FRONTIER REPORT

Broken Promises: COVID-19 School Closures and Suburban Women

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Suburban women are redefining their relationship to schools after their families & mental health were taxed amid COVID-19 school closures, according to a new study from The Frontier Center.

By Anne Segal

Suburban mothers’ mental health suffered acutely when schools stopped in-school learning in 2021 and 2022. This crisis led to an estrangement from schools’ brand promise, causing women newly to examine their relationship with their school. This recalibration of their relationship to the school was preceded by an upending of their home life that strained many of the systems that kept families functioning emotionally and operationally, hurting marital relationships and those between parents and their children. At the same time, women began to calculate the long-term harm being caused today as their children—and others—suffered poor academic performance, lost development, increased anti-social behavior, and adopted a fear-based mindset. Finally, suburban women said their opinion of the schools and teachers, previously thought to be likeminded and professional, became far more negative, according to a new study conducted in January and February 2022 from The Frontier Center.

Interviewers asked women to describe their reasons for opposing school closures, and how they came to form these opinions. In analyzing their responses, researchers sought to find any differences among those who did and did not vote for Donald Trump in 2020; those who do not intend to vote for a Republican presidential candidate in 2024, those who now will vote for a Republican presidential candidate in 2024; and recent immigrants.

Each segment shared remarkably similar experiences apart from a few distinct findings: (1) only those suburban women who intend to vote Republican were highly tuned into the way teachers acted during school closures—and reported a changed view of them and the school system overall from positive to negative; (2) suburban women who intend to vote Democrat in 2024 did not identify anyone to be behind the school closures and instead focused on the stress teachers were also under; and, (3) recent immigrant suburban women were the only segment to focus strongly on

“It felt like no one wanted to teach my kids.”
a disparate financial impact or on unequal rights of parents (vs. the schools) and the impact these have on whether or not the school closures were representative of American values.

While participants in this study were recruited due to their high-intensity opinion about school closures, 100% of our sample\(^1\) were working mothers, in line with the 2020 71.2% labor-force participation rate\(^2\) of American women with children under 18 in the household.

**Trust that schools—and teachers—were on their side became critically damaged during school closures and activated deeply felt values**

The women described key areas where the school had failed most acutely, which allows a picture of how they viewed the schools’ brand promises up till that point:

Each of these broken promises, revealed through women’s descriptions of how the schools had failed and its impact on their children, resulted in the activation of four deeply felt values: American exceptionalism, mental health/peace of mind, trust, and truth.

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\(^{1}\) In January and February of 2022, The Frontier Center assessed the motivations and values underlying strong opposition to school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, speaking with 63 suburban mothers with children under 18 in the household who both identify as Independent or Republican and have Moderate or Conservative political views.

\(^{2}\) The labor force participation rate—the percent of the population working or looking for work—for all women with children under age 18 was 71.2 percent in 2020, down from 72.3 percent in the prior year. [https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf)
Value 1: American Exceptionalism

- Suburban women became aware of long-term and societal impact on America

These women reported that they began to consider the long-term impact of school closures on their children and on society. The mental health consequences on their children may follow them, including developmental delays and falling behind academically. Their rise in anti-social behavior and turning to living their lives on their devices resulted in more depression and instances of their children acting-out.

The school closures also cultivated a culture of fear that they said made them concerned for not only their children but also what America would look like if our culture failed to embolden itself. Their children were also witnessing what happened when a minority (those extremely concerned about shutting down schools) imposed its will on a majority—which they considered their viewpoint to be.

- Recent immigrant suburban women had a more vivid and confirmed belief that school was about assimilation and Americanism

Those suburban women who are recent immigrants uniquely identified that schools had been where America’s values were enshrined—including assimilation, advancement, and equal rights. Closing schools, for this segment, represented a departure from those core American values. They also identified the financial hardship, which the other segments of women were less attuned to.

Value 2: Mental Health

- Reexamining their relationship to the school originated with mental health concerns as new sources of home-life stress and concern for their children’s futures overwhelmed

When suburban women were forced to replace the school as their children’s educator—without finding solutions for the activities that would have normally taken place during the school day—this catalyzed a reexamination of the school’s brand promises to parents. They reported great concern and lack of peace of mind related to their children’s well-being in the long- and short-term, due to several factors:

- Observing that they are falling behind academically
- A rise in anti-social behaviors and depression—and an associated absorption with technology and computer use

“USA has so many opportunities to learn new skills; we all need a broad perspective comparing us to the rest of the world”

“We might have a generation of people not prepared to ‘get things done.’”
Suburban women also reported being overwhelmed with the task of being the primary educator for their children. As a result, they were unable to accomplish their own work related to their profession, household duties, or enjoy time usually set aside for goal-setting and personal restoration. This added duty impacted the health of their family dynamic, their marital relationship, and resentment toward their children.

**Values 3 and 4: Trust and Truth**

Women’s view of the school during this critical period of school closures and at-home learning changed from reliable and resourceful, rooted in truth and science, and most of all, likeminded in its prioritization of the child’s needs first to one that was seen by these women as unprofessional, not solution-oriented, ungoverned by facts or science and most of all, no longer their ally in prioritizing students before adults. They reported feeling unmoored from what was previously a secure and reliable given in their hectic lives: the school.

- **Contrasting schools’ actions with those of their workplaces made failed promises become apparent**

Suburban women reported that contrasting how their own workplaces handled COVID-19 with schools’ handling of the pandemic opened their eyes to the lack of professionalism exhibited by school decisions, which were haphazard, offered no actual solutions, were not open to feedback from parents, seemed to prioritize physical health over mental, and failed to accommodate the science of how children were far less affected than adults.

They observed teachers seeking to avoid in-person classes in a way that strained their previous belief that teachers’ priority was the parents’ children. They also saw frequent break by teachers, taking time off, and doing everything but teaching as making them realize that teachers didn’t truly care about their children.

**Four critical events impacted women’s intensity of feeling about school closures**

1. Observing mental health effects on their children from school closures

"My daughter was always very engaged and enjoyed being in school. I noticed she became very unmotivated during her remote learning. She gained weight and became quite anxious."

"Every industry has had to find a way to re-open and do business. Schools are no different. They should find a way to be open and keep kids safe at the same time."
Values-identified segments hold the most promise for being reform advocates

Amid the COVID-19 school closures, suburban women effectively determined the relationship they have with their schools. While for some, it is confined to daycare – this has been a tremendous cultural event and ushers in great opportunity for reform. The values provide a market segmentation of school consumers: those activated by mental health, by truth, by broken trust, and by a vision of what America’s values should be in a school-shutdown situation.

Some suburban women would be content in making sure their kids are simply safe 9-5 every day. But most suburban women in this study want more than that: they want schools to reflect American values, to cultivate hope and not fear-based mindsets, to reflect truth and act professionally and with solutions, and to be trustworthy.
The way to have profound impact and is to understand what our values are and how we’ve been sacrificing on them.