Close the Schools to Slow the Spread of Coronavirus

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Coronavirus is spreading rapidly. If the number of people with the disease continues to grow exponentially, it will overwhelm the healthcare system within a month. Hospitals will be so packed with patients that hospitals will run out of ventilators needed to keep seriously ill patients alive and intensive care units will be filled to capacity. The lack of adequate medical care will greatly increase the death rate from the disease.

The Washington Post reports that is already about to happen throughout northern Italy, where the disease arrived earlier than in the U.S.

To slow down the spread of coronavirus, and keep the healthcare system from being overwhelmed, we need to close America's schools now. That's the point being made by experts like Howard Markel, who recently published an article in the *New York Times*. He studied the devastating epidemic that killed hundreds of thousands of Americans in 1918-19. His study looked at the relationship between death tolls, local government policies, and social distancing during the Spanish flu outbreak in 1918 and 1919.

Markel emphasizes that closing schools and doing it early was critical in lowering death tolls from the Spanish flu. As he states, "School closing turned out to be one of the most effective firewalls against the spread of the pandemic; cities that acted fast, for lengthy periods, and included school closing and at least one other [non-pharmaceutical intervention] in their responses saw the lowest death rates."

Your kids probably won't die from the coronavirus. It doesn't seem to kill many young people who get it. But if they catch it at school, they can pass it on to their parents or grandparents, and their grandparents have a real chance of dying from it if they get it.

A few states have ordered all their schools closed. The schools will close for two weeks starting Monday in Maryland and Kentucky, and for three weeks starting Monday in Ohio, Michigan, and New Mexico. Other states should likewise close their schools for the next few weeks.

Only a few thousand Americans currently have tested positive for coronavirus. But hundreds of thousands are carrying the disease, and just don't know it yet, and have yet to be tested for it. For example, Ohio Health Dept. Director Amy Acton says that evidence of community spread indicates that 1% of Ohioans are currently carrying coronavirus. That's more than 100,000 people in just the state of Ohio.

That figure would suggest that about 3 million Americans are currently carriers of coronavirus — more than a thousand times more people than have tested positive for the disease thus far.

If we don't keep the number of infected Americans from growing rapidly, we will not be able to provide even rudimentary medical care for the seriously ill. As Professor Yascha Mounk notes, "a week ago, Italy had so few cases of corona that it could give each stricken patient high-quality care. Today, some hospitals are so overwhelmed that they simply cannot treat every patient. They are starting to do wartime triage."

The situation is deteriorating rapidly. As legal commentator Walter Olson explains, "In Italy, with the number of ICU beds inadequate to handle the surge of cases, doctors are being given marching orders to assign the beds and scarce ventilators to patients who are younger and have fewer underlying conditions."

In northern Italy, coronavirus patients over the age of 80 are frequently being denied ventilators. In particularly overwhelmed areas, there are suggestions that "the triage line in some places has moved all the way down to 'over 65 or younger with comorbidities.'" As medical registrar Jason Van Schoor notes, "Patients above 65 or younger with comorbidities are not even assessed by ITU, I am not saying not tubed, I'm saying not assessed and no ITU staff attends when they arrest. Staff are working as much as they can but they are starting to get sick and are emotionally overwhelmed....My friends call me in tears because they see people dying in front of them and they can only offer some oxygen." The vast number of patients overwhelms hospitals, filling intensive care units, then other hospital units, and using up even oxygen supplies: "Staff gets sick so it gets difficult to cover for shifts, mortality spikes also from all other causes that can't be treated properly."

Such denial of intensive care to the elderly may spread to Italy as a whole. An Italian medical association warns, "It may become necessary to establish an age limit for access to intensive care. This is not a value judgment but a way to provide extremely scarce resources to those who have the highest likelihood of survival and could enjoy the largest number of life-years saved." (This is from the Italian College of Anesthesia, Analgesia, Resuscitation and Intensive Care).

China has agreed to supply Italy with 1,000 ventilators and 2 million masks. Additionally, China is donating 1,000 respirators, 20,000 protective suits, and 50,000 test kits as part of "massive aid" package for Italy. But even this will likely not be enough to fill the need.