

CDC's new school guidelines play down risk, play up attendance

Enlarge / WASHINGTON, DC – JULY 2: Dr. Robert Redfield, Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), removes his protective mask before speaking.

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The Trump administration has been pushing for a return to normal behavior even as the number of COVID-19 cases in the United States has shot up to new records. Central to that effort has been a push to reopen schools in the fall, which would normally begin in a bit over a month. It's a push that has been resisted by a number of major school districts and has been met with major skepticism among the public. And it's one that hasn't necessarily seemed consistent with the US government's own advice, provided by the Centers for Disease Control.

That's led to a conflict between the administration and the CDC. Trump has said he disagrees with what he termed the CDC's "very tough and expensive" guidelines, and he was joined by the Department of Education in threatening to pull funding

from schools that don't open. Those CDC guidelines advised schools to improve their remote offerings, emphasized that the decision to reopen should be under local control, and discussed the reasons why schools should consider temporary shutdowns even if they start the school year as normal.

A temporary truce saw the CDC directed to issue updated guidelines for schools. Those arrived yesterday and were discussed by the CDC's director, Robert Redfield, at a press conference today. Overall, the updated material retains some of the original documents—including one that terms a resumption of normal school activities “highest risk.” But there are substantial additional materials that emphasize the value of restarting school and describe in detail the lower risks that the pandemic poses for young students.

A little old, but a lot new

The earlier documents had been issued in mid-May and at least some of those have been retained in a place of prominence on the guideline's new landing page. This includes advice on how to prepare schools for a return of students. The document describes normal school activities as “highest risk,” in contrast with remote education, which falls in the “lowest risk” category. This also includes advice that probably falls in the “very tough and expensive” category that the president was unhappy with, such as modifying classroom layouts to allow greater distancing, installing physical barriers, and extensive cleaning and disinfecting.

But newer documents, such as one directed at school administrators, have a clear change in emphasis. It still has a heavy dose of best practices, like wearing face masks, enabling social distancing for students, and extensive disinfection. But there are now large sections about the “Critical Role of Schools,” which indicates that “[t]he unique and critical role that schools play makes them a priority for

opening and remaining open, enabling students to receive both academic instruction and support as well as critical services.”

If that weren't enough, further down in the document, there's a section entitled “Why is it Important to Open Schools for In-Person Instruction?” That's followed by “Schools play a critical role in supporting the whole child, not just the academic achievement of students.” All told, about a quarter of the 5,000 word document is spent on text that promotes the importance of opening schools for in-person instruction.

Beyond that, the document includes an extensive section on how COVID-19 affects those in the school-aged population, noting that they account for 6.6 percent of the COVID-19 cases but a very small fraction of the deaths. It also cites some tentative data about children being somewhat less likely to transmit the disease. All of this is accurate, but it's also an area where high-quality data on many of the issues is sparse, and different countries have seen different outcomes based on a combination of local conditions and factors that remain unidentified.

A slide into advocacy

There is still good information here—the checklist for parents and accompanying decision-making tool both do an excellent job of providing information in an easy-to-digest form that should allow parents to feel more confident that they've considered all the relevant information they need when managing risks for their children.

But it's now mixed in with an overt push for reopening schools. There's now an entire document entitled “The Importance of Reopening America's Schools this Fall.” In contrast to most other CDC documents on this topic, which focus on providing information that parents and school administrators should consider, this one reads like advocacy.

It barely discusses risks but includes passages like the following:

The best available evidence indicates if children become infected, they are far less likely to suffer severe symptoms. Death rates among school-aged children are much lower than among adults. At the same time, the harms attributed to closed schools on the social, emotional, and behavioral health, economic well-being, and academic achievement of children, in both the short- and long-term, are well-known and significant.

...

The best available evidence from countries that have opened schools indicates that COVID-19 poses low risks to school-aged children, at least in areas with low community transmission, and suggests that children are unlikely to be major drivers of the spread of the virus. Reopening schools creates opportunity to invest in the education, well-being, and future of one of America's greatest assets—our children—while taking every precaution to protect students, teachers, staff and all their families.

The contrast is jarring. The first quote, which minimizes the risks of opening schools, is the only place in the document where risk is considered.

How this happened became apparent during the press conference that introduced the material. There, Erin Sauber-Schatz, who leads a CDC COVID-19 task force, emphasized that opening schools *shouldn't be* a simple decision, as it's one that comes with benefits and risks. She mentioned that, as a mom, she's "heartbroken" about the number of people under the age of 18 that have died of COVID-19 in the United States and emphasized that the risks are even higher for teachers and staff.

CDC director Robert Redfield emphasized that society as a

whole has to play a key role in limiting the pandemic, and he discussed how indications that an area was suffering from high levels of infections should be used to determine that keeping schools open would likely be unsafe.

But...

All of that is reasonable and in keeping with prior CDC approach to the issue. But the two were joined by Deputy Secretary of Education Mitchell Zais, who had a radically different message. “President Trump is leading a great American recovery, and part of that is getting students back to school,” he told reporters, going on to say “the default should be schools fully open.” He unequivocally said that the science indicates it’s “healthier and safer for children” to have schools open, and so it’s “not if it should be done, but how it must be done.”

But Zais’ respect for the research is limited. Back in the spring, there was almost no data on the spread of SARS-CoV-2 among school-aged kids or how COVID-19 affected them. Yet Zais said schools that shut in response to its spread “failed their students.” Zais went on to echo Trump’s threat that school systems that aren’t open for in-person instruction wouldn’t receive federal funding. (Trump has now at least modified that threat to acknowledge the CDC’s judgement that schools in areas with high levels of infections will need to close.)

The impression the press conference left is that some documents or sections of the new documents had been written by the Department of Education, rather than the CDC.

Developing these documents even under normal circumstances would have been challenging. In-person schooling clearly is very important to the health and development of children, but that has to be balanced against the known risks and significant unknowns regarding the spread and impact of COVID-19 in both the children and teachers. But the end result

in this case is a discussion in which the balancing of these risks has been heavily skewed in favor of an outcome that's the product of a political campaign that desires a return to normalcy. And that not only serves the US public poorly but threatens to damage the long-term credibility of the CDC by making it seem like just another campaign tool.

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