

## Chicago Families Debate School Reopening

*Kate Taylor and Amelia Nierenberg for the New York Times – February 3, 2021*

### Voices from Chicago

After days of rising tension between Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Chicago Teachers Union, we are now in the midst of what local officials are calling a 48-hour “cooling off” period. Students are continuing to learn remotely as the two sides try to avoid a strike or lockout.

The battle in the country’s third-largest school system has become one of the nation’s most contentious over school reopening, with both sides claiming to fight on behalf of the most vulnerable families.

But throughout the debate, the voices of parents and caregivers haven’t always been heard. So over the last several days, we have been talking to them about what they think. Roughly 60 percent of families have decided to keep their children home for now, but even among that group, there were a range of perspectives.

Darlene O’Banner\*, 63, is raising two great-granddaughters, who are in pre-K and second grade. Her mother, 81, also lives with them. She has opted to keep the kids remote for now, until she and her mother have been vaccinated. But she is critical of the union for blocking in-person instruction for the children who need it.

She thinks that white teachers in particular don’t want to come back to schools in Black neighborhoods, where the rates of infection are higher than elsewhere in the city.

“Don’t say because of safety,” said O’Banner, who is Black. “Just say, ‘I’m just afraid of it, and I just don’t think I can deal with it.’”

Lilia Guevara\*, an immigrant from Mexico, has three children, including eighth-grade twins, both autistic, who she believes are falling behind both academically and socially.

But Guevara decided not to send them back when she heard their principal describe what the school day would look like: The children would have to stay in the same classroom at their desks all day, with plastic dividers between them. “I thought it was just too much for the kids to adjust,” she said.

Guevara said she believed a strike, whoever is to blame, would be bad for families, and encourage more of them to enroll in one of the online schools whose ads keep popping up on her Facebook feed.

Claiborne Wade\* works for a nonprofit as a parent liaison at Oscar DePriest Elementary School, where two of his children attend. He currently works remotely four days a week and goes into the school once a week.

Wade and his wife don't plan to send their children back until young kids can be vaccinated (for which there is currently no time frame). He said he didn't think that young children would be able to keep their masks on, or stay socially distanced.

Wade supports the union, he said, and thinks that teachers shouldn't be forced to go back into schools until they are vaccinated. "Your health comes first, and if the teachers don't feel right coming back into the classroom, they shouldn't be penalized."

\*Kids First Chicago Parent Advisory Board Member

**A year into the pandemic, thousands of students still can't get reliable WiFi for school. The digital divide remains worse than ever.**

*Erin Richards, Elinor Aspergren, and Erin Mansfield for USA Today – February 4, 2021*

In Los Angeles, special education teacher Jaime Lozano strives to keep the attention of his elementary students during online classes.

But no matter the charisma he brings to the screen, it's no match for glitchy internet connections. Every day, about a third of his students experience an outage that cuts into their learning time, Lozano said. Nearly all of his students are from low-income families, and many can't afford wired, broadband service.

"The system goes down, or someone is working on a tower, or there's too many people on the Wi-Fi hotspot and it cuts out," Lozano said.

Since schools shut down in the spring, districts have scrambled to distribute laptops and internet so students can engage in schooling from home. But almost a year later, with no end in sight for virtual learning, millions of students still lack reliably fast internet or a working computer – the basic tools to participate in live lessons from home.

The digital divide is complicated to solve. The cost of broadband is out of reach for many families. High-speed internet lines are scarce in rural areas. And there's little good and consistent data on the extent of internet connectivity – something the federal government could have taken the lead on years ago, but didn't.

As for computers, many low-income students got them only halfway through the year, further slowing their learning. Or the district-supplied devices are starting to break down and there's not enough IT support, advocates for disadvantaged families say.

As of December, at least 11 of the 25 largest districts in the U.S. were still distributing devices or internet to students or could not define the extent of lingering connectivity needs, a USA TODAY survey showed.

The problem is greatest among the lowest-income students, who also are most likely to be learning online.

"Kids without internet access are more likely to suffer and not even be in contact with their teachers," said Laura Stelitano, an associate policy researcher for RAND Corp., a global research firm that has studied the issue.

**Who is to blame?**

About two-thirds of U.S. public-school students are doing at least some of their classes from home, according to Burbio, a company tracking school districts' reopening plans, even as President Joe Biden's administration pushes to reopen schools for in-person learning.

Yet more than more than 157 million people were not using the internet at broadband speeds as of 2019, according to tech-giant Microsoft. While access is a bigger problem in rural areas, cost is an issue for low-income families everywhere. Broadband service can cost up to \$349.95 a month in California and up to \$299.95 in parts of Alaska, Kentucky, and Virginia, according to data from BroadbandNow.com.

No law requires internet providers to run infrastructure to all families' homes to give them the option of subscribing. Agencies like the Federal Communications Commission have spent years paying companies to run some of this infrastructure to rural areas, mitigating the issue but never completely fixing it.

And the federal government has never really known for sure how extensive the problem is because the FCC has spent years collecting data that underestimates how many people lack broadband, leaving the best estimates to private companies like Microsoft or other nonprofit groups that work with schools.

Online learning during the pandemic has exposed the extent of internet access disparities among students, said Jessica Denson, a spokeswoman for a group called Connected Nation that has spent 20 years working on connectivity issues.

"We didn't really have true numbers of what this looked like," she said. "It's like saying, 'I want to paint my house, but I don't really know the full square footage of it.' To truly do it right, we need a nationwide effort that's focused on this problem."

An estimated 3 million to 4 million students have received at-home internet access since the pandemic started – chipping away at the 10 million to 16 million students who lacked internet before schools shut down. Those guesses come from EducationSuperHighway, a nonprofit that brings broadband internet into schools, and also a new report from Common Sense Media, a nonprofit focused on media and children.

The first COVID-19 relief package that went through Congress in the spring did not allocate money to fix the homework gap. The most recent \$900 billion relief package passed in December includes up to \$50 a month for low-income families to pay for broadband, but that amount falls short for the neediest children, say experts who followed the negotiations.

"The package will help low-income families maintain their existing internet subscriptions, but it's not targeted toward kids who are completely disconnected, at a time when we have the most remote learning going on around the country," said John Bailey, an adviser to the Walton Family Foundation and its philanthropy in education.

"This is a collective failure of Congress and the administration."

### **Differing views on tech gaps**

In some cities, schools say they've met the vast majority of device and internet needs –even while teachers and parents disagree.

Los Angeles Unified distributed about 400,000 devices and all students have computers and internet now, officials told USA TODAY in December.

But that same month, more than half of Los Angeles teachers reported students' lack of high-speed internet was a serious obstacle to their learning, according to a survey by the University of Southern California and Educators for Excellence, a teacher advocacy group.

Sometimes, districts don't ask families the right questions about their needs, said Vikki Katz, a communications professor at Rutgers University.

"It's not enough, especially in a low-income district, to ask, 'Do you have internet access? Do you have a computer?'" she said. "Because the answer to those questions could be 'yes' today and not 'yes' tomorrow."

Those questions must be more specific, Katz said: "'Do you have internet access that's fast enough for the things you need? How many times has that connection been disconnected in the last 12 months?'"

### **More students need broadband**

Many schools view the Wi-Fi hotspots they distributed as an adequate cure, but it's more like a Band-Aid, experts say. A hotspot doesn't have the same power as a broadband connection. And that can shut out students from more rigorous or engaging online learning, such as joining a videoconference while uploading and downloading documents.

In Chicago, first-grade teacher DeJernet Farder said all her students have computers, but online classes are plagued by children reporting they lost their internet connection or a hotspot went out.

"We'll have to change the expectations of what they're going to learn in a year, because it's not possible to learn everything online this way," Farder said.

Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Union have been battling the terms of reopening buildings for traditional K-8 students to return to in-person learning this month. But only a fraction of students are expected to return; the vast majority will continue learning remotely.

Chicago also took the novel step of asking internet service providers to check the addresses of its approximate 355,000 students to indicate who lacked high-speed internet, said Evan Marwell, CEO of EducationSuperHighway. Households that were home to about 100,000 students did not have a wired connection, Marwell said.

About 60,000 of those students got connected through a new public-private partnership to provide free broadband. The other 40,000 may still lack high-speed internet.

"With all of the challenges our communities are facing during the pandemic, it's hard work getting families signed up for the internet, even when it's of no cost to them," said Hal Woods of Kids First Chicago, an education nonprofit that supported the broadband expansion.

### **Who still needs laptops?**

Thousands of students only recently received tablets or laptops.

New York City was still in the process of shipping out 100,000 iPads in December, officials said.

Outside the city in East Ramapo, some students didn't get Chromebooks until early November. By that time, almost half of the district's 9,000 students were deemed chronically absent for not logging in.

Getting the right technology to students who move a lot has also been a challenge. New York City is facing a lawsuit for not providing Wi-Fi to students in homeless shelters.

In her East Bronx middle school classes, Rosanna Perch struggles to keep everyone logged in and actively participating. The students face steep challenges: About 1 in 5 are homeless, and many are recent immigrants.

"Kids drop off and come back in a lot online, because of the internet," Perch said.

Last semester, Perch tried to administer a reading proficiency assessment remotely by texting photos of the questions to the student, who didn't have a computer.

After more than an hour, the girl dropped off the chat even though the assessment wasn't finished.

"I have to take care of my baby brother," she texted.

Recently, the school secured an iPad for the girl's family, Perch said. Now the girl is one of her most engaged students.

### **No internet, no school in rural areas**

In West Virginia, officials expected four out of five kids would be able to access lessons through reliable internet at home, after schools shut down in March.

In reality, only about half the state's 252,000 public school students could get online. The state has scrambled to invest in Wi-Fi hotspots and public access points, but they're no replacement

for the high-speed connectivity necessary for online learning, said Clayton Burch, West Virginia's superintendent of schools.

"We have a lot of families and teachers who want that idea of virtual and remote learning to work, but connectivity is so poor, it just hasn't," Burch said. "I don't think we've made a dent in high-quality, equitable access in everyone's home."

In Colorado, 13.6% of students in the state's most rural areas still didn't have internet this past fall. That barely budged from spring, said Rebecca Holmes of the Colorado Education Initiative, a nonprofit that works on technical issues.

A basic broadband connection in some parts of Colorado can cost as much as \$129 per month, according to data from BroadbandNow.com. In the county surrounding the city of Denver, only 65% of households are using the internet at broadband speeds, according to Microsoft data.

At Centennial School District in rural Colorado, about half of the 200 students don't have internet at home, or the service is too slow for virtual schooling, said Superintendent Toby Melster.

Centennial, like many rural schools, is offering in-person instruction. But students there still have two days of remote learning each week. Teachers reach out by phone or send paper packets to those without internet, but some students are inevitably sliding off track, Melster said.

In a normal year, just a handful of Centennial students regularly miss school. This year, about 60 are considered chronically absent because of the inability to log on.

"The minute they can't log in and be part of the class, they're missing out," Melster said.

## **Lightfoot says lack of parental involvement is another reason to block elected CPS board**

*Fran Spielman for the Chicago Sun-Times – February 17, 2021*

Mayor Lori Lightfoot on Wednesday cited yet another reason for not delivering the elected school board she promised during the mayoral campaign: the lack of parental involvement built into current proposals.

During an interview with Washington Post Live, Lightfoot said the demand for parental involvement was laid bare during the protracted negotiations that produced an agreement to gradually reopen Chicago Public Schools for pre-K, special education clusters and students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

She raised the issue of parental involvement when asked whether she still supports the elected school board she promised on the campaign trail.

“What I will say is this: I learned a lot through this recent experience with the Chicago Teachers Union. And particularly, hearing from parents who believe that their voices were locked out,” she said.

“Whatever the form of governance is that we move to, parents have to have a seat at the table of governance. And the proposals that I’ve seen so far fail spectacularly in that basic gating measure. I can’t agree to any kind of change in governance where parents are not front and center. Where the views and concerns of their children and students aren’t taken into consideration.”

Chicago Teachers Union Vice President Stacy Davis Gates said an early version of the elected school board bill did allocate a specific number of seats to parents, but that provision “did not stand up to constitutional review and had to be removed.”

Davis Gates accused Lightfoot of talking out of both sides of her mouth and making up excuses for failing to deliver on an important campaign promise.

“There were almost 200 local school councils that are full of parents who have been demanding changes to remote learning and also asking for reopening that was safe and gradual. She ignored those parents. She ignored the parents who wanted to see their schools without cops. There were local school councils who voted to remove [school resource officers] and then, they did not receive the funding back,” Davis Gates said.

“Black parents and brown parents have been very clear about what they needed in this pandemic. They needed a hero and they needed an advocate. And what they have gotten is a closed door from the mayor and her team at CPS.”

Lightfoot campaigned as a staunch proponent of an elected school board, only to repeatedly block what she calls an “unwieldy” bill that would triple the size of the board to 21 members: 20 members elected from local districts, headed by a president elected by citywide vote, beginning in 2023.

Earlier this week, she fueled speculation about whether she will ever deliver on that pivotal campaign promise by telling the New York Times CPS would “never have opened without mayoral control.”

On Wednesday, Lightfoot added even more fuel to the fire, telling the Washington Post: “Obviously the fact that I was personally involved made a big difference in getting this matter resolved.”

The mayor said she welcomes “more public discussion” on an elected school board.

But whatever the “form of governance” turns out to be, the “key mission” must be to provide a “safe and nurturing learning environment” for students and confront “systemic racism and other inequities” that have become “even more glaringly apparent” during the pandemic, she said.

“The school system [and] education truly can be the great equalizer, but we have to be very intentional about what we do, how we do it and who we’re investing in and I want to make sure that Black and Latinx students do not fall behind — now or in the future,” she said.

“That’s got to also be a critical part of the calculus when we think about a new form of governance for the Board of Education.”

Shortly after Lightfoot took office, the entire school board resigned. That allowed Lightfoot to appoint an entirely new board with a heavy emphasis on parents, local school council members and other stakeholders.

At the time, the mayor claimed the new board would serve until an elected school board is seated.

But she also asked then-Senate President John Cullerton to put a brick on an elected school board bill that had sailed through the Illinois House. It would have created a 21-member elected board. Lightfoot claimed it would be virtually impossible for a board that size to get anything done.

“I don’t want to have another elected body where we’re gonna see outrageous amounts of money that need to be raised. That’s gonna exclude parent voices. ... We’ve got to look at ... the funding mechanisms so people don’t have to raise undue sums. That runs a risk of having undue influences shaping who gets on the board, who gets a state at the table, whose voices are heard,” she said then.

Last month, mayoral allies once again succeeded in blocking that bill to establish a 21-member board.

The CTU and the Grassroots Education Movement had accused Senate President Don Harmon of stalling the bill and demanded that he call it for a vote.

## **Pritzker's proposed budget keeps Illinois school funding flat for a second year**

*Samantha Smylie for Chalkbeat – February 17, 2021*

Illinois will not increase its budget for education for a second year despite advocates' concerns that a stagnant budget could make it difficult to address lost learning due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Facing down a \$3 billion budget deficit, Gov. J.B. Pritzker laid out plans Wednesday for a 2022 state operating budget of \$41.7 billion that does not increase taxes for residents but relies on hiring freezes and the closure of a series of corporate tax loopholes. The state's education budget for kindergarten to 12th grade will remain stagnant at almost \$9 billion with no increase to the evidence-based funding formula.

The budget plan keeps funding for early learning and higher education mostly flat, too, but the governor outlined Wednesday some modest increases to the Monetary Award Program, or MAP, that provides grants for low-income college students.

Pritzker said that in drafting his budget proposal he prioritized agencies on the frontlines of the COVID-19 response that are addressing public health and unemployment. Ultimately, schools will see a boost of funding, he said, due to \$2.8 billion in emergency federal dollars for education.

"In March of 2020, I promised schools that they wouldn't lose funding because of the pandemic, and this budget keeps that promise. The federal government has made extraordinary efforts to support schools during this time, with \$2.8 billion allocated to schools thus far – and more is expected," Pritzker said.

"No schools will have to reduce spending," he promised, "and they can instead focus on meeting the needs of students who have tried to learn in a chaotic and trying time."

Pritzker also said Wednesday he hoped that schools would use some federal emergency dollars to "follow the Biden plan for restoring safe in-person learning."

The proposed budget will head to the state's general assembly to be approved in the March legislative session.

Pritzker's proposal to keep the state education budget flat comes at a critical time for schools. Last month, the Illinois State Board of Education recommended that the state increase the almost \$9 billion budget by \$412 million for the next school year to adequately fund schools statewide and help districts deal with potential learning loss from school shutdowns and uneven remote learning experiences.

With no new money for the funding formula, some advocates are worried about longer-term disruption to a bipartisan effort to direct more money toward public education after years of

chronic underfunding. In 2017, the state revamped the way it funds school districts, earmarking additional money each year to systems with the highest need. Key to that effort was a bipartisan promise to grow the state's education budget by at least \$350 million a year. This is the second straight year that no more new money will be added to the formula.

Whether the state could see a third round of federal funding for schools, and end up meeting that pledge, remains unclear.

Public education advocates warn that plugging gaps with federal funding shortchanges an underfunded system at a time when costs are rising due to the coronavirus response. Superintendents have said they must spend more on smaller class sizes, cleaning and sanitizing schools, hiring contact tracers, and other health and safety protocols related to the pandemic.

"It is true that there are federal funds coming to help schools reopen," said Robin Steans, President of Advance Illinois, a nonprofit policy and advocacy organization. But, she adds, "we have got to get state dollars to do the deeper structural work. What you can't do with federal funds is make long-term staffing changes and programmatic changes that school districts need in order to truly serve children well and close equity gaps."

Steans acknowledged Pritzker's record as an advocate for public education and the extent of the financial challenges facing the state. The governor pledged to invest more money in public schools last year — but that pledge hinged on voters approving a graduated income tax that would have raised income taxes on the wealthiest residents. It was expected to bring an additional \$1.4 billion in revenue annually. Voters did not pass the amendment.

Mimi Rodman, executive director for Stand for Children, said that not increasing the budget is actually a budget cut because it does not account for inflation and, with two years of cuts, it will limit the kinds of resources available to students.

"The extent of learning loss for students in Illinois is going to continue to be revealed over the next few months. We don't even know about the impacts on social emotional learning, reading and math across the state and across different demographics," said Rodman.

She continued, "If we can, right now, renew our commitment to stay with the promise of the evidence-based funding formula, we are also investing and addressing those future disparities before they start revealing themselves."

Public education advocates throughout the country have warned that the coronavirus pandemic will have major consequences on states' education budgets. However, those dire warnings have yet to materialize as the federal government so far has passed two stimulus efforts that included emergency money for schools.

Governors in some other states have also proposed flat education budgets or spending plans that similarly rely on federal emergency money to help make up for budget shortfalls.

Tennessee's budget largely remains flat, but the budget includes modest raises for teachers. In New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo cut state contributions for schools but said additional federal dollars would actually yield budget increases.