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THE CURRENT: What does back-to-school look like during COVID?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

A new school year is starting, and across the country, schools are welcoming back students even as they struggle to balance the educational needs of those students against the public health concerns of the continued rise of the COVID-19 delta variant. Here today for a look at how different states and school districts are tackling this balancing act and how they're prepared to handle the public health crises is Jon Valant, senior fellow and director with the Brown Center on Education Policy here at Brookings. Jon, thanks for talking to us today.

VALANT: Thanks for having me, Adrianna.

PITA: Education in America, public schooling education, has long been a really sort of basic and almost automatic process. But over the past year and a half of the pandemic that process is kind of stopped being automatic as parents have had to take a larger role in handling their child's education, the technology requirements of doing virtual education, and just the wide variety of difference as how different schools have handled education in a crisis situation like this.

Before we look at what's happening this year, maybe you can start us off with talking a little bit about what we've learned about education in this kind of virtual and or hybrid environment and what's worked and what hasn't for kids.

VALANT: Sure, so, for a lot of us – I'm a parent, I have a couple of kids who are in elementary school – and for a lot of us, I think we're sort of hitting that realization now that we're entering a third school year that's going to be disrupted by this pandemic. And there's enough research out now on how the pandemic has been affecting students that there really is cause for alarm. We've seen negative effects on kids' academic outcomes; we've seen students, especially older students, reporting concerns about mental health; we've seen staffs, school staff reporting concerns about whether they want to stick with the profession; and some other issues that are sort of bubbling up here and there. So, for example, right now there's a nationwide school bus driver shortage because school bus drivers aren't paid enough and it's a job that subjects people to risk, and it's affecting getting kids to school and from school in this in this first week or couple of weeks.

So, we know that there are all kinds of problems that have been with us now for two school years prior to this one and are coming back with us. And there's a lot that can happen when kids are in person that just cannot be reproduced in a virtual setting. So, some of that is, if you think about young kids, if you

think about kindergarteners and first graders, there's a type of interaction with teachers and, if you're working with numbers, with playing with manipulative, like little blocks, that that you can do in an in-person setting that's just really hard to reproduce when you're trying to teach virtually. And for older kids especially, and also young kids, there's interaction with peers that is just very hard to replace when you're out of school and you don't have in-person schooling. And so I think a lot of us are really crossing our fingers that, whatever happens, whatever this this coming school year holds for us, and whatever measures it requires when it comes to ventilation and masking and everything we can do to keep kids safe, that will avoid what has been the story of the last 18 months, which has been a whole lot of instruction that's happening over a computer.

PITA: As we look ahead for the coming year in terms of the public health components, especially now that the FDA has granted full regular approval for the Pfizer vaccine for those 16 and older, we've seen more states come out with vaccine mandates sometimes just for healthcare workers, in some cases they're starting to look at vaccine mandates for all government workers, some localities are also looking at vaccine requirements for educators. There's also the question of you know mask mandates; some states and school districts are mandating mask wearing on school campuses, some are not. Can you give us a picture about who's requiring what, what are we looking at across some of the different states?

VALANT: It's a really good question and it's impossible to talk about that question without talking about the politics. And so, whenever you talk about education governance, you get this complex mix of actors: you have local, state, and federal governments that are all involved in overseeing schools. And what we've had now is a whole bunch of tug of wars between local governments and state governments, often of different political parties with the federal government looking to intervene, too.

So, just to just to pick out one of those: when it comes to mask mandates, mask mandates have been very unpopular with Republicans, and particularly Republican politicians, and more popular with Democrats. And actually, there's survey data from Kaiser that about 70% of parents across the country support mask mandates, but it's been it's been this sort of hot-button issue when it comes to how politicians feel. So when it comes to mask mandates, we've had at this point nine states where Republican governors have banned school districts from mandating that students wear masks in those districts. So, those states are Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah. And what we've seen in those places is this back and forth. So in some places, you have districts they're saying, well, I don't I don't particularly care what the governor, says it's not the governor’s position to say anything. And we've had some of these cases show up in in courts.

Most recently, we've seen more federal intervention on the question where President Biden instructed the Department of Education to be creative and think about how might the federal government intervene and make sure that if districts want to impose a mask mandate that the state doesn't stop them from doing that. And the federal government's approach has been to treat it as a civil rights case and to open up investigations for the possibility that these prohibitions of mask mandates are keeping students from accessing their rights to a safe learning environment and particularly students with disabilities. So you have this tug of war and there's the politics underlying it are really charged and have been since the beginning of this pandemic.

And we've seen, really, it's not it's not starting with mask mandates, even going back to the very early decisions about whether to open schools in person or have learning happen remotely. Even back then, I did some work on this and others did too, that basically showed that when you looked at how

districts were operating and whether they were going back in person or whether they were operating virtually, it was local politics, like partisan affiliations and support for President Trump, that were much more associated with their decisionmaking than anything about local COVID transmission or really any other characteristics. And those nationwide partisan divisions have really permeated a lot of these issues. It's showing up in mask mandates, it's showing up in teacher vaccine mandates, it probably soon will show up in student vaccine mandates, as well as how schools are going about this question of when do schools open in person, and when do we teach remotely.

PITA: The question about control over schooling and whether decisions are made at the very local level, whether questions are made at the state level, where the questions are decided at the federal level, that's always been something of a struggle. Is this aspect of it changing how people look at it or are you seeing differences in how that question is thought about amongst different parties?

VALANT: We are seeing a sort of interesting jumbling of what have been historical partisan ideals in education. So, typically, when people think about what the Republican Party versus the Democratic Party, what their sort of big picture views are for education, you'll have Republicans who advocate very strongly for local control of schools. And that has broken down a bit. And so, it's showing up in these conversations about COVID where you have, for example, Governor DeSantis in Florida and Governor Abbott in Texas who are trying at the state level to dictate what happens at the local level. And they'll tell a story about how they're protecting individual families and students' abilities to decide what they want to do with masks, but it's not it's not consistent with what we've seen in the past where there's been a deference to school districts from conservatives.

And it's not just showing up too in COVID discussions. We're also seeing it, for example, in the other big controversy in schools right now, which is critical race theory, where we have a lot of Republican state leaders who are trying to intervene and prevent schools and school districts from teaching curriculum that they don't – they being these state leaders – don't particularly like. And so there too, you see what seems like a violation of the historical ideological alignment that we've had in education, where you have conservatives advocating for local control. And to me what that says is that there are national partisan politics that are at play in ways that we haven't always seen before, and the country is just divided in ways that we're really feeling. I mean it's showing up in school board meetings across the country; I think a lot of us have seen some of those clips that are really wild for what tend to be pretty sleepy local school board meetings.

And so it's just bubbling up and it's redefining these issues and it's also charging them in ways that I don't think have been helpful, as school boards and states and districts have been trying to navigate what's a very difficult and challenging period for school governance, and trying to figure out what it is that kids need to get through this pandemic. And also, it hasn't been conducive for good decisionmaking in general.

PITA: On one of the more sort of health-oriented questions do you have a sense yet in terms of how different schools are prepared to deal with, Okay, this is what happens when a case is up amongst our students? Whether schools are going with everybody shuts down for quarantine, whether they're ready to pivot to hybrid as needed, whether all students are being required to come back, or whether school district are making the allowance for some kids to stay virtual if there's health concerns at home. Is there any sort of notion about what that picture looks like? I realize that's a big question that's going to be very different all across the country, but any sort of general ideas you have would be great.

VALANT: So, big picture, one change this year that that I think is for the better is, where closures are happening and where students are going off to do remote learning, it tends to be more targeted to places where there are outbreaks. So, if you look back over the last couple of years, we've had more whether it's county-wide or district-wide or citywide closures that affected a lot of kids, even if there wasn't a local outbreak in that school. Now I think there is a general sense that we need to get kids back into schools at this point if we can, and if we can do it safely. So, where we have schools that are closing or anticipating closures, it tends to be kind of more rooted in what's happening in those school buildings. There's also some research showing that when schools are careful, and they are really adopting those measures that prevent the spread of COVID, that that schools can be safer environments then kids home lives can, that you actually might be able to reduce transmission if you have proper ventilation and masking and all those kinds of things.

As far as the particular responses, like what happens when a student shows up at school with the sniffles, that really is being approached differently from one place to the next. So, those decisions, I think there has been some local deference, all while, you have the federal government and you have state governments that are giving some guidance to school boards about how to approach those kinds of situations.

PITA: I want to end us on a longer term look ahead. You mentioned at the top of your comments, there's anecdotes about teacher burnout, questions about the supply of the other non-teaching staff for schools as well. You've mentioned how the federal education department is starting to look at these questions about how schools handle some of these aspects, whether or not this is a civil rights question. I want to ask you what are some of the long-term repercussions for education equity across the country. Like if one state is handling the pandemic a lot better than the other, and so their kids are going to be continuing to have a better education versus other states, or then even below the state level, again the question about equity in terms of what school districts are prepared to deal with in this kind of environment and which aren't. What are we looking at in terms of long-term, how long are these effects that we're feeling from these past couple of years, might they be continuing?

VALANT: Right, I mean this this pandemic has not affected students equally and like lots of other issues that cause problems around the country, it's often historically disadvantaged groups, families in poverty, students of color, students with disabilities, who get hit the hardest and that's certainly been the case here. Initially when school started closing, we started to see digital divide questions and how different access to home internet and home computer was, and a quiet working environment at home, and those types of effects. And the closures really looked quite different across different parts of the country. And so, the pandemic has not created, but it has exacerbated inequities that we've had for a very long time and that's a concern.

It's not the case that students who are in schools are sort of damaged goods that can't be repaired; that's not the situation. There are things that we can do. And my hope, and I do think there is some reason for optimism here, is that what COVID has done in sort of illuminating some of these problems that we have in education, is that it's going to help us both find ways of drawing more resources into the education world – and that has happened already; so schools got a good amount of funding from the American Rescue Plan and look like they may, and particularly early childhood programs may, get a good amount of funding depending what happens with these budget negotiations – but both drawing funds to schools and then thinking about how we use those funds to ensure that kids across the country, regardless of race and income and wealth and background really are getting good opportunities.

But if we don't do that, then this pandemic, and this is showing up already in effects on test scores and some of the other outcomes we're looking at, this pandemic is just going to increase the size of gaps that were already intolerably large. And so that that question of sort of where we stand now and where we're going with respect to equity is one that I think is unanswered and depends very much on the decisions that both policymakers in Washington and around the country are making. And how we're thinking about this, as we go about making sure that students who have been affected by this over the last few years have every chance to recover and have opportunities in the future, even better than the ones they've had the past.

PITA: Alright. Well, Jon, best of luck to you and your kids and, of course, to everyone, all the parents and kids out there going back to school right now. Thanks very much for talking to us about this.

VALANT: My pleasure, thanks Adrianna.