

9 costly mistakes to avoid when filing your tax return

Be careful not to make sloppy errors that could eat into your refund – or worse. **In Money**

When will music festivals, concerts finally return?

This year was supposed to be when live shows made a comeback. It's not looking good. **In Life**



LUKA GARZA BY JEFFREY BECKER/USA TODAY SPORTS

Big Ten promises a bruising tournament

We can expect to see some exciting, physical play among many of the best teams in college basketball, writes Paul Myerberg. **In Sports**

USA TODAY

THE NATION'S NEWS | \$2 | MONDAY, MARCH 8, 2021

Biden's focus is on selling relief bill

Plan with \$1,400 checks to get final OK this week

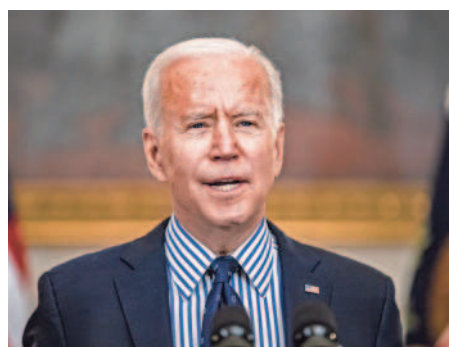
Maureen Groppe
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – The Senate was still minutes away from passing President Joe Biden's pandemic relief package on Saturday when the White House tweeted out a video of the president telling a single mother from Michigan that her family could get a \$7,000 stimulus check.

"I think you're going to be in good shape," Biden told Tammy, a health care professional. "1,400 bucks for you and 1,400 bucks for each of your children."

Trying to avoid the missteps from 2009 when the Obama administration didn't get a political bounce from its economic stimulus package, the Biden administration is putting a heavy

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President Joe Biden will turn to his next phase of recovery after he signs the bill. SAMUEL CORUM/GETTY IMAGES

IN NATION'S HEALTH

Relief bill aims to help mothers fleeing abuse

The pandemic has fueled a rise in domestic violence. Federal assistance could make a lifesaving difference.

Why obese patients are priorities for vaccines

Some have criticized states that include obesity on early lists.

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Doctors worry as fewer in US are getting tested



In January, the U.S. saw an average of nearly 1.9 million coronavirus tests completed each day. It has fallen to 1.3 million. One reason may be test sites, such as Dodger Stadium, are now vaccination sites. ROBYN BECK/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Drop comes as states ease up on restrictions

Ken Alltucker
USA TODAY

Public health experts have been critical of states such as Texas and Mississippi that tossed aside mask mandates last week at a critical juncture in the nation's pandemic.

They also warn of another threat to hard-fought gains – the number of Americans getting tested for coronavirus has dropped significantly since January.

Though the testing slowdown may be the result of fewer infections, it also might signal too many Americans are growing complacent as the second year of COVID-19 marches on and millions get vaccinated every week.

Testing remains a staple of the effort to control COVID-19, along with



Testing has fallen before. In summer, testing dropped in several Southern states before COVID-19 cases came roaring back. JAE C. HONG/AP

wearing masks, social distancing, avoiding crowded indoor places and hand hygiene. Though officials are optimistic vaccines will offer protection, some warn the nation might be letting its guard down before enough Americans are protected from the virus.

"A lot of people are just kind of done with the pandemic," said Mary Hay-

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America's kids risk declines in reading skills

Leigh Guidry, Mandy McLaren, Laura Testino, Isabel Lohman and Gabriela Szymanowska
USA TODAY

Reading brings out the competitor in 8-year-old Uriah Hargrave. The second grader at Eaton Park Elementary in Vermilion Parish along Louisiana's southwest coast was thrilled to return to in-person learning in January. One of his favorite things is the Accelerated Reader program in which he wins points for the books he reads.

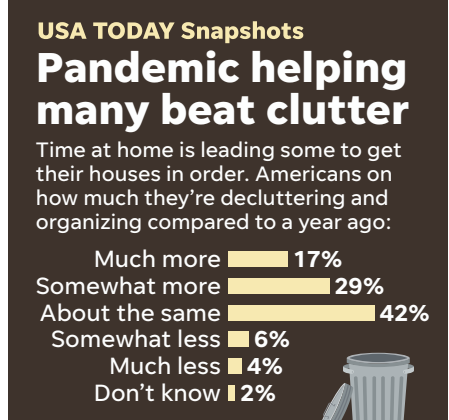
"I like to read because I like to take AR," Uriah said. "You get more (points and prizes) every time. ... Yesterday, I read a big ol' chapter book about animals with kids."

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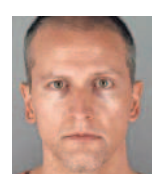


SOURCE Ipsos poll, Jan. 11-12
AMY BARNETTE, DAVID ANESTA/USA TODAY

'Reckless disregard for life' or accident? Chauvin goes on trial

Tami Abdollah
USA TODAY

A video of George Floyd taking his last breath under the knee of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin is at the center of a murder trial in a death witnessed by tens of millions of people.



Chauvin

The question at the heart of the case, which is scheduled to start Monday with jury selection, is whether what people saw on the video was murder or a terrible tragedy.

Prosecutors contend Floyd, 46, was killed by Chauvin's knee, compressed against Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes while he was handcuffed and pinned to the pavement. The defense is likely to argue that Floyd's death was the result of his struggle



A vigil is held at the George Floyd memorial at the Cup Foods Market in Minneapolis on June 1. Floyd died in police custody at this site. JACK GRUBER/USA TODAY

with police, the drugs in his system and health issues such as heart disease.

Video filmed by a bystander went viral, followed by months of protests over racism and police brutality.

"The video of Chauvin murdering George Floyd was powerful enough to do

what the other videos did not do, which is to get close to an estimated 15 to 20 million white people, out of 25 million who marched across the country," said Connie Rice, a civil rights attorney.

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Reading

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His points pay off in extra free time outside and “Star Bucks” that he can use to buy erasers and spy pens at the school store. Plus, his reading helps advance his class’s gingerbread cutout on the Candy Land game bulletin board in the school hallway. He proudly pointed out where his class was in relation to the other second grade classes.

Yet too many children may be falling behind in the reading game during the pandemic, teachers and experts say. The USA TODAY Network visited classrooms in different states to see how schools are adapting as the teachers’ axiom about students learning to read in early grades so they can read to learn the rest of their lives has never been put to a greater test.

“Learning to read is so challenging,” said Laura Taylor, a professor of educational studies at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. “It’s a long process that takes years.”

Lost time from when schools shut down, inconsistent schedules since then, the limitations of teaching over videoconference or even in person with masks and social distancing – these handicaps are likely to have a greater effect on children learning to read than those at other grade levels, said Anjette Holmes, a professor at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette’s Picard Center for Child Development and Lifelong Learning.

A midyear report from the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) early reading assessment shows almost half of students in kindergarten and first grade scored within the lowest category in early literacy skills, an increase of almost two-thirds from the same point last year.

The analysis, covering approximately 400,000 students in more than 1,400 schools from 41 states, shows that compared with last year, twice as many Black kindergarten students are at greater risk of not learning to read.

In Uriah’s district, standardized tests administered at the start of the school year revealed how much had been lost from shutting down schools in March. Among kindergartners, the tests showed 47% were at grade level, a drop from 77% the previous year. In first grade, the numbers fell from 90% to 66%. Second graders fell from 81% to 58%. Educators grapple with how to teach new grade-level concepts when students are still playing catch-up.

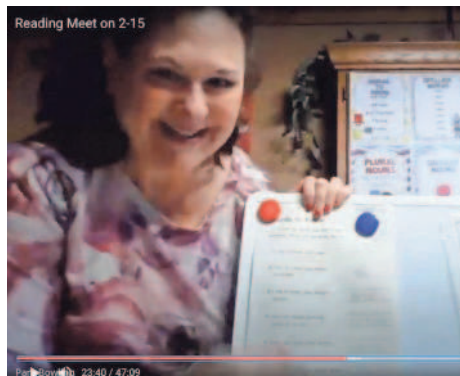
Vermilion Parish’s answer is for elementary school teachers to integrate skills students missed with “mini-lessons” sprinkled throughout the year. For example, when first-graders get to new content that requires knowledge of a kindergarten concept they missed last year, the teacher does a mini-lesson before starting the new skill.

At Eaton Park Elementary, teachers carved out an extra half hour from the school day to devote to reading to help make up for the learning losses.

Phaedra Simon, a single mom of three from Opelousas, Louisiana, can attest to how challenging it is for kids to learn new material when they’re still mastering foundational skills.



Second grader Skylar Tolbert, 7, peers over the shoulder of her sister, Sydney, a kindergartner at Libertas School of Memphis. The sisters read each night after school. Her mother says Sydney flourished when in-person classes resumed.



Pam Bowling, a first grade teacher at in Kentucky, reviews words virtually with her class. PROVIDED BY FLOYD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Simon worked hard to keep her children – ages 9, 8 and 7 – on track when they started the year virtually in the St. Landry Parish school district. She even quit her job to give her youngest the attention he needed.

As soon as the chance came to return to in-person learning, she seized it, even as she worries about their health. “I’m not trained to teach them how to read,” Simon said. She’s continued working with them, reading at home together every night. “I’m still nervous, waiting to see their new report cards,” Simon said.

‘Roll with it’

Nearly a year into remote learning, instilling good learning habits remains a daily mission for Pam Bowling, a first grade teacher at Allen Elementary School in eastern Kentucky. She peppers every virtual lesson with positive narration – “Good job! I hear reading books being opened!”

“Make sure we’re sitting up,” Bowling trilled at the start of her daily 9 a.m. reading session. “I want you to be comfortable, but I don’t want you to be too comfortable, right? We don’t want to fall asleep. We want to make sure we’re sitting up, paying attention, just like we were at school.”

“I’ve got ‘em with hair that looks like they’ve been shot out of a cannon,” joked Bowling, an educator for 25 years. “They’re getting up, and their hair is every which way. And you can tell they’re sleepy.”

Even for veterans such as Bowling, teaching students to read over a videoconference call is an unprecedented challenge.

“I don’t think you can make the same connections, give the same in-the-moment feedback,” Taylor said.

Bowling, 50, has been teaching from her dining room. “I was very skeptical (of remote learning),” Bowling recalled. “I said, ‘I don’t know how we’re going to read through the camera. I don’t know how that’s going to translate.’”

Bowling said she tries to remember the setup is only temporary.

“It’s just swallowing the fact that ‘Hey, this is what I’ve been dealt with,’” she said. “It might not be the best, it may not be the easiest approach, but – and I say this almost every day to my parents and kids – we’re just going to roll with the hand we’re dealt.”

When Bowling and her kids eased back to in-person classes on a hybrid schedule, a litany of health and safety routines was added to her charge.

“We’re just going to roll with it,” she said.

Learning behind a mask

When schools shuttered in March, Sydney Tolbert was a preschooler at the Libertas School of Memphis, starting to make strides in reading, her mother said. “She was just right there. And then all of a sudden, we just stopped,” recalled Stephanie Tolbert, who felt relief that Libertas was one of the few public schools in Memphis that offered in-person classes beginning in the fall.

“I knew that if we could get her back in school, that she would just take off,” Tolbert said. “And you could just see her. I watched her just, like, flourish. It was awesome.”

In Sydney’s multigrade classroom, teacher Toni Sudduth, a classroom assistant and the 15 students practice social distancing and wear masks even when outside.

It’s a challenge for students to watch how their teacher’s mouth moves while sounding out letter combinations and words. Sudduth wears a clear face shield, so she can pull down her mask behind the shield to demonstrate how a sound is made.

Sounding out words is one area where online learning platforms provide an advantage, said Emily Wakabi, a reading interventionist at Libertas. “I used to cue (students) every time, like, ‘Watch my mouth,’” she said, “and that’s not helpful this year.”

Encouraging conversation

Kristin Bosco, a first grade teacher at John Sevier Elementary in Maryville, Tennessee, has 17 students in her virtual class.

While the children read a passage about a king, seeking words with the “ng” sound, Bosco flipped through her Zoom panel to see each face to make sure everyone paid attention.

Between tasks, the children talk with each other, which Bosco said is important for their social growth. Learning this way has given her a window into the children’s home life that she didn’t always have. She hears about – and often sees – the children’s pets and learns when a parent switches jobs.

“Allowing children to talk more is really important,” Holmes said. “Teachers are trained to get children talking to each other. They’re not learning that original, authentic language otherwise.”

‘Expectations are no different’

At the start of the school year, third grade teacher Lisa Gemar was asked to be one of 11 virtual teachers needed for children who didn’t want in-person learning at Northside Elementary School in the Clinton, Mississippi, school district. It was an adjustment, but she was up to the challenge.

“The expectations are no different,” Gemar, a 10-year teaching veteran, said of leading a class in a Zoom session. “I’m still able to pick up on what they’re struggling with, and we’ve built a really great relationship even virtually through a screen.”

The transition to virtual learning was eased by Clinton’s eight-year track record as a one-to-one district, meaning every student gets a laptop or tablet.

In the Madison County School District north of Jackson, Mississippi, technology issues, such as a lack of internet access, have meant more students need additional intervention, said Christyl Erickson, the district’s curriculum director.

The experts fear the pandemic will widen achievement gaps.

“Knowing what we know about how education inequity works, I would think it’s more likely that we’re going to see larger gaps between schools, between districts, because of those different kinds of financial resources,” Taylor said.

If early readers get the resources in time and attention that they need, Holmes said, she’s optimistic they can overcome the pandemic’s challenges.

“Children are strong and can bounce back quickly, sometimes a lot faster than adults,” Holmes said. “With consistent routines in place, whether learning at home or at school, I have hope that they will catch up.”

Early childhood education coverage at USA TODAY is made possible in part by a grant from Save the Children. Save the Children does not provide editorial input.

Testing

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den, professor of internal medicine and pathology at Rush Medical College in Chicago.

In January, labs and other testing sites completed an average of nearly 1.9 million tests each day as cases reached record levels. Average daily testing dropped to 1.5 million in February and 1.3 million in March, according to figures from the COVID Tracking Project.

Hayden said the nation’s testing never reached levels that public health officials thought were “adequate or optimal” to control the virus. “We never quite got there,” said Hayden, an Infectious Diseases Society of America fellow. “And now we’re dropping.”

Testing was hard to get when the first major outbreaks emerged last spring in metro Seattle and New York. The nation slowly built capacity with private labs, and now the United States can test more than 2 million each day.

In the summer, testing dropped in several Southern states before cases came roaring back.

Daily cases still surpass levels of late summer and fall, but it’s likely that fewer people were exposed to the virus in recent weeks compared with January’s peak. That means fewer people experience symptoms that compel them to get tested.

As the pandemic rolls into year two,

people are less willing to get screened for the virus, Hayden said. Earlier in the pandemic, people sought testing even if they had no symptoms or mild symptoms because they were worried. Based on anecdotal reports, it seems fewer nonsymptomatic people are getting tested, she said.

Another factor: public health agencies are focusing limited resources on getting more Americans vaccinated. Large testing sites, such as Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles and State Farm Stadium near Phoenix, converted to mass vaccination sites.

As testing wanes, public health officials are worried about moves by state government to ease social distancing.

Governors in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Montana and Iowa declared masks are no longer required to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Of those five states, Johns Hopkins University data shows, only Montana’s ratio of positive tests over the past week is less than 5%, the threshold the World Health Organization recommends before reopening.

Although local governments and private businesses can make their own choices about wearing masks in public places, such as restaurants, eliminating state mask mandates and allowing more people to gather indoors undermines virus control strategies that have been pivotal in reducing spread of COVID-19, said Romney Humphries, a Vanderbilt University Medical Center professor of pathology, microbiology and immunology.

Pulling health orders creates “a sense for the public that the pandemic is over. By no means is that true.”

Romney Humphries
Vanderbilt University Medical Center

She said relaxing social distancing contributes to “an overall culture of the pandemic is winding down” and may convince some people testing is less important. “All of those things are creating a sense for the public that the pandemic is over,” Humphries said. “By no means is that true.”

Only 21% of adults had received at least one dose of vaccine as of Thursday, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Four out of five U.S. adults have not been vaccinated.

Those who received just one dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine are not fully protected. Now that the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine is bolstering the nation’s vaccine supplies, President Joe Biden said there should be enough doses for every American by the end of May.

Rebecca Weintraub, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School’s Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, said people are not fully protected until two weeks after they get both doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines.

Although early data is positive, it’s not known whether the vaccine prevents spread of the virus from an immunized person to others.

“What we do know is the virus is circulating in our communities,” Weintraub said. “And so one of the most effective ways to understand, either am I infected or could I be infected, is to get tested.”

The College of American Pathologists said members noted a “significant decrease” in the number of tests at health care institutions nationwide.

In metro Seattle, testing has dropped in tandem with new cases. At the University of Washington’s lab, tests surged in the late fall. Tests are about half of fall’s peak, said Geoffrey Baird, the university’s acting chair of laboratory medicine and pathology.

The vaccine rollout is a pivotal period that Baird and others are watching. If vaccination efforts slow, more states relax mask mandates and virus variants gain traction, it could lead to another big spike in cases, Baird said.

“All of us in the testing business are wondering what will occur in the coming month or two,” he said.

Hayden said the public must remain vigilant, even as more and more people get vaccinated.

“While the infection rates are much lower, they are still high,” Hayden said. “I don’t think we’re at a place yet where we can really relax our overall strategies and reduce testing.”

Contributing: Karen Weintraub