

The New York Times' Nicholas Kristof demands immediate reopening of schools

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In a column published Wednesday in the *New York Times* titled, "School Closures Have Failed America's Children," leading Opinion writer Nicholas Kristof deepened the propaganda campaign to reopen schools everywhere in the United States.

Kristof's article is a dishonest and anti-scientific condemnation of the limited school closures that were implemented largely by Democratic politicians in the fall. In line with the Biden administration's demand that the majority of K-8 schools reopen by the end of April, these policies are being reversed everywhere, but evidently not fast enough for Kristof, the *Times*, and their backers on Wall Street.

Best known as the *Times*' leading proponent of "humanitarian" military interventions, Kristof is often tagged to pen columns to justify the crimes of American imperialism. These have included most prominently the neocolonial invasions of Iraq, Libya and Syria during the Bush and Obama administrations, as well as the broader war preparations against both Russia and China. He is a thoroughgoing opportunist, who eagerly serves the interests of the financial oligarchy.

This is his third *Times* column published in the past six months advocating school reopenings, each of which included an endorsement of Trump for spearheading this policy. The reopening of schools is a strategic imperative for the ruling class motivated solely by the need to compel parents to return to unsafe workplaces to produce corporate profits, which Trump expressed most fervently throughout the fall.

In a September 2 article titled, "'Remote learning' is often an oxymoron," Kristof wrote, "I fear that Trump's hyperbolic embrace of reopening schools has led Democrats to be instinctively wary." This was followed by another piece on November 18, 2020 titled, "When Trump Was Right and Many Democrats Wrong," in which Kristof claimed, "Some things are true even though President Trump says them. Trump has been demanding for months that schools reopen, and on that he seems to have been largely right."

In his latest column, he begins, "Flags are flying at half-staff across the United States to commemorate the half-million American lives lost to the coronavirus. But there's another tragedy we haven't adequately confronted: Millions of American school children will soon have missed a year of in-

person instruction, and we may have inflicted permanent damage on some of them, and on our country."

This false equivalency between mass deaths from COVID-19 over the past year and learning losses for children downplays the immense suffering that has befallen the working class and blurs the reality that the entire crisis is a product of the capitalist response to the pandemic.

Kristof complains, "The educational losses are disproportionately the fault of Democratic governors and mayors who too often let schools stay closed even as bars opened."

In denouncing the limited half-measures imposed by Democrats, he fails to ask: What would have been the alternative? If all schools had reopened, there would have been an even greater surge of COVID-19 cases, leading to further suffering and death, thus deepening the social catastrophe of the pandemic. This is the danger now confronting the global population as the Biden administration and governments around the world press to reopen schools.

Kristof cites statistics on the deficiencies of remote learning without explaining their underlying cause in the deliberate sabotage and underfunding of these services by both big business parties. He paints a fairy tale portrait of American schools as nurturing and enlightening places, glossing over the fact that public education has been systematically defunded and hollowed out by both parties for decades.

The entire premise that Kristof and the *Times* care about students is a fraud. Aside from braying for schools to reopen amid a raging pandemic, his previous articles on education fervently backed the right-wing education policies pursued under Obama, including the promotion of charter schools and the mass firings of teachers.

Instead of calling for an improvement in remote learning through the provision of state-of-the-art technologies to every student and the hiring of tens of thousands of teachers, Kristof presents the false conclusion that the only way to address learning loss is by sending kids back into the schools. He asks thoughtlessly, "What are the risks of opening schools?"

In answering this, he invokes the politically motivated guidelines recently released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a limited study from Tulane University,

and a non-peer-reviewed and clearly flawed paper published in the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ). The BMJ paper contains a disclaimer stating that it was “Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed,” and that the lead author, Sarah Lewis, “has campaigned for schools to be reopened during the pandemic.”

Based on these dubious sources, Kristof concludes that “teachers generally don’t seem at greater risk than people in other occupations,” and adds that teachers who want to wait to reopen schools until they and their students are vaccinated are guilty of “an abdication of responsibility to America’s children.”

Contrary to Kristof’s ignorant and biased presentation, numerous peer-reviewed studies have proven that children contract and transmit COVID-19 and that schools are major vectors for the spread of the pandemic. These include the following:

- A study conducted in Montreal published last month found that infections in children between the ages 10 to 19 preceded the increase in cases among adults aged 30 to 49. This means that infected children were infecting their parents, not the reverse.

- A large-scale study which involved the contact tracing of hundreds of thousands of people in India published November 6 in the journal *Science* proved that children spread the virus among themselves and adults.

- A rigorous recent study published in *Science*, which analyzed various government interventions to contain the pandemic in 41 countries, determined that the closure of schools and universities was the second most effective measure after limiting gatherings to 10 people or less.

In addition to these studies, there are the basic facts that over 3.1 million children have tested positive for COVID-19 in the US, while the COVID Monitor has tracked over 650,000 cases among students and staff at K-12 schools across the country.

The present state of the pandemic—in which more infectious, lethal and vaccine-resistant variants of SARS-CoV-2 are spreading largely undetected throughout the US—makes all the more criminal the nostrums of Kristof.

In the same issue of the *Times* in which carried Kristof’s article, the paper also ran an article on a new variant of the virus homegrown in New York City and another which detailed a new study on the impacts of acute COVID-19 and Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C).

The latter article notes that the study, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), “analyzed 1,116 cases of young people who were treated at 66 hospitals in 31 states. ... The researchers found that young people with the inflammatory syndrome were significantly more likely to have had no underlying medical conditions than those with acute

Covid. Still, more than a third of patients with acute Covid had no previous medical condition.”

The study makes clear that the long-term impacts of the virus on children remain unknown. Dr. Adrienne Randolph, the senior author of the study and a pediatric critical care specialist at Boston Children’s Hospital, told the *Times*, “We can’t say 100 percent for sure that everything’s going to be normal long-term” for children infected with the virus.

The purpose of Kristof’s article, which undoubtedly arose out of discussions with the Biden administration and representatives of the ruling class, is to pollute popular consciousness and pressure local Democrats tasked with enforcing the homicidal policy of reopening schools.

Following the deal reached to reopen schools in Chicago, major Democrat-led districts across the country—including in Los Angeles, San Diego, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, San Jose, Seattle, Detroit, Baltimore, Memphis and others—are conducting secret negotiations with local teachers unions to reopen schools as quickly as possible. On Thursday, middle school students returned to classrooms in New York City, the largest school district in the country.

In pressing to reopen schools at the most dangerous phase of the pandemic, Kristof is extending the propaganda campaign initiated by his fellow *Times* reporter Thomas Friedman, who coined the phrase “the cure can’t be worse than the disease.” This became the motto of the Trump administration, which ruthlessly pursued a strategy of developing “herd immunity” without vaccines. In ideologically justifying such policies—which have deepened under Biden—Friedman, Kristof and the *Times* bear enormous responsibility for the devastation wrought by the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, the *World Socialist Web Site* has consistently opposed the ruling class campaign to reopen schools and nonessential workplaces before the pandemic is contained, policies which have been spearheaded by the *Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the rest of the corporate media. We have exposed the politically motivated CDC guidelines, brought forward the most rigorous scientific studies on the pandemic, and advanced a socialist program to guide the working class in its struggle to save lives.



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