

Both Supply and Demand for COVID-Related Academic and Social Interventions Are Insufficient to Address the Negative Effects of the Pandemic

An Essay for the Learning Curve by Morgan Polikoff and Daniel Silver
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The disparate effects of the pandemic on families of different races, ethnicities, and income levels has been well documented. For instance, there were large income gaps in access to adequate technology throughout the pandemic, large racial gaps in parents' fears about COVID-related school safety and willingness to return to school in person, and gaps along racial, ethnic, and income lines in the pandemic's academic impacts on state and other assessments.¹ Not surprisingly, given these disparities, Black parents and parents with low incomes are more likely than other parents to be concerned about their children's well-being now and are more likely to be interested in targeted academic and social interventions. Our new survey data show, however, that they are also less likely to report having access to the interventions they want.

These findings are based on data from the Understanding America Study, a nationally representative, longitudinal panel of American families.² In the most recent survey wave (spring 2022), we asked parents questions about their concerns about their children, the availability of different

¹ Shira K. Haderlein, Anna Rosefsky Saavedra, Morgan S. Polikoff, Daniel Silver, Amie Rapaport, and Marshall Garland, "Disparities in Educational Access in the Time of COVID: Evidence from a Nationally Representative Panel of American Families," *AERA Open* 7 (January 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211041350>; Anna Saavedra, Amie Rapaport, and Dan Silver, "Why Some Parents Are Sticking with Remote Learning—Even as Schools Reopen," *Brown Center Chalkboard* (blog), Brookings Institution, June 8, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2021/06/08/why-some-parents-are-sticking-with-remote-learning-even-as-schools-reopen/>; and Megan Kuhfeld, James Soland, and Karyn Lewis, *Test Score Patterns across Three COVID-19-Impacted School Years* (working paper, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University, Providence, 2022).

² An earlier wave of these data was used in a January 2022 Learning Curve essay. See Dan Silver, Michael Feinberg, and Morgan Polikoff, "Support for Mask and Vaccine Policies in Schools Falls along Racial and Political Lines" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2022).

interventions, and whether they were participating in those interventions.³ Technical details about the sample are available in our publications.⁴

These results have implications for how schools allocate the substantial federal funds they have received to address COVID-related academic, social, and emotional impacts through targeted interventions and for how state and local policymakers can ensure the interventions they offer meet the needs of students and families.⁵

There Are Gaps in Parent Concerns and Negative Experiences, Sometimes in Different Directions

Over several waves since June 2020, we have asked parents how concerned they are about their child's psychological well-being, engagement in school, social well-being, and learning. Similar to what we found last year,⁶ there are gaps in parents' concerns about their children's well-being. On all seven measures of parent concern, Black parents report the greatest level of apprehension. Income gaps are similarly consistent, with parents from the lowest two or three income quintiles considerably more likely than parents from the most affluent quintiles to express concern.

For example, 24 percent of Black parents report concerns about the amount their child is learning at school, compared with 14 percent of white parents and 18 percent of Hispanic parents. We find similarly large gaps by race and ethnicity regarding concerns about children's psychological well-being and engagement in school. The one area where gaps are more muted is how children are doing socially (figure 1).

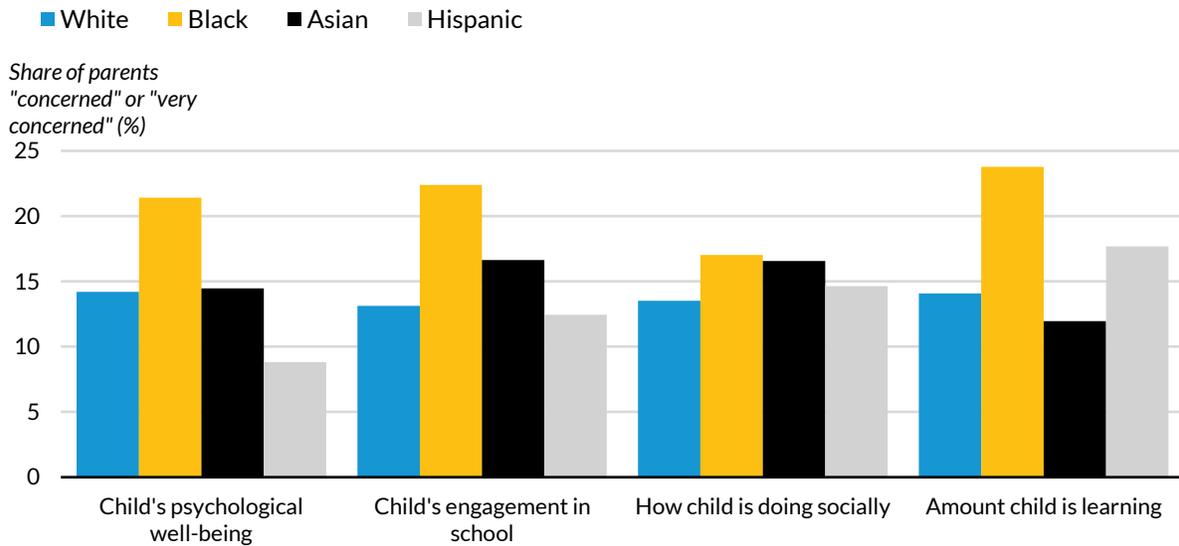
³ For this work, we use data from the Understanding America Study survey administered April 13 through May 12, 2022. We asked parents two batteries of questions about their children's needs coming out of the pandemic: one battery focused on parent concerns (repeating questions we have administered several times previously), and one battery focused on parent reports of children's ongoing negative experiences in school (e.g., poor grades in school, struggling to keep up in class, struggling to keep up with assignments). We also asked parents whether their children's school was offering several interventions: summer school, mental health supports, and tutoring. For each intervention, we asked parents whether their child was participating (if offered) and whether they would participate (if not offered). We combined "participating" and "would participate" into an indicator of parent interest in these interventions. Note, however, that this "interest" indicator likely undercounts true interest in these interventions, as nonparticipation in an intervention may not stem from a lack of interest but from other factors such as scheduling or eligibility.

⁴ See, for example, Morgan S. Polikoff, Daniel Silver, Marshall Garland, Anna Rosefsky Saavedra, Marie Rapaport, and Michael Fienberg, "The Impact of a Messaging Intervention on Parents' School Hesitancy during COVID-19," *Educational Researcher* 51, no. 2 (March 2022): 156, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211070813>.

⁵ "ESSER Expenditure Dashboard," Georgetown University McCourt School of Public Policy, Edunomics Lab, accessed June 17, 2022, <https://edunomicslab.org/esser-spending/>.

⁶ Marshall Garland, Morgan Polikoff, and Anna Saavedra, "Concerns about Child Well-Being during the 2020–21 School Year Were Greatest among Parents of Remote Learners," *Brown Center Chalkboard* (blog), Brookings Institution, September 23, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2021/09/23/concerns-about-child-well-being-during-the-2020-21-school-year-were-greatest-among-parents-of-remote-learners/>.

FIGURE 1
More Black Parents Than Non-Black Parents Report Concerns

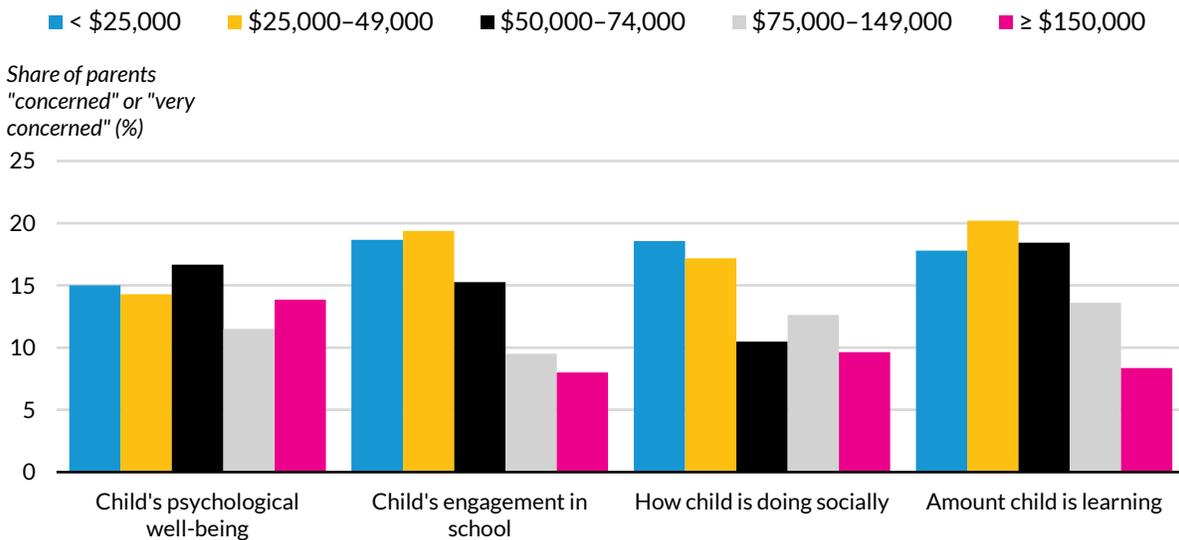


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Source: Spring 2022 survey wave of the Understanding America Study.

Notes: White, Black, and Asian people are non-Hispanic. Survey item: How concerned or unconcerned are you about each of the following now, in spring 2022?

FIGURE 2
More Low-Income Parents Than High-Income Parents Report Concerns



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Source: Spring 2022 survey wave of the Understanding America Study.

Notes: Incomes are rounded to the nearest thousand. Survey item: How concerned or unconcerned are you about each of the following now, in spring 2022?

Though Black parents and low-income parents report the highest levels of concern, when asked whether their child had had a negative experience—like a call from school for poor behavior or struggles with homework—Black parents reported fewer negative experiences than others, while low-income parents reported more. For 12 of the 13 measures⁷ we asked about, white parents reported the highest rates of negative experiences. The one exception was for notes or calls from school about behavior, where Black parents reported the highest rate. And the gaps for parents reporting none of the negative experiences we asked about were enormous—just 56 to 58 percent of white and Hispanic parents report none of the negative experiences, versus 68 percent of Black parents and 81 percent of Asian parents. In short, though Black parents expressed the most concern, white parents expressed the highest rates of various negative academic and behavioral experiences for their children.

By income, lower-income parents (especially those from the second quintile) reported higher rates of negative experiences. But of the 13 measures, the only significant difference was that parents with lower incomes were more likely to report that their students were at risk of not progressing to the next grade. But there are other gaps of equal or larger magnitude: lower-income parents were also considerably more likely than higher-income parents to report that their students were struggling to keep up in class and with homework and were experiencing anxiety. Still, the gaps in negative experiences appeared smaller based on income than the gaps in concern were.

Intervention Offerings Sometimes Differ by Race and Income, Not Usually in Ways That Would Close Gaps or Are Related to Interest

In this iteration of the survey, we also asked parents whether they have or would want access to some of the interventions education policymakers and media members have touted as potential solutions to interrupted learning.⁸ The patterns we find in parents' concerns and reports of negative experiences tend to align with interest in these interventions but have little relation to access.

Overall, interest is low for all racial and ethnic groups and for all interventions—no more than 40 percent of any racial or ethnic group expresses interest in participating in any of the listed interventions (figure 3). Black, Asian, and Hispanic parents are more likely than white parents to express interest in summer school, mental health supports, and tutoring, with the racial and ethnic group differences statistically significant for tutoring and summer school. For income, parents in the lowest income

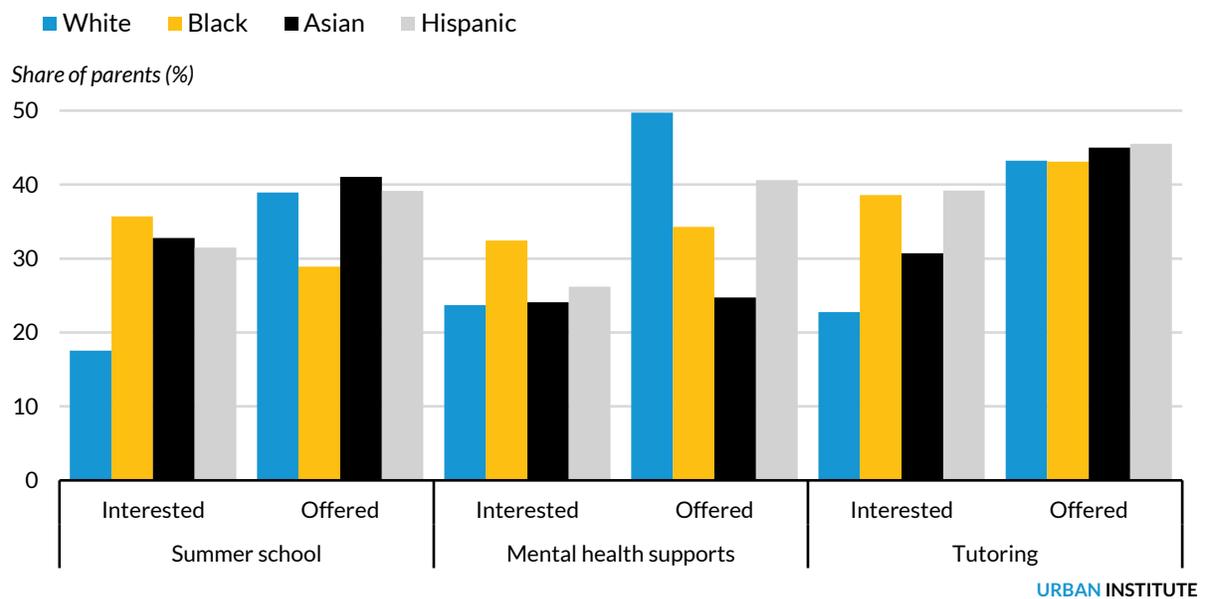
⁷ The 13 negative academic and social experiences we asked about were as follows: poor grades, poor performance on tests, struggles keeping up in class, struggles keeping up with homework, notes or calls home about academics, notes or calls home about behavior, at risk of not progressing to the next grade, at risk of not graduating high school, periods of depression, experiences of anxiety, problems with friends or friend groups, lack of interest in school, and lack of interest in activities the child used to enjoy.

⁸ Matthew A. Kraft and Grace T. Falken, *A Blueprint for Scaling Tutoring across Public Schools* (working paper, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University, Providence, 2021); Lauren Camera, "Addressing Learning Loss in Disadvantaged Kids," *US News and World Report*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2022-04-08/addressing-learning-loss-in-disadvantaged-kids>; and Christine Vestal, "COVID Harmed Kids' Mental Health—and Schools Are Feeling It," Pew, last updated November 9, 2021, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2021/11/08/covid-harmed-kids-mental-health-and-schools-are-feeling-it>.

quintiles are most likely to be interested in both summer school and mental health interventions, though only differences in interest in summer school reached statistical significance (figure 4).

When asked whether they have access to these interventions, however, white parents were significantly more likely to report being offered mental health supports than parents of other racial and ethnic groups (differences in summer school and tutoring offerings were not statistically significant). Similarly, a considerably greater (and statistically significant) proportion of affluent parents reported being offered tutoring relative to less affluent parents. Overall, rates of offering of interventions generally exceed rates of interest, though this does not mean that all parents who are interested in interventions receive them.

FIGURE 3
Offerings of Interventions Do Not Align with Interest, by Race or Ethnicity

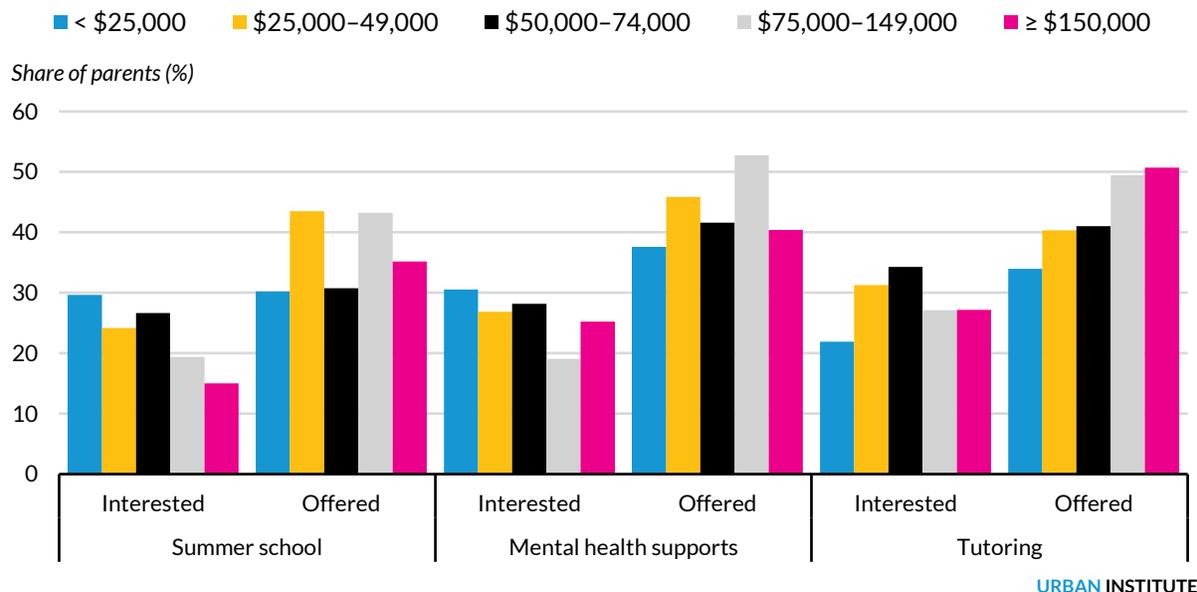


Source: Spring 2022 survey wave of the Understanding America Study.

Notes: White, Black, and Asian people are non-Hispanic. Survey items: Is your child's school currently offering [intervention]? (if yes) Is your child participating in or signed up to participate in [intervention]? (if no) Would you sign up your child for [intervention] if offered?

FIGURE 4

Offerings of Interventions Do Not Align with Interest, by Household Income



Source: Spring 2022 survey wave of the Understanding America Study.

Notes: Incomes are rounded to the nearest thousand. Survey items: Is your child’s school currently offering [intervention]? (if yes) Is your child participating in or signed up to participate in [intervention]? (if no) Would you sign up your child for [intervention] if offered?

Implications

These results suggest that the pandemic’s impacts on children continue to be unevenly borne across racial, ethnic, and income groups. Black families and families from the lowest two income quintiles generally report the most concern about their children’s well-being. Though parent interest in interventions broadly corresponds with parent concern, offerings generally do not. And overall interest in these interventions is low. From these findings, we draw two primary conclusions.

First, despite large infusions of federal dollars, offerings of COVID-related interventions and supports are not distributed in accordance with interest. For example, white parents report being offered interventions at some of the highest rates, despite expressing substantially less interest in them than other racial and ethnic groups. Thus, a first priority should simply be boosting the overall availability of evidence-based interventions to address the pandemic’s negative effects on student learning and social and emotional health, especially for low-income students and Black students.

States are best positioned to play this role by creating policies to ensure interventions are widely available and equitably distributed. State departments of education could also provide clear guidance on evidence-based best practices for summer learning and tutoring to set district- and school-level organizers up for success as much as possible. And states can support capacity-building efforts by, for example, partnering with universities and other credential-granting entities to encourage new mental

health professionals to take positions in schools. Districts also have a role to play by ensuring that their intervention offerings are available to all families in the district and not inequitably distributed within district boundaries.

Our second conclusion is rooted in the fact that only about 20 to 30 percent of parents across all racial, ethnic, and income groups we surveyed expressed interest in these interventions. In many cases, the proportion of parents who are participating or would participate is actually lower than the proportion being offered interventions, suggesting that even if offered universally, we might expect participation in these interventions to be low. If these results really do indicate low interest in summer school, mental health supports, and tutoring, then community, district, and state actors should boost this interest, perhaps by communicating with parents about learning gaps that have emerged over the course of the pandemic or even by mandating participation.

It is also possible that parents do not have low interest in these interventions in general but rather are not (or would not be) interested in them as currently implemented (or as they believe the interventions would be implemented) by their children's schools. Therefore, alongside efforts to underscore the importance of these interventions, it is essential that community, school, and district decisionmakers ensure that their specific offerings align with parents' desires, schedules, and needs, which are likely to differ from school to school. Any effective policy of academic or socioemotional interventions must fit local needs or risk low participation.

Recovery efforts are unlikely to close gaps caused by the pandemic if they are not offered to—and taken up by—communities most affected by the pandemic. These results make clear that we are far from this goal. Narrowing these learning and opportunity gaps will require investment and coordination between schools and their communities (e.g., ensuring families know what services are being offered, ensuring services are offered on schedules that are realistic for students to participate in) to ensure that high-quality supports are both provided and taken up by those who need them most.

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