Am I a Bad Person for Sending My Kids to Private School This Fall?

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“I am the father of two elementary-school-aged children in Bethesda, and for the past three years, I’ve sent them to a private school here in Montgomery Country. While public schools in the county will begin the school year with a virtual-only curriculum, Governor Hogan has made clear that private schools in the county can conduct face-to-face classes if they can do so safely. For months I’ve been looking forward to sending my children back to their private school for in-person classes, so I can get some relief from the child care responsibilities associated with having them at home all day. But in the wake of the failed effort by local officials to ban in-person learning at private schools in the county over health concerns, I’m wondering if it’s ethical for me to send my children back to their private school in the fall? What are the public health and economic inequality issues at play in this decision? And how should I balance the benefits and drawbacks of sending my children to a private school for in-person learning?

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Yet another challenge for parents trying to navigate the pandemic! Back in March we all
hoped that our kids would be able to return to school safely in the fall. Now, with Covid-19 still spreading rapidly, parents are faced with the prospect of months more of distance learning. The ramifications of in-person school closures are enormous. Parents struggle to return to their paid jobs, while children suffer academic, social, and emotional losses. While this is true of all parents and children, it is undeniably worse for families who live at the economic margins of our society.

Private schools are not all the same, and many of them serve children from economically vulnerable households. Even so, you are right to worry that opting for in-person private school this fall may exacerbate the existing inequalities in our educational system. It is also possible that private school openings will worsen our Covid-19 crisis by contributing to its spread. Given all this, what should an ethically conscientious parent do?

Your children are already enrolled in private school. If their school actually opens in the fall (a rather contentious issue in Montgomery County!) and if the school’s plan for in-person learning is consistent with expert scientific guidance about controlling the spread of Covid-19, I think you can justify allowing them to return. After all, you have a moral responsibility as a parent to do what you think is best for your children. But you should also exercise whatever leverage you have to make sure that the plan is serious about protecting

No one knows just yet how risky it will be to open schools in the U.S. And of course, there is much debate over what counts a reasonable risk. Currently Montgomery County allows indoor dining, shopping, and many personal care services. Education is certainly more important than being able to go to happy hour at your favorite restaurant or get a tattoo. Opening schools (public and private) should be our biggest priority, and everyone needs to make the sacrifices necessary to create an environment safe enough for that to happen.

If you do send your children back to school, you should curtail your other activities as much as you can so as to keep the risk to the community as low as possible. You owe it to your children’s teachers to reduce the chance that your kids will bring Covid-19 into the classroom. Every reopened school, whether private or public, will be dependent on families being cooperative and responsible. It’s your moral obligation to follow all school guidelines for safe reopening and to make sure your kids do the same.
No matter where you stand on school openings, do try to be kind to your local school administrators, even if you don’t agree with their decisions. They have very difficult jobs right now, and they need all the support they can get.

Good luck to your family. I hope the school year is a success, however it ends up taking place.