

Governments globally reopen schools, ignoring scientists' warnings of coronavirus impact on children

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While scientists insist the world is in the initial stages of the coronavirus pandemic, governments internationally are ending confinement policies and reopening their economies, pushing millions of workers back to their workplaces even as the virus spreads so the flow of corporate profits can resume. A central element of the back-to-work policy is reopening schools and pushing children and teachers back into classrooms.

Governments see reopening schools as essential not only as a symbol of a return to pre-pandemic conditions, but more importantly so that workers who could not otherwise mind their children may be herded back into their workplaces.

In France, the “president of the rich” Emmanuel Macron is opening schools today, beginning with the youngest school-age children—that is, those least able to obey social-distancing instructions, but most in need of child-minding if their parents are to go back to work. He is doing so in direct defiance of the recommendation of France’s Scientific Council, which recommended postponing school openings until September. Schools will shortly reopen or have already reopened in Germany, the United States, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and elsewhere.

This policy is accompanied by a propaganda campaign claiming that (1) the coronavirus poses no significant danger to children, and (2) that children do not catch or transmit the virus, even as asymptomatic carriers. This propaganda aims to deny that school reopenings constitute a major additional transmission mechanism of the virus.

There is no scientific validity to these claims. Governments are selectively citing isolated or

incomplete studies as justification for their economic policy, often contradicting their own scientific advisors, and ignoring considerable evidence of the danger the virus poses to children and the role children play to transmit the virus to more vulnerable layers of the population.

One study, entitled, “Changes in contact patterns shape the dynamics of Covid-19 outbreak in China,” was published last week in the prestigious magazine *Science* on the outbreak in Wuhan. The study used contact behavior surveys of citizens in Wuhan and Shanghai, conducted both before and after the pandemic, to estimate the impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions, particularly school closures, on the spread of the virus. They sought in particular to determine how many people any given patient from various age brackets would infect.

They concluded that a child under 14 was less likely to catch or transmit the disease from any single interaction than someone aged over 65. However, this is counterbalanced by the fact that children at school have interactions with far larger numbers of people. As a result, researchers found that “where school contacts are removed, we estimate a reduction of 42 percent” in the overall spread of the virus. School closings, they conclude, “can achieve a noticeable decrease in infection attack rate and peak incidence, and a delay in the epidemic.”

A second study came from researchers in Germany led by virologist Christian Drosten, whose team at the Charité Hospital in Berlin had by then conducted almost 60,000 coronavirus tests. Drosten published the study’s results on his lab’s own website before it has been peer reviewed because of his belief in the urgency

of the results, which contradict the German government's school reopening policy.

The team analyzed the 3,712 samples from patients carrying the coronavirus, measuring the "viral load" of each sample, that is, the total amount of virus each patient's sample contained. A higher viral load is thought to generally correspond to greater contagiousness of the patient. Their results showed that younger patients did not have smaller viral loads than older patients.

"Analysis of variance of viral loads in patients of different age categories found no significant difference between any pair of age categories including children," they conclude. "In particular, these data indicate that viral loads in the very young do not differ significantly from those of adults. Based on these results, we have to caution against an unlimited re-opening of schools and kindergartens in the present situation. Children may be as infectious as adults."

In addition, the team analyzed a group of samples from asymptomatic children. There too, there was no sign of a decreased viral load. "In this cloud of children, there are these few children that have a virus concentration that is sky-high," Drosten told the *New York Times*.

Researchers at the Pasteur Institute in France also published the results of a study at a high school in the Oise region, a coronavirus cluster, at the end of April. Researchers tested 326 students, parents and teachers at the school, of whom 40.9 percent tested positive for the virus. These included 25.9 percent of all students.

Claims that children who catch the disease are not adversely affected have also been undermined by the discovery of a suspected link between coronavirus and an uptick in cases of a rare syndrome, Kawasaki Disease, among children and infants. At least three children, a five-year-old and seven-year-old in the US, and a 14-year-old in the UK, have died from the syndrome, which can cause severe heart complications including enlarged arteries. While the syndrome appears to be rare, its emergence only highlights the fact that the impact of the coronavirus on children is still not fully understood.

As governments push to re-open schools, they are doing so in defiance of these scientific warnings. Instead, while ignoring scientific results that conflict with their policy, governments pick and choose

"scientific" evidence according to a predetermined political agenda, pointing only to studies that show less conclusive results or suggest a lower danger for children.

In Australia, the government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison has heavily promoted the incomplete results of a study that has yet to be finished, let alone peer-reviewed, into the transmission of the coronavirus in the state of New South Wales. The study, however, covered a period during which schools in the state had partially or fully closed, and when between a third and a quarter of students were not at school. (See: "Australian schools reopening as spearhead of 'back to work' campaign"). The results of the study have also been cited internationally, including in Canada.

While scientists are still struggling to come to grips with the nature of this new disease, reopening the schools at this point flies in the face of powerful scientific warnings that this policy will increase the spread of the disease. What is driving capitalist governments around the world is not a rational and scientific struggle against the pandemic, but the drive of the corporate and financial elite to force a return to work. They are acting with contempt for the lives of hundreds of millions of people who will be affected by a school reopening policy.

As French health minister Olivier Véran admitted in an interview last week arguing for reopening schools across France: "There is the question of whether children are contagious or not." He admitted that there were "arguments both for and against," but then simply asserted that schools "must reopen." This week the French Senate and National Assembly voted to provide enhance legal immunity to employers and government officials whose actions in enforcing the reopening of schools and businesses leads to deaths from the virus.

If the ruling elite feels the need to preemptively vote itself legal immunity as it ends lock-downs, this underscores that it is well aware that its policy is criminal.



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