

“No, I’m not okay. I’m dying.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I hate this,” he said, not angrily, just totally defeated.

That was the exchange this morning when I saw my 7th grade son visibly upset looking at his computer screen and listening to his teacher, and I started by asking him, “Are you okay?”

The American Association of Pediatrics (AAP) again called for a return to in-person schooling on January 5th in a written release, ““Children absolutely need to return to in-school learning for their healthy development and well-being.” (<https://www.aappublications.org/news/2021/01/05/covid-school-safety-010521>). As has been documented over and over, AAP also reiterated that in that release that “schools are not significant drivers of SARS-CoV-2 transmission.”

The words “absolutely need” I have underscored above. The AAP is not saying “should” or “if possible” or “if the teacher’s union agrees.” Rather, the AAP says school opening is something children “absolutely need.”

Schools have not been open for almost a year now. The rest of essential workers, including my daughter who is a senior in high school, goes to work three to four days per week to serve the people who rely on her. That’s what being part of society is. The hospitals and grocery stores are not shut down. That would be unconscionable. The schools – which have been shown over and over to be safe -- are shut down. That is unconscionable. Yes, people at my daughter’s store have needed to quarantine, and stores in other cities have had to manage around temporary shut-downs. That is part of life amid the pandemic – it is simply what people figure out and manage. No one has said that society wide we should stop allowing people to come purchase food in person. For my essential worker daughter, who wants to be back in school so badly, how can society justify that a high-school senior serves you (putting her and my family at risk while she serves you) but you will not open schools to meet her and my son’s needs?

I know that you believe you have been “careful” when it comes to the virus, but instead you have been anything but careful when it comes to protecting the mental health and well-being of our children. You have been reckless, cavalier, and neglectful of their needs. Risks to society are not one-dimensional, even in a pandemic. Everything but the children has been prioritized, and the damage and risks to children has escalated and compounded. They don’t have a union to back them. They don’t vote. They don’t make campaign contributions. You can pretend each anecdote of children suffering is an isolated instance, you can fail to account for the multitudes of struggling parents and families who feel too helpless and hopeless to even bother to write you or speak up, but ultimately whether you stand up for the children will be a matter of record. Data has shown over and over that schools can be opened safely and that in-school transmission is minimal as the AAP stated above. Oregon is not leading nationally and tight-rope walking on the edge of uncertainty. Rather, Oregon is following in the wake of what is now well-established and understood about safe school reopening, and yet, amazingly, Oregon is still dragging its feet and lagging behind.

Why not wait? Why not delay until next academic year (or even later)? Because this decision to shut down schools has been wrong since last autumn, and it is only unfounded fear, willful ignorance, self-interest, and lack of resolve that is stopping what is right and what preserves health and life for society in aggregate from taking place. Keeping schools closed is not being “cautious,” it is being reckless and harming children. As Nikolas Kristof wrote in the NT Times (11/18/2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/18/opinion/coronavirus-school-closures.html>):

“Dropouts live shorter lives, so while the virus kills, so do school closures. One study this month estimated that closures of primary schools in the United States will cause many more years of life lost, because of increasing numbers of dropouts, than could be saved even if schools did spread the virus freely.”

-- Even if. Transmission in schools has been shown to be minimal over and over, but “even if.”

Yung-Yu Ma