

Should Schools Reopen In-Person During the COVID-19 Pandemic? An Educator's Perspective (Part Two)

The opinions expressed in this piece are solely my own, based on my own science and health background and experiences as a classroom teacher and instructional coach, and do not express the views or opinions of my school district or the Knowles Teacher Initiative. However, I do hope my words resonate with you by providing an educator's perspective. I do not claim to have the same experience as every educator, but believe my thoughts will be shared by many educators.

Part 2: My Public Health Concerns About Reopening Schools In-Person

In the [first part of this blog post](#), I shared my concerns as an educator about reopening schools. In this next segment, I provide a more detailed argument for NOT reopening schools, focusing on public health concerns.

My Argument: If the many public health issues that come with reopening schools cannot be successfully addressed, schools should not reopen in person. Consider the following questions:

1. Can COVID-19 risk factors be successfully mitigated?: Current publications from the [NJ Department of Health and the NJ Communicable Disease Service](#) explain that the risk for COVID-19 depends on four factors. Are these risk factors for COVID-19 able to be properly addressed and the risk mitigated during in-person instruction?

- i. **Time: More time sitting in one place means higher risk.** Will students spend all roughly six hours of the school day surrounded by peers and other people? What about during lunch time or recess when there are larger crowds?
- ii. **Space: Less space means higher risk.** How can there be more space created? Classrooms are confined, smaller spaces. We do not have the time or funding to knock down walls or change the dimensions of these rooms. Hallways are confined spaces as well. When teachers cannot rotate to classrooms and students need to use the hallway, especially at the high school level, will they have to move in shifts? This will take tremendous amounts of time to accomplish safely.
- iii. **People: More people around you means higher risk.** Will class

sizes be reduced? What about common areas where students eat lunch or gather? Major modifications would have to be made to school schedules.

iv. **Place: Indoor places means higher risk.** Classrooms are indoors, and indoor spaces pose a higher risk. Will classes be moved outside? What will happen if it rains or once the weather gets too cold in parts of the country? Will ventilation be addressed? Masks help tremendously to prevent transmission while indoors—what if someone forgets to, refuses to, or cannot physically wear a mask?

2. Can mask-wearing be enforced?: Masks have been shown to have a tremendous positive impact on lowering COVID-19 risk. However, how will mask wearing be enforced (i.e., if a student or staff member is not wearing a mask, what will the consequence be)? If students or staff cannot wear a mask due to medical conditions, how will we protect surrounding people from being exposed to airborne droplets? What happens when in an indoor classroom, someone inevitably takes their mask off by accident, on purpose, or to take a “mask break,” or to eat lunch? For indoor dining, diners must remove their masks while eating, which leads to increased risk of viral spread (**indoor dining has been indefinitely paused in NJ** based on the fact that other states that opened indoor dining had surges in COVID-19 cases).

3. Can classrooms be adequately ventilated?: Increased airflow lowers risk. How will ventilation in the school building be monitored to ensure constant proper airflow is occurring? **Studies** have shown that coronavirus lingers in indoor spaces longer due to lack of airflow. If someone is not wearing a face covering indoors and has COVID-19 or is an asymptomatic carrier, their droplets will remain in the air and could spread throughout the classroom. Wearing a mask does not protect the wearer so much as those surrounding them, so if one person does not wear a mask, this could infect many others in the classroom if they are positive or a carrier for COVID-19.

4. Can asymptomatic carriers be prevented from spreading COVID-19 to others?: Temperature checks will help to prevent those with active COVID-19 infection from entering the building, but this does not prevent asymptomatic carriers from entering the building. Asymptomatic carriers can just as

effectively spread COVID-19 droplets as those with symptoms.

5. Is the school liable for student and staff, or family members' illness?: Contact tracing and testing are very effective ways to prevent outbreaks. Will the school have the resources to properly utilize contact tracing and testing to prevent or quell potential outbreaks at school, when so many people come into contact in a school building in one day?

Are schools allowed to require that students and staff are tested, and if so, will the school provide the testing? Will the test results even come back quickly enough to determine who to quarantine?

In a high school setting, students have classes with at least eight different teachers. If one student becomes sick with COVID-19, I would think all of the students' teachers, all students in those teachers' classes, and any students who came in contact with the sick student would need to quarantine for two weeks. Do these classes then become virtual, or does the entire school have to be closed? This will certainly be a detriment to effective instruction.

If a student or staff member contracts COVID-19 from being at school/work, is the district liable for their illness? What will the criteria be for allowing staff or students to remain home? What if a staff member is not in a high risk category, but someone they live with is? (Also, patients who were not in a high risk category have died from COVID-19, so everyone is at some level of risk for severe illness or death, regardless of high risk status). If a staff member contracts COVID-19 from work, will they be eligible for disability or workers' compensation, or will they need to use their sick leave instead?

6. Will there be enough resources to properly clean and sanitize commonly touched surfaces in each room of the school?: Will the school have the funding and staffing to effectively clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and monitor/restrict restroom use? How often will disinfecting occur, and will it be an EPA-approved disinfectant that will properly destroy coronavirus particles? Who will be responsible for disinfecting surfaces (i.e., custodial staff, teachers, administrators, and/or students), and will these individuals be expected to do this in addition to their usual work? Will students need parental permission in order to clean surfaces in the classroom? How will we ensure surfaces were disinfected properly? Who will

provide the quality control?

In the third and last part of this blog, I will share my concerns about reopening schools focused on pedagogical and social and emotional learning issues.