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## OPINION

# Listen to the science and reopen schools

Adding months more to this toll will be an educational disaster that some children may never recover from.

By **Benjamin Sommers, Joseph Allen, Sara Bleich, and Jessica Cohen** Updated July 20, 2020, 3:00 a.m.



A Department of Public Works worker places a closed sign near an entrance to a playground at an elementary school in Walpole in March out of concern about the spread of the coronavirus. STEVEN SENNE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

President Trump recently took to Twitter to demand that the country's schools reopen in the fall. He has framed the conversation as one that pits fear-mongering Democrats opposed to in-person schooling against Republicans committed to reopening the economy. As public health professionals and parents of school-age children, we urge the

country: Ignore Trump.

Instead, listen to the science, which says that schools can — and should — reopen for in-person learning with appropriate risk reduction strategies, while officials also implement aggressive steps to keep community transmission low.

Listen to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), which argued for [focusing on science](#) and not politics in supporting a return to in-person schooling with new investments in safety, describing in-person school as “fundamental” to the well-being of the nation’s children.

Prolonged time away from schools has led to months of [lost learning](#) and [widened gaps](#) in educational achievement, especially for some students of color and those in lower income households. Adding months more to this toll will be an [educational disaster](#) that some children may never recover from. School closures also threaten some children’s [safety](#), due to increased child neglect, hurt children’s [mental health](#), and keep many from getting [enough to eat](#).

The harms of school closure are clear. What about the risks of reopening?

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Multiple [studies](#) show that children are not only [less likely](#) to become seriously ill from COVID-19, they are also only [half as likely](#) to get infected in the first place. Overall, the rate of infection requiring hospitalization among US school-age children (5 to 17) since the beginning of the pandemic though July 4 was roughly [1 in 20,000](#).

What about the risk to teachers and staff? Again, listen to the science. A report led by the former head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention under President Obama [concluded](#) that children appear less likely than adults to transmit COVID-19 to others — unlike other viruses like influenza — though this evidence is still limited and preliminary. Studies examining [schools](#) with known cases of COVID-19 have shown [low](#) transmission rates — for instance, in one case, just two students and no teachers infected out of 863 close contacts. Others show zero confirmed infections even among teachers and students who sat in the [same classroom](#) with a symptomatic child.

Other studies shed light on why childhood infection rates and school-based transmission may be so low. Compared to adults, children have [lower levels](#) of receptors in their airways that allow the coronavirus into our bodies. Children also may not generate as many [breath droplets](#) that can transmit COVID.

Finally, what about impacts on the community as a whole? Studies show that social distancing measures have been critical to flattening the curve of COVID-19 infection, but school closures may be among the least effective of those measures. A [study](#) of county rates of COVID across the United States from earlier this year found “no evidence that school closures influenced the growth rate” in COVID infections, and two [international studies](#) similarly found large reductions in COVID spread from social distancing policies in general, but no significant effect from school closures on their own.

No scenario of in-person schooling is risk-free, and there will be infections. [Israel](#) has had nearly 2,000 student and teacher cases since reopening in May, though notably it reopened schools largely without classroom size limits or social distancing requirements. In contrast, [22 European countries](#) have reopened schools without a rise in COVID-19, and there has been [little](#) school-based spread in Asia.

Unfortunately, little of this evidence is figuring into the current polarized political conversation. But it should.

We are not advocating a return to schools as usual. Schools must aggressively implement proven [risk reduction strategies](#). A layered approach should include rapid testing and contact tracing, physical distancing when possible, mask-wearing with breaks built into the day, frequent hand hygiene, and well-ventilated spaces. Districts should consider adding tents and trailers and converting gyms, cafeteria, and libraries to expand learning spaces. Staggering arrival and dismissal times and prohibiting parents from entering schools will limit one of the highest risks — having large numbers of adults in indoor spaces.

A final critical step to reopening schools is to keep community rates of COVID-19 low. Opening schools is safer and more feasible if we hold back on [higher-risk](#) reopening activities. State leadership is therefore critical, as school districts can't control what happens in bars, gyms, large public gatherings (especially of adults), and other high-risk settings. It reflects poorly on our public priorities that even in Massachusetts, where COVID-19 has been taken quite seriously, it remains unclear if our children will be allowed to return to school, even as adults return — without much debate — to far higher-risk locations like gyms and casinos.

Reopening schools should not be an us-versus-them argument. It's not a Democratic vs. Republican argument. It's about our children and about the evidence. We should be following the science that says in-person schooling for our kids is too valuable to give up and that the risks of school-based transmission appear to be low. We should be investing in adequate testing and tracing resources, making our physical school environments safer, and encouraging a practical balance of social distancing in the classroom with learning and the reality of children's lives.

Ignore Trump. Listen to the evidence. Reopen the schools.

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