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Let them learn
The risks of keeping schools closed far outweigh the benefits

Millions of young minds are going to waste

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All around the world, children's minds are going to waste. As covid-19 surged in early April, more than 90% of pupils were shut out of school. Since then the number has fallen by one-third, as many classrooms in Europe and East Asia have reopened. But elsewhere progress is slow. Some American school districts, including Los Angeles and San Diego, plan to offer only remote learning when their new school year begins. Kenya's government has scrapped the whole year, leaving its children idle until January. In the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte says he may not let any children return to the classroom until a vaccine is found. South Africa has reopened casinos, but only a fraction of classrooms.

Many parents are understandably scared. Covid-19 is new, and poorly understood. Schools are big and crowded. Small children will not observe social distancing. Caution is appropriate, especially when cases are rising. But as we have argued before, the benefits of reopening schools usually outweigh the costs.

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The new coronavirus poses a low risk to children. Studies suggest that under-18s are a third to a half less likely to catch the disease. Those under ten, according to British figures, are a thousand times less likely to die than someone aged between 70 and 79. The evidence suggests they are not especially likely to infect others. In Sweden staff at nurseries and primary schools, which never closed, were no more likely to catch the virus than those in other jobs. A new study of 1,500 teenage pupils and 500 teachers who had gone back to school in Germany in May found that only 0.6% had antibodies to the virus, less than half the national rate found in other studies. Granted, an outbreak at a secondary school in Israel infected over 150 pupils and staff. But with precautions, the risk can be minimised.

However, the costs of missing school are huge. Children learn less, and lose the habit of learning. Zoom is a lousy substitute for classrooms. Poor children, who are less likely to have good Wi-Fi and educated parents, fall further behind their better-off peers. Parents who have nowhere to drop their children struggle to return to work. Mothers bear the heavier burden, and so suffer a bigger career setback. Children out of school are more likely to suffer abuse, malnutrition and poor mental health.

School closures are bad enough in rich countries. The harm they do in poor ones is much worse (see [article](#)). Perhaps 465m children being offered online classes cannot easily make use of them because they lack an internet connection. In parts of Africa and South Asia, families are in such dire straits that many parents are urging their children to give up their studies and start work or get married. The longer school is shut, the more will make this woeful choice. Save the Children, a charity, guesses that nearly 10m could drop out. Most will be girls.

Education is the surest path out of poverty. Depriving children of it will doom them to poorer, shorter, less fulfilling lives. The World Bank estimates that five months of school closures would cut lifetime earnings for the children who are affected by \$10trn in today's money, equivalent to 7% of current annual gdp.

With such catastrophic potential losses, governments should be working out how to reopen schools as soon as it is safe. This should not be a partisan issue, as it has sadly become in America, where some people assume it is a bad idea simply because President Donald Trump proposes it. In some countries teachers' unions have been obstructive, partly out of justified concern for public health as cases climb, but also because teachers' interests are not the same as children's—especially if they are being paid whether they work or not. The main union in Los Angeles urges that schools remain closed until a long wishlist of demands has been met, including the elusive dream of universal health care in America. Children cannot wait that long.

Places that have restarted schooling, such as France, Denmark, China and New Zealand, offer tips for minimising the risks. They let the most vulnerable teachers stay at home. They commonly reduced class sizes, even though that meant many children could spend only part of the week with their teachers. They staggered timetables to prevent crowding in corridors, at school gates and in dinner halls. They required or encouraged masks. They boosted school-based testing and tracing. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention has used these to draw up sober guidelines, which include measures such as separating desks by six feet (though the vice-president this week said that schools should feel free to ignore them).

European countries waited on average about 30 days after infections had peaked before they resumed some presence at school. Having started this way, many have since relaxed the rules to let most pupils return to school at the same time. There is no known experience of schools reopening in places where the virus was as prevalent as it is now in Arizona, Florida or Texas. Such places will have to bring the virus under control before the new term begins. This probably means that not all children will be able to go back full-time even then. But a few days a week with a teacher are better than none. And, as in Europe, schools can open up more as covid-19 recedes.

The trade-offs in the global South are even harder. Only a quarter of schools in the poorest countries have soap and running water for handwashing. However, schools in such places are also where pupils are often fed and vaccinated. Closing them makes children more vulnerable to hunger and measles, and this risk almost certainly outweighs that of covid-19. The prudent course for poor-country governments is therefore to act boldly. Face down unions and reopen schools. Conduct loud re-enrolment campaigns, aimed especially at girls. Offer small cash transfers or gifts (such as masks or pens) to ease parents' worries about the costs of getting their offspring

back to class.

Reopening the world's schools safely will not be cheap. Besides billions of bottles of hand sanitiser, it will require careful organisation, flexible schedules and assistance for those who have fallen behind to catch up. It will cost taxpayers money, but taxpayers are often parents, too. Rich countries should help poor ones with some of the costs. Steep as these will be, they are nothing like the costs of letting the largest generation in human history grow up in ignorance.

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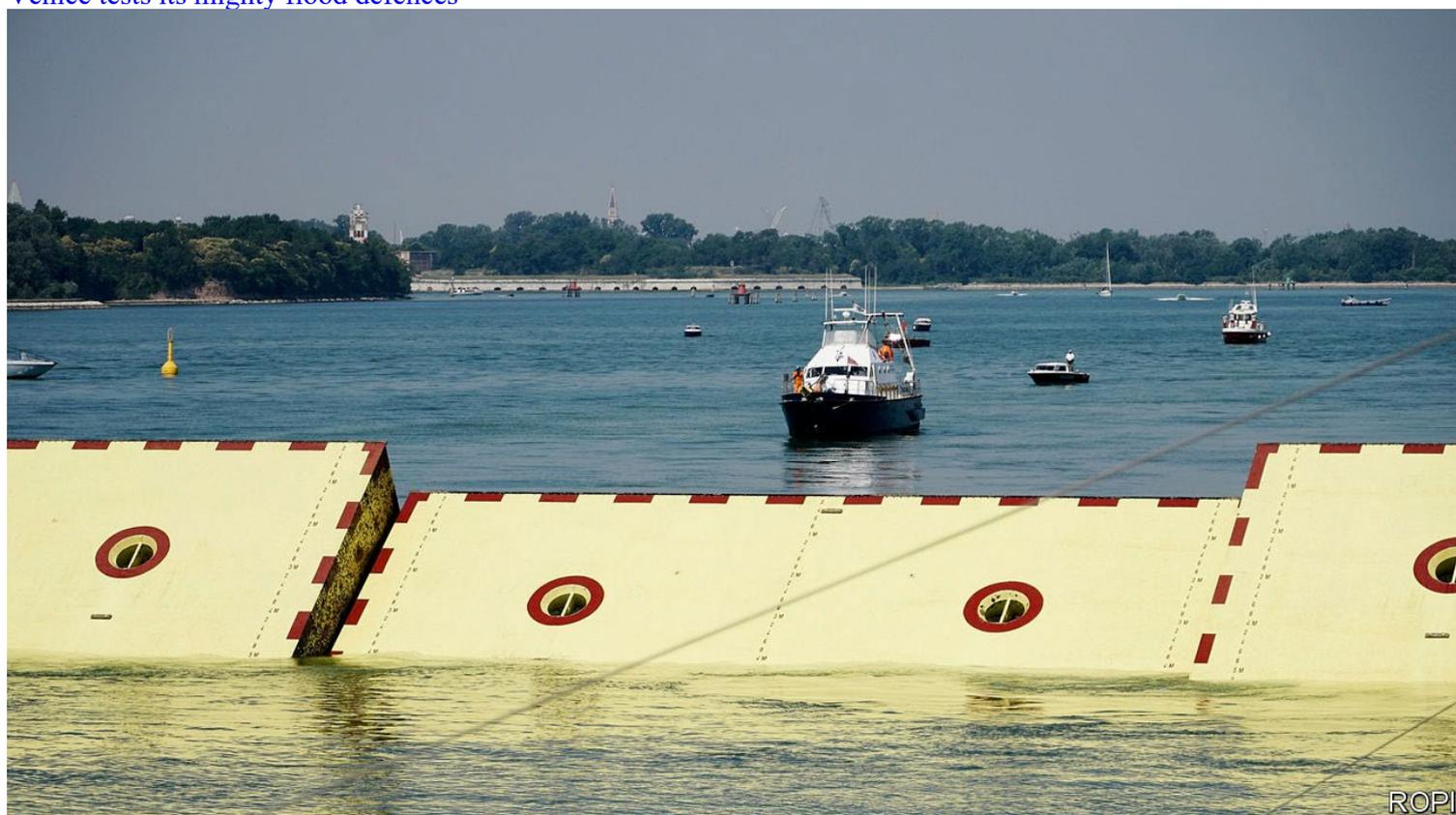
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