

What the science really says: Closing schools is vital to containing COVID-19

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As over 10,000 Chicago teachers and staff are engaged in a struggle to oppose the city's effort to reopen public schools, the entire US media is waging a campaign to pressure educators to resume in-person schooling.

Every major national newspaper in the US, regardless of its political affiliation, has over the past week published statements falsely claiming that schools are safe to reopen. These reports incorrectly assert that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has declared that schools are safe. They slander teachers by claiming that educators' concerns about safety are based on anti-scientific fear-mongering.

The crassest expression of this campaign was Tuesday's editorial in the *Chicago Tribune*, alleging that teachers "ignore science." The article asserted that teachers were falsely claiming "to be a voice for 'the children,'" while "actual science" is "making it harder for teachers unions to continue to justify staying home."

The *Chicago Tribune* editorial echoed the talking points from Friday's editorial in the *Washington Post*, titled, "The covid-19 danger does not lie in the classroom, but in the community."

"Study after study has shown that schools can be safe," wrote David Brooks of the *New York Times*. "A report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention just attested to this fact," Brooks said, declaring the resistance of educators to schools reopening is a "wave of anti-intellectualism sweeping America."

All three of these columns base their assertions on a misrepresentation of an opinion piece published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. None of these editorials and op-eds, which breathlessly declare that the CDC says schools are safe, cite the disclaimer at the bottom of the opinion piece to which they are referring: "The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention."

Even the Biden administration, which is at the forefront of the drive to reopen schools in the United States, felt compelled to distance itself from the media's rampant misuse of the JAMA report and another study published in the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)* journal.

In a press briefing Thursday, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki made clear that these were not official CDC guidelines, adding that "the CDC hasn't issued the formal recommendations or requirements on how all schools across the country can open. They did a report, as they do reports frequently, based on an area in Wisconsin," stressing the report had extremely limited applicability to urban areas such as Chicago.

In reality, the overwhelming preponderance of scientific evidence shows that closing schools, together with other vital social distancing measures, leads to a reduction in the spread of COVID-19.

As documented by whistleblower Rebekah Jones and her team at the *COVID Monitor*, nearly 600,000 students and staff have tested positive for COVID-19 at K-12 institutions throughout the country.

A study published November 19, 2020 in *Nature* found that closing schools is one of the most effective ways to contain COVID-19. The report, "Ranking the effectiveness of worldwide COVID-19 government interventions," noted that "school closures in the United States have been found to reduce COVID-19 incidence and mortality by about 60 percent."

The *Nature* article cited a study in July published by JAMA, "Association Between Statewide School Closure and COVID-19 Incidence and Mortality in the US," which found that "school closure was associated with a significant decline in both incidence of COVID-19... and mortality."

Another recent study published in *Science* magazine

found that limiting social gatherings to 10 people is the most effective method to contain the pandemic, followed closely by closing schools and universities, then by closing “most nonessential businesses.”

A study published this month by Dr. Simona Bignami of Montreal University and Dr. John F. Sandberg of George Washington University found that infections in children age 10 to 19 preceded the increase in cases among adults age 30 to 49. This means that infected children were infecting their parents, not the reverse. “The transmission of COVID among children of school age does not appear to be the consequence, but rather an important determinant of the general level of infection in surrounding communities.”

In the UK, after children were noted to have higher infection rates than adults in December, Prime Minister Boris Johnson had to concede, “The problem is schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission, causing the virus to spread between households.”

After school districts throughout the US reopened in the summer and fall amid widespread community transmission, there was a massive surge in cases that helped drive the US death toll to more than 450,000.

The campaign to reopen schools is all the more criminal now, under conditions where new strains of COVID-19 are taking root in the United States, including some forms that may be more resistant to vaccines.

Speaking on Meet the Press Sunday, the public health and infectious disease expert Michael Osterholm, a former advisor to the Biden transition team, compared the anticipated surge due to these new strains to a category five hurricane. “You and I are sitting on this beach where it’s 70 degrees, perfectly blue skies, gentle breeze,” Osterholm said. “But I see that hurricane five, category five or higher, 450 miles offshore.”

“We are going to see something that we have not seen yet in this country,” he said. “England, for example, is hospitalizing twice as many people as we ever had hospitalized at our highest number.”

“We’re all loosening up right now... We’ve got to turn that ship around too,” Osterholm added. “We’re really good in this country in pumping the brakes after we wrap the car around the tree.”

Despite these stark warnings, the Biden administration is flagrantly disregarding the advice of its own former advisor. It is moving full speed ahead with its efforts to reopen schools, with Biden’s National Economic Council Director Brian Deese declaring, “We need to get the schools open so that parents...can get back to work.”

The unanimity of the media, whether aligned with the Democrats or Republicans, in demanding that teachers abandon remote learning and resume in-person learning shows how critical the reopening drive is to the social interests of the capitalist class. The financial oligarchy has over the past year given itself trillions of dollars in bailout money, helping to fuel a massive stock market bubble.

But this Ponzi scheme—built entirely for the enrichment of the billionaires—cannot keep going without constant infusions of the wealth derived from human labor. This is why all sections of the political establishment are united in the declaration that workers must get back to factories and workplaces teeming with COVID-19.

Teachers who are fighting against an unsafe return to work are acting on behalf not only of their own interests, but of the interests of society as a whole. Any rational social order would shut down schools and nonessential business until the pandemic can be contained through a combination of mass testing, contact tracing and vaccination, while providing full pay for all employees and allocating the social resources necessary to ensure that children can be educated from home.

Parents, members of the community and the working class as a whole should do everything possible to support the stand taken by the Chicago teachers and educators throughout the country. Millions of workers around the US and internationally know that the Chicago teachers are fighting for the entire working class. They need the support of all sections of the working class to continue and expand their struggle.

In opposing the ruling class’s back-to-work campaign, the Chicago teachers are making clear one fundamental truth: the working class stands for saving lives and containing the pandemic, while the capitalist class and capitalism as a whole demand the sacrifice of human lives for profit.



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