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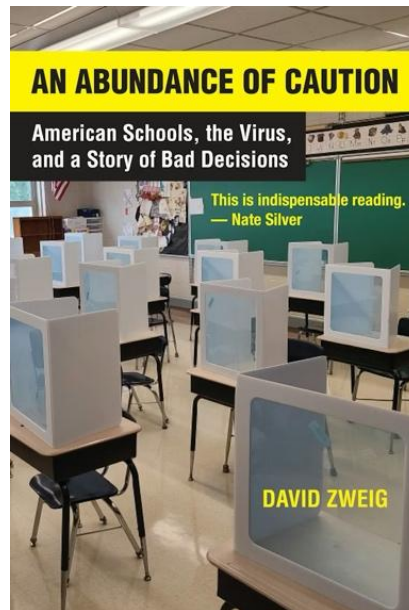
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The height of the COVID-19 pandemic feels as if it were yesterday, and it feels as if it occurred a lifetime ago. The unparalleled disruption to our lives – domestically in the United States and internationally across the planet – was not only a moment in time but, also, still echoes all these years later.

Disruptions that were caused by business and non-business closures, quarantine guidance, social distancing, masking, and an unrelenting fear of the unknown were only surpassed by the sheer volume of overcrowded hospital beds and morgues that were beyond capacity as the world awaited an effective vaccination.



This once-in-a-generation pandemic required an all-hands-on-deck approach to mitigating the spread of the virus as well as a further spread that would lead to viral mutation and stronger variants. One of the central aims of early mitigation efforts was to “flatten the curve” of infections. Hospital staff and medical professionals did their best to save lives. The limitations of space and equipment (e.g., ventilators) demanded that a societal effort was needed to avoid spikes in infections that rose above the capacity of our healthcare system. Data indicate that even in 2020 poor implementation of mitigation efforts like flattening the curve were directly linked with an increased death rate due to hospital capacity stress (Karaca-Mandic et al., 2020). Life-long complications of viral infections and deaths would naturally increase if sick and dying patients were unable to receive attention and treatment due to capacity stress. This meant, among other mitigation efforts, that schools in the United States shifted from in-person learning to digital/distance learning particularly in the Spring 2020. As the Fall 2020 semester came into view, the political fervor of the time, magnified by a

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presidential election, resulted in hyper-partisan disagreement on mitigation efforts that ultimately led to half-measures causing the worst of the pandemic to drag on longer. Looking back, it is easy to engage in cherry-picking and “told ya so” partisan hackery with the benefit of today’s understandings as well as some intentional bad-faith arguments. David Zweig’s *An Abundance of Caution: American Schools, the Virus, and a Story of Bad Decisions* is just that, a politically driven, post-pandemic critique of the mitigation efforts that sought to save lives.

Zweig purports, but fails, to provide a “searing indictment of the American public health, media, and political establishments’ decision-making process behind pandemic school closures” (MIT Press, n.d.). What Zweig’s text accomplishes, however, is a useful case study for what is obviously thinly veiled ideologically driven Facebook-comment-section-style “journalism.” Cherry-picking, Monday-morning quarterbacking, and willful ignorance combine in the author’s quest to serve a predetermined political agenda.

Zweig argues that school closures and other COVID-era mitigation efforts were out of a commitment to an “abundance of caution” and that politically progressive, fear-driven mitigation efforts operated outside of what Zweig claims was clear and irrefutable empirical data that indicated children and those around them were not at any substantial risks from COVID. Of course, the burgeoning data of the time as well as the contemporary data show that children were hurt by COVID infections but, also, that they served as vectors for contagion. Despite this, Zweig ignores the extant literature and engages in selective cherry-picking to make a bad-faith partisan argument that gives the reader the impression that medical experts and policymakers were ignoring data for political gain. In so doing, Zweig seeks to sane wash some of the most marginal conspiracy theories as commonsensical against a backdrop of left-wing overreactions and missteps.

In fact, Zweig notes that “through a close look at their words and actions we see the machinery of decision-making and how policy was determined amidst ambiguity” (Zweig, 2025, p. 2). Despite noting the ambiguous nature of the pandemic – especially in the early weekend and months – Zweig advances his evaluative conclusions about the decisions made. He dwells on missteps as evidence of a lack of expertise among experts, while never acknowledging that the normal minute-by-minute machinery of decision-making in the scientific realm is not covered and broadcast by the media for real-time consumption.

Moreover, Zweig gives his readers the impression that there was, in effect, a massive conspiracy among the political left and nearly all healthcare and research experts to keep schools closed simply because Trump, during his first term, sought to end school closures. That is, Zweig claims that most medical and social science experts willfully ignored the cherry-picked data that informed Trump’s position all in a concerted effort to not give Trump a political win. Organized into four major sections, Zweig retells the arc of the pandemic through the lens of school closures. Part I “Seductive Models: February and March 2020,” “Part II: The Illusion of the Precautionary Principle: April through June 2020,” “Part III Tribalism, Public Health, the Elite, and the Media: June through August 2020,” and “Part IV Progressive Dogma and Narrative Control: Fall 2020 and Beyond.” Ultimately, the recurring “data” that Zweig uses to advance his

narrative across each section relies, falsely, on the assumption that (1) children largely had no negative impacts from the virus, (2) that children live in isolation from adults, and (3) that schools operate without adults. Zweig's false argument that children were nearly immune from the virus and were not serious vectors of contagion not only does not align with the scientific data but as well as ignores the fact that COVID contagion was, for many and especially children, largely asymptomatic and, thus, underreported (Funk et al., 2024; Sola et al., 2021).

In addition to decrying school closures, Zweig also reanimates the classic hits of downplaying the efficacy of masking and social distancing as well as downplaying the need for a vaccine as immunity stemming from contagion was effectively the same. Of course, he also ignores the death rate associated with the contagion. Zweig also promotes conspiracy theories that the COVID vaccine is linked to a higher rate of myocarditis among teens which, conveniently, ignores peer-reviewed data showing myocarditis is far more likely due to the contagion than the vaccination (American Heart Association, 2022; Sampri et al., 2025; Wise, 2025).

Like many on the political right, Zweig focuses heavily on death rates and excludes any meaningful discussion of long-COVID and the debilitating symptoms it can bring to children as well as the adults in their lives (Ford et al., 2025; Lopez-Leon et al., 2022; Perestiuk et al., 2025). A study in 2024 found that 5.8 million children in the United States had "long-COVID" and that 10 to 20 percent of children who contracted COVID developed a chronic condition that outpaces the total number of asthma cases (Suchitra Rao, 2024).

Many of the efforts to downplay the severity of the virus as it began and in the years that followed centered around discourse of some semblance of COVID having a "99% survival rate." This effort, which is echoed in the sentiments and faulty claims laid out by Zweig, relies on the observer conveniently overlooking the fact that, if true, a 1% fatality rate would mean that more than 3.3 million people in the United States, alone, would have died from the virus. As of March 2026, there have been a total of 1,243,708 Americans who have died from COVID which represents the single largest total number of deaths of any country on the planet (CDC, n.d.). Much of Zweig's argument uses Europe as an exemplar of a quick return to schooling. The United Kingdom had a similar death rate to that of the United States, which fits Zweig's basic argument that death rates in the U.S. would have been no better or worse if children returned to schools the way Europeans did. However, this argument relies on an apples-and-oranges comparison of populations as the United States is significantly more populated and an equal death rate means that considerably more people have died. Moreover, the huge difference in population density between the UK (286 persons/sq.km) and the US (38 persons/sq.km) makes such comparisons questionable.

Zweig is partially correct to note that recent studies have found mixed to negative impacts on students because of school closures and distance learning. A recent study of students in California found that reopening schools was benefitted student mental health (Ozluk et al., 2026). And while contemporary

data provide some insights into the mental health toll that mitigation efforts took on children, Zweig's orientation to COVID mitigation not only lacks nuance but weaponizes caution while downplaying comparable harm (e.g., death) at the time of school closures. One of the notable areas where Zweig's argument does hold up and is useful is in his reference to how COVID mitigation efforts disproportionately impacted non-White and non-affluent families.

In sum, Zweig's book is a compilation of right-wing talking points that sought, and continue to seek, to downplay the severity and danger of COVID contagion as well as the virus' long-term implications for the health of millions of Americans, including children. Employing near-conspiracy theory arguments that arose during the first weeks of the pandemic to more recent ones, Zweig animates and elevates political resentment towards the medical community, science in general, and educators around the nation that provides no useful insights into evaluating mitigation efforts surrounding COVID and most certainly may propagate future discontent and discord should the planet be faced with another pandemic anytime soon.

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About the Reviewer

T. Jameson Brewer, Ph.D., is an associate professor of social foundations of education at the University of North Georgia. His teaching experience spans middle school, high school, undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels. Broadly conceptualized, his research focuses on the impact of privatization and marketization of public education by way of school vouchers, charter schools, alternative teacher



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About the Author

David Zweig is an American journalist and author. He has written extensively on topics relating to COVID-19. He wrote the 10th installment of the Twitter Files focusing on Twitter and COVID-19. He has written for *The Atlantic*, New York Magazine's *Intelligencer*, *The Free Press*, *The New York Times*, and *Wired*. He testified as an expert witness before the U.S. House of Representatives Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education Subcommittee Hearing “Back to School: Highlighting Best Practices For Safely Reopening School” on September 29, 2021.



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