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how, in 2015, administrators at Harvard University gave out “Holiday Placemats for Social Justice” to serve as crib sheets for undergraduates who might want to browbeat their less-woke family members over the holidays. Marks points out that several Harvard undergraduates openly criticized the move, anecdotal he uses to make the argument that not all college students fit the caricature of coddled “crybullies.” All well and good; he’s right about that. What he overlooks, though, is that the placemat project was administrator-driven.

For all the ink spilled about potential indoctrination by leftist professors (largely a specious claim), it is administrators and campus bureaucrats who make up the most ideologically biased group in academe—a group that makes major decisions related to collegiate life and campus mores. As my former American Enterprise Institute colleague Samuel J. Abrams found from conducting a survey of about 900 “student-facing” administrators, “liberal staff members outnumber their conservative counterparts by the astonishing ratio of 12-to-one.” It is most often these campus mandarins, particularly those in positions related to offices of “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” who interfere with the

academic enterprise and threaten the idea of liberal education.

Also missing from Marks’s defense of liberal education is a real acknowledgment of the labor-market realities underpinning our higher-education system. Unfortunately, higher education has become for a great many Americans principally a toll—a credential that must be purchased to become eligible for higher-paying employment. A recommitment to liberal

Given the political and ideological polarization that has engulfed higher education over the past decade, it is heartening to read a case made in optimism.

education with a core curriculum that focuses largely on the “Great Books” would be a worthy recalibration for many colleges, but need it be the pathway for all of them? Perhaps a more effective move would be to reestablish institutional diversity and differentiate between liberal arts colleges,

research universities, and vocational programs while making it easier for students to acquire the skills and credentials they need to progress more quickly (and cheaply) to the workforce.

In the end, Marks’s case for a reason-oriented liberal education is likely altogether too reasonable a goal to accomplish. But, as he writes in his preface, “there are worse things to do than to go down swinging.”

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SCHOOL LIFE

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academic year?

It’s my hope that most schools will be open. I was feeling hopeful until I saw the AFT, again, disagree with the CDC and the vast majority of scientific bodies out there. It’s hard to anticipate what the unions’ disagreements will be in a couple of months. So maybe that ends up disrupting the reopening of schools for the coming year.

The wild card we need to watch is that with these new variants of the virus, there’s the risk that at least one or two of them will evade the efficacy of the vaccines. One could imagine a worst-case scenario where a wave of such a variant hits, and that could end up closing some communities and schools.

Another challenge right now is that the fear mongering that’s been taking place for the better part of a year has paralyzed a lot of families. Many parents don’t know who to believe. They hear from the superintendent that it’s safe to reopen. They hear from the unions that it’s not. So in some instances, schools are open, but a sizable number of parents have kept

“It was right to close schools early, but it’s been absolutely wrong to keep schools closed, given the accumulating body of research that we have on the virus and on the various mitigation measures that can help keep teachers and kids safe in the classroom.”

their kids in remote learning.

And the same way that we have vaccine hesitancy, we have “reopening hesitancy.” Some people are waiting for something to make them feel a bit more confident that it’s safe to send their kids back. That is a population we need to listen to and better understand, because I could imagine scenarios this fall where some parents want to keep their kids home until there’s a vaccine available for the kids. What we know is that a vaccine won’t be available for younger children until 2022. And for

older children, probably not until the late summer or early fall of 2021.

If you go by the vaccine rule, you’re going to have another year with schools closed. That would be absurdly costly to an entire generation of students.

That’s right.

This is an edited excerpt from an Education Exchange podcast, which can be heard at educationnext.org.

“Reopening Hesitancy” Threatens Fall 2021

E DUCATION NEXT’S senior editor, Paul Peterson, recently spoke with John Bailey, visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and author of AEI’s extensive research review “Is It Safe to Reopen Schools?”

Paul Peterson: Is it safe to reopen U.S. schools?

John Bailey: Based on the research we summarized in our report, yes, it is possible to bring students back in for in-person learning in a way that’s safe and responsible. The body of research that’s been amassed over the last year has pointed us toward how to do it. There are schools that have safely reopened in Europe, in the United States, and all around the world, with very few cases of Covid-19 among teachers and students.

In your report, you note that between March and October of 2020, fewer than one child in a million died of Covid-19. Of course, any death is one too many, but by comparison, 15 kids out of a million died in a transport accident, nine out of a million died of suicide, and five out of a million died of homicide. So, why did we ever close schools in the first place?

It’s a great question. At this time last year, I was squarely in the camp that schools should close, partly because the pandemic playbooks say that when you have a novel virus, particularly a respiratory virus, you close schools early, for two reasons: one, because kids tend to transmit respiratory viruses much more efficiently than adults do, and two, because kids tend to be the most susceptible to severe disease and even death. But over the past year, we’ve gotten to know a lot about this virus, and that it doesn’t act like a typical respiratory illness—that children tend to be the least symptomatic, have the least disease severity, and have the lowest numbers of hospitalizations and fatalities. There’s even some open question as to whether they transmit the virus as efficiently as adults do.

So, it was right to close schools early, but it’s been absolutely wrong to keep schools closed, given the accumulating body of research that we have on the virus and on the various mitigation measures that can help keep teachers and kids safe in the classroom.

The further point is that even if children are spreading the disease, is anybody getting sick? Is anybody going to the hospital? What is the seriousness of the risk?

There are two ways to look at that: one, what’s the risk to the students, and two, what’s the risk to the teachers?

Meaning, students may spread the virus to one another, but they’re largely asymptomatic and may not even know they’ve been infected, but teachers could be potentially infected with more serious consequences. And again, the research shows that kids under the age of 10 seem to be far less susceptible to severe disease than high-school students. And they seem far less likely even to transmit the virus. That’s not totally settled, but it’s mostly settled.

With that in mind, the bigger risks for kids are from being out of school. We tried to document some of that in our report. Kids have the least amount to gain from closed schools and the most to lose. They have lost academic progress, which translates into future earnings loss.

Many children are also facing mental-health challenges, which we’re only now beginning to get a clearer picture of. And then there are the incredible challenges we’ve created for parents, particularly working mothers. One study found that in cases where schools were online, mothers tended to be out of the workforce. The San Francisco Federal Reserve estimates that about 1.7 to 2 million working mothers left their jobs because they needed to be at home with their kids.

These are huge costs that we’ve asked mothers and kids to bear for very little public-health benefit from having schools closed and very little protective benefit for the kids themselves.

The teachers unions are highly opposed to reopening the schools now. Why are the unions coming up with every excuse they can dream of to keep the

schools from opening up?

I wish I knew. What’s surprising is that the American Federation of Teachers is disagreeing with the scientific bodies and with a pretty robust set of research studies that show that safely reopening the schools is possible. It’s been very frustrating, because it feels like it’s a never-ending set of moving goalposts. And teachers are essential workers, but they have been given many more protections than a lot of other essential workers.

This doesn’t mean that every single teacher should come back into the classroom. Some who have preexisting health conditions should absolutely stay home, but we have learned a lot, and we can do a lot to make classrooms very safe for teachers.

Do you think the schools will be universally open this coming fall? Or will the closings go into another

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John Bailey