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The New Revisionism on In-Class Education During COVID-19

In a March 2 article New York Times reporters Margo Sanger-Katz and Claire Cain Miller wrote:

Scientists and doctors who study infectious disease in children largely agreed, [in a recent New York Times survey](#) about school openings, that elementary school students should be able to attend in-person school now. With safety measures like masking and opening windows, the benefits outweigh the risks, the majority of the 175 respondents said. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/02/upshot/covid-opening-schools-experts.html>

It is tempting to cherry-pick inflammatory quotes, but many of those quoted blamed teachers, unions, and politicians for not following the advice of public health professionals, who, they assert, “have dedicated their careers to taking on these exact issues of school reopening.” (Mitul Kapadia, Associate Clinical Professor, University of California, San Francisco; Director, Pediatric Physiatrist, Benioff Children’s Hospital).

As we slowly emerge from the year-long deep hole of COVID-19 (as of today 531,652 Americans have died - <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/us/>), it is wise to recall that in the 50 weeks since things closed down, public health professionals have not always spoken with a single voice. For the first several months, professionals did not have good ideas of how the disease was spread, nor how contagious it was to whom.

Moreover, the facile comparisons of affluent private schools (which can afford small student-teacher ratios) to crowded public schools are not useful for policy. Further, the suggestion that all that Michigan schools have to do is to open the windows in the middle of February suggests that the advocates have never visited Michigan, or Ohio, or any place that sees a real winter.

Public school teachers did not choose their vocations for the high pay, nor for the working conditions. There has been legitimate concern about the transmission of disease, particularly in older, badly ventilated buildings with poor comfort facilities, common hallways and common stairwells. It will cost billions of dollars to fix these problems.

There is a large literature in economics that measures the costs of regulation in terms of foregone, or misplaced, production. Students have suffered enormously with the foregone opportunities from in-school instruction. One could argue that elementary students will have longer to “catch up” than their teen-age siblings. Nonetheless, these are real (and large) costs.

However, an honest appraisal of regulation must also consider the benefits in terms of averted deaths. There would almost certainly have been

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thousands of additional deaths, had schools remained entirely open. These were averted, and they must be counted, and valued.

A reasoned and cordial discussion of school re-opening is essential as we plan for the 2021-2022 academic year. Revisionist finger-pointing is not.

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