

COVID-19: Emerging Challenges for Students in Medicine and Schools in the United States

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The coronavirus pandemic has changed the world everywhere, including the lives of high schoolers in America. The sudden sharp rise in coronavirus cases forced the closure of schools in Mid-March to curb the further spread of the virus. Several end-of-the-year celebrations, school activities, and examinations were canceled. At the same time, the cancellations gave a chance for the youth to adapt to uncertain situations and learn a different perspective of life.

Living in Florida, a state that battles hurricanes for almost half a year, school closures have become the norm: it is not rare for students to be reminded to keep their textbooks and notes home for a week or two. Prepared from past closures due to hurricanes, the school district board already had a virtual school platform, and the principal instructed all students to shift to Zoom and alternative eLearning. However, when the coronavirus pandemic led to the indefinite closure of high schools across the country, this was something new, different, and unexpected that school communities had to face.

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The excitement of not having to wake up early to commute to school soon faded as the preparation to move to online platforms became more of a burden. Outreach to students of indigent backgrounds was the first hold-up, but some districts were able to deliver computers and hot spots to bridge the digital divide. The loss in formal instruction was another obstacle as student-teacher interactions decreased significantly during the first few weeks. Not only does this hinder teachers' abilities to spot learning difficulties in their pupils, but it also adds difficulty for students to consult peers or their teachers regarding a particular topic.

However, for other districts, moving education online didn't go as smoothly. Some schools simply sent out workbooks that covered some of the planned learning material, while others set up a similar school structure, but online. For those with parents who are still working full-time, it might have been harder for students to self-motivate or find structure within their school day. Students might have to share laptops or e-devices with family members, limiting the amount of time they can spend online in classes. For rural students, the educational divide is growing greater, as many of these students don't have access to home internet.[1] While telecommunication companies like AT&T, Charter Communications, Comcast, and Verizon stepped up to bridge that gap and provide free WiFi or accessible hot spots to people all across the country, it still was not easy for every student to e-learn.

Yet another road bump for students was the college application preparation process. Students typically must take the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) or American College Testing (ACT) as a standardized admission test and submit the school when applying to schools. A survey by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) discovered before the coronavirus outbreak, more than 80% of colleges considered

the SAT or ACT score of considerable or moderate importance.[2] Starting in March, both the ACT and SAT were canceled through June, causing many rising seniors to panic about how they will get these necessary scores.[3] However, universities across the country have moved to a test-optional or test-flexible system, helping to relieve the pressure off of students applying during the 2020-2021 cycle. Most notably, New York University, University of California, and Villanova University have made this unprecedented change.

Another disrupting factor was Advanced Placement (AP) exams moving online. These exams—administered by the College Board—give students the chance to earn college credit if they perform well.[4] AP exams are meant to be a standardized evaluation that checks the knowledge learned in the school class; however, the online test given in Mid-May was anything but standard this year. The test-taking environment varied greatly from household to household, with some students lacking a quiet place to take the exam. Even worse, many students were unable to submit their answers due to a technical glitch, and are now suing The College Board to accept their responses.[5] It is clear that more work needs to be done to ensure that students are given an equal and fair chance to test online and earn college credit at home.

It is not just high school students that are impacted by the shift to tele-education. Aspiring medical school students have had their plans disrupted, as colleges move their classes online, and eight MCAT dates from March 27 through May 21 were canceled. For the rest of 2020, students will be taking a shorter MCAT test and, for the foreseeable future, have to wear a mask while taking the exam. Once again, this raises questions of how standard the MCAT is, and if it will accurately reflect who should gain a coveted spot at a medical school. Despite the cancellations, students are still as eager as ever to become doctors.[6] According to Alison Whelan, AAMC's chief medical education officer, more students than ever before have started the applications for medical school.[6]

The U.S. is currently experiencing a physician shortage, and the problem has been made worse by the pandemic, as more doctors have been called to the frontlines to assist in helping the increasingly full hospitals. Countless nurses and doctors have come out of retirement to assist. This has put medical

schools in an interesting predicament, as they struggle with how to graduate seniors who have not fully completed the requirements. Some schools, like Columbia, the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, and New York University (NYC) Grossman School of Medicine fast-tracked the graduation of their students to ensure that they can help doctors in areas that need it the most.

However, for other medical colleges, it is not as easy to push the graduate date of their students forward. While tele-education classes are adequate for lecture-based classes, a medical student is required to complete other requirements like lab-based class and clinic rotations, which are impossible to complete virtually. This has put several pre-med and medical students in limbo, as they wait to finish these requirements before graduating.

Ultimately, the reality is that every student learns differently, and while some might struggle under these new learning conditions, others might thrive. It is unclear how the educational gap might grow or how the education system will evolve. The importance schools place on exams like the SAT, ACT and, even the MCAT might shift in the upcoming years as the struggles of the students to complete these exams online might require changes to be made. There is also a big consideration on whether classes will resume to normal in the fall; will universities and other schools still be doing virtual classes? Medical school and undergraduate require students to invest a lot of time, energy, and financial resources into their education, and they might not be as willing or able to do so if the classes will be online.

At the same time, there were many positive outlooks to the same situation that could be seen as a blessing in disguise. Many American teens have successfully retrieved coping mechanisms from their childhood by spending quality time with their families and engaging positively in arts and activities. As the youth adapted to the online set-up, several high schoolers joyfully reported that they “*were able to finish the work of a whole school day in three hours,*” which would otherwise take most of the day. High schoolers are alleviated from the stresses of spending most of their day outside and away from the comfort of their home or spending all-nighters trying to complete assigned work.

As the youth generation transitions through

their adolescence, the recent unprecedented events will only mature and allow students to adapt to unfriendly situations. The sudden deviation from the “status quo” not only teaches a lesson about tolerance, compromise, and adaptation but also shines a light on problem-solving in the real world. The traditional classroom environment is absent and may never be the same again. However, with the advent of virtual lectures and online material, students are able to delegate their time to improve on their academics, spend more time with their families, and learn something new. As life eases back to the new normal, schools will have to transition across the globe. High schools, universities, and medical schools will all have to adapt to fit the changes that have occurred and will continue to occur in the upcoming months and years. The hope, particularly for schools in America, is that there will be a balance in both worlds: where school instruction and virtual learning is optimized in the school curricula, so that kids remain connected to their families and values, and that the stress of long hours in school does not serve as a leeway for adapting unhealthy social practices.

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