

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 23, 2022

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

Dr. Mark Schneider
Director of the Institute of Education Sciences
Institute of Education Sciences, Department of Education
550 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Director Schneider,

As Ranking Members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging and Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, we write to request that the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) provide information on the academic and social outcomes of children raised by their grandparents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic-related school closures have had a strikingly negative effect on students' academic performance and mental health, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

More than 2.7 million children are raised by grandparents who provide love, support, and inspiration to their grandchildren and communities.¹ Yet children raised by their grandparents sometimes face unique challenges in receiving quality education and are part of the demographics of children who bore much of the brunt of school closures. Unfortunately, the present lack of clear data on grandfamilies' pandemic educational experiences leaves gaps in policymakers' considerations for designing effective, tailored support.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closures have had devastating effects on students' academic performance and mental health. A recent study from Harvard's Center for Education Policy found that students who primarily remained at home from 2020 to 2021 forfeited 50 percent of their math learning, while students who continued to benefit from in-person instruction did not experience this kind of marked decline.² Students' social isolation has also increased mental health challenges, contributing to the American Academy of Pediatrics' declaration of a national state of emergency for youth mental health.³

¹ Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Delivers Report and Recommendations for Improving Support to Kin and Grandparent Caregivers | ACL Administration for Community Living. (2021, November 16). Administration for Community Living. <https://acl.gov/news-and-events/announcements/advisory-council-support-grandparents-raising-grandchildren-delivers>

² Goldhaber Thomas J. Kane, D., Kane, T. J., McEachin, A., Morton, E., Patterson, T., & Staiger, D. O. (2022). The Consequences of Remote and Hybrid Instruction During the Pandemic. Harvard University. <https://cepr.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/5-4.pdf?m=1651690491>

³ Leonhardt, D. (2022, January 4). No Way to Grow Up. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/briefing/american-children-crisis-pandemic.html>

Prior research has also revealed pronounced inequalities in pandemic-related learning loss.⁴ Poorer students spent an average of 13.5 weeks in remote learning from 2020 to 2021, compared to an average of 8 weeks for higher-income students; and academic performance among poorer, Black, and Hispanic students correspondingly declined by considerably larger margins.⁵ Students attending remote high-poverty schools lost 22 weeks of instruction; Black and Hispanic students lost four to five more weeks than white students.⁶

There are compelling reasons to suspect that the burden of learning loss and mental health problems during the pandemic have disproportionately impacted grandfamilies. Grandfamilies are overrepresented in the demographic groups that research has found suffered most from school closures: among children in these households, 25 percent are Black, around 24 percent are Hispanic, and 30 percent live in poverty.⁷ Additionally, grandparents raising grandchildren already face barriers to accessing educational services for the children in their care.

Social service systems for grandfamilies are in many cases complex, siloed, and difficult to navigate.⁸ As they work through these systems, grandparents must deal with stigma and trauma, both for themselves and children in their care. Grandparents also have to determine how to reorganize their finances to support unexpected or unplanned increases in family size and reorient much of their daily lives around caring for grandchildren. Retirement security, child care, transportation, and other services command substantial amounts of grandfamilies' energy and attention.

The complexities of grandfamilies' legal status can also make it harder for grandparents to assume management of their grandchildren's education in the first place. In many cases, schools are not familiar with the challenges grandfamilies face, and may hold themselves at a distance from effective communication with and support for grandfamilies.^{9,10} Modern educational culture and practices are also hard for grandparents to easily pick up and master. Given these constraints, it is not surprising that grandfamilies often struggle with academic performance and social adjustment

⁴ Mervosh, S. (2021, September 7). The Pandemic Hurt These Students the Most. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/28/us/covid-schools-at-home-learning-study.html>

⁵ Leonhardt, D. (2022b, May 5). 'Not Good for Learning.' *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/05/briefing/school-closures-covid-learning-loss.html>

⁶ Kane, T. (2022, May 22). Kids' Learning Losses Are Worse Than Educators Are Acknowledging. *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/schools-learning-loss-remote-covid-education/629938/>

⁷ Grandfamilies and Kinship Families: Strengths and Challenges. (2022). Generations United.
<https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2022/05/General-Grandfamilies-Fact-Sheet-2022.pdf>

⁸ REINFORCING A STRONG FOUNDATION: EQUITABLE SUPPORTS FOR BASIC NEEDS OF GRANDFAMILIES. (2021). Generations United. https://www.gu.org/app/uploads/2022/02/2021-Grandfamilies-Report_V14.pdf

⁹ Brunissen, L., Rapoport, E., Fruitman, K., & Adesman, A. (2020). Parenting challenges of grandparents raising grandchildren: Discipline, child education, technology use, and outdated health beliefs. *ScholarWorks at WMU*.
<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/grandfamilies/vol6/iss1/6/>

¹⁰ Peterson, T. L., Scott, C. B., Ombayo, B., Davis, T., & Sullivan, D. (2019). Biggest concerns of school personnel about students raised by grandparents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 102, 201–209.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2019.05.004>

to educational settings. Research tends to indicate that children in grandfamilies suffer from worse performance in schools relative to their peers.^{11,12}

In its Initial Report to Congress, the Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren found that existing educational barriers to grandfamilies were exacerbated by the pandemic, "...which has placed in-person education on hold across the country and led to multiple reports of children losing access to special education services and counseling support, and as a consequence, experiencing a loss of critical skills and abilities."¹³ Additional reports document grandparents struggling to serve as tutors for their grandchildren or understand remote schooling technology, with some even traveling to local libraries just to connect to internet access.¹⁴

While this evidence suggests profound and damaging learning loss and mental health challenges for grandfamilies during the pandemic, more rigorous data are required to provide a fuller picture of these families' experiences, needs, and future opportunities. It is difficult for policymakers to respond to students' academic and social setbacks without more precise information on the depth and breadth of the problem. With Congress appropriating hundreds of billions of dollars in pandemic-related support for schools, in addition to large amounts of aid for state and local governments, a more detailed understanding of grandfamilies' educational status and experiences will also help to inform the development of future financial resources and tailored supports for grandfamilies.

We request the following information to better understand the particular educational needs of grandfamilies:

1. What data, if any, does IES have on the academic performance of children raised by their grandparents during the pandemic?
2. What data, if any, does IES have on the mental, social, and physical wellbeing of children raised by their grandparents during the pandemic?
3. What data, if any, does IES have on the effects of school closures and remote learning on the academic and social wellbeing of children raised by their grandparents during the pandemic?

¹¹ Pilkauskas, N. V., & Dunifon, R. E. (2016, March 18). Understanding Grandfamilies: Characteristics of Grandparents, Nonresident Parents, and Children. Wiley Online Library. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12291>

¹² Shovali, T.E. Bright, M.A., & Emerson, K.G. (2020). Children in care of grandparents and non-grandparents: Which have greater odds of high academic performance? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 118. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105389>

¹³ Advisory Council To Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. (2021, November 16). Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (SGRG) Act Initial Report to Congress. Administration for Community Living. https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/RAISE_SGRG/SGRG-InitialReportToCongress_2021-11-16.pdf

¹⁴ Early, B. (2021, June 14). 'I don't let life get to me': Indiana seniors raising grandkids tackle pandemic parenting. *Indianapolis Star*. <https://eu.indystar.com/story/news/2021/06/14/indiana-seniors-raising-relative-children-tackle-covid-pandemic-parenting-coronavirus/7402265002/>

4. Does IES have plans to study the effects of school closures, remote learning, and other pandemic-related educational trends on grandfamilies?

5. Does IES have any information on the types of additional support that may be beneficial for grandfamilies navigating the education system?

Our committees aim to ensure the safety and health of grandfamilies, who play a pivotal role in their communities and support the development of the next generation. We are confident that your answers to the above questions will help Congress develop responses that effectively and fairly support grandfamilies and their contributions to American life.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue and your work to respond. We look forward to your response no later than July 22, 2022. Please direct all correspondence to [REDACTED] with the Senate Special Committee on Aging at [REDACTED], and to [REDACTED] with the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions staff at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,



Tim Scott
Ranking Member
Senate Special Committee on Aging



Richard Burr
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Health, Education,
Labor and Pensions