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School Mask Mandates Mean Trauma For Millions Of Children, Especially Those From Low-Income Families



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Education

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Little girl in face mask looking in the window...
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I have spent my career as an educator fighting standardized testing and the havoc it has wreaked on the mental health and well-being of American schoolchildren, especially kids from low-income families.

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the harm it does to the psychology, health, and academic performance of America's schoolchildren. Instead of desks in a row, they recommended round tables. Instead of multiple choice assignments, they recommended collaborative projects. Instead of punitive discipline, they recommended mindfulness and socio-emotional learning.

The future looked bright for a free, student-centered, constructivist education for all children. It seemed that finally it wouldn't just be rich families who could afford to opt out of restrictive test-based academic settings.

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That was until Covid-19 reached America's shores and overnight transformed the American public education system into something unrecognizable: a system of restrictions and mandates far more repressive than standardized testing ever was. Students in most American classrooms now must wear a covering over their face and stay distanced from their peers the entire school day. In many schools, students are forced to play by themselves during recess. Even for the youngest of school children, desks are in rows. Kids can't see each other's smiles or learn critically important social and verbal skills.

The phrase I hear repeated over and over again to justify masks is: "kids are resilient."

But as an elementary school educator and Ph.D. student at Columbia University trained in trauma-informed instruction, I am concerned that this statement is overly simplistic and misleading. What we should be saying is: "masks and social distancing induce trauma and trauma at a young age is developmentally dangerous, especially for children who are experiencing trauma in other parts of their lives." Every year of a child's early life lays the foundation for their adulthood and insecure foundations do, in fact, crumble. According to [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#), children without assurance of their personal security (e.g. social anxiety from masks and social distancing) are often incapable of making healthy social connections and may have difficulty building intimate relationships in their lives. [Neurological research](#) demonstrates that kids who experience this kind of fear and trauma at a young age undergo structural and functional restructuring of their brain's prefrontal cortex, resulting in emotional and cognitive processing problems. This trauma is especially concerning for children growing up in poverty who often have the compounding effect of other trauma at home or in their community. Before Covid-19, already [nearly half](#) of all American children had experienced trauma in their lives.

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Furthermore, children in masks who are socially distanced are more likely to lead a sedentary

lead to lifelong health challenges that often result in early death. Tragically, the prevalence of clinical depression and anxiety have already [doubled for children globally](#) since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and will likely worsen with continued restrictions.

Children in masks are also likely to miss out on critical [language development](#), another fundamental area of growth in early years where children from low-income backgrounds already have [disproportionate disadvantages](#).

Covid-19 cases among children have increased due to the Delta variant, but according to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), “0.00%-0.03% of all child COVID-19 cases resulted in death” this past week. Despite sensationalized clickbait news coverage, a child’s current [chance of death from Covid-19](#) in America is lower than their [chance of dying](#) from a lightning strike or car accident.

We should keep watching the data to monitor whether children experience morbidity and mortality worse than they currently do, and adjust as is appropriate. But we must ask ourselves: do the benefits of masks and social distancing truly outweigh the long-term psychological, physical, social, and academic harm we are inflicting on a whole generation of American schoolchildren? If we care about equity and the most vulnerable members of our society, we at least can’t be afraid to ask.

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Zak Ringelstein

Zak Ringelstein is a teacher who has spent his career advocating for an education system that brings joy, purpose, and liberation. Recently he founded Zigazoo to give children the opportunity to engage in joyful educational activities and “learn by doing.” Hailed the “future of remote learning” by TechCrunch, Zigazoo enables students to share video-based responses to challenges built by leading museums, educators, and media stars. Ringelstein taught elementary school for 5 years, founded UClass (which he exited to Renaissance Learning), was named to the Forbes 30 Under 30 list, was the first millennial to be a major party nominee for U.S. Senate, and was the architect of the \$60k minimum teacher salary policy. He has a bachelor’s in history from Columbia University and is getting his doctorate at Columbia’s Teachers College. He and his wife, Leah, have three boys ages 5 and younger.

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