School’s Out, But It’s Not About the Children

The decision to close schools in New York is far from a “data-driven, science-driven” decision. Nov. 29, 2020 10:58 am ET

Seth Barron is right (“School’s Out for Autumn in New York,” Cross Country, Nov. 21). The decision to close schools in New York is far from a “data-driven, science-driven” decision. The science that is missing is economics, in particular cost-benefit analysis, the branch of economics intended exactly for such decisions. Medical doctors can and should provide inputs and guidelines, but there are many other factors that should be explicitly quantified.

For example, a recent Wharton study suggests that every month of school closures can cost each student $12,000-$15,000 in lost future lifetime earnings. This is a low estimate of the damage since it doesn’t include the extensive social and mental-health costs as well as costs to parents who miss work as they care for children at home. These costs fall disproportionately on underprivileged students and parents. The same study calculates the expected cost to society of a Covid-19 infection at about $38,000 for September.

This means that an infection rate of 0.355 per student a month warrants closing schools. In New York City the infection rate as reported to the state, including students and staff, is 0.0014 per student per month, which is dramatically lower. Even if the calculations are imprecise and based on many assumptions, they should give decision makers some pause. Incidentally, most European countries have kept their schools open despite rising Covid infections, and even Canada is keeping schools open through a Toronto lockdown.

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