

“In the coming months, we’ll be able to count the bodies of the dead”

Bay Area, California teacher raises critical concerns over school reopenings

A letter from a California teacher

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The World Socialist Web Site received the following letter opposing the reopening of schools and the ending of coronavirus mitigation measures across the US. We urge educators, parents and workers to draw the lessons of these urgent warnings. The claim by the Biden administration, alongside the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and other unions that there can be a “safe” return to school is a criminal lie. The reopening of schools must be opposed in a unified movement across the US and globally. Sign up today to get involved!

There have been numerous arguments made over the past year and a half that distance learning during the pandemic has had a devastating effect on children’s mental health and cognitive development. These claims have been used to justify sending kids back to crowded classrooms, in spite of the risk of catching the delta variant and exacerbating the current surge.

These arguments are entirely speculative and difficult to prove precisely because there are so many variables. If we can measure declines in psycho-emotional or cognitive function, how do we know they are due to distance learning, specifically, and not to the stress and anxiety of living during a pandemic? Or the fear and grief of losing loved ones to Covid? Or the stress of parents unable to work or support them as they had in the past? Or the fear and stress caused by the threat of losing their homes? Or a combination of these factors?

However, what is becoming abundantly clear from the scientific data is that people who get infected with Covid, even kids, and even those who are initially asymptomatic, do have a significant risk of developing Long Covid, a condition that includes weeks to months of “brain fog,” lethargy and fatigue, as well as a loss of cognitive function that may persist long term.

Pediatrician Danilo Buonsenso, in Rome, published data in January 2021 suggesting that 33 percent of infected kids developed Long Covid. More recent data, released by the UK Office of National Statistics, found Long Covid occurring in nearly 10 percent of kids aged 2-11, and 13 percent in kids aged 12-16.

This is particularly disturbing in light of the recent study published in *The Lancet* on July 22, 2021, which confirmed that significant numbers of people who had recovered from COVID-19, including those no longer reporting symptoms, exhibited significant cognitive deficits. And these deficits were present in people who had been hospitalized, as well as those with confirmed, but mild cases of Covid-19. In other words, cognitive deficits caused by Covid can persist into the recovery phase, regardless of how sick you initially were.

In the context of in-person learning, these data require us to rethink the claim that distance learning is worse than in-person learning for children’s mental health and cognitive development.

If 10-33 percent of kids who catch Covid are developing Long Covid and long-term or permanent cognitive impairment, then in-person learning is significantly increasing that risk. And our attempts to normalize life for children, and to provide the quality education we believe is more effectively delivered live, may be having the opposite effect by increasing their risk of catching Covid and developing long-term cognitive impairment.

But are we really significantly increasing that risk? What about vaccinated kids? What about all the mitigation efforts we’re doing, like requiring masks in the classrooms? Shouldn’t that reduce the risk of infection and, therefore, the risk of Long Covid down to close to 0?

It is safe to assume that not all our students will catch Covid at school, let alone develop cognitive impairment.

Probably not even the majority. But let's also be realistic. Even in California, where kids are supposed to be masked inside classrooms, students will be unmasked outside, especially when eating. The schools will also be at full capacity, so distancing at lunch will be minimal to nonexistent. Many, if not most, kids will wear cloth masks, which provide only around 30 minutes of protection indoors (compared with N95 and KN95 masks, which provide hours of protection). Additionally, many kids will not wear them correctly. Some will slip. Kids will rub their eyes. Many teachers will allow, or not notice, when kids pull them down inside the classroom to drink water.

And, with all these inadequacies of masking, the kids will be sitting elbow to elbow, less than 3 feet apart, breathing in each other's germs for 7 hours per day.

At the same time, the delta variant has been surging. In San Francisco and San Diego Counties, which have some of the highest vaccination rates in the world, with over 70 percent of their populations having had at least 1 dose, there are currently over 30 new infections per 100,000 residents per day. This places them solidly in the most restrictive Purple category of the old color coding system. And this high infection rate reflects both the delta variant's high transmissibility, and the fact that the vaccine provides only partial protection against delta infection.

But they say kids don't catch it as much as adults.

That myth was debunked a year ago. Hundreds of thousands of kids have caught Covid. Over 45,000 children have been hospitalized with it since this time last year, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And nearly half of the children hospitalized with Covid-19 had no known underlying condition, according to CDC data.

Over the past week, alone, an average of 192 children with Covid-19 were admitted to US hospitals every day—a 45.7 percent increase from the previous week. There were 71,726 new pediatric Covid cases from July 22-29, nearly double the 39,000 new juvenile cases reported the week prior. And kids are dying, too. Maybe not at the rate of older adults, but at rates far higher than normal. Indeed, the number of Covid-19 deaths among children is more than twice the number of pediatric flu deaths reported by the CDC between 2019-2020, among the worst flu seasons since 2010.

But they say that vaccinated people get milder symptoms? Doesn't that protect our students?

Yes, on average, vaccinated people tend to get milder symptoms. Yet close to 1 percent of the people currently dying of Covid were fully vaccinated. So, the risk of death is still there and still higher than normal. And, more to the point of cognition, the *Lancet* study found that even mild and asymptomatic infections can cause Long Covid and

cognitive impairment.

Consequently, we could end up in a situation where dozens of kids catch Covid at our schools and maybe we get lucky, and none are hospitalized or die. But if 10-33 percent of those infected are developing Long Covid, regardless of the severity of their initial symptoms, we could be looking at a lot of kids who can't come back to school because of the fatigue and brain fog, or who are no longer able to do their schoolwork because of the cognitive impairment caused by the virus.

I know there are a lot of experts, including the CDC, saying that kids must be in school, that it's "safe" to be in school. But by "safe" they mean there will still be casualties, and lots of them. There will be more children who die, who develop MIS-C, who are hospitalized and who develop Long Covid and/or cognitive impairments that undermine their current, and possibly future, academic success.

As the delta surge worsens, which it is predicted to do, the number of these juvenile casualties will also grow. Maybe some schools will dodge a bullet and have no major outbreaks. Many will not. Delta is as infectious as chickenpox. Our classrooms will be packed. We'll be doing far less to control movement and behavior outside the classrooms than we did before and many schools aren't even enforcing masks.

And the vaccine is significantly less effective against Delta than previous strains. Consequently, even some of those teens and adults who've been vaccinated will likely get infected this time around. And lots of kids under 12 will, since they are unlikely to get vaccinated before 2022.

So, we forge ahead in this grand experiment, to determine if live, in-person school actually is better for kids' mental and cognitive development. In the coming months, we'll be able to count the bodies of the dead, the number of people hospitalized, the number of kids developing Long Covid, even measure changes in their IQ.

Of course, our leaders aren't being honest with us when they say it's safe, because they know many kids and adults will catch Covid at school. And they won't call it an experiment, either, even though they will collect and analyze the data, because all experiments with human subjects require approval from an Institutional Review Board, as well as the informed consent of participants. And few teachers, children or parents have been fully informed. And none has provided signed consent.



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