

EconoFact Chats: The Disruptions to Education in the Wake of COVID-19

Nora Gordon, Georgetown University

Published on 18th July 2021

Michael Klein:

I'm Michael Klein, Executive Editor of EconoFact, a non-partisan web-based publication of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein:

One pervasive disruption of COVID was the move to remote learning for kindergarten through to high school students. Many view 2020 to 2021 as a lost school year. Studies demonstrate the extent to which children have missed out on mastering fundamental reading and math skills, and the extent to which their learning has backslid during the pandemic. This has been especially true for students who do not have access to technology or adequate places to do schoolwork at home. A group in which low-income students and students of color are overrepresented.

Michael Klein:

The government has made resources available to school districts to address these challenges, but the question arises of how to best deploy these monies. My guest today on EconoFact Chats is one of the country's leading experts on education policy and education finance, Professor Nora Gordon of the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University. Nora, welcome to EconoFact Chats.

Nora Gordon:

Thanks for having me Michael.

Michael Klein:

Nora, to start out, what do we know about the effect of the move to online instruction during the pandemic, on students learning? How big was the learning loss? Are there good estimates of this or are we operating on, sorry, forgive the pun, educated guesses here?

Nora Gordon:

I appreciate the pun, and there are good estimates, and those estimates are absolutely educated guesses. So, both are true. The real issue here is that testing was much less widespread in the past year than usual. And we only know the test scores for the students who were being tested. So those were the students who were enrolled in school and in the districts that were doing testing. There were also differences in who's testing online versus in-person. But overall, the picture we're seeing from those not representative data is much less dire than initial expectations. More like one to two months of lagging in reading and math.

Michael Klein:

But as you say, that might not be representative. And there probably are differences in the effects of this past year's remote learning across students by income groups or by racial and ethnic groups.

Nora Gordon:

Absolutely. And the studies that are coming out are reporting on those. You do see these lags, and really I would call it a learning lag rather than a learning loss, because it's just a relative. Students are learning just less than we would have expected. It's showing up across all demographic groups, but those gaps are definitely largest for students who are economically disadvantaged. Also, seeing gaps for students of color, for English language learners, remote learning posed real challenges for these students. And also when they were in person, real challenges with masks.

Nora Gordon:

People are also very concerned about the impact of COVID on students with disabilities. And there, it's not just the achievement scores that we see, but also what was happening with students being identified and assessed and the types of services that they were getting. With all of these groups, it's not just how was it going with remote learning, but also what were the odds that you were in remote learning versus being in school? Lots of students were in school, but students of color and economically disadvantaged students were likely to be in more remote settings for longer.

Michael Klein:

Nora, even before the pandemic, you focused on evidence-based educational reform. You recently published a book with Carrie Conaway called *Common-Sense Evidence: The Education Leader's Guide to Using Data and Research*. What was your motivation for writing this book?

Nora Gordon:

We were really motivated to write this book because we thought that people at the local level, education leaders, need to make decisions and evaluate evidence for themselves. And there's a lot of people asking right now with COVID, what should districts be doing with this federal money? What are the best things to do? And I think a lot of the way this conversation is happening is implying a belief that we know a lot more about what works than we do, or that things that work in one place are going to work every place. And Carrie and I really believe that different districts are going to need to choose things that make sense for them, which could be different at different points of time, and track how things are working. Ultimately, we hope that this doesn't just generate demand for more evidence, but that people start producing more evidence, people who aren't researchers.

Michael Klein:

Why do local leaders need to get involved in this? Aren't there national clearing houses of information?

Nora Gordon:

So there are, I mean, for years we've had The What Works Clearinghouse, which the US Department of Education funds. And what those things are really good for are, if you imagine a randomized control trial of, say, one curriculum against another curriculum, or an afterschool program versus no after-school program, but those evaluations work best when the thing that you're evaluating is really tightly defined. And you can say what the treatment is, like think of a medical clinical trial, where you're saying, this is the cholesterol drug. It's hard to have an analogy like that in education where things are implemented so differently in different places.

Michael Klein:

So that's like the common complaint about randomized control trials regarding external validity. And I imagine that's really a big case here where you have school districts that are very different themselves, whereas, as you said, with medication, it's not that bodies are so different, or you can try to control for that a little bit better.

Nora Gordon:

Yeah. You have that. And I think that it comes from this concern with internal validity, that there has been tons of education research that really doesn't allow for causal inference, and people just saying things like, "well, this is how students were scoring at the beginning of the year. And then we use this reading program and now this is how they're doing at the end of the year." And this is really like a common design. You'll see a lot of education research that looks like that. So, the idea with The What Works Clearinghouse is, let's introduce some more rigor so can we believe what we see more. But it is necessarily limited in the types of things that it can evaluate.

Michael Klein:

All right, Nora, we're getting a little nerdy here. We're talking about external validity and internal consistency and so on. So, let's think about a broader thing, money. We're looking at a situation now where funds are being made available to school districts. What kind of money are we talking about here?

Nora Gordon:

Yeah, we're talking about a lot of money, and this, of course, is of interest to many people. Right now we're talking about almost \$200 billion in federal aid. And this is interesting to the districts that are getting a lot of it, where there's been lots of reporting on Detroit, one of the poorest cities in the country, where they're going to be getting more than \$20,000 per student. But then there's lots of districts where they're getting a couple hundred dollars per student, and think that the average district is spending about \$13,000 per student per year. So, there's a huge range here in how much money districts are getting.

Michael Klein:

So, in the context of federal support for education, this is really big.

Nora Gordon:

This is big. This is about 12 times bigger than the Title 1 program, which is typically supporting school districts based on poverty.

Michael Klein:

So, Title 1 is identifying places where you have very high poverty rates. Is that correct?

Nora Gordon:

Sort of. Title 1 is sending money to almost all school districts, and it's sending more money per pupil to poorer school districts.

Michael Klein:

But in this case, is it the situation that moderately poor districts aren't getting as much as they might?

Nora Gordon:

That's right. And you could think about this and ask, if this money is to help districts recover costs that they incurred with COVID, do you think these are costs that they incurred for all students? Or how much do you want it to be targeted for students who are in poverty? And also, this question of, how much cushion do districts have to provide this stuff for themselves? And the way Congress went with focusing on Title 1, they were really focusing on equity, trying to be redistributive with this money. At the same time, there were a lot of districts that have spent a lot of money trying to deal with additional costs of COVID, many of them to operate in person, and now they're not getting that much back.

Michael Klein:

So, what do you think Nora, about the way these funds should be deployed? I guess your previous answer suggests that it may or may not be deployed in the same way as it would be deployed before the pandemic. Are the steps now different from what we would have seen before the pandemic to have the money deployed well or is it more or less the same?

Nora Gordon:

Again, it's sort of both. I mean, to some extent, districts always should be thinking, what are their local needs? And then, how can they spend the money in the way that makes sense for them? What you really need to think about here is that things were not so great before COVID. Only about 35% of 4th graders were assessed as scoring proficient on the NAEP, this is the nation's report card in reading, 41% in math. This is prior to COVID. So, if you're thinking that you should suddenly be coming up with some great new idea to make up for this learning loss, districts were thinking about these things before.

Michael Klein:

So it's a little bit like what we see in other areas, where there were tensions or problems and COVID exacerbated them, or accelerated them but they were there before anyway. Right?

Nora Gordon:

That's absolutely the case. The needs were there before.

Michael Klein:

How might districts be thinking differently about these funds?

Nora Gordon:

Yeah, it is an interesting opportunity for a lot of school districts to have these funds, because I think the way politically a lot of the budgeting goes in school district is, something gets built into the budget and then you keep funding that thing. And you have different pots of revenue from different federal programs, different state programs, and people think of it as kind of their money for their program. So just the fact that this is new money from a different source, kind of opens things up. For those districts that are getting a lot of money, which is of course not all the districts, it really opens up some things, and you hear people talking a lot about HVAC. If you want to do some big expenditure like that.

Nora Gordon:

The thing that's a little different here is that these funds are going to end. It's not like Title 1, which you get every year and you have a basic sense that it generally stays the same or goes up a little bit. So, this is a one-time funding amount which districts can spread over several years, but they're not going to want to make a lot of ongoing commitments with them. So they're not going to want to hire teachers who have

tenure who they have to keep paying. Though they're thinking of things that relate to contracting or one-time investments.

Michael Klein:

You mentioned HVAC. We have a very interesting memo by Ji Sung Park, about how air conditioning in schools really is important for students performance in schools that don't have air conditioning. It's not just a luxury, it's really very important for students to be able to learn. So, some of our listeners might think, "Well, do they really need air conditioning?" But it's a really important part of the infrastructure. And that suggests that this is not a one size fits all policy, but different districts need very different types of assistance. How does that get written into law?

Nora Gordon:

It gets written into law in kind of a messy way. I mean, what you would really like to write is do what makes sense for you and be a good actor. And this is really an ongoing challenge in education policy. Congress gives out education money all the time. It's been an issue in Title 1. And so, try to work around it with evidence mandates, and suggest that states need to submit plans, and they suggest that districts do local needs assessment and make a logic model. But with all of these things you can do it and have many different outcomes. So it's a hard line to walk between allowing for local flexibility and really ensuring that the funds are spent in the most cost-effective way.

Michael Klein:

One example that comes to mind because there's been a lot of discussion about it lately, is the evidence that tutoring is very helpful. But tutoring is really resource intensive. And the ability to have tutoring is quite different across different districts.

Nora Gordon:

Yeah. I'm glad that you mentioned tutoring. I mean, tutoring comes up all the time in this discussion. I feel like tutoring and HVAC are two things that come to mind a lot, summer school also, but tutoring has a much stronger evidence-base than summer learning programs do. And in the past it's been dismissed as just out of reach in terms of cost. And some of these programs where you'd be thinking about \$2,500 to \$3,000 per pupil. Say, if you're thinking about what's called, high dosage tutoring. So that you have a low ratio, maybe one tutor to two to three students. Same tutor with the kids all year, at least three times a week built into the school day. It takes a lot. It's a high touch program to make it effective. But I think actually that the cash has been the biggest limitation and there's a lot of groups working now to help districts scale tutoring. So I think that this could be a good moment for it to work for districts that have lots of Federal aid.

Michael Klein:

Nora, we've been talking about evidence-based research. To what extent is that based on standardized testing? And do you think that there's been a move against standardized testing in the wake of the pandemic? In April, the former New York City School's Chancellor, as well as the Massachusetts Teacher Association, encouraged parents to opt their children out of state tests during the pandemic.

Nora Gordon:

Well, first of, your first question about, to what extent is the evidence-based research based on standardized testing? A lot. You need to have an outcome. If you want to see how does something affect student outcomes? You need outcomes. And standardized tests are a very common source of them. Although you have more people now looking at other things also like attendance or disciplinary

outcomes. People link records to see what happens to students in the labor market years down the line. There's a lot of other interesting things that you can look at. But standardized testing is super important for this. I think it's a little premature to say that responses against testing during the pandemic are going to be with us later.

Nora Gordon:

I just think when students are back in school and parents are not sitting right next to the Zoom, things might look different. But it's not a new set of concerns. And, to be fair, minutes during the day are the most valuable resource that educators have. If you think of a budget constraint for a teacher, that's the really binding budget constraint that they have. So, I think for both educators and students and parents, they really want to see, what are they getting for this testing. And I don't think that's a case that has been made very effectively.

Michael Klein:

Nora, if you had a magic wand and could wave it and have one big change for educational policy in the United States, what would you use your one big change for?

Nora Gordon:

Oh, that's such a great question, Michael. I think it applies not just to education, but to lots of things. I wish that we could all step back from some of our cognitive biases about what we think works, and come to things with a more open mind and a less political take on how things are actually playing out for students.

Michael Klein:

And what would, perhaps, one of the biggest existing biases be that you would like to see under greater scrutiny?

Nora Gordon:

Right now I'm getting very interested in math education. There's been a lot of reporting in the last few years about the reading wars, which for decades people have been talking about the reading wars and the role of phonics versus whole language. And there's similar stuff brewing in math. And this is something where, the way people are talking about it, it makes it hard to get in, in what I would view as an evidence-based way, because the positions are so strongly held.

Michael Klein:

And of course, math and STEM education is seen as really vital for people's future work opportunities and for the country as a whole for its productivity.

Nora Gordon:

Yeah. So, it's disturbing when you see districts and states walking back from advanced math.

Michael Klein:

And what about a more vocational aim of education? Do you think that's something that is important or is it just an excuse that people are making, and there are other things that are much more important than that?

Nora Gordon:

I think that's really important, and you keep hearing people talking about it. And I feel like for over a decade you keep waiting for it to take off. But a lot of questions about, just making sure that you have the right programs matched to the right local labor markets, but this seems like something that is sort of low-hanging fruit.

Michael Klein:

Are there any good examples of that, that people could point to? I know we've been talking about how things are local specific. But are there examples of that kind of program that you think works well and maybe is worth, if not emulating, at least considering carefully for other areas?

Nora Gordon:

I cannot think of one off the top of my head, but I would recommend that you look at this, I remember a Hamilton Project conference where they were talking about a lot of these.

Michael Klein:

Well, Nora, thank you very much for speaking with me today about this vitally important issue that's affecting our children and ultimately our country as well. And thank you for the work that you're doing in this very important area.

Nora Gordon:

Thanks for having me, Michael. And thanks for all of your work with EconoFact. I use it with my students.

Michael Klein:

It's good to hear it. Maybe that's what we should be doing. Have everybody use Econofact more. This has been EconoFact Chats. To learn more about EconoFact and to see the work on our site, you can log into www.econofact.org. You can subscribe on our site to our newsletter that will let you know when we publish new memos and new podcast episodes. Please feel free to share this podcast and our memos with friends, colleagues, and on social media. EconoFact is a publication of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. Thanks for listening.