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What It Would Take to Safely Reopen Schools

Experts fear that without proper funding or precautions, schools will remain ill-equipped to safely reopen to students



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If schools reopen this fall, health experts say there will almost surely be fresh outbreaks of Covid-19 among children and school staff, who will in turn spread the virus to their family and members of their community. Doubts that classrooms may

soon accept students once again are mounting almost as fast as coronavirus infections — Harvard University on Monday became the latest institution to announce that all courses for the upcoming academic year will be carried out online. But doing the same for K-12 schools, keeping children at home, would be hugely detrimental to the well-being of the kids, their parents, and the overall economy, with women, people of color, and lower-income populations hit the hardest.

While many other nations did their homework on pandemic response and corralled their outbreaks, the United States missed the bus, according to infectious-disease researchers and other health experts. Many have watched with frustration and disbelief as the federal government and many states squandered the lockdowns by reopening too fully and too quickly and allowing the coronavirus to roar back.

Anne Schuchat, MD, principal deputy director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told *The Journal of the American Medical Association* last week that the recent approach to the pandemic included “a lot of wishful thinking around the country.” New cases of the disease are now rising in most states and spiking out of control in several, and efforts to control the wildfire-like spread are literally starting over — but with the virus now far more pervasive than when schools shut down in the first place.

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With the first school bells set to ring in just six weeks in some states, two huge questions remain: Can the country rein in the pandemic enough to accept the risks of opening schools? And with the costs of reopening estimated to be well over \$100 billion, for everything from hand sanitizer and masks to additional teachers and nurses, where will the money come from? For now, experts do not seem very optimistic.

“It is highly unlikely community spread will be low enough to reopen schools while still minimizing risk to the children and their more vulnerable contacts,” said Mark Cameron, PhD, an immunologist and medical researcher in the School of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio. “Rather, most of the U.S. will be facing the

exact same, if not worse, metrics compared to when they made their decisions” to close schools in the spring.

The necessary changes will also likely have a heavy toll on already cash-strapped school systems. Every state but Vermont has laws requiring balanced budgets in light of the pandemic. As tax revenues plummet with the economy, many states have already been forced to make severe budget cuts, with more expected and, so far, very little commitment of help from the federal government.

“This is a five-alarm fire,” Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said in a statement last month pleading for federal help. “If schools can’t get the money they need to safely reopen, then they won’t reopen, period.”

Grave consequences to closures

If states or districts opt not to open classrooms, education will suffer. Online learning has shown to be less effective, fostering higher dropout rates and setting kids up for a lifetime of reduced opportunities and less income.

The downsides to shuttered schools go far beyond the classroom. It would be crushing for families that can’t afford childcare, particularly among lower income and minority communities, coming at a time when women are unevenly shouldering parenting responsibilities. Millions of children would be robbed of socialization and a much-needed safe environment, as well as basic nutrition. The subsequent economic effects would also add to the already grim situation: If kids can’t go to school, a lot of people can’t go to work.

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What's needed is a shift in priorities regarding what to open and what to close, rather than the all-open or all-closed approaches taken so far, argue epidemiologists Helen Jenkins and William Hanage in *The Washington Post*.

“The benefits to society of schools being open... are greater than the benefits from opening most other institutions,” they write, questioning the wisdom of opening lower-priority places, like bars, casinos, and indoor restaurants.

Yet that's exactly what happened in recent weeks, causing a surge of infections among younger people, which scientists say will only further worsen the pandemic by putting all age groups at greater risk of contracting the disease.

“Large crowds indoors, including in bars, are driving spread in many places,” Tom Frieden, MD, former director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said on Twitter. “Opening while cases are increasing is like leaning into a left hook. You're basically asking to get hit — and that's what these states did. It's getting worse, not better.”

Concerns for students, teachers, staff

If schools do open amid fears over infections, they may struggle to staff up and even to attract students. A survey by *USA Today* and Ipsos, done in May, found one in five teachers unlikely to return if classrooms open in the fall, and six in 10 parents said they would likely pursue at-home learning for their kids.

“Pretend our vastly underpaid teachers are fine reopening schools (many aren't),” Matthew Fox, a professor of epidemiology and global health at Boston University, tweeted last week. “What's the plan for when they get sick? How will we ensure they get appropriate care? How can schools be open with sick teachers?”

One argument for opening schools is that children and teens seem to be less susceptible to Covid-19 infections and ill effects, compared to adults. But there has been very little research on this.

“Age disparities in observed cases could be explained by children having lower susceptibility to infection, lower propensity to show clinical symptoms or both,” scientists wrote recently in the journal *Nature Medicine*.

Some preliminary research also suggests there might be fewer infections and less transmission among younger school children compared with adolescents and high schoolers. That could inform different approaches to reopening and online options based on grade level, Barry Bloom, a professor of public health at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, told a group of reporters last week.

“As a proponent for in-person school, one piece of the U.S. conversation that feels missing is the idea of phasing in different ages,” Elliot Haspel, author of *Crawling Behind: America’s Childcare Crisis and How to Fix It* and a former elementary school teacher, tweeted last week. “Almost every other nation started with younger kids (pre-K and elementary), and saw how that went and learned lessons before bringing back secondary.”

While there have been few Covid-19 deaths among children, they are susceptible to severe illness and some have died.

“The idea that Covid-19 is sparing of young people is just false,” Lawrence Kleinman, MD, a professor and children’s health expert at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, said in a statement in May. “While children are more likely to get very sick if they have other chronic conditions, including obesity, it is important to note that children without chronic illness are also at risk.”

Truth is, we still don’t know the degree to which children catch, carry, and pass along the coronavirus, or how severely they react, in part because kids have been largely cocooned at home for much of the pandemic, writes Helen Branswell for *Statnews*, adding: “In reality, it may take reopening schools and returning children to a closer-to-normal life for the picture to come into clearer focus.”

What schools should do (and parents should know)

Joseph Allen, assistant professor of exposure assessment science at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and an expert on how to make buildings healthy, is optimistic schools can reopen safely. “The cost of closing schools is too great,” Allen told a group of reporters recently.

Based on a report by Allen and colleagues detailing how to make school buildings safe, along with recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics and other

experts, here are just some of the basic advance efforts and subsequent protocols schools should consider:

- Increase ventilation in classrooms and upgrade AC filters.
- Purchase portable air purifiers for poorly ventilated rooms.
- Install plexiglass shields at reception desks and cafeterias.
- Add buses to limit the number of kids in each bus.
- Purchase fogging machines to disinfect buses.
- Hire additional nurses, cleaning staff, and other aides.
- Provide and require masks and hand sanitizer, and require frequent hand-washing.
- Test for the virus, trace contacts, and ensure sick kids stay home.
- Provide remote learning for high-risk students, and staff that effort so teachers are not forced to manage both remote and in-class learning.

The CDC also offers guidelines for school reopenings, stressing “the more people a student or staff member interacts with, and the longer that interaction, the higher the risk of Covid-19 spread.” The guidelines touch on everything from food service (best if kids bring their own) to field trips (try virtual), plus accommodations for staff and students who are at greatest risk of complications from the disease. Notably, the CDC suggests testing focus on those with symptoms or who may have had exposure, rather than universal testing.

Allen thinks that with good compliance on prevention, even if not perfect, explosive outbreaks can be controlled. “Would I let my kids go back to school in the fall? The answer is yes.”

In a special report, the editors of *Education Week* outlined what K-12 classrooms may look like. Schools might start in-class instruction for just one or two grade levels, phasing others in based on how things go. Students could be divided into groups, with staggered schedules based on different hours or days. In class, much will change beyond just moving desks six feet apart. Students will likely stay in bubbles, perhaps in small groups or single classrooms. They will likely face limited opportunities to socialize and see common areas closed. And say goodbye to lockers or sharing crayons and other supplies.

“The close, in-person collaboration of students on classroom projects, for example, will have to cease for now,” the *Education Week* editors write. “And classes like art, music, and physical education — a critical part of keeping students engaged in school — will need to be severely restricted.”

Allen suggests parents do three things:

- Study up on the recommendations for how schools should prepare, then ask your school officials if those things are being done.
- When the time comes, tell your kids to wear their mask, wash their hands before and after every class, and follow the rules set by teachers.
- Importantly, model this behavior starting now, if you expect your kids to do the right thing.

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Federal funds needed urgently

The American Federation of Teachers estimates the funds needed from the federal government to prepare for safe reopenings: \$1.2 million *per school*, on average, or \$2,300 per student. That adds up to \$117 billion total for pre-K-12 schools nationwide. The Council of Chief State School Officers, meanwhile, estimates safe reopenings of K-12 schools will require far more federal funding, between \$158 billion and \$245 billion.

Governors will make the decisions about if and when public schools reopen. But for many school districts, those added costs will look like a moon shot amid already limited school funding and newly slashed state budgets. Most schools rely on state funding, now more than in the past, and states rely on sales tax and other revenues that have tumbled with the economy.

Officials at districts and schools will be left with the “impossible equation” of opening safely without adequate funding, Nicole Gaudiano and Dan Goldberg write for *Politico*. The writers provide an extensive analysis of the challenges and fears among educators amid widespread budget cuts and significant competing desires and interests, all while “principals are flying blind” without specific guidance on what reopenings will look like.

The challenge will be greatest for schools that serve low-income students and often rely more on state funding than schools in wealthier areas. Lower-income schools are being hit hardest already by state budget cuts, NPR reports.

Congressional Democrats are working on bills in the House to address both schools and childcare centers. Senate Democrats are said to be poised to introduce a bill calling for \$175 billion in aid to pre-K-12 schools. It’s not yet clear if these efforts will pass in the Republican-controlled Senate. However, Republican Sen. Lamar Alexander agrees the federal government should pitch in, saying at least \$50 billion is needed to help schools and universities reopen safely. (Universities face their own dire financial situations, not covered in this article.)

“The American economy cannot recover if schools can’t reopen, and we cannot properly reopen schools if funding is slashed and students don’t have what they need to be safe, learn and succeed,” Lily Eskelsen García, president of the National Education Association, said in a statement last week. “Congress must put aside partisanship and take immediate action to save millions of jobs and ensure students don’t pay the price if states are forced to make deep cuts to education funding.”

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