Twitter Thread by Dominik Mertz



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Time for some thoughts on schools given the revised SickKids document and the fact that ON decided to leave most schools closed. ON is not the only jurisdiction to do so, but important to note that many jurisdictions would not have done so -even with higher incidence rates.

> A group of Ontario experts led by SickKids has updated its guidance for school operation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The living document, COVID-19: Updated Guidance for School Operation During the Pandemic, can be read here: https://t.co/rotLqDqkQh pic.twitter.com/q7kVezAPoG
>
> — SickKids_TheHospital (@SickKidsNews) January 21, 2021

As outlined in the tweet by @NishaOttawa yesterday, the situation is complex, and not a simple right or wrong https://t.co/DO0v3j9wzr. And no one needs to list all the potential risks and downsides of prolonged school closures.

> 1/It's the eve of provincial announcements on schools reopening for in-person instruction.
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> Households are under stress and experts are divided on whether schools are unicorns or infernos.
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> Everyone wants to do right by kids, who have borne so much throughout this pandemic.
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> — Nisha Thampi (@NishaOttawa) January 20, 2021

On the other hand: while school closures do not directly protect our most vulnerable in long-term care at all, one cannot deny that any factor potentially increasing community transmission may have an indirect effect on the risk to these institutions, and on healthcare.

The question is: to what extend do schools contribute to transmission, and how to balance this against the risk of prolonged school closures. The leaked data from yesterday shows a mixed picture -schools are neither unicorns (ie COVID free) nor infernos. https://t.co/m74rtKp6qZ

Assuming this data is largely correct -while waiting for an official publication of the data, it shows first and foremost the known high case numbers at Thorncliff, while other schools had been doing very well -are safe- reiterating the impact of socioeconomics on the COVID risk.

Who is affected most by closed schools? Likely not the affluent folks with well-paid jobs that can mostly work from home. Maybe inconvenient, but able to support and supervise their children in learning virtually, or homeschooling, help by private teachers/tutors, learning pods.

Mostly affected by schools closures are kids of those that have underpaid jobs, have less resources for their kids, that require them to go work in crowded settings, and have as such also the highest risk to contract COVID -at work, at home, and possibly school (ex. Thorncliff).

In summary, prolonged school closures will further harm equity, will harm those that are already mostly affected by COVID. Structural inequities are playing into this, lockdowns and school closures will not solve this problem, paid sick days would. https://t.co/90LcGbZ8el

Solution for this complex problem? Do EVERYTHING to make schools as safe as reasonably possible, and open schools throughout the province ASAP. https://t.co/T1ubqDsOoJ

Having schools shut because of lack of surveillance testing , "inability" to offer smaller class sizes etc. is the easy way out. An arbitrary cut-off such as "it is safe <40/100k/week in a PHU" is inappropriate: we all know that within a PHU, there are huge discrepancies in COVID

Needless to say: the last time that we had been below 40/100k/week as a province was beginning of October. Has the government decided now that school had been unsafe and an inferno ever since? While it is not a unicorn environment, we can agree that it is not an inferno either.

Instead of focusing on keeping schools shut as long as it can justified with some arbitrary threshold, focus on re-opening ASAP with appropriate measures in place. We are in a different spot in terms of testing capacity than in November, we have rapid testing, simply use it!

The younger the kids are, the less virtual school is working out for them. If unable to get JK-Grade 8 back in class in smaller classes, start off with JK-Grade 5, but not only once below a overtly conservative magic <40 threshold, invest into schools and open up.

I supported extended school breaks despite being pro-opening school: I value schools very highly as one of the most important public goods for the future of our society, but epi and risk from Holiday gatherings prevailed in my mind over the last few weeks.

But now is the time for action, make schools as safe as possible rather than simply moving the goalpost to a lower and lower arbitrary threshold for re-opening school. Currently, we are on track to make the same mistake as last year, keeping schools closed for far too long.