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Why NYC kids and parents deserve a remote option

By STEPHANIE FAGIN-JONES

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Back in March 2020, when the first wave of COVID-19 hit New York City, there was no question about schools going remote. Fast forward to now, as the much more [infectious and contagious delta variant](#) wreaks havoc across the country, resulting in a dramatic increase in the [rate of child hospitalizations](#) with COVID-19 in the U.S. since July, prompting the Centers for Disease Control to acknowledge that [the war has changed](#).

Alarming, [child case rates](#) in NYC are seven to 10 times higher this week than in the same week in 2020, and [positivity rates among school-aged children](#) have skyrocketed since the end of the school year, surpassing any age group in NYC.

“In light of this data,” proposes education Prof. Jen Jennings of Princeton, “Let’s evaluate the argument against offering families a remote schooling option this fall.”

But last week, ignoring the current scientific reality and disregarding the fundamental rights of concerned parents to make decisions about our children’s safety and education, Mayor de Blasio announced his back-to-school strategy based on outdated pre-delta data. Furthermore, de Blasio, who regularly touts his progressivism, inexplicably has chosen to join the ranks of policymakers in states like Texas, Florida and Missouri in removing any remote options for families, thereby forcing city parents to gamble with our kids’ health, if not their lives.

I’m a researcher who has studied heroism and morality throughout my 20-year career as a [social scientist](#). In his “final act” as a mayor with likely gubernatorial aspirations, de Blasio is putting politics over pediatrics, peddling a false narrative and posing as a hero offering students a

“homecoming” in the fall, as if they were completing a hero’s journey, when in reality, they are just now entering the belly of the whale.

As a parent and psychologist, I know that schoolchildren, with certain exceptions, do best when they are learning in person, and that an *eventual* return to in-person learning should be our goal. However, even the most conservative epidemiological models on the [delta variant](#) suggest that sending unvaccinated kids *with masks* to school could result in 40% of elementary schoolers testing positive within three months.

Believe me, I would much rather my kids return to school in the fall than learn remotely, but according to a [recent survey](#), thousands of families, among them Black and Hispanic, who often have the least access to and may be the most negatively impacted by remote learning, are far from assured that the proposed strategies will keep our schoolchildren safe and are clamoring for a centralized remote option.

De Blasio says his strategy is based on a “[gold standard of health and safety measures](#).” But the CDC itself says that [their guidelines](#) confirming the effectiveness of school safety measures like masking, spacing and testing are based on the much weaker alpha-, not delta-variant data and thus warrant increased vigilance.

Disturbingly, the DOE in numerous ways is being less vigilant than last year, for example, by not: tracking vaccination status; requiring a baseline negative COVID test to start school; ensuring social distancing in overcrowded schools; and by ill-advisedly reducing “opt-in” random testing to twice a month for 10% of unvaccinated students, down from 20% each week last year, thus flouting the [CDC K-12 guidelines](#) stating that testing in areas with high community transmission should be conducted at least once per week.

As parents, we’re not all in the same boat. Not all parents can utilize or even *want* a remote option. [Mental health concerns](#) about academic decline, anxiety and depression due to social isolation are real. Yet parents all over the city are joining the call for remote learning, something

that's being offered in 85% of the 69 member districts represented by **the Council of the Great City Schools.**

De Blasio is putting parents and children in a double bind by mandating a return to the classroom while medical experts question the safety of this choice. "It's a sad thing to say that [our kids are really guinea pigs,](#)" laments Catherine Troisi, an infectious disease epidemiologist at UT School of Public Health.

If even *one* of our too-young-to-be-vaccinated "guinea pigs" contracts COVID-19 and fails to "come home" as a result of de Blasio's hazardous policy, it will not only be tragic, but also morally inexcusable, given that it could have been prevented.

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