Twitter Thread by Apoorva Mandavilli



Apoorva Mandavilli
@apoorva_nyc

Yesterday, the CDC released new guidelines for schools. Clear, science-based guidance was long overdue, so everyone was agog all week.

Did they get what they wanted? This is a long ■, buckle in.

Before I dive in: I have no agenda here. I am not anti-kids, anti-schools or anti-teachers. The only thing I am is anti-virus. I follow the science, but despite what both sides insist, the science is not straightforward, or we wouldn't have this much division and dissent.

So, back to the CDC guidelines: Pro-opening advocates hoped for a sensible read of the evidence and teachers unions for strict precautions and vaccinations. Did they get what they want? Short answer: No.

There is no issue that is more divisive right now (ok, masks and vaccines). But kids of all colors are suffering, and the long-term loss of education and emotional toll might be devastating. OTOH: the rates in the US might be dropping but objectively they are still very high.

Schools should be the last to close and first to reopen, but many communities have not done that and probably will never. Those communities have not "budgeted" for schools by closing bars and restaurants. In fact, many are now reopening closed businesses before schools.

The CDC, as might be expected from a federal agency, took a conservative middle path. It said elementary schools can be open always. But when transmission is high, they go hybrid and middle and high schools should be fully remote.

Sounds reasonable given what we know of greater risk to high school students (very likely) and middle school students (maybe) compared to kids under 10. But pro-opening advocates are not happy because what CDC considers high transmission is way too low.

In fact, @CDCDirector said yesterday that 90% of school districts would fall into the high transmission category right now. Many schools have been operating at these levels without a problem -- but if they are taking all precautions (ie, masking, distancing hand-washing etc)

Some scientists have pointed out that in-school transmission is a better metric than community transmission because schools can control the environment and make it safer than the community at large. And that is an excellent point.

BUT: and it's a big but. We can only know what in-school transmission is if schools do regular testing -- not just diagnostic testing of symptomatic people, but screening for asymptomatic ones, or surveillance of the school population as a whole.

The problem, it seems to me, is that the schools that don't take precautions and need testing are also the ones least likely to implement testing unless someone forces them to -- which is highly unlikely. So... perhaps this is CDC's way of guiding *them*?

Some scientists have said the CDC should at least make it clear that for schools that are doing testing, the bar should be different -- again, another excellent point. Testing, done with good tests and regularly, can track in-school transmission well.

The CDC guidelines also said physical distancing is only required at high transmission -- another point of contention. Pro-opening advocates would say it's unnecessary at all levels, some teachers unions say 6 feet is minimum required.

What we know is that indoors, with poor ventilation, 6 feet is not much better than 3. But with good masking, both are doable. The CDC buried all talk of ventilation -- and my hunch is that they did so because they didn't want talk of HVAC systems etc to stop schools from opening

Some teachers unions are not happy about the no-distancing requirement at lower transmission or about the CDC saying vaccinating teachers should not be a prerequisite for reopening. Some insist everyone be vaccinated first -- which will not happen by fall.

A point about unions: Some are tough and are asking for things that will be impossible to fulfill, even with low transmission, even in the fall. And that is not helping the ugly fights over school re-openings.

OTOH, talking about teachers and unions as "evil" is also ridiculous. *Nothing* about the school debate is so straightforward. I've spoken to many, many teachers over the past weeks who are heartbroken about being painted as lazy and horrible people.

Some teachers are talking about permanently leaving the profession over this, when we need *more* teachers, not less. And not all unions are bad, just as not all people who want schools to open want it for sensible, logical reasons.

Full disclosure: Most NYT reporters are also represented by a guild that has our back. So on this I absolutely see both sides and I don't think it helps any of us to demonize either side. Neither side is malicious, neither is stupid.

As a parent of an anxious middle-schooler and a hypersocial elementary schooler, I *desperately* want schools to open. But as a science journalist, I genuinely believe there are no straightforward one-size-fits-all answers here.

With community transmission at the levels it still is, and with so many schools not following precautions, there cannot be a low bar for reopening. And yet, it's not fair to the many schools that have done very well to have to close.

If you came here looking for simple takeaways, I'm sorry. I'm no apologist for the CDC, as those of you who have followed me for a while know. But I sympathize with the agency's plight in this case. And I am heartsick over the ugly fighting between the two camps. That is all.