US epidemiologist Michael Osterholm warns of impending catastrophe as children are sent into unsafe schools

Benjamin Mateus
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Amid the rising tide of infections across the United States, dominated by the highly transmissible Delta variant, Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) at the University of Minnesota, provided sobering remarks on the state of the pandemic on Sunday.

Osterholm was interviewed on NBC's "Meet the Press" program. In response to a question from host Chuck Todd about the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) guidance for children under the age of 12, in light of rapidly rising infections and hospitalizations in this group, Osterholm stated, "I do believe we need to rethink it… The data we have used to come up with recommendations for opening our schools is really from pre-Alpha. This [Delta variant] is a different virus in the sense it's much more infectious."

Osterholm noted that though 50 percent of the country is fully vaccinated, 90 million people who could have received the vaccine remain unvaccinated, indicating that a substantial number of people remain vulnerable to the full impact of the virus. Add to this the fact that 48 million US children under the age of 12 are not eligible for the COVID-19 vaccines and you have a situation where the virus has free rein to infect a large swath of the population and ample opportunities to mutate.

He explained that, unlike with previous variants, many infected people have acquired the Delta variant during outdoor activities. He said, "I would… point out the other thing that helps you understand the infectiousness of this virus is the fact that we're now seeing more and more events with outdoor air. You know, months ago we were saying if you're outdoors, you're pretty safe. We have had a number of events happening where, in fact, people crowded together outdoors get infected.

"Now, if that's happening outdoors, imagine what happens to our kids when they're closely together in schools… At this point, we need to put everything we can towards controlling this virus."

Over the weekend, officials in Lancaster County, South Carolina confirmed that a 16-year-old had died from COVID-19. This tragedy came on the heels of the largest school district in the state pausing in-person school just nine days after the beginning of the school year, due to several staff members and a student requiring hospitalization for COVID-19. Currently, 142 students in the district have tested positive for the coronavirus. The previous peak was 85, in January 2021.

Ware County, Georgia school district officials told the press that they had closed 11 of their schools for at least two weeks after an outbreak of COVID-19 tore through their campuses. A total of 76 students tested positive, while 679 were placed in quarantine for possible exposure. At least 67 staff had also tested positive, and another 150 were, likewise, in quarantine. Those infected or in quarantine account for 13 percent of the student body and 23 percent of the faculty. The closures came less than two weeks after school opened on August 4.

Dr. Osterholm noted that an important issue is the quality of the masks that are being used. In addition to non-compliance with masking, the use of relatively ineffective cloth masks to combat a virus that is spread through the air is extremely problematic. "We've not paid any attention really to giving the public the message that you need much more effective masking," he said, "such as the N95 mask that we talk about or the KN95 for kids."

Yet many state officials are fighting to ban even the limited protections such measures could offer. The situation in Texas is perhaps most emblematic of these dangers. Texas Republican Governor Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton are at war with municipal governments in several big metropolitan areas, which are resisting their efforts to ban mask mandates. Meanwhile, Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins issued a dire warning over the weekend that there were "zero ICU beds left for children."

"That means," he said, "if your child is in a car wreck, if your child has a congenital heart defect or something and needs an ICU bed, or more likely, if they have COVID and need an ICU bed, we don't have one. Your child will wait for another child to die. Your child will just not get on the ventilator, your child will be CareFlighted to Temple or Oklahoma City, or wherever we can find them a bed, but they won't be getting one here unless one clears."

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In his opening remarks, Osterholm provided important insights into the ominous state of the pandemic, which compounds the dangers involved in reopening the schools. He explained, “When you look inside this wave, it’s actually a series of different events going on. First of all, we have the southern Sun Belt states that we all know are basically at really dramatic case increases. If you look at the state of Louisiana right now, they’re tied with the country of Georgia for the highest rate of infections in the world.”

He continued, “But what we’re seeing happen right now is, while those states are starting to level off a bit, we’re now seeing in the southeast—Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, southern Illinois—all start to take off. We’re seeing it in the northwest states like Oregon and Washington. We’re even seeing in the Midwest increases.”

He pointed out that the dramatic increase in COVID-19 hospitalizations nationwide to 83,000 today, driven mainly by the southern Sun Belt states, compares to some 25,000 a month ago. “It gives you a sense of what’s happened just in the last month. And if these other states take off, then the surge could sustain itself for at least another four to six weeks.”

The CDC recently reported that the Delta variant now accounts for more than 97 percent of all infections throughout the country. In contrast, the Alpha and Gamma variants have all but disappeared, highlighting the aggressive nature of this new strain, which has displaced all other versions of the virus in three short months.

According to the *New York Times* COVID tracker, the average number of daily new cases has reached nearly 130,000, a 65 percent increase from two weeks ago. Deaths from COVID-19, which lags infections, have reached an average of 655 per day (more than 4,500 per week), an increase of 113 percent from two weeks prior.

Children are being hospitalized across the country at higher rates than ever before and with more severe illnesses. Linda Young, a seasoned respiratory therapist with 37 years of experience, told the *Washington Post*, “I have never seen anything like this!” Even young, healthy children without any underlying conditions are falling ill. Child hospitalization rates are soaring, having exceeded the winter peaks by more than 20 percent and climbing.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, which has been consistently providing critical updates, noted approximately 12,000 COVID-19 cases in the US in the first week of July among children 17 years old or younger. That number climbed to 96,000 in the first week of August, an eight-fold increase. These cases represent 15 percent of all new infections, which implies that children are becoming a larger share of all COVID-19 cases than at any previous time during the pandemic.

On Saturday, the number of children hospitalized for COVID-19 in the country reached a new high of more than 1,900. Additionally, in the first week of August, 310 children were admitted, a rate of 44 per day. Now, with many more schools being readied to accept students, the lives of children, their families and communities will be dramatically and tragically impacted. This includes the health care sector, which is once more facing a surge of cases that is driving hospital bed occupancy to overcapacity.

Osterholm’s assessment has significant implications as state after state prepares to resume in-class instructions, regardless of these rising trajectories. Throughout the pandemic, politicians and state and local officials have attempted to dismiss the role children have played in perpetuating the pandemic, while downplaying the infection’s impact on children. These assertions are no longer sustainable, but that has not halted the reckless and criminal drive to reopen the schools.

Dr. Osterholm stopped short of calling for workplace lockdowns and school closures, as he previously did during the winter surge. Still, his warnings paint a bleak picture of events for the next few months if such measures are not quickly adopted and implemented. His assessment provides a clear but stark warning about what must be done to avert the impending disaster.

Under these conditions, the insistence of the teachers’ unions on reopening the schools is nothing short of criminal. Both American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and National Education Association President Becky Pringle have in recent days reiterated their demand that educators, other school workers and students be herded into unsafe schools so that their parents can return to unsafe jobs to resume pumping out profits for the corporate elite.

Not even the lives of defenseless children are to be spared in the mania to keep stock prices rising and ruling class wealth increasing. And the so-called “unions” serve as the enforcers of this policy of social murder.

This policy of mass death must be stopped! The Socialist Equality Party calls on educators, parents and all workers to form rank-and-file committees to coordinate a national and international struggle to stop the reopening of the schools, provide full income support to all workers impacted, and demand full funding for remote learning until the pandemic is contained.

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