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Coronavirus thrust uncertainty on Nashville families. How it weighs on public school students and their future.



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Most days, Abigail Alexander begins her school day at the dining room table in her family's crowded North Nashville home. The same place she [started class four months ago](#).

Abigail, a fifth-grader at [Head Middle Magnet Prep](#), rummages through a wooden box of supplies, selecting a few markers and a crayon to complete the assignment her art teacher is walking her class through virtually.

Her teacher's lesson mingles with the English language arts class sixth-grader Amyah Alexander is listening to across the table — neither girl is using headphones.

All the while, 2-year-old Amenna plods down the stairs, peeking shyly at Abigail. Soon the toddler is on her knee.

Other siblings, nieces and nephews, and even foster siblings, often mingle in the whirlwind that is the Alexander home, including brother Wilton, a sophomore at Maplewood High School.

Abigail and Wilton are ready to go back to school.

They've been ready.

But like thousands of Metro Nashville Public Schools children, they [haven't set foot in a classroom since schools closed in March thanks to the coronavirus pandemic](#).

For some students, learning from home means grappling with a busy household or taking on more responsibilities. It means isolation and loneliness or falling behind academically. Others, despite the lack of socialization or one-on-one interaction with peers and teachers, are thriving.

PREVIOUSLY: [They navigated virtual school, now these Nashville families face an agonizing decision on return to classroom](#)

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Since Metro Schools began the school year remotely on Aug. 4, the possibility of going back in-person has dangled in front of many students, but for most middle and high school students in Nashville, it's been just out of reach.

And it could be out of reach for even longer. Director of Schools Adrienne Battle announced last week that elementary school students would go back to virtual learning on Monday [through the rest of the calendar year](#). Middle and high school students will also remain virtual.

Through it all, experts say, there's a risk that the impact the pandemic is having on students' mental health can linger and affect academic achievement down the road.

"If you're feeling anxious, depressed, angry, sad, those sorts of feelings, you can't learn," said [Nicole Cobb](#), a former school counselor and associate professor at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College. "So all the hard work that our schools and teachers are putting into these interactive, high-quality learning experiences, students' brains can't engage with them if they are having mental health issues."

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Constant uncertainty for students

The disproportionate learning loss students might be experiencing with schools closed and varying quality of virtual instruction — as well as the impact on students' mental health — are the two main reasons schools should reopen, parents and community members have argued for months.

The Tennessee Department of Education [already estimated students across the state likely "experienced significant learning loss"](#) — as much as an estimated 50% decrease in proficiency rates in third-grade reading and a projected 65% decrease in proficiency in math, according to data released in September.

Though some educators have questioned the data presented by the department, [Metro Schools' own data](#) supports the findings.

RELATED: [Tennessee students likely experienced 'significant' learning loss due to school closures this year, state says](#)

Abigail, typically an A/B student, earned Cs and even Ds on her first-quarter report card this fall.

She chalks it up to middle school being harder than fourth grade, but her mom, LaTonya Alexander, wonders if she gets the help she needs through virtual instruction or if she is as focused as she should be.

Abigail spends at least three days a week with live, synchronous instruction until about 11:30 a.m. but then has hours of independent assignments to complete.

While their young foster children were back in-school, Alexander was able to go back to work and leave the older students home, though she often wondered what they did after 11:30.

"They think, 'School's over, I'm done,' but I come home and check their assignments and see what they actually finished," she said.

Wilton is especially struggling, she said. The 10th-grader was excited to start basketball practice again, but Alexander secretly hopes games won't start. If it isn't safe for kids to be in school, playing basketball definitely can't be safe either, she said.

Health care providers in Tennessee and across the nation have warned about an uptick in mental illness and even suicide among teens and young adults as the pandemic rages and schools remain closed.

[Dr. Meg Benningfield](#), director of the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at [Vanderbilt University Medical Center](#) and an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences, said the hospital's emergency department has seen an increase in teens "with really significant and severe mental health concerns."

CLASSROOM STAFFING: [COVID-19 is creating a logistical nightmare for Tennessee schools. Why finding substitute teachers is so hard.](#)

Hospital staff is concerned about overdose attempts, serious anxiety and suicidal thinking or self-harm among young adults.

"It's hard to know exactly what the factors are but there are probably several factors that influence how hard it is for kids right now — academic stress tends to peak during this time as they're moving into the end of the semester, added stress on the family, the change in the seasons," Benningfield said. "And the social isolation —

one of the biggest indicators of whether a teenager (will) develop mental health symptoms in a situation like this is loneliness."

Benningfield doesn't put blame on school districts or educators, but she said mental health is part of the overall picture of what is needed for a healthy community.

"I think that parents and school districts and administrators are all working very hard to balance the mental health implications with the need to really focus on physical safety," Benningfield said. "I think the ways that schools are really working hard to stay connected with their students and their community are really remarkable."

But as school districts close and reopen or push back start dates, the uncertainty can weigh on students and families.

"One of the most challenging components of this whole experience is the uncertainty, for schools to open and then close again and the worries and fears of whether 'I'm going to have to go back to school or whether I'll have to stay home even longer,'" Benningfield said.

Alexander sees that frustration with [everchanging start dates](#) reflected in Abigail and Wilton. Both of them have said repeatedly it isn't fair.

The loneliness is there, too.

RELATED: [Nashville delays return of in-person class for middle school students as COVID-19 cases rise](#)

Though Abigail feels like she's gotten to know some of her new classmates and is able to stay connected with friends in class or by video calling them from her iPhone, she still wishes she could see them in-person.

"It's not the same as seeing them in real life and just being able to play and hangout," she said. "It doesn't really feel like they are real friends when you just talk online."

'The best year ever'

Still, not all kids are struggling while schools are closed.

"We are finding that some kids are doing really well on a virtual platform, for some kids with their learning style, being able to work independently and check in with a teacher works really well for them," Benningfield said.

Malik Gordon, a sixth grader at Nashville Classical Charter School, wanders into the kitchen of the apartment he shares with his mom.

In between classes, he makes a bag of popcorn, digging around in the kitchen cupboard for some sugar to add to it.

Sugar doesn't affect Malik like it does some kids, his mother Victoria Gordon laughs. The hyperactive middle schooler has ADHD and an autism diagnosis — he already struggles to focus sometimes.

But because they've spent so much time together during the pandemic, Gordon has been starting to teach her son to cook. Little things, like how to use the griddle or what he can make on his own without too much fuss.

Malik takes his popcorn back to the kitchen table — after some giggles and playful bickering back and forth with his mom — and settles in for his next class.

Despite the challenges of virtual learning, Malik is thriving this year, Gordon said.

School has never been easy for him.

Between his exceptional needs, behavioral issues and sometimes just finding the right fit, some days before the pandemic, the Gordons were just trying to get by.

"Anyone who has a child with a behavioral program or a language problem or a learning disability, it is has been challenging. We have always been in a pandemic,"

Gordon said. "We need individualized learning plans and to figure out what works best for our child, so this has been the best school year ever for us."

Gordon, who is a parent leader with Nashville Propel — a parent advocacy coalition made up mostly of parents of Black and brown students — even appeared before the Metro Nashville Board of Education in October to call on the district to help schools create individualized learning plans for all students, not just those with special needs, to help parents figure out how best to meet their child's needs.

Across town, Maya Price is also thriving as much as she can despite the circumstances.

A sixth-grader at [J.T. Moore Middle School](#), Maya also has some exceptional needs. She typically depends on a range of services at her school to be successful.

Maya has nystagmus, a vision condition that makes it hard for her to focus on objects far away, like a blackboard at school, or navigate crowded hallways. The condition also makes spending long periods of time in front of a computer even more challenging.

But the decision to keep Maya home, though a hard one, was never really a question.

Her mother, Tamara Price, has Stage 4 breast cancer. Other than trips to the doctor or for chemotherapy treatments, the family doesn't really go anywhere.

Their groceries are delivered. They wear masks and face shields and social distance when they do leave the house.

Maya worries about getting sick and bringing the virus home to her parents.

"We can't go to school right now because we need to stay at home so you don't catch the virus and get sick," Maya emphasized. She gets angry when she sees people not wearing face masks.

But she also misses her friends and her teachers, especially their hugs.

Price is pleased with the support J.T. Moore and the district have provided Maya. Like a computer with an extra-large screen because of her vision. She still gets one-on-one time with her teacher for the visually impaired, a speech therapist and an occupational therapist.

In fact, Price said Maya's most recent IEP (individualized education program) meeting, which are required for students with exceptional needs, was the most productive one they've ever had.

Price, like Gordon, feels more engaged with Maya's day-to-day learning.

"We are engaged, but we knew we didn't know everything that happened every day," she said of Maya's education prior to the pandemic. "You just don't really know, now not only can we participate if we need to to help her, but we can sit alongside her."

'Children are incredibly resilient'

Middle and high school students aren't the only ones who have grappled with uncertainty this fall.

Elementary schools [reopened for grades pre-K through second on Oct. 13](#), followed by grades three and four later in October based on the district's phased reopening. But after only six weeks back in the classroom, elementary school students will also be back at home after Thanksgiving break.

RELATED: [New COVID-19 risk tool aims to help Nashville families gauge when schools will reopen](#)

Some of the [nearly 46% of Metro Schools families who opted to keep their children home for the entire semester](#) did so not only due to concerns about the spread of COVID-19, but also for some semblance of stability.

Jennifer Hagan-Dier is one of those parents. Instead of sending her third-grader Whitman Hagan-Dier back to school, she and three other families [formed a learning pod](#).

The group of families whose children attend East Nashville schools were already friends before the pandemic. Since they have similar-aged children, this summer they agreed to do remote learning together.

For much of the semester, four students including Whitman, John Hollis Chester, Eleanor Dyer and Ameila Mize gathered in Hagan-Dier's former dining room-turned classroom with a full-time tutor the family hired to help manage virtual learning, independent assignments and outdoor time.

RELATED: [Why some Nashville parents are considering learning pods, tutors amid concerns over reopening plans](#)

The pod dynamics also help combat the biggest factor for students' struggles, according to Benningfield — loneliness.

"That feeling of loneliness and feeling of lack of connection is a real warning sign for kids," Benningfield said. "Some kids are able to still say connected though."

But even the pod hasn't been immune from COVID-19 and the disruptions it causes.

A possible exposure for one family prevented the students from coming together for several days and required multiple children and family members to be tested for the coronavirus.

Cobb, the Vanderbilt education professor, said parents should be aware of the negative impacts the pandemic's upheaval is having on students, but also believes they and their children can get through it.

"Children are incredibly resilient so I would not want to say this is going to automatically mean they are going to have negative consequences, but I do think it

is something we have to be intentional about helping families to address," Cobb said. "Children and adolescents thrive on routine and predictability and that's what we've all lost in this. The longer this continues, that causes more feelings of isolation and a lack of social connection."

'If we even go back'

Benningfield cautions that as the pandemic continues to unfold and students remain at home for an unknown period of time, returning to school won't be seamless, either.

Malik can't even imagine when he might go back. When asked when he might return, he glanced at his mother, and then guessed, "Seventh grade? High school? Not this year."

He worries about contracting the coronavirus and bringing it home to his mother or his infant nephew, C.J.

And he isn't alone. Many students and families are likely to still wonder how safe schools are when they do return, Benningfield said. Catching COVID-19 is and will be a real fear for many students who have been living with the thought for months.

"For some of these families, it's going to be really challenging," Benningfield warns. "Kids have gotten used to a routine with schools closed. The main message I have for parents there is to really be persistent and encouraging, for parents of kids with anxiety disorders the most important thing is to help kids develop mastery over their fears, and really help kids learn that just because they have a thought that this is not safe or this is scary that doesn't mean that it actually is."

The Prices don't plan to send Maya back to school in-person until it is completely safe, whether that means there is a safe and reliable COVID-19 vaccine or the family is no longer considered high-risk.

"It's not an option for us," Price said. "Ideally she would be able to keep doing school virtually and then have a way to connect with her peers through extracurriculars or other activities."

Gordon also questions whether she'll send Malik back to school. The flexibility of his current learning environment to meet his needs has been ideal, she said.

If she and other parents just had more resources and knowledge on how to actually support their children, it would be better, she said.

She's started questioning whether Nashville Classical — or any Metro school — is the right fit for Malik. She wants to find a way to make up the learning loss he has experienced throughout the pandemic and get him on grade level.

PREVIOUSLY: [With the struggles of remote learning, why educators say 'it's impossible to separate' academics from digital access](#)

That might mean sending him to a special day center, finding a non-public option or homeschooling him.

"How will in-person look when schools reopen? It would look different, but who will be there to support these kids? Will we have more time to nurture now? Will it be as flexible? How will that look?" Victoria Gordon said. "I don't know."

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About this series

Nashville's recent economic boom has not changed the struggle for Metro Nashville Public Schools, where disparities rooted in race, income and social status persist. Not every child gets an equal chance at success.

The inequities have only widened as parents, families and schools struggle with how to safely provide high-quality education during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic .

The Tennessean is continuing its examination of how the city can provide the same opportunities to all its students. Read more at [dismissed.tennessean.com](https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/dismissed/2020/11/29/nashville-school-covid-19-mental-health-virtual-learning/6312625002/)