stand up and protect our children.

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