Getting Kids Back to School in NYC

Population Health Sciences

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After shuttering in March because of COVID-19, students returned to the classroom in New York City's public schools in mid-September. Getting them there was a herculean task that required city leadership to work closely with many stakeholders, but perhaps none more important than the teachers' union. While the city's return to in-person learning is still in its early stages, and it remains to be seen whether it can be sustained as case counts begin to rise once again, other school districts can learn from the path to reopening taken by the country's largest, and arguably most complicated, district.

New York City's school system is huge with more than 1.1 million students served by 75,000 teachers across 2,000 schools. When in-person classes were suspended in the spring, many worried how vulnerable students who rely on schools for everything from lunch to laundry would fare. Three-quarters of the public school students in New York City are economically disadvantaged and more than 100,000 students experience homelessness in a given year. Low-income students are also likely to struggle with remote learning, experiencing issues of access to technology, high-speed internet and space.

Following the COVID-19 surge in the spring, New York City's burden of disease this summer was significantly lower than that of other large cities. The city's mayor, Bill de Blasio, pushed hard for in-person instruction in the city's schools while nearly all other big city school districts opted to start the year with virtual instruction. Out of concerns that in-person instruction would put teachers at risk, the teachers' union—the United Federation of Teachers (UFT)—presented a set of demands centered on health and safety standards.

It is clear from what we saw publicly that the back and forth between the mayor's office and the UFT was messy. However, by October 1, all of New York City's public school students had the opportunity for some amount of in-person learning, with most in a hybrid model.

Over the last few months, I have supported PolicyLab's COVID-Lab forecasting model project by tracking the responses of communities and school districts to the pandemic. The policy responses of states and localities have varied, with each laboratory of democracy offering a cautionary tale or a blueprint for responding to the crisis. Our team has kept a close eye on New York City's school reopening and believe there are opportunities for other districts to learn both from the strategies that brought kids back into the classroom at the beginning of the school year and from the continuous adaptation that will be necessary to keep in-person instruction going through the fall and winter. Getting to this point was dependent on a three-part strategy, which I've parsed out here:

Addressing Safety Needs in Schools

The UFT created a 55-point checklist with health and safety standards that each school must meet to commence in-person learning. The checklist includes many of the same suggestions laid out in the PolicyLab's "Evidence and Guidance for In-person Schooling" policy review. The checklist calls for multiple levels of mitigation techniques including room-by-room ventilation checks, socially distanced desks and personal protective equipment (PPE) availability.

Staffing to Fit a Hybrid Model

Mixing in-person learning with remote learning puts additional strain on teachers. Back in late

August, the city and the UFT agreed that students participating in a hybrid model will have separate teachers for in-person and remote instruction. In response, the city agreed to hire an additional 4,500 teachers. It is not clear at this time where they are on meeting this commitment.

Testing and Tracing

The UFT and the city worked together to create a testing and contact tracing regime that will randomly test between 10% and 20% of asymptomatic students and staff on a monthly basis. Testing and tracing is being led by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the city's public hospital system and a private contractor. The city has planned to primarily use self-collection kits designed for PCR testing, and in mid-October, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that the state would supply 200,000 rapid antigen tests for New York City schools in neighborhoods with high test positivity rates. The city's testing program, which began on October 9, has so far offered signs of encouragement—of the 16,000 staff members and students who have been randomly tested, only 28 positive cases were detected.

While the district's testing strategy is a start, it may not be enough. Experts have indicated that the city's testing regime may miss outbreaks, and it has been suggested that a rigorous infection control system would require testing half of the district's in-person students every two weeks. PolicyLab's own school recommendations emphasize symptom surveillance, including routine daily symptom checks with on-site or in-home screening for students, teachers, staff and families. While low test positivity rates from randomized testing may temporarily buoy public confidence in the safety of in-person schooling, the city must ensure its strategy is effectively monitoring and mitigating the virus's spread.

The back and forth between the city and the UFT has been extremely contentious at times, but this friction is important. Both the mayor and the union want the same thing—for children to get back into the classroom—but their institutional focuses differ. The mayor is primarily responsible to his constituents, many of whom are working families needing to get their kids back in the classroom as soon as possible. The union's responsibility is to its membership; nationally, about half of school employees meet the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention's (CDC) definition of having increased risk of severe COVID-19. And in light of years of underinvestment in aging school infrastructure, teachers are rightfully worried about their health and safety amid a pandemic. When these countervailing forces go toe-to-toe, it doesn't look pretty, but it can put in motion a process that improves the safety of workers and those they serve alike.

However, for the back and forth between the city and the union to produce positive results, both sides of the negotiation need to take expert counsel seriously and advocate for evidence-based policies that address the concerns of their respective constituencies.

The road to providing in-person instruction in New York City schools this fall was a tough one, and the struggle is far from over. Nearly half of New York City's students who elected to start the year in-person have now opted for virtual learning, leaving only one-quarter of the district's students attending in-person classes. Even with bold strategies in place, safely keeping schools open will be tested in the weeks ahead. For the sake of the more than one million children served by the New York City schools, we hope that the strategies prove to be successful.

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