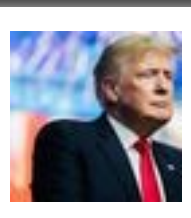


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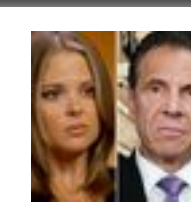
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OPINION

Reopening schools isn't worth the risk

By ERIKA KITZMILLER

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS | JUL 19, 2020 AT 6:00 AM



Mayor Bill de Blasio, left, and Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza hold a media availability on COVID-19 at New York City Hall on Sunday, March 15, 2020. (HANDOUT)

We shouldn't be pushing to reopen public schools this fall. The potential health risks that COVID-19 continues to pose to students, educators, their families and the city at large are still too high.

But that's exactly what's happening. And the calls are coming from every direction: [left-leaning professionals](#), [Democratic officials](#) and [Donald Trump](#).

As someone who has been balancing her career and children, I get it: We're all drained and exhausted. But fully reopening schools in just a few weeks' time involves an unacceptable level of risk.

Most of the push to return to in-person instruction this fall [rests](#) on the assumption that COVID-19 isn't especially dangerous for children, and the benefits [outweigh the risks](#). However, given how little time researchers have had to investigate the novel coronavirus and its [recent mutation](#), the science in this area is [not yet settled](#). In the past week, COVID-19 surges have forced many recently reopened schools to close again. Florida officials just [announced](#) that nearly 1 in 3 children tested for the novel coronavirus were found to be infected.

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Furthermore, children are not the only population we need to consider. We must also weigh the impact that reopening public schools will have on their families, school employees and wider communities.

There is reason to be concerned.

This past spring, at least 74 New York City Department of Education employees [died](#) as a result of COVID-19 complications. In March, 63 Philadelphia public schools [closed](#) unexpectedly when the schools in nearby suburban Montgomery County, where hundreds of Philadelphia teachers live, closed abruptly due to a COVID-19 surge.

Imagine counseling a child whose teacher died from COVID-19. Imagine running a school when half of your staff is not able to come to work. We need to consider these realities when planning reopening. These scenarios have happened. And they will likely happen again if our public schools reopen for in-person classes too quickly.

Then there's the issue of transportation: Children do not magically appear in schools. Those who attend classes in urban school districts tend to have long commutes on buses and subways. In New York City, the typical [commute](#) for public school students is about 30 minutes. And Black students who attend a school in the top quartile citywide have longer commute times than all other youth.

More often than not, students are accompanied on their commutes by family members. This puts the entire family, and ultimately the whole community, at higher risk. Communities of color have already [suffered](#) too much under systemic racism and this deadly virus.



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While the abrupt decision to close schools last spring undoubtedly [had](#) many profound negative effects, it does seem that the demand for reopening is coming most vocally from individuals, like me, who have the privilege of flexibility. Remote work allows us to perform our jobs, even under these difficult circumstances, from the safety of our homes.

As we continue to think about reopening public schools, it's important that we ask ourselves a couple of questions. First, would you be willing to teach in-person classes this fall, given how little we know about this virus? Second, do you think reopening schools on hybrid schedules, as many New York and Philadelphia school districts are planning, will significantly boost children's ability to learn while allowing working families to return to their pre-pandemic schedules?

For me, a parent, college professor, educational researcher and former K-12 educator, the answer to these questions is a resounding "no."

I realize how fortunate I am to be able to teach remotely and stay home with my children. Not all parents, especially essential workers, have this luxury. Many parents, especially working mothers, [are struggling](#). But reopening public schools for in-person classes in the fall could lead to untold deaths, especially in communities of color. These deaths could be prevented if we simply embraced and improved upon online learning, despite its shortcomings, while we have time to think and plan.

We must continue to put health and safety first and not [be bullied](#) into a rash and dangerous decision.

Kitzmillier is term assistant professor of education at Barnard College.

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