

Should Schools Reopen In-Person During the COVID-19 Pandemic? An Educator's Perspective (Part One)

The opinions expressed in this piece are solely my own, based on my own science and health background and experiences as a classroom teacher and instructional coach, and do not express the views or opinions of my school district or the Knowles Teacher Initiative. However, I do hope my words resonate with you by providing an educator's perspective. I do not claim to have the same experience as every educator, but believe my thoughts will be shared by many educators.

Part One: I am an Educator, and I am Concerned about Schools Reopening In-Person

Across the nation, the discussion continues: Should schools in the United States reopen in person for the 2020-2021 school year during the COVID-19 pandemic? I find that much of the dialogue around this issue comes from politicians, doctors, and parents, all of whom have a legitimate opinion. However, I think we need first and foremost to listen to *educators*, who will be on the ground and are the experts in what effective classroom instruction looks like and what will best support our students. I am an educator, and I am concerned about schools reopening this year. I want to make sure educator voices get a larger stake in this conversation.

I have taught high school biology for eight years and have been an instructional coach for three years in New Jersey. In college, I majored in biology and minored in public health, and have taken advanced-level coursework in the areas of virology and epidemiology. I am always learning more and improving my own practice, but I can speak with expertise towards the public health concerns from my science background, and can speak to educational concerns from my years of experience in education. There may not be straightforward answers to all of the questions and concerns raised in this post; I want to generate discussion and express my concerns, which are based on current public health data, current social distancing recommendations, other information from reputable organizations ([see resources here](#)), and my perspectives and experience as a classroom teacher and instructional coach.

Remote learning for educators and students was not easy, but we made it work.

In March 2020, New Jersey schools were forced to close for the remainder of the school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our state was one of the hardest hit

in the initial COVID-19 outbreak, and it was a very difficult time for all of us. Teachers who I coached were asked to pivot from traditional instruction to remote learning literally overnight. Our instructional coach team worked hours of overtime in order to train ourselves in the technology so that we were able to best support our teachers. We quickly shifted our roles from partnering with teachers around classroom instruction to becoming technology coaches.

Transitioning to the uncharted territory of pandemic emergency remote learning was not easy. Classrooms became virtual “voids” where teachers were teaching to a screen of students’ “icons” or a few video screens of students instead of having their classrooms buzzing with excitement. There were technology glitches, where students’ assignments would get lost. Home internet issues caused teachers’ computers to crash during live video lessons with students, preventing them from showing their planned lesson materials. Teachers with young children balanced teaching kindergarten lessons to their own children while teaching live lessons on the computer to high school students. Some students fell off the radar, and we needed to check in and make sure they were ok. It was a struggle, but we made the best of it.

There were successes. A group of special education students I worked with thrived in this new environment, and felt they had more of a voice in the virtual classroom. Many virtual classrooms held engaging virtual discussions and debates. Music teachers digitally edited individual student videos into a full ensemble performance. Science teachers recorded live video demonstrations of a lab experiment using at-home ingredients. Culinary students learned to cook at home and adapted recipes for what was already in their pantry. I am in awe of how amazingly our teachers handled this situation. Many teachers dove into this uncharted territory, trying out new techniques and figuring out ways to replicate the in-person lessons in this new virtual world. Administrators worked around the clock to support their staff and students. Technology departments worked tirelessly to ensure equity of access to technology by providing students in need with Wi-Fi or devices. It was an emergency situation, and we made it work, but everyone put in many extra hours and made sacrifices in order to do this.

In order to reopen schools, the benefits of in-person instruction need to outweigh the COVID-19 risk, and they do not.

In my professional opinion, the number one priority when determining whether to

reopen schools in person is whether the benefits of in-person instruction outweigh the risks of staff or students contracting COVID-19. I argue that in-person instruction in a socially distanced classroom will not be as effective as remote learning. This is because social distancing and mask-wearing, along with other public health measures, will alter the effectiveness of research-based teaching strategies that are used during in-person teaching and learning. Obviously, nothing is going to be as effective as “normal” school, but there is no more “normal school” as we knew it pre-COVID, and it will not look that way again until we have a vaccine (or reach herd immunity) as a country, which will take a year or more. Since “normal” school is out of the equation, I believe the second best option is remote learning with a virtual school day for all. This would protect the health of our students and staff, and would allow for more effective teaching strategies to be accomplished better than in the socially distanced classroom.

In [part two](#) of this blog post, I will discuss in more detail my public health concerns for school reopening and in part three, I will discuss my concerns about pedagogy as well as social and emotional learning.