No More Teachers, No More Books

As the summer of 2020 drew to a close, parents, teachers, and students across the nation wondered what schooling would look like in the fall given the continued impacts of COVID-19. A primary question was if and when schools would open for face-to-face instruction. It was clear that, no matter what decision was made, some individuals and groups would experience significant hardship. While many schools opted for a virtual start to the semester, many also decided to begin their school year in person.

Many parents were and continue to be concerned about the health and safety of their children. In response to these concerns, people often claim that spread of the virus to and from children is rare. They point to studies which seem to support the conclusion that children are at low risk.[1] The sample sizes in such studies are often small, and evidence running counter to this conclusion abounds in the U.S.. In multiple states, for example, summer camps had to shut down because an overwhelming number of campers tested positive for coronavirus.[2] [3] While many international reports suggest that coronavirus has not killed any children, this is unfortunately untrue of the United States. Even if deaths are rare among children, we do know that it is possible for them to suffer severe organ damage, including brain damage.[4] Moreover, some viruses have symptoms that only show themselves much later in life (e.g., childhood chickenpox producing shingles cases). Coronavirus cases might appear mild in children, but we don't yet know enough about this virus to know what might happen down the road. Furthermore, even if parents grant that children are at low risk, the fact remains that COVID-19 clearly can be spread between adults who can suffer and die from it. 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 their educational delivery method in the fall.[5] This includes teachers who are immunocompromised or those who have immunocompromised loved ones for whom they care. Continued employment, especially during a recession, is a compelling force. Many people can't afford to quit their jobs.

On the other hand, there is a recognized need for children to have formal education. Some argue that students have already experienced a developmental setback when classes transitioned online this past March.[6] This burden has fallen especially on the shoulders of already vulnerable populations, such as BIPOC students and students with special needs. Additionally, in many cases, parents can't constantly be the full-time caregivers for their children. Some jobs can't be done from home, and parents who work those jobs need a place for their children to go where they will be safe and fed. Many of these people are already suffering financial hardship, and they pay taxes to fund schools.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Was it morally permissible to open up schools for face-to-face instruction under the circumstances?

2. Who should be or should have been involved in discussions about the reopening of schools? What principles should be used to make decisions?

3. Is there a meaningful difference between the way the decision to reopen is made by public schools as opposed to private or independent schools?

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[1] RIVM, "Children and COVID-19"
[2] FOX23, "85 campers and staff test positive for COVID-19 at YMCA summer camp"
[3] FOX13 Memphis, "Coronavirus outbreak at Missouri summer camp infects at least 82 campers, counselors, staff"
[4] CDC, "COVID-19–Associated Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children"
[5] The New York Times, "Teachers Push Back on Reopening In Florida"
[6] Salon, "As school closures continue, students could face long-term learning setbacks"