

Until teachers feel safe, widespread in-person K-12 schooling may prove impossible in US

July 16 2020, by Michael Addonizio

Safely resuming in-person instruction at U.S. public schools is important for the [academic, physical, emotional and social well-being of children](#) and their families. It's also a key factor for the nation's [economic recovery](#).

But in mid-July, despite [considerable pressure from the Trump administration](#), many school systems around the nation had announced that they didn't yet believe that anything close to resembling a traditional schedule would be feasible before the 2020-21 school year starts. Many school districts, including those in [Los Angeles, San Diego](#) and [Houston](#), three of the nation's largest, were planning to be fully online.

Others, such as those serving [New York City](#) and [Clinton, Mississippi](#), currently plan to follow hybrid approaches that combine distance learning and in-person learning. The goal in those cases is to reduce the spread of coronavirus by keeping students several feet apart from each other at all times and the only way to do that is to have fewer children in school at any given time.

Some states, including [Florida](#), are trying to demand that local school systems at least offer families a chance for in-person daily instruction. But it's unlikely that all schools in those states will have on-site instruction, especially in [COVID-19 hotspots](#).

[Pressure from teachers](#) has contributed to decisions to refrain from holding classes in person everywhere from [Southern California](#) to

[Northern Virginia](#). Based on my research regarding [educational leadership and school policies](#), I believe that those moves reflect how teachers are insisting that schools only be reopened once staff and student safety can be more assured.

Concerns expressed

In June, a survey of the members of the [American Federation of Teachers](#), a union with [1.6 million members](#), found that only 21% of K-12 teachers preferred to resume school on a traditional schedule. Another 42% supported a hybrid approach combining in-person and distance learning and 29% wanted to continue with distance learning exclusively and the rest didn't express a preference.

Fully 62% of the teachers responding to the survey expressed concerns over school safety tied to the COVID-19 pandemic.

One reason for this trepidation is demographic. More than 1 in 4 of the nation's [3.7 million public school teachers](#) are [50 years old or older](#). That means they have a high [risk of getting severe symptoms](#) if they contract COVID-19.

Countless other teachers live with someone who is in a high-risk category due to their age or have underlying conditions that put them at a greater risk should they get sick.

A recent effort to at least bring teachers together while they taught young students online over the summer didn't bode well. [Three teachers shared a classroom](#) at an Arizona public school. Although all three wore masks and gloves, used hand sanitizer and socially distanced, they all got infected with the coronavirus. One of them, who was 61, died in June.

Even experts do not yet have a good understanding of the likely risks

tied to [reopening K-12 school buildings](#). Much remains unknown about the degree to which kids, who appear to be [unlikely to develop COVID-19 symptoms](#), can spread the coronavirus. It's unclear whether the [heating and cooling systems](#) in school buildings function adequately enough to rely on during a pandemic. And no one knows how the [alternative scheduling scenarios](#) taking shape might affect student and staff safety since for the most part they are unprecedented.

Greater clout

This pushback from teachers is in keeping with a recent wave of mass mobilization by educators.

In 2018 and 2019, tens of thousands of public school teachers, both unionized and not, walked out of their classrooms. In states like Kentucky, Arizona, California and Illinois, they protested low salaries, large class sizes and cuts to school budgets that have forced many teachers to spend their own money on classroom materials.

From these walkouts, some statewide and others limited to specific school districts, teachers won better pay and working conditions. They also garnered [considerable public support](#) that may have bolstered educators' [political clout](#) in decisions being made about how to carry on with K-12 schooling in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

Major consequences

Teaching is challenging in the best of times. Now teachers are being asked and told to do more than ever: prepare in-person, online and hybrid lessons, allay students' anxieties, and risk their own and their families' health while serving students and families, often in communities where the pandemic isn't anywhere near under control.

Should school systems not heed teacher safety concerns, there's a risk that large numbers of educators [might retire early or quit](#) until conditions are safer.

A wave of resignations could have major consequences for school quality. [Teacher experience makes a big difference](#), in terms of both measured student achievement and student behavior. And replacing them with inexperienced substitute teachers and others far less qualified and issued emergency credentials would surely take a toll on the quality of education children get, whether it happens online or in classrooms.

In my view, the educational costs of losing scores of veteran teachers over personal health concerns would be incalculable.

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