

Chicago Tribune

‘Class of COVID’: For this year’s graduating seniors, the pandemic dominated and defined high school

By Zareen Syed, Olivia Alexander and Alexandra Kukulka
Chicago Tribune

Published: Jun 01, 2023 at 5:00 am



Marist High School student Clare Dunneback, right, high-fives a fellow student while walking to the school football field for their graduation ceremony on May 18, 2023, in Chicago. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

Jaylin Green was still adjusting to a new school in a new neighborhood when his barely rooted new life was uprooted in March of his freshman year.

Something called COVID-19 was abruptly shutting down schools and hurtling students into one of many unknowns: remote learning.

The shift was jarring enough, even with Green thinking at first that “we’re going to go and have normal class in a week or so.”

When that week turned into the rest of the school year, the sense of isolation set in.

“It was really challenging. ... I was just in my room, just looking at a computer screen, and I know there’s a lot of people there, but I was still by myself,” said Green, now part of the class of 2023 of Chicago’s Mather High School, whose seniors graduated Wednesday evening.

Green and his peers have been dubbed by some the “class of COVID” — freshmen when the pandemic hit and, as it happened, seniors on the verge of earning their diplomas when the public health emergency formally ended in May. The coronavirus brought unprecedented academic, social and psychological upheaval even to those who didn’t get sick or lose a loved one; for many graduating seniors, it dominated and defined their high school experience.

Green was already dealing with a lot of change before the arrival of COVID-19, even though he got good grades his first semester as a freshman. He’d recently moved from the Southwest Side to the North Side, a transfer to Mather and without his old social crutches. And in Chicago Public Schools, the school year had already been disrupted by a two-week teachers strike that fall.

Then when COVID-19 hit, Green was having to juggle full-time remote learning with helping care for his toddler-aged nieces and nephews while other family members worked. Sometimes the stress got to him.

“It kicked into depression, and I struggled to be positive and felt like ‘woah, what’s happening?’ It was just a lot of confusion.”

Part of what helped Green stay the course was the one-on-one support from Stephanie Estrada, a student support manager at Mather.

“I’d talk to her and feel somewhat safe, not have to deal with other people, not my family or friends.”

Estrada works at Mather in partnership with Communities In Schools of Chicago, one of the city's largest education nonprofits, to provide counseling to a caseload of 50 students. She had already been working with Green and other students pre-pandemic; that work, too, had to move online.

"The conversations that were hardest to have were the ones where students were experiencing grief, because a lot of what happened during COVID was the loss of family members, the loss of friends," Estrada said. "And to have those conversations not in person was very difficult."

Estrada recalls one day asking Green how his classes were going and Green responded that he hadn't even logged on yet. It was noon.

"He had lost motivation and it was a recurring thing," Estrada said. "Looking back, that's memorable to me because I now see him and he's on time for school, he's involved, he stays after school — so I see a big difference in him."

For all the focus on test scores and learning loss, Estrada said there needs to be a greater emphasis on the impact of the pandemic on students' mental health.

"I firmly believe that students are not able to perform academically if they don't have the social-emotional supports that they need," she said. "They are going to have a tough time focusing on school work if they're experiencing depression or anxiety, if they've got social issues happening."



Marist High School students walk to the school football field for their graduation ceremony on May 18, 2023. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

Ismael Flores is another member of the class of 2023 who never thought at first a two-week school shutdown would turn into a yearslong disruption.

He still recalls March 13, 2020, when all the students and staff of Marist High School gathered in the gym as officials announced spring break would be two weeks instead of one. That was the day Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker ordered all schools to shut down.

“To be quite frank, after COVID, I don’t think everything ever was the same,” Flores said moments before receiving his diploma last month from Marist, a Catholic school on Chicago’s Southwest Side.

One way the pandemic affected Flores, a resident of Palos Heights, was that he wasn’t able to get the full experience of being a student ambassador. If not for COVID-19, he’d have spent time giving tours at the school’s open house, visiting elementary schools and assisting with special events.

“Freshman year I had so much fun, I enjoyed every day. After COVID, it really impacted me, just kind of reminding myself every day, when am I going to be finishing? It made my school days at Marist feel longer,” Flores said.

During the graduation ceremony that sent off 387 seniors, Marist Principal Meg Dunneback noted that their high school experience began typically enough, from the anxieties of learning their class schedules to attending homecoming.



Marist High School student Joey Fortner hugs a teacher before the school's graduation ceremony on May 18, 2023. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

By sophomore year, the school had reopened — sooner than local public schools — on a “blended” schedule, meaning two groups of students alternated between online and in-person classes for a few hours a day.

That year, “you were never together as a full class,” Dunneback said. “Classes were so different, but hey, at least you were here and you were learning.”

When junior year rolled in, students attended school in person wearing masks, and lunch breaks were split, with some students in the gym and others in the cafeteria.

Senior year was the students’ “most back-to-normal year since early on that freshman year,” Dunneback said. “So we’ve come full circle. You did it all and you did it during a pandemic. You demonstrated perseverance.”

Fellow Marist graduating senior Demarco Hunter, 18, of Lansing, said it was strange having to stare at a screen all day for school work.

“I went from being active, working out anywhere between four to six times a week, to pretty much doing nothing and just sitting down (with) my iPad the whole day,” Hunter said. “It was a lot of adjustment to get used to that.”



Marist High School students Kamryn Chaney and Demarco Hunter talk before their graduation ceremony on May 18, 2023. (John J. Kim/Chicago Tribune)

As a football player, Hunter struggled with split schedules his sophomore year. He often had to go to practice on days he had online learning. The usual season was upended, with training in the fall and only a six-game season in the spring.

“I wish that time wasn’t taken from us,” he said. “There’s no telling what we would’ve been able to do in that time.”

For all the disruption, fear and challenges the pandemic brought, some seniors said they gained something useful from the experience.

Melina Fonseca, a graduating senior at Chicago’s John Hancock College Preparatory High School, said she’d just signed up to run track when the school had to close.

Though her first extracurricular experience “went down the drain immediately,” Fonseca said being at home allowed her to focus more on academics without the usual social distractions. But when she returned to school a year and a half later, in a brand-new building, she said felt a “culture shock.”

“It was like I was doing my freshman year all over again, I had to get used to this brand-new space, and I had to continue to make friends all over again,” Fonseca said. “I had to try to get involved, and so I was trying out different things. I was trying to find what made sense to me. ... It was just like before, but entirely different with the restrictions put in place.”

With just over 200 students in her grade, Fonseca said the students created a tightknit community since returning to school.

Principal Vanessa Puentes saw students in the class of 2023 return to school ready to find their voices and advocate for what they need to feel safe and successful. She said she hopes the students can hold onto these skills to better themselves, their families and their communities.

“It’s really incredible what my students have done since then,” Puentes said. “I have kids that are going to amazing colleges that have bounced back from the pandemic, who are pushing me to really think about what school means for young people.”

Deja Miles is a member of the Englewood STEM High School class of 2023 — the school’s first.

For Miles, the most challenging part of the pandemic was transitioning back to in-person learning.

“We were so used to being at home doing work, being in our own comfort zone, and not being in a context socially with our friends or other students,” she said. “So coming back in contact with them, seeing new students that we didn’t see before, it was a social change.”

Her classmate Ija Lanford said she preferred learning remotely because the instruction felt more personal, and Kamarah McNulty shared that the class of 2023 had to “start over” socially after spending time apart.

Joserik Figueroa-Duran, a senior at Chicago’s Whitney Young Magnet High School, said the early pandemic days felt like “a break from real life” for her. During that time, she said, she spent almost all her time in her room, and her great-grandfather, with whom she was close, died.

“My mental health became so much worse because I felt like I lost such a big part of my life,” Figueroa-Duran said. “And I was just so unmotivated at school.”

After traveling to Mexico to attend the funeral, many family members caught COVID-19, which only added to the stress. Figueroa-Duran said her school counselors were able to help through offering group therapy sessions and by checking in with her over email, and teachers made accommodations to help her finish her classwork during that time.

The pandemic also made it difficult for Figueroa-Duran to plan for a life after high school.

“Throughout the pandemic, I did not know what I wanted to do with my life,” she said. “I really was just thinking, I’m going to graduate school and not do anything afterwards.”



Joserik Figueroa-Duran, left, and her mother, Erika Duran, outside Whitney Young High School on the last day of classes, May 26, 2023, in Chicago's West Loop. (Shanna Madison/Chicago Tribune)

Since childhood, she'd been participating in Young Eagles, a program through which local pilots introduce students to aviation and take them on flights. Those had to stop at the beginning of the pandemic, but when the restrictions were lifted, she once again realized how much she loved airplanes.

"After that, everything in my world just became about airplanes," she said.

She began taking dual enrollment classes in aviation maintenance through Olive-Harvey College during the second semester of her junior year, once she felt mentally prepared to get started. Figueroa-Duran will graduate this month with 15 college credits, having taken classes after school twice a week and every day over the summer. Figueroa-Duran said she's learned the importance of doing something every day to prepare for her future.

During the pandemic, she said, many of her peers struggled emotionally to the extent that they stopped talking to their friends. While she and her

friends made up later, Figueroa-Duran said they were so estranged during the height of COVID-19 that they had no idea the challenges one another experienced.

“I don’t know if they lost a parent or a sibling and it’s just so hard because there’s nobody really wants to talk about that either,” she said.

Figueroa-Duran’s mother, Erika Duran, said she found it difficult to encourage her daughter when she was at home and it felt like the world was ending.

Duran, who works at Whitney Young as a school associate, still sees the effects of COVID-19 and the loss of social, emotional and academic connections the students endured. She also sees the impact of grief on many students who lost loved ones.

“I always tell kids, ‘You’re not alone. You always have someone to talk to here,’” Duran said. “Think about how many people went through what you went through.”