

# The Junk Science of Pandemic School Closure

*A new book offers a painstaking look at how researchers, journalists, and policymakers got Covid wrong.*

## An Abundance of Caution: American Schools, the Virus, and a Story of Bad Decisions

by David Zweig

*The MIT Press, 2025, \$39.95; 464 pages.*

*As reviewed by Frederick M. Hess*

**B**E FOREWARNED: If you had school-age children during the Covid-19 pandemic, you may want to down a couple shots before picking up David Zweig's new book. It is a scrupulously researched, painfully detailed examination of why extended school closures were so misguided and why it was so tough for public officials to course correct.

Caution can be a healthy thing. But during the pandemic, Zweig argues, the notion of "caution" was hijacked. Officials and public health professionals cited "an abundance of caution" to justify unprecedented school closures even as evidence accumulated that schools could safely reopen. Meanwhile, these same authorities ignored cautions about the devastating effects of closure on youth learning, mental health, and wellbeing. To challenge the groupthink was to be deemed "anti-science"—or even an apologist for "human sacrifice."

A journalist by trade, Zweig traces the genesis of this book to his experience watching his two young children "slowly wilting" during the early weeks of school closures in spring 2020. He recalls wondering, "How necessary was it to keep children away from each other? . . . And how long was this supposed to go on?" That spring, as Zweig interviewed specialists and read international reports, he concluded "a very large story was not being told."

Rejecting claims that the nationwide imposition of school closures was a defensible "fog-of-war decision" or primarily due to the "malevolent influence of teacher unions," Zweig offers a more sweeping indictment: "American politicians, health officials, much of the broader medical establishment, and the media misled, lied to, and manipulated the public." This yielded, he argues, official guidance and policies that were based on "subjective values" but were "presented to the public as objective science."

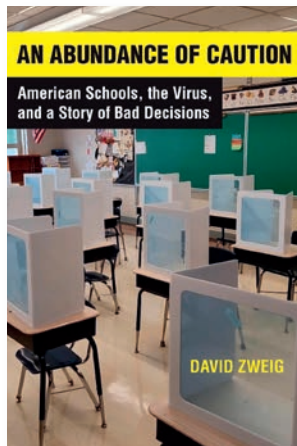
The result, Zweig concludes, is a portrait of "a country

ill-equipped to act sensibly under duress." He's not kidding. This is a story of profound failure. The inaccurate predictive models. The evidence-free case for extended closures. The dismal track record of remote learning. The inattention to reopening, and then the way the reopening debate became a tribal referendum on Donald Trump. The dubious rationales for in-school preventive measures. The devastating consequences for kids. The misleading media coverage. And for all of it, Zweig has the receipts.

Initially, authorities dismissed talk of lockdowns and closure. In January 2020, Anthony Fauci, later to become a media darling for his pandemic absolutism, said, "Historically, when you shut things down it doesn't have a major effect." In late February, the director of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases was casually (in one line in a lengthy speech) urging parents to "think about" what they'd do if schools closed.

And then, with astonishing speed, the conviction took hold—fueled by admiration for China's totalitarian lockdown strategy—that a willingness to lock citizens down was the measure of strong leadership. Before March was out, schools across the United States had shut their doors, with some not reopening for a year or more. Zweig notes that many states and municipalities in the United States "even forced two-year-olds to wear masks for six or more hours a day, for years"—an "extraordinary, absurdist, and cruel" policy unquestioned by prestige media or the public health establishment. (Indeed, the American Academy of Pediatrics was still arguing in 2022 for extended mask mandates.)

*An Abundance of Caution* offers an extended, devastating critique of Covid-era education. From the get-go, Covid's "novel" nature was cited as a reason for school closure. Yet, Zweig notes that it was already established science that children generally have milder symptoms from coronaviruses than do adults and are less likely to be spreaders. To justify aggressive closures, officials and media outlets made much of a dramatic graph showing infection data from St. Louis and Philadelphia during the first months of the 1918 influenza pandemic.



David Zweig

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Within weeks, though, Harvard University economist Robert Barro crunched the data from 45 U.S. cities during that pandemic and reported that closures had had no long-term effect on mortality rates.

Indeed, well before Memorial Day 2020, countries around the globe had reopened schools, and it was clear that doing so entailed minimal risk. Across Europe, schools had reopened in April and early May without problems, including in nations where infection was substantially higher than in the United States. While Italy's early experience with overwhelmed hospitals had been viewed as a cautionary tale, just 2 percent of cases involved youth aged zero to 18—and those youth accounted for just *two* (two—not 2 percent) of Italy's 30,000 fatalities. The risks were of the same magnitude as going swimming or taking a bus to school. Tracking outbreaks in 15 schools, Australia reported that not a single faculty or staff member had been infected.

Zweig reports that by April 2020, CDC data showed school-age youth had accounted for less than 1 percent of hospitalizations in this country *when schools were open*—and without masking or mitigation. On May 17, the European Union's education ministers shared the data from the first month of return-to-school in 22 nations and saw no evidence of increased spread despite minimal masking, three-foot (one meter) social distancing, and a lack of sophisticated HVAC systems. Yet, the prestige media offered a drumbeat of frenetic stories with headlines like “My Son Survived Terrifying Covid-19 Complications: If schools reopen, how many kids won't?” in the *New York Times*. (Meanwhile, on May 5, the prominent British medical journal *BMJ* published the paper “Children are not COVID-19 super spreaders: Time to go back to school.”)

In Zweig's telling, the teachers unions don't loom quite as large as they do in many other accounts. It's not that the unions are absent (in the index, the American Federation of Teachers is mentioned nine times and the National Education Association five times), but that Zweig is more focused on how the conduct of the public health community, the media, and public officials drove school closure. The result certainly doesn't do anything to absolve union leaders for striving to keep schools closed, but it does suggest the culpability is more broadly shared than some of the more polemic accounts have suggested.

The book can be a tough read. While well written, it's long

and dense, and it wades deep into minutiae. Zweig walks through the intimidating forecasting models, developed by epidemiologists such as Neil Ferguson and Michael Glass and used to justify school closures, showing how key elements rested on wild guesses and inaccurate assumptions. The Glass model, for instance, which was foundational in shaping the nation's

pandemic playbook, posited that youth “form the backbone” of viral spread. The basis for that supposition? Simulations the modeler's 14-year-old daughter had done for a school science project. The result, Zweig explains, was a federal pandemic playbook reliant “on Glass's model, which was based, in part, on Ferguson's model, which was based on a *made-up figure*” (italics in original).

Which of the Covid forecasting models turned out to be most accurate? A study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* took a hard look at the results and found that the most accurate forecasting models were those from *outside* the public health establishment. While organizations like the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, with hundreds of experts, were

routinely cited by CDC officials and governors to justify heavy-handed lockdowns, these “authoritative” models were massively outperformed by those designed by dabblers—including a physicist and a software developer. As Zweig observes, “It's as though an auto mechanic and a scrimshaw artist started performing open heart surgeries, and achieved better outcomes than a dozen of the top cardiothoracic surgery teams in the nation.”

Readers may recall Michael Lewis's 2021 bestseller *The Premonition: A Pandemic Story*, which offered a fawning portrayal of the most overzealous Covid doomers. One of Lewis's heroes was Carter Mecher, a veteran federal health official who helped drive aggressive school closures. Mecher reemerges here in a far less impressive light. Zweig shares a March 10 missive in which Mecher reassured key officials that kids wouldn't spread Covid if they weren't in school. Why? Mecher wrote, “Many of you have kids, do any of them hang out at malls? In my neighborhood I don't even see kids outside—they are all inside texting on Instagram, playing games with their friends online or whatever they do these days.” So much for careful evidence. Indeed, Zweig's account is rife with self-assured experts flippantly treating conjecture as fact and showing astonishing disregard for hard questions about youth wellbeing.

This is a book calculated to shake one's confidence in



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expertise, and “science” more generally. Researchers treated assumptions as fact. They waved away inconvenient evidence. Opaque models were cited as definitive when frank discussion about hypotheses, assumptions, and evidence would have yielded healthier, more informed public discourse. In short, “science” became a tool to enforce groupthink and suppress inconvenient questions. The result seems custom-designed to turbocharge a populist backlash.

Zweig has clearly read a lot and seems to have interviewed everybody. And, despite his frustration with the prolonged school closures, he comes across as remarkably reasonable. He acknowledges the rationale for brief, initial school closures, if done in conjunction with other intensive interventions. He recognizes that some kids lived with grandparents or had health conditions and that some parents wouldn’t have sent kids to schools even if they were open. While such situations called for accommodation, though, Zweig deems it dumbfounding that they were treated as a justification for wholesale closure—and argues there was never cause to think protracted school closures should be a cornerstone response to Covid.

Zweig isn’t out to pin the blame on anyone in particular. But he’s angry, and you’re likely to come away from this book angry too. As he laments in his final chapter, “There was a

certain willful dishonesty and fantasy to the idea that making children sit alone, staring at screens, isolated in their homes, for hours each day, for weeks, and then month after month after month was going to be anything other than a tragedy for many children.”

While the education world is today full of handwringing about distrust in institutions, experts, and the media, Zweig’s damning account suggests this distrust is both understandable and hard-earned. As he makes all too clear, we’re dealing with the aftermath of long years during which public officials and experts failed abjectly, while the media championed destructive policies and ignored or belittled those who were asking about the emperor’s lack of clothes.

The experience shattered the public’s already fragile trust in schools, experts, and media. Rebuilding that trust will be tough, absent an acknowledgment of what went so wrong. That makes Zweig’s magisterial contribution not just an overdue exercise in truth-telling but also, potentially, a crucial first step in that restorative journey.

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