NEPC
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Newsletter

To Reopen or Not to Reopen: Equity-Related Arguments For and Against Resuming In-Person Instruction This Fall

To reopen or not to reopen schools for in-person instruction? That's the question that educators, parents and policymakers have been struggling with for much of the summer, as the coronavirus pandemic continues to ravage the nation. Unfortunately, parents and educational leaders are now attempting to ascertain the least bad of several options. It is possible to identify arguments for and against each approach—especially when it comes to the equity-related concerns that have grown more prominent during this difficult time. In this newsletter, we consider how some NEPC Fellows have struggled with these concerns as they apply to the resumption of in-person instruction versus the alternative of keeping campuses closed. First, we list three equity-related reasons to reopen. Next, we list three equity-related reasons to remain closed.

Three Equity-Related Reasons to Reopen

1. **School buildings and educators provide in-person services that extend above and beyond academics, especially for our most vulnerable students.** "Schools play a critical role in the lives of children beyond the delivery of instruction," writes NEPC Fellow Carol Burris, who has opined in favor of reopening of schools—albeit very cautiously if the conditions allow. As a high school principal on Long Island, Burris, who has since retired to work as a public education advocate, says she called child protective services on a monthly basis while also working daily with counselors and social workers to respond to mental illness, drug dependency, parental illnesses, and other challenges that are more difficult to detect and address without in-person

contact. Before, during, and after class, school buildings themselves are a respite for students whose homes are chaotic or violent or even just too crowded to provide a quiet place to study. In lower-income neighborhoods, the food, healthcare, and other services that schools provide are essential to the health and well-being of children and their families. Although schools have made valiant efforts to continue to offer these services during the pandemic, some are difficult, expensive, or impossible to provide when buildings are closed. "Students at risk," Burris writes, "can easily slip through cracks."

2. **Remote instruction only fills some of the needs that are usually met by public education—and some families have access to better options than others when it comes to filling the gap.** Prime among those needs is in-person supervision. In a handful of states, it is illegal to leave your children home alone until they reach a certain age. The law aside, most parents would hesitate to leave children unsupervised alone at home—especially younger ones. Then, there's the related issue of monitoring students to make sure they stay on task with their schoolwork, responding to questions that arise about assignments, and other needs that are challenging to meet without in-person instruction. Most parents have to work to support their families. Even those who can work from home—a group that is disproportionately affluent and white—are not available to serve as surrogate teachers because they're busy with their own jobs. Enter the much publicized and much debated phenomenon of "pods"—small groups of parents who band together and (usually) hire full-time teachers who instruct their children outside of school. With price tags that can be in the $25,000 range, this option is simply not affordable to most families. "[T]he pandemic pods are teaching us one more crucial lesson: cavernous societal inequality creates opportunity gaps for children and is exacerbated in times of crisis," writes NEPC Director Kevin Welner, a professor of education at the University of Colorado Boulder. "The pods indeed stand as a clear example of what sociologist Charles Tilly described as opportunity hoarding, where the advantaged use their resources to secure more advantage for themselves and their families or 'cliques.'" Rather than criticize the parents (or "Pod People") who use their resources to safely advance their children's education, Welner holds up their approach as an example for policymakers to follow—and to fund. Such public funding is needed in order to scale up the pod idea, and also because equity demands it. Although some pods are offering so-called "diversity slots" to students who could not otherwise afford to participate, NEPC Fellow Prudence Carter cautions that this could be less than comfortable for the beneficiaries. "What are you going to do socially and culturally to make sure that that child feels deeply included?" asks Carter, the Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California Berkeley.

3. **Access to technology is inequitable.** Although near ubiquitous in households that earn $100,000 annually or more, home broadband internet access is unavailable to approximately 4 in 10 families with incomes under $30,000. Households earning under $30,000 are also significantly less likely to have home computers. Effective remote instruction relies on both these things. While school districts have handed out millions of devices and worked to bring WiFi to families that can't afford it, they still have a way to go. During the sudden shift to remote instruction this spring, educators in high-poverty districts were less likely to offer online instruction to all students,

and the instruction was less likely to be synchronous. Perhaps as a result, teachers in high-poverty districts reported a larger share of their students were missing in action and could not be reached. They were more likely to say that a lack of access to technology was a major challenge. "It's the same story we've long known in K-12 schools," said NEPC Fellow Janelle Scott, a professor at the University of California Berkeley. "Districts with more resources are likely going to be able to avail themselves of higher quality instruction."

Three Equity-Related Reasons to Remain Closed

1. **COVID-19 is disproportionately sickening and killing Black, Indigenous, and Latinx Americans.** The death rate for Black Americans, for example, is more than twice than the rate for White Americans. Although children and youth of all races are less likely to suffer serious consequences of the disease, they can spread it to older family members and friends. Additionally, Latinx and Black children are five to eight times more likely than White children to be hospitalized with COVID-19. "[Black people's] risk is tied to our limited access to quality health care," wrote NEPC Fellow Gloria Ladson-Billings when the pandemic first hit the United States.

   > We are less likely to receive a COVID-19 test even if we present with symptoms . . . We are more economically vulnerable so we are likely to risk going to work or taking on side hustles like shared ride gigs (Uber, Lyft) and food delivery to make ends meet,

   added Ladson-Billings, who is president of the National Academy of Education and Professor Emerita at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. NEPC Fellow William Tate, the Provost of the University of South Carolina, noted that Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people are also more likely to suffer from pre-existing conditions such as hypertension or diabetes that can exacerbate the consequences of the disease. "Historically, we say, 'When White America catches a cold, Black America catches pneumonia!,'" Ladson-Billings wrote presciently in March, well before data revealed the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on people of color. "COVID-19 is scary by any measure but it is especially scary for Black folks."

2. **Schools in lower income communities with higher percentages of students of color have fewer resources to keep students safe at school.** School districts that serve larger percentages of students of color and students from low-income families receive less funding. Yet the cost of safely reopening schools with in-person instruction is expensive—about $30 billion in unanticipated expenses according to an estimate from the Council of Chief State School Officers. "The provision of health services, additional health supervision, these ideally would involve adding significant additional staff to be able to check on kids, to be able to provide support," said NEPC Fellow Bruce Baker, a professor in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. Other potential expenses may include improving ventilation, purchasing personal protective equipment, and maintaining social distancing by placing fewer students in each classroom, school bus, or building. If schools lack the funding to im-

plement these measures, they risk putting students and employees at greater risk of contracting and spreading the virus.

3. **Schools' low-income employees and employees of color are more likely to have high-risk jobs.** Across industries, including K-12 and higher-education institutions, low-income people and people of color are more likely to have jobs that cannot be done from home. That means that even if some employees with health concerns are offered the opportunity to continue to telecommute when in-person learning resumes, the staff members who clean the hallways, prepare the food, or repair the furnace may not have that option. "Being required to come to campus more frequently and interact with other workers and students therefore places employees of color and the family members with whom they live at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19," NEPC Fellow Shaun Harper testified before U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Investment in July. "Campus reopening plans must consider the racial stratification of the workforce, specifically the health implications for employees of color and lower-income essential workers." Harper, a professor of business and urban leadership at the University of Southern California and the current president of the American Educational Research Association, was referring to higher education, but the same concerns apply to K-12 education, where teachers and administrators, who are disproportionately middle class and White, are better able to do their jobs from home than are school bus drivers, cafeteria workers, or custodians, who earn less money and are more likely to be people of color.

In the end, many districts and schools may adopt a hybrid approach, offering students and their families the option of participating in in-person instruction or remaining at home. These hybrid approaches may, in fact, carry even more risk because it removes the insulated, consistent group of peers during the "off" days. However, even when options exist, some families may be better able to exercise choice than others, given their incomes, health histories, and other factors that impact equity. Many low-income parents may, for instance, feel compelled to send their children to school because they can't afford childcare. We all need to keep equity in mind, regardless of which alternatives are available.

NEPC Resources on Equity and Social Justice

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