

No, colleges and universities are not safe to reopen for in-person learning

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On Wednesday, the *Atlantic* published an article by Professor Emily Oster, an economist at Brown University, titled, “Universities Need to Catch Up to the Post-vaccine Reality.” Oster argues that the recent decision by a number of colleges and universities to temporarily return to virtual learning in the face of skyrocketing COVID-19 cases is a mistake.

Oster makes three deceitful arguments: 1) Students are not themselves at risk of illness; 2) Campuses will not lead to community spread of the virus; and 3) campuses must be opened to protect students’ mental health.

Oster’s arguments are not based on science or experience. They are made on behalf of the political establishment and with no regard for the lives and livelihoods of the students she claims to care for.

The reality must be stated clearly: No, colleges and universities are not safe from COVID-19, especially as the vaccine resistant Omicron variant has taken its place as the dominant strain throughout the country.

Young people are in no way immune from infection and death, and, if infected with the virus, will spread it to all those with whom they come into contact. While mental health issues are an important concern, Oster, following the lead of the entire political establishment, has weaponized the severe mental health crisis among young people to justify the intentional infection of the population with the virus.

The arguments made in Oster’s article are reflective of the entire strategy of the Biden administration and worth answering in some detail. But let us first address the question: Who is Emily Oster?

Ivy League Democratic Party operatives fight for a policy of mass death

Oster is a well-seasoned “official” Democratic Party academic operative who has been tapped throughout the pandemic to advocate for the unsafe reopening of schools. In 2020, she authored a number of articles where she argued that schools were not significant spreaders of Covid-19.

Among these articles are two for the *Atlantic* titled “Schools Aren’t Super-Spreaders” and “Go Ahead, Plan a Family Vacation with Your Unvaccinated Kids.” Another notable piece by Oster was published in the *Clinical Infectious Diseases Journal* titled “Effectiveness of three versus six feet of physical distancing for controlling the spread of COVID-19 among primary and secondary students and staff.” This latter “study” published March 10, 2021 was picked up by the CDC and used as its primary evidence for changing social distancing guidelines.

Remarkably, Oster has no background in public health, biology, or any other field related to the science of the pandemic. She holds a PhD from Harvard in economics, is currently a professor at Brown University and has authored books on pregnancy and parenting. She has no expertise or authority in the field in which she is meddling.

The data she uses to back her arguments for keeping schools open

are riddled with errors at best, and are purposefully skewed and distorted at worst.

In August of 2020, for example, Oster claimed she had created a database of COVID-19 infections in schools that showed that just 0.23 percent of students and 0.49 percent of teachers had become infected, making her case that schools are not “super spreader events.”

However, this information was derived from just 550 public and private schools, and over 200 of them were fully remote during the time the data was collected! Additionally, the most populated schools from urban areas where there have been the largest outbreaks were excluded.

In the “three versus six feet” article, similar errors were made to claim that a three- or six-foot social distancing guideline made little difference in transmission and could be abandoned. Most notable was that the study only compared schools that had differing official guidelines without actually investigating if they followed those guidelines.

In other words, the study contains no actual science or experiments to test the different social distancing methods. The actual science of COVID-19 has shown that the virus is airborne, meaning that even six feet of social distancing is not sufficient to stop its spread.

In short, Emily Oster is not an expert on the pandemic or school safety in any sense. She is a mouthpiece for the ruling class in its aggressive drive to reopen schools to keep parents at work and the economy afloat. Her concerns are not the health and wellbeing of students and families but the profit demands of Wall Street.

Are school classrooms safe for in person learning?

There is no way to evaluate the current pandemic conditions and conclude that schools, including colleges and universities, are safe to reopen without engaging in an immense level of self-deception or false arguments. For Oster, it appears to be the latter.

Oster writes in her article that “the world has changed” since the pandemic began, and yet, “the rise of the Omicron variant and the ensuing spike in COVID cases have led many university administrators to articulate the same old concerns: Students could possibly spread the virus to community members, who could in turn end up in hospitals, which could be overwhelmed.”

She continues: “Such a chain reaction is of course possible, but the probabilities are not what they used to be, because the great majority of students are now vaccinated and *the percentage of people in the surrounding communities who are at risk of landing in the hospital is much, much smaller than it used to be.*” [emphasis added]

Students “could” infect others, and the hospitals “could” become

overwhelmed, Oster skeptically suggests. Is this not the very situation taking place in towns and cities across the country right now?

It is false to suggest that the percentage of people who are at risk of landing in the hospital is smaller than it used to be. In fact, hospitalizations among 18–29 year olds is at a record high since the start of the pandemic, standing at a seven-day average of 1,433 new patients per day. For those aged 30–39, the average is 1,532 hospital admissions per day, also a record high.

Child hospitalizations are also at their highest point ever, at 766 per day. Lurie Children’s hospital in Chicago reported Thursday that child hospitalizations have increased 10 times compared to the number of admissions at the end of November.

Across the country, one in five hospitals reporting to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) noted that their ICUs were above 95 percent capacity. Don Williamson, president of the Alabama Hospital Association, told CBS 42, “I’m worried now! That’s right now where my main concern lies. You know, we may have beds, but we don’t have anybody to staff the beds.”

Hospitalizations have increased 161 percent in the last 10 days across the state.

Patricia Maysent, chief executive officer of University of California San Diego Health, told the *San Diego Union-Tribune* that the university system had more than 500 health care workers test positive over the last week, forcing some of their departments to operate at half capacity. “This is the first time,” she said, “from the very beginning of the COVID pandemic, that I’m actually worried that we don’t have enough staff to take care of the patients.”

On Thursday, Beaumont Health, one of the largest hospital systems in Michigan, with nine hospitals in the Detroit area, reported that 430 employees had COVID-19 symptoms in a notice sent to the public headlined, “We’re at a breaking point.” The notice said that hospitalizations have increased 40 percent in the last week.

It is in this context, in which nurses and doctors around the country are at a breaking point, that Ms. Oster insists that closing the schools “reflects an outmoded level of caution.”

She goes on to claim that, in fact, closing colleges expresses a “failure of universities to protect their students’ interests.” The natural question to ask from such a statement is what are students’ interests and how are they best protected?

Oster’s only answer to this question is to point to the youth mental health crisis. Her claim is that the closing of schools and a temporary shift to online learning has too great an impact on students’ mental health, and schools therefore must remain open at all costs.

The weaponization of the youth mental health crisis

Oster writes, “Moving to remote schooling when the conditions on the ground have changed so dramatically is an abdication of universities’ responsibility to educate students and protect *all* aspects of their health. College students are in the midst of a mental-health crisis.”

There is no question that mental health issues affect an alarming number of young people. But the arguments made by Oster do not in fact have students’ interests in mind to the slightest degree.

While it is true that mental health issues have been accelerated by that pandemic, alongside all other social crises, it is not their root cause. Oster and those she speaks for never made the slightest noise about mental health issues until it became a convenient cover to justify the unsafe reopening of schools.

Students do indeed need immediate access to mental health treatment and services. But deteriorating mental health is only the symptom of a much deeper problem.

The situation facing the average American student even before the pandemic is a distressing one. Many young people find themselves stressed to the point of exhaustion, balancing studies while also working to make ends meet. Those who live on their campuses and in the university dorm rooms must deal with poverty-like conditions with crumbling facilities and unhealthy food.

Most students will come out of school saddled with thousands, tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt and few quality jobs to repay their loans. For many young people, a trip to the emergency room or even an unexpected car repair is enough to entirely cripple them financially.

The pandemic has undoubtedly added significantly to these issues with an abrupt shift to online learning certainly being a challenge. But how are these issues to be resolved? Are we to be expected to believe that, by keeping campuses open, students will have forgotten all these other inescapable problems?

Oster has nothing to say about the real difficulties and challenges students and youth face living under capitalism. For Oster and people in her privileged middle-class layer, the pandemic has been merely an inconvenience where their routines have been disrupted by lockdowns or mitigation efforts. Their solution: pretend like nothing is happening, return to classes, and resume business as usual.

Students need relief from their crushing debt and access to health care and resources, so that they no longer need to rely on food pantries and other charities to survive. Students need the ability to study and learn without the concern that they might become infected or infect their parents and loved ones with COVID-19.

If mental health is the concern, the situation currently underway in high schools and colleges that have opened can only deepen them. In recent days, students have flooded social media with reports of schools practically devoid of teachers who are all sick. Students are testing themselves for COVID-19 in bathrooms followed by a panic as they are left to figure out how to appropriately respond. How is forcing students into this kind of environment supposed to relieve their anxiety?

There will be no resolution to the mental health crisis as long as the pandemic rages on. And to defeat the pandemic requires the intervention of the working class, which is already under way.

Thousands of teachers and students are in the midst of a struggle against reopening, fearing for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Teachers in Chicago have bravely voted not to return to in-person learning amid record-breaking case numbers, with graduate students at the University of Michigan, teachers in San Francisco, and other major cities following closely behind them. There is growing anger and outrage among broader layers of the working class over being forced to continue to work in factories and workplaces that are centers of COVID transmission.

The working class is the social force that must be mobilized. To defend students is to protect them from infection from COVID-19 and fight for an international program to eliminate the virus once and for all.



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