

Study 2/2023

Pandemics and Parental Beliefs about Returns to Education²

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Summary

- This study summarises the findings of an empirical survey of the impacts that interruptions to in-person teaching in schools had on parents' expectations about the returns to their financial and time investments in their children's education. The study made use of four repeated questionnaire surveys carried out during 2020 and 2021, in which parents responded to hypothetical scenarios involving two fictitious families who invest different amounts of time and money in their children's education. On the basis of these scenarios, the parents estimated how much each fictitious child would earn at the age of 30, taking into account the given level of investment in their education. They also estimated how much the quality of the child's schooling would impact their future earnings. This experimental methodology enables us to identify how parents' expectations changed during the pandemic.
- During 2020 and 2021, schools in the Czech Republic were closed for nearly half a year due to the Covid-19 epidemic. Teaching took place remotely or in combined form (part remote, part in-person). As a result of this situation, parents became far more involved in their children's education than they had previously been. The experience parents gained in this way might have changed their expectations as to the role school plays in their children's education and about the extent to which their own involvement, in terms of time and money, benefits their children's development.
- The research was based on repeated questionnaire surveys carried out in April, June and September 2020 and in April 2021 with the same group of 500–800 respondents, all of whom were parents with at least one child attending primary school. The average future income these parents estimated for pupils with below-average skills increased between April 2020 and April 2021 by 5%. This represented growth at a rate slightly higher than inflation at

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the time. Parents' expectations about the future earnings of their pupils with above-average skills did not change.

- During the course of the pandemic, parents' expectations that they could effectively help their children with their education – either financially or in terms of time investment – gradually reduced. In April 2020, when the parents had only very brief experience of school closures, they expected that spending 5 hours per week on school work with their children or investing 500 CZK per week would lead to an average increase in their child's earnings at the age of 30 by 12–14% compared to zero time or financial investment. In April 2021, after a year of school interruptions due to the pandemic, the parents' expectations of the return on their time and financial investments had fallen by approximately one third, to an 8–10% increase in income.
- The main factor behind this change in parental expectations appears to be distance learning, which revealed to parents the limitations in their ability to effectively assist their children's learning. Other factors, such as the family's financial situation, concerns about the pandemic, or the amount of time parents spent with their children during distance learning, are not strongly correlated with the parents' expectations about their children's future income.
- Our findings indicate that parents are more aware of the benefits of education for weaker pupils. It is nevertheless problematic that after a year of the pandemic parents had developed lower expectations about how worthwhile it is to invest time and money in their children's education. A positive interpretation of this could be that the parents simply became more aware of their own limits, but that they will continue to invest in their children's education to the same or a greater extent, or will become more interested in the quality of their children's school. If so, there would not necessarily be any negative impact on their children's education. However, should the observed change in parental expectations also lead to a reduction in the real time and money parents invest in their children's education, this would have negative impacts. Furthermore, it would deepen existing educational inequality, since our findings indicate that these negative effects would be greater among families who receive lower quality remote – and, likely, in-person – teaching.