

COVID as a Pretext to Prevent the Reopening of Schools: Deceit and Demagoguery in Montgomery County, Maryland

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Global Research, August 10, 2020

[American Institute for Economic Research](#) 7

August 2020

Region: [USA](#)

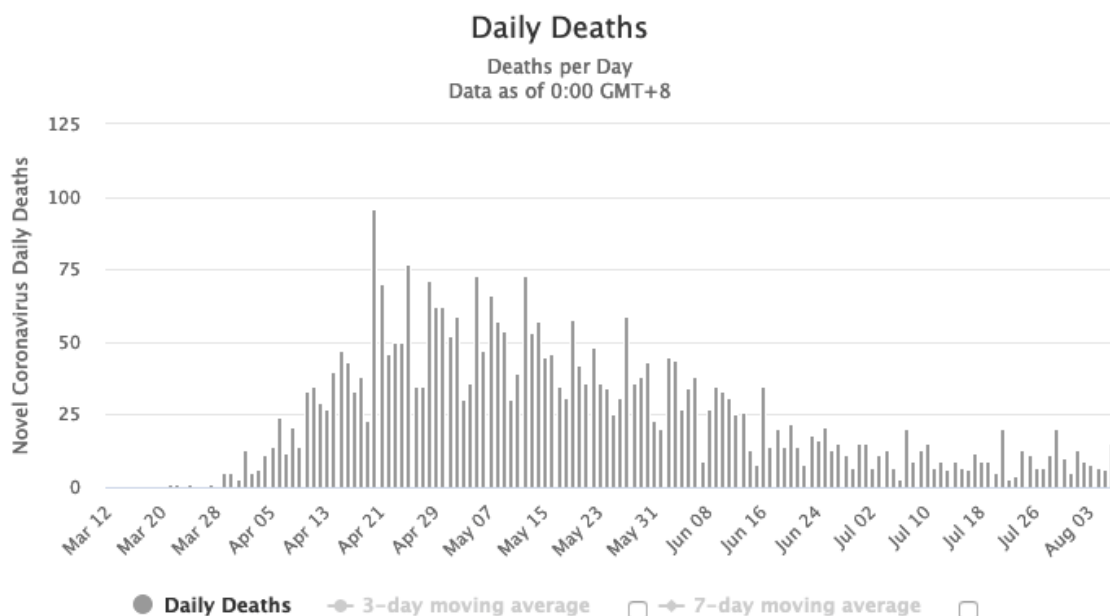
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*Across the nation, politicians and bureaucrats have invoked the COVID pandemic to seize dictatorial power to ban activities they disapprove. One of the most brazen examples recently occurred in super-lefty Montgomery County (MoCo), Maryland, where local health czar **Travis Gayles** announced last Friday that he would impose **a \$5,000 fine and up to a year in prison on private school teachers that teach students in person between now and October 1.***

New COVID cases have plummeted in MoCo and are at very low levels. Gayles justified banning private schools in part because of rises in COVID transmission rates elsewhere in Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Virginia. Apparently, as long as there are any positive COVID test results within 300 miles, letting teachers teach is too risky.

Maryland as a whole has been through the Covid wave and now deaths have plummeted.

Daily New Deaths in Maryland



On Monday, **Gov. Larry Hogan** overturned Gayles' decree, ruling that the

“blanket [closure mandate imposed by](#) Montgomery County was overly broad and inconsistent with the powers intended to be delegated to the county health officer....As long as schools develop safe and detailed plans that follow CDC and state guidelines, they should be empowered to do what's best for their community.” [Hogan declared](#), “This is a decision for schools and parents, not politicians.”

On Wednesday, Gayles issued a new dictate claiming that local health officers are entitled to “[take any action or measure](#) necessary to prevent the spread of communicable disease” and “issue, when necessary, special instructions for control of a disease or condition.” Gayles claims that as long as more than 8 people test positive for COVID in Montgomery County each day, he is entitled to shut down all private schools at least until October 1.

In a closed video briefing for county employees on May 28, Gayles continually invoked “science and data” like a righteous priest invoking God and the Bible to sanctify scourging his enemies. What does it require to justify boundless power in a county of a million people? A COVID positive rate of 0.000008%. Surprise - the dictatorship will last forever - or at least until the Democratic political machine that runs the county decides it can profit from loosening the tourniquet it imposed that helped destroy more than 50,000 jobs and countless small businesses.

Image on the right is Travis Gayles (Source: Montgomery Community Media)



Montgomery County is suffering from epidemic levels of sexually-transmitted diseases including [Hepatitis C and chlamydia](#). If Gayles has the right to shut down schools based on the 0.000008% rate, the same standard would justify invoking STD numbers to outlaw all sex between unmarried adults. But MoCo would never do that because sexual activity, unlike other private learning, is a freedom that progressives champion.

Gayles justified his school shutdown dictate: “The purpose of what we’re doing [is to keep kids safe](#).” According to Gayles and other MoCo politicians, nothing matters except politicians’ self-proclaimed good intentions.

But the school shutdowns have profoundly disrupted lives and are increasingly blighting learning. A recent *Wall Street Journal* analysis [headlined](#),

“The Results Are In for Remote Learning: It Didn’t Work,” noted, “In many places, lots of students simply didn’t show up online, and administrators had no good way to find out why not... Soon many districts weren’t requiring students to do any work at all, increasing the risk that millions of students would have big gaps in their learning.”

The Center on Reinventing Public Education found that the vast majority of school districts did not require any live teaching over video. An analysis by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) noted that only “[one in three school districts](#) expected teachers to provide instruction, track student engagement, or monitor academic progress for all students.” But since teachers in most places continued collecting full pay, the shutdown is wildly popular with teachers unions.

Montgomery County politicians and school officials have endlessly invoked “closing the achievement gap” to justify boosting school spending (and property taxes). But school shutdowns are devastating minorities. [The CDC warned](#) last month that “the lack of in-person educational options disproportionately harms low-income and minority children.”

An analysis by McKinsey and Company consultants estimated that if schools were entirely online until January, on average white students would lose 6 months of learning, Hispanic students 9 months, Black students 10 months and low-income students more than a year during the time school buildings have closed for the pandemic,” [the Baltimore Sun](#) reported.

Many parents are desperate to get their children back to learning at full speed and are seeking private alternatives to shuttered public schools. Private schools have taken extreme measures to assure [the safety of returning students](#), installing plexiglass shields, banning field trips, restricting time in hallways, and minimizing unnecessary contact. In comments last week, Gayles brushed off their efforts as “[niche issues.](#)” Bureaucrats have always considered freedom a niche nuisance.

After controversy erupted over the shutdown order, the County Council held a session “really showing its hatred of private schools,” *Washington Examiner* columnist Tim Carney, a Catholic father of six kids, observed. [Carney tweeted](#), “Montgomery County Councilman Craig Rice said that ‘racism’ was behind the efforts to reopen nonpublic schools—because the bureaucrat who tried to close them is a black doctor.” Carney summarized Rice’s argument: “The county shouldn’t allow private schools the same liberty it allowed public schools (whether to reopen) because ‘affluent’ people are more willing to expose their own kids to infection than others are.”

Unfortunately, Rice did not bother explaining the “achievement gap” between local public schools and private schools (many of which spend far less per student). These are the same local politicians who cheered on local mass protests over the George Floyd killing in stark violation of “shelter-at-home” orders at the same time they continue outlawing church services.

While private teaching is considered inherently too risky to permit, Montgomery County announced this week that massage parlors would be permitted to reopen. Local massage parlors are [perennially getting](#) busted [because Asian](#) masseuses provide more services to patrons than state law permits. But masseuses providing “happy endings” to male customers is apparently less of a public health peril than an adult standing in front of a group of plexiglassed students explaining algebra.

MoCo politicians pretending to take the high road have actually turned local children into “revenue hostages.” Gayles’ shutdown order expires on October 1 – one day after local public schools report their expected enrollment, which will largely determine how much subsidies they receive. Keeping private schools shut down could result in tens of millions of additional tax dollars for the school system even if those kids never show up for a single class – simply because parents will not have the opportunity to notify the county of plans to withdraw their kids for private schools.

The Montgomery County fight has brought out the usual Twitter mobs proclaiming that any government official who fails to prohibit all purportedly risky activity is to blame for any resulting illnesses or deaths. A Twitter user named TeachersAreNotYourSacrificialLambs responded to Hogan’s action: “He now owns it. Every Maryland private [school](#) illness, hospitalization, and death now falls squarely on his shoulders. He. Owns. It.” A self-described “progressive democrat” Twitter user railed at Hogan: “Why does he want dead children & school staff in Maryland?... Gov Larry just part of the #GOPDeathCult.”

This is typical of how the COVID shutdowns and lockdowns have been scored: politicians are applauded for everything they ban while enjoying zero liability for the vast collateral damage they inflict. Many MoCo school nurses are concerned about the harm from shutdowns of school-based health centers that effectively serve as primary care providers for many low-income families. [The CDC cited studies](#) on pandemics that showed “a strong association between length of quarantine and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms, avoidance behavior, and anger.” Maybe the champions of perpetual shutdowns will solve that problem by making antidepressants mandatory for all children?

Politicians and bureaucrats who claim a right to outlaw all risks ignore the risk of tyranny. Gayles and other MoCo politicians sneer at their critics as if they were unwashed deplorables incapable of understanding “science.” But their school shutdown policy is simply Political Science 101, using deceit and demagoguery to seize more power.

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