

April 9, 2020

An Open Letter to Independent School Leaders

It is an understatement to say that the Coronavirus (COVID-19) has disrupted American families, culture, the economy, governments, healthcare systems, and your schools as well. Like many other institutions in American life, schools have been forced to make radical changes in day-to-day routines, including ceasing their face-to-face interactions with students. Students now receive instruction, assignments, and tests in their homes using virtual means—with no transition period for teachers, parents, and students.

This letter makes a case that, as soon as possible, independent schools should create plans to:

- Keep your students and staff safe from the virus during the 2020-21 academic year
- Maintain fiscal solvency, including keeping enrollments at desired levels
- Demonstrate to your families that you will provide educational value to their children under the likely scenario that they will spend a significant amount of time learning from home during the 2020-21 academic year.

The Likely Health Environment for the 2020-21 Academic Year

The good news first: [Dr. Fauci's expert opinion as of April 7](#) is that we will likely be in “good shape” to open schools on time for the 2020-21 academic year.

While we are all hoping for the best, we need to be realistic. For example, in his April 7 remarks, Dr. Fauci also said that school opening on time was not an “absolute prediction” and that “It's going to be different, remember now, because this is not going to disappear.”

This summer of 2020 will be your most intense planning summer ever, as you make crucial decisions on how to deliver the best education possible to your students under the following likely scenario—schools open on time this summer and fall as the Coronavirus abates, only to close when the virus spreads again, open their doors to students and educators again, and then close again. Of course, we are not virologists and there are other possible scenarios, but all of them seem to indicate that school doors will be closed for substantial time periods during the next school year. As Dr. [Fauci said](#) about the Coronavirus on Sunday April 5, “... **there is a very good chance that it'll assume a seasonal nature. We need to be prepared that since it will be unlikely to be completely eradicated from the planet that as we get into next season, we may see the beginning of a resurgence.**”

On April 6, Dr. Gabriel Leung, [wrote in the *New York Times*](#) and made this same point:

After achieving a sustained decline ... and bringing the number of daily new cases down to an acceptable baseline thanks to stringent physical distancing, a society can consider relaxing some measures (say, reopen schools). But it must be ready to reimpose drastic restrictions as soon as those critical figures start rising again — as they will, especially, paradoxically, in places that have fared not too badly so far. Then the restrictions must be lifted and reapplied, and lifted and reapplied, as long as it takes for the population at large to build up enough immunity to the virus.

Trying to see our way through the pandemic with this “suppress and lift” approach is much like driving a car on a long and tortuous road. One needs to hit the brakes and release them, again and again, to keep moving forward without crashing, all with an eye toward safely reaching one’s final destination.

In an April 7 [letter to the White House](#), a National Academy of Sciences panel indicated there was a lot of uncertainty, but that it does not appear that warm weather will cause the COVID-19 to dissipate. Of course, our information about this Coronavirus will change as scientists learn more about how it spreads and learn more about the efficacy of various treatments.

Given that scientists are still learning more, there are several scenarios that are possible during the upcoming interim period of “[semi-normalcy](#)” that will likely last well into 2021. Regardless of which public health scenario is realized—they are likely to involve different dates of return to normalcy in different states.

History is also instructive: The Spanish Flu of 1918-19 came in [three waves](#): The first wave in March 1918, the second—and worst—wave came in August 1918, and a third in March 1919.

Very recent history comes to us from some of the countries that did an excellent job containing this Coronavirus: Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan each had outbreaks before the U.S., and “flattened the curve” at very low levels of rates of new infections—[but the virus is already returning to them](#).

It appears that prudent risk management suggests, at a minimum, that schools need to be prepared for students toggling between receiving instruction at school and students receiving instruction at home—where this toggling may occur during the entire next school year.

Given the likelihood of students switching between learning at school and learning at home, independent schools must rethink how you deliver educational services to your students for the 2020-21 academic year—and you have mere months to do it. Further, given the large effect of the Coronavirus on the macroeconomy, independent schools are going to be especially impacted.

This friendly letter comes from two education policy experts (Benjamin Scafidi and Eric Wearne). We are faculty members in the Coles College of Business at Kennesaw State University, just outside Atlanta, and, both of us have extensive experience working with independent school leaders in various capacities.

We divide this remainder of this letter into four parts:

- The Coronavirus Macroeconomy and Independent Schools
- Health Considerations for the 2020-21 academic year
- Immediate Financial Considerations
- Educational Considerations for the 2020-21 academic year.

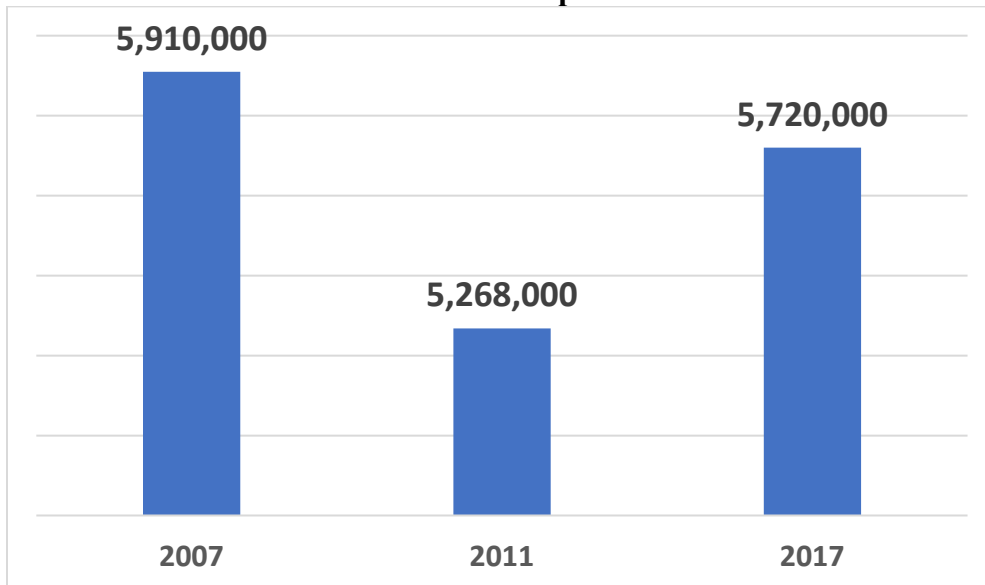
The Coronavirus Macroeconomy and Independent Schools

While we do not know if the current economic recession—that surely just began—will be as bad as the Great Recession, it is worth remembering the impact the Great Recession had on the independent school sector.

The Great Recession began in December 2007. As shown below, nationwide independent school enrollment declined by about 640,000 students from 2007 to 2011—a decline of 10.9 percent. Enrollments recovered to 5.72 million by 2017.

Nevertheless, 2017 enrollment was still down by 3.2 percent when compared to 2007—a decline of almost 200,000 students.

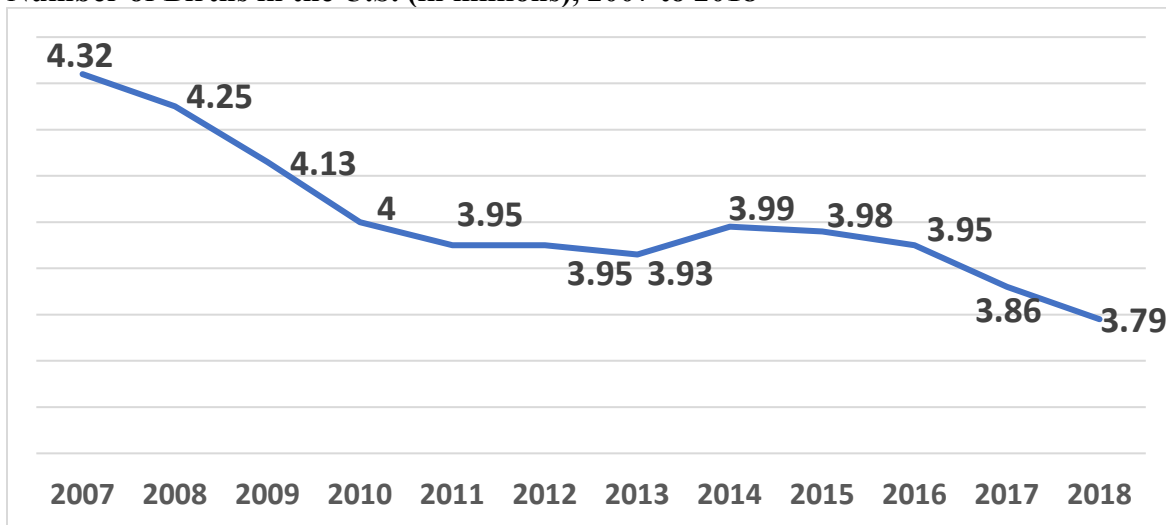
Estimated Enrollment in American Independent Schools



Source: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_205.10.asp?current=yes

Any adverse impacts on enrollment due to the Coronavirus recession that surely began in March 2020 are going to be in addition to adverse enrollment impacts due to demographic changes in America. As shown below, the number of births in the United States fell by 12 percent from 2007 to 2018—from 4.32 million in 2007 to 3.79 million in 2018.

Number of Births in the U.S. (in millions), 2007 to 2018



Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/195908/number-of-births-in-the-united-states-since-1990/>

Without any action on your part, fewer births over the past 12 years and the poor Coronavirus macroeconomy will likely lead to significant enrollment decreases in the independent school sector, for fall 2020 and beyond. Of course, some schools and some regions of the country will be impacted more than others.

Given the Coronavirus economy we are in, and given the likelihood that students will toggle between learning at school and learning at home, for at least large stretches of the upcoming school year, we recommend that you immediately begin conversations with your school community on the following six questions:

- 1) **How can we—credibly—convince our school community that we will provide more safety against the coronavirus relative to public schools?**
- 2) **What will be our crisis management plan when one of our teachers, staff, or students tests positive for the Coronavirus?**
- 3) **Enrollment drops are likely, so what do we do for families who will have just a one-year liquidity problem?**
- 4) **Do we need to implement a temporary reduction in compensation for the next academic year?**
- 5) **How can we make our work environment better for our teachers and staff, when they and their children will be toggling between school-home-school-home?**
- 6) **How can we best educate our students next year, when they will be toggling between school-home-school-home?**

In this letter we provide the questions, and some guidance. But, you and your individual school communities will have to decide on the answers for yourselves—given your specific situations and given health updates that will be forthcoming over the summer months.

Next, we briefly discuss each of these questions in turn.

Health Considerations for the 2020-21 Academic Year

1) How can we—credibly—convince our school community that we will provide more safety against the coronavirus relative to public schools?

We do not know to what extent instant testing or N95 masks will be available, or how effective homemade masks are. As doctor's offices are doing now, are schools prepared to take each person's temperature and ask them health questions before deciding whether to let them into the school building each day?

Depending on a school's population, and the possibility of a partial but incomplete lifting of distancing rules, school leaders may consider using a hybrid-style schedule for part of the year. Schools may create Monday/Wednesday and Tuesday/Thursday cohorts, in which only half or so of the school population is on campus any particular day, making distancing easier. The other days of the week, students would do work at home assigned by their teachers. If this is not practical for your families, can you use gymnasium, auditorium, and other non-classroom space for class meetings, in order to keep students at safe distances from one another?

If we are required to quarantine next school year, perhaps encourage closed circles of 2-3 families to do so together (interacting only with each other, not necessarily in the same home). If 2-3 families were in the same quarantine circle, they could safely take turns supervising each other's children when they are learning at home and not at school during the academic year.

You need a health safety plan, and you need to communicate it clearly to families and staff over the summer. Safety is clearly the paramount concern at this time. Independent schools are well versed in explaining your value proposition in terms of academics, faith and values, structure, and physical safety. For this upcoming academic year, you will have to clearly communicate your value proposition in terms of keeping students and staff safe from the virus when they are at school.

Until a vaccine is developed and widely used and/or herd immunity is present, it is likely the case that keeping students and staff healthy is your first concern.

2) What will be our crisis management plan when one of our teachers, staff, or students tests positive for the Coronavirus?

First, alert the relevant public health authorities. Second, obey the law. Third, be transparent—immediately—with your families and staff. We are not experts in this area by any measure, but you need a crisis management plan.

Immediate Financial Considerations for Independent Schools

3) Enrollment drops are likely, so what do we do for families who will have just a one-year liquidity problem?

You may need to reach out to each of your families—one on one—to ascertain their financial situation for 2020-21. You would hate to lose an entire family because of a one-year liquidity problem. You can counsel them as to possibilities for funding their children’s education:

- Tapping into home equity and/or taking money out of retirement accounts—the latter can be done [penalty-free in some cases under the recently passed CARES Act.](#)
- Mention any scholarship aid or targeted tuition reductions, if you are willing and able to provide them.

When your governor and state legislature are providing emergency funds to local governments, including public school districts, consider asking them to appropriate money for emergency scholarship programs for 2020-21 (or expand existing programs). If students leave your schools and enroll in the public sector, that imposes a significant cost on state taxpayers, as they must appropriate new per student “formula” money to accommodate the increase in public school enrollments. State governments could appropriate emergency funding for 2020-21 for modest private school scholarships, \$3,000-\$7,000 per student. As shown in an appendix at the end of this letter, these scholarship amounts are below or significantly below per student state “formula” funding amounts for public schools in most states. Again, if students leave your institutions for public schools, that places a fiscal burden on the state.

4) Do we need to implement a temporary reduction in compensation for the next academic year?

If (a) enrollment is down and (b) net tuition revenue per student is down due to targeted tuition reductions to families in need, then this double-whammy to your revenues may necessitate spending reductions. Perhaps your school has significant reserves or a significant endowment, so you can weather the (hopefully only a one-year) storm. If not, you have at least two options:

- Make a clarion call to your families, alumni, and benefactors asking them that if they are maintaining, or somehow increasing, their income during the Coronavirus economy to consider making additional donations—above their normal level of giving—to help families in need attend your schools next year. Some middle-income families who maintain their incomes may be receiving federal stimulus funding. Ask families in those situations to consider donating those funds to help provide temporary scholarships to families in need. Families who maintain their incomes will spend less on eating out, vacations, and fuel—because of the virus.
- Implement cuts in compensation including a suspension of any employer match on retirement accounts or temporary pay reductions.

Educational Considerations for the 2020-21 Academic Year

5) How can we make our work environment better for our teachers and staff, when they and their children will be toggling between school-home-school-home?

Maintaining a coherent – but flexible – schedule for students, parents, and teachers is important. Imposing singular demands on the specific technology platforms teachers use will be difficult, as individual teachers have a variety of comfort levels with this level of technology and online instruction, especially on short notice. Some schools are currently requiring use of a particular platform while others vary based on subject area or preference. Teachers should be required to have some kind of live check-ins with students online. At least weekly is best; daily check-ins may become onerous for families. Maintaining some kind of meeting schedule is important; some teachers may want to meet online more than others, but the times allotted for these class sessions should be clear and predictable for students and parents to avoid conflicts. Some hybrid home schools, which only meet 2-3 days per week under normal circumstances, have mostly kept their normal work routines going in the online environment. Tuesdays and Thursdays, for example, might be considered “class days,” while the rest of the days are considered “home days,” in which students complete work (assigned by their teachers) at their own pace. This also gives teachers dedicated, predictable time to do their grading, preparing, and to conduct their family lives—especially when they may have their own children with them at home. This “hybrid” model may be best for conventional independent schools as well.

6) How can we best educate our students next year, when they will be toggling between school-home-school-home?

Smaller institutions, such as independent schools, tend to be much **more nimble** than large institutions when crises such as sudden shutdowns occur. We have seen multiple breakdowns in our largest-scale institutions, and a lot of support for the most local ones. This is a potential advantage for many kinds of independent schools. Hybrid home schools are perhaps a useful group to learn from in terms of academics as well. They have experience shifting instruction from school to home on an ongoing basis. Conventional schools should look to hybrid home schools in their community to see how they handle this toggling of the learning process between school and home.¹

If conventional school leaders ask hybrid home school leaders and teachers, they will learn that when significantly more learning occurs at home:

- Students will have to read more books, or have more books read to them, as appropriate. The latter during virtual synchronous sessions with their teachers and classmates or with their parents.

¹ Eric Wearne has done some of the first academic research on hybrid home schools (see [here](#), for example), and is the author of the first book on this rapidly growing phenomenon (*Little Platoons: Defining Hybrid Home Schools in America*, forthcoming from Lexington Press this spring).

- Students will have to do more research projects, as appropriate given student ages and expertise, and will spend more time on virtual creative activities like preparing and delivering presentations, creating artwork and music, creating videos, etc.
- Students will do more writing on their own, and re-writing of their marked-up work on their own, as appropriate.
- Students will be asked to discuss concepts with their family members as part of their lessons.
- To get a fuller educational experience, students cannot be glued to a screen all day doing lessons, and so those lessons will incorporate more time with outdoors, hands-on, or interpersonal activities.

More suggestions from hybrid home school practices are discussed [here](#) and in *Little Platoons: Defining Hybrid Home Schools in America*. It is possible that work done at home, guided by a school support system, can produce strong academic results. When public school systems have experimented with this concept in the past, they sometimes place a lot of value on students having logged-in seat time for accountability purposes. This typically isn't necessary. New [research](#) shows graduates of hybrid homeschools to be well-prepared for college, based on both their confidence and their college GPAs, compared to similar peers. Parents can support well-structured, content-rich lessons, especially if more of the content is simply reading and discussing ideas, and if they have the support of a school.

Of course, independent schools have their students do each of the above activities as a matter of course. But in this era of the Coronavirus, they may have to do more of these activities than usual, because students may be spending significantly more time at home. Students doing more learning activities that are amenable to being completed at home—more reading, more writing, more re-writing, more research, more public speaking, more creative activity, and taking low-stakes standardized tests on-line (like CogAt or Iowa)—are certainly not bad things. We are advocating that independent schools make the most of the situation caused by quarantines that are likely to come next school year.

As soon as possible, you should convene your educators into small appropriate groups by grade and subject to rethink your educational offerings in order to best serve students who will spend substantial time during the 2020-21 academic year learning from home. The next school year will be here soon.

You will need to have a solid education plan that convinces your families that you will be providing value to their students—if they will be spending a significant fraction of the 2020-21 academic year learning at home. Of course, you should not publicize this plan until the appropriate time, as health experts learn more about this Coronavirus.

Concluding Remarks

We wish we had better news for you, but the Coronavirus is with us—until we get wide distribution of a vaccine and/or herd immunity 16 months, or so, from now. For prudent risk management, it is best if independent schools create health, fiscal, and educational plans for the 2020-21 academic year now—to offset likely negative effects of the Coronavirus on your schools.

Finally, feel free to share this open letter with your networks, leadership teams and boards, on the web, or via social media.

Thank you for your great service to your students, your communities, and our nation!

Benjamin Scafidi
Director, Education Economics Center
Professor of Economics

Eric Wearne
Fellow, Education Economics Center
Visiting Associate Professor of Education Statistics

Coles College of Business, Kennesaw State University

* The views expressed in this letter are the authors' alone, and do not necessarily represent the views of Kennesaw State University, the Coles College of Business, or the Education Economics Center.

Appendix – State Revenues Per Student for Public Schools in Each State, 2016-17

Notes: Not all state revenues are enrollment driven. That is, not all funds depicted below represent the increased per-student costs to state budgets when public school enrollment increases by one student. However, for most states, the vast majority of these state funds are directly tied to enrollment. For the District of Columbia, we used local funds. 2016-17 was the most recent year available, and for almost all states, state funding for public schools has increased significantly in more recent years.

Source: Data that state departments of education annually report to the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education,

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_203.20.asp?current=yes

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_235.20.asp?current=yes

	State Revenues Per Student, 2016-17
United States	\$6,546
Alabama	\$5,841
Alaska	\$12,058
Arizona	\$4,255
Arkansas	\$5,980
California	\$8,058
Colorado	\$5,085
Connecticut	\$8,399
Delaware	\$9,714
District of Columbia	\$26,654
Florida	\$4,028
Georgia	\$5,350
Hawaii	\$13,959
Idaho	\$5,743
Illinois	\$6,765
Indiana	\$6,753
Iowa	\$7,321
Kansas	\$8,154
Kentucky	\$6,184

	State Revenues Per Student, 2016-17
Louisiana	\$5,449
Maine	\$6,057
Maryland	\$7,476
Massachusetts	\$7,257
Michigan	\$7,997
Minnesota	\$10,014
Mississippi	\$5,000
Missouri	\$4,097
Montana	\$5,925
Nebraska	\$4,545
Nevada	\$3,758
New Hampshire	\$5,569
New Jersey	\$9,161
New Mexico	\$8,108
New York	\$10,350
North Carolina	\$5,844
North Dakota	\$9,250
Ohio	\$6,162
Oklahoma	\$4,335
Oregon	\$6,629
Pennsylvania	\$7,007
Rhode Island	\$7,649
South Carolina	\$6,311
South Dakota	\$3,965
Tennessee	\$4,622
Texas	\$4,354
Utah	\$4,825
Vermont	\$17,650
Virginia	\$5,101
Washington	\$8,937
West Virginia	\$7,000
Wisconsin	\$6,201
Wyoming	\$12,122