

Bridget Lynn

Mass Persuasion and Propaganda: Final Paper

Professor Mark Crispin Miller

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### Reopening Schools During Covid: What Is Actually Putting Children in Danger?

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the US at the beginning of the year, the government shut down all non-essential businesses and transferred education to online. Once summer came around, the essential question became whether or not it was safe for students to return to school in person, and the overwhelming majority of people agreed that sending children to school was incredibly dangerous and needed to be handled with the utmost strategy and care. New York City mayor Bill DeBlasio released his plan to reopen schools in July, sparking a media blitz that greatly denounced the decision to send students in person. The New York Post reported that the city would require the students and teachers to receive daily temperature checks at home and anyone with a temperature exceeding 100 degrees would not be allowed in the building. They would be chosen at random for temperature screenings in school as well, and all students and teachers would be tested regularly for Covid. Schools were also required to alternate students in school and at home, to lower the amount of people in the building on any given day. Of course any parents could opt to go completely remote, and any student who tested positive or came into contact with someone who did would be required to quarantine for two weeks or until their symptoms are gone for 24 hours.<sup>1</sup>

Looking at articles that came out following this announcement, they greatly emphasize the concerns and worries that parents and teachers have, and often put the city government, the board of education, and the teachers union at odds with one another. Two articles from the New

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<sup>1</sup> Algar and Marsh, "Mayor DeBlasio, Carranza roll out NYC school reopening plan for fall", New York Post

York Times and NPR both consist of mainly quotes from nervous parents and teachers. The New York Times article states that “some principals have begun raising alarms about the system’s readiness” and even called upon the mayor to delay in person classes for a few more weeks and then “phase students back into the buildings throughout the fall,” (Shapiro). There’s no mention of what real difference these principals believe bringing kids into the building more slowly would do, and it really makes no sense to think the virus would not spread if the process was elongated. The article then goes through the day of Alexa Sorden, a principal in the Bronx, and how she must disinfect and ensure that desks are far enough apart. It also mentions her fears, such as how teachers will teach kids at home and in person simultaneously. The article even goes as far as to stating that she “quiet[s] her mind with daily morning meditation and writing in her journal.” This paints the image of a desperate principal at her wit’s end, unable to comprehend how she could possibly make her school safe for kids.

NPR’s article entitled “New York City Educators Warn School Reopening Plan is Missing Pieces” by Anya Kamenetz lists quote after quote of concerned educators, parents, and students as well. They express concerns such as “I have to teach them to read from afar,” “I want to always create a space for my students to be able to process what's happening in their world,” and “[students aren’t] being cautious now, why would they be cautious when it comes to school?” The hyperfocus on people who are scared ultimately creates a sense of fear in readers as well, and when these articles are the only kind being written, people are going to see them all over their TV screens, phones, and newspapers, and they’re going to panic and demand their kids stay home from school.

In addition to these articles, there was also an alleged quote from Betsy DeVos that went viral on social media. Around July 12 and 13, tons of people were tweeting and posting about

how she stated that “only .02% of children would die from the coronavirus if schools reopened.” This quote comes off as quite harsh, and many were pointing out that “only .02% of children” is still tens of thousands of kids that would supposedly die. DeVos never said this, and many sites have since fact checked the statement, but there are still many articles “fact checking” other claims that she has made, with little credibility. An article from the Seattle Times discusses the studies that DeVos has cited in press conferences, and then gives several other pieces of evidence that supposedly contradict her claims. She said that “more and more studies show that kids are actually stoppers of the disease and they don’t get it and transmit it themselves, so we should be in a posture of — the default should be getting back to school kids in person, in the classroom,” (Kessler). The article aims to prove DeVos wrong by listing instances of children spreading the disease and a study from South Korea that supposedly suggests “that children ages 10 to 19 can spread the virus at least as much as adults do.”

There are several possible issues with using this particular to make this claim. The Seattle Times article does not include a link to the study it mentions, raising questions of how useful Kessler considers it to be, but it was not too difficult to find. First of all, the study was not done in a school at all, but was a contact tracing study done with several different households. The study even states “Despite closure of their schools, these children might have interacted with each other, although we do not have data to support that hypothesis,”<sup>2</sup> meaning that there is no definitive conclusion that the children in the study spread the virus *to each other*. It also only concerned symptomatic patients, which may not be a significant issue if kids showing symptoms are not allowed to go to school. The only point the study makes that may be worth looking into is that “Children who attend daycare or school also are at high risk for transmitting respiratory

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<sup>2</sup> “Contact Tracing during Coronavirus Disease Outbreak, South Korea, 2020”

viruses to household members” which is worth noting when considering sending kids in households with high risk people to school.

The studies cited by DeVos and the US department of education are worth looking at, despite the Seattle Times claim that the study done in Germany “should not be used to guide clinical practice” because it had not been peer reviewed. It is worth looking at, however, and is a fairly simple study that presents some interesting conclusions. Doctors tested 2045 children and teachers for antibodies, including some who had already gotten the virus, and they only found antibodies in 12 people.<sup>3</sup> They then did the same study at three districts in Saxony, the only German state to reopen in person with full classroom sizes. 1500 students and 500 teachers were tested for antibodies, and they found five people who had previously tested positive had them and only seven others had them as well. This suggests that despite the full reopening in Saxony, the virus did not spread in a school setting. Another interesting find is that 24 children in the study had household members who had tested positive, but only one of these children had antibodies. This is where the theory that children are “blockers” of the virus comes from. They don’t seem to get it from close contacts, and when they do they do not spread it. This theory is certainly not absolute truth, but it is interesting that the Seattle Times and other news outlets would disregard it for its lack of peer review when the results are quite clear and logical.

There is plenty of other scientific evidence that supports the theory that children do not really catch or spread the virus. An article from the Journal of the Academy of American Pediatrics summarizes several different studies done throughout the world that suggest the low risk that children are at in terms of Covid. From March 10 to April 10, all children at Geneva University Hospital underwent contact tracing. They found that of 39 households with infected children, in only three of them was the child the suspected source of the virus. In all the others,

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<sup>3</sup> Huggler, “German study finds no evidence coronavirus spreads in schools.”

the children showed symptoms after the adult. The Pediatrics article also mentions contact tracing at the Qingdao Women and Children's hospital, where out of 10 available households, only one was suspected that the child was the original source of the virus. The article concludes that according to these studies, children are not the spreaders of the disease. It hypothesizes that this may be because they are usually asymptomatic and therefore do not spread it through coughing and such.<sup>4</sup>

Another study done in France showed significant evidence that the virus does not spread in schools. They looked at 510 students from three different primary schools in Crepy-en-Valois. There were three probable cases of the virus before they shut down in February, and none of these cases led to a significant spread of any kind. The rate of infection was 61% among parents of infected children and only 6.9% among parents of uninfected children, suggesting that "the parents were the source of infection of their children in several cases," ("Covid-19 in primary schools: no significant transmission among children or from students to teachers"). They also found that symptoms in children were very mild, most experiencing nothing more than diarrhea and fatigue, and only adults associated with the study were hospitalized. The overall consensus of these foreign studies is that there is no significant evidence that Covid spreads in schools, or that young children are particularly susceptible to getting or spreading it at all.

Data that the CDC provides in regards to children and Covid is limited to comparing rates of infection, hospitalization and deaths of different age groups. According to them, children who've tested positive for Covid between the ages of 5-17 are 9 times less likely to be hospitalized than the comparison group of people ages 18-29 and are 16 times less likely to die.<sup>5</sup> What interests me about this data is the way that it's phrased. To say that children are "16 times

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<sup>4</sup> *Pediatrics*, "COVID-19 transmission and children: the child is not to blame"

<sup>5</sup> CDC, "Covid Hospitalization and Death by Age"

less likely to die” is a quite bleak statement. The logical response would be that “no children should die!” The same thing happened when the falsified Betsy DeVos quote was circulating; to say that only a small percentage of children will die, implies that the lives of those children do not matter. However, it is much more useful to look at Covid spreading in schools, and consider the fact that there is a population of children with preexisting conditions that are more likely to pass from the virus. The lives of these children should, of course, be taken into consideration, but surely there is a more reasonable and less harmful alternative to forcing all young children to go to school remotely.

Despite the frustrations of parents and students across the country regarding online learning, many media outlets have spun the positive side and tried to make it a good thing. Benedict Carey wrote in the New York Times back in June of the struggles associated with remote education, but then attributes that with the unprecedented shut down in March. While teachers were certainly unprepared for the sudden switch, those problems have not gone away, though Carey wrote that there were solutions, and that online learning may even be beneficial. He admits that most students do worse online than they do in person, but “if they have a facilitator or mentor on hand, someone to help with the technology and focus their attention — an approach sometimes called blended learning — they perform about as well in many virtual classes, and sometimes better,” (Carey). The rest of the article is filled with inspiring stories of teachers succeeding in the difficult task of online school, ending with a cheesy Great Gatsby line, “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” The article paints these teachers as hard working heroes, which in many cases they are, but also subtly puts less focus on serious issues faced by children during this time.

Praise of hard working teachers is all over the internet and news at the moment. Most of them definitely deserve it, but there is no denying that online school presents, especially for the poorest children in America. A survey done by Victoria Collis and Emiliana Vegas at Brookings showed that 1 in 10 of the poorest children have little or no access to technology needed for online learning.<sup>6</sup> They then compared food security to technology access, finding that of families that reported they often don't have enough food, about 25% also never have access to technology needed for remote learning. Both food scarcity and education are then hindered by Covid restrictions, since many poorer children get free lunches from in person school. On top of this, there is an overwhelmingly black population of students without access to the proper technology, revealing further how race factors into wealth disparity in the US. A study from Fairfax County, Virginia found that 83% more students are failing in two or more classes since they switched to online.<sup>7</sup> Overall, the result of online learning in many parts of the country is an advantage disparity between poorer and wealthier kids, as well as a downfall in academic success for many students.

One other element that is most likely contributing to this downfall is the toll that remote learning takes on the mental health of many. An article from the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry looked at statistics from the impact of mental health due to other instances of children staying home from school for prolonged periods of time. One study they mention looked at children from the US, Canada, and Mexico who were exposed to various infectious diseases in the past and forced to isolate. One third of parents involved reported that their children needed mental health services due to their quarantine, and 28% tested above the cut-off for PTSD symptoms, compared to the control group of children who did not

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<sup>6</sup> Collis and Vegas, "Unequally disconnected: Access to online learning in the US."

<sup>7</sup> Leshan, "Fairfax County Schools are seeing an alarming increase in children failing at online learning."

isolate in which 5.8% tested above the cut-off for PTSD.<sup>8</sup> Another PTSD index that they tested with showed an even larger gap, with 30.3% of isolated children showing signs of post traumatic stress compared to only 1.1% of non-isolated children.

In the context of Covid-19, it would make sense that these mental health issues are elevated for some, due to the overwhelming amount of negative news being distributed and the economic stress being placed on so many families. This calls back to the disparity between poor and wealthy children. Brown University published an article projecting the academic success of online learning, and it touches on the extra anxiety put on poorer families. An Education Trust poll of New York and California parents exposed that many feel an overwhelming sense of stress due to economic strain, fear of catching a deadly disease, and the psychological impact of social isolation and disruption of everyday routine.<sup>9</sup> The article then uses past instances of disruptions due to natural disasters to project how the Covid shut downs will impact children in the long term, psychologically. “Research suggests the impact of school disruptions following natural disasters on student development was long lasting, with some students continuing to show psychological distress and trouble concentrating for several years afterwards,” it states. If school disruptions during natural disasters had a lasting impact, there is no telling the kind of impact something as prolonged and stressful as Covid-19 will have.

Another significant issue to consider that is not being covered at all is privacy. Due to the quick switch to online learning back in March, schools implemented education technology without taking privacy issues into consideration, and they continue to use that same tech. The International Association of Privacy Professionals (IAPP) reported that “schools and teachers have been solicited by non-educational companies and platforms that lack children's privacy

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<sup>8</sup> “The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19”

<sup>9</sup> “Projecting the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement”



policies and may not comply with children's privacy laws,” (Duball). They write that companies both lack children’s privacy standards and collect data on child users in the same way they would with an adult. Zoom has not avoided attacks based on privacy concerns by any means, most people referencing the phenomenon of “zoom bombing” in which hackers enter zoom meetings unprohibited and say or write inappropriate things. The IAPP points out, however, that Zoom is getting all the attention that other video conferencing platforms deserve as well. They reference Google Meet as another big platform with privacy issues, and also point out the extended use of YouTube for lessons, a site where nothing is hidden or censored from young children.

These concerns are not new, but they are in no way getting the media attention they deserve. Back in 2018, the FBI released a public service announcement regarding the risk of data collection and unsecured systems to students. They list out potential information that people could be getting from students using educational technology, including biometric data, personal information, web browsing history, and students’ location. They warn of the following:

“The widespread collection of sensitive information by EdTech could present unique exploitation opportunities for criminals. For example, in late 2017, cyber actors exploited school information technology (IT) systems by hacking into multiple school district servers across the United States. They accessed student contact information, education plans, homework assignments, medical records, and counselor reports, and then used that information to contact, extort, and threaten students with physical violence and release of their personal information.”<sup>10</sup>

For the FBI to release this statement regarding criminal activity through education technology should be deeply considered during a time when some students are using solely technology to get their education. Yet, there are incredibly few media outlets reporting on this and it is something that has slipped the minds of most parents and students.

In addition to the issues surrounding online school, there’s much evidence that suggests in person school is also endangering students as it exists now. Several Chinese outlets, such as

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<sup>10</sup> FBI Alert number I-091318-PSA, Sept. 13, 2018

*Sixth Tone*, reported that three middle school students died while running in gym class with masks on. Technically there is no proof that the masks are what caused the deaths, and as journalist Zhang Wanqing reports, “while some experts have said running in a mask might lead to difficulty breathing, others have said the sudden deaths may stem from heart problems or other causes,” (Wanqing). The odds of three students dying from heart problems in gym class while coincidentally all wearing masks seems highly unlikely. One of these deaths led the Hainan education bureau to instruct schools that students should not wear masks in gym class and should instead stay one metre apart without them. These deaths have not been reported by any global news source in the US, and many other foreign outlets report two deaths rather than three. If parents are concerned that sending their children to school will endanger them, they have a right to consider the adverse effects of mask-wearing during physical activity as well.

The media’s push to instill fear around in person learning heavily overshadows the vast number of concerns about online school and the way schools are modified during the Covid-19 pandemic. A few weeks ago at the end of November. Mayor DeBlasio announced that New York City schools would fully close again amidst rising cases throughout the city. *City & State New York* reported the announcement, stating that it occurred at a press conference that DeBlasio was “hours late” to and that moments before Governor Cuomo had pushed back on questions about school closures, despite DeBlasio’s claim that the two had discussed it at length.<sup>11</sup> At the conference, DeBlasio said, “When we reopen, everyone who comes into that building, all of those kids have to have a testing consent on file. Testing is going to become more of the norm.” Heavier testing will most certainly lead the percentage of positive cases to go up, leaving ample room for schools to be shut down once again. Since this announcement, some schools have begun to set dates to reopen beginning December 7, with the heavier emphasis on testing that the

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<sup>11</sup> Annie McDonough, “What we still don’t know about school closures.”

mayor promised. With fears about the coronavirus increasing, it will be no surprise if cases in New York City rise in the next few weeks, and the pattern of media outlets instilling fear in parents and children will continue. Fear for one's children is one of the most effective ways to get people emotional. By continuing to report the number of children who test positive and keeping the debate about schools alive and well, the media has aided in the overall fear mongering that surrounds this virus, while also avoiding statistics and evidence that very clearly show that online school and modified in person school are not the solution to protecting the children of this country.

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