

## School shutdowns have put children up to eight months behind in reading, research indicates

CAROLINE ALPHONSO > EDUCATION REPORTER  
PUBLISHED 2 DAYS AGO

138 COMMENTS  SHARE   TEXT SIZE  BOOKMARK 

The abrupt spring shutdown of in-class learning left young students up to eight months behind in reading, according to early research findings that suggest children could lose more ground without focused lessons this school year.

Further, the reading deficit was even more pronounced among children who were previously struggling, setting them behind almost a year, said George Georgiou, a professor in the department of educational psychology at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

“Here is the challenge: If we don’t manage to get them to become at least average readers by the end of this school year, we should expect an overrepresentation of struggling readers in upper grades,” Prof. Georgiou said. “This means that basically children who struggle in reading will also be struggling in other areas of academic skills, such as mathematics, writing.”

Educators and parents have been concerned about gaps in learning during the pandemic, especially in the spring when many families struggled with the sudden move to online learning.

In the early years of schooling, children learn the fundamentals of how to read. An important milestone happens around Grade 3, where many students read to learn.

Prof. Georgiou measured the reading assessment scores involving more than 4,000 students per grade level from Grades 1 to 9 in the Edmonton area. He looked at the three years before COVID-19 and then again in September. The assessments involved sounding out words, reading fluency and comprehension.

He found that, on average, students in Grades 1 to 3 – the crucial years when they learn to read – saw their scores decline this fall, which was equal to anywhere between six to eight months behind where they should be.

Surprisingly, Prof. Georgiou said students in Grade 4 and higher were at level or performed better, on average. He suspected it was because those students are independent readers.

In a second study that builds on his findings, Prof. Georgiou had been following a group of about 1,560 young children in Edmonton and Fort Vermilion, Alta., since last fall. Of the 409 students who were struggling Grade 1 readers in the last academic year, only 85 had improved to become average readers as they started Grade 2 this fall. He said that school-based interventions could not be moved online in the spring.

“If this situation continues and they are not receiving intensive, targeted intervention, these kids will continue to be struggling readers throughout their life,” he said.

Megan Normandeau, a spokeswoman for Edmonton Public Schools, said the board has expanded an initiative to assess students’ reading ability to those in Grades 4 to 6, and not just primary-age children. In an e-mail statement, she said the information will help educators provide targeted supports and interventions, although she did not elaborate on how that would work.

Paul Wozney, president of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union, said his province

provides reading intervention supports to children in Grades 1 and 2. However, he said many of those reading specialists were redeployed to fill other teaching gaps for the first couple of months of the academic year. That meant students who required those extra supports were not receiving them.

Further, he said that large class sizes and the structure of the classroom, where students have to physically distance and remain at their desks, means that teachers are less able to help students one-on-one or have small group reading sessions on the carpet.

“Those early grade teachers have a heightened sense of anxiety about what these kids are not getting,” Mr. Wozney said. “They know in their heart of hearts that their kids are behind.”

He added that struggling students would continue to have difficulty in reading, and it could result in reading deficits throughout their school careers.

Jess Whitley, an associate professor in the faculty of education at the University of Ottawa, said the range of academic and social-emotional skills of students may be broader this year than in previous years, and the struggles of those who were previously behind may be exacerbated. The gaps, she said, are likely more pronounced for young students who can't work independently or don't have a strong reading foundation.

Prof. Whitley said it's important for schools not to separate the social-emotional well-being of students from academic learning.

“Issues will definitely arise if these gaps are ignored and we place curricular demands ahead of student needs,” Prof. Whitley said. “This is always the case, but far more so in the context of the pandemic.”

Resilience is how well you can cope with a difficult time and then bounce back. Michael Ungar from the Resilience Research Centre outlines strategies and resources to help improve your resilience as we head into winter with COVID-19.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

*Our Morning Update and Evening Update newsletters are written by Globe editors, giving you a concise summary of the day's most important headlines. Sign up today.*

---

© Copyright 2020 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher