

GUEST ESSAY

Too Many Americans Don't Understand What Happens in Their Schools

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PHILADELPHIA — As America enters a less acute phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is time to reflect upon what we lost and what we learned. America's failure to prioritize time in school should be at the top of the list.

Major disruptions to school schedules were perhaps to be expected in the early days of the pandemic. But we allowed them to persist to a troubling degree, even though we know that time in school is not fungible — learning lost now cannot simply be made up later.

How did we get here? Why was U.S. public education so vulnerable to pandemic disruption? How did bars, restaurants and other businesses reopen in many American cities before schools did? As an urban education scholar who has witnessed the damages Covid-19 inflicted on schools over the past two years, I believe our unwillingness to put schools first has two sources, which both originated long before the pandemic started.

First, Americans fail to take the work of teachers seriously. This manifests in teachers' low salaries compared with other professions, of course, but also in the requirements for entering and remaining in the profession. Compared with

teachers in higher-performing countries (such as Finland, Singapore and Canada), teachers in the United States receive less rigorous training before entering the classroom and are less likely to participate in high-quality, sustained professional development throughout their careers.

Teachers I speak with in Philadelphia often feel disrespected as professionals. They report having their judgment challenged by administrators, policymakers and parents, having to teach outside of their subject area or being required to attend trainings they find useless.

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Much of the public discourse during the pandemic has positioned teachers either as villains putting their own safety over their students' needs or as heroes selflessly serving the public with little thought for their own well-being. But generally teachers are neither villains nor heroes. They are professionals who use the tools of lesson planning and repeated interactions with students to produce learning. Because Americans tend not to understand or appreciate this, we have not protected the conditions teachers need to practice their profession successfully.

Teachers need stable environments in which to practice their craft. Research on effective schools has demonstrated the importance of consistent supports, sustained relationships and strong leadership and, in contrast, the damage caused by too many disruptions. The quality of students' education depends on regular, day-to-day interactions between students, teachers and subject matter. Moreover, there is ample evidence that students thrive with consistency. Strong classroom management starts with routines. Students who move from one school to another tend to fall behind.

The second source of Americans' collective willingness to sacrifice in-person learning is an attack on public schools and teachers also decades in the making. From the right, critics have argued that public education is failing, school systems are inefficient monopolies and schools are sites for liberal indoctrination. While the left is generally more supportive of public education, progressive critiques of educational inequality, outmoded practices and narrow curriculums can also undermine faith in public schools.

It is rare in these debates for either side to acknowledge the important everyday work that happens in classrooms as educators design instruction, plan assessments and strive to meet students' needs. This disregard for the daily work of schools was especially clear in spring 2020, when teachers were expected to quickly, and with minimal support, pivot to remote instruction. Then, in Philadelphia at least, they were told for weeks they could not expect students to complete any schoolwork — but should still teach every day.

The consequences of such disruption are profound: In my research, I have seen teachers and students unable to build relationships, settle into complex projects, practice new skills or even sustain meaningful conversations from one day to the next. While one missed day or week can feel inconsequential — especially given the dangers associated with Covid-19 — when a week of disruption becomes two weeks and then becomes a month or more, learning and relationships suffer. Faced with so much instability, teachers become depleted, moving from ambitious instruction to survival mode. Students check out; teachers burn out.

I have also seen what it's like when teachers and students are in a rhythm — when they have sustained time together and know what is happening next. I have seen students who were shy and withdrawn in September become engaged socially and academically by January after forming relationships with their peers and teachers. It's no happy accident; such a change is a result of the school's investment in a powerful set of daily routines.

In December, I spoke at length with a ninth grader in a Philadelphia school that serves mostly students living in poverty. This student confidently explained to me the shift from an agrarian to market economy, describing changes in farming technology and social structure. She was able to do this because her teacher had planned and executed lessons that built on one another, ultimately creating a learning trajectory that made this synthesis possible. Each one of these lessons mattered; each one of the exchanges the student had with her teacher, her peers and the material helped her build upon and expand her knowledge. This is the work of schools, the craft of teaching. This is also what has been badly undermined these past two years.

If Americans truly valued this work, we would have done more to ensure teachers have safe, stable environments in which to practice their craft. This does not mean keeping schools open at all costs or prematurely eliminating mask mandates. But it does mean taking measures to prevent community spread of the coronavirus, even if they are unpopular and inconvenient to adults, as well as investing in adequate ventilation and widespread testing in schools. As the country continues to return to some semblance of normalcy, at least for now, we should remember the price students and teachers paid for America's decisions over the past two years. We should not make these mistakes again.

As a society, we show we value education not by calling teachers heroes while treating their work as expendable. We do it by paying attention to the conditions that make teaching and learning possible and by ensuring that — despite everything else happening in the world — schools are sites of stability, not chaos.

Teachers, please tell us about your pandemic experience

We are no longer accepting submissions.

Maia Bloomfield Cucchiara is a professor at Temple University and the author of "Marketing Schools, Marketing Cities: Who Wins and Who Loses When Schools Become Urban Amenities."

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