Neoliberalism, COVID, Anti-Science, and the Politics of School Reopening

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Abstract: This paper explores the politicization of school reopenings in two swing states against the backdrop of rising COVID cases, public health warnings, and the hyper-partisan weaponization of "choice" rhetoric by parents to send children back into school. Rhetoric surrounding parental choice partnered with economic considerations placed significant pressure on school boards to navigate their reopening plans from a partisan frame of reference. We explore, compare, and contrast the landscape of school reopening plans in Wisconsin and Georgia, which both served as pivotal states in the contentious 2020 Presidential election. Within each state we consider two districts that are situated in either a more traditionally conservative or liberal environment. Our guiding questions are: (1) How is the conversation about school reopening reflective of politicized and polarized approaches to COVID? and, (2) How are school reopening discussions different in politically liberal and conservative communities?
Keywords: COVID; school board; neoliberalism; anti-science; schools

Neoliberalismo, COVID, anticiencia, y la política de reapertura escolar
Resumen: Este documento explora la politización de la reapertura de escuelas en dos estados "oscilantes" en el contexto del aumento de casos de COVID, las advertencias de salud pública y el uso de la retórica sobre la "elección" de los padres para enviar a los niños de vuelta a la escuela. La retórica en torno a la elección de los padres asociada con consideraciones económicas ejerció una presión significativa sobre las juntas escolares para navegar sus planes de reapertura desde un marco de referencia partidista. Exploramos, comparamos y contrastamos el panorama de los planes de reapertura de escuelas en Wisconsin y Georgia, que sirvieron como estados fundamentales en las polémicas elecciones presidenciales de 2020. Dentro de cada estado, consideramos dos distritos que están situados en un entorno tradicionalmente más conservador o liberal. Nuestras preguntas guía son: (1) ¿De qué manera la conversación sobre la reapertura de las escuelas refleja los enfoques politizados y polarizados de COVID? y (2) ¿En qué se diferencian las discusiones sobre la reapertura de escuelas en comunidades políticamente liberales y conservadoras?
Palabras-clave: COVID; consejo escolar; neoliberalismo; anticiencia; escuelas

Neoliberalismo, COVID, anticiência, e a política de reabertura das escolas
Resumo: Este artigo explora a politização da reabertura das escolas em dois estados "swing" contra o pano de fundo do aumento dos casos de COVID, advertências de saúde pública e o uso da retórica sobre a "escolha" dos pais para enviar as crianças de volta à escola. A retórica em torno da escolha dos pais em parceria com considerações econômicas colocou uma pressão significativa nos conselhos escolares para navegar em seus planos de reabertura a partir de um quadro de referência partidário. Exploramos, comparamos e contrastamos o cenário dos planos de reabertura das escolas em Wisconsin e Geórgia, que serviram como estados centrais na controversa eleição presidencial de 2020. Dentro de cada estado, consideramos dois distritos que estão situados em um ambiente mais tradicionalmente conservador ou liberal. Nossas questões norteadoras são: (1) Como a conversa sobre a reabertura das escolas reflete as abordagens politizadas e polarizadas do COVID? e, (2) Como as discussões de reabertura escolar são diferentes em comunidades politicamente liberais e conservadoras?
Palavras-chave: COVID; conselho escolar; neoliberalismo; anticiência; escolas

Neoliberalism, COVID, Anti-Science, and the Politics of School Reopening

The COVID-19 pandemic ravaged normalcy across the globe, devastated domestic and global markets and economies, caused unprecedented unemployment in the United States (Jones, 2020), and shuttered the nation's schools. The majority of K-12 school districts sent students home under, what were then, temporary measures to social distance through the use of digital learning from home. However, as cases surged, most schools remained closed for the rest of the 2020 academic year. Moving public education to an online, at-home, setting highlighted the socioeconomic disparities throughout the United States that have long manifested in and been exacerbated by our nation's schools (Preheim, 2020). COVID was almost immediately politicized in the United States, including mitigation factors such as closing schools, mask wearing, and vaccines. On top of that, the emergence and surge of COVID and mitigation efforts coincided with one of the most vitriolic and partisan presidential elections in modern history.

To that end, this paper explores the politicization of school reopenings in two swing states against the backdrop of rising COVID cases, public health warnings, and the hyper-partisan weaponization of "choice" rhetoric by parents to send children back into buildings exposing teachers and staff who are at higher risk for serious disease or death. Rhetoric surrounding parental choice partnered with economic considerations placed significant pressure on school boards to navigate their reopening plans from a partisan frame of reference. We explore, compare, and contrast the landscape of school reopening plans in Wisconsin and Georgia, which both served as pivotal states in the contentious 2020 Presidential election. Within each state we consider two districts that are situated in either a more traditionally conservative or liberal environment. Our guiding questions are: (1) How is the conversation about school reopening reflective of politicized and polarized approaches to COVID? and (2) How are school reopening discussions different in politically liberal and conservative communities?

Our exploration sheds light on the specific partisan rhetoric employed surrounding school re-opening efforts. The use of school-choice narratives suggests the depth of which such rhetoric has permeated the re-imagining of schooling as an individualistic commodity rather than a public good. The eschewing of scientific and medical expertise in the face of an ongoing, and growing, pandemic that had claimed more than 300,000 Americans lives at the start of the 2020-2021 school year serves as a snapshot for how political ideologies were operationalized in relation to schools. At the time of writing, nearly 600,000 Americans have died as a result of COVID. The prioritization of the economy, for many, was elevated above the documented dangers surrounding COVID – even though the consequences were that workers and consumers would die. The prioritization of the economy clashed squarely with school closures given the fundamental role that schools have come to play in U.S. society as a means of childcare for workers.

Profit over People: Neoliberalism and COVID

Neoliberalism prioritizes individualism and defines freedom through individualism in commercial and consumer terms. Neoliberal policies promote the free market, personal responsibility, choice, and private enterprise, and view government as ineffective and bureaucratic (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2003; Burch, 2009; Harvey, 2005). Michael Apple (2006) demonstrated how the "conservative modernization" shifted notions of common sense around the material and ideological conditions surrounding schooling, which resulted in a dramatic societal and cultural shift rightward in education and social policy (Apple, 2006; Ball, 1994; Burch, 2009). In action, neoliberalism favors increased privatization, deregulation, and decreased state intervention, coupled with the defunding of public services, such as higher education, K-12 schools, libraries, and health care. In brief, neoliberalism represents an increased commitment to the promotion of unbridled capitalism under the premise that the free market should govern businesses and society (Harvey, 2005). Apple (2006) argued that "neoliberalism transforms our very idea of democracy, making it only an economic concept, not a political one" (p. 15).

Shifts towards neoliberalism have had an especially profound impact on education, evidenced by policies such as the dramatic expansion of school choice, mayoral control in many large cities, the No Child Left Behind Act and its reauthorization, merit pay initiatives for teachers, and the deregulation of teacher education (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2007; Burch, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). Contemporary proponents of deregulating schooling and teacher certification draw from Milton Friedman's conceptions of enacting neoliberal educational policies (Friedman, 1955, 1997, 2002; McShane, 2014; McShane et al., 2018; Walberg & Bast, 2003). The focus on bureaucratic problems and managerial solutions, rather than resource neglect and racist public policy obfuscates the racist structural, systemic, and historical root causes of an increasingly stratified society along racial and

economic lines (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brewer & Myers, 2015; Grusky, 2008; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Lareau, 2003; Piketty, 2014; Rich et al., 2017; Sacks, 2007; Swartz, 1990). This divorce of education from a racial and economic analysis is often used by educational reformers to convince the general public that it does not have to alleviate poverty or dismantle racist structures to work towards equity (Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2011). The solution for schools that are labeled as 'failing' is the expansion of school choice in the education marketplace, which is often promoted under the guise of targeted benefits for non-White students despite evidence to suggest White and affluent students are the primary beneficiaries (EdBuild, 2019; Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Rotberg, 2014; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2019).

Parents make school decisions within this increasingly neoliberal educational system that situates education as an individualistic commodity rather than a component of a larger collective good (Brewer & Potterton, 2020; Lipman, 2011; Potterton, 2020). Choice is frequently used as a proxy for equity under neoliberalism (Lipman & Haines, 2007, p. 485). School choice is sometimes narrowly equated with charter schools and school vouchers, but "the notion of 'parent choice' and the discourses that frame parents as choosers versus defaulting into a neighborhood school have been institutionalized into mainstream educational reform efforts, including NCLB and intra and inter district 'open enrollment' practices" (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; DeBray-Pelot et al., 2007). Opponents of school choice have argued that these policies lead to further segregated and homogenous school populations and exacerbate racial inequality (Frankenberg, 2011; Frankenberg et al., 2017; Frankenberg & Lewis, 2012; Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2011; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2019). This neoliberal framework ultimately creates a system in which individual parents are deemed responsible for ensuring a quality education for their child/ren through choice, further abdicating the government's responsibility to provide high quality, equitable schools for all students. In this paper, we look at the language of choice in a new context: Many parents demanded the choice for their children to return to in-person learning during the COVID pandemic. The cases presented in this paper examine the ways neoliberal ideology undergirded discussions about school reopenings in the 2020-2021 school year.

The Politicization of COVID-19

> Schools are a very appetizing opportunity. I just saw a nice piece in *The Lancet* arguing that the opening of schools may only cost us 2 to 3 percent in terms of total mortality. You know, that's — any life is a life lost, but to get every child back into a school where they're safely being educated, being fed, and making the most out of their lives, with the theoretical risk on the backside, it might be a trade-off some folks would consider. (Dr. Mehmet Oz on *Fox News* in April 2020, as cited in Cramer, 2020)

The impending 2020 Presidential election exacerbated political divisions and then, COVID hit. Early on in the pandemic, political communication related to COVID became extremely polarized and hyper-partisan. In July 2020 "about twice as many Democrats (85%) as Republicans (46%) said COVID posed a major threat to public health. Democrats were more likely to support wearing face coverings and to trust the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)" (Halpern, 2020). White male Trump supporters constituted the group far less likely to wear a mask or get vaccinated (Center, 2020). With the lack of a national COVID approach under the Trump administration, state and local governments were left to make decisions about mitigation mandates, leading to a wide range of strategies that generally fell along partisan lines. Republican-leaning states and counties

typically offered more limited (or no) public health mandates, whereas Democratic-leaning states and counties generally implemented more stringent public health orders such as widespread mask mandates. For example, all 16 states without a mask mandate in March 2021 were led by Republican governors. As described in our cases below, public health mandates were often an issue of contention between state and local governments of different parties.

While President Trump inherited a bullish economy with low, and falling, unemployment numbers, the continued success of the economy that was to be the pièce de résistance of Trump's reelection campaign (Frazee, 2020). Fox News and conservative pundits worked overtime during each Trump-induced scandal – and especially during the COVID shutdowns (Relman, 2020) – to redirect viewers, and the Trump administration, to focus on the growing economy as a selling point that overrode any of the negative aspects of the administration (Jennings, 2018; Montanaro, 2019; Schiller, 2019). Early on in the pandemic, Trump quickly coined the phrase "We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself" referencing the need to focus on mending the economy over the preservation of lives (Haberman & Sanger, 2020). Trump and the GOP understood that the best-selling point for a Trump re-election and down ballot victories was a quick return to the pre-pandemic economy. This focus is, seemingly, the crux of the rationale behind Trump's efforts at downplaying the severity of the virus, opposing lockdowns and calling for supporters to "liberate" states in shutdown (leading to a thwarted attempt to kidnap democratic Governor Whitmer of Michigan), the eschewing of masks as a public reminder that the virus was real and that masks, shutdowns, and distancing was simultaneously necessary to save lives and equally the cause for the economic downturn. It is also important to note that this nonchalance approach to the science of the raging pandemic positioned those living in poverty and non-Whites to bear the burden of their attempts to elevate the economy over saving lives (Frum, 2020).

Mask wearing was one of the most notable examples of how the virus was politicized. Despite the pleas from the medical community, mask wearing quickly became a proxy for political orientation. In open-ended questions about the ways COVID made their lives difficult or challenging, mask wearing was the most mentioned among Republicans (Van Kessel & Quinn, 2020). Among Republicans, 27% noted skepticism about the efficacy of masks and the severity of the pandemic in general (vs 3% of Democrats). 31% of Democrats expressed concerns about the failure of others to wear masks or those not taking the pandemic seriously (Van Kessel & Quinn, 2020). Another analysis found empirical evidence that mask wearing was lower in counties Donald Trump won during the 2016 presidential election (Kahane, 2021). Moreover, Kahane (2021) found that there was higher compliance for mask usage in states that implemented mask mandates.

While the 2020 election may have heightened the partisan response to COVID, it is not an isolated phenomenon. Strikingly similar debates played out during the deadly 1918 influenza outbreak when authorities enforced similar mitigation efforts including: (1) closing schools; (2) the ordering of mask wearing; and, (3) encouraging proper ventilation by opening windows. Efforts were made during the 1918 influenza epidemic to associate mask wearing with patriotism as well as to publicly shame those who refused to wear masks as "dangerous" as "slackers" who were endangering the lives of others (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 1918). Those resisting mask wearing during the 1918 flu cited the "appearance, comfort, and freedom" or that masks presented, on their own, a medical threat to the wearer much in the same vein as those taking up anti-mask positions during the COVID pandemic (Hauser, 2020). The symbolism of masks, in 1918 and 2020, became a proxy for political ideology where anti-mask groups formed and made public statements against mask wearing to press legal boundaries by purposefully not wearing masks. Under the demagogic leadership of Trump (Roberts-Miller, 2017), many sought to project eschewing masks as a sign of

masculine strength (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Stanley, 2018) and, by extension, patriotism as the act purported to showcase a lack of fear.

The politicization of mask wearing continued to reach peak partisanship in 2021 as *Fox News'* highest rated show hosted by Tucker Carlson noted in April:

> This grotesque version of Halloween [mask wearing] went on for more than a year. It's still going on. But not even [Dr.] Tony Fauci pretends that masks are medically necessary. Instead, they're now purely a sign of political obedience, like Kim Il Sung pins in Pyongyang. We wear them because we have to. The only people who wear masks voluntarily outside are zealots and neurotics. How neurotic are they? Well, we know. A Pew survey from last March found that sixty-four percent of white Americans who classify themselves as "liberal" or "very liberal" have been diagnosed with an actual mental health condition. . . . The next time you see someone in a mask on the sidewalk or the bike path, don't hesitate. Ask politely but firmly: "would you please take off your mask? Science shows there is no reason to wear it. Your mask is making me uncomfortable." We should do that, and we should keep doing it, until wearing a mask outdoors is roughly as socially accepted as lighting a Marlboro in an elevator. It's repulsive. Don't do it around other people. That's the message we should send because it's true. As for forcing children to wear masks outside – it should be illegal. Your response when you see children wearing masks as they play should be no different than your response to seeing someone beat a child in Walmart: call the police immediately. Contact child protective services. Keep calling until someone arrives. What you're seeing is abuse. It's child abuse, and you're morally obligated to try to prevent it. If it's your own children being abused, act accordingly. Let's say your kids' school emailed to announce that every day after lunch, your sixth-grader was going to be punched in the face by a teacher. How would you respond to that? That's precisely how you should respond. Think about it. That's precisely how you should respond when they tell you that your children have to wear masks on the soccer field. That is unacceptable, it's dangerous, and we should act like it. Because it is. (Carlson, 2021)

Carlson, who is notable for advancing White supremacist ideologies, exemplifies the wide-ranging anti-science, COVID denialism, and anti-mitigation efforts of the far right. Public sentiment about the closure of schools also fell along political lines.

Table 1
Desired School Delivery in August 2020

	Fully In-Person	Fully Online	Hybrid	Not Sure
All Adults	19	28	36	16
Men	21	25	37	16
Women	17	31	35	16
White	24	23	38	15
Black	8	43	32	17

	Fully In-Person	Fully Online	Hybrid	Not Sure
Hispanic	10	39	32	19
Asian	12	35	38	14
Upper Income	23	20	44	14
Middle Income	20	28	37	15
Lower Income	15	35	30	19
Republican/Lean Republican	36	13	36	15
Democrat/Lean Democrat	6	41	37	16

Note: Adapted from (Horowitz, 2020).

According to an August 2020 Pew survey on factors in the decision to re-open school, those who lean left cited the safety of students and teachers as the top two factors. Whereas those who lean to the political right cited the perception that students would fall behind academically and the economy as the top factors (economy, here, measured by a parent's ability to continue working or not) which were represented by a large minority of all American adults (Horowitz, 2020). As the pandemic continued and many schools remained closed or hybrid in February of 2021, there was a shift in public perception about the need to reopen schools to avoid the possibility of students falling behind academically, and a decline in overall concern about the risk of COVID contraction among students and faculty as vaccines began increasing. However, it is worth noting that the majority (59%) of U.S. adults in February of 2021 said that schools should wait to reopen until all teachers were vaccinated (Horowitz, 2021).

In April of 2020, parents in the lower income brackets reported the most amount of concern that their children would fail or fall behind because of school closures; yet, four months later in August of 2020 they represented the group with the highest level of support for fully online and the lowest level of support for fully in-person instruction. While the Pew survey did not report rationales, it is possible that low-income parents can simultaneously be worried about the academic progression of their students but also the health and safety of their children, other students, and teachers. Additionally, over the summer school districts worked to improve the quality digital instruction through planning and training, perhaps impacting parents' perceptions about the efficacy of online learning (Vestal, 2020).

The paper adds to the emerging literature on the politicization of COVID by specifically examining the language and framing of school re-openings in Wisconsin and Georgia. For the scope of this paper, we analyzed comments that fit within the broader national conversation related to the politicization of COVID and schools.

Methodology

As educational reform movements become more complex, layered, and organizationally interconnected, it behooves critical scholars to develop new theoretical and methodological tools capable of piecing together these relationships. As such, we have examined the COVID school reopening plans in Wisconsin and Georgia through the lens of critical policy scholarship. This

framework was developed as a counter-hegemonic response to traditional policy science, which limits analyses to the 'technical and immediately realizable' inside-the-system understandings of and solutions for urban education (Grace, 1984, p. 32). Conversely, critical scholars situate policies within social, economic, political, and cultural contexts (Lipman, 2011). By looking at the relationships between policies and the contexts they respond to and enable, critical scholars bring to the fore the specific interests and relations of power shaping educational policy processes (Grace, 1984; Lipman, 2011).

Data Sources

This paper uses two swing states as cases: Wisconsin and Georgia. Within each state, we selected two school districts to represent a Democratic and a Republican County. We compared and contrasted their COVID reopening plans and discussions. Given the heightened polarization in 2020, the contrasting ways in which school reopening was discussed provided a rich source of data to capture and analyze discursive variance and the COVID policies for the 2020-2021 school year.

Data Analysis

This paper draws on an analysis of publicly available video of school board meetings discussing COVID reopening plans in four districts, two in Wisconsin (Madison Metropolitan School District and the School District of Elmbrook) and two in Georgia (Gwinnett County Public Schools and DeKalb County Public Schools). Additionally, other sources include public statements and public documents released by the districts.

We transcribed portions of school board meetings related to reopening discussions including school board member discussions and community stakeholder comments. In some cases, districts allowed written or in-person community comments, which served as a data source as well. In Elmbrook, we also transcribed the Taskforce on Reopening Schools meetings. For contextual information, we also drew on County Public Health Department COVID data and communication. We transcribed the board hearings for Gwinnett County Public Schools, notably those in August of 2020 and January 2021 when decisions about reopening were being considered. DeKalb County Public Schools, comparatively, held its board meetings exclusively through a digital format and does not have in-person public comments as is the case in Gwinnett.

We coded this data in three stages. Each researcher completed a first-pass analysis to identify relevant data and information related to the context of the district and reopening (i.e., Did the district reopen? When? How?) Then we completed a thematic analysis looking for patterns in the data and determining categories of analysis (Bowen, 2009). Finally, we identified themes and categories of analysis in each local context. All school board meetings featured a range of opinions and perspectives and the analysis below is not exhaustive of all views expressed during meetings, but representative of themes. In most cases, members of the public who spoke at school board meetings represented political extremes and although we recognize that communities also had many parents who were conflicted about whether or not to send their child back to school, those were not represented in the data. Further, many of the school board discussions featured detailed conversations about specific logistical practices such as quarantine procedures and practices, technology, and the logistics of a hybrid model. We are focusing on the larger themes that arose out of the decision to return to face-to-face or stay virtual vs how schools have logistically managed a return to in person.

While our sampling of the four districts in these two politically contentious states provides a good cross section of the political divide that characterized the 2020 Presidential election, they also represent convenience sampling. Kretchmar is a parent in MMSD. Brewer is a graduate and former

employee of GCPS. Given the limitations of field-work during COVID, we relied on some of our own lived experiences surrounding these school districts.

Findings

Wisconsin

Wisconsin is a swing state. The state's electoral college votes played a key role in the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020. An increasingly polarized political culture took hold in 2011 when the Republican Governor Scott Walker passed Act 10, a budget repair bill which stripped unionized workers of nearly all their collective bargaining rights and essentially dismantled public sector unions, including teachers' unions. The introduction of Act 10 set off a month of massive protests that brought crowds of up to 100,000 to Madison, a weeks-long occupation of the state capital by demonstrators, and an unsuccessful recall election. The divisiveness that began with Act 10 increased with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Reilly (Reilly, 2021) explained that post Act 10 "around one-third of Wisconsinites stopped talking to a friend or family member about politics to limit contention. By 2018, that figure rose to one-half, while one-in-four Wisconsinites surveyed reported they'd broken off a relationship because of political strife (p. 9)." In a divided state like Wisconsin, the ways school reopening was approached during COVID highlights the politically polarized nature of the virus.

Located just a little over an hour apart, the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) and School District of Elmbrook (SDE) exemplify two political extremes. Madison is a politically liberal community, with a long history of left-wing politics and protest. In 2020, Biden received 84% of the Presidential Vote in Madison (Brogan, 2020). Elmbrook serves the Milwaukee suburbs of Brookfield, New Berlin, and Elm Grove and is located in Waukesha County, which is considered a Republican stronghold. In the 2012 recall election, 72% voted for Governor Scott Walker and 59.6% of Waukesha County voted for Donald Trump in 2020. Elmbrook is consistently a top-rated school district in Wisconsin and is also one of the wealthiest school districts in the state. Madison Metropolitan School District is the second largest district in the state, and it is known for promoting progressive educational practices and strong teacher leadership although it is also frequently criticized, along with greater Dane County, for producing some of the worst disparities in outcomes for Black residents in the entire country related to incarceration rates, educational achievement, and poverty (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2013).

Table 2
School District of Elmbrook Information

Students served	7,334
Grades	K4-12

Race/Ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.3%
Asian	16%
Black or African American	2.6%
Hispanic/Latino	6.4%

Students served	7,334
Grades	K4-12
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%
White	69.8%
Two or More Races	4.8%
Student Groups	
Students with Disabilities	11.1%
Economically Disadvantaged	8.0%
English Learners	4.3%
2020-2021 Delivery Model	
5 days a week face-to-face or fully virtual options	

Note: Data from Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2019)

County Public Health Departments

In order to understand the contrast between school reopening discussions, it is critical to examine the strikingly different approaches of each County Public Health Department who evaluated and advised districts on reopening plans.

Madison: Dane County Public Health. Between May 2020-March 2021 Dane County Public Health (DCPH) put into effect 14 Emergency Orders that were among the strictest in the state of Wisconsin. DCPH produced a three-tiered, metric-based reopening plan with categories such as percentage of positive tests, average number of new cases, testing, hospital capacity, and contract tracing success. In order to move to the next stage of reopening, a certain number of categories needed to be rated green. Throughout the summer of 2020, private gatherings were limited to ten individuals indoors and when cases spiked in November of 2020, all private indoor gatherings were prohibited. Bars and taverns were prohibited from serving customers throughout most of 2020-2021, and restricted to 25% capacity. At the beginning of the 2020 school year, DCPH issued an emergency order prohibiting in-person schooling for grades 3-12. Parents, independent and religious schools, and groups that back school vouchers sued Dane County, and the order was overturned by the Republican controlled State Supreme Court. As a result, a number of private schools offered face-to-face instruction. Throughout the Fall, rural and suburban districts in the County began to return to in-person instruction. As of March 2022, Dane County had 484 COVID deaths or 89 deaths per 100,000 people (*New York Times,* 2022*)*. DCPH worked closely with MMSD throughout the year and MMSD made the decision to remain fully virtual after first and second quarter with advisement from DCPH officials, a medical advisory team, and teacher and parent input.

In March, MMSD began a phased-in return to in-person instruction beginning with K-2. In April, additional grades were added. Approximately 65% of families choose to return to face-to-face instruction in March.

Elmbrook: Waukesha Public Health. Waukesha County Public Health (WCPH) made no Emergency Public Health Orders and instead offered loose recommendations. For example, the May 2020 recommendations for reopening business said, "Like all businesses, large venues like sit-down restaurants, bars, movie theaters, sporting venues, gyms and places of worship can operate, but should consider social distancing protocols recommended by the CDC" (Waukesha County, 2020). In June 2020, up to 100 people could congregate indoors in a social setting and in September up to 250 people could gather indoors (Waukesha County, 2020). When Governor Evers issued a statewide mask mandate in July, County Executive Paul Farrow issued the following statement:

> Private businesses should have the flexibility to implement their own rules on mask usage in their establishments, it should not be their role to enforce government orders.
>
> Lastly, many residents have valid concerns about how this mandate infringes on their personal freedoms. Some parts of the Governor's order mandates mask usage even at times that social distancing may be more practical and less invasive. At this time of historically low faith in the government, these issues have a marked impact on individuals who value their freedom of choice. (Farrow, 2020)

As of March 2022, Waukesha County had 1002 COVID deaths or 248 deaths per 100,000 (*New York Times*, 2022).

For Fall 2020, SDE offered parents two choices: face-to-face instruction 5 days a week or a fully virtual model. 72% of families choose face-to-face instruction for Quarter 1. By 4th quarter, 81% of families were in-person. Teachers either worked in-person 5 days a week or fully virtually. This delivery model was recommended through the SDE Reopening Schools Task Force made up of 20 parents, three building administrators, three teachers, five district office staff including a school nurse, two board members, one community member and representatives from SDE's afterschool care partner and the school bus company.

Different Reference Points

School reopening discussions in MMSD and SDE tackled the same issue – school delivery models during a pandemic – from completely different reference points. The starting place for discussions was framed by the wildly different approaches taken by the Waukesha and Dane County Health Departments and contrasting perspectives on the risks and seriousness of COVID.

In the Fall, Madison remained essentially shut down, with businesses operating under strict restrictions to try to control COVID. In July, MMSD announced Quarter 1 would be fully online. During the same time period, businesses in Waukesha County were only provided loose recommendations and operating as they wished. Despite higher rates of infection in Waukesha, up to 250 people could gather indoors in contrast to Dane County's restrictions of indoor private gatherings to 10 people, socially distant and masked. SDE formed a Taskforce on Reopening Schools in June with a goal to "develop a master facility reopening plan that responds to the requirements of school reopening during a pandemic to reopen" (School District of Elmbrok, 2020). While the first meeting was virtual, the subsequent meetings were hybrid with many attendees participating in-person. The perceived risk presented by COVID was markedly different in these two areas.

Although both communities had members who were in support of or in opposition to reopening, the SDE community favored a return to in-person in the summer of 2020 while MMSD received significant opposition to their phased reopening plan for March 2021. In SDE, 28 of 33 of Taskforce members supported a hybrid or in-person model, and five voted for a virtual model. All but one public comment at the August School Board meeting supported reopening. In contrast, at the MMSD February 15th Special Meeting of the School Board, 72 parents submitted concerns, questions or opposition to the Madison reopening plan and four parents wrote in support.

In Madison, concerns about the reopening plan were focused on maintaining safety for teachers, students, and community and grounded in an aversion to anyone contracting COVID due to the risk of death and/or long-term side effects. The Superintendent, who made the decision to return, stated, "This is matter of life and death. There is no way we are taking this lightly." Eleven community comments used language about "risking lives" to frame what is at stake with the return to face-to-face instruction.

In contrast, discussion in Elmbrook was framed by an assumption that students and staff would contract COVID, and far lower perceived risks than the discussions in Madison. A SDE school board member said, "Kids are going to come to school. And they are going to come to school with COVID-19. That's the reality. . . my feeling is when it happens we need to make sure there is adequate medical attention. You know there is no-free lunch here. There is no perfect solution. People are going to get sick. It's going to get spread. They are going to get quarantined." The Superintendent noted, "There will be spread. There is going to be COVID."

Two long form quotes exemplify two very different frames of reference for reopening discussions. A Madison Teacher offered a public comment in opposition to the reopening plan stating:

> We talk about freedom dreaming and the need to be culturally responsive and yet
> we're willing to put the lives of teachers, our families, and our community on the
> chopping block, and for what? To appease the GOP and the dangling of blood
> money? For being in person? To be better customer service representatives to the
> privileged predominantly white voices who demand that we open our doors because
> *their* kids are falling behind? To appease the need for mental health support that we
> never satisfied in the before times and isn't on deck for now either? To be
> babysitters for the economy because our government failed us and with education
> being a female dominant profession, we can be gaslight to take care of the kids so
> parents can work? MMSD is always saying we are committed to anti-racist teaching
> practices but are we? When it really comes down to it are really willing to sacrifice
> the status quo to shift the system? . . . Now that I see that MMSD is willing to put
> our lives on the line because, I can only assume, of the economy, I no longer have
> any faith we are committed to anti-racist practices.

This teacher framed the decision to return to in-person school as prioritizing profit over people and highlighted a disconnection that many noted between MMSD's supposed commitment to anti-racism and the decision to return prior to vaccination.

Comparatively, an Elmbrook Parent argued in support of reopening five days a week, emphasizing the need for parents to work and schools to open for the sake of the economy, stating that the school district works for taxpayers, and criticizing the mask mandate. She refused to wear a mask as she spoke:

> We do not support the continuation of virtual learning partly or fully. In addition to
> learning online being subpar we pay for school instruction which also includes the

security of our children. Online brings tremendous risk as many parents will not be home. They are working and there is cross access between families you don't know. . . responsible parents will have to have someone home with their children which will result in people not going back to work, leaving their jobs and loss of income and tax base. We demand that you stand with us against the illegal and illogical order by the governor and his unelected and unconfirmed Head of Health Andrea Palm to make our students wear masks. 6 foot distance and masks are a pagan ritual of satanic worshippers. 6 ft where did 6 ft come from why is not 3 why is it not 5 why is not 30? Why is it 6?! We are Christians. Our children do not practice satanic worship. We do not have them stand 6 ft apart from each other with facial coverings. You are employed by the people. The school administration works at our pleasure. You do not work for Madison or any other unelected entity.

These two opposing remarks encapsulate the conflicting themes that were apparent in Elmbrook and MMSD's discussions, with one community viewing the risk of COVID as grave and the other as prioritizing the economy and parental choice over any potential health risks.

"People have to get back to work." Language emphasizing the need for parental choice and the economic impact of parents not being able to work was pervasive in SDE meetings. A parent said, "Please continue to focus on what precautions can be taken to minimize risk and allow parents to assess the right choice for their family vs. taking away opportunities from our children." A parent on the Taskforce advocated for the 5 day a week model by highlighting the need for parental choice and emphasizing the economic consequences of not opening:

I'm in favor of a five-day model but I'm also in favor of the **choices**. I think that you can **choose** for a virtual model if you so **choose** so as a family. I think there is a lot of families out there that, one, are expecting to come back for five days under the assumption that face masks are worn that we socially distance similar to where business are starting to go. . . business are a little ahead of the curve than schools are at this point. We have to take a look at the impact in the long term. . . businesses are starting to open up more and more. People have to get back to work and that means we need to have childcare. We need to kids go someplace. I don't want this to have an impact on a future school district where we start to see that people can't go back to work because they don't have a place to put their kid, they don't have childcare. They can't afford their mortgage because they have to move and start to see enrollment go down. There is a large snowball effect from an economic standpoint that goes through with this.

In SDE discussions were much more focused on the economic impact of COVID than the health impact. As one parent said, "I urge you to open 5 days a week immediately. In your presentation you stated that health is your priority, facilitating education is your priority. Our children's safety and our children's health is our responsibility, primarily. Your responsibility is to educate our children."

"All teachers should be vaccinated before we return." A majority of the comments and concerns expressed at the MMSD February School Board meetings related to safety of teachers, students, and the larger community. The most common parent and teacher frustration voiced in the 72 comments in opposition were that the district was beginning the reopening process just weeks before teachers would be fully vaccinated. One parent wrote, "There is a vaccine so close to being widely available. Going back in-person is as unadvisable as jumping out of the window when your

house is on fire just as the firemen offer you a ladder." Comments were focused on protecting teachers and staff members much more then offering parental and student options.

Other concerns about safety related to PPE, building ventilation, and the lack of control over the behavior of students and families. Teachers and families were upset by a lack of clear communication and planning on a number of safety measures. A teacher asked, "What is the screening and testing protocols in place for the staff? What kind of PPE will be provided for staff? . . . What is the plan to address families that travel around Spring Break?" Many comments connected safety concerns with equity concerns. As one community member explained:

> Communities of color have been hit particularly hard by COVID and increasing exposure via school will exacerbate this disparity. . . Many teachers are also the primary caregivers for their own school age child or elderly relatives. It is a gender equity issue to ask teachers to return to buildings when many grades remain closed and/or will face closure due to COVID exposure. This feeds into a larger caregiving conversation disproportionately affecting the careers and mental health of women—and, again, exacerbated for at the intersections of multiple identities.

Many community members and several school board members voiced concerns about teachers who were high risk or lived with someone high-risk for COVID. A MMSD teacher wrote, "I implore the district to offer more options for teachers who are also parents or who have at-risk family members – whether that is more flexibility in scheduling, ability to work virtually some of the time, or having less costs incurred for taking a leave of absence. As a teacher I love my job. I love my family. It is painful feeling forced to choose between them and having no good options. Please give us more options; realistic options." MMSD comments focused on the lack of options for teachers, a contrast to the SDE focus on choices for parents.

"Teachers are teaching and learning new skills and creating new ways of reaching students:" Perceptions of teachers. Themes from comments offered evidence of different perceptions of teachers. A majority of comments at MMSD meetings expressed a concern for teachers' safety and many commended the ways teachers navigated virtual learning. A parent said, "MMSD teachers are the backbone of our schools and community. They have gone above and beyond this past year. We cannot keep asking them for more, while giving them less—less of a seat at the table, less communication, less resources." A teacher said, "Watch the genius of our students and teachers and be grateful for what we have. A solid, loving, safe structure in place where our students and teachers can remain in their learning cocoon together until the real spring arrives (vaccines and infection rates low) and they can safely slide into the building." Another parent acknowledged the gaps in virtual learning and made the distinction between childcare and education, "There is no benefit that outweighs the danger. Instruction continues online. It is not perfect; it takes great effort; but it is largely successful. Entertaining the idea of opening schools for in-person instruction is simply addressing a need for childcare, not instruction. The cost of childcare should not be paid with the lives of any vulnerable person, whether or not they accept the risk."

While SDE meetings included expressions of support and concern for teachers, the general perception was that teachers should be expected to return unless they were high risk and requested accommodations to teach virtually. Perhaps tellingly a hot mic captured a parent member of the taskforce who said, "It's amazing how teachers have become such pussies in the past two weeks." The Superintendent swiftly removed this parent from the Taskforce yet the comment is representative of the perception some have of teachers' as well as the virus.

Data and metrics. Both districts presented a number of metrics and research-based tools to guide decision making and yet, the ways data and science were being used and the items that were up for discussion differed based on how data was interpreted. Aligned with an approach to data taken by many anti-maskers to "privilege personal research and direct reading over 'expert" interpretations (Lee, et al., p. 11)" a senior ESD administrator shared the Waukesha County dashboards with the Reopening Taskforce saying, "I want to get a pulse for your own tolerance for risk is in that environment. How do you assess the data?"

In MMSD, many of the comments focused on whether or not returning at all was the right choice and masking and social distancing were considered non-negotiables. In SDE, significant time was spent discussing the mask mandate and social distancing. After initial masking recommendations from the group were perceived to be loose by teachers, a district administrator told the Task Force, "Our staff and teachers would like to have the added reassurance of a strong masking policy to just make sure they feel protected coming into the building." After much discussion and despite some concerns that, "If we require masking and social distance all day long, the teacher is going to be consumed by that," the group ultimately unanimously voted to approve a stronger mask mandate language. District administrators noted, "Classrooms will be designed for physical distancing as best we can."

In MMSD, Superintendent and district administrators drew heavily on the CDC guidelines and their collaboration with a team of medical experts to justify their decision but also noted the contested ways data is being interpreted. The Superintendent said, "CDC guidelines clearly say it's time to reopen schools. We're being very intentional because we are concerned about the health and safety. We are hearing from families based upon the science who want to send kids back. Let's face it out there, there are conflicts on the science."

Yet many members of the public did not agree that the science was telling us we should open schools. A MMSD teacher wrote, "Why are we ignoring science and common sense and rushing to reopen when we could wait a few weeks to make sure that teachers, at a minimum, have received the vaccine? I urge you to ask hard questions and make decisions that will preserve the life and health of our staff and community and rethink this hasty and misguided plan to reopen for our youngest and most vulnerable."

Georgia

Similar to the Wisconsin comparison above, we explore two school districts in Georgia with varied re-opening plans. Georgia, like Wisconsin, was also a swing state in the 2020 Presidential election (though, notably, it was not initially expected to be a swing state). The work of Stacey Abrams to register Black voters (Johnson & Timmons, 2020) coupled with large disapproval for Kemp and Trump in their handling of COVID (King, 2020) translated into a narrow victory for Joe Biden in the state. Trump would later go to great efforts at reversing his loss in the state to such an extent that at the time of this writing, he was under criminal investigations in Fulton County for numerous phone calls to election officials pressuring them to change the election outcome (Cole, 2021).

Brian Kemp had won the gubernatorial race against Stacey Abrams in 2018 by employing many of the over-the-top political techniques marked by the Trump-era GOP such as pointing a shotgun at his daughter's boyfriend (Stracqualursi, 2018) in addition to another campaign ad in which he drives a large truck "just in case I need to round up criminal illegals and take 'em home myself…yep, I just said that" (Cummings, 2018). Kemp was endorsed by Trump who campaigned for him, and they quickly developed synergy along the Trump-style GOP party platform. This ideological marriage informed Kemp's approach to the pandemic in that mirrored the anti-science

disposition of the Trump administration. For example, Kemp adopted Trump's anti-mask stance to the point where Kemp sued Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms over an order requiring the use of masks within the city (Romo, 2020). The spectacle of masks were understood by Trump and Kemp to be a sign that the pandemic was either maintaining its grip on the nation or, perhaps, becoming worse. At the very least, Trump stated that Americans wore masks specifically as a way of hurting Trump's image (Lovelace, 2020). Given the importance of spurring the economy that relies heavily on perception, Trump worked overtime at the federal level to downplay or dismiss the importance of mask wearing as Kemp mirrored at the state level.

Georgia was one of the last states in the nation to issue lockdown orders (Judd, 2021). As Donald Trump began to ramp up his anti-lockdown rhetoric in April, Governor Kemp made national headlines as Georgia became the first state to lift a significant amount of COVID-related bans and shutdowns including hair salons, spas, tattoo parlors, and bowling alleys (Swan, 2020). Kemp was initially met with praise from Trump for seemingly ignoring the perils of the virus while elevating the importance of business and capitalism – though, Trump later reversed his support saying Kemp went too far, too fast (Swan, 2020). In March of 2021, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* published a story following months of investigation and open records requests that had gone unanswered for nearly a year showing that Governor Kemp explicitly "ranked economic concerns ahead of public health imperatives" (Judd, 2021). In addition to intentionally skewing chart data to give the appearance that COVID infections were falling when they were rising (Mariano & Trubey, 2020), the AJC investigation found that the state "withheld critical information showing the pandemic was worsening as Kemp lifted restrictions" (Judd, 2021). The hesitancy to employ lockdowns and, subsequently, an accelerated re-opening plan has largely been blamed for the increase in cases and deaths and has been tied directly to the GOP focus on the economy over science. Kemp's downplaying of COVID manifested in his push for schools to reopen saying that it was the media inflating the risks of the virus and that COVID outbreaks in schools were no different than a "stomach bug or the flu" (Raymond, 2020).

Gwinnett County Public Schools

Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) is the nation's 11th largest school district and among the most racially diverse in Georgia. While the school district is diverse, White families have often wielded disproportionate influence over the district. Until 2018, no Person of Color served on the school board. Gwinnett County is historically conservative-leaning but demographic shifts over the past two decades have slowly changed the political landscape. While Hilary Clinton did not win the Georgia election against Donald Trump, she did win Gwinnett County – the first Democrat to do so since the county went for President Carter in 1976 and that was an aberration in the county's 50-year support for Republicans (Cobb, 2020). In 2020, Gwinnett County served as one of the many metro-Atlanta counties that turned Georgia blue for Biden. Until November 2020, the GCPS board was comprised of four Republicans and one Democrat. This was the composition of the board during the majority of the decisions to return to in-person learning. However, the composition of the board is now 3 Democrats and 2 Republicans. For the past 25 years, J. Alvin Wilbanks has served as the superintendent of GCPS and his salary of 621,000 made him among the highest paid in the nation (Malik, 2021a). While his tenure brought attention and accolades to GCPS, his contract was terminated early due primarily to his push for increased standardized testing, lack of attention to racial disparities in school discipline cases, and downplaying of the dangers of COVID.

Table 3
Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) Information

Students served	177,401
Grades	K-12
Race/Ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.16%
Asian	11.17%
Black or African American	32.32%
Hispanic/Latino	32.74%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.09%
White	19.42%
Two or More Races	4.1%
<u>Student Groups</u>	
Students with Disabilities	9.93%
Economically Disadvantaged	50.30%*
English Learners	17.6%**

<u>2020-2021 Delivery Model</u>

Fully Virtual March-May 2020. Offered parental choice of in-person instruction or digital instruction for the duration of the 2020-2021 school year. All teachers were required to teach from their classrooms and teach co-currently to in-person and digital students.

*Notes: Data from the Georgia Department of Education (n.d.). *Eligibility for free/reduced lunch used as proxy for economically disadvantaged   **Data from the 2016-2017 school year (Sugarman & Geary, 2018)*

In June of 2020 GCPS commissioned a survey to community members, parents, teachers, and students to gauge their desires for how the 2020-2021 school year would begin in August.

Table 4
GCPS Fall 2020 Survey Results

	100% Digital	Hybrid	100% In-Person
Community Members	42.4%	18.6%	38.5%
Parents	33.9%	22.7%	43.2%
Faculty/Staff	27.1%	29.2%	43.5%
Students	29.2%	16.7%	53.8%

Note: Adapted from (Gwinnett County Public Schools, n.d.)

In addition to questions surrounding a preferred method of instructional delivery, survey respondents also reported (see Table 5) their level of comfort level should in-person instruction begin in August 2020.

Table 5
Comfort with In-Person Starting in August of 2020

	Very Comfortable	Comfortable	Uncomfortable	Very Uncomfortable	Response Rate
Parents	17.2%	28.3%	27.0%	27.1%	
Faculty/Staff	18.1%	32.8%	28.8%	20.0%	67.43%
Students	25.7%	32.9%	19.7%	21.5%	7.13%

Note: Adapted from (Gwinnett County Public Schools, n.d.)

This GCPS survey was distributed in June 2020 when cases had steadily been declining for months, offering a false sense of hope that the worst of the pandemic was in the past. This view did not comport with public health officials who vehemently noted that cases would increase in the fall and at a faster rate (which is what transpired). It is important to understand the context in which these desires about instruction were captured but also how they represented a contrasting outlook on the fall with that of actual experts. As cases and deaths began to rise in the fall, GCPS continued to use the results of the June 2020 survey to justify the back-and-forth decisions they made surrounding a return to in-person instruction. In July, the district announced that it

- When Georgia lifted its shelter-in-place order, GCPS announced that teachers would no longer be able to facilitate digital learning from home and would be required to report to their classrooms to facilitate digital learning (Yeomans, 2020a).
- Teachers immediately began voicing concern and organizing mass demonstrations about their forced return to the classroom noting that their location was irrelevant when 100% of students were digital. With so much negative attention, the district reversed its decision and teachers finished the school year at home (Downey, 2020).
- July 16: GCPS doubled down on plan to offer a choice between in-person and digital (Yeomans, 2020b).
- July 20: GCPS announced that all students will begin the year in virtual learning (Klar, 2020). Around this same date, teachers were told that despite the fully digital start to the school year, they would be required to facilitate online learning from the school building rather than from home (Whittler, 2020). Teachers were told that if they had medical conditions that put them at higher risk for COVID that they could request accommodations. Only three accommodations were granted (Edney, 2020).

It was against the backdrop of the district wavering in their decision-making process that parents began demanding that their "choice" of in-person instruction be returned.

"Choice:" The decision by GCPS to begin the school year virtually for all students followed by a phased in return to in-person instruction was interpreted by many parents as going back on an earlier decision to allow for "choice" in the type of instruction desired. During a five hour August 2020 meeting, over 100 parents and teachers spoke during the public comment section. During that hearing, parents cited their "choice" for in-person learning as sovereign, unquestionable, and untethered from CDC data or guidance from public health officials. One noted that, "[the most important thing] is that we continue to make giving our citizens a choice a priority. Other parents compared the choice to go to a restaurant (which were open at the time) to the broader concept of a choice:

> Everyone here has a choice to do a lot of things when they wake up tomorrow. You can go to work you can protest you can go to a bar or restaurant. A gym, a mall, you can even take your family to Disney. Almost all businesses are back open in Georgia and we have a choice to visit those non-essential entities. No one is being forced to send their child back to school. Yet there are people here today still trying to take away our choice in my right as a taxpayer a citizen and most importantly, a mother. To send my children to school. That I pay for.

Within the scope of the language of choice, parents pushed back against teacher comments and protests outside being held by teachers to suggest that teachers, too, had a choice: A choice of quitting. One parent said:

> The bottom line [is that] teachers have a choice. No one is forcing them to go back to in person. Right now, I'm not sorry. No one else is being forced to go back to work.

Others made comments from the false assumption that teachers had an actual choice of remaining home while providing instruction:

> I'm not here to demand anyone step foot back in the school that does not want to all
> I want is the choice to do what is best for my child and our family our nation was
> founded on choice.

Others suggested that the teacher-led protests were political in nature, did not center the wellbeing
of students, and were primarily aimed at denying parental choice:

> I am for our students, not the politics. But you can see from the stage theatrics, both
> outside and now inside that the protest is political. You can see by the number of
> politicians, speaking tonight, that this is political they aren't interested in my child 's
> education or welfare. The health of our essential teachers and staff. Not even equity
> for all the students. They're here tonight, only to deny our choice.

A large portion of parents who were advocating for the "choice" of in-person instruction for their
children couched their arguments against a notion that not having in-person instruction was an
artifact of living in fear. For example:

> Thank you for giving us the choice now to let our children. Go back to school and
> thank you for not letting them live in fear anymore.

> The call of the day is we can't let this stop us from living. We can't live in fear.

> I'm here because I'm concerned about the board and how you're going to react once
> we go back into schools and have in person learning and we start to see COVID
> cases in the school. I bring this up because, so, what we're hearing about and I'm
> hearing about tonight is just about COVID cases the numbers is creating fear, what
> we're not hearing about is the severity level of these cases.

For some, parents cited pseudo-data or incomplete data to suggest that concern over COVID was
overblown and posed no real or measurable threat. One parent provided some back-of-the-napkin
math using the meme and Fox News generated metrics that COVID has a 99.9% survivability ratio
to suggest that not that many students and teachers would die. He went on to make false
equivalencies between teaching and other professions in which interactions are limited or the
professional is trained in mitigation techniques and receives top of the line PPE:

> We have doctors, nurses, health care providers that are in the hospitals facing
> COVID patients every day. They're not abdicating their responsibility. We have
> individuals all around our towns that are in grocery stores, gas stations. Home
> Depots, the hair salons. Probably some of the places that teachers that are here
> tonight, that are frequenting. They're not abdicating their responsibility. So my
> question is: Why are teachers able to abdicate their responsibility?

The suggestion that COVID was nothing to fear followed comments from Superintendent Wilbanks
that COVID was "no worse than the flu" and a then-majority Board who downplayed the severity
of the virus and its ramifications. During the July 2020 Board Meeting, Carole Boyce said, "I feel
very strongly that we should go ahead and get back to school as quickly as we can, and deal with the
repercussions perhaps, you know, obviously somebody may get sick. We may have to deal with that"
(Yeomans, 2020b). The comment was widely interpreted by teachers as dismissive of their concerns
about contracting COVID as well as what it would mean if infected students brought the virus
home to more at-risk family members. It was during this meeting that board member Everton Blair

(the only Democrat and the only person of color on the board) presented data to suggest that a fully digital reopening was the more appropriate course of action. Board member and Chair, Louise Radloff, cut Blair off and quickly ended the meeting. Moments later she was caught on a hot-mic telling Superintendent Wilbanks "I could strangle him" (Kleinpeter, 2020). Wilbanks issued an apology letter the following day on behalf of Boyce and Radloff.

      The general sentiment by the Board that COVID did not represent enough of a legitimate health threat was parroted by many of the parents who spoke in favor of a return to in-person instruction. One parent based his comments on a false equivalence to the dangers of driving saying:

> I'm very appreciative that Gwinnett County provides choices to all its stakeholders. As a parent, I understand there is inherent risk in life. COVID did not change this, only my awareness. My 16 year old that I'm prepared to send into a school building is the same one I put behind the wheel of a car in January to drive herself to school and the dark of the morning hours…I would argue that the need for education supersedes the current risk of COVID.

For context, in 2019, 36,096 people died from vehicle-related accidents (or 11 deaths per 100,000 people) (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2021). During the same week that this parent suggested that cars posed a greater threat than COVID, the national hospitalization rate was 151.7 per 100,000 and as of August 2020, there had been 189,266 deaths attributed directly to COVID (CDC, 2020). For the entirety of 2020, 381,840 Americans succumbed to COVID (CDC, n.d.), roughly 1,058% more than vehicle-related deaths in 2019. One parent noted:

> When I found out that the choice of in person learning was taken away. I was sad for my kids. Of course, but I was completely heartbroken, thinking about those children's those children who don't have homes like mine. Rather, homes that have physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and plain neglect is actually happening right now. That good parents are having to go to work and leave their 6 year old and 8 year old at home alone just so they can do digital learning.

While couching her comments in the rhetoric of choice, the disposition was rationalized by citing instances of abuse and neglect. In fact, during the pandemic, reports of cases for concern of abuse fell by over 50%. Students having regular visibility by adults outside of the home is an important component of mitigating what would otherwise be undetected abuse. Though, during the pandemic, alternative and creative efforts of checking in (counselors or teachers doing outside home visits) could have ameliorated some of these concerns.

      While the comments shared by parents who were in favor of a return to in-person instruction were grounded, largely, in a conception of choice and political overtures, the teachers who spoke out against the hybrid model as well as the requirement that all teachers be in-person (even during pre-planning), the majority of them cited community spread, total case numbers, ratios of hospitalizations and deaths, and noted that the 3 local hospitals were all over-capacity at the time of reopening. The coordinated efforts by teachers to use their 3-minute speaking time wisely resulted in a barrage of data and pleas for safety on behalf of students, student families, teachers and staff, and their respective families. While Georgia teachers are legally prevented from unionizing, Brian Westlake, a high school teacher and active member of the Gwinnett County Association of Educators, quickly became a mainstay during the summer Board meetings public-comment agenda for his impassioned pleas for the decisions about reopening to be grounded in scientific data. During the November meeting, Willbanks stalled Westlake's comments with a prepared statement that he read suggesting

that Westlake had previously been disrespectful and unprofessional and specifically warned Westlake to have "respect for the organization of this board that provides you with a paycheck" (Embry, 2020) and "if you are so unhappy with GCPS, we could accept your resignation at any time" (Malik, 2021b).

DeKalb County Public Schools

While GCPS is considered to be a county within the metro-Atlanta landscape, DeKalb County is closer to downtown Atlanta and, comparatively, has a longer history of an orientation to the political left and DeKalb County Public Schools (DCPS) is dominantly non-White in terms of its student demographics.

Table 6
DeKalb County Public Schools (DCPS) Information

Students served	93,470
Grades	K-12
Race/Ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.37%
Asian	6.87%
Black or African American	59.29%
Hispanic/Latino	19.68%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.12%
White	11.35%
Two or More Races	2.33%
Student Groups	
Students with Disabilities	10.81%
Economically Disadvantaged	68.56%*
English Learners	16.7%**
2020-2021 Delivery Model	
Fully Virtual March-May 2020. Fully virtual until March 2021.	

Notes: Data from the Georgia Department of Education (n.d.).
*Eligibility for free/reduced lunch used as proxy for economically disadvantaged
**Data from the 2016-2017 school year (Sugarman & Geary, 2018)

DCPS also conducted a survey in June 2020 to assess stakeholder perceptions about re-opening plans. Notably, parents and faculty dominantly stated that they were unconformable with in-person instruction. This reality comports with the broader Pew data suggesting that non-White and less affluent families expressed greater concern about the risks associated with COVID than White and more affluent families.

Table 7

DCPS Fall 2020 Survey Results of Being "Comfortable" with the Type of Delivery

	100% Digital	Hybrid	100% In-Person
Parents	57.31%	61.42%	37.34%
Faculty/Staff	68.0%	64.81%	25.8%
Students	41.49%	59%	56.45%

Note: Adapted from (DeKalb County School District, 2020)

Table 8

DCPS Survey Responses on Comfort with In-Person Starting in August

	Comfortable	Uncomfortable
DCPS Parents	37.34%	59.43%
Students	56.45%	35.04%
Faculty/Staff	25.8%	70.2%

Notes: Adapted from (DeKalb County School District, 2020)

At the September 14th board meeting, Superintendent Watson-Harris (2020) presented a detailed phased plan for how the district would re-open schools but also provided a significant amount of data surrounding COVID case rates in the county. Of note is that DeKalb county's case rate was greater than 100 cases per 100,000 residents and constituted "substantial spread" according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC). The plan specified that schools would begin a gradual process of returning to in-person instruction once COVID case rates fell to less than 100 cases per 100,000 residents over a 14-day period in accordance with guidance from the Georgia Department of Education, the Georgia State Department of Public Health, and the DeKalb Board of Health. At

such time, the district would implement a hybrid A/B day transition into in-person learning (2 days face-to-face, 3 days remote learning) with the stated caveat that health conditions continue to improve. If, however, conditions worsened, the district would implement a hybrid A/B day transition to distance learning again until conditions improved. Only in the event that the case rate fell to 1-5 cases per 100,000 would the district implement a traditional learning model. Based on the hopeful projections at the time, the goal was to realize low case rates by November and have the full transition back into traditional face-to-face instruction. However, because case rates spiked (as projected by health experts) in the fall, DCPS remained fully online for the entirety of the fall semester and through March of 2021. The district updated its re-opening plans in mid-Spring of 2021 to reflect an increase in vaccinations.

Discussion

School board discussions in Wisconsin and Georgia illuminate how understandings of COVID and school reopening opinions are undergirded by different ideologies, and serve as an account of the ways the American school system increasingly represents neoliberal values, including the prioritization of individualism over the collective and profit over people. While parents on both sides of the debate were grappling with real concerns for their child's educational and social emotional well-being, the public comments analyzed here evidence how individuals and districts used different frames of reference to interpret and develop COVID school reopening plans. We found that districts in historically conservative areas were far more likely to adopt anti-science and anti-teacher dispositions in their quest to re-open schools. Further, we found that in many cases, these parents relied heavily on rhetoric such as "choice" much in the same way it is operationalized in the school choice paradigm. In conservative counties, the perceived risk of COVID was lower, and education was viewed as an individual good, evident through the consistent emphasis on the need for parent choice about whether or not children should return to the school. The desire to reopen schools was often explicitly tied to the economy, and the need for parents to return to work. In contrast, liberal districts such as MMSD and DCPS characterized the decision to reopen as risking the lives of teachers and students and offered data-based decision-making processes that aligned with national public health expert suggestions and guidelines. Understandings and interpretations of science were also politicized and used differently based on the underlying political ideology. Parents and administrators in conservative districts expressed a distrust of mainstream narratives about COVID and information from the CDC, local and state Public Health Departments. The mortality of COVID was downplayed. Considering the inevitability of sickness and deaths, conservative board members said, "We may have to deal with that."

Conclusion

So, what follows? Education – specifically public education – has always been understood as a fundamental component of our society's obligation and commitment to the public good. While U.S. public schools have never fully realized or actualized its obligation to provide equitable education for all students (and markedly unequal education for non-White and non-affluent students; Berliner, 2013; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brewer & Myers, 2015; Frankenberg & Lewis, 2012; Grusky, 2008; Holme, 2002; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Jencks et al., 1972; King, 2005; Kozol, 1991; Lareau, 2003; Massey, 2007; Massey & Denton, 1993; Newman & Chin, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Rich et al., 2017; Sacks, 2007; Shapiro et al., 2010; Swartz, 1990; Wiggan, 2007), schooling represents a necessary endeavor for a society to undertake if we are to understand education as

common good. This collective sense of obligation to one another – to other people's children – drives the work that educators do, and in theory, the work of school boards.

In stark contrast to a conception of education as a public good is the reimagining of schooling as a commodity, or an individualistic good. At its fundamental level, the conception of being afforded the "choice" to return to in-person instruction as well as an anti-science and anti-teacher disposition reinforces the belief that schooling, and science, are for individualistic benefits. It positions schooling as a commodity to be consumed at will and to operate on the adage that the "customer is always right." The position that one's beliefs surrounding COVID, mask wearing, digital learning, and other mitigation efforts can be dismissed on personal whim prioritizes the individual over the collective good. In fact, much of the anti-science rhetoric and actions surrounding COVID often used 'personal freedoms' as the rationale for refusal to mask, social distance, or adhere to temporary economic lockdowns (see, for example, Michigan).

The emphasis on parent "choice" during COVID, as illustrated in our data, aligns with the continued expansion of school choice policies across the United States. But, and perhaps more importantly, it may have exacerbated the growth of such dispositions that will have a measured impact on public education and the marketized educational landscape for many years to come. For example, while most American families participated in digital learning at some point during the pandemic, many families have opted to continue learning at home by way of homeschooling. It is important to note that digital learning and "learning at home" are qualitatively not the same practice as homeschooling. In the former, curriculum, teaching, assessment, etc., are provided by professional educators whereas in the latter, the practice of homeschooling relies on non-professional educators (i.e., parents) to provide instruction for their children (Brewer, 2021). Prior to the pandemic there were approximately 2.5 million homeschooled children (Ray, 2019) and at present there are now approximately 5 million homeschooled children (Ray, 2021). Many families chose to homeschool due to religious or political rationales but, often, simply report that they withdraw from the public school because the public school does not align with their views or because they have a general dissatisfaction with the school environment (a rationale that is not unlike many similar ones for using vouchers to attend private schools or shifting to charter schools; Brewer, 2021).

The doubling of homeschooled children (which represent the epitome of schooling as individualistic and as pure market choice) has, with little doubt, found some rationale in the continued anti-science sentiment surrounding pushback on mask mandates and the politically-charged discussions of critical race theory being taught in K-12 schools. The withdrawal of students from public schools by families who are more affluent than non-homeschooling families (Brewer, 2021) represents a growing threat to conceptions of education as a community practice benefitting the public and common good but, also, will likely exacerbate policy agendas seeking to expand vouchers and tax credits for homeschooling and private schools that represent a direct financial harm the public school system. Republican Governors such as Florida's Ron Desantis as well as State Legislatures such as the one in Georgia, have already promoted expanded, or new, school choice policies that work to destabilize public schools in favor of bolstering private schools, charter schools, and homeschooling practices. The ongoing pandemic presents a prime opportunity for disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007) policies to be rushed through State Legislatures that operate on the logic of individualistic education and neoliberal marketization of schools all at the continued detriment to public education as a collective good.

We aim, here, to provide some final thoughts on the state of our collective affairs. What lessons can be gleaned from our exploration of rhetorical leveraging of political ideologies surrounding school closures that may mitigate future tensions and turmoil? Certainly, there will

always be a portion of society that will take up far-right, or anti-science, and anti-teacher positions. With little doubt, conspiracy theories about COVID or other public health issues will remain. It is with this understanding that we argue that there is a proactive role for educators to play moving forward. While not sufficient on its own, media and data literacy must be incorporated more heavily into curriculums across grade levels to help students develop the skills necessary to navigate a social media landscape wrought with the mines of skewed data, dubious use of data, and politically-charged data that feeds into political confirmation biases. Educators must double down on efforts to inculcate critical thinking skills among students. Questioning claims and authority can be a healthy academic exercise as well as a technique to root out biases and inequalities. But this questioning must be done in good faith that does not lead to a carte blanche dismissal of expertise. Our students, as the rest of us, must recommit to a conception of the common good in our actions, language and policy. We must not simply acknowledge our obligation to one another, we must actively pursue avenues to manifest this obligation. How this looks will, and should, vary by region, culture, and the needs of individuals so it is difficult to posit a standard answer to practice a commitment to the public good. Yet, we can say that we have seen many instances of what it does not look like in 2020: eschewing data and science, forgoing masks, spreading conspiracies about vaccines, and pushing for school re-openings despite the documented dangers such actions pose to students and adults.

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