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## DO SCHOOL REOPENINGS CONTRIBUTE TO COVID'S SPREAD?



As pressure [mounts to reopen schools](#), a study coauthored by NEPC Fellow Douglas N. Harris of Tulane University may offer guidance to decisionmakers caught between often-conflicting desires and concerns of teachers, students, parents, and politicians.

The study, published January 4<sup>th</sup> by the National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice (REACH), found that in-person instruction did not increase the number of COVID patients in hospitals in counties where pre-opening rates were below 36 to 44 new weekly hospitalizations per 100,000 people. During the period the study data covers (summer through October 2020), three quarters of counties fell into that “no effect” category. A caveat is that schools were considered to be open even if parents also had the option to choose remote learning for their children. Hospitalizations were used as an outcome measure because positivity rates, which other studies have relied upon, can change when schools reopen even if schools are not spreading the virus, or the positivity rate can stay the same when schools do spread the virus. Hospitalizations do not suffer from these same problems.

In counties with hospitalization rates above 36-44, Harris and his co-authors, Engy Ziedan and Susan Hassig of Tulane University, said their findings were inconclusive. Although hospitalization rates sometimes declined in these counties, they also sometimes increased.

The study authors warn that it is important to remember that reopenings may affect different groups in different ways. For instance, Black and Latinx people have disproportionately experienced negative effects of COVID.

While this new COVID study is but one piece of evidence to consider, in a time when reopening discussions too often end up mired in politics, rhetoric and emotion, the results provide at least one empirical criterion for governors, school boards, and superintendents to consider—one that is not subject to the same concerns as prior studies.

Harris, Ziedan, and Hassig write:

The underlying assumption of COVID-19 school decision-making has been that opening up schools to in-person instruction would benefit students and parents in many ways, but at a cost of spreading the virus and harming teachers and the community as a whole. While we find evidence that this trade-off exists in counties with already high virus transmission, we do not find evidence of such a trade-off for the majority of school districts, based on the summer COVID-19 numbers. This is important for policymakers to consider as they make decisions this spring and in future virus events.

### NEPC Resources on Politics, Policy, and School Practices

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