

Letter from an American teacher: “In a pandemic, no one is safe unless we are all safe.”

29 May 2020

The WSWS Teacher Newsletter has received this letter from a high school AP Biology teacher in the Bay Area, California for publication, opposing the reopening of schools with in-person learning. Originally sent to the superintendents and board members of his and his child's schools, the letter provides an annotated argument that points to the crying need for a massive increase in school funding to address the crisis.

Dear Superintendent and Board Members,

I am a father of a middle school student and a teacher of Biology and AP Biology. Before I was a teacher, I was a scientist at the University of California San Francisco, in the Infectious Diseases Department. For more than a decade I have been teaching my students about Pandemic Preparedness as part of my unit on Human Body Systems and the Immune System. As a result of this curriculum, several of my students expressed to me that they felt less scared and anxious during the **Shelter-in-Place (SIP)** because they had a better scientific understanding of what was happening and how we could protect ourselves.

Please read carefully each of the arguments I lay out below. Any one of them, alone, should be sufficient justification to keep the schools physically closed and continue **Distance Learning (DL)** for the 2020-2021 school year. Contrary to the all the hype and propaganda we are hearing about “safety” and returning to normal, there is no truly safe way to return to school or work while a pandemic is happening.

1. The most significant reason to continue DL is to help prevent this tragedy from becoming much worse. The pandemic is not going to end any time soon. The only way to slow it down or contain it is with continued SIP/DL, combined with universal weekly testing, PLUS contact tracing and quarantining. Anything short of this, we will see surges, like in New York, Italy and Spain, where people died because there weren't enough ICU beds, ventilators or even sufficient doctors and nurses. Unfortunately, we are not seeing these requirements met anywhere in the U.S., including the Bay Area, and we are unlikely to by August.

- A recent study by researchers at the University of Washington predicted there could be 1.2 million U.S. deaths by the end of the year, even if states continued to SIP.

- Without mitigation, this could easily surpass the death and economic devastation of the Spanish Flu, or even the Black Death. Consider that without mitigation, the CDC and WHO predict 60-70% of all humans will catch this disease (that's 196-230 million Americans). At a 3.8% mortality rate, that would be 7.6 million U.S. deaths, more than 10 times that of the Spanish flu, and more than 200 million deaths worldwide.

- Even if only half that number got sick or died, this would still disrupt the production and distribution of food and other basic services because of the lack of sufficient healthy workers, and could result in famine, even here in the U.S. The UN has already warned of multiple famines of biblical proportion in the poorest war-torn nations. What we're

experiencing now would seem like a cakewalk in comparison.

- There have already been surges in many of the states that have relaxed their SIP, including California. In contrast, studies indicate that starting SIP sooner could have reduced mortality by 55%. A study of the Spanish flu pandemic showed that regions with the most aggressive social distancing policies had the fewest deaths and the quickest economic recoveries.

- Therefore, keeping the schools closed not only protects students, staff and their families, it protects the entire community and helps prevent this pandemic from spiraling into a cataclysm.

2. One of the most effective ways to slow down a pandemic is by shutting schools.

- Indoor environments are the riskiest places to be during a pandemic.
- The infection rate indoors is 19 times higher than it is outdoors.
- The longer you spend indoors with people outside your immediate family, the greater the exposure to their germs and the greater your chances of becoming infected. This is true for our students and even more so for our teachers, who will be expected to spend hours inside a potentially infectious room.

- Studies show that Keeping Schools Closed Significantly Reduces Transmission rates.

- This study shows a 40-60% reduction in infections when schools are closed.

- And this one, by pandemic expert Dr. Howard Merkel, shows that closing schools early and keeping them closed is one of the best ways to curtail a pandemic.

- In contrast, if we do reopen the schools in August, we will almost certainly have to close them again well before December, when the 2nd wave hits concurrently with flu season. This would be far more disruptive than simply starting with DL and continuing with it for the duration of the year. As you may have read, they had to close down schools in France only one week after reopening them because of a surge of new infections.

3. It is NOT true that kids don't get this disease.

- Studies show a similar infection rate among kids and adults.

- Thus, even if the kids die at a lower rate, they can still spread it to their older teachers and family members who are at greater risk of severe complications and death.

- Furthermore, young people are still getting acutely ill in significant numbers. 20% of U.S. hospitalizations for Covid-19 have been in people under the age of 44.

- And what about the rare, but frightening Kawasaki-like syndrome? How many kids have to come down with that before a lawsuit bankrupts the school district?

4. Clearly, in-person learning is better than DL. Children benefit from the social interactions with their peers and the one-on-one personal attention from their teachers. However, the way in-person learning will

have to be implemented during the pandemic will undermine many of those benefits. Consider that the main route of transmission is droplets and aerosols that fly out of people's mouths and noses when coughing, sneezing, talking, singing and breathing heavily. All of these activities increase the volume, velocity and distance infectious materials travel in the environment.

- Therefore, we'd have to cancel band and orchestra (where students are blowing heavily into instruments); choir (where students are expelling virions with every syllable sung—remember the choir outbreak in Washington State?); athletics (where students are panting heavily with exertion and are in close contact with teammates and competitors).

- However, even sitting still at a desk will be risky, (less so if it is done in silence), because speaking increases the release of potentially infectious droplets 10-fold. Only 5 minutes of face to face speaking would be enough to infect someone nearby.

- Students will NOT be able to collaborate face to face at tables or lab benches without violating the 6-foot rule.

- Likewise, teachers will not be able to kneel beside students' desks to assist them. K-5 teachers will not be able to hug students who are distraught or hurt.

- Many of the social activities that create and sustain healthy school cultures and children's relationships will not be possible with social distancing (e.g., most sports, band, choir, assemblies, dances, eating together at lunch, giving each other hugs and high-fives).

- And where will the extra staff come from to police students to make sure these things aren't happening outside the classroom, when we are faced with enormous budget cuts?

5. Not all social interactions that happen at school are necessarily healthy and positive.

- Here is an interesting editorial by a teen from NY who loved having her school close and doing DL at home because it allowed her to work at her own pace, at her own hours, and avoid some of the fraught and disruptive interactions that can happen at schools.

- In my own experience this year, I had at least a half-dozen students who had D's or F's prior to March 16 because of absences and failure to make up the assignments. Yet during the SIP, they completed every single assignment and even went back and made up work from earlier in the semester and are now passing. Upon chatting with them, many had similar experiences to the NY teen who wrote the editorial.

6. There are numerous intractable logistical problems with Blended-Learning models where students attend class 2 days a week, with social distancing, and then continue doing DL at home the remaining 3 days a week

- The CDC guidelines for reopening schools state that each cohort of students should remain in the same room with the same teacher all day to reduce social mixing, not switch rooms, like secondary schools traditionally do.

- The CDC says no devices, tools or equipment should be shared, which means 1 chromebook per student (not class sets).

- The CDC says students should eat in their classrooms and not congregate in hallways, cafeterias and yards. Will we hire more security to ensure students aren't congregating?

- Many districts' proposals for blended learning suggest that custodians will disinfect rooms in between classes, but this is not feasible without hiring a lot more custodians. And with the severe budget cuts all districts face due to tax revenues lost because of the pandemic, this is highly unlikely, as they are doing much more firing than hiring.

- If student arrivals and departures are staggered to reduce social mixing, it could add significant time to the school day and seriously delay when classes can actually start.

- The biggest problem is that 48% of all teachers have their own children living at home with them. If all schools move to blended

learning, what happens to those of us with younger children who have to stay home 2-3 days per week for their own schools' DL? Will those teachers have to get substitutes and lose 60% of their income? Or will they have to hire babysitters? It hardly seems fair that teachers be required to work under dangerous conditions in order to provide free babysitting to their communities, while they have to pay for babysitters or childcare out of their own pockets. Clearly, the simplest solution is for all districts to continue with DL for the entire school year.

7. Most back-to-work models include some form of screening at the beginning of the work day. While this was quite effective for SARS, where infectiousness coincided with the onset of symptoms, like fevers, it is virtually useless with Covid-19, where 44% of infections are caused by people who are asymptomatic. It also could give a false sense of security that could lead many people to engage in riskier behaviors and not respect the social distancing and hygiene rules. Also, the CDC recommends creating an isolation room for any suspected cases and a Covid-19 point person at each site who follows and reports on community trends to staff and the authorities. Where will the funding and humans come from for this, particularly if districts are cutting staff and struggling with budget shortfalls?

8. According to Ed Week, one-third of all teachers are at elevated risk for severe covid-19 complications or death due to age and/or underlying health conditions.

- Nearly 30% of all teachers are older than 50, which is a much higher risk group than those under the age of 50.

- Because of the enclosed indoor work environment, and the significantly higher rate of social contacts compared with other adults, teachers are at much greater risk of contracting the disease.

- The virus can remain viable in the air for up to 3 hours, which means that teachers, who must be in their classrooms all day, will have much greater exposure to any germs.

- The CDC says that anyone with an underlying health condition should be allowed to self-identify and be allowed to telework (or continue teaching DL). It would be much easier to implement this if the entire district did DL from the start.

- And where will they find enough substitutes to cover all these sick teachers?

9. The pandemic and the SIP are stressful to everyone, students, teachers, and their families. Right now, everyone needs more free time, not less, in order to manage the increased challenges, stress and time demands of the pandemic, like waiting in long lines to shop, sanitizing homes, spending extra time with children and family members to help calm and soothe them.

- Reconfiguring in-person curriculum and classroom structure to accommodate social distancing could double teachers' workload. However, teachers will be expected to not only reconfigure what they do in the classroom, they will also have to create and assess DL lessons, potentially tripling their workload.

- Considering that most teachers were already working far more than their contractual hours prior to the pandemic (most teachers come in early, stay late, and/or work weekends and holidays), where will all this extra time come from?

- Rather than providing teachers with more time to take care of their families and their own mental health, the Blended Model could cause an epidemic of fatigue, stress, depression and even absenteeism among teaching staff.

10. One final note: Continuing with DL for the entire 2020-2021 school year could save districts a lot of revenue when they are already facing severe budget shortfalls. By keeping schools closed, there would be much lower energy bills; less maintenance costs; and quite likely fewer teachers and staff on the payroll.

In a pandemic, no one is safe unless we are all safe.

In Health and Solidarity,
Michael Dunn



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