SCHOOL CLOSURES ‘OPEN UP CHASM’ BETWEEN PUPILS

Economists warn it may not be feasible for schools to make up time lost to Covid-19 lockdown

The closure of schools in response to the Covid-19 pandemic has “opened up a chasm” between pupils with involved parents who attend outstanding schools and children who don’t enjoy such advantages, according to new research.

The study by the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) at LSE shows that previous unexpected shutdowns have had a “quite large” impact on children’s education.

The research team’s analysis suggests that a four-week closure could have an impact on students’ achievement equivalent to moving an average child down to the bottom 30 per cent of children. The effect is greater for children in low-income families.

In order to compensate for this dip, schools could make up the lost learning time when they reopen, but the extra time needed will vary by school.

What’s more, as the study – Covid-19 school shutdowns: what will they do to our children’s education? – points out, while some schools may be able to make up the effect of each week’s shutdown with two to three hours extra per week over a school year – others may need many more extra hours than is feasible.

The study adds that trying to increase the effectiveness of schools through increasing resources, without increasing instruction time, would cost around £3.4 billion for children at key stage 2 (aged 7 to 11) alone.

The study is the first in a series of CEP Covid-19 briefings. These will provide evidence-based analyses of economic and social questions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.
It concludes:

- Evidence from unexpected temporary school closures and reduced instruction time suggests school closures will reduce educational achievement, both in the short and long term.
- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be affected more than others by school closures, with fewer family resources and less access to online learning resources to offset lost instruction time.
- In England, the total cost of the resources lost in each week of state school closure is more than £1 billion.
- Compensating for lost instruction time through additional resources, without additional hours, is likely to be even more expensive.

Professor Stephen Gibbons, director of CEP’s urban and spatial programme, said: “Closing schools will have an impact on pupils’ achievement and the costs of putting this right are likely to be high – and this is without taking into account the mental and physical toll on children of being in lockdown.”

Andy Eyles, research economist, said: “It is clear that children from more advantaged backgrounds attending schools where technology is in place to substitute for classroom teaching, and whose parents have both the time and skills to plug the deficit, are likely to be less adversely affected by the closures than others.”

Piero Montebruno, research economist, said: “School closures are a manifestation of a new equilibrium of forces in educational economics. The reverse effect of congestion has replaced the normal benefits of agglomeration. Before the outbreak, gathering together at a school was a big plus for children - now it can cause the transmission of a potentially fatal disease. The key question is how we, as a society, resolve the equation of providing an education for our kids while the virus remains with us.”

The full paper can be read here, Covid-19 school shutdowns: what will they do to our children’s education?

Notes to editors:
1. The Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) is an independent research centre based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Its members are from the LSE and a wide range of universities within the UK and around the world.


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- Piero Montebruno is a geographical research economist in the urban programme at CEP.