

The Case Against Reopening Schools: A Teacher's Perspective

By Rose Levine, Grade 5 Teacher, Cambridge, MA

July 14 update: This piece is now also available on [Medium.com](https://medium.com).

(A note on my perspective: I am a white, middle class, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual teacher in a well-resourced, heterogeneous school district that has provided 1:1 technology access to all students. I teach fifth graders, who are able to read, write, type, and use computers somewhat independently. Some of the many structural advantages I had this spring included a full-time paraprofessional, a super-competent technology specialist dedicated to our staff, social workers and school administrators who could help support students in crisis, a reasonable class size, well-established relationships with students and families, and a spouse on parental leave to help care for our baby in our home. No one in my immediate family was sick with COVID, and we were able to stay in isolation without economic or psychological hardship. All of these factors of my identity, circumstances, and setting contribute to my experience this past spring and my concerns about the future.)

Virtual instruction is a terrible idea, especially for young children. In the context of our dual pandemics, it is even less effective--some have deemed what we did this spring "crisis schooling." It is isolating and alienating. Troubleshooting video and sound and wifi and document sharing all day is maddening even for those of us with access to appropriate technologies. Boundaries between home and school are blurred for students and staff. Work becomes our life. We spend half the time trying to locate and coerce reluctant students into showing up in the first place. It is wildly inefficient. I absolutely hate remote teaching and can't wait for it to end. And yet, I still think it's a better option for our upcoming school year than any of the proposals that involve returning to buildings.

When we consider the idea of returning to physical school under [the guidance proposed by DESE](#), we must center this question: **which benefits of in-person education will be available to us with these restrictions in place?** And sadly, I believe that a classroom operating under these protocols will be **less** effective and possibly **more** traumatic than the inadequate and painful experience of remote learning. I actually think we can access more of the benefits of teaching, learning, and community-building if we are not physically in the same space.

Here are some of the benefits of a classroom during pre-pandemic times, all of which are much more difficult to achieve given COVID restrictions:

Building Relationships & Community

Sharing a physical classroom allows our elementary cohorts to become like family to one another. We play games, we exchange smiles and laughter, we sit in circles on the rug and tell stories. We taste each other's food and whisper in each other's ears. We have casual, informal, non-academic exchanges with children during downtimes at recess or transitions between subjects. We share supplies and learn to collaborate and take turns. We share ownership of the

space and materials, the classroom jobs, and in so doing we build a model of accountability to one another and our community.

None of this is possible with social distancing in place. The DESE guidelines recommend that adults remain six feet away from children at all times, and that children remain three feet from one another. Putting aside the total impracticality of this guidance, if we were able to maintain this distance it would make community building very challenging. With all students and teachers masked, it would be much harder to hear each other or read expressions, even more so for students with processing issues and for new English speakers. We would be unable to have any informal or private exchanges with children, and they would be unable to speak privately to one another. Most classroom and playground games would be off limits due to proximity, and the process of eating together would become a strictly enforced exercise in compliance and restraint. Students would be unable to share any materials or sit together at tables or on the rug. Each student would become a little island unto herself, guarding her supplies and personal space and looking out for Number One. Under these restrictions, we would feel less like a community and more like office workers in cubicles: occupying the same space, but disconnected from one another.

Safe, Welcoming Environment

Safety, ultimately, is our top concern and is the prerequisite for all learning. When we design our classrooms and schools, a sense of physical and emotional safety is the priority. We create Calming Corners with shared supplies for mindfulness and relaxation. We provide students choices and autonomy whenever possible, allowing them to work in different positions, spend time with friends, and start collaborative projects that bring them joy. We offer hugs and reassurance when a child is upset. We encourage students to walk their peers to the nurse's office when they get injured on the playing field. We give high-fives and pats on the back when students achieve their goals. We provide private spaces for students to share confidential information or de-escalate from distress. We take them out for recess as often as logistically possible and let them exercise their legs, wrestle with their buddies, compete at their favorite sports, and pile together on the group swing.

In a social-distancing school setting, everything is inverted. Closeness and warmth is now dangerous, and instead of feeling welcomed and relaxed at school, students and teachers remain in a hypervigilant state, always looking out for mask violations, friends huddled too tight together, an uncovered cough, hands that haven't been washed, common surfaces that haven't been sanitized. We take students out to recess in their pods, but the soccer lovers can't touch the ball, and the best friends from two different classes can't meet up to chat, and the monkey bars are off-limits. The bus ride to and from school becomes a miserable slog as monitors work to enforce developmentally unachievable rules. Anxious students are afraid to visit the bathroom because of all the door handles they might need to touch. A student experiencing abuse at home can't find a way to share that information with a trusted adult without the whole class overhearing.

What worries us the most about school closure is knowing that for many kids, school was their safe space. They may be in danger at home, facing neglect, violence, hunger, mental illness, and a host of other challenges. As teachers, this reality torments us. We want to do everything we possibly can to reduce the trauma that this generation is facing. But counterintuitive as it may seem, bringing children back into the building that has served as their refuge may actually serve to exacerbate and heighten their trauma. Virtual school poses great risks for our most marginalized and vulnerable children. But returning to school under these conditions may hurt them even more.

Learning in Multiple Modalities

One of the most difficult hurdles to clear during remote instruction is the way technology flattens everything. All of a sudden, a room full of artistic, creative, sporty, spunky, vocal, unique, three-dimensional children transform into a grid of identical boxes on a screen, and identical black and white documents in Google Classroom. What a loss! What most of us love most about the elementary classroom is the many opportunities it affords to teach in multiple modalities. We engage children through hands-on projects, music, art, physicality, acting, experiments, and the natural environment. It's a good day in elementary school when a child comes home covered in paint and dirt, carrying a trumpet case and a model of the solar system. Due to persistent inequities in our educational system, not every child has the same range of opportunities, but teachers in all settings make efforts to teach to children's strengths, interests, and perspectives.

Given the challenge of adapting this physical environment to our new virtual reality, it makes sense that we would want to return to classrooms as soon as possible, where we can best engage with each child's individual ways of knowing. But in a restricted environment, many of these hands-on opportunities are out of reach. Most musical outlets, including bands and choruses, will be banned. Because students will be unable to share supplies, art and science projects may become prohibitively complex and expensive to execute. And given the limitations on student movement within the classroom, collaboration on projects will be a challenge to pull off. Will teachers still find creative ways to engage our students? Absolutely! But we could find just as many ways in the virtual world, where students have been learning to record and create videos, code programs, design games, and make artwork.

Differentiating Instruction

Elementary teachers pride ourselves on our ability to differentiate instruction for young learners. We place children in flexible, heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings that shift constantly throughout the day. While some instruction happens as a whole class, the majority of the day students are working in pairs and small groups. Any given fifth grader in my class might have one partner at 8:30 am Morning Meeting, a different partner for Writing at 9:00, a table group of four to work with throughout whole-class instruction in Social Studies at 9:45, a math group of three at 11:00, and a Book Club of six readers sharing a text at noon. Why do we make our lives so complicated? Because we know that students learn best when they collaborate with peers, discuss their thinking aloud, and experience instruction tailored to exactly the skills they need to learn next.

This particular fifth grader might be a strong writer and need to be partnered with another student who is similarly skilled, so that when I conference with them I can push both to use a complex strategy like symbolism, and then let them continue on together when I step away. Meanwhile, this student might have struggled with yesterday's math lesson on adding unlike fractions, and would be best placed in a math group of children who need review on a particular strategy. In Social Studies, however, the key factor is that this child tends not to speak up in small groups, and needs to be matched with other students who will encourage him to be assertive and will make space for his voice. These are just a few of the many considerations that we make each day for each of our twenty-odd students.

DESE's guidance suggests that students should be seated at individual desks, three feet apart, all facing the same direction, for the entirety of the school day. There goes our ability to differentiate! In fact, most elementary classrooms don't even have individual desks. Teachers opted long ago to replace them with tables, rugs, couches, and other kinds of flexible seating that allows for creative, individualized, collaborative learning. If students are to be seated at individual desks, unable to see each other or interact, they may as well be home on their laptops. At least in that setting, we can have students meet in smaller groups and see each other face to face. We can conference with individual students one on one and give them meaningful, targeted feedback without the rest of the class listening in. Can we replicate the complex choreography of the in-person school day in a virtual setting? No, of course not. But under the DESE restrictions, we can't even begin to approximate it.

OTHER CONCERNS

Staff Safety

It didn't escape my notice--or that of many other educators--that the initial guidance barely pays lip service to the health and well-being of the adults in the school building. While children seem to be mercifully spared from the worst impacts of COVID-19, the grownups in school buildings are in serious danger, especially those of us who are older or have compromised immune systems. We already make many, many sacrifices on behalf of our students, some of them detrimental to our own health. While these practices aren't sustainable, and are a leading cause of educator burnout, we continue to put the children first because that's what we joined this profession to do. But no one--not us, not our families, not our students or their parents--wants us to seriously risk our lives in order to be physically present in the school building. And that is what this guidance asks us to do.

Yes, we can wear a face covering for six hours straight each day, sweating in stuffy classrooms with no AC, skipping food and water so we don't have to lift our masks. Sure, we can stay away

from the staff bathroom all day so we don't have to share an unventilated space used by other possibly contagious adults. We can try to remain inside the boundaries of our classrooms and eschew all contact with other staff members, further isolating us from our teams. But some of our staff members won't be able to pull this off. What about the custodial and cafeteria staff, who must necessarily interact with multiple spaces, surfaces, and germs? What about specialists, special educators, and other shared staff who must visit classroom after classroom, or even multiple school buildings, in the course of their daily work? What about staff members who are pregnant and need to use the bathroom every hour? What happens if a child is in crisis and needs multiple adults in close proximity around him?

And this is all before someone gets sick. Because, given the prevalence and virulence of this disease, it is inevitable that there will be outbreaks. When a staff member comes down with COVID-19 and has to quarantine for two weeks, what adult do we ask to step into the classroom where infection is active? If an infected staff member gets very sick and is hospitalized, will they receive infinite sick days? What about their spouses? Their roommates? Their elderly parents? And, god forbid, if a staff member or someone in their family dies of this disease after catching it in our school building, how do we justify that to ourselves? Was it so important for students to return to "normal" that we were willing to risk death?

This may sound overly dramatic, but there were [principals and other staff members in schools in New York City that died of COVID](#) after Mayor Bill DeBlasio kept the public schools open just four days longer than we did here in Cambridge. Were their deaths worthwhile?

Student & Family Safety

These same concerns apply to students and their families. This is not a question of "teachers versus families." [We are all part of one community. all connected](#), and the virus does not make such distinctions. There appears to be a growing body of evidence that children are less susceptible to the virus, and less likely to be contagious if infected. Some of the reduction in transmission seems to be a result of children's asymptomatic infections. Because they are not coughing when infected, they are less likely to spread the virus through respiratory droplets. While this is excellent news for children's health, it does not offer much reassurance when considering the other illnesses that kids inevitably develop after just a few weeks together in a school building.

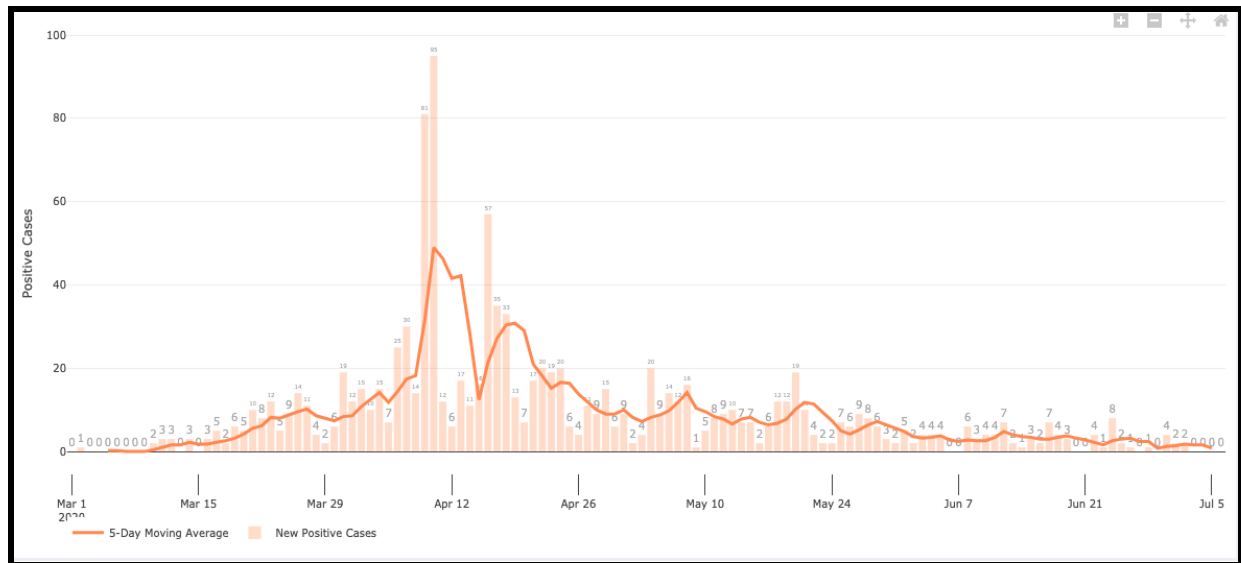
Elementary schools are petri dishes of colds and influenza. Once students begin exchanging those diseases, there will be more than enough coughing, sneezing, nose-blowing, and snot-wiping to spread whatever germs they are carrying—including COVID-19. While the DESE guidance suggests that we encourage families to get flu vaccines this upcoming year, we cannot mandate that they do so, and the vaccine's effectiveness varies significantly from season to season.

Many of our students live with vulnerable adults, such as grandparents and chronically ill relatives. Many of our students live in tiny apartments, with only one bathroom, sharing

bedrooms and beds with adult family members. For many of our students, if coronavirus comes home, the entire household will be exposed. Are we willing--and are families willing--to risk the safety and lives of elders in order to have students back in physical school buildings?

But, Cambridge is Safe!

We are very fortunate to live in a state and city where public health leadership has been clear and consistent from the beginning, and where precautions have been quickly adopted and maintained. As a result of this forward-thinking approach, Cambridge is doing well at [flattening the curve](#).



With rates of new infection this low, it is very tempting to think that we are in a safe position to open schools in the fall. And were the rate to stay this low, it seems feasible that we could do so safely. However:

- Many Boston-area colleges, as of this writing, plan to open their campuses to students from all over the country (and world) in September. While some local institutions, such as Harvard's graduate programs and Lesley College, plan to teach remotely, many others plan to open either entirely in-person or to a subset of students. As has been [extensively documented](#), it is unrealistic to assume that college-age students will be capable of social distancing to the degree necessary to control the spread of the virus. With cases rising in a majority of states, it is reasonable to be concerned that college students returning to Massachusetts will act as viral incubators and help to bring about a second wave.

- Part of our success in keeping viral transmission low is due to the extensive lockdowns we've maintained over the past four months. As more and more businesses and workplaces open up over the course of the summer, and as residents leave home, socialize with friends and family, and go on vacations out of state, we are likely to see an increase in cases. Even the [many op-eds published](#) in recent days imploring us to return to school buildings acknowledge that this

will not be safe if we proceed with reopening bars, restaurants, salons, and other non-essential businesses.

- Even in the unlikely scenario that Cambridge remains relatively COVID-free, we will still be bound by state guidance to follow the social distancing and hygiene protocols that will make attending school a far cry from the educational experience it once was.

Impossibility of Distancing

Sometimes I have to wonder whether the people who write educational policy have ever met children. While the DESE guidance makes some concessions to reality, such as acknowledging that students under 7 years old might not be able to keep masks on for six hours a day, much of the rest of the document is frankly delusional.

Children cannot social distance. Yes, individual families can wrangle their two or three children into compliance for an hour at a time when taking a walk around the neighborhood. But a building full of children, rooms packed to three-feet-apart capacity, everyone stressed out and annoyed about wearing a mask and being stuck at a desk, for six hours a day, every day? No, this will not work. Children are not tiny adults. They are clumsy, uninhibited, hyperactive, curious, impulsive, social creatures who spend half the day with their fingers up their noses or down their pants. They do not understand germ theory.

I teach fifth graders, the oldest (and theoretically, most responsible) students in the building. If any classroom could be considered a hygienic space, it would be mine. And yet children constantly find ways to skirt my rules. They routinely “forget” to wash their hands or fail to use soap. Even after years of training to sneeze into their elbows, students still spray each other in the face with regularity. Sure, kids will be more scared in a post-pandemic classroom, and that will help them adhere to the rules. But after a few days of vigilance, their essentially wild nature will return. Children are messy. Anyone who has raised a child knows this. No matter how much we mark up the floor with tape, hand them their own personal supply of markers, and force them to sing Happy Birthday while lathering, it will not be long until they are sharing beverages and chewing on each other’s erasers. We cannot count on children to maintain hygiene measures. If it is in fact possible for the coronavirus to be spread by children, then they will spread the virus. (And if, as some literature suggests, it’s NOT likely for children to spread the virus...then why are we recommending these impossible measures be established in the first place?)

Logistics of Technology/Materials

It seems clear that even if we achieve the stated goal of having as many children as possible back in school buildings this year, there will be some number of families who keep their kids home. Even an “everyone at school” plan is in some respects a hybrid plan, because every classroom is likely to have students who engage remotely. Furthermore, students who start out in person may switch to remote instruction for short periods, such as if they need to quarantine, or long periods if their family circumstances change.

Therefore, we will need to plan for any student, at any time, to transition from in-person to remote schooling. Where we might ordinarily have students working in a variety of notebooks and folders throughout the school day, we will instead have to use laptops so that kids can access their ongoing work regardless of where they are. Students will need to bring their computers back and forth between home and school each day. Charging their devices will be complicated: if they must remain at their desks, using the computers, they can't be plugged in. We will have to require students to fully charge their devices each night before coming to school the following day. What happens when they forget to do so? Or forget their device entirely? Or the battery dies during the day? If all our eggs are in one basket, we will become reliant on functioning technology to carry us through. At a certain point, as students sit spaced apart, staring into their laptops, shouting out regular updates on their remaining minutes before battery death, we might begin to wonder whether it is worth it for us to be in the same physical space at all. This is just one small example of the ways in which the devil is in the details.

Policing of Bodies Will Have a Differential Impact on BIPoC

A school building during a pandemic will be a tense place to work. Students, staff, and families will be on edge as they monitor and surveil one another for violations of hygiene measures. The stakes are high, after all. Many of our kids will come to school this fall already having experienced losses in their families from the virus. Even those students who have remained insulated on a personal level will be aware of the risks.

In the midst of all this anxiety and fear, our job as educators will be to exert control over students' bodies. In a sense, school is always an exercise in bodily control. We tell students where and when to sit, to speak, to come and go, to use the bathroom. We order them into lines and tell them where their hands can and can't be. Some of us mandate details of their dress and comportment. For Black and brown children, who are so rarely given the benefit of the doubt and who suffer disproportionately from their teachers' adultifying gaze, school can feel like a labyrinth of arbitrary rules and restrictions, a surveillance state in which something about their bodies is always wrong. We know the weathering effects this has on even very young children, and the alienation and self-hatred it can instill.

The type of classroom envisioned in the DESE guidance will inevitably feature greater policing of all children, and children of color will bear the brunt of this ramped-up intensity. Just for example, here are a few of the new regulations we might attempt to enforce among children as young as seven years old:

- Stay in your seat unless given permission to get up
- Face forward
- Keep your mask on
- Wait to eat until you are told (even though others may be eating already)
- Pay attention to our class only (even though we are co-located with other pods in a large shared space with no sound barrier)
- Stay three feet away from your peers (no chatting, whispering, touching, playing)
- No sports on the field

- Don't touch any materials that aren't yours
- Stay away from everyone else on the bus

None of these are developmentally appropriate, but we will be asked to maintain these conditions. Educators and other staff, already under tremendous pressure and stress, will come down hard on our wily little charges, and our implicit biases will ensure that we find Black and brown children less compliant and more defiant. We will judge their normal, impulsive childlike behavior more harshly than that of their white peers. We will not intend to be inequitable in our enforcement, but the impact, not the intention, is what matters. How do I know this will happen? *Because it's already happening.* If we listen closely to the testimony of generations of Black and brown children in our schools, we can hear them clearly expressing the ways in which their bodies, actions, and motivations are routinely mistrusted and pathologized by their teachers. A set of impossible-to-achieve guidelines for human behavior overlaid on top of this existing police state will be a disaster for all children, but especially for our children of color.

Difficulty of Creating Community in Hybrid Setting

We can expect that our schools will be operating on some sort of hybrid model for at least part of the upcoming year. Perhaps children will attend school only on certain days of the week, or parts of the day, or alternate weeks. Even if we are fully in-person, some children will end up joining remotely. So we embark on a bold new experiment: hybrid education, where we attempt to cohere a cohort of children, some of whom are in the physical space, and others who are joining from their bedrooms.

The concept of building community among a brand new, totally virtual class is daunting and I dread it. But I would argue that building community in a hybrid setting will be even more challenging. Plans have been floated such as assigning each typical elementary-sized class (20+) two adults, one of whom is responsible for in-person teaching while the other handles remote learning. Because students may shift back and forth between these two groups, the adults will necessarily need to work closely together and remain aligned despite some instruction being synchronous and some asynchronous. We will have to be vigilant to prevent competition and resentment from forming between the "at home" and "at school" kids. We will face pushback from families about who is getting what, who faces greater barriers, who has higher expectations. Creating a cohesive cohort of children, the way we were ultimately able to do with our all-virtual groups, will prove very difficult indeed.

Workload of Remote & In Person Instruction

This spring, we were instructed to provide some kind of academic content totaling three hours a day for students. Because three hours is only half the length of our shortest school days, some may have reached the conclusion that teachers were working at less than full capacity during the closure. This could not be further from the truth. Every teacher I know worked harder than we have ever worked before. We felt like first-year teachers all over again, learning on the fly and toiling late into the night, all while managing the demands of our own families and households at the same time. Teaching remotely is more than a full-time job. Any proposal that

asks educators to simultaneously manage both in-person and remote instruction is requiring us to perform two full-time jobs.

Good Teaching & Learning Requires Planning

One of the many reasons why virtual instruction this past spring lacked rigor and quality was that teachers had no time to plan. Excellent teaching and learning can only happen when educators have sufficient advance time to prioritize objectives, design meaningful assessments, and craft lessons that will help students to meet those objectives. We also need planning time after teaching each lesson in order to evaluate student understanding and adjust our subsequent instruction to meet the needs of the students in front of us. Without this thoughtful planning and recalibration, student learning can feel chaotic, shallow, and unaccountable.

Much has been written about the significant and devastating learning loss that students are experiencing right now. One of the main arguments for returning to in-person instruction is that continued virtual schooling will mean children simply don't learn anything for...another semester? A year? More? This prospect is terrifying and has severe ramifications, especially for students who were most impacted this past spring. But I would counter that if we squander the remainder of this summer on planning for the nearly infinite logistics of the COVID classroom, and spend the coming school year attempting (and failing) to implement those policies, we will have no time or energy left for planning meaningful instruction.

At Harvard's graduate schools, which [decided at the beginning of June](#) to hold classes online next year, instructors are already receiving individualized support in digital pedagogy and effective virtual learning so they can plan to do the best teaching possible under the circumstances. Will this instruction be inadequate compared to in-person teaching and learning? Absolutely! But at least it will be mindful and purposeful. CPS educators are desperate to get to work on the nitty-gritty details of planning curriculum and instruction for next year, and are eager to collaborate across schools to consolidate our resources and create a more consistent learning experience for children in our district. We need to be using these few precious weeks to sharpen our skills, create and finalize as much curriculum as we can ahead of time, and streamline our systems for working with children remotely so we can guarantee a smoother, clearer, more accountable experience for families next year. Instead, the summer is slipping out of our grasp. By August, if we are still operating in this limbo space of preparing for all possibilities, but prioritizing in-person teaching, our every waking moment will be occupied with minutiae like "where am I going to store all these tables, rugs, and beanbag chairs that are no longer allowed in my classroom?" and "how can we rearrange the entire school schedule so that every child can wash her hands before and after lunch?" Once school begins, planning for instruction will be an afterthought. Our brains will be entirely devoted to the daily ins and outs of managing an unmanageable system. If our goal is to prioritize student learning, the in-person path will not lead us there.

Managing Absences

Under normal conditions, any elementary class can expect to have at least one child absent every single day. During cold and flu season, it might be more like 4 or 5, absent often for days at a time. A not insignificant part of our job is keeping track of who has missed what, who needs to hear the lesson again, who will need support to finish up a project they're behind on, which Book Clubs need to pause in their reading because too many members missed the previous meeting, and so on. With a mix of students attending school in person and at home, and those groups potentially shifting continuously, and overlapping quarantines of individuals and groups, it would be an understatement to call the learning that will take place this year "interrupted." And this does not even take into consideration the impact of staff absences for illness, quarantine, or the care of family members who might be infected.

If we are always uncertain about who will be at school on which days, it will be impossible to plan any kind of significant work for students to do. Instead, we will have to rely on one-off lessons and worksheet type teaching that can be easily skipped over when students are absent. In an all-virtual setting, we have the capacity to teach in more meaningful, project-based, longer-term ways because we will have a much clearer sense of who will be present.

Staggering Everything = There is No Learning Time

School entrances and hallways are characterized by bottlenecks. With students pouring into the building at the morning bell, running out to recess at the same time, jamming into the cafeteria together at lunch, and rushing off to their buses in the afternoon, schools can resemble little highways with multiple daily rush hours. Rightfully, the DESE guidance suggests that schools stagger arrival, dismissal, meals, recesses, and any other high-traffic moments in the day to avoid overcrowding. Given social distancing requirements on school buses, this will necessarily have to happen in order to transport as many children as possible between home and school. And given that we can't ensure six feet of space between unmasked students as they eat breakfast and lunch, they simply can't all eat at the same time, even within one classroom.

So staggering will be necessary. But consider the effect this will have on learning time for students. With kids arriving in waves over the first hour or two of the school day, we would be unable to commence any whole-class learning as we wait for all students to arrive. But small-group and individual instruction will be significantly hampered by distance requirements. Therefore, teachers are likely to use those hours before all children have arrived to have students working independently. Lunch time, instead of taking 20 minutes, will take an hour. And if you believe that half the class will be able to sit still, masked, focusing on a lesson while classmates in every other seat bite into their delicious sandwiches and crinkle their bags of chips, you have not met elementary aged children. Recess presents a similar scheduling challenge. If only part of the group can be outside at any given time, what is the other part doing, and how does the staffing work so that time is spent meaningfully? The confusion continues at the end of the day, when staggered departures would lead to another hour or two that can't be spent on whole-group lessons.

There are certainly creative solutions that can be found to many of these challenges. Teachers and administrators are masters at hacking a schedule to make the impossible possible. But before we begin moving all the puzzle pieces around to try to make them fit, we might step back to consider what picture the puzzle would even display when completed. Is it worth the gymnastics involved for students to have what will amount to an hour or two of meaningful in-person instruction each day? Will the endless waiting and delays create a classroom environment that is conducive in any way to learning in those few precious hours?

Staffing

Our local union is currently in the process of conducting a more fine-grained survey of educators, but preliminary data show that about 60% of our faculty and staff would be either unable to attend in-person school, or only able to attend if they have childcare. Any school operating at 40% staff capacity would not have the capability to function, especially given that these circumstances will require *more* staff, not fewer.

The childcare piece is a catch-22. If schools can't open until teachers have childcare, but teachers won't have childcare until schools open, then we are stuck in limbo indefinitely. Even if schools open on a hybrid model, claiming to provide childcare, the logistics are maddening to contemplate. This is part of the problem with approaching re-opening on a district by district basis, instead of making decisions by region or state.

Let's take as an example a CPS teacher living in Watertown, with a two year old and a rising third grader at home, who is the sole provider of childcare for her kids. If Cambridge adopts a hybrid schooling model with cohort A attending Monday and Tuesday and cohort B attending Thursday and Friday, our teacher still needs to be physically present in the school building all day, four days a week. Meanwhile, let's say that Watertown decides to adopt a different model, where cohort A attends school Monday/Wednesday/Friday one week, then Tuesday/Thursday the following week, and cohort B follows the reverse pattern. The third grader gets assigned to cohort B. This teacher is now keeping track of an alternating schedule for her own child, somehow finding and paying for a childcare provider who can be present in her home on different days each week, paying for daycare for the toddler, and also tracking multiple cohorts of in-person and remote students for whom she is responsible. Then there is an outbreak at the third grader's school and it goes all-remote. Her childcare provider can't make up the days, so the teacher has to call out of work. Fortunately the two-year old still has daycare...until the daycare center shuts down, as many have been forced to do during the economic downturn. And so on.

Even in the unlikely event that every school in the state adopted identical models, teachers would still be in a childcare bind when our work schedules don't line up with our childcare needs. Any hybrid model demands that classroom teachers be in the building full time, while students are in the building part-time. This does not compute for teachers who are also parents.

There are other staffing concerns as well. Educator schedules are intentionally structured to provide breaks in the day for meetings, planning, communication with families, and our human needs. But in a school day dominated by the logistics of social distancing, cleaning, and disinfecting, in buildings suddenly understaffed, it's hard to see how any of that time or space could be maintained. Because many educators will necessarily be unable to enter the school buildings, the rest of us will need to be "all hands on deck" all the time. We might negotiate something that looks more humane on paper, but when it comes down to reality and the 11-year-olds in my cohort need to be supervised so that they maintain three feet of distance and keep their masks on and don't fight with each other while another adult sprays down every surface in my room with bleach and waits for the fumes to dissipate, am I really going to go blithely off to my lunch break? Furthermore, where would I even take my lunch break when every space in our school is now filled with small cohorts of children? I'd have to remove my mask to eat, and there's nowhere safe left to do that, so I'll just work through lunch and eat when I get home. Working conditions for educators are learning conditions for children. It will not be sustainable or healthy for our school communities to function with fewer adults and so many more demands.

Opportunity Hoarding

In a school system as diverse as ours, families with privilege (especially white and affluent families) frequently engage in opportunity hoarding: claiming the "best of the best" for their children. Opportunity hoarding can take many forms, from demanding extra meetings with a classroom teacher, to pushing for a student to be included in a certain class, school, program, or track. Families who opportunity hoard do not have ill intent toward less fortunate or less connected families. They perceive their advocacy as fighting for what is best for their child. The consequences of this behavior profoundly shape our system at every level.

So, how might opportunity hoarding manifest in the current context? It's a little hard to know, as this situation is unprecedented, and individual families are still determining which options are "best" for their children. But we can be certain that as soon as CPS comes out with a plan, our privileged families will decide what the most desirable options are and push for their children to be prioritized.

The vast majority of parents everywhere really want their kids to go back to school. Working from home, or not being able to go to work at all, is at best frustrating and at worst economically devastating. Parents are worried about their children's mental health and learning loss. They certainly do not have any desire to continue "teaching" third grade math and keeping track of their children's Zoom schedules. As educators, we understand this! Many of us are juggling our own children at home, as well as managing our online classes. No one believes this is a good way to do school. We realize that everyone is doing the best they can under incredibly trying circumstances.

Against this backdrop of stress and desperation, CPS is about to introduce options for families. The state, rightly, mandates that we provide the choice of remote instruction for families who

need it, and additional in-person or hybrid options as well. And any time choice is introduced into a system, families will begin jockeying for the most preferential positions. In this case, that might mean demanding that their child get an in-person spot in the school building, when another family might need it more. It might mean petitioning for an individualized plan for their child, tailored to their family's particular work schedule. It could look like opting in and out of in-person instruction according to their child's mood, requesting frequent 1:1 FaceTime calls with the teacher, composing long emails about their child's experience, hiring a tutor for their child and then asking the school to communicate with and provide materials specifically for the tutor, and other behaviors that make it difficult for teachers to distribute our time equitably.

Privileged families may push for schools to reopen completely, insisting that it is safe to do so, precisely because they and their children will be insulated from many of the riskier components. These families own cars and can drive, walk, or bike their children to school, avoiding the school bus and public transportation. They have jobs that will allow them flexibility to stay home with their children if there is an outbreak. They can pack their children lunch, masks and personal supplies so they won't need to touch anything from the school. When these families go in and out of their homes, they don't need to ride in a shared elevator or use door handles and bannisters that have been touched by many other people. They have room in their homes to isolate if a family member gets sick or needs to quarantine, and they are less likely to live with elders. They have good health insurance and access to medical care, and can confidently expect to be well cared for if they need treatment. For all these reasons and many more, these families--especially the white ones--are [less likely to contract COVID](#) and [less likely to die](#) from it.

Paradoxically, these same families are the ones who are best positioned to withstand the continued closure. They often have the flexibility to work remotely. They are typically native English speakers with high levels of educational attainment, and are able to support and supplement their children's schoolwork. Many have already hired private tutors to work with their children during the closure. They live in homes with access to outdoor spaces and can supervise their children's social-distance playdates. Quite a few have decamped to second homes this spring. Have they been just as miserable as everyone else? In many cases, yes! But remote learning is doable for these families.

Each family faces different circumstances, and as educators we are not in a position to advise families on which learning options they should choose for their children. But if privileged families take a moment to pause and consider the needs of the wider community before making a choice for their individual children, we may be better able to ensure safety and connectedness for all. What are the ways in which well-resourced families can leverage their assets to serve all the children in their schools? In this historical moment when liberal people are declaring their support for Black lives, how can white families allow Black, brown, and immigrant families to lead the conversations about reopening? How can we center the experiences and needs of community members such as school bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodial staff, who are disproportionately people of color?

These are just a few of the ways in which privileged families could help (or give up power) in the following models:

Remote	Hybrid or In-Person	In Any Scenario
• Organize inclusive WhatsApp parent groups to share communication. • Organize inclusive online playdates. • Offer tech support to other families in the class. • If getting private tutoring services for your child, ask the teacher which other students in the class could benefit from tutoring. Then invite those kids to join while you cover the costs. DO NOT form study groups exclusively made up of kids from privileged backgrounds. • Have extra supplies or technology? Offer them to other families in the class.	• If you have the flexibility to work from home, allow families without that flexibility to have their first choice of schedule. • Be consistent with your commitment to the school. If you have volunteered for your student to attend on certain days, follow through. • Offer to walk, drive, or bike to school with other families/children who do not have that capability. • Provide extra supplies (masks, sanitizer, soap, wipes) to classrooms. • Maintain social connections with kids in the class who need to learn remotely.	• Do not demand extra attention or accommodations for your child if you can get by without them. • If teachers are looking for input from families, is there a way for you to amplify the thinking of families who are not as well-represented? • Be mindful of your communication with educators: keep it brief! • Accept that this year will be less than ideal for everyone. • Think broadly when making requests or offering help: beyond just my child, how can I help the class? The grade? The school? The district?

Are We Doing This Just for Childcare?

When I consider the many risks and challenges inherent in this project of bringing children back to school buildings in the midst of the most serious global pandemic of the last century, my thinking veers in an existential direction. What is the point of school? Why do we gather in physical spaces? What constitutes learning? How does our economy consider (or disregard) the reality of children? What are our shared ethical responsibilities for the care of the children in our communities?

The bottom line is, there are many families in our district and state that must continue working in order to survive. There are many families who never *stopped* working, even at the height of the epidemic in our city. These are essential healthcare workers, but they are also shift workers with

no safety net, who are living paycheck to paycheck and can't afford to miss even a day's worth of income. And the children in these families cannot be left unsupervised. We already had a childcare crisis in this country before COVID, and it is greatly exacerbated now. It is our job to provide care and education to children. But in this catastrophic moment in our history, the *care* component may need to take precedence over the *education* component.

I submit that the main reason we are tying ourselves into knots trying to get kids back to "normal," the reason that the DESE guidelines are built around the goal of returning to school buildings, is that we know that our economy relies on childcare to keep going, and we are the providers of that childcare. There are many other deleterious effects of keeping kids out of school. There are profound impacts on physical and mental health. There are devastating learning losses that will be felt disproportionately by our most marginalized children. There are serious safety concerns in some homes that are often mitigated by adults in the school setting. But the central reason we are concerned about getting kids back to school is so that parents can go to work.

If we have clarity about this--that **our main purpose in this unprecedented moment is to provide a safe location for those children who need it during the workday**--then we should proceed accordingly. We shouldn't attempt to recreate an academically rich and meaningful in-person school experience for the maximum number of children. We should bifurcate our efforts:

1. Laser focus on creating safe, small cohorts of very young children whose families *need and want* CPS-provided childcare. Especially emphasize children under age 7, who cannot read independently and are unable to access anything remotely without a parent's constant assistance, children with moderate to severe disabilities, and new English speakers. Place these students in classrooms across the district (consider even using upper schools and the high school campus) with educators who are specialized in caring for young people. Prioritize placing educators in in-person settings who are able and willing to handle the increased risk (younger educators, those who are not caring for elderly parents, etc.). In these CPS-provided childcare facilities, offer full day, five day a week care. If these end up looking more like daycare or summer camp facilities than schools, so be it. Yes, we have a responsibility to ensure that academic gaps do not grow into chasms during this period, but meaningful instruction just may not be possible in these circumstances, and our first priority should be the *holistic well-being* of all our children, not just their academic growth or stagnation.

2. Grades 6-12, and as much of grades 2-5 as possible, should be held remotely. We should NOT ramp up the academic expectations for students from where they were last year, as is suggested in DESE guidelines, because we must avoid creating a two-tiered system in which some students receive more meaningful instruction than others, and because we are in the midst of a massive trauma during which one billion of the Earth's children are experiencing learning loss. It is not essential that students make significant academic progress during this period. It is essential that they feel safe, supported, connected, and engaged. Our educators are

getting better and better at achieving this from a distance, and the more time we are given now to plan, the better we will get. All families who are able to select this option should be encouraged to do so.

Like all of the possible plans for school year 2020-21, this is a terrible plan. It has many pitfalls, including:

- Families opting for in-person instruction may well be disproportionately low-income, Black and brown families who require childcare. Thus, our school buildings will become de facto segregated spaces. This will be harmful for the students who attend, and for the students who don't. It will likely mean that we are providing two entirely different educational and social experiences for different social classes of children. This is an equity disaster in the making.
- The particular populations that may most need to return to school, especially students with moderate to severe disabilities and very young children, require specialized staff to work with them. We cannot just re-assign a middle school PE teacher to teach Special Start, or a building math coach to be a one on one aide for a nonverbal autistic child. Do we have a sufficient number of staff members trained to work with these populations who aren't themselves caring for young children, and who are not medically vulnerable? Is it ethical to, for example, require staff who happen to teach little kids to return to work, while other faculty can stay home safely? At a minimum, any staff members who are asked to come back to buildings will need to be provided hazard pay and childcare subsidies for their own families.
- When we fail to offer in-person schooling as an option for all families, we are disproportionately [placing a burden on the shoulders of women everywhere](#). Women continue to be the primary caregivers (and homework-helpers, and snack-makers, and schedule-managers) in most homes, and moms who are trying to balance their careers and their children's remote schooling are paying a price (literally!) at work.

These are all very serious concerns with profound implications. But the fact is, we don't have a plan that will not cause harm. **We can only choose a plan that will cause the least harm.** We are attempting to construct an emergency policy on top of a system that already penalizes the most marginalized members, in a country that fails to provide a social safety net, under a government that has utterly failed to control--and has, in fact, exacerbated--a deadly pandemic. We cannot get this "right," we can only get it less wrong.

In Conclusion...It Didn't Have to Be This Way

Perhaps the most maddening and heartbreaking injustice of this catastrophe is that the situation we find ourselves mired in was avoidable. If ever we needed a time machine to travel back and make a different set of decisions, now is that moment. Returning to school in the pandemic IS possible, and we know this because [many other countries are doing it](#). But there is a key feature distinguishing our country from all the other nations that are managing to bring children back to

their school systems: they had functional school systems and social services before the pandemic hit. We did not.

COVID-19 has pulled back the curtain on so many failures of our society: our inadequate, for-profit health care system, our partisan politicization of truth, the white supremacy that continues to define our policies. Many Americans are finally recognizing for the first time that our schools have been serving less as educational institutions and more as life rafts. Our schools and teachers have, for decades, picked up the slack as our nation has systematically defunded and disenfranchised all the other components of a caring community. We have provided schooling, yes, but also nutrition, health care, counseling, social work, and--most critically--free childcare that allows the nation to abdicate all of its responsibilities to working families. We have done all this as federal and state budgets for public schooling have gradually diminished. We are expected to resolve all of the ills of a society that simply **does not value families**. And it's become blindingly obvious, in this moment of great crisis, what a cavernous hole in our social and economic fabric is left behind when schools are out of the picture.

We will not resolve this fundamental flaw by reopening our school buildings in the fall. Indeed, we will exacerbate it, by further spreading a deadly disease among the most vulnerable members of our population, by traumatizing our community and our children, by once again applying schools as a band-aid over a gaping wound. I wish, very sincerely, that this were not the case. Like every teacher I know, what I would love most of all is to return to work, embrace my sweet little scholars, and pick back up the momentous task of training our new generation of changemakers. **This is not what would happen**. We must take a different path. Our city, our state, and our nation depend on it.