Welcome to this special broadcast from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Thank you for joining us. I'm Josh Sharfstein, Vice Dean for Public Health Practice and Community Engagement, a pediatrician, and host of our daily podcast, Public Health On Call.

Our topic today is Back to School 2020, what community leaders, teachers, parents, and students need to know to plan for the year ahead. What can we expect to see as schools open this fall? How can parents and students make the most of a difficult and unusual school year? What can be done to mitigate the tremendous stress and anxiety that many are feeling?

To explore these questions and others, I'm joined by a panel of terrific experts from Johns Hopkins. Dr. Jennifer Nuzzo is a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, as well as an associate professor here at the school. She has been advising cities and states on the potential for the coronavirus to spread in schools and what can be done to stop it.

Dr. Annette Anderson is Deputy Director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Safe and Healthy Schools and an assistant professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Education. She has worked both as a classroom teacher and as a principal.

Dr. Tamar Mendelson is Director of the Center for Adolescent Health and a Bloomberg professor of American health at Johns Hopkins. A clinical psychologist, Dr. Mendelson will speak to a variety of mental health issues that are now surfacing in families. Our discussion today will also include questions submitted from the audience and media for the broadcast.

But let's start with doctor—let's start with you, Dr. Nuzzo. We have seen schools opening and, in some cases, many cases and quarantines. What is going on now? What are we learning from the early experiences this summer with reopening school?
What we’re seeing is unfortunately so far more of a cautionary tale, but nonetheless I think we can gain some insights from the schools that have started to go back. I think there are three key lessons in what we’ve seen so far. The first lesson is that the level of illness in the surrounding community matters. If there are high numbers or increasing numbers of infections in the school feeder communities, it stands to reason that students and staff may be infected and come to school with that infection.

And so the easiest scenario for reopening is one in which the level of illness in the surrounding community is low or stable and declining-- or declining. So schools are obviously going to have to evaluate the level of illness in the community in their decisions about when and how to return to in-class instruction. Communities, I think, where it is not currently possible to reopen due to the level of illness that they are seeing in their surrounding communities, they’re going to have to take a hard look at what is driving transmission of the virus and possibly be prepared to close establishments that have been identified as sources of transmission.

The second overarching lesson that I think we can take away from the reopenings that have happened so far is that safety protocols are important. And so even in communities where the level of illness is low, there still is a chance that the virus can show up at school in somebody who is infected and doesn't know that. And if that happens, we want to minimize the chances that that person will spread their infection to others.

And so having interventions aimed at reducing that probability-- things like masks, maintaining physical distance between students and staff, improving ventilation to the extent that it's possible, and staying outdoors as much as possible-- could play an important role for making the school environment safer and reduce the likelihood that the virus will be transmitted in school.

Thank you.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN:

Oh, OK.

JENNIFER NUZZO:

Yeah, I want to ask you a related question, because you're talking about reducing
SHARFSTEIN: the chance. But as you said, there's still a chance. So even in areas with relatively low community spread, even with schools that are taking different precautions, there could be cases. So the question is, how should people prepare for that? What are the kinds of protocols and, really, ways of thinking that we should have to be ready for that possibility?

JENNIFER NUZZO: Yeah, so that, I think, is the third lesson that we have seen from the reopenings, which is basically plan for cases. Even if these safety measures are in place, we have to think about what we do to further limit the spread. And so I think schools should plan to reduce the numbers of people that any one person interacts with to reduce the probability that if an infection comes that it will result in a school outbreak.

And so we've talked a bunch about the importance of sort of pandemic bubbles, or creating cohorts of people who are-- their interaction is limited to those in the cohort. And what that will achieve is that if one of those people is infected, we then know who was exposed to that infected individual. That makes assessment much easier. And also, we have potentially limited who else has been exposed, so prevented that from happening.

SHARFSTEIN: So are you saying in part that parents, teachers, others should know what the protocol is if there is a case?

JENNIFER NUZZO: Absolutely. This is something that schools are going to have to plan for. They're going to have to figure out what they're going to do if there is a case. I think, actually, CDC has some good guidelines for schools on how to do these assessments. But schools need plans beyond just trying to assess what this means for the school, what the level of infection is likely in the school at that moment. Also communication plans to allay the concerns of staff and parents.

And then also think about how they're going to react. Hopefully with the cohorts they won't have to close the entire school, unless they find that the infection has spread beyond that cohort or that there was a breakdown in who was exposed. But decisions about what will be closed and when, who will be quarantined, and crucially what the triggers are for returning, that will be important so that people understand what the protocols are. And hopefully that can be communicated in
advance so that people aren't learning about it after infections [INAUDIBLE].

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: So if all you're getting from your school system is, here's everything we're doing to reduce the chance of infection, that's not enough. People should also know what should happen when and if there is a case of coronavirus in the school.

JENNIFER NUZZO: And it's also really important that schools communicate with families and staff that what happens when they are not in school is critically important to [AUDIO OUT] able to remain open. And if families and staff are committed to making decisions that otherwise reduce their exposures, that can have an important impact.

What we've seen in other countries when they have reopened schools is that when cases have been found in the schools, they are not infrequently linked to sort of social events that happen outside of school hours and outside of school settings. And so it's one thing for the school to put all these measures in place. But if families and staff don't take similar precautions in their lives, then that will potentially dilute the impact of the school planning.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: Great. Thank you. I want to turn to you, Dr. Anderson, for the educational perspective. This is, under even the best-case scenario, a very difficult year. What can parents, teachers, students do to make the best of the situation?

ANNETTE ANDERSON: Well, I would agree with Dr. Nuzzo that schools need to be prepared that there will be cases. What I would add, though, is that while it may seem impossible, this year schools will have to show that they are able to go the distance in terms of delivering strong academic rigor in their content this year.

So whether it is in an online or off face to face or a hybrid environment, schools will have to show parents and to one another that they are able to deliver strong academic rigor consistently across the year. There may be cases this fall. But whether the schools will start in a face-to-face version and then go to a hybrid or an online version, they need to make sure that they do have some plans in place to make sure that the instruction is consistent.

When we had to pivot in the spring to close schools, we know that there was a little bit of grappling, and schools were trying to figure out the new online environment. But going back into fall, schools will have an imperative to make sure that all of the
classes, whether they are in a hybrid or an online or face-to-face format, that there's consistency in the rigor that is delivered in the content.

**JOSH SHARFSTEIN:** How can parents know whether that's the case? So a school might say, we've got it covered this year, don't worry. But what are the kinds of questions parents should ask to know whether there will be rigor in the academic offerings?

**ANNETTE ANDERSON:** Absolutely. I think they need to look at the synchronous versus asynchronous times. So I think every school has to develop a plan and should have communicated that plan to families around how they are going to implement the curriculum. We know that there have been some interventions that have started, but those have had a mixed success rate right now.

So we need to make sure that all students are getting grade level curriculum. So parents should be looking for that. Parents should make sure that their students are frequently engaged in learning, whether it's asynchronous or asynchronous, and that there is some kind of schedule or calendar that can be routinely expected for every student, no matter what the platform is. So I think starting there in the fall will be really important for parents to start to rebuild their degree of trust in the level of instruction being academically rigorous.

**JOSH SHARFSTEIN:** Great. I'm going to ask you about what your biggest concerns are.

**ANNETTE ANDERSON:** Well, I think one of my concerns is that we need to continue to get this message out about prevention and reducing the numbers of cases that we're starting to see crop up in children. There was a recent CDC report that said that of the children who have been hospitalized with COVID-19, 76% of those children were African-American or Latino. And so we know we've got to redouble our prevention efforts in schools and places that serve children, like early learning and child care centers.

I think I also have a big concern that, as we go back to school in the fall, that we need to think about having more outdoor and experiential learning. We need to think about how we can do some of this instruction outside. And I think we also need to be prepared for us to think about equity, again. We know that despite the redoubling of efforts in districts to try to get devices to children, there's still a backlog in the number of devices and hotspots that are available to some of our...
students. So we need to make sure that we are being more consistent and bringing everyone up to the same level if we're going to deliver online content this fall.

**JOSH SHARFSTEIN:** Great. One more quick question for you. What do you make of this trend of parents forming pods, sometimes with the blessing of the school, sometimes outside the school, maybe joining up with a bunch of other parents and a group of kids to either directly educate the kids or be sort of monitors for online learning?

**ANNETTE ANDERSON:** Well, we know that parents who have more resources have always had more choice for their children in schools. And so I think there is an equity concern about the pandemic pods. But even beyond the inherent equity concerns about who can be in a pod or not and the exclusiveness that is part of deciding who can be part of a pod, I think that there are concerns about how you choose the pod teacher.

Do you need to have a pod principal to manage all of the logistics of having a pod? You need to wonder about whether or not the pod is going to be acceptable to your school district or not. Is it meant to supplement or to supplant the existing work of your school? So I think as parents are starting to think about this, along with micro-schooling and unschooling and homeschooling, they need to really think about how they're going to balance some of the needs--the academic needs, but also some of the social/emotional learning needs of the students so that they can make sure that it's fair and balanced for everyone.

**JOSH SHARFSTEIN:** Great. Thank you. Dr. Mendelson, we heard Dr. Anderson just reference at the end there the social and emotional learning of students. There's also, even beyond that, the mental health stress that is there now--kids who don't know what's going to happen yet with their school, the parents who are very stressed about work and their ability to have their kids remotely learning. What do you think are key strategies that are needed to be able to mitigate, even if those serious stresses can't be eliminated?

**TAMAR MENDELSON:** Yeah, so parents and teachers should really make sure to acknowledge and validate how young people are feeling right now, so really giving them a space and an opportunity to feel and express their stress, their frustration, what they may be going through in terms of losses. And I think teachers and parents can also really try to address pressing youth needs.
So Dr. Anderson mentioned some of the equity concerns. There are certainly, for example, some students who have larger barriers to engaging academically right now due to the digital divide, not having enough access to the right technologies, or other kinds of barriers. So teachers can really be creative in helping these young people engage and sort of overcome those additional frustrations that may be due to feeling shut out of the educational experience.

And then, finally, I think also really model positive coping right now. So this is an opportunity for young people to learn about flexibility, giving each other grace, dealing with imperfections and difficulties. So adults can help with that.

**JOSH SHARFSTEIN:** How important is communication between parents and teachers in this sort of tumultuous and confusing environment that we’re in right now?

**TAMAR MENDELSON:** Absolutely. I think it’s more important than ever. And parents and teachers can both be watching to see if there are changes in how students seem to be doing academically or emotionally, and that’s a great opportunity to check in with young people to see whether they may need extra supports.

**JOSH SHARFSTEIN:** Now, there’s some stories emerging of some young people, particularly adolescents, who may be finding some advantages in online learning. What do you make of those reports?

**TAMAR MENDELSON:** Yeah, I think it’s important for adults not to overlook that some young people may actually experience some silver linings to this situation. So for example, I’ve had young people tell me about the fact that they’re no longer exposed to bullying or social issues at school. It has actually helped them to feel happier and to do better in their courses. Some young people may actually also prefer online learning. As you said, more for adolescents this may be the case. And some adolescents who have learning issues may benefit from those different kinds of instruction.

**JOSH SHARFSTEIN:** So it really comes down to really paying attention to the young person and what their experience is. If there were a few things that you would say would be really important warning signs for parents and teachers to look out for at this moment, what would those be?

**TAMAR MENDELSON:** Yeah, so I think it’s always really important to look for significant changes in a
MENDELSON: child’s behavior or mood, and in particular looking for signs of withdrawal or disengagement, loss of interest or pleasure in things that the child used to enjoy. Those can be important signs. And check in with your child. Give them opportunities to tell you about how they’re doing. And if you do feel like you’re seeing some of those signs, please do link with school or local mental health services for assessment and treatment if needed. Those things are available and can be very, very useful.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: Great. Thanks so much. I want to turn to some of the great questions that we’ve received prior to starting the podcast. And the first one is for you, Dr. Nuzzo, which is, what data should be made available publicly to see if school reopenings are successful.

JENNIFER NUZZO: I think it’s important that we understand when infections come to the school and what the outcome of the contact investigations that are occurring, hopefully as soon as those infections are identified—what the plans are, what the outcomes of the contact investigation. If they find people who have been exposed and they may be quarantined at home, we should know if they also became infected so that we can have confidence in potentially returning to school that the virus isn’t spreading within schools.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: So it’s really about both the number of cases and evidence of spreading within the schools.

JENNIFER NUZZO: Absolutely. People can get infected in the community. That’s just what we see happening. Hopefully when the infection numbers are low and with the safety precautions that are emphasized as being important, we can keep those numbers to a minimum. But there still is a chance that infections will come to school. And so then we have to ask, is it then spreading in the school. And again, hopefully with the safety protocols, that will also be minimized. But this is what people want to know, and these data can help us gain some clarity about that.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: Great. Now, the next question is from Alexis Taylor of Afro-American Newspapers here in Baltimore. And Alexis notes that the Census Bureau reported that 10% of students were living with a grandparent. In some cases, the grandparent may be the only adult in the house. I wonder, first of all, whether that poses a special risk to the
grandparent and whether additional precautions need to be put into place. And also I wonder about the stress that that can put on the family. So maybe I'll start with you, Dr. Anderson, how you would approach that situation as a principal, for example.

ANNETTE ANDERSON: Sure. So we know that kinship care relationships are very important in our country, across the country, particularly in our most vulnerable communities, that there is a larger likelihood that children will be in a home with a grandparent or an extended relative. So it is important that there be strong communication between the schools and with the families around the placements when the instruction begins in the fall. So if a student is in a kinship care relationship and there needs to be some additional care taken for a student who might have a hybrid learning option or an online learning option, that communication needs to happen very early in the school year between the school and those family members.

You also have to think about how they're going to continue to check in with the school during the school year. The relationship between the family and the school is really paramount this year. We're seeing parents really stepping up in terms of making sure that there is more engagement because they want to have a larger stake in how their children are performing. And so whether those are the birth parents or whether they're adoptive parents or kinship care, we need to make sure that that communication comes from the school regularly and that the school is doing all that it can to understand the complexity and the dynamics of the different relationships of the students that are in their care so that they can accommodate their learning styles and needs to the best of their ability.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: So it may be, in some cases, that some of those kids will have to do online learning. If it can't really be worked out, in other cases, there may be enhanced communication that's necessary to really assure the grandparents of how things are going.

ANNETTE ANDERSON: Absolutely. That's why I say schools have to be flexible. They have to be ready to be able to deliver content in all three options, whether it's virtual or face to face. They have to be able to do it. And it comes from having that relationship with their parents, that they're able to understand how to meet the parents' needs this fall.
JOSH SHARFSTEIN: Got it. Dr. Mendelson, I want to ask you a question that we got about students with special needs who may have problems wearing masks, who may have very close relationships with people at school, may also be expecting to hug them. The question is, what can be done in this circumstance to help kids in that situation.

TAMAR MENDELSON: So the folks who do work with these students will need to have careful protocols in place. And there may be ways also in which there will be virtual opportunities for interactions for those young people, in addition.

ANNETTE ANDERSON: I also join that with what Dr. Mendelson just said to say that I think that school buildings that are virtual may be able to open those campuses, those facilities for special needs students and students who are in targeted smaller groups, like gifted students, for example, so that they can come in and get their instruction in a face-to-face setting, albeit in a smaller group. So you may not have the entire campus open for all students.

But for those students with special needs, we know in many cases those students thrive when they are in a face-to-face environment. And while it is not eliminating risk, it will be at a lower risk if you are able to have some smaller groups inside the school building with the rest of the school being online and running virtually.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: So it doesn't have to be one size fits all?

ANNETTE ANDERSON: No, I absolutely think that, in fact, we need to think about our school buildings as places where we continue to have lots of services for families and for students. Schools are very complex and dynamic places. And I think as schools have reopened in the fall, they're trying to think about how they can meet so many needs for families, whether it's housing access or food access. Students who have special needs are one special group, but we've got lots of other special groups in schools that also can be accommodated in these smaller kinds of situations.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: Got it. Dr. Nuzzo, a question from Joanne Silberner from the British Medical Journal. "The American Academy of Pediatrics is calling for students' desks to be placed at least three feet apart and for teachers and staff to keep at least a six foot distance. Do you think those are good recommendations?"
JENNIFER NUZZO: Yeah, I mean, this is one area where there is a difference in numbers used by different countries and the national health authorities of different countries. I think we generally know about this virus that more distance is better, and I think six feet is a reasonable distance. I realize that that actually puts a lot of pressure on schools and has also led schools to potentially not reconvene because they just have not been able to find the space. But I think it is consistent with what we are stressing for adults. And I think that consistency is important to try to maintain as much as possible.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: One more question for you, which is the testing needs at school. We've seen stories saying Los Angeles is going to try to test 700,000 children. Other school systems, they may not be testing at all in school. What are the priorities around testing?

JENNIFER NUZZO: So I think there are a lot of visions of using testing as a way to establish safety, and that is not of a clear-cut endeavor as it may seem, particularly when you test people who don't have clinical symptoms. And it can be a hard test result to interpret.

I think if schools are thinking about using testing, they have to consider, how quickly can we get the test results back, and will it meaningfully change our interventions. Or is the test result going to come back too late to act upon? Two, what do we do if we get the answer wrong, if the test result in some way doesn't give us the right answer?

I think regardless of how we use tests, we absolutely still need to maintain the safety protocols, the distance, and the masks and other things because no test is perfect. And there will be incorrect answers generated by these tests.

And then also just thinking through what the testing frequency is and whether that's actually giving you meaningful results. The challenge with this virus is that you could test today and be negative but be tested again and be positive. So we need to think about how realistic it is to test and to test with a frequency that would actually enable us to spot infections early enough to do something differently.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: Thank you. Dr. Anderson, here's a great question. What's the right size for a virtual learning class? Can you do well with 40 kids on a Zoom? What is your sense of how big these online classes should be?
ANNETTE ANDERSON: Well, I think that right now we're seeing that most of the virtual learning classes are mimicking the regular in-person class sizes. And I think that that is OK, but we would actually think that smaller class sizes would continue to build up our students' learning experiences and allow them to have greater engagement. So I would say personally that I would think that between 15 to 20 students would be ideal. I know that resources don't necessarily follow that thinking, though, so it could be a challenge if districts are trying to hew to a model that size.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: Is that an important area for research? I don't know how much research has been done and what the right way to do this is.

ANNETTE ANDERSON: I do. I think that going into the future, we're going to have more virtual learning and not less. So there should be some research around how many students is an optimal size and what grade and age, because it differs by the age and the developmental stage of the child.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: Got it. I've got a question saying that in a particular school district, they're encouraging kids to have mask breaks, that they allow them to take the masks off even while they're still in the classroom, or a lot of kids in the hallway taking the mask off just to have a break in wearing it. Any thoughts from any of you?

ANNETTE ANDERSON: I would just say-- I'd go back to the schools in Israel, because there was some anecdotal belief that that was how the COVID case numbers started to rise again because they were having mask-free lunch periods or mask-free afternoons and mask-free days. I think that we have to help our young people to know how to keep their masks on.

This is unprecedented in that we're asking seven and eight-year-olds to keep masks on for six and seven hours. So whether or not that's comfortable for them is still yet to be determined in many cases. But I think that we have to have more practice around how students can get incentives, in fact, for being strong adherers to this mandate, because it's part of a safety protocol. And schools are going to have to take that up.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: And so it may be better to think about doing that outside where kids are really far away from each other than in a crowded classroom.
ANNETTE ANDERSON: Absolutely.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: Here is a question, Dr. Mendelson. I'm going to just read it directly. "I'm a school nurse. Is there anything I can say or do to help allay the fears of my pregnant teachers, aside from reinforcing all the things they should be doing-- handwashing, masks, et cetera? They're just so scared."

And I guess the question really is, how do you cope with that kind of fear? It could be a pregnant teacher, could be someone else who is just extremely worried, perhaps because maybe they know someone or someone in their family has already gotten quite sick from COVID.

TAMAR MENDELSON: Yeah, I mean, I guess one thing I would say just from the mental health perspective is how important self-care is during this time. I mean, I think across many different groups of people, there are significant anxieties about how COVID may impact one's self, a child, a pregnancy, an older relative.

So I do think taking time to do whatever it is that helps you to cope and to be calm is really important. There are tons of mindfulness apps and other kinds of strategies that can be used for self-care, obviously keeping informed about the best safety protocols and then balancing what risks you have to take versus which ones you can safely avoid. All of those are important, I think, to feel that you're at least doing all you can do to protect your baby, your pregnancy, in addition to the self-care.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN: Thank you.

JENNIFER NUZZO: Can I just maybe chime in on that for a second, which is that I'm answering this as an epidemiologist but also as a parent. And I do think that the school situation will be best when people feel generally fairly confident about being there. And I think for teachers and staff that are in known risk groups that school districts should really think about potentially alternative assignments for them.

I think there are some teachers who are better equipped to be in the in-classroom environment given their life situation than others and certainly teachers who are advanced age, but also potentially those with risk factors. I think creating some
room for flexibility and potentially involving the teachers with risk factors in the remote education, which will probably have to continue to some extent even in school districts that have allowed in-person instruction to resume.

TAMAR MENDELSON:

I would echo that. And some schools are taking those measures, which is great.

JOSH SHARFSTEIN:

Well, I think the concept of flexibility and some humility in the face of the virus, especially as we’re seeing all these cases in schools right now, are just really important things. We don’t know what’s going to happen. It is really important entirely we have principles of what can make schools safer, and following those principles is extremely important. And we will learn as we get into the fall.

I really want to thank the three of you for joining today and for all of you for watching. This webcast is just one of the many ways Johns Hopkins University experts are sharing their knowledge on the COVID-19 pandemic. You can find tools and resources for K-12 schools, including reopening plans by state at equityschoolplus.jhu.edu. That's equityschoolplus.jhu.edu. You can also find expertise from across our university, including our Map Dashboard and Data Center at coronavirus.jhu.edu.

We at the Bloomberg School of Public Health also have a daily podcast called Public Health on Call, where we're having conversations with experts every day, including on topics like opening schools, both for K-12 and university. You can subscribe where you get your podcasts or visit jhsph.edu/covid-19. You can also sign up for our expert insights email newsletter, delivered Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, to stay up to date with all of the latest content and to be notified about future broadcasts. Thank you for joining us.

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