

For months now I have understood that Oregon would not be quick to reopen public schools to in-person instruction. We would be cautious. However, as we have learned about coronavirus, as schools have steadily reopened elsewhere, and significant research has been conducted regarding COVID transmission in various settings, several findings should provide reassurance about the safety of reopening at this stage:

- Kids – especially young ones – acquire and transmit Coronavirus at lower rates than adults.
- The key to reopening a school safely is the same key to reopening other communal spaces and places of work: implementing a number of practical, and relatively inexpensive safety measures like distancing, masking, and open windows. While we may all desire state-of-the-art school buildings, we do not need building upgrades to reduce the risk of COVID transmission.
- To those who think such safety measures cannot work in a school setting, the evidence of what has actually occurred when schools open bely that.
 - A newly published analysis in the medical journal *Pediatrics*, found that among 90,000 North Carolina public school students receiving in-person instruction during the pandemic, there were zero cases of child-to-adult transmission in schools. The study was designed before schools opened and involved thorough contact tracing of cases. (<https://www.aappublications.org/news/2021/01/08/covid-north-carolina-schools-study-010821>)
 - And in research conducted by the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice epidemiologists looked at the effects of school reopenings on COVID spread by analyzing COVID hospitalization rates prior to and after school openings. They found that in counties with fewer than 36 to 44 hospitalizations per 100,000 people prior to opening, COVID-19 hospitalizations did not increase when [schools] opened fully in-person or with a hybrid model. Based on Oregon Health Authority data, Multnomah County’s hospital admission rates have consistently been lower than the range at which this research showed no observable effect on hospitalizations. (<https://www.reachcentered.org/publications/the-effects-of-school-reopenings-on-covid-19-hospitalizations>)

The vast majority of epidemiologists – the experts in this space — encourage prioritizing reopening of schools because of these facts: the risks associated with reopening with safety measures are low; on the other hand, risks from continuing to provide remote-only instruction are high. Oregon’s public school kids in districts that remain virtual are missing valuable and quality instruction time and falling further behind peers in reopened public districts and private schools. This is not just a matter of a “few months” or a slight decrease in the amount kids will learn this year. Our school district’s virtual learning model doesn’t even begin to approximate a normal school year. We have second and third graders in our district who are barely asked to put pencil to paper (because that can’t be done on a computer!) – in years when mastering writing should be a major focus of their school work.

Further, you cannot easily make up for the social and developmental milestones that are being missed and the importance of interacting with their peers in person. Kids are suffering physically and mentally languishing at home. <https://cnn.com/2020/09/11/health/covid-school-closings-depression-suicide-study-trnd/index.html> Whether or how many Oregon children will die of suicide, abuse, accidental injury, or even COVID-19 as a result of school closure also remains to be seen. As many families continue to rely on informal, unregulated networks of care within and outside the home, children are less safe not only psychologically but also physically than they would be in a classroom where distancing and masking are enforced.

The Governor's relaxation of restrictions to open schools was a needed step. And despite all of the alarmist reporting, Oregon is doing well. Our mandatory mask mandate and other limitations have kept our COVID infection rates and hospitalization rates well below most of the rest of the country. Those mandates and restrictions should be kept in place while schools safely reopen. In a way, I am glad teachers and school staff are being prioritized for vaccination as well, but vaccinating these groups should not be a prerequisite to returning to school buildings. Teachers and school staff as well as people in many other professions have been working safely and successfully without vaccines for months. What is needed are safety precautions, not the vaccines, for schools to operate safely with low risk to staff, teachers, students and the community.

Please, please keep **children** (not an unreasonable level of fear, not the desires of unions who are prioritizing their own political interests over the needs of children) at the center of decision-making. Please honor our kids' right to an adequate public education. Please do everything in your power to help ensure that our public schools open swiftly and safely.

Melissa Oliver-Janiak

Parent, 2 elementary-aged children in Portland Public Schools