

# In CDC's backyard, school reopening debate divides experts

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A sign that reads "our children deserve better safe choice now" is seen on Friday, Jan. 15, 2021, in Decatur, Ga. Just down the road from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in a community flush with resident health professionals, the Decatur school system had no shortage of expert input on whether to resume in-person classes amid the coronavirus pandemic. Scores of public health and medical professionals from the affluent, politically liberal Atlanta suburb have weighed in about what's best for their own kids' schools.(AP Photo/Brynn Anderson)

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One emergency medicine doctor said initial reopening plans for the district's 5,000-plus students weren't safe enough. A pediatrician doing epidemiology work for the CDC advocated delaying. Others, including a leader of the CDC's COVID-19 vaccine efforts, argued the district could get students back in classrooms safely—and that not doing so jeopardized their development and mental health.

"The challenge for me has been trying to weigh all of these things that I'm being told by experts and non-experts alike to try to make the best decision that we can," Superintendent David Dude said. "And that's what I, and I'm sure other superintendents, have been struggling with."

Each side argued data and science supported their view in a debate over reopening schools that sometimes veered into vitriol. The division in Decatur illustrates the challenges U.S. schools—many in communities without so much expertise—have faced in evaluating what's safe.

Health officials say there's growing evidence that children aren't the main drivers of community spread and that transmission is relatively low in schools if mask-wearing, social distancing and contact tracing is in effect. The CDC says that for schools to open safely, they and their surrounding communities must adopt prevention measures.

Without specific reopening instructions from federal and state leaders, [school administrators](#) have had to become amateur epidemiologists, Dude said.

When he first consulted privately with CDC and other professionals—who he said wouldn't speak out publicly at that point in the process because the pandemic response had been politicized—people accused him of not being transparent. When he rolled out fall reopening plans, some parents and teachers questioned whether it was safe and which virus metrics were used. When he hit the brakes on reopening, other parents got riled up, complaining about the abrupt change or how virtual schooling wasn't tenable.

Tiffany Tesfamichael, a [single parent](#) who stretched her budget to move to Decatur because of the well-regarded schools, was upset that her freshman daughter had to struggle through remote learning while neighbors citing concerns about virus spread protested against opening schools, but not against opening businesses.

"Why aren't they out here with signs protesting restaurants if they really, really mean it?" she said.

Dude ended up asking a giant committee of volunteers—many with relevant expertise, though it wasn't required—to make recommendations, including parameters for reopening and protocols to limit virus spread in classes.

Then he decided a new plan for January: Students at the seven elementary schools could return, staying in cohorts of 15 or fewer and attending only in the mornings, to avert the logistical nightmare of an unmasked lunch crowd. Older students would stay remote because it was too difficult to arrange them in small cohorts.

Some CDC employees and other health professionals objected to that part, arguing in a letter to a community news website that safe, in-person learning was doable for older students using precautions other than cohorting, and that decision-makers were misreading evidence about virus transmission in schools. A hospital doctor treating COVID-19 patients countered with her own letter, warning that reopening as cases surged would be irresponsible.

The expert insights made parent Kerry Ludlam reconsider her own stance.

"I think letters like that are so powerful because you think you feel one way and then you read a letter with all of these experts. ... And you're like, 'Well, their opinion is different from mine. Have I been wrong all the time?'" Ludlam said.

She remained inclined to keep her middle schoolers in distance learning, partly because an autoimmune disorder increases her vulnerability. But she said learning more about other families' circumstances and academic challenges convinced her that parents should at least be offered the choice of face-to-face learning.

Without it, some families moved to private schools or other suburbs offering in-person classes. Republican Gov. Brian Kemp had pushed a largely voluntary approach to precautions, even after a summer surge in cases, and urged schools to reopen.

Around Decatur, neighbors dodged the issue in polite conversation as tensions rose during [school](#) board meetings and on social media.

Some commenters pushed the debate to its sharpest and crudest edges, suggesting that advocates of resuming in-person classes were OK with gambling teachers' lives in a desperate grasp for normalcy, or that

perhaps people urging continued remote learning couldn't see past their privilege to understand how much other families were struggling.

In a Facebook group for district parents, the sniping got so bad that some users complained their posts were shared with their employers by others trying to disparage them.

"I'm reminded of that analogy where if you put black ants and red ants in a jar, they get along fine until you shake up the jar and you set it back down, and then the ants ... go after each other to the death, like without ever once considering who shook their world," Susan Camp, one of the group's administrators, told The Associated Press.

She didn't feel the district's reopening plans were safe or equitable, particularly for the most vulnerable students, but the increasing incivility troubled her, too.

Ludlam worries about the conversations yet to come.

From behind their keyboards and screens, "people just kind of let it fly—forgetting that at some point, the world is going to get back to normal, and we're going to see each other at school or the pool or, you know, the grocery store and have time to stand and talk," Ludlam said. "And we're going to have to face the things we said to each other and the things we accused each other of."

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