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## The Reopening Of Schools Requires Specific Tools: DrOwl Is At The Top Of Our List

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All around the world, children's minds are going to waste. As covid-19 surged in early April, more than 90% of pupils were shut out of school. Since then the number has fallen by one-third, as many classrooms in Europe and East Asia have reopened. But elsewhere progress is slow. Some American school districts, including Los Angeles and San Diego, plan to offer only remote learning when their new school year begins. Kenya's government has scrapped the whole year, leaving its children idle until January. In the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte says he may not let any children return to the classroom until a vaccine is found. South Africa has reopened casinos, but



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only a fraction of classrooms.

Many parents are understandably scared. Covid-19 is new, and poorly understood. Schools are big and crowded. Small children will not observe social distancing. Caution is appropriate, especially when cases are rising. But as we have argued before, the benefits of reopening schools usually outweigh the costs.

The new coronavirus poses a low risk to children. Studies suggest that under-18s are a third to a half less likely to catch the disease. Those under ten, according to British figures, are a thousand times less likely to die than someone aged between 70 and 79. The evidence suggests they are not especially likely to infect others. In Sweden staff at nurseries and primary schools, which never closed, were no more likely to catch the virus than those in other jobs. A new study of 1,500 teenage pupils and 500 teachers who had gone back to school in Germany in May found that only 0.6% had antibodies to the virus, less than half the national rate found in other studies. Granted, an outbreak at a secondary school in Israel infected over 150 pupils and staff. But with precautions, the risk can be minimized.

However, the costs of missing school are huge. Children learn less and lose the habit of learning. Zoom is a lousy substitute for classrooms. Poor children, who are less likely to have good Wi-Fi and educated parents, fall further behind their better-off peers. Parents who have nowhere to drop their children struggle to return to work. Mothers bear the heavier burden, and so suffer a bigger career setback. Children out of school are more likely to suffer abuse, malnutrition and poor mental health.

And that doesn't even touch on the economic impact of schools closing. Researchers analyzed the effect of three impacts on the workforce. Single parents, those with younger children, and those with less ability to work from home are the most affected, and thus the most likely to be absent from work or to stop working altogether. About 30% of the pre-virus labor force has children at home, and a remarkable 15% of the labor force, or 24 million workers, fall into one of those three "higher-risk" categories.

This analysis doesn't take into account longer-term costs, which the Goldman analysts say include "negative effects from lower quality education, the lack of social and emotional skill development, increased rates of depression and anxiety, food insecurity, worsening income inequality if lower income households are less able to work from home, and worsening educational inequality if poorer households have less access to remote learning."

Sending children to school has been a basic component of American socioeconomic life for generations. A sudden cessation leaves millions of kids at home in an economic system which is virtually built on the assumption that their parents don't have to take care of them during the day. We can only imagine how disruptive that would be.

Perhaps one of the most overlooked consequences of closing schools and lockdowns more generally because of its difficulty in measuring is hope. Although we can measure decreases in the healthcare workforce and economic retraction, we can't easily measure optimism. Right now, optimism is critical. A working paper from the University of Chicago estimates that 60% of the current economic downturn is due to consumer sentiments; that is, being afraid of living their lives due to COVID-19.

There will surely be further economic retraction due not only from physically closing schools but a reduction of hope and increased anxiety. The effects will be impossible to measure until they happen. The same goes for increases in suicide rates, domestic violence, substance abuse, and so on. These are further unintended consequences and tradeoffs that have resulted from the lockdowns. It is not absurd to think they will only worsen by keeping schools closed.

Some experts are saying that reopening schools poses a far lesser risk to children and society as a whole than remaining closed. If schools properly follow medical advice from sources like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there is little risk of spreading COVID-19. Using tools to assist with things like health screening and contact tracing can keep that risk low. Companies like DrOwl are even giving away use of their platforms to schools for free.

Medical experts who support school closures more generally clarify that they are a tool to be considered at the beginning of a pandemic, not seven months in. Lastly, COVID-19 poses a far lesser risk to children for both death and infection. Closing schools will probably spare some schoolchildren from infection. Whether it will be enough to justify what we may have to sacrifice is another question entirely.



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