

The Overlooked

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Introduction

Over the past 18 months, the parents of an estimated 10.8 million students, or nearly one in five of the nation's schoolchildren, did not get what they wanted from their child's school. These families are not a monolith — they represent a diverse range of communities found across America, both in terms of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. While some were more economically equipped to react, all have felt the disruptions of the pandemic in their daily lives.

Two important changes have taken root among these families. First, there has been a fundamental transformation of what families prioritize for their kids' physical, mental, emotional, and academic development. Second, for the first time in modern history, nearly every family in America had to consider different educational settings for their children.

Families' preferences for their children's education in the fall of 2020 looked very different from their preferences in any previous year. Some have been able to find new options to meet their needs, some have disengaged from the system entirely, and others will have to grapple with unresponsive systems and limited choices this fall. Together, they are **The Overlooked**.

TABLE 1. MEET THE OVERLOOKED

GROUP	ESTIMATED NUMBER OF STUDENTS	WHO ARE THESE CHILDREN?
The Movers	8.7 million	Children who changed schools between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years outside of normal grade-level progressions.
The Missed	0.6 million	Children who did not enroll in any formal schooling during the 2020-21 school year.
The Muted	1.5 million	Children of parents who are frustrated with their current schooling option and lack access to their preferred alternative(s).
The Overlooked	10.8 million	Combined populations of The Movers, The Missed, and The Muted.

There were early signs of hope that schools were meeting the expectations of families during the first months of the pandemic. During the summer of 2020, Americans displayed a boost of confidence in the public school system: Gallup’s annual poll of institutional trust showed a 12-percentage-point jump in Americans with “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of trust in public schools — a historic single-year increase.^[1] But that increased confidence was short-lived. A year later during the summer of 2021, that same measure of trust dropped by 9 percentage points.^[2] It’s likely that the 2020 jump was due to respondents signaling solidarity with public schools as schools responded to an unprecedented situation rather than a durable increase in confidence.

Families’ initial optimism about how schools would adapt to the pandemic declined as they witnessed its negative effects on students’ growth and development. Estimates vary, but some researchers have suggested that the pandemic’s negative impact on student learning may be two to four times larger than what students in New Orleans felt in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.^[3]

Millions of families are concerned that the schools they trusted their children with pre-pandemic will not be able to meet their needs moving forward. Some have been able to move their kids to a different school, some avoided or delayed schooling entirely, and others are frustrated with the lack of options for their kids. All of these families share a common problem: Their children’s needs are being overlooked and they are being underserved.

Who Are The Overlooked?

The Overlooked are students and families who did not get what they wanted from their child’s school over the past 18 months. During the 2020-21 school year, this included many families who only had access to remote learning while they would have preferred an in-person learning setting for their children. In an abrupt reversal this upcoming school year, families who would prefer to keep their children learning in a remote setting may not have that option in their current school system.

The Overlooked can be best understood as three distinct categories: **The Movers**, **The Missed**, and **The Muted**.

The Movers

Some of **The Overlooked** were able to take action during the 2020-21 school year to move their children to a different school. Research from Tyton Partners shows that 15% of families made a change in their children’s school, which is **50% higher than** the pre-pandemic rate.^[4] Taken together, **The Movers** represent approximately **8.7 million** students nationwide.

[1] Megan Brennan, “Amid Pandemic, Confidence in Key U.S. Institutions Surges,” Gallup Poll Social Series, August 12, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/317135/amid-pandemic-confidence-key-institutions-surges.aspx>.

[2] Megan Brennan, “Americans’ Confidence in Major U.S. Institutions Dips,” Gallup Poll Social Series, July 14, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/352316/americans-confidence-major-institutions-dips.aspx>.

[3] Damian Betebenner et al., “Assessing the Academic Impact of COVID-19 in Summer 2021,” Center for Assessment, August 6, 2021, <https://www.nciea.org/blog/covid-19-disruptions/assessing-academic-impact-covid-19-summer-2021>.

[4] Adam Newman, Tanya Rosbash, and Andrea Zurita, *School Disrupted Part 1: The Impact of COVID-19 on Parent Agency and the K-12 Ecosystem* (Stamford, CT: Tyton Partners, May 2021), <https://tytonpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/School-Disrupted-04.21-FINAL.pdf>.

Some of The Movers stayed within the same sector of school operators, switching from one traditional public school to another, or moving from one private school to another. But for the first time in the modern era, many families turned to smaller-sized and do-it-yourself learning options at an unprecedented scale. Enrollment in public schools and private schools declined by a combined 2.1 million students compared to pre-pandemic enrollment levels. At the same time, the number of homeschool students and students attending microschools or full-time learning pods grew by 1.5 million students.^[5] Among public schools, enrollment in charter schools grew by approximately 600,000 students (perhaps because many public virtual schools operate as charters) while traditional public schools lost 1.6 million students.^[6]

The Movers represent a diverse collection of families. The expansion of smaller-scaled options such as homeschooling and learning pods were not solely due to suburban white families. Black and Hispanic families now have the highest rates of homeschooling in the nation.^[7] Fifty-one percent of Black families and 44% of Hispanic families are interested in forming or joining learning pods, while only 29% of non-Hispanic white families have interest in forming or joining learning pods.^[8]

The ranks of The Movers may very well continue their growth in the next school year. While the rate of families switching schools was approximately 15% during the 2020-21 school year, survey data indicate that may rise to 20% for the 2021-22 school year. ^[9]

TABLE 2. CHANGE IN HOMESCHOOLING RATES DURING THE PANDEMIC BY RACE/ETHNICITY

RACE/ETHNICITY	RATE OF HOMESCHOOLING, U.S. HOUSEHOLDS		CHANGE IN HOMESCHOOLING RATE, SPRING 2020 TO FALL 2020
	SPRING 2020	FALL 2020	
White (non-Hispanic)	5.7%	9.7%	+4.0 percentage points
Black	3.3%	16.1%	+12.8 percentage points
Hispanic	6.2%	12.1%	+5.9 percentage points
Asian	4.9%	8.8%	+3.9 percentage points
Other	6.2%	11.6%	+5.4 percentage points

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

[5] Newman, Rosbash, and Zurita, *School Disrupted Part 1: The Impact of COVID-19 on Parent Agency and the K-12 Ecosystem*, <https://tytonpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/School-Disrupted-04.21-FINAL.pdf>.

[6] Newman, Rosbash, and Zurita, *School Disrupted Part 1: The Impact of COVID-19 on Parent Agency and the K-12 Ecosystem*, <https://tytonpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/School-Disrupted-04.21-FINAL.pdf>.

[7] Casey Eggleston and Jason Fields, "Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey Shows Significant Increase in Homeschooling Rates in Fall 2020," US Census Bureau, March 22, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/homeschooling-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>.

[8] Morning Consult and EdChoice, *The Public, Parents, and K-12 Education: A National Polling Report* (presentation, July 2021), <https://edchoice.morningconsultintelligence.com/assets/127416.pdf>.

[9] Morning Consult and EdChoice, *The Public, Parents, and K-12 Education: A National Polling Report*, <https://edchoice.morningconsultintelligence.com/assets/127416.pdf>.

The Missed

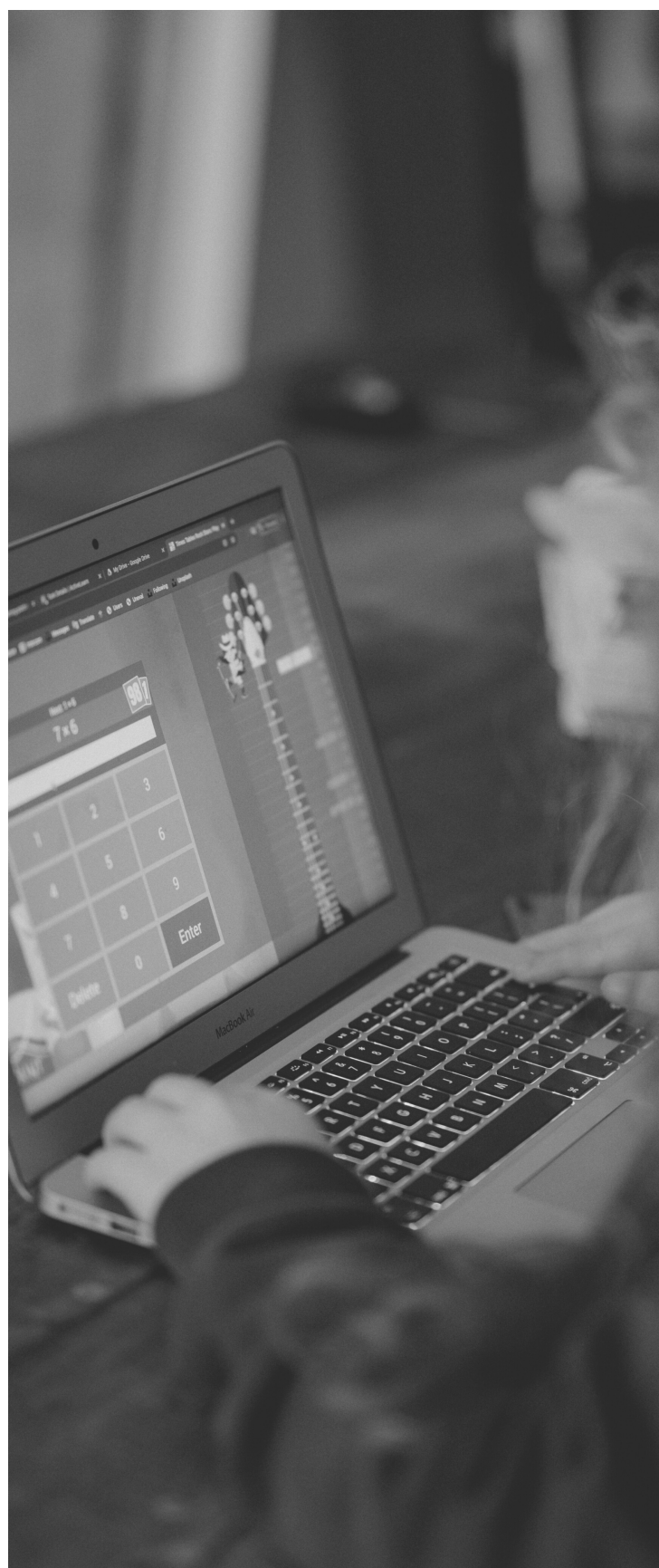
Across all school sectors — public, private, homeschool, etc. — there were approximately **0.6 million** fewer students enrolled in schools in 2020-21 than there were in 2019-20.^[10] The enrollment losses in public and private schools were not fully absorbed by homeschooling, microschools, or learning pods — these children simply did not receive any formal schooling.

Most of **The Missed** are younger children, as many families did not want their kids to experience kindergarten through a tablet or laptop. Nationwide, kindergarten enrollments declined by 9%.^[11] Data from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that approximately 30% of The Missed would have otherwise been enrolled in kindergarten during the 2020-21 school year.

The Missed present a particular challenge for education leaders. Not only did these students miss out on a year of schooling, but education leaders still don't know where to find many of them. School systems don't typically keep good data on what happens to students who disenroll. In the case of students who didn't show up for preschool or kindergarten, there may not be any educational records for leaders to follow up on at all.

Educators can't meet the needs of The Missed if they can't find them. Some of the nation's largest school districts are missing large numbers of students, including enrollment drops of 24,877 elementary students in Los Angeles Unified^[12] and approximately 10,500 students in Miami-Dade.^[13] But the challenge of finding The Missed is compounded by the fact that they are so widely dispersed across the communities served by the nation's more than 13,000 school districts.

Schools can't serve kids they can't find. Until The Missed find their way back to schools, their educational needs will only continue to grow.



[10] Newman, Rosbash, and Zurita, *School Disrupted Part 1: The Impact of COVID-19 on Parent Agency and the K-12 Ecosystem*, <https://tytonpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/School-Disrupted-04.21-FINAL.pdf>.

[11] Dana Goldstein and Alicia Parlapiano, "The Pandemic Exodus: Kindergarten Enrollment Drops," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/07/us/covid-kindergarten-enrollment.html>.

[12] Erin Richards, "As America Heads Back to School, Thousands of Kids Are Missing," *USA Today*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/education/2021/08/16/first-day-of-school-kids-missing-covid/5565167001/>.

[13] David Goodhue, "Thousands of Miami and Broward Students Have Left the Public Schools amid the Pandemic," *Miami Herald*, February 17, 2021, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article249214655.html>.

The Muted

Many families are frustrated with the educational options offered by their children's current school and lack meaningful access to high-quality alternative choices. This frustration can manifest in different forms and is difficult to quantify, but a large subset of **The Muted** can be defined as those who want access to high-quality remote instruction but will not have access to that option in the 2021-22 school year.

There are many reasons why families might prefer a virtual option — some want a remote learning option for safety considerations while some students may actually do better academically in a remote setting. Whatever reasons families have for preferring a remote option for their children, millions of those families will not have access to that option this fall.

Several large public school systems — including those serving families in New York City^[14] and Washington, D.C.^[15] — plan to offer only in-person instructional settings at the start of the 2021-22 school year. Chicago Public Schools will only offer virtual options to students “who meet specific, documented medical criteria.”^[16] New Jersey has a statewide ban on virtual learning options for the upcoming school year.^[17]

But a significant number of families still want a remote option in 2021-22. When parents were polled by the RAND Corporation in July 2021,^[18] 3% did not want to send their children to in-person schooling this fall while another 8% were unsure about doing so. Black and Hispanic parents were more likely to oppose or be uncertain about sending their children back to in-person instruction this fall when compared to white or Asian parents. Taken together, 11% of parents were hesitant about or downright opposed to sending their children to in-person schooling as the 2021-22 school year was about to begin. The continued evolution of the delta variant and future variants may push these numbers back up.

TABLE 3. PARENT OPPOSITION TO AND UNCERTAINTY ABOUT IN-PERSON SCHOOLING IN FALL 2021

PARENT GROUP	WILL YOU SEND YOUR CHILD(REN) TO SCHOOL AT LEAST ONE DAY PER WEEK THIS FALL?		
	NO	UNSURE	NO + UNSURE
White	2%	4%	6%
Black	4%	14%	18%
Hispanic	4%	13%	17%
Asian	1%	11%	12%
All Parents	3%	8%	11%

Source: RAND

[14] Alexa Lardieri and Lauren Camera, “New York City Schools to Fully Reopen with No Remote Learning,” *U.S. News & World Report*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2021-05-24/new-york-city-public-schools-to-fully-reopen-with-no-remote-learning>.

[15] DCPS ReopenStrong, “#ReopenStrong,” District of Columbia Public Schools, <https://dcpsreopenstrong.com>.

[16] Karen Ann Cullotta, “With Illinois Schools Fully Reopening in the Fall, Chicago Public Schools and Some Suburban Districts Will Offer Distance Learning for Kids at Risk of COVID-19 Exposure,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 2021, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/coronavirus/ct-covid-illinois-schools-virtual-academies-20210625-i2crapia4nawihupelakgctfua-story.html>.

[17] Tracey Tully, “New Jersey’s Governor Removes the Remote Learning Option for the Next School Year,” <https://nytimes.com/2021/05/17/world/nj-schools-covid-virtual.html>.

[18] Heather L. Schwartz, Melissa Kay Diliberti, and David Grant, *Will Students Come Back? A July 2021 Parent Survey About School Hesitancy and Parental Preferences for COVID-19 Safety Practices in Schools* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1393-2.html.

It's difficult to understand precisely how many public school students across the country will have access to remote schooling this fall through their current district. Analysis of the fall 2021 plans for the nation's 200 largest school districts shows that 4.2 million students are enrolled in districts that will *not* offer any virtual option this fall. Combining these districts' enrollment and demographic data with polling data produces an estimate of approximately 360,000 students in the nation's 200 largest school districts who will not have access to the option their parents prefer — remote schooling.

But what about students who attend the thousands of other school districts across the nation? No data sets aggregate the plans of these more than 13,000 districts. If we assume that schools that ended last year with full, in-person instruction aren't likely to offer a virtual option this fall, we can use data from the Return to Learn Tracker^[19] to approximate access to remote options in other districts. When we combine that with demographic and polling data, we produce an estimate of approximately 1.2 million students in districts smaller than the nation's 200 largest who will not have access to the remote option their parents would prefer.

Combining these two estimates produces a national estimate of **1.5 million students** who will not have access to a virtual option through their public school districts, even though their parents would prefer one. These students are a significant but not comprehensive portion of **The Muted**. Our estimate is a conservative assessment of how many students and families are frustrated with their schooling options but lack meaningful access to high-quality alternatives.

How Will The Overlooked Impact Schools and Systems in Years to Come?

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be a catalyst for a tectonic shift in families' preferences for how their children are educated. Millions of families had to consider the kinds of health precautions and risks they were comfortable taking for their children. They also researched and experienced nontraditional learning settings on a scale that was orders of magnitude larger than the pre-pandemic status quo.

As families' risk preferences and understanding of options shifted, large existing school systems worked to adapt to the needs of the families they serve. But many of these systems did not have the organizational dynamism required to meet families' needs.

School systems' inability to meet the seismic shift in what families wanted produced three reactions from families. **The Movers** had the motivation and means to change the school their children attended, resulting in a net shift away from traditional public and private schools and a net gain in charter schools or the smaller-scale, more dynamic settings of learning pods, microschools, and homeschools. The families of **The Missed** didn't enroll their children in school during 2020-21 at all. Whether and how their children received instruction is unknown. And there are **The Muted** — families who haven't yet moved from their public school systems but will not have access to the remote options they prefer in the upcoming 2021-22 school year.

[19] Return to Learn Tracker, "Home," <https://www.returntolearnteacher.net>.

There are signs that some providers and policymakers are adapting to address the shifting priorities of families. An entire ecosystem of instructional and operational support has emerged to meet the rapid increase in demand for microschools and learning pods.^[20] Eighteen states expanded existing or created new educational choice programs that will provide more families with resources to access the learning opportunities they want for their children.^[21] While these developments are encouraging, they do not match the scale of needs that families have — yet.

There will be no one-size-fits-all solution to the needs of **The Overlooked**. Their preferences and needs are varied; many of **The Movers** likely prefer in-person instructional settings, while the opposite is true of **The Muted**. Even if **The Missed** return to school systems this fall, the lost year of schooling is likely to have long-term consequences on their academic, social, and emotional development. Some of **The Overlooked** were able to find solutions to meet their children's needs, while others lack the ability to access needed options. Each of these groups shares a common experience of school systems not offering solutions that meet the needs of their children.

Families ought to have access to different school systems that can fulfill those families' myriad preferences. Schools need to adapt to meet the new and broader range of options families want following the disruption of the pandemic. It's not enough to make **The Overlooked** seen — it's time for them to be heard.

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[20] Michael B. Horn, "The Rapid Rise of Pandemic Pods: Will the Parent Response to Covid-19 Lead to Lasting Change?," *Education Next* 21, no. 1 (2021), <https://www.educationnext.org/rapid-rise-pandemic-pods-will-parent-response-covid-19-lead-to-lasting-changes/>.

[21] Jason Bedrick and Ed Tarnowski, "How Big Was the Year of Educational Choice?" (blog), *Education Next*, updated August 19, 2021, <https://www.educationnext.org/how-big-was-the-year-of-educational-choice/>.

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Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.

Appendix: Data Methods, Limitations, and Sources

The Movers

Estimate based on data from Tyton Partners.[22]

15% of families switched schools during the pandemic * 58.2 million students attended some form of schooling during the pandemic = 8.7 million students switching schools.

The Missed

Estimate based on data from Tyton Partners.[23]

58.2 million students enrolled in some form of schooling during the pandemic – 58.8 million students enrolled in some form of schooling pre-pandemic = 0.6 million students missing from school enrollment rosters.

The Muted

Estimate based on data from RAND,[24] National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data,[25] the American Enterprise Institute (AEI),[26] and original research from Bellwether Education Partners.

We began with RAND data on parents' preference for or uncertainty regarding remote schooling for their children in the 2021-22 school year, including rates for racial subgroups. In this analysis, we assume that all parents who say they would prefer a virtual option for their children would choose that option if it were offered to them. We also assume that only half of uncertain parents would make that same choice for their children if they were offered a remote learning option.

Next, we researched the availability of virtual options in the nation's 200 largest school districts. For districts that did not plan to offer a virtual option for students in the fall of 2021, we used the polling data averages by race along with district enrollment and demographic data from NCES to estimate the number of students in these districts with 1) parents who would prefer a virtual option and 2) the number of students in these districts with parents who are unsure of their preference for in-person or virtual instruction. For students in the second group, we estimate that half of these families would prefer a virtual option if offered. By combining all of the estimated students from group 1 and half of the estimated students in group 2, we arrive at an estimate of The Muted in the nation's 200 largest school districts.

[22] Newman, Rosbash, and Zurita, *School Disrupted Part 1: The Impact of COVID-19 on Parent Agency and the K-12 Ecosystem*, <https://tytonpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/School-Disrupted-04.21-FINAL.pdf>.

[23] Newman, Rosbash, and Zurita, *School Disrupted Part 1: The Impact of COVID-19 on Parent Agency and the K-12 Ecosystem*, <https://tytonpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/School-Disrupted-04.21-FINAL.pdf>.

[24] Schwartz, Diliberti, and Grant, *Will Students Come Back? A July 2021 Parent Survey About School Hesitancy and Parental Preferences for COVID-19 Safety Practices in Schools*, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1393-2.html.

[25] National Center for Education Statistics, "Common Core of Data: America's Public Schools," <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/files.asp>.

[26] Return to Learn Tracker, "Home," <https://www.returntolearnteacher.net>.

Appendix: Data Methods, Limitations, and Sources

To estimate The Muted in the rest of the nation's school districts, we rely on data from AEI's Return to Learn Tracker to approximate the relative portion of districts ending the 2020-21 school year with fully in-person instruction. We assume that districts ending the year with fully in-person instruction will not offer a virtual option for the 2021-22 school year. Again using NCES enrollment and demographic data, we estimate the number of students in districts smaller than the 200 largest that will have access to a virtual option this fall by multiplying the total enrollment of these districts in each state by that state's Return to Learn in-person instructional index from June 7, 2020. We then perform the same calculations using the parent preference polling averages to estimate The Muted outside of the 200 largest school districts.

There are some statewide exceptions that were introduced into our calculations. New Jersey removed remote learning options for the 2021-22 school year,[27] which we allow to overrule their Return to Learn in-person instructional index in our calculations. Conversely, a new law in California requires every school district to provide families with a remote learning option,[28] which we also allow to overrule their Return to Learn in-person instructional index in our calculations. The Hawaii Board of Education, which governs a state served by a single school district, ruled that students should have a remote option for the 2021-22 school year.[29] Similar to California, we consider all students in Hawaii to have access to remote options in the 2021-22 school year in our calculations.

The Overlooked

Estimate based on data from Tyton Partners.[30]

10.8 million students in The Overlooked / 58.8 million students enrolled in some form of schooling pre-pandemic = 18.4%.

[27] Tully, "New Jersey's Governor Removes the Remote Learning Option for the Next School Year," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/17/world/nj-schools-covid-virtual.html>.

[28] Sydney Johnson, "California Directs Districts to Offer Remote Independent Study This Fall," EdSource, July 7, 2021, <https://edsources.org/2021/california-directs-districts-to-offer-remote-independent-study-this-fall/657578>.

[29] Suevon Lee, "Hawaii School Board Says Families Should Have Distance Learning Option in the Fall," Honolulu Civil Beat, July 15, 2021, <https://www.civilbeat.org/2021/07/hawaii-school-board-says-families-should-have-distance-learning-option-in-the-fall/>.

[30] Newman, Rosbash, and Zurita, *School Disrupted Part 1: The Impact of COVID-19 on Parent Agency and the K-12 Ecosystem*, <https://tytonpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/School-Disrupted-04.21-FINAL.pdf>.



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