

“Zero was never a realistic expectation”

Official academics downplay the risks of school reopenings as pandemic rages across the US

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Last month, the *Atlantic* published an article by Professor Emily Oster, an economist at Brown University, titled “Schools Aren’t Super-Spreaders,” which has since been promoted by multiple media outlets to pressure communities to resume in-person learning in K-12 schools and universities across the United States. The *New York Times* has been early and steadfast in its endorsement of the policy.

In her article, Oster argued that “fear and bad press” led to the slowing down and cancellation of school reopenings in late summer, even in places “with relatively low positivity rates” like “Chicago, L.A., and Houston—all remote, at least so far.” As her article title suggests, Oster seeks to allay these fears by asserting that schools are not super-spreader locations, where one person transmits COVID-19 to multiple others.

In reality, COVID-19 is often transmitted in “super-spreader” fashion because its aerosolized form allows it to linger and concentrate in a closed space, with poorly-ventilated and overcrowded classrooms being highly conducive to this type of spread.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) reported Monday that there were 61,447 new child COVID-19 cases last week, bringing the total in the US to 853,635. This represents 11.1 percent of all US cases, up from 2 percent in April. In October there were nearly 200,000 new cases in children, predominately in Western states such as Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico and Utah. Other states reporting a greater rise among children include the Dakotas, Kentucky, Michigan and Wisconsin, where recent surges have been significant. These rapid rises coincide with the expansion of school reopenings in recent weeks.

The basis of Oster’s data was limited to the last two weeks of September, where she notes that infections in schools were very contained. She writes: “Our data on almost 200,000 kids in 47 states from the last two weeks of September revealed an infection rate of 0.13 percent among students and 0.24 percent among staff. That’s about 1.3 infections over two weeks in a school of 1,000 kids or 2.2 infections over two weeks in a group of 1,000 staff. Even in high-risk areas of the country, the student rates were well under half a percent.”

According to CISION PRWeb, only 38 percent of K-12 school students were attending schools in person on Labor Day. However, by Election Day that figure exceeded 60 percent, with 35.7 percent of schools offering in-person learning every day, 26.5 percent in a hybrid schedule of 2-3 in-person days per week and 37.8 percent of schools only offering virtual learning.

There are more than 53 million K-12 students enrolled in schools in the US, meaning that over 30 million students are attending schools that now offer some form of in-person learning. The Brown University data set represents 200,000 school children during a period of time when schools were largely being conducted remotely and community transmissions were low.

With close to 10 million cases of COVID-19 in the US, the seven-day moving average has climbed from 35,000 at the end of summer to over 85,000 cases per day. Hospitalizations across the US have exceeded 50,000, and the number of daily fatalities is climbing again. Just yesterday the number of new cases exceeded 108,000.

The conclusions reached by Dr. Oster should be treated with the utmost skepticism. The siloed approach of the study is not appropriate for the complex, dynamic disease transmission of COVID-19, which is spreading amid a complete lack of any coordinated governmental effort to locate the contagion at a granular level. The study is analogous to a blurry, static photograph taken from a film reel. However, these are real-life situations with deadly consequences that require the utmost precision and careful analysis.

In her efforts to downplay the impacts of reopening schools, Dr. Oster is joined by her new colleague at Brown University, Dr. Ashish K. Jha. After working with the Harvard Global Health Institute and serving as a frequent guest on cable news programs throughout the pandemic, Dr. Jha was recently appointed the Dean of Brown University’s School of Public Health.

In an interview Monday with *Education Week*, Dr. Jha stated callously: “Obviously, if going back to in-person education was going to lead to a lot of infections and deaths, you’d say OK, that’s a cost we can’t bear. But districts that are being too cautious are doing enormous harm to children and families in their

communities.”

Seemingly oblivious to the deepening surge of COVID-19 cases across the US, Dr. Jha added: “I’m not saying schools should never close. They probably should at some point if things get really horrible.”

Such casual asides by Oster, Jha and their ilk demonstrate deep resentment of and contempt for the working class, including the more than 50 teachers, staff, maintenance workers and students who have perished from COVID-19 since schools began reopening in late July.

The arguments put forward by these upper-middle-class “liberal” academics follow a similar logic to that proposed by the Great Barrington Declaration of “focused protection,” as advocated by Stanford University neuroradiologist and Trump acolyte Dr. Scott Atlas. This variant of herd immunity is intended to ensure that the workforce is fully engaged in producing profits and not parenting.

More principled academics have approached the question of school reopenings with greater concern. Zoe Hyde, a senior research officer at the University of Western Australia, stated recently: “If community transmission rises, then you will see outbreaks in schools. This has become very apparent in Europe as they battle their second wave.” She added, “It’s quite likely we are not spotting a lot of the infections which are occurring in children.”

Kim Powers, an epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina, commented, “While we know we are only seeing part of ‘the iceberg’ of all infections, we don’t exactly know how much of that iceberg we are seeing.”

As part of its homicidal efforts to achieve “herd immunity” through the mass infection of the population, the Trump administration has aggressively pursued school reopenings. Democrats and Republicans at every level continue to support this reckless policy, while the teachers unions have worked with Democrats to promote the fraud that schools can “safely” reopen with a slight increase in funding.

Numerous studies from case reports, modeling analysis and clinical epidemiological research have found that not only are children able to be infected but are a critical component of community transmission. It is precisely for this reason that it becomes necessary for health departments to make all efforts to follow-up and test children in the chains of transmission.

Additionally, it has been recognized that some children can develop severe Kawasaki-like symptoms that can have significant morbidities and even be fatal. More recently, it has been determined that post-viral syndrome, also known as “long-COVID,” impacts a substantial percentage of the population, including children and young adults. Patients can have an assortment of dysautonomia disorders, which can cause their heart rates to race at dangerously high levels. Others suffer from chronic fatigue and poor concentration for several months.

What is required is a comprehensive strategy of public health measures, including scaled testing, a massive investment in contact-tracing resources, and offering isolation and quarantine facilities that can monitor and treat individuals while safeguarding their families and communities’ livelihood.

Stated bluntly, there is no national contact-tracing infrastructure

in the United States. Presently, there are only 53,116 contact tracers in the country, a four-fold increase since April but a far cry short of the more than 100,000 that are recommended. As of October 8, only six states have reached their per capita benchmark: New York, Massachusetts, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Utah, as well as Washington D.C. However, as the surge proceeds, even these limited systems are becoming overwhelmed. It has been estimated that fewer than 5 percent of those infected are traced in time to stop them from transmitting to others.

The continued reopening of schools amid a raging pandemic is unconscionable and will only exacerbate the spread of COVID-19 throughout the US and internationally.

Rank-and-file educators must recognize that they can help bring an end to the pandemic through unifying their efforts against state and federal mandates to resume in-person learning. The official bourgeois academics and health experts, as evidenced by the likes of Oster, Jha and Atlas, place the profit interests of the ruling class above the safety and lives of the working class.

Schools and the children who attend them are society’s most precious resources. Educators play a pivotal role in society as community leaders and stand in a position to sway considerable influence within the broader working class. Only through coordinating their efforts with the working class, in preparations for a general strike movement, will teachers and education workers be able to close schools and ensure that adequate resources are provided for high-quality remote learning and the social needs of working-class families.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* have been at the forefront of the struggle to build independent, rank-and-file safety committees among educators, parents and students in California, Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Tennessee and New York. We have organized online discussions to coordinate these efforts, while publishing numerous articles on the terrible impacts of school reopenings throughout the US and internationally. We urge all those who take science and public health seriously, and who wish to fight for the closure of schools until the pandemic is contained, to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee and contact us today to get involved.



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