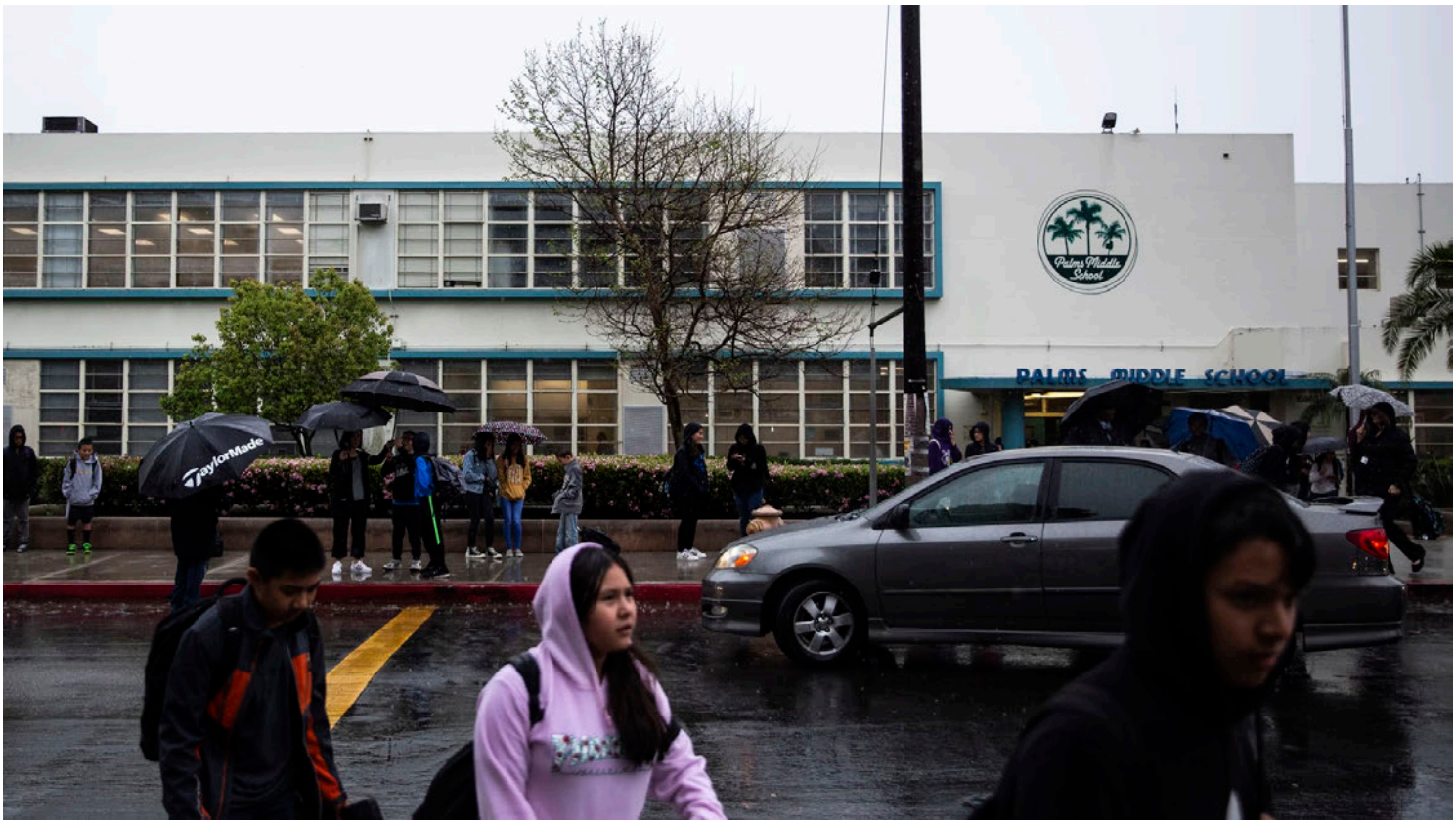
IDEAS

Closing the Schools Is Not the Only Option

Districts can give parents some flexibility while implementing stronger mitigation measures.

By Erika Christakis and Nicholas A. Christakis



Students leave Palms Middle School in Los Angeles, on Thursday, March 12, 2020. Facing pressure from parents, conflicting messages from experts and initial silence from the federal government, superintendents began making their own decisions to close. The Los Angeles Unified School District, the largest in California, announced on Friday that it was closing. (Jenna Schoenefeld / The New York Times / Redux)

MARCH 16, 2020

SHARE AS GIFT SAVE

As part of a national effort to mitigate the worst effects of the coronavirus, at least 56,000 schools have closed, are scheduled to close, or have closed briefly and then reopened, affecting at least 29.5 million public-school students in the United States. Even more school districts will no doubt close in the near future.

But outright suspension of the school year or business as usual is not necessarily the only option. Districts can allow parents the flexibility to choose what's best for their family while redoubling their mitigation efforts in schools.

There are two kinds of school closures: reactive and proactive. In the former, a school closes upon discovery of a case of the coronavirus among the students, staff, or parents. This is relatively uncontroversial, and most people feel it is sensible to close the school for a period of time, to limit the outbreak. Mathematical models and empirical analyses of reactive closures in past pandemics show that closing schools reduces the total number of cases in the community by about 25 percent and postpones the peak of the pandemic by a week or two, which is helpful.

In the proactive case, a school closes before the disease even reaches its doors. Strictly from the point of view of reducing the number of deaths, proactive school closure makes sense: Rigorous analyses show that proactive closure is one of the most beneficial interventions that can be employed to reduce the impact of epidemic disease. One of the main ways proactive closure works is by radically decreasing social

interactions in a community. It has this effect even if, as in the case of the coronavirus, children are relatively spared by the pathogen, in part precisely because it forces parents to stay home.

But proactive closures are hard for officials to justify, given the economic and social disruption. School closures burden working parents—and, in particular, health-care workers, who are suddenly overwhelmed with domestic cares when we need them most in the public realm. Kids also miss subsidized meals or the opportunity to spend time in a safe environment.

Families—and teachers, who may have families of their own—vary in their desires about school closures. Some may find them nearly impossible to manage. Others, including a sizable number of first-generation immigrant families, have grandparents or other elder relatives in the home who can provide child-care support in the event of school closures. (These relatives are also more at risk of serious health consequences if they are exposed to the coronavirus.) And while the great majority of families have working parents, at least 32 percent of married-couple households have one parent who stays at home. At least some of these households might prefer to assume the burden of child care during an outbreak.

Schools that feel unwilling or unable to close outright should, then, give their

diverse student populations and their teachers some flexibility.

For starters, schools could stay open but announce that they will tolerate long absences for as long as the crisis lasts. Schools are rightly concerned about truancy, especially for at-risk students, such as homeless children. But the usual rules of reporting extended absences to child-welfare authorities shouldn't apply in this moment of national crisis. Since attendance records determine school funding and Every Student Succeeds Act scores, such policies should also be suspended or waived.

Parents in all 50 states have the right to educate their children as they choose, so it really doesn't make sense to turn families into adversaries with arguments about whose perception of risk is more accurate. (One recent study estimated that 41 percent of Americans face the risk of serious illness should they become infected with COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, due to underlying health conditions.) If families want to take on the responsibility of educating their children during a pandemic, they should be allowed to do so, and schools should welcome these students back at the end of the crisis without recrimination or drama. (That said, parents should not expect that teachers will get their kids caught up on material they have missed.) Children can learn in a number of settings, after all, and parents who keep their kids at home with them are actually performing a public service to those making a different choice, by reducing social mixing.

For the great majority of children who remain in school in such a scenario, teachers and administrators can implement some practical measures immediately, if they keep schools open. In areas of minimal-to-moderate community transmission, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends increased custodial cleanings, more frequent hand-washing, and increasing physical distance among students by splitting up desk clusters, canceling gym classes, and prohibiting mixing in common areas. Limiting outside visitors, field trips, and nonessential social events is an unpleasant step, but taking that action might prevent a school from having to take much more draconian measures later.

Broadening the time window in which parents can drop off and pick up their children can also help, by reducing congestion at choke points in the school such as front offices. The less physical contact, the better. Anyone who has actually watched a young child "wash" his hands will also know that teachers need to provide a high level of surveillance around personal hygiene; hand-washing posters above the sink and vague reminders to "sing the happy-birthday song twice" will not do the trick. The Swiss-cheese model of mitigation—layering multiple strategies to cover potential holes in any one intervention—is taxing, but far less so than school closure.

Schools could also give children more outdoor-learning time. They can encourage children to sketch quietly, conduct science observations or experiments, or draw or write in journals outside. Like other possible virus-mitigation strategies, this might have wider benefits than simply reducing the spread of disease. Being outside makes physical distancing easier, and ventilation helps reduce viral transmission. Of course, like the other ideas proposed here if schools stay open, this approach may require creative thinking about changes in schedules and staffing to allow greater access to the outdoors, but the positive effects of nature-based learning are so overwhelmingly dispositive at this point that it really shouldn't require a global pandemic to enact these changes.

Standardized solutions to the pandemic may seem easiest. But not all communities will be willing or able to close schools altogether. In such cases, flexibility and creativity can help us work collectively to confront the coronavirus pandemic.