

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion: Why three feet of social distancing should be enough in schools

Opinion by Joseph G. Allen and Sara Bleich

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On March 19, 2021, the CDC revised its guidelines for schools, saying three feet of distance between students is sufficient for all elementary and many middle and high schools. This op-ed was written in November 2020.

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The requirement for six feet of distancing has forced many schools to limit the number of students attending in person due to space constraints and thus

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Second, strict six-foot distancing rules that force schools into “hybrid” models, in which students rotate days at school, might actually *increase* community risk, as our colleague William Hanage [warned](#) in August. The reason is that kids are not always fully isolated at home; instead, they are likely to have an even wider network of contacts, increasing the chances of the virus entering schools.

Third, six feet is not a magical cutoff. It has a weak scientific basis, coming from a fundamental misunderstanding going back decades that the tiny droplets we exhale when we breathe and talk will fall to the ground within six feet. The reality is that while some large droplets do fall out of the air, most are tiny and will stay aloft for an hour or more — traveling well beyond six feet. There is no bright-line cutoff.

Fourth, without such cutoffs, we have to turn to the science to understand risk in context. A recent evaluation of [172 studies from 16 countries](#) found a significant reduction in risk with distancing of at least three feet, but no additional benefit at six feet *so long as baseline risk is low enough*. There is no question risk is higher at close range, but where community spread is low, three feet of physical distancing should suffice.

Fifth, distancing must be evaluated in the context of other controls in place. The six-foot rule was declared in March, before widespread mask mandates. Now, masks are our best friend — even at three feet. Consider what happens when everyone wears masks that are 70 percent efficient at filtering particles (typical of two- and three-layer masks). Because a virus must pass through two of these masks to move from one person to another, they have a combined removal efficiency of 91 percent.

That leads us to the last — and perhaps most critical — point: A room with 25 adults is different from a room with one adult and 24 kids. Kids are [less likely to catch this virus than adults](#) (especially children younger than 10), and if they do, the fatality rate is extraordinarily low. (There is also evidence that kids [transmit less](#), although this is not completely settled.) Remember, these are *joint* probabilities. The infection fatality rate for kids is very low (3 per 100,000), but they have to get it first. That means the likelihood of *any* kid dying from covid-19 is even lower. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that excess mortality this year for those younger than 25 is [2 percent below average](#) compared with the past four years.

The critical question, then, is: How do we protect teachers?

Teachers should continue to distance six feet from students as much as possible, limit adult-to-adult interaction and wear better masks (a three-layer mask

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As cases rise in the United States, we should acknowledge that there will be cases in schools. There is no zero risk. We should also be prepared to adapt our strategies accordingly. If cases rise quickly in a region, schools should not automatically close; rather, the level of controls should increase. That might mean the six-foot rule could come back for high schools, while the three-foot rule remains for younger grades. If high levels of community spread emerge and school closures become warranted, high schools should close first, then middle schools. Elementary schools should close last, if at all. Most important, schools should be prioritized over bars and restaurants.

The risks from covid-19 in schools are manageable. The risks to kids being out of school, however, are escalating rapidly. For the sake of our children, it's time for more scientifically justified distancing guidelines in the classroom.

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