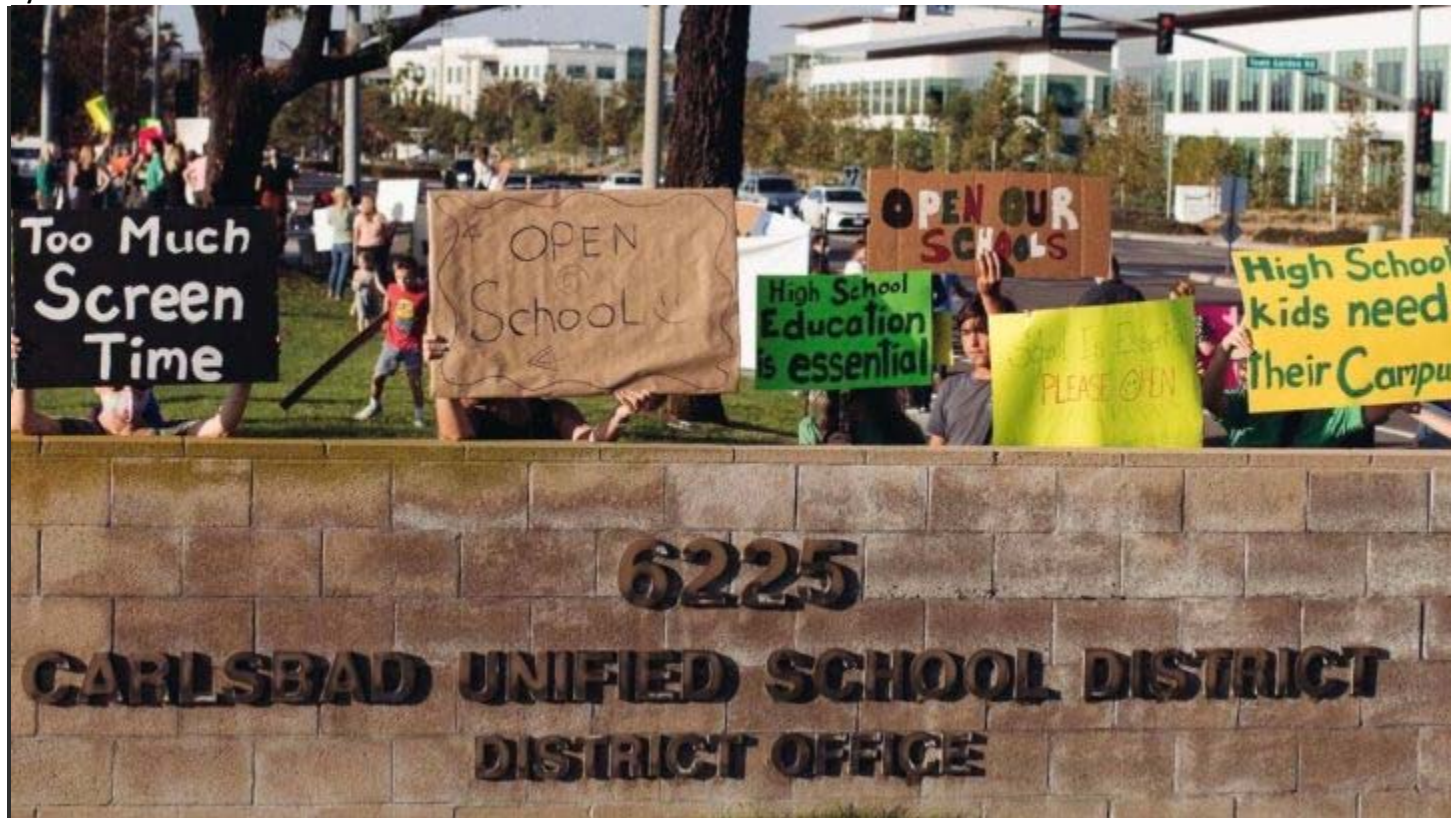


# California Parents Despair over Mental-Health Toll of School Closures: ‘It’s Criminal’

By RYAN MILLS



Open school rally in San Diego, Calif. (Scott Davison, director of legislative affairs for the Parent Association of North County San Diego.)

On that Thursday in early December, she immediately knew something was wrong. And he told her as much: he had been thinking of suicide. All day. Over and over and over.

She didn't know what to do, so she called 911. She was directed to a San Diego-area emergency room. During intake, a doctor asked her son if he **had a plan to kill himself**. He did.

"He was going to take a toaster into a bathtub full of water and end his life," said the boy's mother, whom NATIONAL REVIEW is identifying only as Marie. "Everything left me when I heard him say that. Everything. Every ounce of everything."

Depression is a complex disease, and there are many reasons why a teenager may struggle with suicidal thoughts – genetics, medical illness, social factors. But when confronted with the reality of her son’s spiraling mental health condition, Marie pointed to one particular source of distress in his life: school. Or, more specifically, all the changes that have accompanied schooling during the coronavirus pandemic.

“When we were in the ER, his only wish to fix everything was to go back to his normal school, his normal life,” Marie said of her son who is in the seventh grade.

Marie is one of more than a half-dozen parents in the San Diego area who spoke to NATIONAL REVIEW about the impact of the area’s school closures on their kids and on their families. Most of the parents have become involved in local groups fighting to re-open the schools.

They described kids riddled with anxiety, stunted socially and struggling academically. Several parents said they’ve given up job opportunities to stay home with their kids, and their families have suffered financially.

As the COVID-19 pandemic drags on, the mental health impacts are slowly becoming clearer, particularly the impacts on children who thrive on routine, but who in many parts of the country have been stripped of the consistency of school, teachers, and friends. A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found **significant upticks** in mental health-related emergency department visits by children during the pandemic. President Joe Biden has called school closures a “national emergency,” and vowed to get most schools open in his first 100 days. However, his administration has since been criticized for setting a low bar for what it means to actually reopen a school – having classrooms **open at least one day a week**.

But even with increasing evidence that schools can be reopened safely – a late-January article in the Journal of the American Medical Association by three CDC scientists **reported “little evidence”** that reopened schools “have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission” of the virus – many public schools around the country remain shuttered. The ongoing closures often are driven by indecisive school boards and teachers unions who claim that heading back to classrooms is too risky, and threaten strikes and legal action.

In Chicago, city leaders and union heads were in a standoff for weeks over a school reopening plan. The two sides appear to have **reached an agreement over reopening** elementary and middle schools, avoiding a strike. Teachers unions in cities like Buffalo, Cincinnati, and Minneapolis also have fought reopening plans.

Reopening schools has proven particularly difficult in California, where most schools are still shut and where the state’s largest teachers union has called for all school employees to be vaccinated before returning to the classroom. The vast majority of the state’s 6 million public school students haven’t been in a classroom since last March.

In late January, *Politico* reported that Governor Gavin Newsom lost his cool during a meeting with the Association of California School Administrators, telling them that “If we wait for the perfect, we might as well just pack it up and just be honest with folks that we’re not going to open for in-person instruction this school year.” Newsom – whose four children attend [a private school with in-person learning](#) – is still negotiating with lawmakers and union leaders over a public school reopening plan.

The inability to reopen schools, and the ease with which teachers unions and school boards have found reasons not to reopen, has led parents in school districts across the state to band together to swap stories, share concerns, and to fight to get their kids back in class.

One of those groups, the Parent Association of North County San Diego, launched last fall to be a voice for frustrated parents in several school districts in that area. More than 350,000 students in the San Diego area are still in distance learning, according to [a county dashboard](#).

Ginny Merrifield, executive director of the Parent Association, pointed to San Dieguito Union High School District as an example of why parents in the area are upset. The school board voted in December to partially reopen schools immediately after winter break, but then delayed the reopening after the teachers union sued. New guidance from the state released in mid-January that made school reopenings dependent on case rates, positivity rates, and health equity metrics ultimately made it even harder to get students back to the classroom, Merrifield said. It’s unclear now when the district’s [public schools will reopen](#), if at all this year.

“Public schools exist to serve students. Period,” Merrifield said. “Our communities really need to make sure that those needs are being served. And I can unequivocally say students’ needs are not being served by the public school system in California.”

Leslie Hofmeister, co-founder of the Reopen San Diego Unified School District group, launched her group last year after she and another parent struggled to get answers from the district about why their local schools were not reopening. They now have more than 1,000 Facebook followers. They’ve organized protests, and encourage parents to speak at school board meetings. They’ve also joined with Open Schools California, a statewide coalition.

“We believe it’s probably going to take a statewide effort at this point,” Hofmeister said. “We’re not being heard on the local level.”



*(Photo: Scott Davison)*

## **A Mental Health Spiral**

Marie said her son was a straight-A student before the schools closed last March. At first her son did fine with at-home learning, she said. When the schools in the Carlsbad Unified School District first closed last year, teachers simply posted assignments online, students completed the assignments on their time and turned them in, Marie said. It was mostly unstructured.

Heading into the seventh grade, her son signed up for advanced English and math courses. But the online schooling had changed. Students were now expected to be logged on to their computer all day, following their teachers' live-streamed lessons from home.

Her son struggled navigating the online system, she said. He had trouble logging on and turning in completed assignments. He began falling behind, and ended up digging a hole he couldn't get out of. Over the first month of school, her son received more than 1,000 emails from teachers. She said she started finding him in his room sobbing.

"He would click on a class and see that he had a 36 percent in it," she said. "He would click on another one and he'd have an F, or all these assignments, zero, zero, zero, zero. He's like, 'I know I turned them in. I know I turned them in.'"

Marie, who had been busy keeping her small business afloat during the pandemic, said she tried to help her son get caught up, but new assignments kept coming as fast as her son finished old ones.

She ended up pulling him out of school and sending him to a \$2,000-a-month private school, where at least he could attend in person. But even in a new setting, anxiety continued to

overwhelm her son. He struggled with headaches and stomachaches and sobbing fits. He eventually opened up to his parents that he felt lost. He wanted life to return to normal.

It was early December when he opened up about his suicidal thoughts. He spent a night with his mom in an adult psychiatric emergency ward with people screaming they wanted to die. Marie called it “the worst night of my life.” Her son spent the next night alone in a treatment facility, before a doctor eventually sent him home.

Marie is now homeschooling her son. He’s doing better, but he still sleeps in her bed and she’s still worried.

“I’m paranoid when he’s in his room alone to walk up the stairs and find him hanging in the closet,” she said. “That’s my visual. That’s my reality right now.”

Marie said she blames the local school board and teachers union. She points at schools open in other states as evidence that California schools should be open, too.

“There might be some tweaks. You might have to wear a mask or whatever. But you’re functioning,” she said. “It’s criminal. It’s gotten to the point where it’s criminal.”

Kristine Brady, a private practice psychologist in the North County area of San Diego, said being out of school for going on a year “has been incredibly detrimental” to students. The educational model that most schools are using – online assignments and Zoom calls – is better suited for adults, but even the college students she teaches are struggling with it, Brady said.

Younger kids learn by interacting with the world, so sitting in front of a screen all day is “torture,” she said. Older kids, who think more abstractly, need peers to bounce their thoughts and ideas off of. Developmentally, they are supposed to be separating from their parents.

Over the last year Brady said she’s noticed an uptick in parents and even kids themselves reaching out for help. “I’ve never had boys actually seek out therapy, 13-year-old boys,” she said.

It’s good they’re asking for help, she said, but the pandemic limits her treatment options.

“What they need most, the treatment for depression is behavior activation, which is getting out there, interacting, especially with friends,” she said. “What I normally do is set small goals to get them moving and doing something. That would often involve something outside, or making one phone call or one text to a friend, and then that would lead to meeting somewhere. Well, it can’t lead to that anymore.”



(Photo: Scott Davison)

## Frustrated and Falling Behind

Sharon McKeeman is shocked her oldest son hasn't given up on school.

A junior in the Carlsbad school district, her son struggles with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, and for him online learning has been a challenge.

"He failed every single class the first semester of distance learning, and was to the point where he was thinking about actually dropping out of high school," McKeeman said.

McKeeman said her son doesn't learn well by watching a screen, so she reached out to school leaders to ask about what they offer as an alternative plan for kids like her son.

"And they basically said we don't have any plan. We don't have any other option for a kid that can't learn in this format," she said, calling remote learning, "an experiment that has failed miserably."

Her son is aware of the proposed start dates that have all been missed, and every delay has an emotional impact, she said. "If I went into the details, you'd have a much better story."

She was eventually able to find a spot for her son in another district school that offers a hybrid, in-person model for students with learning difficulties. She said there are “way more kids that need it that couldn’t get into this school, but thankfully he’s gotten a spot.”

“He’s got a long ways to make up now,” she said. “I’m just hoping it’s not too little too late.”

McKeeman actually has three school-aged children, along with a preschooler. She said her fourth-grader cried most days before he was allowed to return to school in a hybrid model. “He was incredibly, incredibly lonely,” she said.

He’s now back to school five days a week, and “it’s like absolute night and day,” she said.

Her ninth-grade son has done the best of the three. He’s maintained a 4.0 grade point average throughout the pandemic, McKeeman said. But she’s seen the frustration build in him, too.

### **Highlighting Economic Disparities**

McKeeman’s family moved into the Carlsbad district just before the shelter-in-place order last year. She and her husband stretched financially to move to the area because of its good schools. Now they have limited access to those schools, and McKeeman, who had her own business before the pandemic, has been unable to work, spending most days serving instead as an unpaid at-home school proctor for her kids.

She turned down a part-time job because it didn’t pay enough to cover the additional child-care costs her family would have incurred. And her plans to go back to school herself are on hold.

The pandemic has shined a spotlight on economic disparities, not just between the very rich and the very poor, but across the financial spectrum, including middle-class and working-class families. Many parents, including McKeeman, have had to make professional and financial sacrifices because their kids are stuck at home. “The school has basically commandeered our home,” McKeeman said.

Even for many solidly middle-class families, private schools and tutors are out of reach. McKeeman said it’s hard when she sees parents transferring their kids to private schools.

“I’m happy for them, but it really hurts for a parent that isn’t able to do that,” she said.

“We’re trying to figure out how to pay our mortgage, pay our property taxes, all the things that were supposed to help provide this publicly funded education for our kids,” she said. “And yeah, I don’t know how it’s going to work out for us financially.”

Emily Diaz, a working parent in San Diego, couldn’t afford a private school for her third-grade son who has learning difficulties and was struggling with remote learning.

She said she asked for some changes that would allow her to help her son and also work around her job, but local school leaders “were completely inflexible about it.”

She pulled her son out of the public school and is homeschooling him now. She sends her son to a homeschooling group in the mornings, providing a four-hour block when she can meet with clients. In the afternoons, she does a reading program with her son, and then does her own work in the evenings.

“We really wanted to be part of our school community. I was looking for any option to bridge this gap and also for me to earn an income for my family, and they just didn’t have it,” said Diaz. “It’s definitely taking a toll.”

Merrifield, the Parent Association director, said the push to reopen California schools is “100 percent a non-partisan issue,” and includes some of the most liberal and most conservative parents she’s ever met. Their frustrations are helping to **fuel an effort to recall Newsom.**

Merrifield said there’s plenty of blame to go around for why most California public schools remain closed: risk-averse school districts, school boards beholden to and intimidated by powerful teachers unions, state mandates that have handcuffed local governments, and state leaders who have usurped local control.

“I would like to say that there’s a villain. I’d really like to be able to point to someone because then we could all get our pitchforks and baseball bats and take care of them,” said Merrifield, who doesn’t approve of violence and was speaking rhetorically. “But it really isn’t that simple. The public school behemoth infrastructure that we have in the state of California, and really in some ways in our country, has been built to basically run a certain way. There are very powerful special interests that control that.”

Merrifield said she remains optimistic that local schools will reopen in her area before the end of the school year. She expects infection rates to drop as the weather warms and more people get vaccinated. She hopes well-meaning teachers will encourage their union leaders to engage with the problem and get them back to class. But nothing is certain.

“We are going to fight until the last day of school,” she said. “And the reason for that is, if we concede that it’s just too hard to open, what we’re really conceding is it’s just too hard to open. And in the fall, it will be just too hard to go back to normal. It will be just too hard.”

***NATIONAL REVIEW Reporter Tobias Hoonhout contributed to this report.***