OPINION
09/01/2022

WHAT IS SCHOOL FOR?

The past two and a half years have brought disruption after disruption to America's K-12 schools. It's been ... stressful. But these disturbances in our education equilibrium have also given us a chance to step back and ask, "What is school for?"

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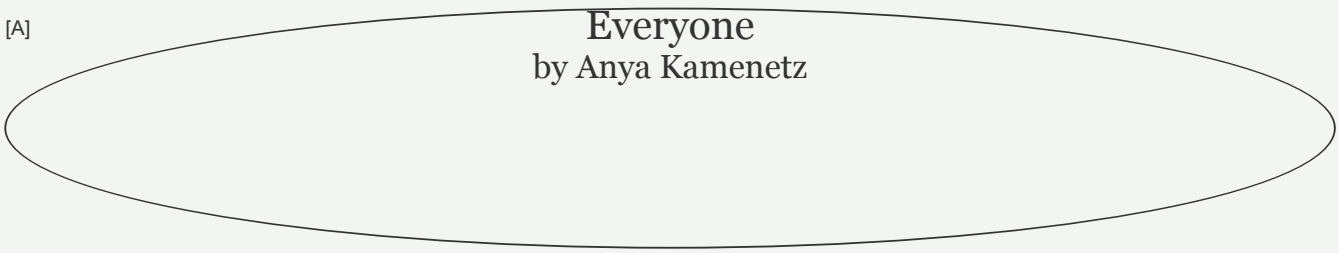

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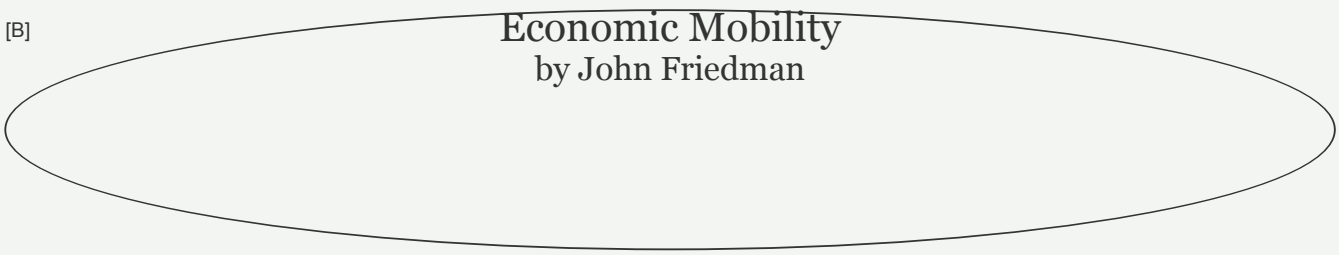

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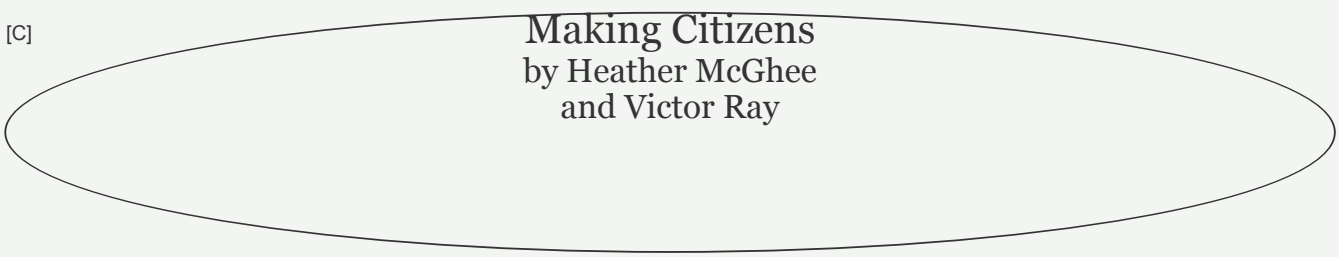

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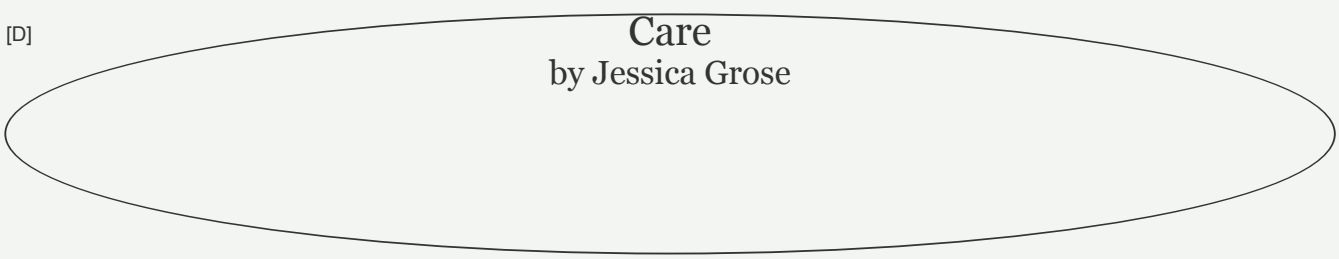

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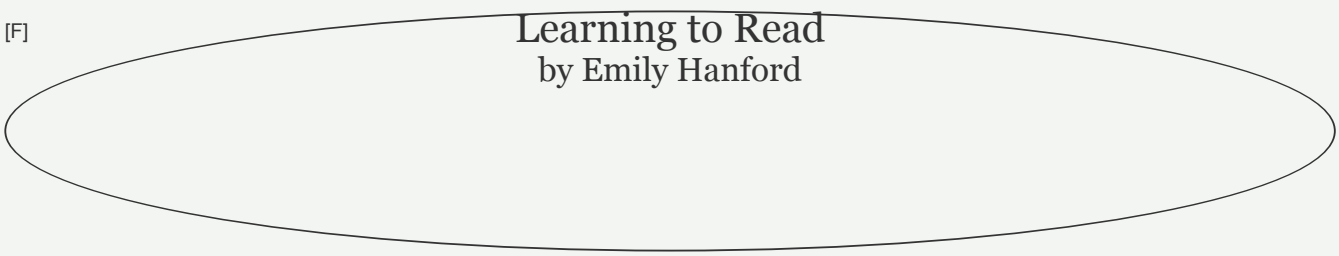

Learning to Read

by Emily Hanford

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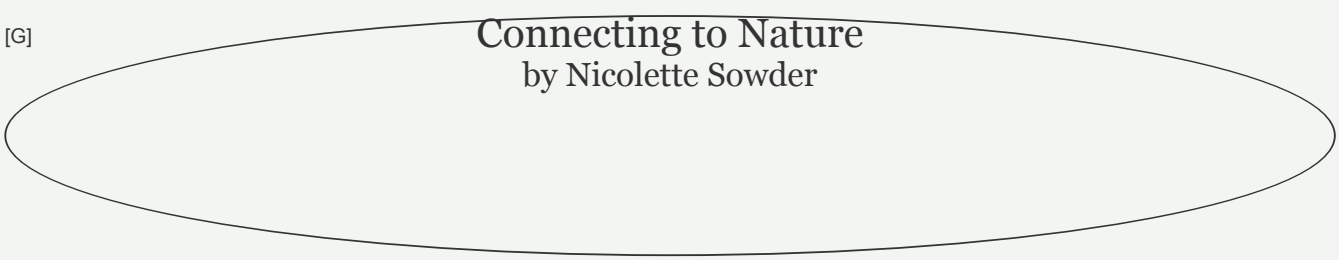

Connecting to Nature

by Nicolette Sowder

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Merit

by Asra Nomani

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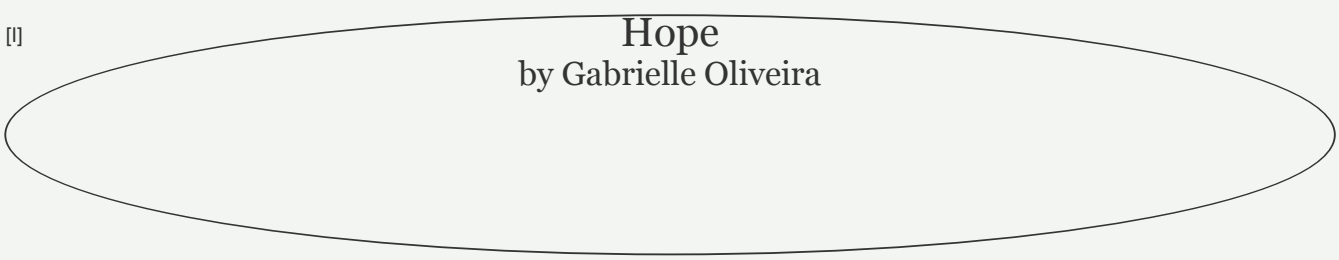

Hope

by Gabrielle Oliveira

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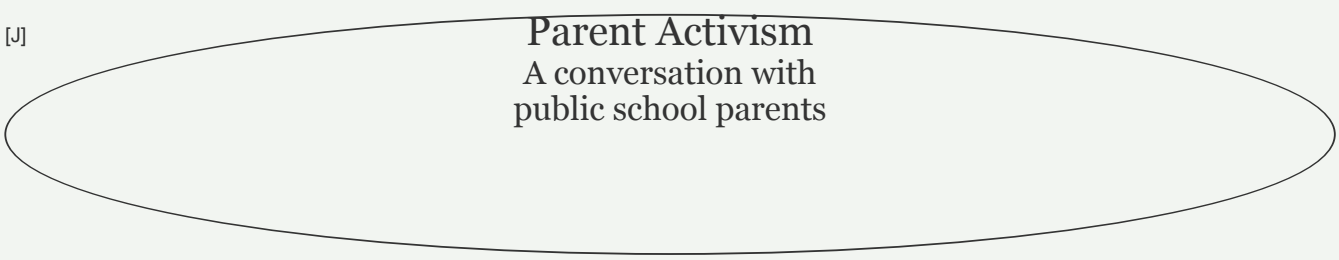

Parent Activism

A conversation with
public school parents

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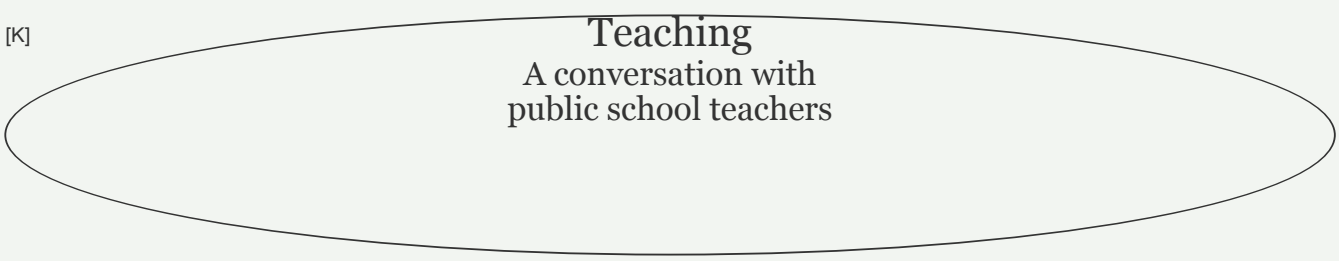

Teaching

A conversation with
public school teachers

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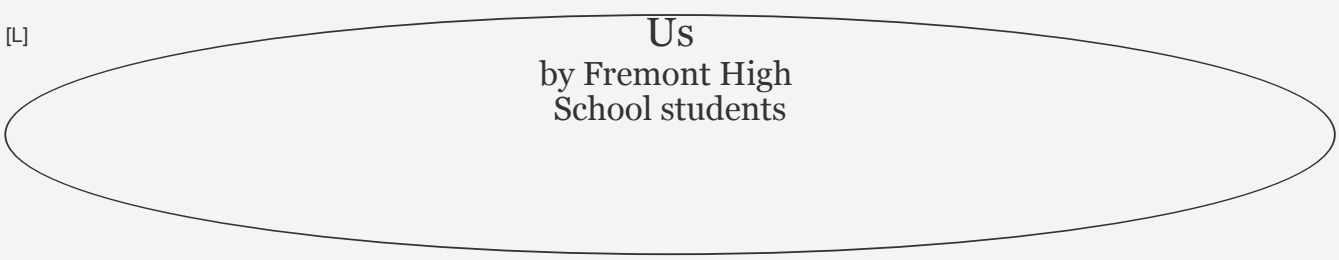
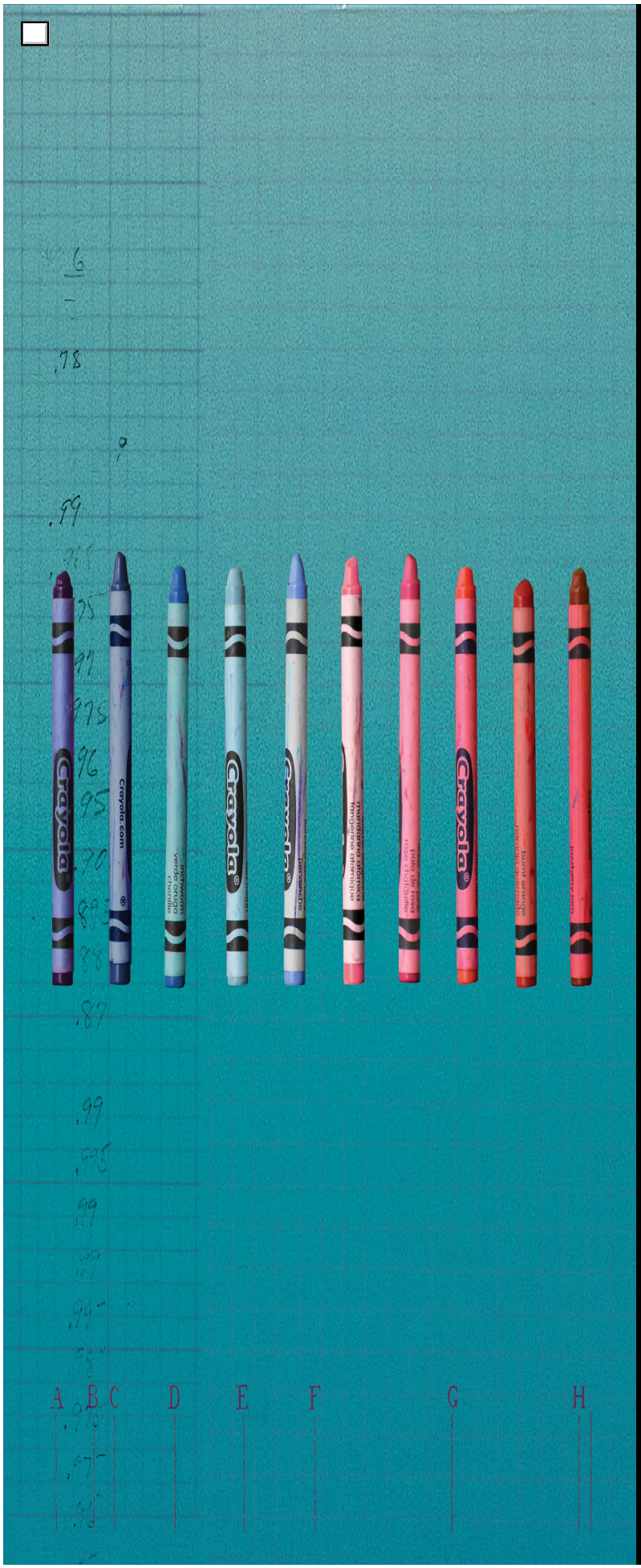


Us

by Fremont High
School students

Illustration by Chloe Scheffe; photographs by Internet Archive; Lan Gao, via Unsplash, and PediaPress and Mikus, via Wikimedia Commons.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OPINION
ROUNDTABLE

‘A Breach of Trust’: Three Parents on Why They Became School Activists

America’s schools have emerged as a battleground for the country’s most fervent cultural disagreements, and in many places, parents are finding themselves on the front lines. As part of Opinion’s “What Is School For?” package, three parents of public school students joined Lulu Garcia-Navarro to discuss the big questions underlying the new era of parental activism.

Letha Muhammad is a mother of three in Raleigh, N.C., and serves as the executive director of the nonprofit Education Justice Alliance, which works to dismantle the school-to-prison and school-to-deportation pipelines. Tom Chavez of Elmhurst, N.Y., is a father of three who co-founded the group Elmhurst Parents for Integrity in Curriculum, which seeks to remove ideological agendas from the classroom. Siva Raj lives in San Francisco with his two sons and co-founded the group SF Guardians, which led the drive to recall three of the city’s school board members this year.

‘We’ve Awakened the Sleeping Giant.’

Listen to three public school parents explain to Times Opinion podcast host Lulu Garcia-Navarro why this era of school activism is here to stay.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of “First Person” podcast

Before we really get going, I'd like to have a picture of your family and the schools you've raised your kids in. So please, can you tell me who you are, tell me a little bit about your kids who are in public school right now, how old they are and briefly tell us what the school is like? Let's start with Letha, then Siva and then Tom.

Letha Muhammad, Parent in Raleigh, N.C.

I am the mother of three children, but one currently in high school. He's my only son. And he just started the 11th grade — 16-year-old. And he actually attends a public magnet high school in Wake County. And his high school is about 1,500 students. He is attending the engineering academy that's a part of the magnet program that his high school has. And fun fact, I have two other children who also graduated from that same high school, as well.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Cool. All right. Siva?

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

So I'm a single parent of two boys who are both in San Francisco public schools. My oldest is also in 11th grade, so he just started a school year. And my youngest is in fifth grade, in an elementary school close by. And we moved to San Francisco in December 2020, when I moved in with my partner, who has three kids of her own, so we have a big family together. Before that, my kids were in a more traditional suburban school environment. So we've seen different school environments. And I've volunteered in different schools. So I can appreciate some of the nuances, what's similar and what's different.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Tom, you?

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

I live in Elmhurst, Ill., which is a near-west suburb of Chicago. I have three children. My son is currently a senior at York Community High School. We moved to Elmhurst 17 years ago because of the reputation of the school system. And overwhelmingly, I'd say, we've been pretty satisfied. My kids are thriving. But at the same time, there are issues that need to be addressed.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

I'm going to start with this question. School is many things. It provides a place to learn. It can provide a place to socialize. It can provide a place to get a hot meal. I want to start very simply. To you, in a few words, what exactly is school for? Letha?

Letha Muhammad, Parent in Raleigh, N.C.

School, I guess, in a nutshell, I would say, is a place of discovery. It's a place where young people, young children as early as pre-K all the way up to 12th grade, enter into a place that oftentimes is transformative. It's a place where they get introduced to formal learning.

And they have the opportunity to connect with other students and adults who may come from different places from them. I think it's a place for transformation, for young people in particular, as they move through public schooling. But also, I think public schools and schools in general should be a place for young people to dream a dream about who they want to be in the world.

I'll use myself. I was a public school graduate. I went to public school starting in middle school up through 12th grade. I love to read. And so I had a teacher in middle school that introduced me

to the Hardy Boys, to Nancy Drew, to Maya Angelou. And it opened up a world for me that I didn't necessarily have access to within the confines of the home and community that I lived in. But it helped to shape my view. And so it does create a space of discovering a new way — and maybe not even new like foreign new, just a new way of operating in the world that actually could help a young person say, "Oh, well, I could do that, too."

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Siva?

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

That's really well said, I think. For me, a lot of what I see from school tracks back to my own upbringing. I grew up in extreme poverty in India, living on top of a factory where my dad worked as a security guard. My parents really struggled to put me through school because government-run schools in India are pretty bad. And so if you have to get a good education, you have to put your kids through private school and pay for it.

And I know they really, really struggled every day of their life to be able to give me that education. And without that education, I wouldn't even be here talking to you guys. And for me, at the foundational level, what school is is this opportunity to bridge some of that gap, to give every kid a chance at a successful life. And that's what, at the core, I want for my kids, too. As a parent, for me, personally, that is probably more important than anything else I do.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Tom, what is school for?

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

I agree with what Letha said. It is sort of a discovery. And there's a lot of learning that goes on that isn't academic. But the reason why we moved to the community we moved to is, we look at the role of the taxpayer-funded public education system, first and foremost, is to teach children to read and write and speak and spell and compute accurately and effectively. And we — my wife and I, as parents — believe that the primary role, first and foremost, is to prepare our children for future success.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

So Tom, it seems like for you, it's about academics. Letha, you said that to you, school is really about more, though, than academics. It's about this sense of discovery. Siva, you were involved in the San Francisco school board recall. What did you feel was going wrong for your child at that point? And why did you decide to get involved in changing the direction of your kids' school system?

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

The impetus to the recall was really seeing my kids struggle through distance learning. And the longer we stayed in distance learning, the more they struggled. Especially my older guy, who went from being an honor student to being rock bottom in terms of grades. And I think, for me, even more strikingly, he was at home, borderline depressed, barely getting out of bed. He had lost all the joy of learning because his distance learning experience was just about — every one of his peers had shut their cameras off. So he was just looking at a blank screen while this teacher was lecturing day in, day out, class after class.

When we moved to San Francisco, San Francisco had better Covid control than the rest of the Bay Area. And the schools were supposed to reopen. And then out of the blue, I get this email from the school district, saying middle and high school kids are not going to go back this whole year. And that was just — shook me up and woke me up, so to speak.

And so that galvanized me. And I started to get involved, talking to other parents and joining some of the parent groups that had formed to advocate for reopening. I started logging in to school board meetings to try and make sense of what's going on. And that also shocked me because reopening was a priority for most parents. The majority of parents in the school district wanted the schools to reopen. And yet the school board didn't seem to have prioritized that at all.

So we would have these nine-hour-long school board meetings where school reopening was literally the last item on the agenda. I remember waiting online for, like, seven hours once. And then you get to speak, like, for 30 minutes at the stroke of midnight. And there were 200 parents still waiting to talk about it.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

So in that context, to build on your answer to what is school for, that it's a place that you said should provide opportunities for children, you felt that the school system let your child down?

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

Oh, yeah, absolutely. It felt like the school board had completely deprioritized learning and education. It was focused on everything other than education.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Tom, I'm going to bring you in here because I think you also felt let down by the Elmhurst school system. Why did you decide to get involved in your kids' school?

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

Initially, my involvement was around reopening the schools. For me, it was not as difficult because I'm fortunate that my children were much older. My middle child was a senior in high school at the time. And she missed rites of passage — prom, her track season, her graduation ceremony. It was all gone.

But it's a lot easier, I guess I would say, for an 18-year-old to cope than it is for somebody with a first grader or a fifth grader. So I felt very sympathetic with those parents. And I agree again with Siva, which was, what are the priorities? What are the priorities of the school district?
It should have been a five-alarm fire. We need to get children back into school and learning because learning loss compounds and it makes it difficult for children to catch up. So that was the first time I was really paying attention in this way to what goes on in our school district.

And then the distance learning, or the remote learning, and the lack of accountability and the lack of, it really seemed to be, any real focus on prioritizing education, that's where I said, "Wow, I have to get involved here." And when you started to peel the layers back, you started to discover things that were unsettling as a parent.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

So I'm hearing a lot of dissatisfaction around school closures during Covid. But once schools opened back up, there was a lot of conversation about what's actually going on inside the classrooms. So I want to get to this big question in our national conversation about schooling. And that is how we want schools to teach our kids about what history we learn and how we understand the context of the facts that we're given, which is where things tend to get complicated. I mean, Tom, you became an activist after your son's teacher was instructing something you found inappropriate.

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

That's correct. The difficult histories or the difficult topics have really become the center of gravity for the debate in public education. We send our kids off to school, and we believe they're learning math and reading and science and how to compute. And learning difficult things about our history. And what we've come to find is that children are going into classrooms and certain topics are being discussed in certain ways that don't align with what we believe in our home. If your child comes home to you and says, "In my classroom, I don't believe that I can share my opinions," that's a problem. This forced me — or caused me — to look into the curriculum.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

What was being taught, though?

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

Well, transparency means that if you're teaching — the primary teaching tool in the high school for history is the Zinn Ed Project. It's not in the syllabus. So it's handouts. It's "Watch this video." And all of these things have a particular political ideology attached to them.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

What is Zinn Ed, exactly? I'm not familiar with that.

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

The Zinn Education Project is Howard Zinn.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Ah, yes, "A People's History." Right.

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

“A People’s History,” right? So the overarching theme in Zinn Ed is that the United States is an irredeemable, oppressive regime. It’s been founded to marginalize people of color. And it’s the go-to resource for teaching children American history. What is that — why is that the primary piece of information that is being used to teach children about our country’s history?

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of “First Person” podcast

Siva, what’s your view on how schools should discuss our difficult history, which Tom says has a particular lens that he doesn’t agree with? How do you think that needs to be addressed? And then we’ll go to Letha.

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

So I’m not familiar with the specific material that Tom was pointing to.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of “First Person” podcast

Sure.

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

But in general, I think no nation’s history is singular. So one of the things I certainly think we should be doing a good job of is capturing all of these different strands of history and being able to represent them reasonably well. And I think, when I look at what’s happening back home in India, we are shifting away from the polarity of history.

And India is a long civilization. There’s so many things that have

happened. And there is a desire to look at it with a very singular narrative. And that is counterproductive. It means that you're not allowing all of those different people who live in this nation to actually feel represented in the story of the nation.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Letha, how do you think about how and when to pull on those different strands of history? How should teachers discuss things, for example, like slavery, Jim Crow?

Letha Muhammad, Parent in Raleigh, N.C.

Yeah, as a Black woman in this country whose ancestors were brought here as enslaved Africans, I think I would have to say that the truth of that has to be taught in public schools. It does a disservice to Black students and other students if we don't share the full historical context of America. And not from a place of demonizing or witch hunting out folks and, in particular, white people. I have to name that. It isn't from that context that, as a parent, I would want history taught in its totality or even difficult topics addressed. Because what I recognize is that America prides itself on being the great melting pot, the great melting pot of ideas and individuals and communities and racial and ethnic groups.

And if we are a country that is a melting pot of all these different parts that sum up to the whole, then all these different parts have a right to be represented fairly and accurately in our public education system.

And so that means that there should be honest historical context shared in a classroom setting, in the curriculum that is used, in the materials that students are introduced to, as an opportunity for everyone to be fully actualized in that space. We do ourselves a disservice to continue a lie.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of “First Person” podcast

I think the challenging thing here is that none of you are saying, “Teach this. Don’t teach that.” But the question, of course, of what to prioritize is where things get complicated. Letha, I’m going to follow up with you: Should parents expect to agree 100 percent of the time with the values their kids are being taught in school?

Letha Muhammad, Parent in Raleigh, N.C.

No. How is that possible, to have 100 percent agreement? So I’m not striving for 100 percent agreement. For me and my husband, as parents, it’s important for us to carve out space within our home that allows for us to have deeper conversations and interrogate ideas that are introduced, histories that are introduced, that may be new and are foreign to them. So that they have always this baseline of grounding that comes from who we are as a family and the community that we’re a part of.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of “First Person” podcast

Tom, you started with your story about not liking something that your child was being taught. And so I put it to you: Should parents have to agree with everything their child is taught in school?

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

Well, it’s not whether they agree. What we’re really trying to get to is, when people say they’re in favor of diversity, because that’s used a lot in — District 205 talks about diversity, welcoming, inclusion. And I agree with all those things. But what does it mean?

And I think diversity in a school setting should not just be about diversity of skin color. It should be about the diversity of ideas and opinions as well. So every student that walks into York High

School or any school in our school district should feel free to express the opinions that they have about all these difficult topics. But in many instances, the opinion is not appreciated.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of “First Person” podcast

Can you give me an example of that?

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

Well, the viewpoint in this particular classroom and in certain classrooms are viewpoints that are not what we value in our home and not how we want to teach our children about history. They’re unbalanced. Let’s go back to the Zinn Ed Project and what his overarching theme is. I believe there is racism in our country. I’m Hispanic. I’ve experienced it. But I don’t believe that racism defines who we are.

The idea that parents like me want a sanitized version of history taught — that’s not accurate. Do talk about slavery and Jim Crow and the Civil War and Reconstruction. And talk about them in their full context. Talk about slavery and where it’s existed in other parts of the world.

We didn’t invent slavery in the United States. And should children walk away from a history class thinking, “Wow, I really learned a lot about the historical facts about slavery, but I’ve also learned about historical facts about the progress we’ve made in this country”? And are we living up to equality under the law for everybody? Have we been moving closer to that over the last 250 years, or are we going backwards?

Teach history. Call it hard history. Wonderful. I think those discussions need to be had. But they have to be had in an intellectually honest manner.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of “First Person” podcast

Siva, I want to bring you in because you've got an interesting perspective, obviously, as an immigrant. You yourself didn't go to school in the U.S. You have kids who do. Should parents expect to agree 100 percent of the time with the values their kids are being taught in school? Where do you stand?

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

So if I could just briefly comment on Tom's comment there.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Please.

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

One of the things we found when we were speaking to parents — and through the recall process, we've spoken to literally thousands of parents. And we spoke to people across every part of the city, from different ethnic groups. And people have a lot more in common than we appreciate.

We were able to find common ground between people who are polar opposites, from a political perspective. And I'd say to Tom's point, what we are seeing and hearing is that people want history to be taught and want history to be taught accurately. But how you do it is as important as what you're teaching.

There is obviously a need to help kids appreciate that just because we, with one stroke of the pen, said no to slavery or no to segregation in the '60s and we took away a lot of those discriminatory laws doesn't mean that things immediately changed on the ground. The legacy of those institutions still exists and still influences the life of people today.

It's exactly like in India; we have a caste system. In '47, we gained independence. There was no more caste system, presumably. But the reality, if you go to rural India, is that those

structures very much persist. Things take time to change. And I think it's important for people to appreciate that those influences are much more pervasive and much more persistent than we sometimes want to believe.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

But Siva, just briefly, though, do you think that you need to approve of everything that is being taught in your kids' class and the way that it's being taught?

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

[LAUGHING] That's a great question. That is a challenging question. The school district just changed the start time and the end time for elementary schools. And obviously there was an outcry. And some people are happy. Some people are unhappy. It's a challenge on anything that you do when you have such — and we have obviously incredible diversity in San Francisco. And so getting everyone to agree on something even as simple as what you teach in school is an incredibly challenging task. It doesn't mean that parents shouldn't have a say.

You want parents to have a say. We should be able to voice your opinion and have that heard and acknowledged. Yet at the same time, if every parent has to agree to the coursework, then we'll never get that job done. It may take us decades to even figure out what's the right thing to teach.

So we have to be able to balance the two. And so a lot of the issue here, I think, is a lack of trust. There is a breakdown in trust between the parent community and the institutions that are running our public schools. And it's that breach of trust that is causing a lot of anxiety in the minds of parents.

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

I think that was well put. The breach of trust is the reason why

parents are getting more involved.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of “First Person” podcast

Letha, I just want to follow up with you on the idea of parents’ trust being breached in schools. I’m curious if that’s something you’ve felt, maybe in a different way than Tom or Siva?

Letha Muhammad, Parent in Raleigh, N.C.

Oh, most definitely. I’m so glad you called my name because I was about to hop in here and say, a breach of trust of who and when? When I think about my own experiences as a parent early on, which was my now-23-year-old entering public school in the first grade and me being a parent who was heavily engaged in the school, was in there all the time, on the P.T.A. Because I didn’t have that trust that the school would do for my Black Muslim girl child all that it needed to do in order for her to thrive in that environment.

And so a breach of trust for Black parents goes way back in the history of this country, in the ways in which racism has impacted Black communities and has shown up in our schools. And so I just find it an ironic conversation to have, now that some parents are just now getting on the bandwagon when it comes to this idea of a breach of trust. When Black parents in particular have been fighting for many years to make sure their young people just stay in the building.

When we think about the disparity when it comes to who is suspended or expelled or referred to law enforcement from our schools, it’s overwhelmingly, across the country, Black students. And I know — because I’m a Black person with Black children and have been a Black child — that we don’t behave any worse than anyone else. But we oftentimes get the punishment in a different way.

And to Tom’s point about just teaching the basics, academics — but if I’m a child in a classroom who is being taught the basics —

reading, writing, arithmetic — and I don't see myself anywhere in that curriculum, how do I get to connect to that? If all of the images and the stories are grounded in another culture or another ethnic group, where do I see myself? How do I thrive in that environment?

And I love Siva saying that we have so much in common, because we do. I could close my eyes and listen to Tom talk, and many of the things you said, Tom, I could agree with. Like, yeah, that's me. There are things you said that I don't necessarily agree with. But I do think sometimes it's hard for us parents — just people in general — to put ourselves in the shoes of others, to hear other people's stories, experiences in this country and the ways in which it impacts them.

And I think if we could really create those spaces to have those honest, open dialogues, I think we could transform our public education system to one that allows all young people to thrive, even if ideas are taught that are anti to what we may believe within our own family homes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

I want to shift the lens a little bit. All three of you are heavily involved in your schools. So what then is the role of you all, of parents in the school?

I want to stay with you Letha because I know you and your husband made the choice for you not to work so that you could be active in your school. Can you talk to me a little bit about how you see your role in your child's school?

Letha Muhammad, Parent in Raleigh, N.C.

As a partner, first and foremost. And again, this started out way back when that 23-year-old was entering first grade so many, many moons ago. And let's be clear: The decision not to work wasn't because we had money, because we didn't. What we had was a community of grandparents around us who helped supplement and take care of things so that I could make that

particular sacrifice.

But I think, overwhelmingly, schools and families should have a space for a partnership. For building trust. For even interrogating difficult ideas and thoughts. So even this idea that we teach, in the classroom, different ideas and viewpoints, like Tom was talking about earlier, and allowing space for our young people to see different points of view. I think sometimes we adults fail at that. And so we don't model that in the best of ways, even sometimes between the school and parent interface.

Not every school has wanted to see me come through the door, because I am a parent who will ask the difficult questions, who will lift up when something doesn't quite seem equitable or right for all students. And so not everybody has been open to that idea. But I will tell you the schools that my children have been in and the teachers and administrators that we have dealt with who have been open to that critical conversation of the good, the bad and the not so good — that is the places where I think my children have thrived the most.

And so I think that partnership model has to be one that we lift up across the country in order to transform our schools, for them to be the best place that they could be for young people.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

OK, so Letha, you see it as a partnership. Tom, as someone who also started an organization, I'm curious how you think about so many parents with competing visions being now so heavily involved in schools. You know, I've spoken to teachers and administrators. And I'm sure you've heard this, too. It's become really hard for them to navigate this era of parent activism.

School is becoming a magnet for national races, political money. And I'm just curious if you think it moving into the political sphere is beneficial. We've seen people like Glenn Youngkin of Virginia being elected off the back of parents' rights and school issues. How do you feel about that?

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

I do think it's a good thing. And listening to Letha speak, I appreciate her perspective and where she comes from. And the things that she wants out of a school system might be a little bit different than what I want or where my priorities are. But that doesn't mean we can't agree on certain things. So at the end of the day, yes, I'm involved. And I think more parents should get involved.

I think what happened in Virginia was very similar to what happened in San Francisco. Virginia was a blue state that turned red over parents' concerns about what kids are learning in school and curriculum. And in the state of Illinois, much of what's being pushed into local school districts, these progressive ideologies, are mandated through policy in Springfield, Ill.

So when you push back against the school district, in District 205, many times, their comments back to you are, "We're teaching to the state standard." So the politics, unfortunately, have become part of the education system and very much so in the state of Illinois. That information is available to any parent that wants to go read what the requirements are.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

So Tom, you seem to be saying that politics might be inherent in some of the things around schools because, of course, some of the decisions are made by elected officials. Siva, I'm going to turn to you now. You left your day job in tech to run your school community organization full time. You've talked about how you've spoken to so many parents. Have you seen parents see their role differently now? Has your view of your own role changed over time?

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

That's a good question. I think we had huge parent mobilization during the recall. We had over 1,000 volunteers getting signatures across the city and many more helping in so many other ways. But that's not sustainable, though. And not all parents can sustain that level of interest. If you're a single parent, working three jobs a day just to put food on the table, there's no way you can call in to school board meetings. There's no way you can wait for seven hours to talk.

So the process of engagement filters out those without means. You have to have some time or have the luxury of being able to work from home to even be able to participate in things like this. And in San Francisco, especially, I think what we've seen over time is that, actually, the people speaking for parents are not really parents. A lot of political activist groups that say they are speaking for us. But they don't faithfully represent our views. They represent their interests.

And I think a lot of the dysfunction we've seen on the school board, especially the school board members who were recalled, were the worst of the lot. But that dysfunction has been there for a while. And it's because the school board has been a stepping stone for politics. It's a quick way to get into public visibility, be there for a few years and then go on. So many of those who are currently serving on the board of supervisors in San Francisco, for example, or who have stood for election for mayor started on the school board.

And, in fact, when we started the recall, our call to action was to get politics out of education. We are fiercely nonpartisan for that reason, because we see the overpoliticization of education as contrary to doing the right thing for our kids. In fact, it distorts the perspective.

And so for us, really, if we have to solve the persistent problems in San Francisco, which is essentially that we have a school district that has incredible diversity. We have, literally, kids of multimillionaires and homeless kids going to the same school district. We have incredible diversity in terms of ethnicity. And we have also huge disparity in terms of educational outcomes.

And the people coming in talking social justice and equity have

not solved this problem because they have not focused on doing the things that are necessary to run a public education system well. They focus on the things that get them names in the press and so they can get on to the next job. They focused on advancing themselves, not advancing our children.

For decades, we've had this issue of persistent gap in educational equity and outcomes. And you're setting up so many kids for failure. We're passing them through the public education system. Eighty percent graduation, but only 60 percent are actually ready to go to college. And so a lot of what we are doing right now is putting the focus on those hard problems.

We want the school district to focus on student outcomes, to spend more than half of the time in board meetings focused on how are we going to actually improve student outcomes. Not on performative politics, which has really been the curse of the San Francisco school board.

What we don't have today in the public education system is accountability for outcomes. Who is accountable for those kids not getting a good education? Who is going to get fired?

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Do you think that this era of parent activism is a blip? Or do you think that this is now the way things are going to be? Letha, then Siva, then Tom.

Letha Muhammad, Parent in Raleigh, N.C.

This has been the way in my community since way back when. So it's not a blip. We will continue, parents that I work with and know in community, to fight for the schools that we know our young people deserve to have in order to thrive.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Siva?

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

It's just beginning. I think the way in which people will interact won't always be the same way. But parent engagement I don't think is going away. And I think this is not just about parenting. It's just about shared democracy.

I think the way in which we practice democracy is changing, where we are not just electing someone and trusting that person will do the job. That trust is broken. That's what happened during the school closure. And so when that trust breaks, then you get very engaged in paying close attention to everything that the institution is doing.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Tom?

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

I agree. I think that this is a sea change. I think we've awakened the sleeping giant. Parent engagement is here to stay. I use myself as an example. Many nights when I'm sitting at my computer and working till 11 o'clock at night, writing comments to go to the school board meeting. They say learning is lifelong. I'm not an educator. I do something completely different. But I've taken a lot of time to read information about what's going on in public education.

If there is a silver lining to Covid, it is that parents have become more aware of what's going on. I think at the end of the day, we all want the same thing. We want our children to be educated, and we want them to thrive. When they leave our house at 18 and they go into a trade or to college or university, we want them to be well-adjusted, smart kids that are equipped to go out and do something big in the world. We all want the same thing.

And I think what has to happen — and I think will happen — is that parents need to begin to hold the education-industrial complex in this country accountable to produce results, because it isn't just in my community. It's not just in Letha's community. And it's not just in Siva's community. It's a nationwide problem.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

I want to end with this: What is working? What do you like about your school or a teacher your child has had? What about you, Tom?

Tom Chavez, Parent in Elmhurst, Ill.

Well, I said earlier that we've been here — this month is our 17th year in Elmhurst with kids at District 205. And overwhelmingly, I'm happy. I love my community. I love my school district.

There are teachers that have been instrumental in making my children who they are. The day I first walked into our high school, for orientation for our first child that was going through York Community High School, I almost fell back in my chair at the resources, and the building is just beautiful. And so I have a lot of gratitude to be in this community, in this school district. That's why I'm passionate about wanting to improve it.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

Letha, what works great in your son's school?

Letha Muhammad, Parent in Raleigh, N.C.

Options. In our district, we have traditional schools, we have magnet schools, we have year-round schools and schools that are on modified tracks. So there is a diversity of options available to you. And then when I drill down to my son's school

in particular, one of the main reasons we chose this school for him, because he said early on, in middle school, he was interested in engineering.

And so he was able to then be placed in a magnet high school that had an engineering focus, so that then he can do a deeper dive into an area that he thinks he's interested in before he graduates. So it's been an, overall, overwhelmingly positive experience for our family. And I would say our school board, the current members that are on the board, have been open to dialogue and feedback and criticism about the ways in which the district isn't helping. So it's overwhelmingly a positive experience for our family.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Host of "First Person" podcast

OK, Siva, last word to you. What do you like about your school? What is great about it?

Siva Raj, Parent in San Fransisco, Calif.

So when I moved from Pleasanton, which is in the East Bay, to San Francisco a few years ago, I did it because I wanted my kids to have the experience of having a diverse student body. And so he's getting an education about the world while just living in this small pond right here.

And especially over the last few years, as we've kind of had — public education is something you take for granted. At least some of us have. Hearing from Letha, I can appreciate that it was not something that everyone in this country could take for granted. And I think that totally makes sense.

But many of us have taken that for granted. And suddenly we had that taken away. And so it has obviously jolted us up.

And the last few years were exceptionally challenging, and especially challenging for both my kids. Even after they returned to full-time school, things were not the same. They still had really

lost a lot in terms of just their basic, daily structure that school brought. The joy of discovery and learning that Letha was talking about. All of that had just gone away.

And this year, I'm seeing both my kids be excited about going to school. They've made a lot of friends over the last year, friends they didn't have. And they're also really excited about learning, which is awesome.

That's really what you want to see in your kids, this joy of discovery and learning coming back to them. And for me, as a parent, that is very rewarding to see them come back every day, excited about things they learned or things they did in school. And it's nice to see that returning to their faces and smiles.

This Times Opinion round table was produced by Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Phoebe Lett, Kristin Lin, Derek Arthur and Cassady Rosenblum, with help from Shannon Busta, Olivia Natt, Aaron Retica, Eleanor Barkhorn, Alison Bruzek and Anabel Bacon. Original music and mixing by Isaac Jones. Fact-checking by Kate Sinclair, Mary Marge Locker and Michelle Harris.

Siva Raj photograph by David Topete for The San Francisco Standard.

WHAT IS SCHOOL FOR?

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by John Friedman

Making Citizens

by Heather McGhee and Victor Ray

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by Jessica Grose

Wasting Time

by Bryan Caplan

Learning to Read

by Emily Hanford

Connecting to Nature

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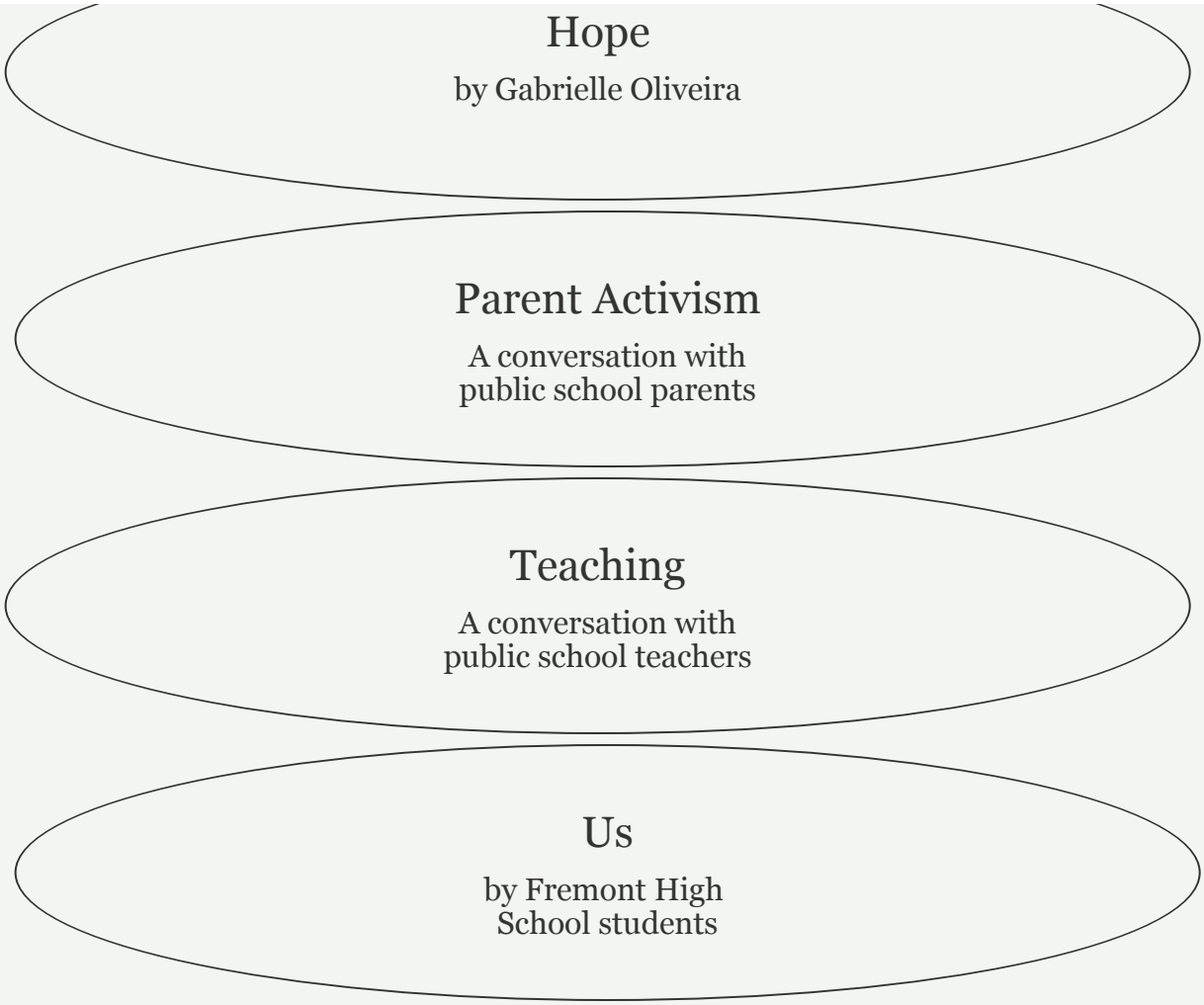
Merit

by Asra Nomani



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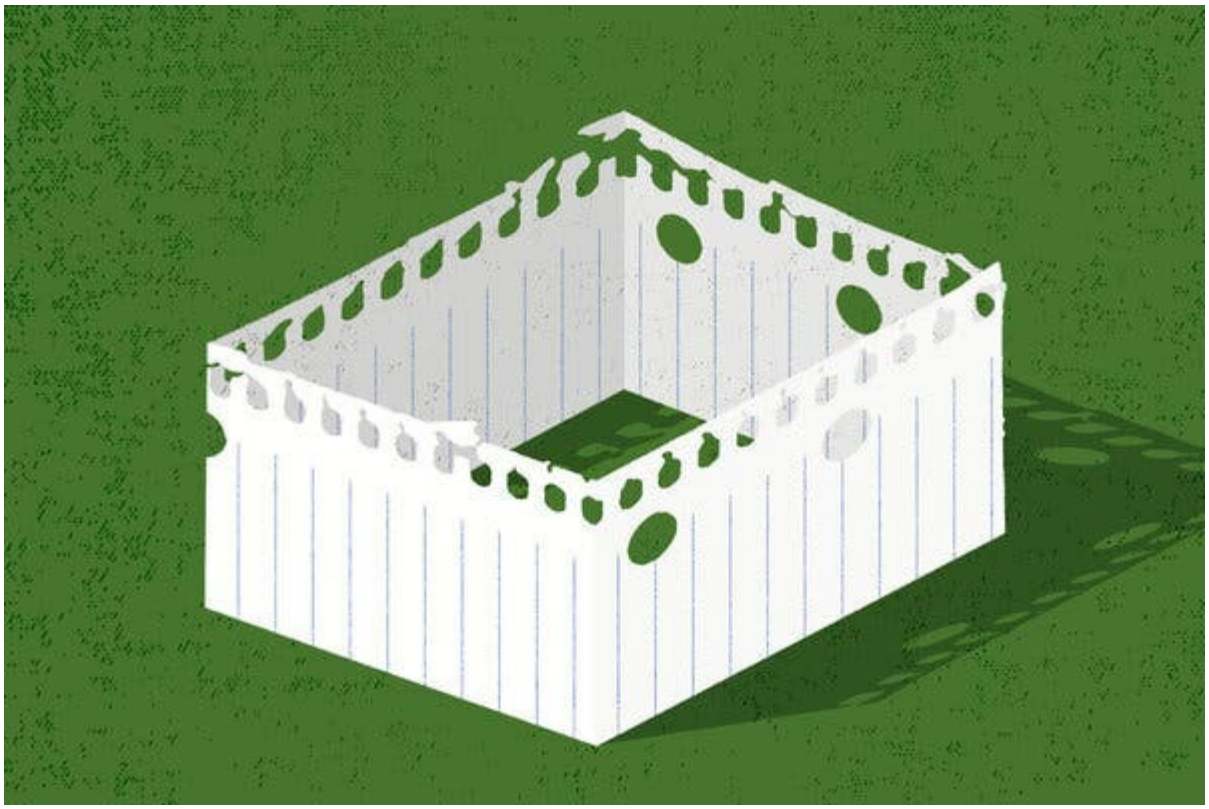

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OPINION

School Is for Care

Sept. 1, 2022

Illustration by Chloe Scheffe; photographs by Internet Archive; Jordan Rowland and the New York Public Library, via Unsplash; and Mikus, via Wikimedia Commons

By Jessica Grose

Kimberly Wilson's TikTok videos often begin with the back of a little girl's head. The child's hair is matted, and Wilson, who works at Butcher-Greene Elementary in Grandview, Mo., begins to gently comb out the snarls. By the end of the videos, which tend to be just a minute or two long, the girl's hair has been transformed into a beautiful braided style, often with colorful bows adorning it.

Wilson, who posts under the handle @ms.honey.vibes, is careful to obscure the children's identities and never shares specific details of their struggles. Butcher-Greene is a Title I school, which means that it receives federal assistance because a high number of its students come from low-income families. Over 80 percent of its nearly 300 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Wilson told me that some of her students are dealing with unstable and

even violent home lives, and they see things outside of school a child should never have to see. She started making videos of the children before she even had a TikTok account, because she wanted to show them how to do their own hair at home if the adults in their lives weren't capable of helping them care for it.

Hair care isn't part of Wilson's job description. As a behavior intervention specialist, she provides support to teachers when students are struggling. She gives children breaks from the classroom when they act out, and helps them work on their emotional regulation. "We'll either remove the student to work on skills or remove the students to have a sensory break," she explained. Wilson has mats and beanbag chairs in her room, where children can rest when they are exhausted or overwhelmed.

She does hair in any spare moments she can grab. Since her TikToks started going viral, other educators have reached out to her to say they do similar care work for their students. Wilson highlighted a fourth-grade teacher in Alabama named Carey Arensberg who has a "care closet" filled with toothbrushes, deodorant, hair ties and food for kids in need. Wilson has been able to install a washer and dryer in her school building, thanks to donations from her TikTok followers, so that children without clean clothes can do laundry.

This kind of crucial support for children is something that happens every day in schools. When the pandemic began in 2020 and schools shut down, children did not just miss out on academics. They missed out on essential care from trusted adults outside their homes. I'm not just talking about child care for working parents, though of course schools do provide that, to an extent (still, the American school day doesn't mirror typical parents' working hours). I'm talking about a full spectrum of physical and emotional support, what Lauren Bauer, a fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution and the associate director of the Hamilton Project, who

researches education and safety net policies, described as “stability and relationships.”

“Schools served a vital function in protecting our most vulnerable kids,” said Bauer. This function may have been obscure to many people who don’t frequently interact with the public education system. But when schools closed for months, “we no longer had that window into children’s lives. The screening — not just for glasses but for trouble at home; the observation that a child is falling asleep at their desk, or seems hungry or lacks an appetite,” she said.

Before the pandemic, more than 29 million children received food from the National School Lunch Program and around 15 million received food from the School Breakfast Program on a typical day, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. And according to Census Bureau data for 2020, the most recent year for which information is available, the median estimated poverty rate for school-age children was around 13 percent.

This lapse in care for many children happened before the pandemic, in a smaller way, every summer break: As the nonprofit campaign No Kid Hungry noted in 2016, “Research shows that family grocery costs rise more than $300 a month when school is out and school meals disappear, putting a strain on already tight budgets.”

But once the coronavirus quarantines hit, it was a true disaster. “Between March and May of 2020, the rate of food insecurity tripled in the United States; by May, one-fifth of mothers were struggling to feed their children — the highest rate since such data became available in 2001,” according to Karina Piser in The Nation.

What seems missing from a lot of the culture war wrangling over the implementation of “social-emotional learning,” or SEL — a curriculum meant to help bolster students’ emotional regulation and relationship skills

— is the acknowledgment that emotional stability and academic achievement are inextricably linked. And that link is not new. Wendy A. Paterson, the dean of the School of Education at Buffalo State College, who has been an educator for 40 years and now trains educators, said that it has always been her experience that the whole child matters. “If you were a really well-prepared teacher, you were also sensitive to the fact that these are human beings in progress, and that schools have such a great influence,” Paterson said.

For example, it is much more difficult to learn if you’re crushed from grieving a parent or caregiver who died from Covid, a fate suffered by roughly one in 450 American children by the end of 2021. As the report “Hidden Pain: Children Who Lost a Parent or Caregiver to Covid-19 and What the Nation Can Do to Help Them,” from a group of health, economic and education experts, points out, “The traumatic loss of a caregiver has been associated with depression, addiction, lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates.” Nonwhite children lost caregivers at “up to nearly four times the rate of their white peers,” the report notes — a “grim reality.”

While “kids are incredibly resilient,” Paterson said, after being out of school for a prolonged period of time, “we were getting kids coming back who were just unable to work with other kids, to integrate with other kids and speak with them appropriately.”

What’s the most important thing school offered you? How did it influence your life, either in the long term or the short term?

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When The Times polled over 300 school counselors in May, 88 percent of them said that students were having more trouble regulating their emotions than they did before the pandemic. This is a stark reminder for

everyone that “we have got to go back to the notion that the classroom is a place for the development of people, and not just for the dissemination of curriculum,” as Paterson said. Ideally, we would live in a country where kids had their basic needs met by their parents or their close communities, and schools did not have to play such a vital and expansive role in children’s emotional lives. But we don’t live in an ideal world, and the more places children can learn to be empathetic humans, the better.

As Kimberly Wilson told me, what she’s doing for these children “goes so much further than just hair.” All the children in her school know that she only does hair for the kids who really need it, so they have started looking out for one another. They will bring her the children who need help. When the children walk in the room with their new hairstyles, their classmates shower them with compliments. “It’s starting to come full circle with our babies,” Wilson said. The children are seeing their teachers act with care and compassion, and they are giving it back to one another. If that’s not an essential schoolroom lesson, I don’t know what is.

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

School Is for Connecting to Nature

Sept. 1, 2022

Nicolette Sowder home-schools her two daughters and two nieces at her family farm near Cedar Springs, Mich. Stacy Kranitz for The New York Times

By Nicolette Sowder
Ms. Sowder is the creator of Wildschooling.

Throughout the first five years of my older daughter's life, I watched her dance through the clover, climb trees, puddle jump and play her way through the day. As she stood on the threshold to kindergarten, I pictured her stuck inside at a desk, cut off from her relationship to the wild, and my stomach sank. I believe that school is for nurturing children's innate talents and helping them figure out where those gifts, necessarily diverse, fit in the whole. The school system, by contrast, tends to produce a monoculture. Despite the heroic efforts of many thoughtful, caring teachers, public school mostly prepares children to be obedient workers and fails millions of students who don't fit the mold.

So I developed a method called Wildschooling, a form of home-schooling that celebrates an interconnected, relational view of nature, which I now practice with my two daughters and two nieces on our farm near Cedar Springs, Mich. We're hardly the first people to approach education this way; numerous earth-centered cultures, such as the Anishinabe of our region, and Richard Louv, the author of "Last Child in the Woods," are just a few important influences.

Wildschooling looks different for each family. If you browse the Facebook group I started six years ago, 90,000 members strong now, there are single parents and city dwellers practicing it all over the world. And while it's a privilege to undertake any form of home-schooling, Wildschooling does not require a rural setting or big backyard. As long as you've got a tree on your block or a community garden nearby, you can Wildschool.

Magnolia Sowder plays on hay bales during a day of Wildschooling. Stacy Kranitz for The New York Times

From left, Serafina Blanco-Bond, Magnolia Sowder and Vivienne Blanco-Bond. Stacy Kranitz for The New York Times

For us, a typical day begins by going outside and getting some sunshine on our faces. Then we orient ourselves to where we are in the moon cycle and the solar calendar. This helps us stay anchored and know where we are in the big picture. While most children are going back to school right now, we've been in session since the winter solstice. As the days grow longer, so does our knowledge. Once we pass the summer solstice and the light begins to fade, we start reviewing our lessons.

Sometimes, people assume that Wildschooling means there are no lessons or that it means letting your children run aimlessly through the woods. My

girls do plenty of running around — usually after lunch for about two hours — but in the mornings, we do a standard math curriculum and practice our music. Right now we are learning to sing and to play piano and violin. Violin is taught by a fellow home-schooler who is 13.

After math and music, we do our farm chores, like gathering eggs and harvesting the never-ending supply of zucchini from the garden. We recently had to build a new chicken coop, which became a lesson on how to use graph paper to draft something to scale. Once you start approaching learning this way, you realize life is the curriculum. If we need to write a letter to someone, for example, we'll learn how to write a letter. If the frogs are singing, we'll learn about frogs.

Violin practice. Stacy Kranitz for The New York Times

Exploring a swamp on the Sowder property at a gathering with other nearby home-schooled children. Stacy Kranitz for The New York Times

When children start Wildschooling, I've noticed that their sense of themselves transforms. They begin to see themselves as the individuals they are — radically themselves and essential to the whole. They see that nature is lopsided, that nature has specialties. It's a very different situation from sitting in a classroom and comparing yourself with other humans.

And while it may seem unusual, at first, to design school around nature, research attests to the benefits: Nature-based learning leads to academic, cognitive, psychological and social gains, even when factors like class are controlled for. Interestingly, the mechanism at play is not entirely understood, although some researchers have postulated that nature-relatedness, or connection to nature, may be a basic human need.

What's the most important thing school offered you? How did it influence your life, either in the long term or the short term?

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At the same time, we're only just beginning to understand the downsides of traditional schooling. This year, a major study following nearly 3,000 low-income children in Tennessee found that students who had gone to pre-K scored worse in third grade than those who had not. By the end of sixth grade, as NPR reported, the students who had gone to pre-K "had lower test scores, were more likely to be in special education and were more likely to get into trouble in school, including serious trouble like suspensions."

Wildschooling does not require a rural setting or big backyard. Stacy Kranitz for The New York Times

How can this be? According to Dale Farran, one of the lead researchers,

children in formal pre-K, who may be required to line up to go to the bathroom or walk silently through the halls, are possibly developing an "allergic reaction" to control, which could explain the discipline problems seen later in life. By contrast, Dr. Farran noted, wealthier families tend to pick play-based preschool programs that emphasize creativity, movement and nature.

In a healthy society, all children should have access to this kind of education. When I watch how active my kids are, my heart hurts to think of how little they would be able to move if they were in school. Or how quiet they would have to be. My 10-year-old daughter, in particular, loves to sing. She sings in the morning, she sings in the afternoon, she sings at night. She loves to memorize songs and is even beginning to write them. It's spontaneous; it makes her who she is. If she were in school, she would have to consciously repress this part of herself.

Back when my husband and I bought our farm, we thought we were going to heal the land by applying the principles of regenerative agriculture. But every time my children get upset and we walk out to their favorite tree to calm down, I realize the land is healing us more than we are healing it. My girls can learn math, and they can learn violin. But nothing will ever matter more than their being able to take responsibility for their lives and feeling as if they are part of something bigger than themselves.

Nicolette Sowder is the creator of Wildschooling.

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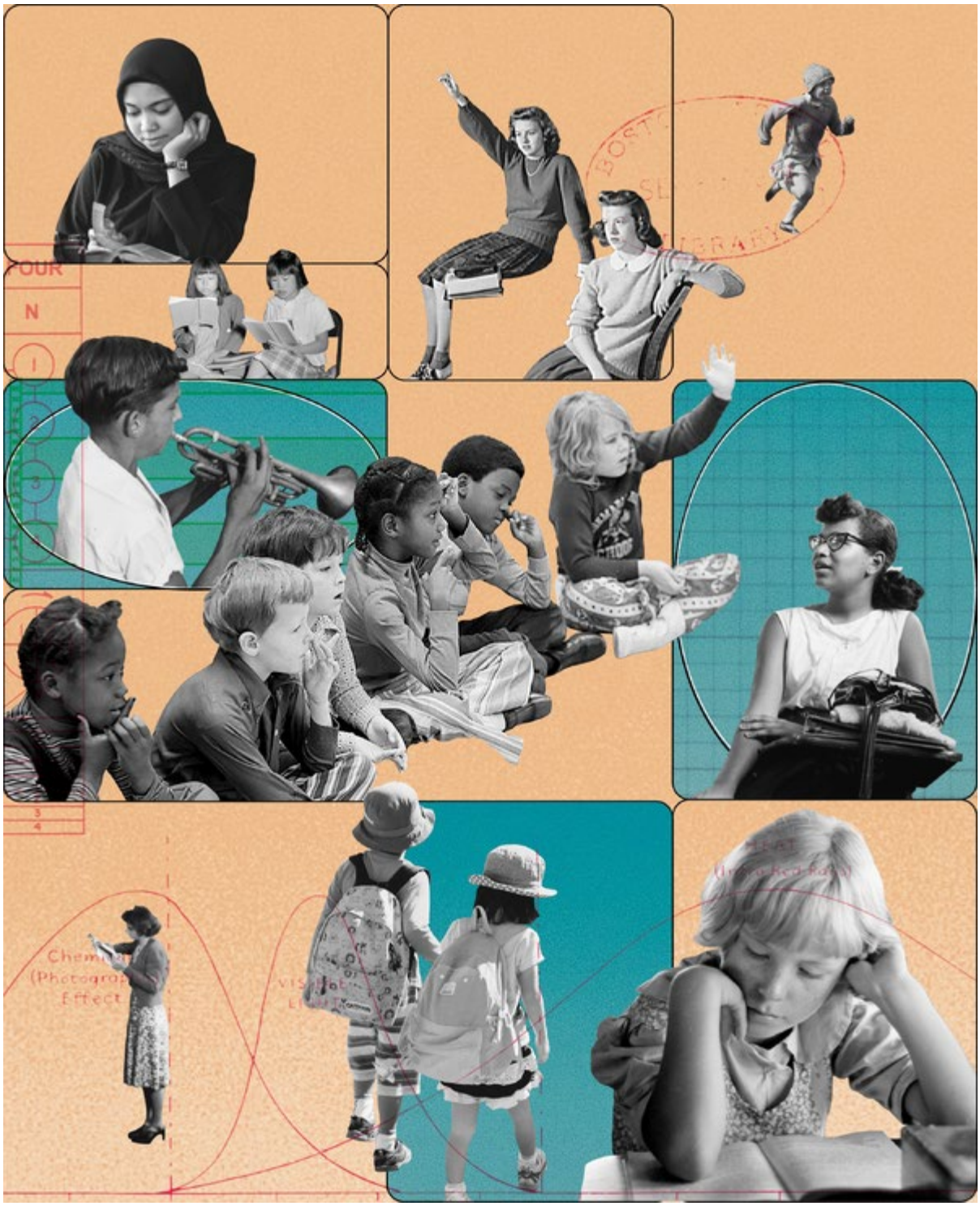
OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

School Is for Everyone

Sept. 1, 2022



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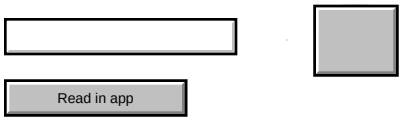

By Anya Kamenetz

Ms. Kamenetz is a longtime education reporter and the author of “The Stolen Year: How Covid Changed Children’s Lives, and Where We Go Now,” from which this essay is adapted.

For the majority of human history, most people didn't go to school. Formal education was a privilege for the Alexander the Greats of the world, who could hire Aristotles as private tutors.

Starting in the mid-19th century, the United States began to establish truly universal, compulsory education. It was a social compact: The state provides public schools that are free and open to all. And children, for most of their childhood, are required to receive an education. Today, nine out of 10 do so in public schools.

To an astonishing degree, one person, Horace Mann, the nation's first state secretary of education, forged this reciprocal commitment. The Constitution doesn't mention education. In Southern colonies, rich white children had tutors or were sent overseas to learn. Teaching enslaved people to read was outlawed. Those who learned did so by luck, in defiance or in secret.

But Mann came from Massachusetts, the birthplace of the "common school" in the 1600s, where schoolmasters were paid by taking up a collection from each group of households. Mann expanded on that tradition. He crossed the state on horseback to visit every schoolhouse, finding mostly neglected, drafty old wrecks. He championed schools as the crucible of democracy — his guiding principle, following Thomas Jefferson, was that citizens cannot sustain both ignorance and freedom.

An essential part of Mann's vision was that public schools should be for everyone and that children of different class backgrounds should learn together. He pushed to draw wealthier students away from private schools, establish "normal schools" to train teachers (primarily women), have the state take over charitable schools and increase taxes to pay for it all.

He largely succeeded. By the early 20th century all states had free primary schools, underwritten by taxpayers, that students were required to attend.

And that's more or less how America became the nation we recognize today. The United States soon boasted one of the world's highest literacy rates among white people. It is hard to imagine how we could have established our industrial and scientific might, welcomed newcomers from all over the world, knit our democracy back together after the Civil War and become a wealthy nation with high living standards without schoolhouses.

The consensus on schooling has never been perfect. Private schools older than the nation continue to draw the elite. Public schools in many parts of the country were segregated by law until the mid-20th century, and they are racially and economically segregated to this day.

But Mann's inclusive vision is under particular threat right now. Extended school closures during the coronavirus pandemic effectively broke the social compact of universal, compulsory schooling.

School closures threw our country back into the educational atomization

that characterized the pre-Mann era. Wealthy parents hired tutors for their children; others opted for private and religious schools that reopened sooner; some had no choice but to leave their children alone in the house all day or send them to work for wages while the schoolhouse doors were closed.

Students left public schools at a record rate and are still leaving, particularly in the blue states and cities that kept schools closed longer. Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (known as the Nation's Report Card) dropped significantly this year: 9-year-olds lost ground in math for the first time since the test came out in the 1970s, and scores in reading fell by the largest margin in more than three decades. The drop in math was much worse for Black students than for their white peers. Home-schooling is on the rise, private schools have gained students, and an unknown number have dropped out altogether; Los Angeles said up to 50,000 students were absent on the first day of class this year. Teachers are experiencing intense burnout, and schools have many staff vacancies.

Meanwhile, a well-funded, decades-old movement that wants to do away with public school as we know it is in ascendance.

This movement rejects Mann's vision that schools should be the common ground where a diverse society discovers how to live together. Instead, it believes families should educate their children however they wish, or however they can. It sees no problem with Republican schools for Republican students, Black schools for Black students, Christian schools for Christian students and so on, as long as those schools are freely chosen. Recent Supreme Court decisions open the door to both prayer in schools and public funding of religious education, breaking with Mann's nonsectarian ideal.

If we want to renew the benefits that public schools have brought to America, we need to recommit to the vision Mann advocated. Our democracy sprouts in the nursery of public schools — where students

grapple together with our messy history and learn to negotiate differences of race, class, gender and sexual orientation. Freedom of thought will wilt if schools foist religious doctrine of any kind onto students. And schools need to be enriched places, full of caring adults who have the support and resources they need to teach effectively.

Without public education delivered as a public good, the asylum seeker in detention, the teenager in jail, not to mention millions of children growing up in poverty, will have no realistic way to get the instruction they need to participate in democracy or support themselves. And students of privilege will stay confined in their bubbles. Americans will lose the most powerful social innovation that helps us construct a common reality and try, imperfectly, to understand one another.

It's a testament to the success of our schools that it took the pandemic shutdowns for many people to see all the essential roles they play in society. The length of these closures made the United States an outlier among other wealthy nations. They forced Americans to ask themselves: What is school for?

For Melissa Henderson, a single mother of five in Georgia, school was a safe place for her kids. With schools and day cares closed in May 2020, she left her 14-year-old daughter in charge of her younger siblings. Ms. Henderson was arrested and charged with reckless conduct.

For Alexis, a 10-year-old on Maui, school was a place to be with her friends. She has a rare genetic condition and is autistic. When schools closed, she went from a "happy, bubbly, loving-life child" to "flat and empty and not really there — like a robot," said her mother, Vanessa Ince. Alexis regressed from walking to crawling, went back to wearing diapers and stopped using a communication device.

For Osvaldo Rivas Santiago, a 15-year-old growing up in foster care in Vancouver, Wash., school was where he set goals for himself and excelled. He had trouble willing himself to stay focused with remote learning.

"It impacts your motivation," he told me. "You tend to not really care about school at all."

The shutdowns reminded Americans that schools provide vital services besides learning. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, slammed "people who saw teachers as glorified babysitters" before the pandemic. But the fact is, public school is the nation's major source of free child care for working families. Moreover, tens of millions of children depend on school for meals, safety, special education services and therapies, and English language learning.

They are also hubs of community togetherness.

I live around the corner from my daughter's public elementary school in Brooklyn, a sprawling brick building dating to 1895. At the start of the pandemic, the cheerful daily rush of cargo bikes, scooters and children walking to school gave way to an eerie silence punctuated by the howl of ambulances.

Without the ability to meet in person regularly, some neighborly relationships curdled. Someone removed the schoolyard's Black Lives Matter and Pride flags, and suspicions flew. Here and across the country, school board and P.T.A. meetings moved online and sometimes stretched into the wee hours of the night as parents yelled themselves hoarse over

reopening protocols and varying responses to the nation's racial upheaval.

Some Americans missed schools when they were closed, and others distanced themselves. The extended blue state closures were a failure on the part of Democrats, who have historically been the party that Americans trust over Republicans when it comes to education. That trust eroded during the pandemic, as many Democratic governors and mayors seemed unable to balance families' needs with fears of a deadly virus. Today, the few union leaders and other educators who have impugned or outright denied the existence of learning loss are coming pretty close to arguing that public schools accomplish nothing. If being at home for a year and a half didn't have any negative impact on children, why do we need school?

What's the most important thing school offered you? How did it influence your life, either in the long term or the short term?

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All of this emboldened a movement on the right that has for more than half a century sought to dismantle public education and the idea that Americans from diverse backgrounds should learn alongside one another.

Corey DeAngelis, a fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, told me that "the teachers unions' influence on keeping the schools closed for so long" opened the door to expanded alternatives. His dream is a universal voucher

program, where taxpayer funds are parceled out directly to families to spend as they wish, with no public school "monopoly." Meaning, no collectively funded infrastructure to provide education as a public good.

This dream began, more or less, in 1955, when the University of Chicago's Milton Friedman published the first manifesto arguing for school vouchers to replace publicly administered education. James McGill Buchanan, a University of Chicago-trained economist teaching at the University of Virginia, took the argument further by seizing on the era's post-Brown v. Board of Education segregationist fervor. As Nancy MacLean summarizes in "Democracy in Chains," her acclaimed but polarizing 2017 intellectual history of the right in America, Buchanan intuited that if rich white people could be convinced that they were justified in no longer paying for public schools, it opened the door to resist all taxation, all public goods. And he supplied that justification. He came to argue that it was anti-liberty to force people of wealth, a minority, to ante up for goods enjoyed by the majority.

What was called "massive resistance" to integration was so strong that some places in the South chose to close public schools altogether rather than see them integrated. In the fall of 1957, President Dwight Eisenhower called in the 101st Airborne to protect the Little Rock Nine. The next year, the Arkansas Legislature and the governor tried to block desegregation by closing Little Rock's four public high schools, Black and white, entirely. It became known as the Lost Year. In Prince Edward County, Virginia, officials went even further, closing the schools from 1959 all the way to 1964, while providing private schooling to white children.

This was an outright rejection of Mann's ideal that Americans should be educated at public schools that serve everyone. And the mark of that rejection remains to this day. Throughout the South, white children attend private schools that began as so-called segregation academies during the civil rights era, while many Black children attend the hollowed-out public schools that white students left behind. And elsewhere the pattern is repeated — in fact, schools in the Northeast are among the most segregated in the country.

The movement Friedman and Buchanan encouraged lives on. Opposition to public education, and the promotion of alternatives like vouchers and for-profit schools, has attracted Catholics long devoted to parochial schools, evangelical Christians and other religious groups, cultural conservatives, corporate capitalists and libertarians. Today they are joined by the millionaires and billionaires who see K-12 education as another sector ripe for disruption.

In other words, the core constituencies of today's Republican Party, otherwise seemingly so disparate, unite over this one issue. Their shared agenda is to privatize and defund schools.

This movement could have no better avatar than Betsy DeVos, who had never taught in, attended or sent her children to a public school before President Donald Trump named her secretary of education. "I personally think the Department of Education should not exist," she said in July.

During the pandemic, Ms. DeVos diverted a disproportionate share of federal relief funds to private schools until a judge declared her actions illegal. She proposed a federal school voucher program.

And she declined to direct the Department of Education to track school reopening plans or Covid mitigation strategies, abdicating responsibility for helping districts reopen safely, even as the Trump administration called for

them to reopen at any cost. Her approach signaled exactly what the agenda will be if Republicans regain control of the federal government.

And though Mr. Trump is out of office (for now), and Ms. DeVos with him, the Supreme Court justices the former president nominated have opened the door to both prayer in public schools and the public funding of religious schools. Right-wing donors, many of whom have long histories of opposing public education, have backed the activists whipping up a fervor over the treatment of race and queer and trans rights in the classroom. In the eyes of conservative activists, public education is the enemy of the people, alongside the deep state and the mainstream media, and they are working hard to make the American people believe it too.

Mann's vision of public schools is at stake right now. Not only his vision of school as the great equalizer, the place where disadvantaged groups gain access to social and economic capital, which is important enough, but also his view of school as the place where Americans can give up ignorance in exchange for freedom.

This country has seemingly never had a harder time embracing a shared reality or believing in common values. The parents who are showing up at school boards yelling about "critical race theory" and pronouns are trying to get public schools to bend history, reality and values to their liking. I disagree with them vehemently, but I also want them to stay in the argument. It would be far worse if these parents went home and created

their own schools. Because their children would then grow up with one set of unchallenged beliefs, while my children and the children of like-minded people would grow up with another — emerging as adults who have no hope of understanding one another, much less living together peacefully.

If we lose public education, flawed as it is, the foundations of our democracy will slip. Not only the shared knowledge base but also the skills of citizenship itself: communication, empathy and compromise across differences.

I grew up Jewish in the Bible Belt, studious and serious. My Christian classmates sometimes taunted me that I was going to hell.

I can only imagine how I would have felt if my teachers had openly agreed. If my textbooks were full of conspiracy theories about "globalists" and Jewish space lasers. If I and my friends who were Jain or Buddhist had to choose between attending a school that conformed to the majority of our neighbors' religious beliefs and staying home.

As it was, it was hard to be singled out. But that experience of difference helped me connect with Creole children, and those whose families came from Sri Lanka, Costa Rica, Taiwan, India, Nigeria — brought to the land of football and po' boys by the oil industry and jobs at Louisiana State University. And some of my closest friends were from white, churchgoing families too. We did the Cajun two-step, lined up for the geography bee and learned to be together, imperfectly, in this ever-various country.

Anya Kamenetz (@anya1anya) is a longtime education reporter and the author of "The Stolen Year: How Covid Changed Children's Lives, and Where We Go Now," from which this essay is adapted.

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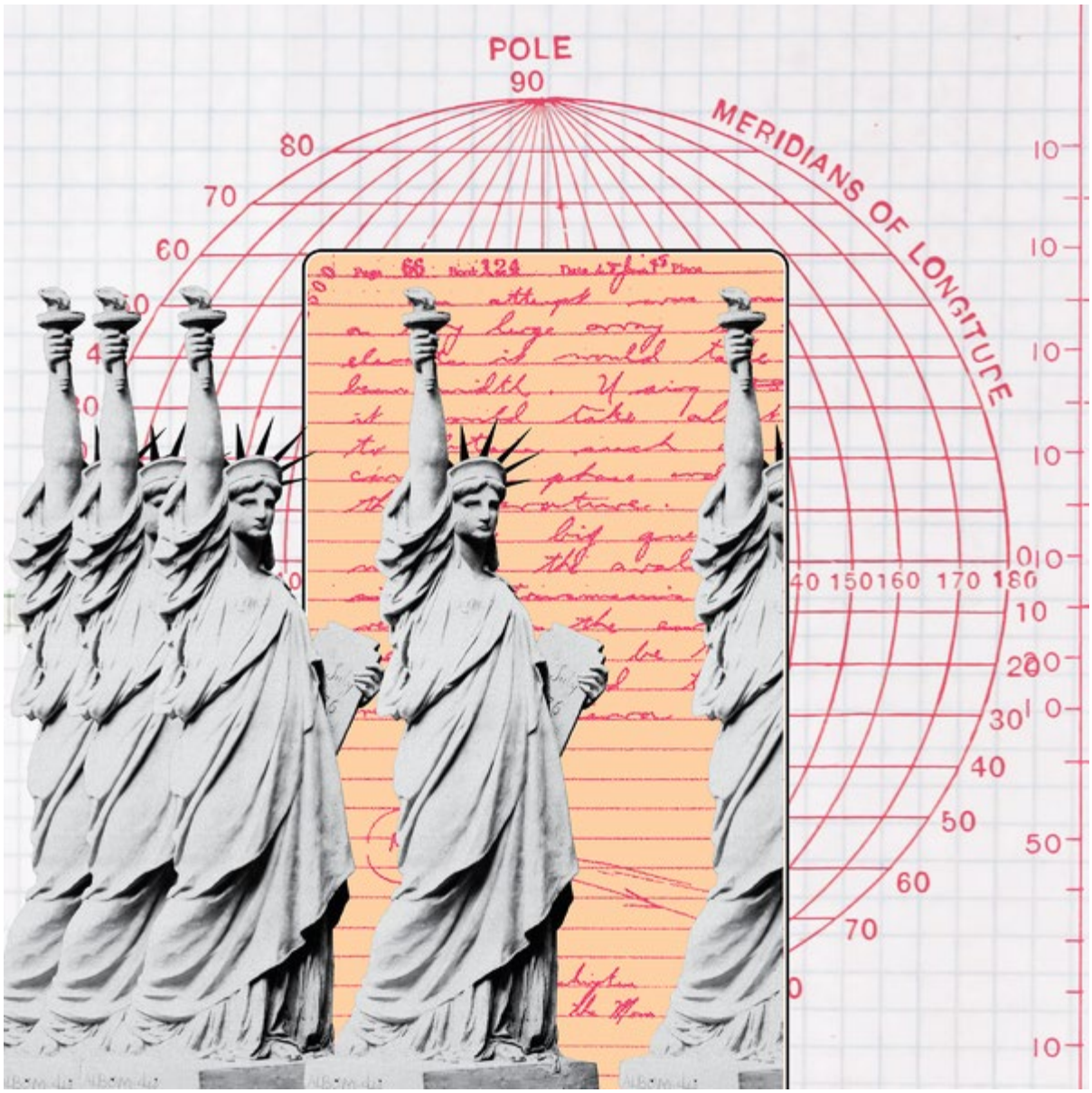
OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

School Is for Hope

Sept. 1, 2022



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By Gabrielle Oliveira
Dr. Oliveira is an associate professor of education and Brazil studies at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her work focuses on family migration, care structures and the educational trajectories of immigrant children in the United States.

It was a cold day in January 2019, and Heidi, who was 6 years old, was ready for her first day of school in the United States. Her father, Jorge, woke up early to help her with her hair and pack her lunch. Jorge and Heidi had migrated from Guatemala to the United States in 2018. (I am using their first names only because of their vulnerable and changing

immigration status.) Upon arrival at the Mexico-U.S. border, they were separated. For more than two months Jorge was in Texas while his daughter was 1,700 miles away in New York City.

Like many immigrant parents, Jorge's greatest goal is to provide a better life for Heidi. And like many immigrant parents, he believes that American schools promise Heidi the opportunity for that better life. For Jorge, after the hardship of the journey north and the trauma of family separation, school offers hope.

Before Heidi headed to school that morning, Jorge took pictures of her in her dress, tights and puffy silver coat. They waited at the bus stop, looking nervous but feeling excited. Heidi spoke mostly Spanish and a little English. She was headed to a bilingual program where one of her teachers spoke Spanish. Jorge was hopeful. Heidi was hopeful.

Over 18 million children in the United States — one in four children — were born in another country or have at least one parent who was. For the last 12 years I have focused on understanding the trajectories of Latin American immigrant families in the United States. Immigrant parents describe education and schooling as among the most important benefits of migrating to the United States. Leaving home and risking the treacherous, expensive journey north is often partly motivated by the promise that U.S. schools hold for children. To migrate is to care.

The promise of education, however, became precarious in March 2020, when school closures and remote learning measures were implemented to curtail the spread of the coronavirus. These measures disadvantaged immigrant children. Their parents were unfamiliar with the school system and often faced language barriers — which posed challenges to navigating distance learning.

In addition, the pandemic compromised many in-person school support structures that immigrant students depend on, such as English-language instruction, speech therapies, reading support, social work check-ins and other forms of counseling. Between 2020 and 2021, many immigrant parents struggled to navigate their vulnerable immigration statuses and a health crisis while continuing to work outside their homes in essential services.

With school buildings open again, educators now must focus on welcoming immigrant students and families to their classrooms, providing in-person language support and, most important, learning from these families' experiences.

When an immigrant child arrives in an English-speaking classroom without many English-language skills, research shows that the most important factors are the teacher's mind-set, access to adults who speak the child's language and the overall environment of the school. Some educators perceive immigrant families negatively because of cultural and language differences: They focus on what immigrant children don't know and don't have, as opposed to what they do know and what they bring to the classroom. A deficit-oriented view can lower educators' expectations of immigrant children, which in turn can make it harder for those children to succeed academically. Classrooms where teachers celebrate immigrant students' languages and cultures in meaningful ways provide a safe space for children to grow.

Language connects school and home. Any communication materials —

letters sent home, emails from teachers, phone calls from nurses, signage on school walls — in languages other than English allow immigrant families to get closer to schools and educators. Bilingual or multilingual programs, teachers trained in language learning, counselors, nurses and school psychologists who speak languages that the children speak all increase trust between families and schools.

But perhaps the most effective way to provide an environment that allows for children to flourish, learn and develop is to understand the specific vulnerabilities of immigrant families in the United States. In other words, to care. Teachers in many schools have done just that. From creating WhatsApp group chats with families to engaging in parent-teacher conferences over FaceTime, teachers are meeting parents and children where they are. Some immigrant parents work in low-paying, unstable jobs, leaving them with little time to physically go to schools. There is also a general hesitance to trust the bureaucratic structure of schools because of immigrant families' vulnerable immigration statuses. There is fear that sharing their stories, physically being in school buildings and signing school forms could hurt their asylum cases or compromise their undocumented status.

Educators in schools with high rates of immigrant student enrollment are learning about immigration laws and how those laws affect the families their districts serve. This knowledge makes authentic relationships

possible.

Our society benefits as a whole when educators support immigrant students. When implemented with care, multicultural and multilingual curriculums engage students in constructive dialogue, prioritizing the human experience and genuine learning. Schools aren't only about the hopes of individuals but also the larger hope that we can create an inclusive and just society where people of all sorts of backgrounds can thrive.

What's the most important thing school offered you? How did it influence your life, either in the long term or the short term?

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Heidi had a great first day of school that January in 2019. She mentioned the colorful classroom, the teacher speaking to her in Spanish, and her excitement about having books to bring home. It took Jorge a couple of months to trust Heidi's teacher enough to tell her the story of their migration. Heidi had already written some stories and made drawings about Guatemala, the border and living in the United States at school.

When the pandemic hit a year later, Jorge's hopes for school as a place of opportunity shattered. Like many children, Heidi had a hard time engaging in remote schooling. The Wi-Fi connection was unstable at home, she missed the social aspect of learning among peers and Jorge contracted the

coronavirus, resulting in a three-week stay at a hospital.

Eight months later, when Heidi was able to go back to school in person, she and Jorge felt the nervousness of that January day again. But Heidi came home from her first day back and told her father that there were other students in her class who also were from Guatemala. Heidi was excited she got to use Spanish and English with her friends. She was enthusiastic about helping them find the library and gave them tips about when and how to use the bathroom at school. Heidi was hopeful.

Gabrielle Oliveira is an associate professor of education and Brazil studies at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her work focuses on family migration, care structures and the educational trajectories of immigrant children in the United States. She is the author of "Motherhood Across Borders: Immigrants and Their Children in Mexico and in New York City."

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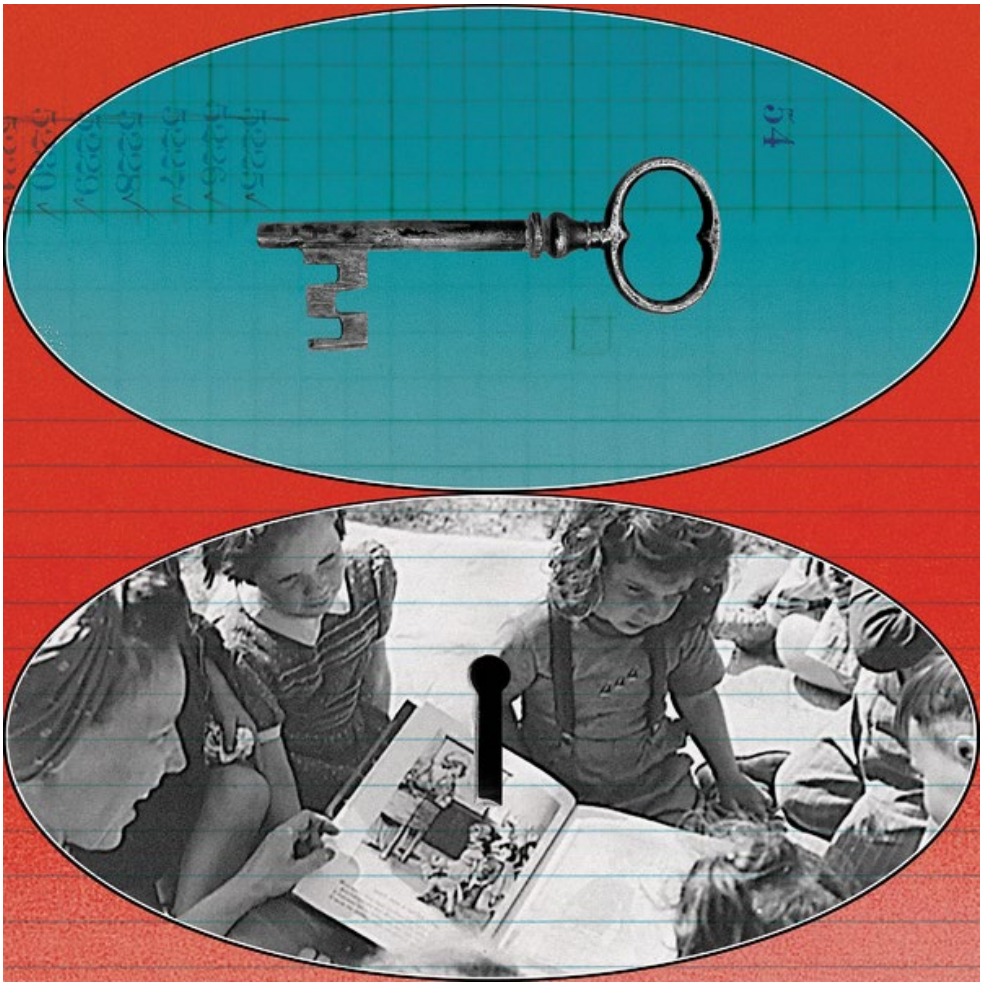
OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

School Is for Learning to Read

Sept. 1, 2022



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By Emily Hanford
Ms. Hanford is a senior education correspondent for American Public Media.

The most important thing schools can do is teach children how to read. If you can read, you can learn anything. If you can't, almost everything in school is difficult. Word problems. Test directions. Biology homework. Everything comes back to reading.

But a lot of schools aren't teaching children *how* to read. It came as a shock to Corinne Adams. "Public school should be this sacred trust between the community and the school," she told me. "I'm going to give you my child, and you're going to teach him how to read. And that shattered for me. That was broken."

Her son was in kindergarten in Rhode Island when schools closed because of the pandemic. She sat next to him and watched as he was taught to read over Zoom. In kindergarten and again in first grade, her son and his classmates were taught that when they came to a word they didn't know,

they should look at the first letter, look at the picture in the book and think of a word that would make sense. They weren't told to sound out the word.

Ms. Adams encountered a method for teaching children how to read that is contradicted by decades of scientific research and yet remains popular in schools. As many as a quarter of elementary schools use Units of Study, the curriculum her son's school was following. Far more schools teach the same word-reading strategies as part of an approach to teaching reading broadly known as balanced literacy. In a 2019 survey by Education Week, 72 percent of elementary special education and K-2 teachers said their schools used balanced literacy.

These word-reading strategies are a crutch, kind of like training wheels, that allow children to "read" books without knowing how to actually read the words. They're based on the belief that most children will eventually figure out how to read words and spell them if they spend enough time with books.

But research shows that children need to be taught how their written language works. It doesn't happen naturally through exposure to print. Some kids learn easily; they don't need much instruction. But learning to read is hard for more children than you might realize.

It's not about intelligence. Lots of very smart people have a tough time learning how to read. G. Reid Lyon, a former chief of child health and human development at the National Institutes of Health, told Congress in 1998 that learning to read is a "formidable challenge" for about 60 percent of children. They need direct and explicit instruction. Lots of children weren't getting that kind of instruction in 1998. And they're still not getting it.

Here's what happens in response: Parents who notice there's a problem take care of it themselves. If they can.

By the fall of her son's first-grade year, Ms. Adams was very worried about him. He could memorize simple books and use the pictures if he was stuck on a word, but he couldn't read the words out of context. He was frustrated and falling behind. So she decided to teach him herself. She was a stay-at-home mother who had time to figure out what she needed to do and money to buy books and teaching materials. Other parents turn to private tutoring, which can cost hundreds of dollars an hour.

"The families will provide the safety net," said Todd Collins, a school board member in Palo Alto, Calif., where the median household income for parents of children in public school is close to a quarter of a million dollars a year. "If we fail in something fundamental like reading, you can be damn sure the parents will hire a tutor or put them in private school or the kid will get taught at home. And that kid will learn to read."

This exacerbates inequality in an already unequal education system. And I think it's one reason reading programs that aren't providing adequate instruction have remained popular for so long. People point to good test scores in an affluent district that is using one of these programs, and they say: Look, it's working. And they point to low test scores in a poor district using the same program and say: Oh, it's poverty.

But all kinds of kids, from all kinds of families — rich, poor and middle class — need more help with reading than they're getting in school. On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, 65 percent of fourth graders scored basic or below basic in reading.

There's increasing awareness that many children are struggling because

they're not getting the instruction they need. At least 30 states have instituted new policies or laws to try to bring schools in line with the science of reading. Some of that change has been fueled by reporting done by me and other journalists. It's also been fueled by parents — many of them in affluent school districts — who have been speaking up about their children's reading difficulties.

And a big push is coming from teachers, too. Many of them are ditching the word-reading strategies and asking their schools for new materials and better training, both of which are expensive.

Ms. Adams thinks often about what might have happened to her son if she hadn't intervened. And she thinks about parents who may have no idea their children aren't getting the instruction they need — or might not have the means to fix the problem even if they do.

"That's wrong," she told me. "Your kid should go to school and learn how to read. Baseline. Because if they can read, they can teach themselves anything."

Emily Hanford (@ehanford) is a senior education correspondent for American Public Media. She is working on "Sold a Story," a new podcast about how teaching kids to read went so wrong.

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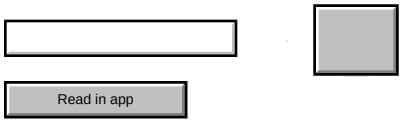
OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

School Is for Making Citizens

Sept. 1, 2022

Illustration by Chloe Scheffe; photographs by Library of Congress; AlexMSchool, Calsidyrose and Mikus, via Wikimedia Commons; and Mika Baumeister and Dima Shishkov, via Unsplash.



By Heather C. McGhee and Victor Ray
Ms. McGhee is the author of "The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together" and creator of the "Sum of Us" podcast. Dr. Ray is the author of "On Critical Race Theory: Why It Matters & Why You Should Care."

Why do we have public schools? To make young people into educated, productive adults, of course. But public schools are also for making Americans. Thus, public education requires lessons about history — the American spirit and its civics — and also contact with and context about

other Americans: who we are and what has made us.

That broader purpose is currently under attack. According to PEN America, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting free expression, legislatures in 36 states have proposed 137 bills that would limit teaching about race, gender and American history. Nineteen censorship bills have become law in the past two years. In our increasingly diverse nation, insulating students from lessons about racism will create a generation ill equipped to participate in a multiracial democracy. When partisan politicians ban the teaching of our country's full history, children are purposely made ignorant of how American society works. And the costs of this ignorance to American democracy will be borne by us all.

Fortunately, our shared American history offers models of the kind of education that can unite students and communities to produce a solidarity dividend — a positive public good that we can create only by working together across racial and socioeconomic lines. Black people in Jim Crow Mississippi lived under racial authoritarianism so strict and violent that it is hard to imagine today. But lies and omissions about history were essential to the program of Jim Crow subjugation. Lost Cause mythology, which downplayed slavery as a cause of the Civil War, replaced factual history. Students, regardless of race, were taught that Black people were inferior. And many white employers thought Black people should learn only enough for proficiency in menial Jim Crow jobs.

That's why the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sent volunteers to the Mississippi Delta during the 1964 Freedom Summer, to found schools in poor Black communities that offered a truthful education that was explicit about racial oppression and the denial of political rights.

This multiracial group of volunteers made plain the distance between American reality and its ideals. As a result, these Freedom Schools made citizens. According to William Sturkey, an associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, once the S.N.C.C. volunteers left, Freedom School students changed their state by organizing voter registration drives and civil rights protests and by charting a more equitable future in terms of housing, jobs and health care. They earned advanced degrees and were elected to office.

The broader civil rights movement helped transform the nation — in ways that even benefited the white Southerners who were so deeply opposed. As Gavin Wright recounts in "Sharing the Prize," civil rights gains helped create more robust economies and local democracies, benefiting all citizens. These gains were possible precisely because people learned how to confront the nation's failures.

Every student deserves the kind of myth-shattering and empowering education that the Freedom Schools provided. Such education doesn't shy away from America's ugly truths and contradictions. Stories of racial progress should be coupled with data on abiding racial inequalities in employment, life expectancy and incarceration. Discussions of figures such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson should include the contradiction between their hypothetical opposition to slavery and the fact that they both enslaved people.

Honest education isn't all bad news. In fact, the deeper you go into our history, the more you can find new heroes to celebrate. As Freedom School participants learned by looking at the people who taught them, there is a tradition of American heroism, by people of all races, that is as real as the

tradition of oppression and injustice. We can't understand one without the other. Teaching age-appropriate but full history today allows white students to ask themselves: Do I want to be like the hundreds of protesters in the black and white photograph, yelling at Ruby Bridges, a 6-year-old Black girl, as she tried to integrate a public school? Or do I want to be like the hundreds of white students who boarded buses for the South to register Black voters during Freedom Summer?

Contemporary attacks on teaching true history are authoritarian attempts to impose a sanitized curriculum. America's book banners and anti-critical race theory zealots are following a path well worn by authoritarian regimes in Russia and Hungary, which have issued laws targeting the teaching of L.G.B.T.Q. issues. In the current U.S. debates, both the authoritarians and those people committed to multiracial democracy recognize that education is inherently political, because it enables students to understand, question and change their world. For the latter, this is the point; freedom comes from having the tools to comprehend a range of good and bad experiences and weigh the options for charting their future. Despite wails to the contrary from activist groups like Moms for Liberty, who claim accurate teaching of America's history will harm white children, research shows that *all* students benefit from reading accurate but critical accounts. Lessons about racism make students more likely to engage and empathize across race. Such cross-racial solidarity is essential for members of our most diverse generation.

Perhaps that's why many young people are rightfully suspicious of grown-ups who want to keep the truth from them. A white teenager in Nevada spoke out against censorship at her rural county school board meeting.

"Discussions of lessons based around our country and society's true history are absolutely not making me, as a white person, feel attacked or guilty," she said. "In fact, being able to talk about hard topics such as racial inequality and slavery allowed me to feel proud of how far our society has come and hopeful that we can continue to progress."

This position recalls a letter home from a Freedom Summer volunteer explaining her students' eagerness for knowledge. She wrote that her students "know that they have been cheated and they want anything and everything that we can give them." Schools shouldn't cheat kids by denying them the tools to navigate the world as it exists — and to create a better one for all of us.

What's the most important thing school offered you? How did it influence your life, either in the long term or the short term?

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The people who resist an honest teaching of history have an economic agenda, too. They attack our children's freedom to learn in order to create "universal public school distrust," as Christopher Rufo, one of the leading architects of the effort to censor the teaching of race in the classroom and an advocate of school vouchers, put it. When white parents — and the tax dollars that often move with them — abandon public schools out of fear of integrated curriculums, it drains the pool of public resources from our schools. It is no surprise that some recent campaigns to pack school boards, sue districts and spread book bans are reportedly funded by some of the same secret money groups that espouse low-tax, small-government economics, while financially backing the nomination of conservative judges.

If an educated citizenry makes democracy possible, attacking schools becomes a proxy war to limit democracy. This is a battle that our parents and grandparents fought and won. Now the struggle for an honest education — and the democracy it makes possible — must be ours as well.

Heather McGhee is the author of "The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together" and creator of the "Sum of Us" podcast. Victor Ray is the author of "On Critical Race Theory: Why It Matters & Why You Should Care."

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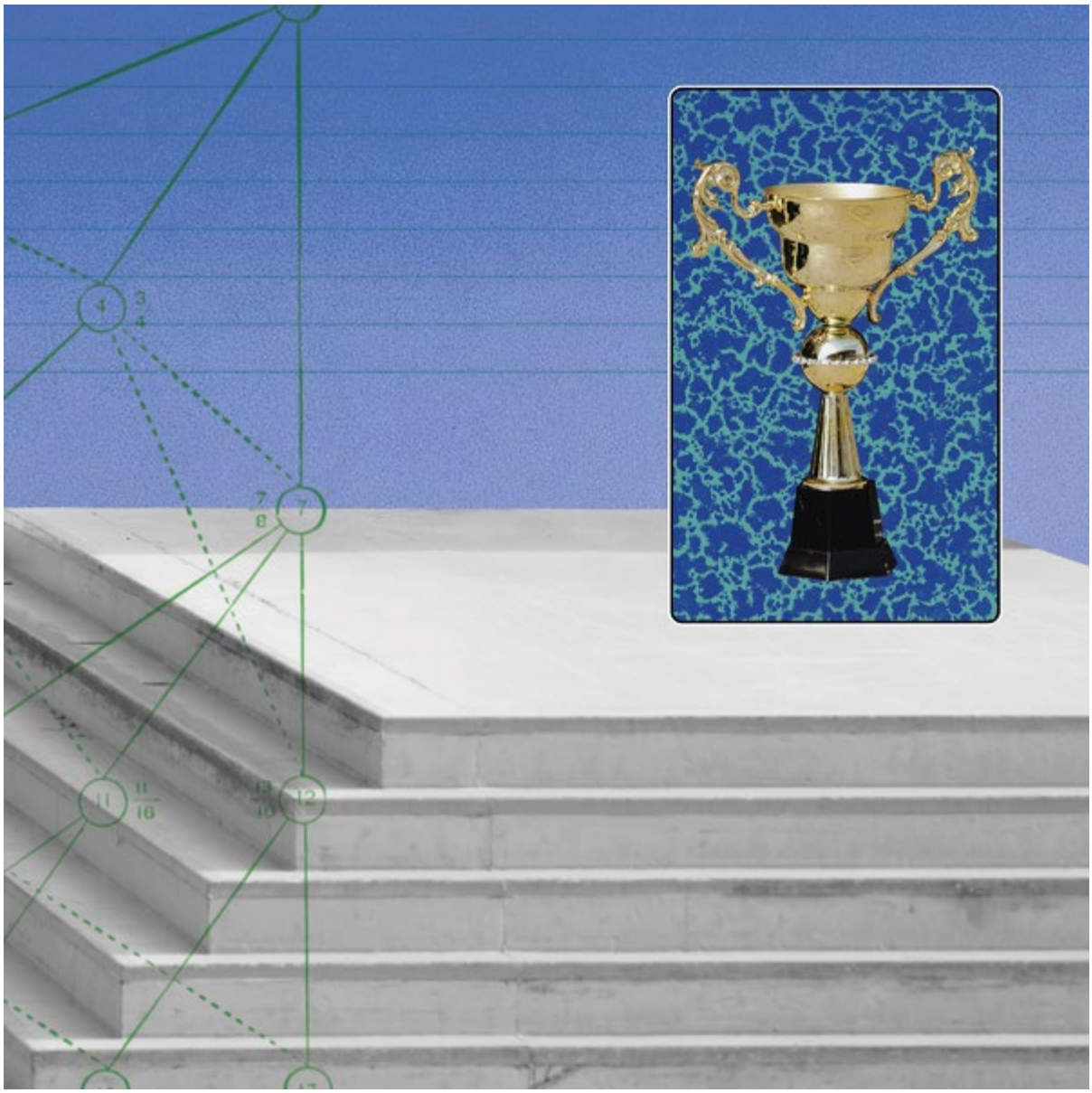
OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

School Is for Merit

Sept. 1, 2022



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By Asra Q. Nomani
Ms. Nomani is a senior fellow at the Independent Women's Network and a co-founder of the Coalition for TJ, a group working to promote high admissions standards at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a magnet school in Alexandria, Va.

In 1982, as a 5-foot-0 teen at Morgantown High School in the foothills of West Virginia's Appalachians, I stepped forward at our annual sports award ceremony to claim an honor: female athlete with the highest G.P.A. A boy named Michael Roh, who won the male athlete award, towered over me at

6-foot-6. He'd been my academic rival since middle school. But on this day, we both smiled. We had both ascended based on hard work and merit.

It was America's public school system and its culture of meritocracy that allowed me, an immigrant girl from India who arrived at age 4 not knowing a word of English, to become a reporter for The Wall Street Journal at age 23. But now, as my high school classmates and I mark 40 years since graduation, a war on merit is raging. We can't afford to lose this ideal. The price would be too steep for our nation's competitive place in the world and, more important, for our nation's kids, who thrive when they are challenged and motivated to work hard and aim high.

Merit demands excellence and rigor. It is not, as its critics often insist, an elitist, classist or racist value. It acknowledges that all kids have talents. Even though talents are not distributed equally, it is our obligation as parents and teachers to nurture each child's individual spark and make sure that all children have the chance to be the best that they can be. I learned that on the Morgantown High volleyball team. I was never going to make the Olympic team. But Coach Rice encouraged me to understand that the most valiant, healthy challenge is a personal one, to strive to do and be my best.

Merit should never have become a battlefront in the culture wars. I understand the impulse to declare the system rigged when so many children, particularly Black and Hispanic children, have fallen behind academically. But the answer to racial disparities in math and reading scores and advanced academic enrollment is not to blame the game and rerig it to favor outcomes that please certain political constituencies but do little to make life better for struggling children. The solution is to channel more resources into disenfranchised communities — from the Black urban poor to the white rural poor in West Virginia, where I grew up. The solution is not to give up on merit.

To be sure, pursuing merit requires sacrifice. At 37, I became a single mother, leaving The Journal so I could work at home and focus my energy on raising — and educating — my son. I sat cross-legged on the carpet at my son's elementary school in Fairfax County, Va., reading aloud as a volunteer for Book Café. I coached his Lego League team and cheered his classmates during the annual spelling bee. Skilled at math and science, my son was admitted to a magnet school based on race-blind, merit-based admissions tests. Skill alone didn't get him there. He worked hard at geometry even when, like most kids, he would have rather been conquering Super Mario Galaxy 2.

Merit also requires vigilance. In 2020 our school board announced it was eliminating the school's entrance exams and adopting new admissions requirements in an effort to increase the diversity of the student body. No one argued against such a basic, noble goal — but many of us had plenty to say about the method. It crushed the kids who had worked hard and sacrificed so much to gain entrance to the school based on merit. I was part of a group including parents, students and alumni that sued to reinstate merit-based, race-blind admissions. (The school board insists the new admissions requirements are based on merit.) A federal judge ruled this year that the changes to the admissions requirements were "patently

unconstitutional" and discriminatory to Asian American kids. We are confident we will prevail while the school board appeals the ruling.

Unfortunately, these misguided policies are spreading across the education landscape. In California and Virginia, school districts are moving to decrease the number of D and F grades doled out and putting in place "equitable grading," like making a 50 (instead of a 0) the lowest grade a student can receive and allowing missed deadlines in new "reasonable late work policy" guidelines. School districts in other parts of the country are eliminating academically advanced programs, advanced placement classes and valedictorian honors.

This race to the bottom doesn't help the young people it sets out to uplift, including students with learning disabilities, people facing socioeconomic challenges and new English language learners.

Finally, merit is contagious. During my time at The Journal, the paper won many Pulitzer Prizes. I took enormous pride in the achievements of my peers, and they inspired me to pursue excellence in my own work at The Journal and now as an advocate for young people.

Michael, my fellow award-winning classmate, went on to be a mechanical and aerospace engineer and Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya. He then became a math and physics teacher at our crosstown rival, University High School. Last year, he won the Yale Educator Award. Merit has gone full

circle in the most noble of ways: in service of our youth.

Asra Q. Nomani (@AsraNomani) is a senior fellow at the Independent Women's Network and a co-founder of the Coalition for TJ, a group working to promote high admissions standards at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a magnet school in Alexandria, Va.

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In one word, how does it feel to be a teacher right now?

OPINION
AMERICA IN FOCUS

These 12 Teachers Don't See Themselves as Superheroes

Across the United States, education has become one of the hottest and most keenly felt political issues. Ever since the Covid pandemic began, governors, mayors, union officials, legislators and school board members have been arguing — often quite fiercely — about fundamental questions: When should schools reopen? What should be taught there? What is the purpose of public education? Who should decide these questions?

Once pretty much everyone was back in school — an uneven process that took place at different rates in different areas and in different types of schools — another set of questions emerged: How far behind had students fallen academically? How could they catch up? What about their social and emotional development, which also seemed to be lagging?

Nearly everyone had an opinion, but it sometimes seemed that one of the most important constituencies in this discussion was left out: teachers. As part of Opinion's "What Is School For?" package, we asked a dozen public school teachers from elementary, middle and high schools to talk with us about teaching during a pandemic, trying to meet students' academic and social needs and being caught between parents and politicians.

Like a lot of people in America, they were worried. "I find we don't even have the art of conversation anymore," one of the teachers said. "My students can't talk to each other." Teacher after teacher talked about how much harder the job has gotten over the past few years. "I just feel like I have an endless to-do list," one said. "I understand that everyone should have a say," another pointed out. "But oftentimes, there's a lot of collision there."

The teachers we gathered spent an hour and a half talking through these collisions with one another — which policymakers and parents would benefit from digging into — but they also took the time to talk about what inspired them to become teachers in the first place and what, despite all the difficulties, is keeping them in the classroom.

"Our school district has seniors write a letter to a teacher that's impacted them, an elementary or a middle school teacher that's impacted them," one teacher told us. "And when you get a letter from a student saying, 'I hated going

to the library at the beginning of the year, but after taking your reading class and reading better, I love to go to the library, and I might write a book myself one day.' I mean, that's why I do it."

Aaron Retica and Adrian J. Rivera
Mr. Retica is an editor in Opinion. Mr. Rivera is an editorial assistant in Opinion.

PARTICIPANTS

Stacey

55, Democrat, Black, special area teacher

Brandie

38, independent, Black, elementary school teacher

Jill

35, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

Carlotta

35, Democrat, Latino, elementary school teacher

Bobbie

48, Democrat, Asian, special education teach

TRANSCRIPT

Moderator, Margie Omero

If you had to describe your biggest concern about the United States in a single word, what would it be?

Jill, 35, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

Inequitable.

Jessie , 37, Democrat, white, high school teacher

Extremists.

Dan, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

Polarized.

Shannon, 54, Democrat, white, middle school teacher

Divided.

Brandie, 38, independent, Black, elementary school teacher

Unbalanced.

Tyler, 35, Republican, white, middle school teacher

Corruption.

Carlotta, 35, Democrat, Latino, elementary school teacher

Lacking.

Stacey, 55, Democrat, Black, special area teacher

Turmoil.

Mary, 37, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

Hate.

David, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

Polarized.

Bobbie, 48, Democrat, Asian, special education teacher

My word would be “disregard.”

Laura, 49, Republican, white, high school teacher

Mine was one that was already used — “division.”

Moderator, Margie Omero

Why did people pick so many words around “division”?

Stacey, 55, Democrat, Black, special area teacher

I feel like we’re going backwards in terms of equity. Whenever I look at the news, it’s always the left, the right, Republicans, Democrat. And in my head, I’m thinking, “Why can’t we all just be one?”

David, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

With polarization, it has to be “either/or,” instead of “both,” instead of “and.” We’ve lost empathy. And with that, we lose forgiveness.

Bobbie, 48, Democrat, Asian, special education teacher

I teach high school. I teach young adults. I used to teach in college. But even just within my limited experience, I’ve seen a lot of shift in attitude. I’ve seen a lot of shift in effort.

Moderator, Margie Omero

A shift in a good way or a shift in a bad way?

Bobbie, 48, Democrat, Asian, special education teacher

A bad way. I find we don't even have the art of conversation anymore. My students can't talk to each other. They can't talk to adults. And I feel that that doesn't bode well because, again, I look at these young people, and I want to have hope for them, but then I try to teach them, and I just don't feel hopeful.

Mary, 37, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

I kind of have the opposite experience. I did intervention this past school year, and before that, only elementary education for eight years. I feel like the kids now are so much more respectful and appreciative of each other, especially in the district I came from before Kansas City. It was Title I, low income. But they realized how hard it is to work for something and how appreciative they were when they got something. And I don't think kids now, like older kids maybe, high school kids — I think they're spoiled rotten, whereas the younger kids have — they're just so much more respectful and appreciative. It was mostly second, third grade where, yeah, they're little and not corrupt yet, I guess.

Jessie , 37, Democrat, white, high school teacher

I definitely can empathize with Bobbie in terms of feeling hopeless. I've been an educator for 13 years, and my toughest year was this past year. But I have hope that we're going to swing away from this extremely difficult time.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

This is another pick-a-word exercise, a single word to describe how it feels to be a teacher right now.

Dan, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

Challenging.

Bobbie, 48, Democrat, Asian, special education teacher

Tough.

Laura, 49, Republican, white, high school teacher

Exhausting.

Mary, 37, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

Pressure.

Tyler, 35, Republican, white, middle school teacher

I'm trying to think of a word that's like "pulled in different directions." "Overwhelmed," maybe.

Jessie , 37, Democrat, white, high school teacher

Also "exhausting."

Brandie, 38, independent, Black, elementary school teacher

Chaotic.

Shannon, 54, Democrat, white, middle school teacher

Frustrating.

Carlotta, 35, Democrat, Latino, elementary school teacher

Exciting.

Jill, 35, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

Exhausting.

Stacey, 55, Democrat, Black, special area teacher

Unappreciated.

David, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

Needed.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

There were three people who said “exhausting.” Why “exhausting”?

Jill, 35, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

I am in a school district where we’re facing the possibility of going on strike. It’s exhausting to me to come in already starting the school year where our board of education is not respecting us. And after last year and the year and a half we’ve had with teaching, it’s just — it’s so exhausting to be pulled all these different ways.

Laura, 49, Republican, white, high school teacher

I just feel like I have an endless to-do list that’s what I have to do to prepare for my classroom, what admin wants me to do to prepare for my classroom, what the law says I have to do.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

Carlotta, you said “exciting.”

Carlotta, 35, Democrat, Latino, elementary school teacher

I agreed with the other words that everybody else said, too, but I was trying to think of something a little bit different. And I’m into technology, and so that’s why I think it’s exciting with all of the new technology that is coming into the classrooms for students to use.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

Tyler, you were trying to describe a sort of multifaceted feeling?

Tyler, 35, Republican, white, middle school teacher

Kind of piggybacking off of what Laura just described: You’re answerable not only to administration and also parents but also to the different levels of bureaucracy that are sometimes telling you things that don’t coincide with one another on a district level and on the state level and the federal level. And then there are just a lot of voices because education is essential. I understand that everyone should have a say. But oftentimes, there’s a lot of collision there. And then we’re kind of caught in between with what exactly the expectations are for us. And then things kind of get piled on with state testing and then other mandates. It’s a lot to kind of manage all of that, while also managing behaviors day to day in the classroom.

Dan, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

Teaching’s always been challenging. I’m going into my 30th year, and it’s still a challenge. When I first started, it was a challenge to get stuff ready for my classroom. And I didn’t think I was doing a very good job. And I still don’t know if I’m doing a good job, but it’s less challenging for the classroom management

part. But the other challenges come up. There are new initiatives. It's always something new.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

Dan, several teachers here have mentioned that this last year was particularly challenging, and you said that all the years are challenging. Do you feel that the postpandemic period has been especially difficult for teachers overall?

Dan, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

Absolutely. Last year, we finally got back to being in a classroom. The kids who really hadn't been in a classroom for two years — I kind of think they forgot how to be in a classroom and forgot how to act in a classroom. It was a challenge to get them to focus. This isn't your house. Get off the furniture. You can't do that kind of stuff. You're back in school. And we have certain things we have to do in class.

Moderator, Margie Omero

If we had done this group three years ago before the pandemic, would you have picked the same word to describe teaching? How many people say, "I would have picked the same word if we did this three years ago, before the pandemic"?

Jessie , 37, Democrat, white, high school teacher

I said “exhausting,” and I’ve always felt that teaching is exhausting, which doesn’t, at this point in my career, stop me from doing it.

Brandie, 38, independent, Black, elementary school teacher

Yeah, I picked “chaotic,” and I would just say I’ve been a teacher for 16 years. It’s always been a certain level of chaos and unpredictability. But I would say, postpandemic, it’s just intensified things that teachers have been saying for years about workload, about support with managing challenging student behaviors, about unrealistic testing and curriculum expectations.

Stacey, 55, Democrat, Black, special area teacher

I feel the same way. For the most part, I feel like being a teacher is a thankless profession. And it’s something that you definitely have to want to do. Otherwise, you won’t be doing it for long. I come from a district that’s a parent-pleasing district —

Moderator, Margie Omero

What does that mean, “a parent-pleasing district”?

Stacey, 55, Democrat, Black, special area teacher

Students aren’t held accountable, parents aren’t held accountable. For example, at one point, they wanted to implement a uniform policy. Parents raised a stink. OK, they scrapped that. A teacher gives a kid a grade — or a kid earns a grade on a certain thing, and they don’t pass the assignment or the class. And the district is breathing down the teacher’s neck: “You need to pass this child.” Well, the child didn’t do what he or she was supposed to do. At times, there’s pressure on you to change it because the parent is over here, barking at the district level. And then the district is barking at the administration. And the administration is barking at us.

Moderator, Margie Omero

Shannon, you said you would have picked a different word if we had done this a couple of years ago. What’s changed?

Shannon, 54, Democrat, white, middle school teacher

When I started teaching, it was more fun, and students were held accountable. Now my middle school students come with some kind of sense of entitlement. And I don’t know where that comes from. And many of their parents are younger, and they just want to be their friend. When I was a kid, you were afraid of your parents. If you got in trouble at school, there was a consequence at home. Now a lot of these kids, they get suspended, they come back with new fancy shoes and tattoos and rewards for being rude and disrespectful.

Stacey, 55, Democrat, Black, special area teacher

For me, it was a fleeting thought because at the beginning of the pandemic, my district's theme was compassion over compliance. Well, that quickly went out the window. Almost a year into the pandemic, we finished out the first year virtual, and the following year was almost completely virtual. And in the middle of our district's Covid numbers escalating, they ordered all teachers back in the building, with no students. Well, some of us, like me, have children who are also in the district. You want me back in the building, but I can't bring my child. And my child is a minor, and she can't stay home by herself. If I wasn't so close to the end of the rainbow, I would have said, "You know what? Forget this." I just felt like I wasn't appreciated.

Tyler, 35, Republican, white, middle school teacher

I had an exit plan this summer and was looking to shift careers. This past year, the group of sixth graders that I had was by far the best I've had in my six years of teaching. That wasn't pushing me out. I still love the curriculum and love interacting with them. But it was the other stuff that I wasn't sure was going to end. Everything that we have to do on top of teaching was kind of driving me out. But I do have hope for this next year.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

What are some of the other jobs that you're performing when you're a teacher?

Carlotta, 35, Democrat, Latino, elementary school teacher

A counselor, a parent, a nurse.

Brandie, 38, independent, Black, elementary school teacher

Technician, curriculum development. Mediator, social-emotional therapist, to some degree. Secretary, data analyst.

Jill, 35, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

I'd say all the above, as well as, sometimes I'm — I don't feel like a police officer, but I'm breaking up fights, even at the elementary level.

Mary, 37, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

A safe space, the only safe space for some, and a confidante, an advocate.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

A lot of people suggest that teachers don't have enough say in decisions about education.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

If teachers had more of a voice, how would things be different?

Shannon, 54, Democrat, white, middle school teacher

Teaching is a second career for me. And I've never had a job

where so many people think they could do your job better than you without any training. People think they can just come in and be a teacher. Everybody says, “Oh, teachers are so valuable.” But in most states — and I’m sure many of you would agree — they’re not treated that way. In other countries, teachers are paid very well and given all these other things and revered. And here they’re not. We do need to be about the students. At the same time, with the pandemic, people are like, “Well, if you don’t like teaching, just quit.” Well, who’s going to teach the kids if we all quit?

Moderator, Aaron Retica

Laura, you were talking before about being pulled a million different ways. If teachers like you had a bigger voice, how could it be better?

Laura, 49, Republican, white, high school teacher

Well, I think the biggest thing is to let teachers be the drivers of policies that are created, instead of them being created at a political level or even an admin level. And when I say admin, I’m not talking about the admin within my school but the district itself. Really listening to the educators and just letting them drive the policy decisions, not letting people who have never been in a classroom — politicians and things like that — drive those policy decisions. Because we know what happens in our classroom on a day-to-day basis, and others don’t.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

Could a couple of you give me examples of what you would be doing in class that you’re not getting to do because of the jumble of other things?

Jill, 35, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

Yeah, I would say focusing more on the social-emotional side of

teaching, because my kids, they come in, and they've been home for a year and a half, almost two years. And they've forgotten how to play with each other or how not to argue — just the basics. I felt like because I teach first grade, they haven't ever been in school, some of my kids. So I really wish we could spend more time building the background that they need, even just saying "thank you" after you get something. Some of them don't get that at home. I just wish we could focus more on that instead of so much on the rigor of what we have to teach, because if they aren't met emotionally, they're not going to retain anything.

Stacey, 55, Democrat, Black, special area teacher

As far as nonteachers making policy decisions: In my state, any Joe Blow can be on the board of education. Most professions, you have to be in that profession to be on the board that governs that profession. And that's not the case for education. Nonteachers making policy changes and decisions that affect us — it's ridiculous.

Moderator, Margie Omero

We talked about some of the challenges of teaching. But what made you decide to go into teaching? What inspired you?

Brandie, 38, independent, Black, elementary school teacher

I wanted to be a teacher because of the children. That was my big drive when I started. And that's what I continually think about on the bad days, is, "These kids depend on me," especially kids that look like me. They need to see other teachers that look like them in the classroom. And I've always taught primary children, so third and second and first. And they're just funny at that age. Just remembering something silly that the kids did or something they said or something they said to each other just makes me smile and gets me through the day.

Laura, 49, Republican, white, high school teacher

I love what I teach: government and history. I love the age group that takes those classes in my state, juniors and seniors in high school. I love talking with that group of kids. They have a lot to talk about and to learn about history, and we have a lot of great conversations.

Dan, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

I tell everybody I have the greatest job because I get to come to school and I get to play every day in physics. And I like teaching high school because the kids have a sense of humor. They start to laugh and get sarcasm. And we have a good time. I also coach and advise classes and see kids outside of the class as well. It's just — it's a great experience.

Carlotta, 35, Democrat, Latino, elementary school teacher

I had some teachers who were a great help to me in middle school. That's why I wanted to go teach.

David, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

I didn't want to be a teacher. I hated kids. I graduated from U. of A., was working for the city of Tucson. It was boring, and the people I worked with were boring. When my college career ended, my roommate kind of forced me to go help out at the local high school. I had fun with coaching. You can have some positive effect on kids. You see and you kind of become everything that everybody else is saying — a parent. You see their successes. You have the joy with them. But you have the accountability. And so I went back and changed my career and went back to U. of A. and got a teacher certification. And now I've taught 11 different subjects across 32 years.

Jessie , 37, Democrat, white, high school teacher

Similar to David, I didn't think I wanted to teach. I studied writing in college. And they say when you're an English major, you can do anything. And I just said, tell me one thing because I don't know what I want to do. And I loved books. And I thought — I had a friend who became a teacher, and I was like, "Oh, maybe I can just talk about books all day and have super-high-level conversations about literature. That sounds like a good thing." And I learned quickly into student teaching that that is not what education was all about. So I went into education for books, but I stayed for the students. I don't always get to have those high-level conversations. But once in a while, they do. The kids absolutely have kept me in it. And I don't think I ever would have thought that. Seeing kids first in their family not only to graduate high school but to be in high school or to see them get those acceptance letters from college — I mean, there's nothing like it in terms of being there when that happens.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

Sometimes people talk about how teachers are kind of superhuman. What do you think people mean when they say that?

Brandie, 38, independent, Black, elementary school teacher

As I've chugged along in my career, I've liked that phrase less and less. It adds an unrealistic pressure. And in some ways, it takes the humanity out of us. It's like we can't have bad days. We can't be off. We can't be unhappy. We have to be always on. The culture's infatuated with superheroes. Superman can't have a bad day. He's Superman. He has to save everybody constantly. But who's saving Superman when he has a bad day? Or he's sick or he's hurt?

Mary, 37, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

The idea that teachers are superheroes — do people say that because there's so much stuff we go through and have to deal with that normal civilian people are like, "There's no way I could do it"? Well, half the time, we can't do it, either. But also, when a student comes back to you or when you have a struggling student and they finally get it, that is the biggest emotion in the world, is when you have that kid, that kid who overcomes a behavioral issue or finally masters the standard or hits proficient on something. Those are the superhero moments, for sure.

Shannon, 54, Democrat, white, middle school teacher

Sometimes people say "superhero," and my thing is, I'm just doing my job. I mean, everybody does their job. Sometimes I think that people expect teachers to fix everything. As much as we love the kids, you can't fix everything in their life with school. But our school district has seniors write a letter to a teacher that's impacted them, an elementary or a middle school teacher that's impacted them — and when you get a letter from a student saying, "I hated going to the library at the beginning of the year, but after taking your reading class and reading better, I love to go to the library, and I might write a book myself one day." I mean, that's why I do it.

Moderator, Margie Omero

Let's switch gears here a bit. What is the purpose of education? What is school for?

Bobbie, 48, Democrat, Asian, special education teacher

School is to help students realize their potential. They get exposed to different kinds of people and different backgrounds and different topics. And it's for them to absorb as much as they want to and to do that exploration on their own. So my job, as a homeroom teacher or as a science teacher, is just to give them more options beyond maybe what they're seeing online or in their home, to see that there's other stuff out there and just to get

out and figure it out for yourself. It's really about encouraging them to find confidence and move on and just be awesome.

Moderator, Margie Omero

Carlotta, in your view, what is school for?

Carlotta, 35, Democrat, Latino, elementary school teacher

Teaching kids the basics of life: reading, writing, math, budgeting.

Moderator, Margie Omero

Tyler, how about you?

Tyler, 35, Republican, white, middle school teacher

To provide the next generation with the skills to help them succeed and to be responsible citizens with good values, to give students the foundation of what our democratic system is. This is how we participate in it. And this is why it's important, along with compassion, strong families, kindness.

David, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

I think education is just formalized curiosity. Our skill set is to get a bunch of kids and individual kids who don't want to be there — and don't want to do what you do — to do it and do it willingly and happily. As teachers, we're just the directors to help them get the skill set, the civic responsibility, as a person.

Moderator, Margie Omero

What do you mean by "civic responsibility"?

David, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

To understand that they're not entitled to anything, that they

have to give back and it's a community. And you have to be respectful and listen. That's civic responsibility, as well as, "You can have a chance. There's still hope for social mobility."

Moderator, Margie Omero

You think that's an important part of your job as a teacher, is helping kids with social mobility?

David, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

Absolutely, to teach them there is hope. You can still, in this nation, be whatever and whomever you want to be.

Jessie , 37, Democrat, white, high school teacher

I think part of it is helping students really figure out who they are. And I can say this, especially for high school, what they're good at and how to foster that, what they're not good at and how to either get better at it or kind of work around it and then prepare them to sort of take that and show them what possibilities there are for them in all that.

Moderator, Margie Omero

OK, Stacey, what do you think? What is school for?

Stacey, 55, Democrat, Black, special area teacher

Guiding the students in how to navigate this world that we live in. It's changed. It's not like it was when we were growing up. I was just telling my daughter this morning, she and her peers have the world at their fingertips. And there is nothing that they can't find out by going online. And so at this point — I don't see schools going away, but I see fewer and fewer brick and mortar buildings because, again, the pandemic has taught us that for older kids anyway, a certain level of things can be done online.

Mary, 37, Democrat, white, elementary school teacher

I want my kids to have a passion and to take ownership of their learning. And whatever they are thrilled about, diving deeper into — amazing. We're all forced to teach to the standards and whatever, yada, yada, yada. That is not the entire thing of school. School is learning how to be social with people. School is building character. It's so much more than reading, writing, arithmetic.

Moderator, Aaron Retica

Here's the last thing I want to ask about: How much do you think it would matter if teachers had higher social status and were simply paid more? Would that revolutionize education?

David, 55, independent, white, high school teacher

Thomas Jefferson always said that you needed the best and the brightest to be able to educate the next generation. And if that's true, you need to treat them with respect. That means monetary compensation. Then others will hold you in that same regard. If not, then anybody, like the guy next to me, says, "I'll just go teach as a hobby." They don't have any idea of the skill set that we possess.

Bobbie, 48, Democrat, Asian, special education teacher

This is actually my second career. I am a doctor, a medical doctor. And due to circumstances, I went from being in the hospital to being in the classroom. And I've actually had a strange reluctance to let people know about my education or my professional background because they're like, "Why are you a teacher?" And I always tell people, "I can teach the material. I know my stuff. But not everyone can relay it and get it through to

the kids.” So for me, I actually have both sides of it. I do believe that we need a little bit more respect and prestige for teachers because, again, as we said earlier, a lot of what we do does go unappreciated, just because of ignorance. They just don’t know what we do, how we get there, how hard it is every single day. It’s not just at graduation or the first day of school. It’s that second Tuesday in the middle of November when nobody wants to be there. And you’ve got to somehow muster up the strength to get everybody to open up that book and try to learn something today.

Shannon, 54, Democrat, white, middle school teacher

I think part of the problem is that a lot of people discount being a teacher out of hand because it is such a low-paying, underappreciated profession. There are people that would probably be excellent teachers that do something else that they might not enjoy as much to make money. I mean, when I was a single mom and my kids were in school, I had to work two jobs because being a teacher didn’t pay all my bills. My students tell me, “I would never be a teacher.” If people felt like it was a more prestigious job and that they were going to get paid for all the work that they do, more people would want to do it.

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10 Americans on What It Means to Be Brave Politically

America in Focus seeks to hear and understand the views of cross-sections of Americans whose voices are often not heard in opinion journalism.

This discussion was moderated by a focus group veteran, Margie Omero, and Aaron Retica, an editor in Opinion. Ms. Omero does similar work for political candidates, parties and special interest groups. She chose the participants. (Times Opinion paid her for the work.) This transcript has been edited for length and clarity; an audio recording of the session is also included. Participants provided their biographical details. As is customary in focus groups, our role as moderators was not to argue with or fact-check the speakers, and some participants expressed opinions not rooted in facts.

Illustrations by Lucinda Rogers.

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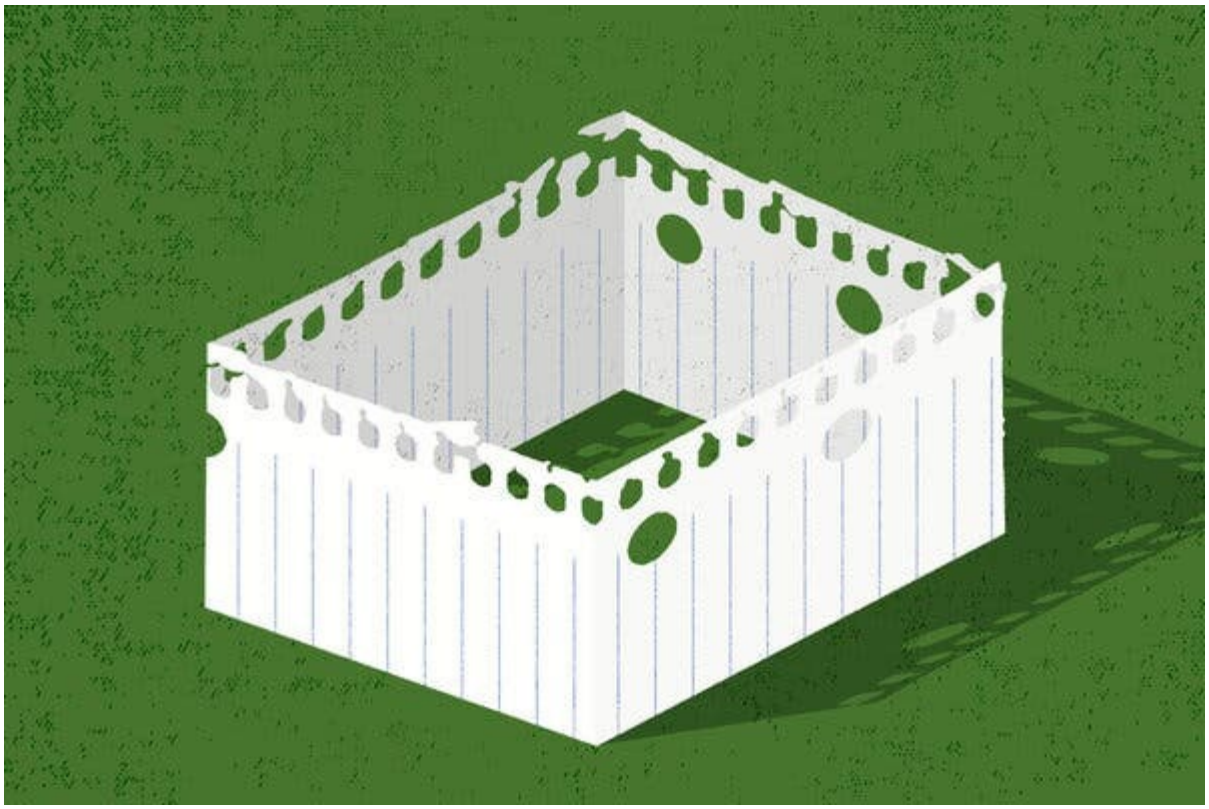

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OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

School Is for Us

What is school really for? Students at Oakland's Fremont High answer this question with their cameras.

Sept. 1, 2022

Jahmese Jones Dunbar

By Fremont High School students

OAKLAND, Calif. — School is a community, a common place to gain relationships. School is for social interactions and learning to become an active member of society.

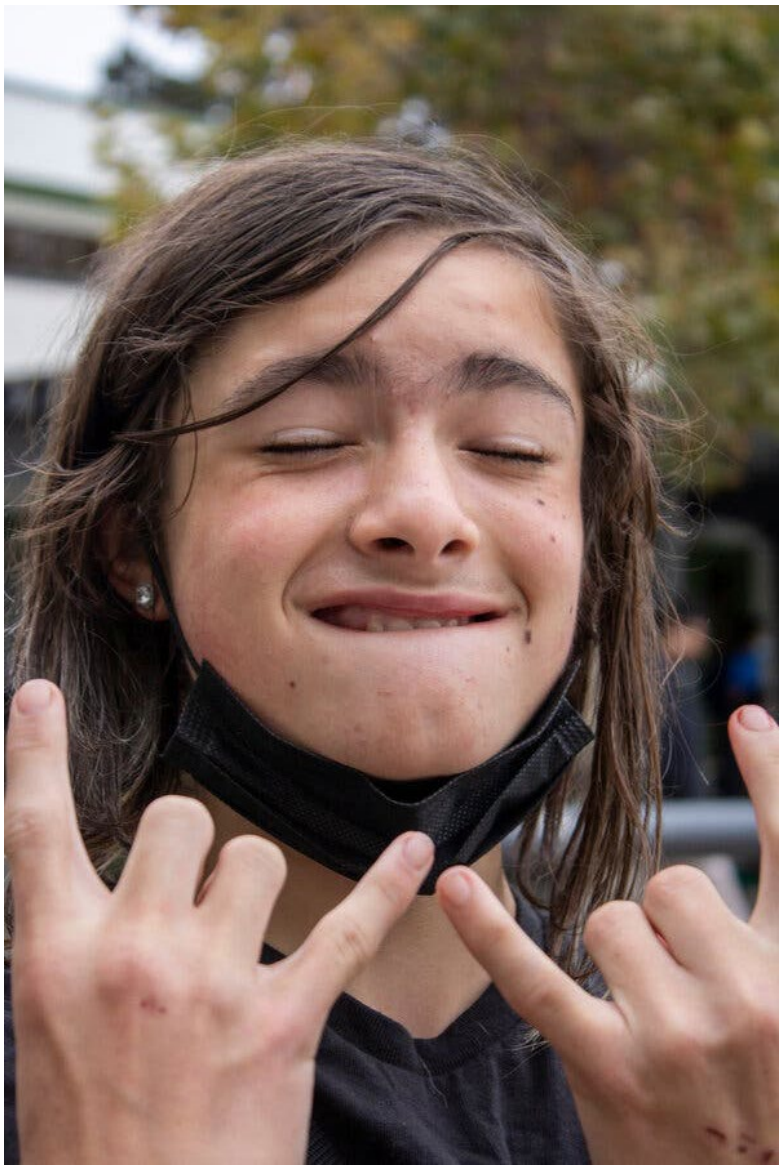
Most grown-ups believe that school is only for learning back-to-back. They don't understand the parts that build character for us teens. They don't understand that school is where we grow and learn to express ourselves. The things we go through are like the practice tests for what comes next.

These photos show the community and social parts of our school, Fremont High; they show the common struggle and the growth that you can get only from a high school. The photos were taken over the course of one busy week in August by students in Fremont's media academy. Each photo has a caption written by the student photographer. We also have quotes from

Fremont students sharing their view on what school means to them. —

Kendal Erving, 15, sophomore

Fremont High School sometimes feels small, with around 1,000 students. But it's during the passing period that I get my daily reminder of how big the school really is. Passing period makes the school feel lively. You see groups of friends talking to one another or teachers greeting their students. Fabiola Chavez Ayala



Anthony is always full of energy and excitement, even in the early morning before class starts. His favorite thing about school is hanging out with friends and doing sports. Yizel Ceja Martinez

Mr. Harris explains government econ to two students, Gladys and Abygale; they've been joking a lot during his lecture, so they need a little support. Santiago

“School is about making mistakes and learning from them. School is the prime time in life to make as many mistakes as you possibly can so that you can learn from them and not repeat those same mistakes again in adult life, where they could have more drastic consequences.” — Victor, 15

“Being in school lets you be yourself. School is where you can be anyone without anybody judging you. A school is a place where people want to see the real you.” — Evette, 15

Ms. Zap, an English teacher, takes attendance. Jahmese Jones Dunbar

Second period digital art, taught by Mr. Basta, has to be one of my favorite classes. Fabiola Chavez Ayala

Goofing off during Spanish class, the last class of the day, a.k.a. the most relaxing period of the day. Jahmese Jones Dunbar

“For me, school is hard, but other people think that school is easy. Parents think that being in school doesn’t make you tired, but in reality, it does.” — Jayla, 15

“School is somewhere you can build your confidence in life, even if you are not too sure about it.” — Destini, 15

“Take a picture of us,” say Mar and Neeya. Jahmese Jones Dunbar

Vanessa is getting ready to enter her A.P. world history class and then wonders, “What is the point of having lockers if we can’t use them?” Yizel Ceja Martinez

Lunch from the school cafeteria: a chicken burrito and some fruit. The burrito actually tasted pretty good. Michael

“I think what adults misunderstand about what school means to me and my friends is that school is vastly different from when they grew up and went to school. Things that applied to them when they went to school don’t necessarily apply to the current school demographic. Trends and people that were popular when they were kids aren’t popular now.” — Victor, 15

Jimmie and I like to joke around with each other. Recently, I saw him do a pose from a famous anime called “JoJo's Bizarre Adventure.” The pose is known to be made by someone named Dio, so we call it the Dio pose. I dared him to do it, and to my surprise, he did it almost perfectly. Fabiola Chavez Ayala

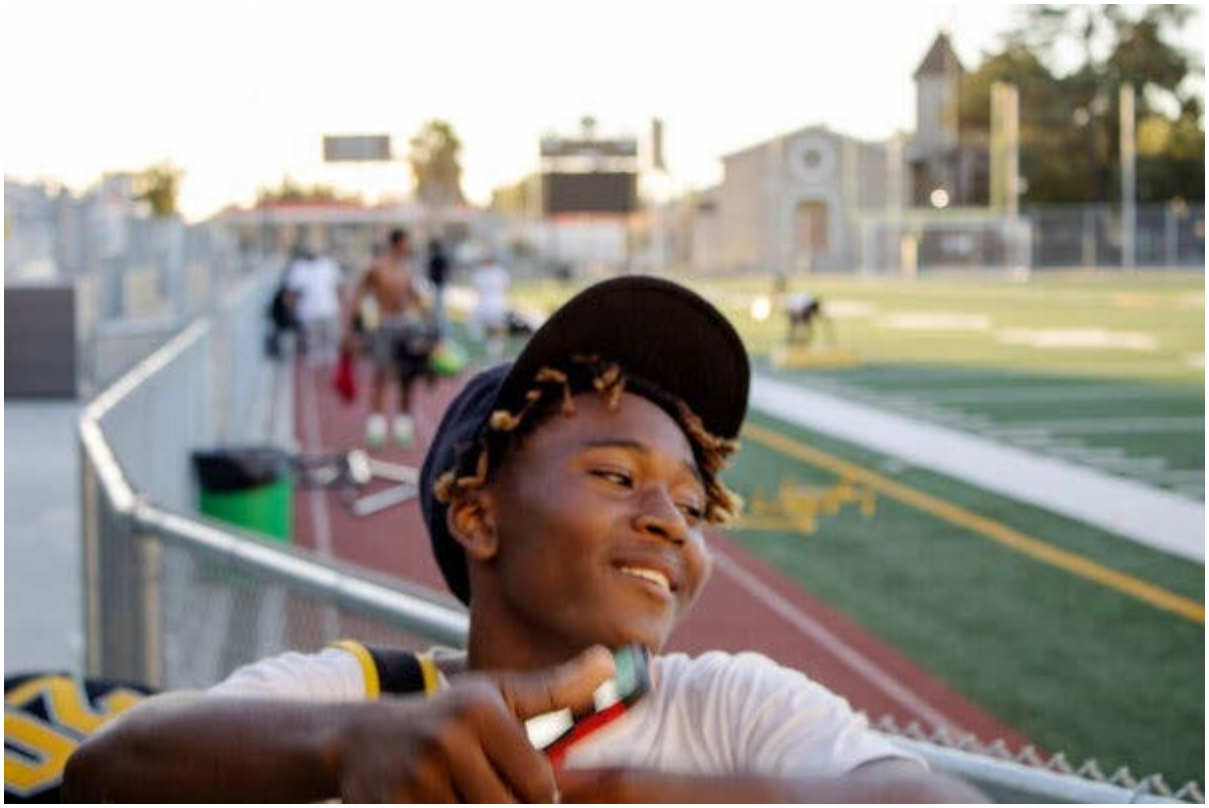
“Grown-ups misunderstood that school isn’t just a place about

learning; it's more of a place to hang out with people your age who understand your perspective." — Evette, 15

"People think that school is only for learning, but they're incorrect, because for me, school is where I spend time with my friends. That's where I have fun. We spend 80 percent of our life in school." — Jayla, 15

Kelepi, Ahmed, Futa, Naki and Mona prepare to get in formation. Edwin Pineda

[1] Some upperclassmen chillin' out in the bleachers watching everything play out. Jahmese Jones Dunbar



Angel enjoys a well-earned break after football practice. Amanakilelei (Naki) Tuakoi

Student photographers: Fabiola Chavez Ayala, 14, junior; Jahmese Jones Dunbar, 15, junior; Michael, 14, sophomore; Yizel Ceja Martinez, 14, sophomore; Edwin Pineda, 15, sophomore; Santiago, 17, senior; and Amanakilelei (Naki) Tuakoi, 16, junior.

The Media Academy at Fremont High School is a training ground for students considering careers in media.

Faculty advisers: Kevin Kunishi teaches photography and multimedia in Fremont's media program. His personal work as a photographer focuses on long-form documentary projects. Jasmene Miranda is a career technical education teacher and program director at Fremont, of which she is a proud graduate.

Produced by Jessie Wender.

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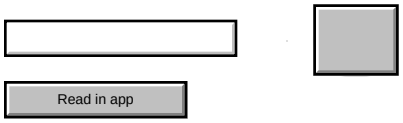
OPINION

GUEST ESSAY

School Is for Wasting Time and Money

Sept. 1, 2022

Illustration by Chloe Scheffe; photographs by Internet Archive; Warren K. Leffler, via Library of Congress; photos-public-domain.com; and Charles Deluvio and Subhash Nusetti, via Unsplash



By Bryan Caplan
Dr. Caplan is a professor of economics at George Mason University and the author of “The Case Against Education.”

I have deep doubts about the intellectual and social value of schooling. My argument in a nutshell: First, everyone leaves school eventually. Second, most of what you learn in school doesn’t matter after graduation. Third, human beings soon forget knowledge they rarely use.

Strangely, these very doubts imply that the educational costs of the coronavirus pandemic are already behind us. Forced optimism notwithstanding, the remote schooling that millions of students endured during the pandemic looks like a pedagogical disaster. Some researchers found that being in Zoom school was about equivalent to not being in school at all. Others simply found that test scores rose much less than they normally would.

But given my doubts about the value of school, I figure that most of the learning students lost in Zoom school is learning they would have lost by early adulthood even if schools had remained open. My claim is not that in the long run remote learning is almost as good as in-person learning. My claim is that in the long run in-person learning is almost as bad as remote learning.

How do we know all this? My work focuses on tests of adult knowledge — what adults retain after graduation. The general pattern is that grown-ups have shockingly little academic knowledge. College graduates know about what you'd expect high school graduates to know; high school graduates know about what you'd expect dropouts to know; dropouts know next to nothing. This doesn't mean that these students never knew more; it just means that only a tiny fraction of what they learn durably stays in their heads.

This is especially clear for subjects beyond the three R's — reading, writing

and arithmetic. Fewer than 1 percent of American adults even claim to have learned to speak a foreign language very well in school, even when two years of coursework is standard. Adults' knowledge of history and civics is negligible. If you test the most elementary facts, like naming the three branches of government, they get about half right. The same goes for questions of basic science, like "Are electrons smaller than atoms?" and "Do antibiotics kill viruses as well as bacteria?"

How bad are these scores? Very bad. If you know half the letters in the alphabet, we don't call you "half literate." We correctly call you illiterate. I say the same goes for lack of elementary knowledge of history, civics and science. If you don't know half the basics of history, civics and science, you really don't understand history, civics or science at all.

The payoff for teaching basic literacy and numeracy is admittedly much larger. Since adults regularly use reading, writing and math, they retain much of what they learn. Even here, though, schools' performance is mediocre and unlikely to meaningfully improve. Schools have been trying to overcome reading, writing and math deficits among underperforming students for decades. Boosting their performance in the short run is quite doable. The recurring problem is fade-out; the effects of interventions diminish or disappear over time.

I freely admit that my dim assessment of American education is a minority view among my fellow economists, who offer piles of evidence that education has a big effect on what adults earn. They're basically right about that, but that's no excuse for ignoring the piles of evidence that education has little effect on what adults know.

This blind spot is especially odd because there's a clean explanation for both piles of evidence. Namely: School is lucrative primarily because it certifies, or signals, employability. Most education isn't job training; it's a passport to the real training, which happens on the job. That's why graduation pays individuals so well. You don't learn much in your last few

weeks of school, but completion persuades employers to trust you. And that's why credential proliferation pays countries so poorly. Handing out ever more high school, college and grad school diplomas can't enrich society as a whole unless students durably learn long-run skills along the way.

If school closures are unlikely to make our kids any more ignorant than they would have been without Covid, in what sense were school closures even a temporary disaster? Simple: When schools shuttered, they stopped performing their sole undeniably valuable function: providing day care. In-person schooling allows parents to work full-time without distraction. In-person schooling allows parents to take care of infants and elders. In-person schooling allows parents to finish their household chores. And in-person schooling allows parents to relax.

School closures were a disaster for convenience. And while you'll never hear a "convenience above all" political speech, actions speak louder than words. By February 2021, about 90 percent of private schools serving elementary or middle schoolers offered in-person instruction. Why? Presumably because they knew that parents cherished the convenience of in-person education. Fewer than half of corresponding public schools, funded by taxes rather than paying customers, were fully open by that time. Many large districts stayed closed or in hybrid mode for over a year. While the pedagogical costs of closure remain speculative, the convenience costs

are beyond all doubt.

What's the most important thing school offered you? How did it influence your life, either in the long term or the short term?

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If we set aside wishful thinking and calmly reflect on what happened to education during Covid, we learn two valuable lessons. First, schools before Covid gave taxpayers a bad deal, taking lavish funding while imparting little long-term knowledge. Second, schools during Covid gave taxpayers an even worse deal, enjoying massive emergency funding while refusing to provide at least day care in exchange.

Even before Covid, American schools were spending over $15,000 a year per student. Is there any way to get better value for our money? The most straightforward way is to spend a lot less of it. American schools will never make American students bilingual, so why waste precious resources pretending otherwise? The same goes for most of the curriculum.

The opposite goes for private schools. Do they actually boost test scores? The evidence is mixed. But when parents wanted day care in a pandemic, private schools delivered. School vouchers — funding students instead of systems — are therefore another credible way to give us better value for our money. Arizona has already created a roughly $7,000 per student per year school voucher program, which gives private schools incentives to both cut costs and please parents. School choice doesn't just protect families against future closures; it protects families against whatever goes wrong with education next. Though school choice is no panacea, sticking with our status quo is for suckers.

Bryan Caplan (@bryan_caplan) is a professor of economics at George Mason University and the author of "Open Borders" and "The Case Against Education."

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