IDEAS

School Wasn't So Great Before COVID, Either

Yes, remote schooling has been a misery—but it's offering a rare chance to rethink early education entirely.

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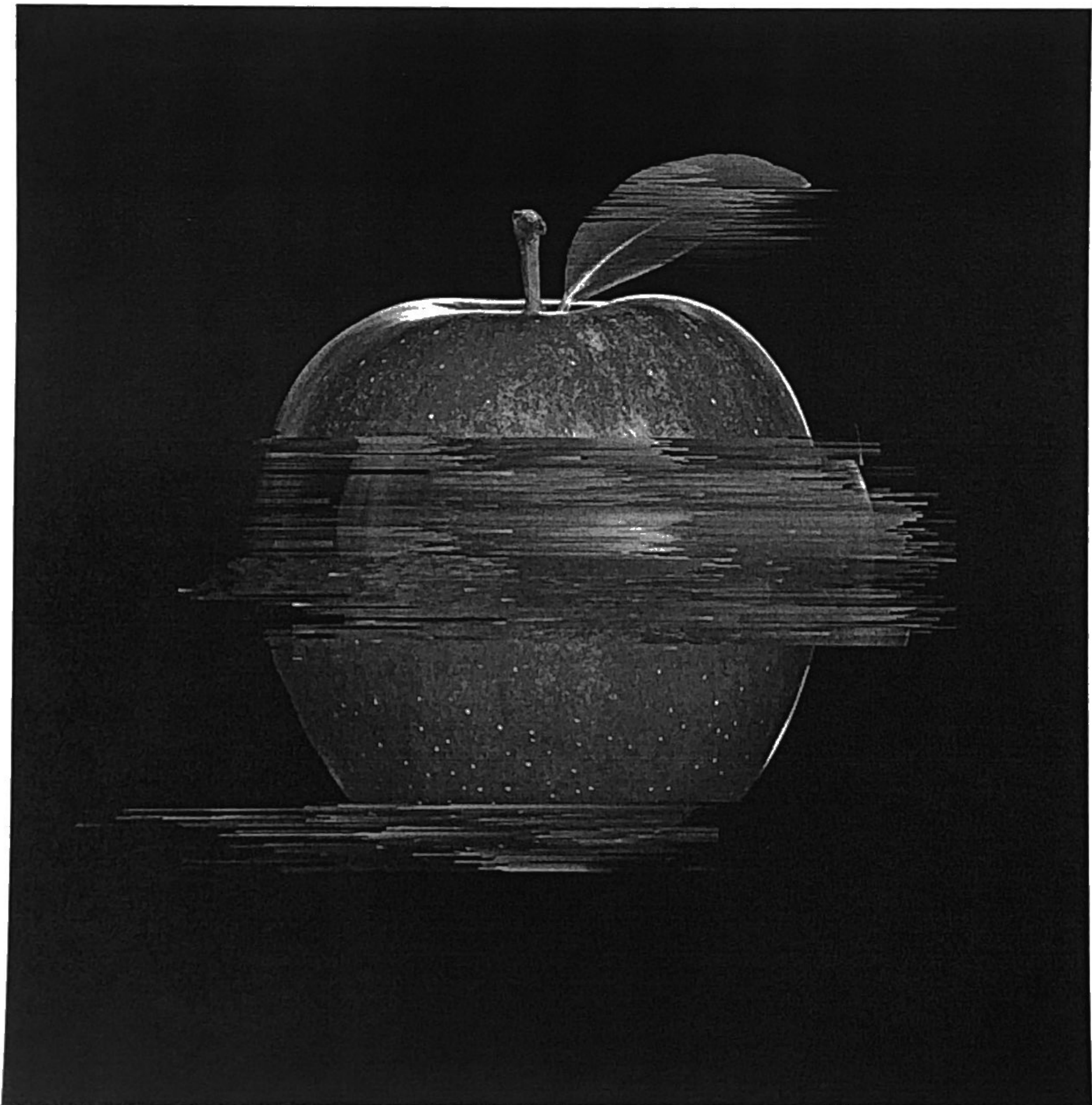

THE LITANY OF tragedies and inconveniences visited upon Americans by COVID-19 is long, but one of the more pronounced sources of misery for parents has been pandemic schooling. The logistical gymnastics necessary to balance work and school when all the crucial resources—time, physical space, internet bandwidth, emotional reserves—are limited have pushed many to the point of despair.

Pandemic school is clearly not working well, especially for younger children—and it's all but impossible for the 20 percent of American students who lack access to the technology needed for remote learning. But what parents are coming to understand about their kids' education—glimpsed through Zoom windows and "asynchronous" classwork—is that school was not always working so great before COVID-19 either. Like a tsunami that pulls away from the coast, leaving an exposed stretch of land, the pandemic has revealed long-standing inattention to children's developmental needs—needs as basic as exercise, outdoor time, conversation, play, even sleep. All of the challenges of educating young children that we have minimized for years have suddenly appeared like flotsam on a beach at low tide, reeking and impossible to ignore. Parents are not only seeing how flawed and glitch-riddled remote teaching is—they're discovering that many of the problems of remote schooling are merely exacerbations of problems with in-person schooling.

[Emily Gould: Remote learning is a bad joke]

It's remarkable how little schools have changed over time; most public elementary schools are stuck with a model that hasn't evolved to reflect advances in cognitive science and our understanding of human development. When I walked into my 10-year-old son's fourth-grade classroom a year ago, it looked almost exactly like my now-28-year-old son's classroom in 2001, which in turn looked strikingly like my own fourth-grade classroom in 1972. They all had the same configuration of desks, cubbies, and rigidly grade-specific accoutrements. The school schedule also remains much the same: 35 hours of weekly instructional time for about 180 days. The same homework, too, despite the growing wealth of evidence suggesting that homework for elementary-school children (aside from nightly reading) offers minimal or no benefits. Elementary education also values relatively superficial learning that's too focused on achieving mastery of shallow (but test-friendly) skills

unmoored from real content knowledge or critical thinking. School hours are marked by disruptions and noise as students shift, mostly en masse and in age-stratified groups, from one strictly demarcated topic or task to another. Many educators and child-development experts believe that some of the still-standard features of pre-K and elementary education—age and ability cohorts, short classroom periods, confinement mostly indoors—are not working for many children. And much of what *has* changed—less face time with teachers, assignments on iPads or computers, a narrowed curriculum—has arguably made things worse.

As distance learning has (literally) brought home these realities about how we educate young children, an opportunity to do things better presents itself—not just for the duration of the pandemic but afterward as well.

EVER SINCE it became clear last spring that school closures would be protracted, we've heard an outpouring of concern about potential learning loss and other serious costs for kids, including undetected child abuse and hunger. For a sizable fraction of children—those with disabilities whose educational needs can't be met remotely, and the millions of kids eligible for free or reduced-price lunch who weren't fed during the spring and summer—that concern has obvious merit. A McKinsey analysis concluded that if remote learning continues into 2021, students will suffer an average of seven months of "learning loss"—in essence, they'll be seven months behind in mastering certain concepts and skills. Latino and Black students will fall a little further behind, McKinsey found, and low-income students will lose more than a year. A report out of the Brookings Institution in the spring projected that an extended break from in-person school could cause a "COVID Slide," in which third-to-eighth-grade students could lose a substantial portion of the progress they would have been expected to make in math and reading.

The effect of these potential learning setbacks should not be underestimated. But the picture gets murkier when we consider that many children, from a variety of backgrounds, seem to be coping quite well without traditional school. Some are even continuing to make learning gains. For instance, the Brookings study predicted that the top quarter of students would still advance in reading. "I think a huge part of [some students' work improving] is that we've dramatically ratcheted down the total workload in order to make tasks accessible rather than overwhelming," Mark Gardner, a high-school English teacher in Washington State,

told the education website *Edutopia*. Some students are doing "unexpectedly well," according to *The Hechinger Report*, in part because it has been easier for them to remain focused on learning.

Many kids are also happier and less stressed than they were while sitting in a classroom. Some students are even excelling, as the superintendent of the L.A. public-school system told the *Los Angeles Times*. Survey results from a demographically representative sample of American families conducted in the spring revealed that 43 percent of parents agreed with the statement "My child is less stressed now than before school closed." (Only 29 percent disagreed.) Some children have been freed from bullying (school-based bullying has been reported by 20 percent of 12-to-18-year-olds). One teacher told *Edutopia* that students are thriving because high-stakes-testing pressure has been eased during the pandemic. A recently published survey suggests that the more flexible schedules afforded by pandemic schooling are allowing teenagers to get enough sleep for the first time. And as Steven Mintz, the author of *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, has put it, the pandemic has given students "opportunities to grow and develop in ways that would have been impossible in more 'normal' times."

[Read: Teens did surprisingly well in quarantine]

We know the pandemic has created or exacerbated mental-health problems for many children. But what's less appreciated is that pre-pandemic schooling was already contributing to such problems. One large study from this year found that students reported feeling less happy while at school than in any other location. Another found that emergency psychiatric visits between 2009 and 2012 more than doubled when school was in session compared with during the summer and vacations. While the adult suicide rate has historically peaked in summer, the recent increase in youth suicides has shown the opposite pattern, with suicides dropping off in the summer and climbing when kids are back in school. Researchers have found that elementary-school students' levels of the stress hormone cortisol become elevated during the school year. Peter Gray, a psychology professor at Boston College who studies these issues, says that if school were a drug, it would not receive FDA approval.

Both long-standing instructional practices and more recent changes in curriculum may have contributed to these problems. For instance, traditionally age-stratified

classrooms, which most people take for granted, represent an unnatural and potentially unhealthy way of organizing children's lives, experts now believe. Angela Duckworth, a University of Pennsylvania psychologist and the author of *Grit*, hypothesizes that the age segregation of schools can contribute to competition and stress. In a mixed-age group, she told me, "the 10-year-old takes the hand of the 5-year-old and looks both ways crossing the street. The 5-year-old looks up to the 10-year-old with admiration and trust, and does as they are told. In contrast, when you throw hundreds of kids of exactly the same age together, attention goes, unhelpfully, to comparisons within the group: Who is smartest? Who is fastest? Who is prettiest?" This steers children's values away from kindness, trust, and community and toward status competition, which can generate stress and bullying. This effect may be more potent than it used to be, because children spend more time away from their home and neighborhood than in previous generations.

Experts across the educational and ideological spectrums agree that a curriculum rich in literature, civics, history, and the arts is essential for strong reading, critical-thinking, and writing skills. But schools have—quite irrationally—abandoned this breadth in favor of stripped-down programs focused on narrow testing metrics. Five years after the shift to high-stakes testing under the No Child Left Behind Act, which was signed in 2002, a survey of a national sample of school districts found that nearly two-thirds of school districts had dramatically increased language-arts or math time while almost half had reduced time spent on social studies, science, art, music, physical education, lunch, or recess. "Special" classes, such as music—as well as periods like recess, physical education, and even lunch—provide children with important opportunities for emotional growth and independent learning. For many children, they are what make school bearable. (In one intriguing natural experiment, researchers observed that ADHD diagnoses spiked dramatically in tandem with the timing of states' adoption of high-stakes-testing policies; another study found that being in kindergarten was a significant risk factor for receiving an ADHD diagnosis compared with same-age children who remained in preschool for an extra year.)

Pandemic Zoom classes have also revealed the extent to which the teaching of young children today relies on flawed classroom approaches—teachers talking too much, kids not enough. But developmental scientists and educators have long known that academic outcomes in the later elementary-school years are built on a foundation of authentic, conversational language and on the nurturing of

meaningful relationships in early childhood. Early learning is fundamentally a social process, during which the architecture of the developing brain is constructed from emotional connections with trusted caregivers and friends. One study, from 2011, found that preschool teachers' use of sophisticated, responsive language during children's free play predicted better fourth-grade reading-comprehension outcomes. Many studies have shown the value of face-to-face, empathic teaching styles for language development in infants and young children. In general, children experience greater academic and social gains in classrooms where teachers are emotionally attuned to them—bending down to chat spontaneously and meaningfully, and following curricula that encourage physical, collaborative, open-ended play.

One of the many ironies of contemporary education is that as we learn more about the importance of emotional connection and face-to-face communication in early brain development, we seem ever more invested in technological quick fixes—"self-monitored" math lessons on iPads and the like—that take young children away from the adults charged with teaching them. What parents are seeing on Zoom is not a radical departure from what goes on in regular pre-K and elementary-school classrooms, but rather a virtual extension of that.

For all its challenges, the pandemic presents an opportunity to rethink school entirely. What should we be demanding?

A good start would be to include a broader and deeper curriculum with more chances for children to explore, play, and build relationships with peers and teachers. Schools should also be in the business of fostering curiosity and a love of learning in all children, or at a minimum not impeding the development of those traits. This is a low educational bar but one that is too often not cleared, as the millions of American adults who are functionally illiterate might suggest.

But the most obvious demand should be for more time outside. In a pandemic, the reasons for doing this are clear: Outdoor transmission of COVID-19 has been shown to be far less likely than indoor spread. But outdoor learning has myriad benefits even without a public-health emergency. Years of accumulating evidence reveal concretely measurable benefits of nature-based learning and outdoor time for young children. For instance, multiple studies have shown that providing children with nature-based experiences reduces the frequency of ADHD symptoms in both

the immediate and longer terms. Another study found that children who received science instruction outdoors learned more than those who received it only in a classroom. Yet despite what we know about nature's positive impact on mental health, attention span, academic outcomes, physical fitness, and self-regulation, outdoor time is too often seen as a quirky and marginal add-on, rather than as central to the learning process itself.

[Read: Why can't we just have class outside?]

Early in the 20th century, tuberculosis outbreaks led many American schools to successfully adopt outdoor teaching. Nowadays, a host of new obstacles stand in the way: perceptions about lack of neighborhood safety; access to outdoor spaces; teacher know-how; adult buy-in; and concerns about extreme climate and air quality, especially for students attending schools in western states. But the biggest obstacle is a lack of will and imagination. The limited national discourse about alternative learning venues still seems to be rooted in the presumption that indoor lessons can be transposed either to the outdoors or to the internet with a few tweaks here and there, using the same curriculum, the same learning goals, the same expectations, and—lest we forget—the same questionable outcome measures. We shouldn't be surprised when teaching approaches that didn't serve all children well in traditional in-person classrooms are even less successful when applied online or to outdoor classrooms.

Here's what we should have done last spring—and a radical proposal for what we could still do for the balance of the 2020–21 school year: What if we give every kid in kindergarten through sixth grade in America the option to spend the academic year engaged primarily outdoors in a kind of "pandemic camp" instead of traditional school? The focus would be on achievement that is not narrowly academic—physical challenges; acts of service; and the development of self-regulation, independence, and friendship. Academic goals would also be part of the program; you can learn a lot of science while roaming a municipal park. But the emphasis would be on creating a new set of challenges for students to master, not on an ersatz version of school as we know it. We could suspend state-mandated testing for a year. We could replace the standard playbook with a new one that rejects the cognitive and emotional harm done to children who sit in taped-off squares in a mask all day and that values instead the broadest definition of learning. Among other benefits, spending money on universal year-round summer camp

would do more to help poor kids close the achievement gap than would spending it on remedial phonics lessons.

Finally, one thing the pandemic has highlighted is the abiding tension between schools' custodial function (warehousing children for the day, feeding them and keeping them safe, so their parents can work) and their educational function (actually teaching children). Too often, when we talk about "school" we really mean "child care"—and also nutrition, medical care, mental-health services, and social-skills support. Some teachers routinely purchase and wash clothes for their neediest students. Some even become foster parents to them. Modern family life is complex, and it's tempting to keep asking schools to assume more and more responsibilities. But the more we ask schools to expand beyond their core mission, the harder it becomes to discern which aspects of schooling are educationally effective. Schools can and should help mitigate harm to disadvantaged kids, but they cannot be a panacea for children in dangerous or neglectful home environments. Issues like livable wages and the absence of affordable child care are distinct from questions about learning, and we can't keep commingling them.

If the parental frustrations kindled by pandemic schooling can be converted into political energy, that could ultimately yield much-needed reforms in both schools and their surrounding communities, the health of which is essential to children's growth. As we muddle through the COVID-19 era yearning for a return to something close to normal, we shouldn't squander this occasion to imagine how much better "normal" could be.

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