

Feared coronavirus outbreaks in schools yet to arrive, early data shows^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Thousands of students and teachers have become sick with the coronavirus since schools began opening last month, but public health experts have found little evidence that the virus is spreading inside buildings, and the rates of infection are far below what is found in the surrounding communities.

This early evidence, experts say, suggests that opening schools may not be as risky as many have feared and could guide administrators as they chart the rest of what is already an unprecedented school year.

“Everyone had a fear there would be explosive outbreaks of transmission in the schools. In colleges, there have been. We have to say that, to date, we have not seen those in the younger kids, and that is a really important observation,” said Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota.

This does not mean the risk of contracting the coronavirus is zero. Poor and inconsistent reporting in many parts of the country means that experts do not yet have a full view of the situation, and most schools have been open for only a few weeks. It’s also unclear how closely the incidence of the coronavirus in schools is tied to policies in schools such as mandatory mask-wearing.

Most of the nation’s largest districts opened with fully remote teaching, so the data are largely from smaller communities. And the pandemic may grow worse as flu season and winter approaches.

But the fact that large swaths of the country opened for in-person school while others did not offers the more cautious districts a chance to observe how things have gone elsewhere in charting their next steps.

On Wednesday, researchers at Brown University, working with school administrators, released their first set of data from a new National COVID-19 School Response Data Dashboard, created to track coronavirus cases. It found low levels of infection among students and teachers.

Tracking infections over a two-week period beginning Aug. 31, it found that 0.23 percent of students had a confirmed or suspected case of the coronavirus. Among teachers, it was 0.49 percent. Looking only at confirmed cases, the rates were even lower: 0.078 percent for students and 0.15 percent for teachers.

“These numbers will be, for some people, reassuring and suggest that school openings may be less risky than they expected,” said Emily Oster, an economics professor at Brown University who helped create the tracker. She noted that the school coronavirus rates are “much lower” than those in the surrounding community.

Still, she said: “I don’t think that these numbers say all places should open schools with no restrictions or anything that comes close to that. Ultimately, school districts are going to have different attitudes toward risk.”

The information for her dashboard is voluntarily reported by schools and school districts, both public and private, including schools that offer in-person classes and those that are fully remote. As of Wednesday morning, the project had data from more than 550 schools, including more than 300 that have some in-person classes. Organizers are working to add more schools as they go.

Separately, the early data from Texas also shows low levels of infection. Since the start of school, 3,445 Texas students reported positive coronavirus tests — or about 0.31 percent of the 1.1 million students attending school in person, according to data released Wednesday. An additional 2,850 school employees tested positive, although a rate could not be calculated because it was not clear how many of the state’s more than 800,000 school staff members were working in school buildings.

Teacher’s unions in Texas that keep track of infections say they have been surprised by how low it was. In many parts of the country, teacher’s unions have resisted school systems’ efforts to return to classes, saying sufficient safeguards were not in place.

“I am not seeing at this particular point the rate I had expected,” said Zeph Capo, president of the Texas branch of the American

Federation of Teachers.

He said this is partly because parents in communities most affected by the coronavirus are less willing to send their children back to school. And he predicted that the numbers will rise as more students return to buildings and if the pandemic worsens this winter, as experts are expecting.

There's also evidence from the Northeast. The Network for Public Education, a nonprofit advocacy organization that supports traditional public school districts, has been tracking 37 school districts in Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania.

In the weeks since school started, there have been 23 confirmed cases of the coronavirus across 20 schools and no indication that the virus was spread in schools, said Carol Burris, the network's executive director.

The districts studied were in counties with low coronavirus rates and all required wearing masks.

"So far, in the schools that we are following . . . outbreaks have not occurred, even when someone tests positive for covid-19," Burris said.

"We're not seeing schools as crucibles for onward transmission," said Sara Johnson, associate professor of pediatrics at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "It's reasonable to say that it looks promising at this point."

She added that the data suggests that schools should bring students back "slowly and carefully" and with safeguards to protect teachers and staff members. "These data are promising but covid is still a very big threat to people," she said.

These findings were underscored by an analysis this week in Science magazine, a leading academic journal. It found that children and adolescents are at a "much lower risk" for the coronavirus and said assumptions that schoolchildren would be a "key component" of the transmission chain are "most likely" wrong.

"Relative to their risk of contracting disease, children and adolescents have been disproportionately affected by lockdown measures," it contended.

The early data are emerging as school officials continue to evaluate their plans and consider whether they want to change course. Many districts that began with entirely remote education are considering whether they want to introduce in-person options for some students or on certain days.

The data are helpful but superintendents will want more detail, such as information about districts similar to their own, and what covid mitigation strategies seem to have worked, said Noelle Ellerson Ng, an associate director at AASA, the School Superintendents Association, which is a co-sponsor of the new dashboard reporting tool.

She called the early data "potentially optimistic" but said it is premature for districts to change course and decide to open their buildings.

Much of the concern is focused on teachers and other adults in the building, because data shows that covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, is far more deadly to older patients.

According to the American Federation of Teachers, 14 active teachers, principals and counselors have died of covid-19 since the school year started, although it is not possible to conclude that any one of them contracted the coronavirus at school.

Some experts, including teacher's union officials, say it appears that coronavirus rates are lower in school districts where face coverings are required and policies are enforced to keep distance between students in the building, although there is scant data to prove the correlation.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said the "science worked" in districts that took adequate precautions.

"We don't have all the information, that's true, but I'm not surprised that things were okay," she said. She posited that early pictures of Georgia schools that went viral showing students packed into hallways without masks "scared people enough" to institute mask and physical distancing policies.

Nationwide, though, these policies vary widely. The new dashboard asked about covid mitigation strategies and found that about 7 in 10 schools required staff members and students to wear masks. About half limited gatherings to 25 people or fewer. About four in 10 kept students in one classroom, with about the same portion checking temperatures upon arrival.

In suburban Atlanta, the Cherokee County School District encourages but does not require masks for students in most circumstances and requires them for teachers and staff members only when they are not able to keep a distance. Officials have tried to reduce crowds in hallways by staggering bell schedules and eliminated large gatherings such as assemblies.

The schools opened for in-person learning in early August, when coronavirus caseloads in the area were high, and since then, at least 381 positive cases had been identified, each one triggering a two-week quarantine of teachers and classmates who may have been exposed. At one point, more than 2,329 people were in quarantine and three of six high schools were temporarily closed.

District spokeswoman Barbara Jacoby said that none of the cases had been definitively linked to in-school exposure, although it had not been ruled out in about a dozen.

"Our community is entirely open," she said. "You can go to not only school but youth sports, houses of worship, scouts, swimming pools. You can go anywhere. So it's hard for public health officials to determine where transmission happens. A lot of these students interact

outside school together.”

Last week, the number of students and staff members in the district in quarantine was down to about 400, with 67 positive cases identified. The district has about 42,000 students.

Jacoby said that, overall, things had gone “better than expected.”

One problem in evaluating school programs is not every school and not every state is providing useful data. Some districts in the country, such as Cherokee, are reporting every case to the public. But others report nothing.

In Florida, where Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) has pushed schools to open even in areas with high coronavirus positivity rates, some counties have been pressured not to release school-specific coronavirus information, citing privacy concerns.

A promised state school coronavirus dashboard has not yet been produced, although there is a “pediatric report” that shows some data, by county, of cases for Floridians younger than 18. According to the latest report, as of Tuesday, there is 13.7 percent rate of positive cases among children ages 1 to 17.

Andrew Spar, president of the Florida Education Association, the state’s teacher’s union, said it’s hard to discern the true situation.

“There is no real reporting of cases going on in the state,” he said. “There is no mechanism for consistent and fair reporting, so there is no way to analyze what is really happening in our schools.”

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