

~ **“We Studied 1,000,000 Students. This is What We Learned about Masking.”¹ ~**

On August 10, 2021, the New York Times published an article entitled, “We Studied One Million Students. This Is What We Learned About Masking.”²

Curious about the quality of this analysis, I decided to do a deep dive. Not surprisingly, the media tosses a piece like this at us every time there is a new CDC guideline to be pushed. This one was just in time for school re-openings in the fall.

1. **The New York Times piece (PDF attached at the end of this document):** notes low transmission in North Carolina schools and suggests it is due to masks.
2. **Key Paragraph in the Article:** “Because North Carolina had a mask mandate for all K-12 schools, we could not compare masked schools to unmasked schools. To understand the preventive impact masks can have, we looked outside North Carolina for comparisons. Data from our research and from studies conducted in Utah, Missouri and Wisconsin shows that school transmission rates of coronavirus were low when schools enforced mask mandates. By contrast, one school in Israel without a mask mandate or proper social distancing protocols reported an outbreak of Covid-19 involving 153 students and 25 staff members.”
3. **So, No Control Group in the NC Data:** Implied in the above paragraph is that these three OTHER studies DO compare masked to unmasked students and show that the low transmission is due to masks. They don’t say this outright (their wording is very careful), but it is implied. It is also completely untrue.
 - a. **Utah Study** – “SARS-CoV-2 testing was offered to 1,041 school contacts of 51 index patients across 20 elementary schools in Salt Lake County, Utah. In a high

¹ In this essay, I am speaking in a personal capacity as a mathematician and do not intend to represent the views of Winona State University. These documents began as my attempt to organize for myself information which complements and even challenges the dominant narrative on COVID-19. It was not my intent to make them publicly available, but enough people have found them helpful that I decided to do that. Unlike government bureaucrats and social media fact-checkers, I do not claim to be infallible. I am simply a classical liberal who is quite concerned at the lack of robust conversation around such an important topic.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/10/opinion/covid-schools-masks.html>

community transmission setting, low school-associated transmission was observed with a 0.7% secondary attack rate. **Mask adherence was high**, but students' classroom seats were <6 ft apart and a median of 3 ft apart.”³

- b. **Missouri Study** – “In 22 participating K–12 schools implementing multiple COVID-19 mitigation strategies, school-based SARS-CoV-2 secondary transmission was detected in two of 102 tested close contacts of 37 persons with COVID-19. Among 21 tested student contacts participating in a modified quarantine, all SARS-CoV-2 test results were negative.” The study used data from two counties in Missouri and “**schools in both locations implemented COVID-19 mitigation strategies [including mask mandates in 100% of them]**.”⁴
- c. **Wisconsin Study** – “Among 17 rural Wisconsin schools, reported **student mask-wearing was high**, and the COVID-19 incidence among students and staff members was lower than in the county overall (3,453 versus 5,466 per 100,000). Among 191 cases identified in students and staff members, only seven (3.7%) cases, all among students, were linked to in-school spread.”⁵
- d. **All Three Studies** – noted that the transmission in schools was **lower than in the surrounding community**.

4. **What Was Really Shown:** that transmission was low, but there was no comparison to schools with no mask mandates, so it is impossible to say WHY the transmission was low. Certainly, we cannot say it was due to masks. The most plausible explanation is that the average age in a school is very low, because it is full of youth. We know for a fact that young people contract and transmit COVID at a very low rate compared to adults, hence we would expect the rate of transmission in schools to be lower than the surrounding community.

5. **Offered in Contrast to these Three Studies:** **ONE anecdote from ONE school** way over in Israel (they had to travel half-way around the world to find an outbreak?): “By contrast,

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7012e3.htm>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7012e4.htm>

⁵ https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7004e3.htm?s_cid=mm7004e3_w

one school in Israel without a mask mandate or proper social distancing protocols reported an outbreak of Covid-19 involving 153 students and 25 staff members.” That’s it! That was their “control.”

6. **Compare to the Study from the UK:** which noted very low infection rates in schools in England, during the Delta wave, without a mask mandate (though other mitigation measures were in place). They report 0.27% (primary) and 0.42% (secondary) infection rates among mostly unvaccinated children vs. 0.625% in the highly vaccinated general population (no surprise there, since they are young). That means the rate of infection in the schools was 43% (primary) and 67% (secondary) of what it was in the surrounding communities, comparable to the Wisconsin study which showed the rate of infection in schools was 63% of what it was in the surrounding communities (the other two studies don’t report these numbers).⁶

Consistently, this is the quality of work I have found when I do a deep dive on any piece like this advocating masks. The problem is that the government and corporate media can crank out this drivel more quickly than a single person can fact-check it. After a while, it is tempting for a person to just give in and accept what they are being told more or less uncritically. This is why I am increasingly convinced we are in the middle of a well-coordinated propaganda campaign rather than an honest effort by scientists, public health experts, and the media to help effectively manage this pandemic.

⁶ <https://www.sfgate.com/coronavirus/article/delta-variant-schools-England-cases-COVID-reopen-16382449.php>