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

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 3: Pedagogical (Classroom Instruction) and SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) Concerns About Reopening Schools In-Person

In the first two parts of this three-part series (part one and part two), I shared my concerns as an educator about reopening schools, and I provided a detailed argument for NOT reopening schools, focusing on public health concerns. Here I make an argument for NOT reopening schools focused on my concerns about pedagogical and social and emotional learning issues.

My Argument: Even if schools meet all of the public health concerns I outlined in part two of this post (*which still does not completely remove COVID-19 risk*), the new classroom structure in a socially distanced environment will present many difficulties to our teaching staff, and will not lead to effective learning experiences for our students due to the nature of social distancing. Any of the traditionally successful learning experiences could be replicated more effectively in the remote environment than in the socially distanced environment, and would better protect student and staff health. Consider the following questions:

1. Will there be enough support for the mental health of staff members and students?: Coming to a work and school environment each day when there is risk of contracting COVID-19 would make me fearful to go to work every day. What choice will teachers who are in high risk groups (because of their age or health conditions) be given? Will all teachers be mandated to attend work in person? If so, we would be asking teachers to choose between their jobs and their health.

In addition to the stress that comes with risking one's health to attend work, teachers are responsible for the safety of their students. I am sure teachers will feel an immense pressure to ensure they are properly modeling for their students how to utilize face coverings, sanitize hands, and social distance, on top of having

to modify instruction for this uncharted territory of socially-distanced teaching. How will this impact teachers' mental and physical well-being over an extended period of time by being exposed to this chronic stress? On a flight, adults are always told to put on their oxygen masks first and then assist children, because if you are not taken care of first, you cannot care for others. I think we are asking too much of our teachers. They will be put under so much stress every day, will be made to risk their health to go to work, and will then be asked to protect their students' health and create engaging lessons despite many restrictions. Will every school provide enough support to their teachers? What would this support even look like? Additionally, I would imagine many students would feel immense stress and fear as well, and we will need to provide increased mental health support for our students.

2. Will there be enough time and resources for school staff training and support for new policies and procedures?: Professional development and training would need to be provided to teaching staff and support staff to properly train them to communicate to their students about the new rules of social distancing, face coverings, hand washing and sanitizing, etc. School staff (including administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses, and counselors) have never had to train students in these protocols before, and students have never had to follow these protocols before. As an educator, I know that with learning something new, everyone makes mistakes and will have failures (failure is an important part of growth and is a good thing!). However, can we afford to have failures where students may accidentally not put on their mask when they are supposed to, or may not maintain social distancing when required to? In a normal non-COVID learning environment this is perfectly fine, but from a public health standpoint, in this new normal, I do not believe we can afford to have any missteps that put others at risk of contracting COVID. It is not fair to assume that everyone will implement the health regulations perfectly, and this adds another layer of risk to the in-person school environment. Teachers will need time and training to become well-versed in the new safety procedures, and should have a voice in developing procedures that are feasible to implement and best suited for the safety of staff and students.

3. Will there be enough time and resources for school staff training and support for new instructional strategies and implementation? In addition to the new responsibility of training students in new procedures, teachers will be tasked with

designing and implementing meaningful and engaging instruction in a socially-distanced environment, which is new territory for all educators, regardless of experience level. In a hybrid model, teachers would be required to plan two sets of lessons for each class, both virtual and in-person versions, while also preparing to teach in a socially-distanced classroom for the first time. As teachers, we develop teaching strategies and lessons over time that impact student growth the most, and share these best practices within our teaching community. The lessons that we previously taught may no longer be effective or feasible in the socially distanced classroom, and there is little time left this summer for teachers to prepare for and plan for how this new classroom would look. Teachers will need ample time, resources, and support to collaborate on and develop lessons for the socially distanced classroom.

4. Is it worth it to still have in-person school if quality instruction is nearly impossible for teachers to implement under the new conditions?: My opinion as an educator is that socially distanced in-person instruction will not be as effective as traditional in-person instruction due to social distancing restrictions. The most meaningful instruction prepares students to be future-ready, allowing them to develop skills (e.g., communication, empathy, collaboration, problem solving, etc.) that employers look for in candidates. In the classroom, learning experiences that are authentic and involve peer group collaboration and problem-solving are most effective in helping students to develop these skills. These effective instructional strategies will be nearly impossible to achieve, or will be completely ineffective, in the socially distanced classroom. Students will not be able to collaborate in groups. Class discussions will be less meaningful, since face masks and social distancing will hamper effective communication, which relies on being able to read non-verbal cues like facial expression and tone. I am a strong proponent of following the precautions including mask-wearing and social distancing, so I believe that has to be the top priority. Therefore, if we are to follow precautions, it will negatively impact the benefits of in-person instruction.

In the table below are more detailed scenarios where I explain the issues with socially-distanced instruction. After reading this, my hope is that you will see how much thought and effort teachers would have to put in to modify these strategies for a socially-distanced classroom to ensure student safety while also trying to make this instruction meaningful and engaging. Most importantly, my hope is that you decide whether you think it is worth it to risk the health and safety of our

students and staff in order to have this in-person, socially-distanced type of instruction. I have also provided a virtual version for each strategy so you can see how this strategy would occur remotely. I believe the virtual version will be either more effective for learning, or safer than the socially distant version.

Scenarios: How traditionally effective teaching strategies would look in a classroom with social distancing or during remote learning

		Method of Delivery	
Instructional Strategy	*Traditional Teaching Method (In-Person, Pre-COVID)*	*With Socially Distanced Modifications (In-Person, during COVID)*	*With Remote Learning Modifications (Virtual, during COVID)*
Think-Pair-Share	Students respond to a discussion prompt first through an individual brainstorm, and then turn to a partner and discuss. Finally, pairs share their thoughts with the class. This allows students to form relationships with peers, improve their communication skills, and add to either their understanding of a concept or their perspective on an issue.	From six feet apart and with masks on, it will be difficult for students to hear and see what their partner is saying. If instead I choose to have my students write their thoughts in a note and pass it to their partner instead of discussing verbally, I would worry about cross-contamination, and would have to ask my students to sanitize their hands after touching the note. That means I would need to have hand sanitizer bottles for each student or pairs of students in my classroom.	I can use the "chat" feature in my learning management system (such as Google Classroom or Microsoft Teams) for students to share their thoughts in writing to a partner through their device, or I can have small groups of students discuss a prompt in virtual "breakout rooms" on a video call. The groups can then report back to the whole class call with their thoughts on a class video call.

| Gallery walk | In this strategy, student groups create a diagram, write a quote, or display their work on posters around the classroom. Then, students are asked to silently circulate and write feedback and responses on each poster. Students cluster together at posters and are free to roam the classroom at their choosing, or are asked to rotate at different times. The silence provides time for students to form their own ideas, and adding their dialogue in written form gives them a chance to process and respond to others' ideas in a safe space. | Students can no longer cluster around the poster. I would need to make sure each poster is at least six feet apart. I would worry about students sharing markers (common touched surfaces), so I would most likely provide each student with their own marker, but then would need to sanitize each one at the end of the class period, since another class would use them later. If there were six posters, I would have to call up six students at a time, one assigned to each poster. This would make the entire activity longer, and also reduce the ability for students to move freely to different posters to add their feedback. | I can post the students' "posters" (most likely made with a virtual software) on the class virtual page, and have students use a commenting feature to add comments freely to the posters. |

Authentic Performance Tasks

Each discipline (i.e., visual and performing arts, humanities, STEM, foreign language, etc.) has its own version of hands-on, performance-based tasks. These experiences are real-world, authentic learning experiences that allow students to develop their skills at the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. As a science example, I have my students design their own experiments in groups and then carry out these experiments. This often requires students to collaborate at lab stations where group members sit about three feet apart, handle shared equipment, and collaborate and gather around a shared group poster to report out their findings.

I would not feel comfortable asking my students to sit at lab stations when they cannot be six feet apart. I could have my students work in pairs so they are spaced out better, but I only have enough lab stations for half my class to sit in pairs. I would also feel more comfortable creating individual kits of lab equipment for each student so the equipment is not passed and shared. This means each students' role in the experiment would have to be planned days in advance so I have enough time to set up equipment for each individual student. Or, I might abandon the idea of group work altogether and instead modify the lab so that students work individually, so I can ensure proper social distancing and cleaning of equipment. Can I make my students responsible for clean-up, where they use the sinks to wash glassware? Normally students share these sinks and have limited time to clean up at the end of the lab period. Now, I am not sure I would have enough time to have students clean up. Will I have enough sanitizing product for students to clean and sanitize their equipment before the next class period? How will I know for sure that all equipment was cleaned properly unless I do it myself (which would take hours)?

Although not as effective as hands-on labs, I could have students complete virtual labs on the computer. Or, I could record a demo of myself performing the lab and students could record data. My school could also work with laboratory supply companies to provide students with at-home science kits delivered to their houses where they could perform safe experiments at home. Or, students could design their own experiments but not conduct the experiment, and instead could analyze a standard data set I provide to them.

These are just three strategies, but I think the same roadblocks apply to many of the strategies that I, and the teachers I coach, have found to be effective. The only exceptions I can see are:

1. Lecture: The teacher explains concepts to the class while students are seated and take notes. Lecture is an important part of teaching, but it cannot be the only way we teach, or students lose out on solving problems, applying their knowledge to tasks, and taking risks as part of their learning. I think that in a socially distant classroom though, lecture is the safest way of teaching in terms of reducing COVID-19 risk. Also, can teachers lecture while wearing a mask? I would imagine it will be difficult for students to understand the teacher because of the mask, especially if students need accommodations to support their learning. If the teacher takes off the mask, their airborne droplets could circulate the classroom, putting students at higher risk of exposure if the teacher is an asymptomatic carrier. Do we want our students only learning from lectures? The key pieces of collaborative learning will be extremely difficult to make authentic if we are in a socially-distanced classroom. Is it worth it to risk health and safety for extremely modified learning experiences that lose their authenticity?

2. Class Relationship Building: I also think the virtual environment would be less effective than the socially-distant, in-person environment when teachers meet their students at the beginning of the school year to set expectations and form relationships. It is difficult to do this virtually, so perhaps there can be periodic times when students visit the school in small groups to meet their teachers in person (similar to a "back to school night," but in smaller groups).

Should we risk the potential of our children or our teachers getting sick or dying from COVID-19 when this is what learning would look like in a socially-distant classroom? In my opinion, it is not worth it.

Conclusions:

I do not disagree with how important it is for students to interact with others as part of their learning, and I understand that the American Pediatrics Association promotes schools returning in-person in the fall. I also understand that for some students, school is their only safe space, where they receive food, shelter, and the care they need. However, as an educator, I disagree with the APA's recommendation to have the goal of returning in-person unless the benefit

of in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic outweighs the risk of students and staff members falling ill. In my opinion, the risk is too great to our staff and students, and in-person school under social distancing restrictions will not be more effective than remote learning. I completely understand that social interaction is an important part of adolescent development, but I also feel that in this new normal, the benefits of social interaction as we knew them have changed and will remain that way until we have a vaccine for COVID-19.

In my opinion, it is better to focus on virtual learning as our primary mode of instruction, where students can be safe in their homes and isolated from COVID-19 exposure, and to have limited in-person interactions with others at school (for select activities or to meet their teachers) that follow the safety guidelines and reduce the risk as much as possible. I acknowledge that remote learning is far from perfect, and it can lead to issues around equity of access for all students, potential loss of engagement and decrease in learning progression, or difficulties for parents who must balance working and childcare. However, I feel that even one student or staff member contracting COVID-19 from being in the school building is a far worse scenario than the issues that come with remote learning. Also, instead of focusing our efforts on reopening schools in person, we could instead focus on improving remote learning. We have had three months of remote learning experience, and can focus our efforts on refining and enhancing this type of schooling to make it better. School districts could make plans that can mitigate the issues and inequities involved with remote learning to best support their students during this time.

I completely understand that we also need to focus on equity of access, which has been made so difficult during this time. However, I feel there are ways that we can address equity in a primarily virtual learning environment. Although not ideal, districts can provide devices and meals to students in need through curbside drop-offs, and communities can come together to support this cause. We can restructure schedules to help parents who are juggling work and childcare responsibilities. We can focus our efforts on providing in-person interactions first to those students who need it most, in an environment that reduces the COVID-19 risk as much as possible to protect the health of our students and staff members. It is not an ideal situation, but during these times, nothing is ideal. In short, I feel we should choose the path that protects the health and well-being of our students and school staff first.