

The media falsely claims schools are safe: What the science actually says (Part two)

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This is the second part of a two-part article rebutting a commentary published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Viewpoint, which claims school reopenings are safe. Part One can be read here.

The authors of the JAMA article could have also referenced recent news reports from Austin, Texas, that found positivity rates in schools had climbed over 20 percent. A study conducted by researchers in Michigan and Washington state found that when community infections were low, reopening schools did not seem to make the outbreaks worse. However, when infection rates climbed, schools did contribute to community spread.

A physician and public health professor at George Washington University, Dr. Leana Wen, offered a candid assessment, “So, there are two issues: One is that we don’t have enough contact tracers all across the country. The second problem is that the community prevalence is just so high that it’s going to be very difficult to sort out where the infections are originating from.”

Study of Marine recruits during quarantine

The CDC has acknowledged that most COVID-19 cases are caused by people who are either presymptomatic or asymptomatic but has deliberately failed to connect these findings to the dangers posed by such transmissions in schools.

Part of the answer to this important question was found in a study funded by the US military and published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in December involving Marine recruits during quarantine

A total of 1,848 recruits volunteered to participate in the study. The average age of these recruits was between 18 and 21, which is just older than high school students, making the results relevant to the question of the pandemic’s course in schools.

Before entering boot camp, the recruits quarantined for two weeks at home and then two additional weeks on a closed college campus. This involved wearing masks, socially distancing and undergoing daily monitoring of symptoms that included temperature checks.

The volunteers had SARS-Cov-2 PCR testing conducted within two days of their arrival, and again on day 7 and day 14, their last day of supervised quarantine. In the first two days, 16 recruits tested positive, but only one had developed symptoms. By the end of the second week, 35 more participants were found to be infected. Of the 51 volunteers that tested positive, only five had symptoms in the week

before their test. That means that less than 10 percent of young adults in this well-controlled study presented with any symptoms.

Additionally, no SARS-CoV-2 infections were identified as a result of daily symptom monitoring. These findings have significant relevance to school openings and highlight that even under the best circumstances, identifying cases among young people will be challenging.

Mitigation studies revisited

One essential factor that the Democrats, the CDC and the bourgeois press keep silent on is that school closures are a crucial mitigating measure to aid in curtailing community transmission. Teachers and students must have safe environments to conduct classes without fear of becoming infected. But the principal reason for school closures is to suppress the transmission of the virus to protect health systems and avoid further loss of life and spread of disease among the population as a whole.

President Biden and his nominee for education secretary, Miguel Cardona, have gone on record to say that school closures would not help mitigate the pandemic. But it is precisely here that the CDC and proponents of school reopening have avoided referencing the following studies delineating the public health benefit of closing educational institutions:

? In a JAMA study published last July 29, the authors had found that statewide school closures in the first wave of the pandemic led to a decline in the incidence of COVID-19 of 62 percent per week. Similarly, mortality saw a 58 percent decrease per week. States that closed earlier saw the most significant relative change per week.

? According to a study published in *Science*, looking at various government interventions used against COVID-19, the combination of the closure of schools and universities, limiting gatherings to 10 people or less, and closing most nonessential businesses reduced the reproductive number, R0, to below one. In other words, it led to an overall reduction in the number of infections in the community. Among the interventions listed, school closures and limiting gatherings to 10 people had the highest impact on mitigating the pandemic.

? In a *Nature* study published in November that ranked the effectiveness of worldwide COVID-19 interventions, the cancellation of small gatherings, closure of educational institutions, border restrictions, increased availability of PPE and individual restrictions

were statistically significant in reducing the reproductive number, R0.

? A German discussion paper published last July that evaluated the effectiveness of school closures and other pre-lockdown COVID-19 mitigations across three countries, Argentina, Italy and South Korea, found that early interventions that included school closures reduced the total number of COVID-19 deaths and helped flatten the epidemic curve. The authors write, “Our preferred estimates—those that in the main analysis are obtained with the smallest root mean squared prediction error—indicate that the interventions prevented 84%, 29%, and 91% COVID-19 deaths in Argentina, Italy and South Korea, respectively, in comparison to a counterfactual projection. These results are robust across different specifications and show that the effectiveness increases the earlier interventions are enacted. ... The later schools were closed nationwide during the course of the pandemic, the lower the effectiveness of this measure.”

The argument being put forth by the Biden administration and the Democrats is a deliberately misleading one. When they assert that school closures do little to halt the pandemic, they mean that *without all other aspects of non-pharmaceutical interventions in place*, school closures will do little to control community spread of the virus. The study published in *Science* corroborates that by itself, schools are insufficient to bring the reproductive number under one.

That is not an argument for reopening schools, but for making the closure of schools part of a whole-society effort to control the coronavirus’s spread. The fight to prevent school reopenings must be conducted with the struggle to implement a lockdown of nonessential businesses, with full income support for all the workers and small business owners affected.

Concerns over SARS-CoV-2 variants

The rapid developments of new variants of the coronavirus, such as the B.1.1.7 (also known as the UK variant), circulating widely in the US and many other nations, raises significant new problems for fighting the pandemic. The N501Y mutation in the spike protein of the variants has not only made them more contagious, but it also seems it makes the virus more lethal. There is some evidence that they may also be impacting younger people more severely.

Dr. David Strain, a British physician treating COVID-19 patients and an instructor at the University of Exeter’s medical school, has seen a rise in admissions to hospitals among younger people and women. He found that the average age of admission to the ICUs has declined from December to January.

After many months of genomic stability in the virus, suddenly, three distinct versions of the SARS-CoV-2 virus on three separate continents have independently acquired similar mutations involving their spike protein. According to a new report published in *Wired*, “that pattern is what scientists refer to as ‘convergent evolution,’ and it’s a sign of trouble ahead.” This means that separate SARS-CoV-2 viruses have acquired similar mutations that help them evade the human immune response. Examples of convergent evolution in nature include such concurrent and independent phenomena as the evolution of flight by bats, birds and insects.

Dr. Stephen Goldstein, an evolutionary virologist, explained that the variants becoming more infectious is a real benefit to them, from the standpoint of their survivability. They have arrived at the same

solution to their dilemma at the same time. If random chance created these mutations, it would improve their odds to acquire the ability to invade as many people as possible. However, it appears that there are selective pressures to these mutations which aid the virus to evade a person’s immune system. Vaccines could create these selective pressures as well, but they have been introduced too recently in the course of the pandemic to be the dominant factor presently. (See the link to the study: mRNA vaccine-elicited antibodies to SARS-CoV-2 and circulating variants .)

According to Dr. Goldstein, “The convergent evolution of wilder versions of the virus might just be a consequence of so many poorly managed government pandemic responses, which didn’t marshal sufficient resources or inspire the kind of collective action required to not just crush the initial curve, but keep it crushed.”

However, as the virus runs rampant and governments attempt to vaccinate the population quickly in ways that violate protocols without containing the epidemic and looking to force schools open, the consequences could well be additional “convergent evolutions” that produce an extremely virulent strain of the coronavirus.

This danger was stated most succinctly last week by Dr. Katherine O’Brien, director for Immunizations, Vaccines and Biologicals at the World Health Organization:

“Risk of variants relative to the vaccines is ever greater when the transmission is very high in the communities. Not only because of variants that have occurred but because of the possibility of additional variants emerging under the pressure of vaccines. ... We have these amazing tools, and the urgency is to deploy them. But we risk something about those tools if we are also not suppressing transmission to the maximum degree possible where those tools can be effective is setting when there is limited transmission. ... We have to emphasize about the importance of really crushing transmission now while we are rolling out these new vaccines.”

The ruling classes see school openings as necessary to maximize surplus value extraction out of the population. As Biden’s top economic aide Brian Deese told a Reuters conference last month, “We need to get the schools open so that parents ... can get back to work.” The Biden administration and the Democratic Party, backed by the teachers unions and the Republicans, are playing with fire.

The well-being of the community cannot be left in the hands of any government that places the enrichment of the financial oligarchs over its population’s well-being. The concerns being raised by teachers and workers worldwide are validated by the science that must guide humanity’s struggle to rid itself of an economic system that not only is a dead weight on social progress, but threatens mass extermination on an unprecedented scale. The pandemic is such a scourge, with the contradictions of capitalism blocking a serious, science-driven response that prioritizes saving lives, not corporate profit.



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