

The racist effects of school reopening during the pandemic — by a teacher

By **Valerie Strauss**

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Dismayed by plans to reopen schools amid the growing [coronavirus](#) pandemic, she has written the following post, a powerful piece that takes up the question of why black, indigenous and Latinx students would be prone to see more deaths from covid-19 in their schools than white students.

With concrete examples and data, she analyzes unequal funding, environmental racism, and toxic stress to which students of color are exposed, showing how the comorbidity is white supremacy.

Her argument adds new dimension to the national discussion over when and how to reopen schools that have been closed since the coronavirus pandemic began to spread in the United States this past spring.

On Wednesday, U.S. states and territories reported more than 1,100 new deaths attributed to the novel coronavirus, marking the first time since May 29 that the country exceeded that number, [according to Washington Post tracking](#). Deaths from covid-19 are disproportionately high in communities of color, especially among black and indigenous Americans.

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By Nataliya Braginsky

Much to the dismay of teachers like me, governors across the country have begun broadcasting their plans to reopen schools amidst a growing pandemic. In Connecticut where I teach, Gov. Ned Lamont (D) announced that schools across the state must reopen full time and in person for all students in the fall. Lamont's declaration was both confounding and revealing: "I wanted to make sure we had a class day and a class week that was something that employers can bank upon for their employees."

If there were any doubts as to the governor's priorities, with these words he made his stance abundantly clear. His gaze is fixed on keeping the machine of capitalism chugging along in Connecticut — not on keeping students, families and

teachers alive.

The Connecticut Department of Education released its school reopening plan a few days after Lamont's announcement. Echoing throughout "Adapt, Advance, Achieve: Connecticut's Plan to Learn and Grow Together" is the disconcerting idea of feasibility, which appears 13 times in the document. Reduced class sizes, student cohorts, and single direction hallways and staircases are not mandated, but will be implemented only "where feasible."

Maintaining six feet distance, procedures for monitoring students' and staff members' symptoms, and provision of cloth face coverings: "when feasible." Bus capacity will not be reduced in Connecticut, making it impossible for students to distance on their way to and from school, but the reopening plan suggests: "Keep in mind the feasibility and availability of alternate transportation by parents/guardians."

For whom will these lifesaving measures actually be *feasible*?

In New Haven Public Schools, where I have taught for the past seven years, in a building whose windows do not open, my classes will remain as large as 27 students. In the neighboring town of Hamden, a private school with a 12-acre campus will relocate a portion of their students to a recently purchased castle where they can properly distance from one another. This public vs. private school disparity is just one piece of a much larger puzzle of educational injustice.

Public schools across the country are funded through a combination of federal, state and local sources. Federal funding, which Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and President Trump recently threatened to cut if schools do not fully reopen, make up the smallest percentage. In Connecticut, 58 percent of school funding comes from local property taxes. This all but guarantees that a young person raised in a city whose property values are lower will attend a school with less funding than a child raised in a town with higher property values.

As schools in Connecticut and throughout the country reopen, property values will be a key determinant of "feasibility." For white and wealthy families, the language of feasibility is reassurance that their existing privileges and entitlements will continue to protect them throughout the pandemic. For people of color and low-income families, feasibility is a specter of safety, used by the state to shrug off accountability. The state knows what they are doing, and though they attempt to disguise it, their own words show their hand.

At a recent webinar about school reopening plans, Connecticut Education Commissioner Miguel Cardona began with: "Reopening will look a lot different in Salisbury or in Sprague, Connecticut, than it will in Hartford or Bridgeport. If we had issued a highly prescriptive plan, it would never have been able to take all the unique local factors into consideration. Then no schools would be able to open."

Taking a closer look at the schools contrasted by the commissioner is revealing: Salisbury spends \$22,909 per student while Bridgeport's per pupil amount is \$14,041. Certainly these two districts' reopening plans will look quite different and will lead to starkly different outcomes for the people living in those cities.

In addition to one of the highest levels of income inequality, Connecticut also has one of the nation's highest rates of school segregation. In Salisbury, 83 percent of students are white, and in Bridgeport 87 percent are students of color. The governor and commissioner know exactly which of these school districts will be able to implement their feasibility measures.

As does DeVos, who, during a recent CNN interview, offered another illustrative example. DeVos spoke about the differences in reopening schools in Michigan, contrasting Detroit and the Upper Peninsula. Indeed, they "would be

very different. The Upper Peninsula boasts school districts with the highest per-pupil funding in the state, such as Elm River Township School District, where they spend \$83,036 per student and where 100 percent of students are white. This compared to Detroit, where per-pupil funding is \$14,744 and nearly 100 percent of students are black.

These patterns of separate and unequal exist across the country. As states reopen their schools, they are employing the language of feasibility in an attempt to justify “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death,” which is how New Haven-born prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism. In other words, feasibility is the state’s alibi for what will be a wave of preventable death determined in large part by race and class.

We have already seen devastating racial disparities in coronavirus infection and mortality rates. Black and Latinx people are three times more likely than white people to become infected, and twice as likely to die of coronavirus. While the picture is incomplete for Indigenous people, who are being left out of data collection — and further compromised as the Trump administration orders hospitals to cease reporting data to the CDC — it is clear that infection and death rates are also disproportionately high in Native communities.

The reopening of segregated and unequally funded schools will only deepen these disparities. The causes of disproportionate coronavirus rates are directly linked to inequality in housing, employment, transportation and health care, all of which are undergirded by racism. In other words, the comorbidity is white supremacy.

In schools, it’s no different — and this injustice precedes the pandemic.

The windows of the New Haven high school where I teach look out onto a freeway, a common classroom setting for students of color, one which is known to cause respiratory issues and impair student learning. The classroom I share is often inexplicably near 90 degrees even when it’s cool outside. The students endure it, still engaging in discussion and writing, even though they shouldn’t have to. For several months this past year, our school suffered from a sewage issue making it difficult to breathe in many wings of the building and impossible to enter certain bathrooms.

In Philadelphia, where I used to teach, we could not drink the school’s water because the pipes were contaminated with lead. Rodents roamed every night, their feces greeting us in the morning, the mice sometimes scurrying by while students tried to work. For weeks one winter students attempted to learn under a heap of layers, freezing still, because we did not have heat.

This past year, 11 Philadelphia schools were forced to partially or fully close because of toxic asbestos exposure. Last month in response to the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Philadelphia educators took to the school district headquarters to protest systemic racism and health hazards in their schools, giving the rallying cry “I can’t breathe” an added layer of meaning.

At the demonstration, City Councilwoman Kendra Brooks spoke to the crowd: “We are worthy of the same building conditions like they have in Lower Merion and Doylestown,” referring to nearby suburban districts that are majority white and receive significantly more funding than Philadelphia schools. “We have been fighting around the issue of asbestos and lead in our schools for years. The system has failed us.”

On top of the existing environmental racism and toxic stress imposed on youth of color in schools, now the president, the education secretary and governors across the country want to double down on the necropolitics embedded in our

education system. As some teachers prepare their wills, we already know which school communities will suffer the most loss.

The politicians insisting on the return to school know this, too, yet they pretend they don't. They hide behind their alibis of "feasibility" to disavow the death they will have caused. They expect us to be the jurors who will acquit them, the witnesses who will vouch for their well-meaning intentions. But this is not a time to nod our heads in compliance, to ignore what the evidence clearly reveals. This is a time for refusal in the name of survival and racial justice.

School districts across the country have already begun refusing, from Los Angeles to Baltimore, from Richmond to Chicago — and as we near the fall, more refusals will come. The time is ripe for refusing more than just a return to school. Now is the time to refuse — a time to abolish — the racist education system that we have lived with for far too long.

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