As we inch ever closer to August, the question of if and how schools will open in the fall is increasingly pressing on everyone’s minds. Many decisions related to COVID-19 are presented as morally controversial when they really shouldn’t be. The issue of opening the schools, on the other hand, is complex. No matter what decision is made, some individuals and groups will experience significant hardship.

One critical question should be procedural: who should get to make decisions related to if, how, and when schools open back up? The fact of the matter is that, across the country the entities actually making the decisions, at least when it comes to public schools, are local school districts. COVID-19 is a tragedy of a sort that no one has experienced before, and there is no reason to think that local school districts know better than anyone else how to proceed. Comparatively, the number of people who are in decision-making positions in school districts is small. As a result, decisions could easily be made by a group of people who don’t believe the virus poses a significant threat.

A second approach, then, is to let communities decide. As the entire community will suffer the consequences of gathering large groups of people together in school buildings, the least we can do is give each one of those members a voice regarding if and how they would like that to happen. One problem with this, however, is that we are experiencing a strong wave of anti-intellectualism and science denial in the United States. This wave started building momentum before COVID-19 hit, but in response to the virus it has become a tsunami that threatens the lives and well-being of everyone every day. A democracy infected in this way can’t ensure just or even safe outcomes.

A third option is to let matters be settled by epidemiologists. This is a novel virus, so no one has perfect knowledge regarding what might happen in the future. Keyboard-certified “experts” flood the internet with baseless predictions that “sunlight kills the virus” or that “children can’t spread the virus.” Best, then, to leave the decisions up to the people who have dedicated their lives’ work to the study of infectious diseases in settings in which peer review and replication studies happen regularly. There are a handful of concerns for this approach as well. First, it can be tempting to think that people of science are people of dignity that are immune from political pressures. This simply isn’t so. An epidemiologist in one state may be more reliable than one in another. An alternative approach may be to act on the basis of what appears to be the consensus among experts. That said, the experts that arrive at consensus
aren't themselves going to be making the decisions in local communities, so again, the question becomes: who should be responsible for crafting policy? Since this is a decision by which everyone will be bound, it's important that the decision is made in a way that is procedurally just.

However it turns out, the parties responsible for crafting policy will need to look carefully at the arguments, and there are compelling considerations on all sides of the issue. Right out in front is an argument that points to the intrinsic value of the lives and health of the children, teachers, and staff that will be crowded together in the school. Many people argue that the schools must reopen for the greater good. We'll consider some of those arguments below. The response to them is to say, “life and health are not the kinds of values that should be bartered away.”

In response to concerns regarding the well-being of teachers and students, people often claim that spread of the virus to and from children is rare. Those making that argument point to studies like this one conducted in the Netherlands. One concern with the information presented there, however, is that the sample size is very small, and cases in the Netherlands never came close to approaching what we have experienced in the United States. In the United States, the circumstances simply aren’t the same. In northern Georgia, a YMCA summer camp had to shut down because 85 campers and staff tested positive for coronavirus. In Missouri, a summer camp shut down after 82 campers and staff tested positive for coronavirus. Across the country, cases of coronavirus spread at daycare facilities have been reported. In plenty of these cases, people who knew that they or their children might have coronavirus dropped their children off at daycare anyway because they couldn’t miss work. This seems like a situation that is likely to be repeated if schools open up in the fall. What’s more, the Netherlands report suggests that coronavirus has not killed any children there. Sadly, that is not true in the United States. We have the grim distinction of having more information to work with on this topic than the Netherlands does. All one has to do is search news sources for “child dies of coronavirus” to find plenty of cases.

Even if children don’t die from the coronavirus, we do know that it is possible for them to suffer severe organ damage, including brain damage. Many viruses have symptoms that only show themselves much later in life — consider the case of the chickenpox virus producing debilitating cases of shingles decades after the initial infection. Coronavirus cases might appear mild in children, but viruses can stay in the body of the carrier for their lifetime, and we don’t know enough about this virus to know what might happen down the road. Best then to err on the side of caution, social distance, and educate our children from the safety of our own homes.

Let’s imagine for a moment that children never get the virus, never pass it, or never experience any deleterious effects. The fact remains that COVID-19 clearly can be spread between adults. Adults can suffer and die from it and are doing so in great numbers. Bringing children back to school in the fall doesn’t just involve packing children into small buildings together, it involves packing adults together in close quarters too. In many cases, teachers and staff have been given no choice regarding what they would like their educational delivery method to be in the fall. This includes teachers who are immunocompromised or those who have immunocompromised loved ones for whom they care. Continued employment, especially during a recession is an immeasurably coercive force. Many people simply can’t afford to quit their jobs. These are skilled people and we should value what they do. We need them, and shouldn’t force them to work in conditions that are unsafe.

The considerations mentioned above are compelling, but there are also compelling arguments in favor of reopening. Of course, one of the most obvious arguments concerns children’s need for formal education. Some people believe that students have already experienced a developmental pause because when material was presented during the lockdown period, it was presented in less than ideal ways. Educational quality needs to improve in the fall. Of course, whether this goal can be realized depends a great deal on the area in which a person lives and the particular teacher, class, learning environment, and student in question. Some teachers went above and beyond the call of duty in planning course content that may have resonated with students better than it would have in a traditional classroom. It is a fact, however, that education in a physical setting does work better for at least some students, and this fact must be acknowledged in decision making about what to do in the fall.

Another argument for opening up the schools is that, for various reasons, parents can’t constantly be the full-time caregivers for their children. Many jobs can’t be done from home, and parents who work those jobs need a place for
their children to go where they know that they will be safe and fed. Many of these people are already suffering financial hardship because of the pandemic. These people already pay taxes that fund the schools. It is a challenge for many people to find and pay for daycare in addition to everything else. On top of that, daycare situations may pose just as significant a threat as schools, so these parents would incur all of the harms and none of the benefits.

What’s more, not all children and parents have the same needs. Attending school in a physical way may be particularly important for certain special needs children. Educators trained to provide valuable resources to such children are critical in the lives of both the children and parents. Not having access to these resources might put significant strains on these households.

One way of replying to these concerns is to get creative — how might we design schooling that allows for children who need to be there to do so safely? One answer might be to offer high-quality online options to students and parents for whom that delivery method makes sense, freeing up space for in-person learning to be done in a safe, socially-distanced way. This kind of arrangement requires careful planning. Unfortunately, in many areas across the country, school districts have squandered away critical planning time while they were busy holding their collective breath hoping that the virus would disappear before it was time for the children to go back to school.

There are all sorts of considerations that are legitimate here. But there are at least three positions that are not morally defensible. First, there is no good argument for starting school in the fall with no coronavirus protections in place. Masks and social-distancing plans are a good place to start. Second, relatedly, it is not acceptable to commit the perfectionist fallacy — to say, “there are problems with all approaches, nothing is perfect, so let’s just stick with the status quo.” Though it may be true that no approach is perfect, some approaches are surely better than others. Finally, it is not morally defensible for decisions about if and how to open up schools safely to be motivated by re-election hopes, either at the local or the national level. A culture that would play politics with the lives of children and educators has truly lost its way.

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