

Tracking an Outbreak Learning and Loss

EDUCATION

As Pandemic Upends Teaching, Fewer Are Choosing to Study It

By EMMA GOLDBERG

Kianna Ameni-Melvin's parents used to tell her that there wasn't much money to be made in education. But it was easy enough for her to tune them out as she enrolled in an education studies program, with her mind set on teaching high school special education.

Then the coronavirus shut down her campus at Towson University in Maryland, and she sat home watching her twin brother, who has autism, as he struggled through online classes. She began to question how the profession's low pay could impact the challenges of pandemic teaching.

She asked her classmates whether they, too, were considering other fields. Some of them were. Then she began researching roles with transferable skills, like human resources. "I didn't want to start despising a career I had a passion for because of the salary," Ms. Ameni-Melvin, 21, said.

Few professions have been more upended by the pandemic than teaching, as school districts have vacillated between in-person, remote and hybrid models of learning, leaving teachers concerned for their health and scrambling to do their jobs effectively.

For students considering a profession in turmoil, the disruptions have seeded doubts, which can be seen in declining enrollment.

A survey by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education found that 19 percent of undergraduate-level and 11 percent of graduate-level teaching programs saw a significant drop in enrollment this year. And Teach for America, which recruits recent college graduates to teach in low-income schools, said it had received fewer applications for its fall 2021 corps compared with this period last year.

Many program leaders believe enrollment fell because of the perceived hazards posed by in-person teaching and the difficulties of remote learning, combined with longstanding frustrations over low pay compared with professions that require similar levels of education. (The national average for a public-school teacher's salary is roughly \$61,000.) Some are hopeful that enrollment will return to its prepandemic level as vaccines roll out and schools resume in-person learning.

But the challenges in teacher recruitment and retention run deeper: The number of education degrees conferred by American colleges and universities dropped by 22 percent between 2006 and 2019, despite an overall increase in U.S. university graduates, stoking concerns about a future



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teacher shortage.

For some young people, doubts about entering the teaching work force amid the pandemic are straightforward: They fear that the job now entails increased risk.

Nicole Blagsvedt, an education major at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, felt a jolt of anxiety when she began her classroom training in a local public school that recently brought its students back for in-person learning. After months of seeing only her roommates, moving around a classroom brimming with fourth and fifth graders was nerve-racking.

Ms. Blagsvedt's role also encompassed new responsibilities: sanitizing fidget toys, enforcing mask use, coordinating the cleaning of the water bottles that students brought to school because they couldn't use the water fountains. In her first week, she re-

ceived a call from an office assistant informing her that one of her students had been exposed to Covid-19, and that she had to help shepherd the students out of the classroom so it could be disinfected.

"This panic crossed my mind," she said. "I thought: This was what it's going to be like now."

Administrators running teacher preparation programs said the new anxieties were most likely scaring away some potential applicants. "People are weighing whether or not it makes sense to go to a classroom when there are alternatives that may seem safer," said David J. Chard, dean of the Wheelock College of Education and Human Development at Boston University.

But for many students, the challenges posed by remote teaching can be just as steep. Those train-

ing in districts with virtual classes have had to adjust their expectations; while they might have pictured themselves holding students' hands and forming deep relationships, they're now finding themselves staring at faces on a Zoom grid instead.

"Being online is draining," said Oscar Nollette-Patulski, who had started an education degree at the University of Michigan but is now reconsidering. "You have to like what you're doing a lot more for it to translate on a computer. I'm wondering, if I don't like doing this online that much, should I be getting a degree in it?"

In some instances, remote teaching has deprived education students of training opportunities altogether. At Portland State University in Oregon, some students were not able to get classroom placements while schools were

Clockwise from top left: Kianna Ameni-Melvin had second thoughts about teaching early in the pandemic; a remote lesson; Whitney Bush leading a class in Brooklyn. The pandemic has profoundly disrupted education.

operating remotely. Others were given only restricted access to student documents and academic histories because of privacy concerns.

At the university's College of Education there was a decline in applications this year, which the dean, Marvin Lynn, attributed to students in the community hearing about the difficulties in training during the pandemic.

Applications may tick back up as schools return to in-person learning, Dr. Lynn said, but the challenges are likely to outlast this year. Educators have struggled with recruitment to the profession since long before the pandemic. In recent years, about 8 percent of public schoolteachers were leaving the work force annually, through retirement or attrition. National surveys of teachers have pointed to low compensation and poor working conditions as the causes of turnover.

The pandemic is likely to exacerbate attrition and burnout. In a recent national study of teachers by the RAND Corporation, one quarter of respondents said that they were likely to leave the profession before the end of the school year. Nearly half of public schoolteachers who stopped teaching after March 2020 but before their scheduled retirements did so because of Covid-19.

This attrition comes even as many schools are trying to add staff to handle reduced class sizes

and to ensure compliance with Covid-19 safety protocols. Miguel A. Cardona, the secretary of education, recently called for financial help to reopen schools safely, which will allow them to bring on more employees so they can make their classes smaller. The Covid-19 relief package approved by President Biden includes \$129 billion in funding for K-12 schools, which can be used to increase staff.

Not all teacher preparation programs are experiencing a decrease in interest. California State University in Long Beach saw enrollment climb 15 percent this year, according to the system's preliminary data. Marquita Grenot-Scheyer, the assistant vice chancellor for the university system, attributes this partly to an executive order from Gov. Gavin Newsom, which temporarily allowed candidates to enter preparation programs without meeting basic skill requirements because of the state's teacher shortage.

Teachers College at Columbia University in New York City also saw an increase in applications this year, according to a spokesman, who noted that teaching has historically been a "recession-proof profession" that sometimes attracts more young people in times of crisis.

Even some of those with doubts have chosen to stick with their plans. Ms. Ameni-Melvin, the Towson student, said she would continue her education program for now because she felt invested after three years there.

Maria Izuza Barba also decided to put aside her doubts and started an education studies program at the Wheelock College of Education at Boston University last fall. Earlier in the pandemic, as she watched her parents, both teachers, stumble through the difficulties of preparing for remote class, she wondered: Was it too late to choose law school instead?

Ms. Izuza Barba, 19, had promised to help her mother with any technical difficulties that arose during her first class, so she crawled under the desk, out of the students' sight, and showed her mother which buttons to press in order to share her screen.

Then she watched her mother, anxious about holding the students' attention, perform a Spanish song about economics.

Ms. Izuza Barba said she realized then that there was no other career path that could prove as meaningful. "Seeing her make her students laugh made me realize how much a teacher can impact someone's day," she said. "I was like, whoa, that's something I want to do."

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

After Suicide of Loved Ones, Toll of Long Isolation Is Felt

By ELIAN PELTIER and ISABELLA KWAI

LONDON — Sunny, driven and with a new engineering master's degree in hand, Joshua Morgan was hopeful he could find a job despite the pandemic, move out of his mother's house and begin his life.

But as lockdowns in Britain dragged on and no job emerged, the young man grew cynical and self-conscious, his sister Yasmin said. Mr. Morgan felt he could not get a public-facing job, like working at a grocery store, because his mother, Joanna, had open-heart surgery last year, and Mr. Morgan was "exceptionally careful" about her health.

He and his mother contracted the coronavirus in January, forcing them to quarantine in their small London apartment for over two weeks. Concerned by things he was saying, friends raised the alarm and referred him to mental health services.

But days before the end of his quarantine last month, Mr. Morgan, 25, took his own life. "He just sounded so deflated," his sister said of their last conversation, adding that he said he felt imprisoned and longed to go outside.

Suicides are challenging to link to specific reasons, but Mr. Morgan's sudden death has left his sister with a feeling that is hard to shake. "The cost of the pandemic was my brother's life," she said. "It's not just people dying in a hospital — it's people dying inside."

More than 2.7 million people have died from the coronavirus — and at least 126,000 in Britain alone. Those numbers are a tangible count of the pandemic's cost. But as more people are vaccinated, and communities open up, there is a tally that experts say is

harder to track: the psychological toll of months of isolation and global suffering, which for some has proved fatal.

There are some signs indicating a widespread mental health crisis. Japan saw a spike in suicide among women last year, and in Europe mental health experts have reported a rise in the number of young people expressing suicidal thoughts. In the United States, many emergency rooms have faced surges in admissions of young children and teenagers with mental health issues.

Mental health experts say prolonged symptoms of depression and anxiety may prompt risky behaviors that lead to self-harm, accidents, or even death, especially among young people.

Some intellectuals, like the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, have asked the authorities to weigh the risks of depression if they impose new virus restrictions. And public health officials in some areas that have seen a surge of adolescent suicides have pushed for schools to reopen, although researchers say it is too early to conclusively link restrictions to suicide rates.

In Europe, with the crippled economy and the aftermath of the restrictions, the psychological fallout of the pandemic could unfold for months or years, public health officials say, with young people among the most affected.

But bereaved families of young people who have died during the pandemic are haunted by questions over whether lockdowns — which not only shut stores and restaurants but required people to stay home for months — played a role. They are calling for more resources for mental health and suicide prevention.

"Mental health has become a buzzword during the pandemic, and we need to keep it that way," said Annie Arkwright, whose 19-year-old daughter, Lily, died by suicide in western England in October. "So many of us have never been taught the skills to help our-



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Yasmin Morgan, left, is mourning the sudden death of her brother. Joshua Morgan, right with his sister and mother, Joanna, took his own life last month during a quarantine period. "It's not just people dying in a hospital — it's people dying inside," Ms. Morgan said.



JOSHUA MORGAN'S FAMILY

selves or help others."

While people may have felt a sense of togetherness during the first lockdowns, that feeling began to wear thin for some as it became clear that restrictions were hitting disadvantaged groups, including many young people, harder.

"If you are a young person, you are looking for hope," said Dr. Rory O'Connor, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Glasgow who specializes in the study of suicide. "But the job market is going to be constrained, and opportunities to build your life are going to be slimmer."

As winter approached, mental health experts began to see more teenagers in emergency rooms and psychiatry wards and warned of a rise in drug use, gambling or self-harm. A June CDC survey found that younger adults, along with ethnic minorities and essential workers, experienced increased substance use and suicidal ideation.

"Imagine a young person in a small room, who takes their course online and has limited social life due to restrictions," said Fabrice Jollant, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Paris. "They may be tempted to consume more drugs or drink more alcohol, and may have less physical activity, all of which can contribute to symptoms of depression, anxiety and poor sleep."

For Pepijn Remmers, such temptations had tragic consequences.

Pepijn, 14, greeted lockdown re-

strictions last spring with positive energy. An adventurous and sociable teenager, he picked up piano playing and would slip under the fence of the local soccer field on the outskirts of Amsterdam to play with his best friend, Thijs.

But as the pandemic dragged on, Pepijn struggled to focus and

Families are haunted by the role lockdowns could have played.

online classes became too "booooring," he told his parents. New restrictions in the fall stopped the soccer.

He began to take drugs in October, according to his father, Gaston Remmers, and his exercising routine waned in December. As his sleep patterns began to change, his parents took him to a therapist.

"We would ask him if he was depressed, and he would say, 'Depressed? I don't know what depressed is, I don't think I am. I feel bored, but I don't feel depressed,'" Mr. Remmers said.

Then one cold January night, Pepijn left the house. He was found the following day in a tent, where he had taken drugs and lit a barbecue to keep himself warm. Mr. Remmers said his son's death was caused by a combination of

carbon monoxide poisoning and drugs.

"With the pandemic, the things that spiced his life, that made it worth going to school, were gone," he added.

As Pepijn's death made headlines in the Netherlands, a lawmaker asked if lockdown had killed him. It's not as simple as that, Mr. Remmers said.

But the pandemic, he added, "provided a context in which things become possible, and which may have otherwise not happened."

After a series of lockdowns in Britain last year, one suicide hotline for young people, Papyrus, saw its calls increase by 25 percent, in line with an increase of about 20 percent each year.

It is unclear, the organization says, whether this is a sign of more people experiencing more suicidal thoughts or symptoms of mental health issues, or if people now feel more comfortable reaching out for help.

Lily Arkwright confided in her friend and housemate Matty Bengtsson. A 19-year-old history student at Cardiff University, Lily was self-confident, outgoing and charismatic in public, her friends and family said, but as she went back to school in September, she began to struggle with the effects of lockdown.

She also became more withdrawn, Mr. Bengtsson said.

One evening in October, as Mr. Bengtsson and Ms. Arkwright were getting ready to see some

friends, she grew upset and called her mother to say that she was coming home, Mr. Bengtsson said.

Ms. Arkwright took her own life there, a day after the birthday of her brother, one of her closest confidants.

"Lockdown put Lily in physical and emotional situations she would never have in normal times," said Lily's mother, Annie.

Ms. Arkwright said she hoped that growing concerns about young people's mental health during the pandemic would prompt more of them to share their struggles and seek help.

"It's OK for a young child to fall over and let their parents know that their knee hurts," Ms. Arkwright said. "This same attitude needs to be extended to mental health."

But though stigma around discussing mental health has lessened, society, too, needs to normalize talking about suicide, said Ged Flynn, chief executive of Papyrus.

People should be praised for adapting and finding resilience during these difficult times, Mr. Flynn said. "Even the need to reach out to a help-line shows resilience," he said, adding that considering the circumstances, many people were doing "really well."

For Mr. Morgan's friends, the loss of a man they called confident and kind has given them a resolve. "Josh always said: One day he's going to make it," said his friend Sandy Caulee, 25. "At least we will — for him."

If you are having thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 (TALK). You can find a list of additional resources at [SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources](https://www.speakingofsuicide.com/resources).