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School, Interrupted

How should we teach in a pandemic?

The coronavirus upended education. Schools across the country shut down in spring of 2020. Now many communities have to decide when and how to reopen them.

Local governments, school boards, teachers, and parents are making hard decisions based on limited and evolving information. Evidence suggests that young children are less likely to suffer severe effects from the virus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that schools can reopen but with strict masking and other safety measures. Even so, teachers, custodians, bus drivers, and others spend indoor time with students and could catch the virus.

Yet there are huge costs to keeping schools closed. Children can fall behind in reading, writing, and math skills. Some suffer emotionally and psychologically from isolation and lack of contact with their teachers and schoolmates. Distance learning is not a perfect option, and not all families have reliable access to Wi-Fi and computers. In many families, adults cannot stay home to support and watch children who are not in school. Experts have also voiced special concerns about children with disabilities, who may require intensive support, and about challenges facing people learning English.

Education is only part of it. The pandemic also revealed just how much we ask our schools to do. They provide free and reduced-cost meals to millions of disadvantaged children. Teachers are trained to notice signs of child abuse or suicide risk. And students develop social skills and independence when they attend school in person.

How should we teach all of our children now while keeping them safe?

This advisory presents three options for moving forward, each coming from a different perspective and each reflecting a different set of ideas about what should be done. Most people will find something to agree with in all three approaches, but each also has trade-offs, risks, or drawbacks that need to be taken into account and worked through.

In thinking about different approaches, we will consider these questions:

- How will these proposals affect student learning?
- How will they affect students' social and emotional needs?
- Should we consider different approaches for younger children, low-income children, or those with learning disabilities?
- Schools provide meals, counseling, social learning, friendships, and extracurricular activities. How will these be affected?
- What kinds of resources—money, teachers, and more—do schools need in order to return to in-person learning? Do the schools have enough resources? If not, how could we provide them?
- How should we make up for the educational and other losses that all children suffered over the last year? How should we address the educational inequities that the pandemic both exposed and made worse?

These are not the only possible options nor the only questions. They are a starting point for weighing alternatives and reaching a sound judgment.

We would appreciate your feedback as you use this draft framework in your communities. Please visit www.nifi.org/education-2021 to share your insights.

Option One: Put health concerns first.

This option says that our children’s health should be our priority. Even though early data about the coronavirus show that most young children are affected mildly if at all, those with underlying conditions can fall ill or die and some may suffer long-term effects. Teachers are at risk as well, and children could bring the virus home to parents, grandparents, and siblings. This option says that it is better to be safe than sorry, especially with more contagious variants of the virus emerging. We should emphasize and improve remote learning even if limited in-person instruction is offered.

A Primary Drawback

Remote learning harms children educationally and emotionally, particularly those with learning disabilities or who are already struggling in school. It makes our unequal education system even more unequal as children fall behind in their studies, go hungry, or are left without adult supervision and support.

Actions	Possible Drawbacks
Close schools and offer remote learning until vaccines are more available and we get much better control over this pandemic.	Children learn less and suffer emotionally when schools are closed.
Allow parents to choose either in-school or remote learning or a combination of the two, depending on their family’s needs and risks.	Expecting schools to organize this and stretched-thin teachers to do both remote and in-person instruction will lead to confusion and burnout.
Teachers should be given the choice whether to teach remotely from home or in person at school.	This invites chaos. Taking the proper precautions, teachers can work in person just as grocery store workers and police officers do.
Employers should offer parental leave until the pandemic ends so all workers have time to help their children with school.	It is unfair to expect small businesses—many of them pounded financially by the pandemic—to provide this benefit.
What else? What could we do, especially on a community level?	What’s the trade-off if we do that?

About 40 percent of teachers and 41 percent of adults living with school-age children have risk factors for severe COVID-19 disease, such as advanced age, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, or cancer.

—*Annals of Internal Medicine*, Nov. 2, 2020

Option Two: Put learning and emotional well-being first.

This option says that in-person learning is irreplaceable, and we should do whatever it takes to open schools for in-person instruction. Teachers report that few students stick with online schooling, and all students get far less instruction time online than they would in person. Students miss out on forming friendships and learning teamwork. Schools provide millions of children their main or only meals of the day and act as sentinels for child abuse or suicide risk. Nothing is risk-free in a pandemic, but this option says that the educational, emotional, and societal benefits of opening schools outweigh the health risks.

A Primary Drawback

Many school districts lack funds to improve ventilation, hire additional staff, lower class sizes, or add other safeguards to often older, cramped facilities, putting children, teachers, and communities at risk.

Actions	Possible Drawbacks
Open schools with predictable five-day schedules and mandatory mask rules.	Staying open may lead to more outbreaks, especially with more contagious variants of the virus now appearing.
Require teachers to teach onsite as other essential workers do.	Some teachers, including many of the best and most experienced, would leave the profession rather than risk their and their families' health.
Invest in making schools safe by renting classroom space to allow better physical distancing and by improving ventilation and sanitation.	Only wealthier districts would be able to afford such upgrades, leaving teachers and students in poorer areas in unsafe schools.
Open schools but cancel sports, chorus, and any activity that includes physical closeness, shouting, or singing, which can spread the virus.	Physical exercise and group activities are essential for children and are a major motivation for many students.
What else? What could we do, especially on a community level?	What's the trade-off if we do that?

Eighty-six percent of pediatricians say that COVID-19 vaccinations are not necessary for schools to reopen if schools use other basic safety measures such as masks.

—Survey by the *New York Times*, February 2021

Option Three: Focus on children most likely to fall behind.

Closing schools hurts some children more than others. Very young children miss out on the critical early years when they learn to read. Special education students forget hard-won skills they will need to live independently. A child who has lost a parent to the pandemic also loses the support network that school once provided. The coronavirus has hit communities of color and low-income households especially hard. It has magnified old inequities and revealed new ones, such as whose parent gets to work from home or who has reliable Wi-Fi. This option says we should focus on helping those who need it the most even if others have to wait.

A Primary Drawback

The pandemic has affected all students educationally and emotionally. To focus on only some would be unfair and would undermine broad support for public education.

Actions	Possible Drawbacks
Bring back the earliest grades first. Young children learn reading and other basic skills best with in-person instruction, and they are less likely to spread the virus or fall seriously ill.	Many older students are not showing up for online classes and risk falling behind academically. They may end up gathering in unsupervised groups that are even more likely to spread the virus.
Open schools to offer in-person instruction for special education students, low-income children, English language learners, and others left behind by remote instruction.	Remote teaching is harming all students' ability to learn. Singling out some for special treatment will create resentment and divide communities.
Offer summer school and after-school classes to help those students who have fallen behind to catch up educationally.	Teachers already are exhausted by the demands of the pandemic and cannot be asked to do even more.
Create permanent enrichment programs, such as music and the arts, counseling, and mentoring programs, that give children who have suffered from poverty, racism, or other forms of abuse an equal chance at a good education.	Schools should stick to teaching reading, math, science, and other critical subjects. We ask too much of them as it is without demanding that they fix larger societal problems.
What else? What could we do, especially on a community level?	What's the trade-off if we do that?

During fall of 2020, about half of white students had the option of in-person instruction while only about a quarter of African American and Latinx students did.

—Analysis by Associated Press and Chalkbeat

About This Issue Advisory

THE CORONAVIRUS HAS UPENDED EDUCATION. Schools across the country shut down in early 2020. Now many communities have to decide when and how to reopen. Deliberative forums on this issue will not be easy. Remember that the objective of these forums is to begin to work through tensions among security, fairness, and community health.

In productive deliberation, people examine different options for addressing a difficult public problem. This issue advisory presents three such options and provides an alternative means of moving forward in order to avoid the polarizing rhetoric so common today.

Each option is based on a shared concern and poses a distinct strategy for addressing the problem. Equally important, each option presents the drawbacks or trade-offs inherent in each action.

Ground Rules

- Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.
- Consider all options fairly.
- Listening is just as important as speaking.
- No one or two individuals should dominate.
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate.

Holding a Deliberative Forum

1. Introduction

Review ground rules.
Introduce the issue.

2. Connect to Issue

Ask people to describe how the issue affects them, their families, or friends.

3. Consider Each Option

Consider each option one at a time.
Allow equal time for each.

- What is attractive?
- What about the drawbacks?

4. Review and Reflect

Review the conversation as a group.

- What areas of common ground were apparent?
- What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?
- Who else do we need to hear from?

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