

Transcript: Are The Risks Of Reopening Schools Exaggerated?

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3-Minute Listen Transcript

ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

The debate about whether to reopen schools has divided communities across the U.S. this fall. Only a fraction of all students are attending school in person full time. Now, as NPR's Anya Kamenetz reports, while there is no final verdict, emerging evidence shows few clear links between K-12 schools and COVID infections.

ANYA KAMENETZ, BYLINE: If you talk to experts around the world about the risk of reopening schools, you'll start to hear a lot of this.

RANDA GROB-ZAKHARY: There is no predictable pattern.

ENRIC ALVAREZ: The school makes absolutely no difference.

PREETI MALANI: The data so far are not indicating that schools are a superspreader site.

KAMENETZ: That's Dr. Randa Grob-Zakhary of Insights for Education, Enric Alvarez of Spain's Universitat Politecnica de Catalunya and Dr. Preeti Malani with the Infectious Diseases Society of America. Schools are places where people congregate indoors, which we know is generally risky for the coronavirus. Classrooms were shut all over the world at the start of the pandemic. So how can experts say that it might be safe to open them now, while the virus is still spreading?

Well, take Spain, for example. The country is currently in a second wave that started before schools opened. Still, Alvarez found that cases in one region of the country actually dropped three weeks after school reopening. In other regions, they continued rising but at the same rate as before. And in still another, cases stayed flat. Alvarez says when it comes to schools, whether open or shut...

ALVAREZ: It's pretty clear that they don't have a very major epidemic-changing effect, at least in Spain, with the measures that are being taking in Spain.

KAMENETZ: Measures like masking, ventilation and social distancing, that is.

GROB-ZAKHARY: Schools do not seem to be the superspreaders that people feared they would be.

KAMENETZ: Grob-Zakhary analyzed data from 191 countries. She found some, such as Thailand, that opened when cases were low and they stayed low. Others, such as Vietnam and the Gambia, saw cases drop after schools fully reopened.

GROB-ZAKHARY: What we see globally is if it's gradual, if it is careful and transparent - there is monitoring, there is reporting - then things tend to go well.

KAMENETZ: But many experts worry the United States as a whole isn't being so cautious.

MELINDA BUNTIN: We're still driving with the headlights off, and we got kids in the car.

KAMENETZ: Melinda Buntin is a health economist at Vanderbilt University. She says the U.S. needs more testing, more contact tracing and more information about what safety rules are being followed in schools. Otherwise, we can't figure out what is working or interrupt hot spots when they happen.

BUNTIN: One might argue that we're running, really, a massive national experiment right now with opening schools, and we're not collecting uniform data.

KAMENETZ: One U.S. state that does stand out for its data collection is Utah. They track cases by district, among staff, students and everyone under 18. You can easily find it all under the school's tab of the state health department website. Tom Hudachko of the Utah Department of Public Health says, thanks to careful monitoring, they spotted a surge among teens and young adults when schools and colleges started reopening and traced it mainly to social gatherings, not to classrooms. Since then...

TOM HUDACHKO: We've seen those numbers come down significantly over the past several weeks. We've done some really targeted messaging and communication campaigns to those 15- to 24-year-olds.

KAMENETZ: When cases are rising in a community, as they are in Utah, experts say, infections will inevitably turn up in schools as well. And Malani, the epidemiologist, knows that's scary.

MALANI: This diagnosis strikes fear in people's hearts.

KAMENETZ: But, she says, a staff member or student getting sick or even a school that has to close temporarily, these don't mean that schools are necessarily driving infections.

MALANI: The risk may not be that high, but it feels high.

KAMENETZ: Malani and other experts say we should balance the potential risks of opening schools with the known risks to children of keeping them closed.

Anya Kamenetz, NPR News.

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