

COVID fears keep many Latino kids out of classrooms

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For the past year, 13-year-old twins Ariel Jr. and Abraham Osorio have logged on to their online classes from their parents' flower shop. Ariel nestles in a corner among flowers, bows and stuffed animals. Abraham

sets up on a small table in the back, where his dad used to work trimming flowers and keeping the books.

It's not ideal for learning: It's loud. It's cramped. It's bustling with people. Still, when the twins' mother, Graciela Osorio, recently had the chance to send her kids back to Brightwood Elementary in Monterey Park, California, she decided against it.

"After what we went through with their father, I'd rather keep them at home where I know they are safe," said Graciela, 51. "There's only a month left. It doesn't make sense that they return for such a short time."

The boys' father, Ariel Osorio Sr., 51, died of COVID-19 in January, four weeks after a trip to Mexico to visit his mother. He fell ill quickly and wasn't able to say goodbye to his children.

"I miss his presence," Abraham said. "I'm used to seeing him sit in his chair working, but not anymore."

Latinos have been hit disproportionately hard by COVID, and many families are opting out of in-person learning.

In California, Latinos make up 39% of the state's population but account for 47% of COVID deaths, according to the state Department of Public Health. Nationally, their risk of death from COVID is 2.3 times higher than that of whites.

Latinos are vulnerable to the highly transmissible coronavirus because they are more likely than non-Hispanic whites to work essential jobs that expose them to the public, said David Hayes-Bautista, a professor of public health and medicine at UCLA and co-author of a January study on this topic. They are more likely to lack health insurance, which may make them less likely to seek medical care, he said. And they are more

likely to live in multigenerational households, which means the virus can spread quickly and easily within families.

"Many of them are essential workers and the breadwinners for their families and don't have the luxury of telework, of physical distancing and self-isolation," said Alberto González, a senior health strategist at UnidosUS, a Latino advocacy group in Washington, D.C.

The Osorio family has lived in a multigenerational household since Ariel died, and Graciela had to keep other family members in mind when deciding whether to send her boys back into the classroom.

In February, Graciela and the twins moved in with her 74-year-old mother, Cleotilde Servin, in East Los Angeles. Ten people now share the roughly 1,000-square-foot home, squeezing by one another in the kitchen every morning.

Graciela's mother and the other adults in the home have been vaccinated, but the children haven't. Even though she instructs her sons to wear their masks and doesn't allow them to visit friends, she's terrified of what could happen if her kids caught the virus at school and brought it home.

"My mother is active and takes vitamins, but it still worries me," Graciela said. She got COVID from her husband and gave it to her sister and niece. "I don't want anyone else to get sick," she said.

State and local education officials don't have recent data on in-person attendance by race, but an EdSource analysis of California Public Health Department data from February shows that [white students](#) were more likely to attend school in person than other students. The analysis showed that 12% of Latinos were attending in-person classes at least some of the time, compared with 32% of whites and 18% of all students.

The Los Angeles Unified School District, the second-largest in the country, serves more than 600,000 students and reopened for in-person learning in mid-April. Only some campuses are open, mostly [elementary schools](#), and are running on hybrid schedules, combining on-campus classes with distance learning.

"We've upgraded the air filtration systems in every classroom, reconfigured school facilities to keep all at a school appropriately distanced, doubled the custodial staff, and we'll provide weekly COVID testing at school for every student and staff member," district superintendent Austin Beutner said in his weekly recorded video update on March 22.

In a statement released May 4, Beutner said 40% to 50% of elementary school students are now back in schools in "more affluent" communities compared with roughly 20% in low-income communities.

"We see the greatest reluctance for children to be back in schools from families who live in some of the highest-needs communities we serve," he said.

Brightwood Elementary is a K-8 school with 870 students, about half of whom are Asian American and 40% Latino, said principal Robby Jung. Just 15% of students are back on campus, he said, and, of those, about one-third are Latino.

For the Osorio family, the overriding reason the eighth grade twins are not back at Brightwood is fear.

Like so many other Latino families—roughly 28,000 Latinos have died of COVID in California—they are reeling from the grief and trauma that the disease has already wrought, and the fear of what it could do if it struck again.

"The boys are seeing a therapist to deal with their dad's death," Graciela said. "I know I should probably talk to someone, too."

With the memory of her husband's death still so fresh that she can't speak of him without crying, Graciela is still adjusting to the emotional toll, and to the day-to-day realities of running a flower shop by herself.

Originally from Guerrero, Mexico, she started Gracy's Flower Shop with her husband in 1997. Ariel took care of the finances at home and at the shop and was the better English speaker of the two.

"Now being alone with the boys, it's more difficult to keep up," she said.

During the COVID lockdowns, the boys joined the couple at the shop. Her husband sat next to their children while they attended school online, helping with their homework and acting as the main contact for the school.

"They were always with us," Graciela said. "They grew up in the flower shop, so they didn't have a problem setting up their school stations there."

Brightwood reopened its doors April 12, offering in-person learning two days a week for a few hours a day, with the rest of the sessions online. Graciela said the limited schedule doesn't work with her role as the family breadwinner.

"I would have to take them to school, pick them up for lunch and then bring them back," she said. "I can't do that. I have to work."

But mostly she's keeping them off campus because she doesn't want to lose another family member. She said she knows online classes aren't the same as in-person instruction "but they have been keeping their grades

up," she said. "I thank God I have good boys. They listen. They understand why I kept them home."

The last day of school is May 28. Ariel and Abraham said they're looking forward to high school in the fall. Still dealing with their father's death, the boys, who are shy and reserved by nature, are torn between returning to [school](#) in person or continuing their classes online.

"We might go back," Abraham said. "For now, we keep each other company."

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