

Keeping Schools In Session

Omicron has created renewed challenges for parents, teachers and students.

By Carl Tannenbaum

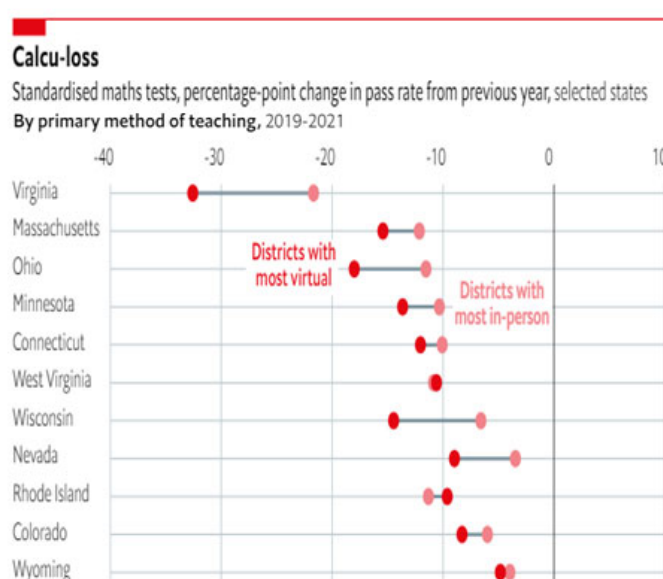
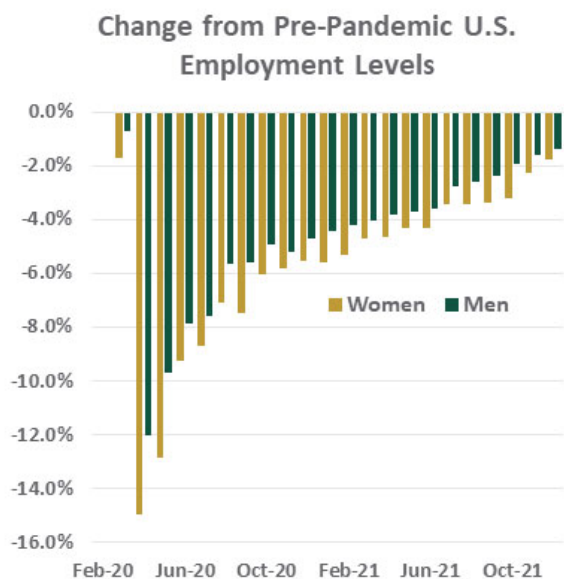


Last week, we **wrote** that the Omicron variant of COVID-19 is unlikely to create the kind of widespread commercial disruption that previous waves have. Most of those who contract Omicron are experiencing only mild symptoms; this has allowed public health officials in most parts of the world to keep their economies largely open.

This is not to say that the latest spike in cases hasn't been impactful. One arena where the effects are being keenly felt are schools, which are working very hard to keep their doors open.

Quarantine requirements for classrooms are still in place in many areas: a positive test for a teacher or pupil can mean a period of remote lessons for those affected, and those who have been close to them. Teachers, fearing exposure in crowded classrooms, have expressed their apprehension directly or through their unions.

The uncertainty has created renewed challenges for parents. Students unable to attend class require adult supervision, which can limit the time and attention that mothers and fathers have to devote to work. Labor force participation remains depressed from its pre-pandemic levels, especially among working-aged women; this is one reason why so many job openings in the economy have gone unfilled.



Sources: BLS, Haver Analytics, The Economist, NBER

Schools should be the last enterprises to close, and the first to reopen.

Further, a whole range of studies have found that distance learning is a poor substitute for attending school in person. Student achievement diminishes, and the development of social skills is delayed. The learning deficits which have accumulated over the past two years will be difficult to close, and some students may never be able to catch up.

Human capital development and maintenance are essential to a well-functioning economy. Educated workers are more productive and better positioned to adapt to change. Both of these elements will be critical in the decades ahead.

In a recent [Brookings study](#) on schooling, the author notes that “schools should be the last to close and the first to open.” As the world’s pandemic policies evolve, this would be valuable advice to follow.

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