



**Editor in Chief**

Lory Hough  
LORY\_HOUGH@HARVARD.EDU

**Creative Direction**

MO.D  
Patrick Mitchell  
MODUSOP.NET

**Writers**

Andrew Bauld  
Elizabeth Christopher  
Megan Perna, Ed.M.'xx

**Illustrators**

Tete Garcia  
Adam Maida  
Wren McDonald  
Nate Williams

**Photographers**

Alex Gagne  
Jonathan Kozowyk  
Heather McGrath

**Copy Editor**

Marin Jorgensen

**POSTMASTER**

Send address changes to:  
Harvard Graduate  
School of Education  
Office of Communications  
13 Appian Way  
Cambridge, MA 02138

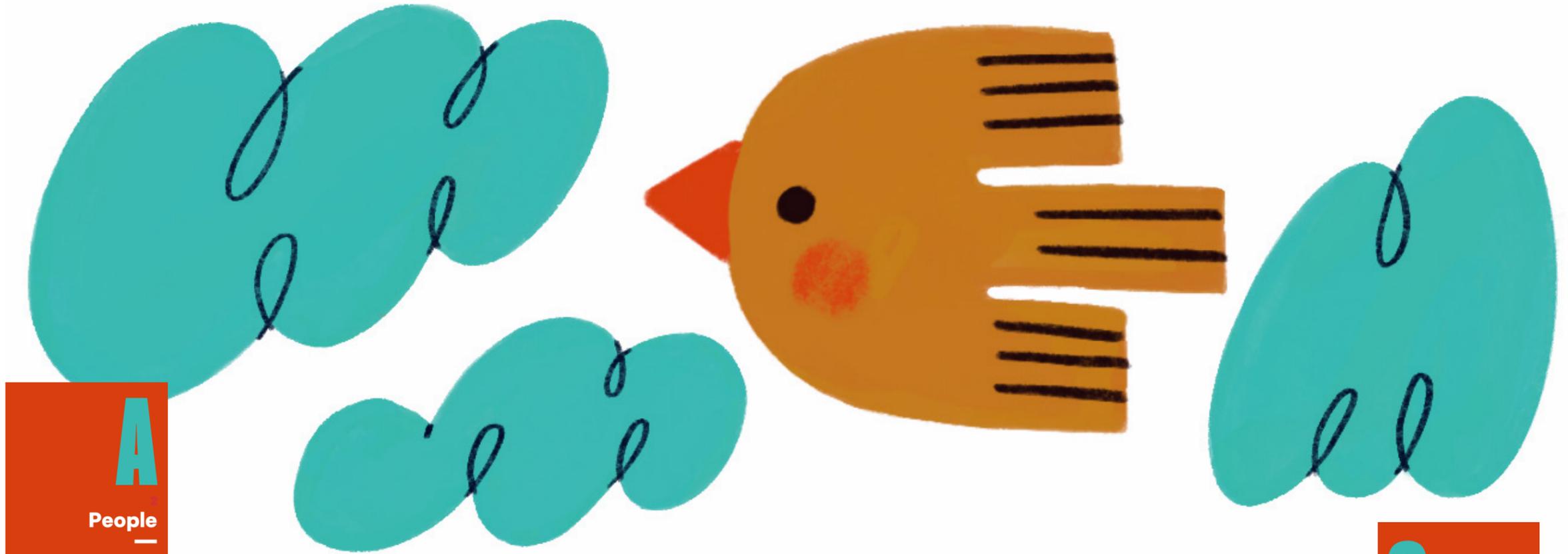
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## Making the Grade

When I told people I was working on a feature story about grading, I usually got the same response: lots of nods, followed by people wanting to share their own tales about unfair grades when they were growing up or in college. When the people I was talking to were parents, the conversations were often about their kids's grades and how frustrating the whole grading system was. It seemed like most parents had lots of questions because, as I learned writing this issue's cover story, grading is a confusing system that isn't always fair and desperately needs to change. The problem is, we basically accept traditional letter grades — the As and Fs — as just the way we do school. We assume those letter grades were earned and are a measure of academic smarts. You're getting all As? You must be the smartest kid in the class. Get a C? You're not as smart as the kid who got the A. But any teacher or parent will tell you, that's not the case. Letter grades are symbols and what they mean isn't always clear. The C student may turn in their work late all the time (and gets points knocked off) or had a few low grades at the beginning of the semester. It's hard to know. And that's the point of this issue's feature: We should know.



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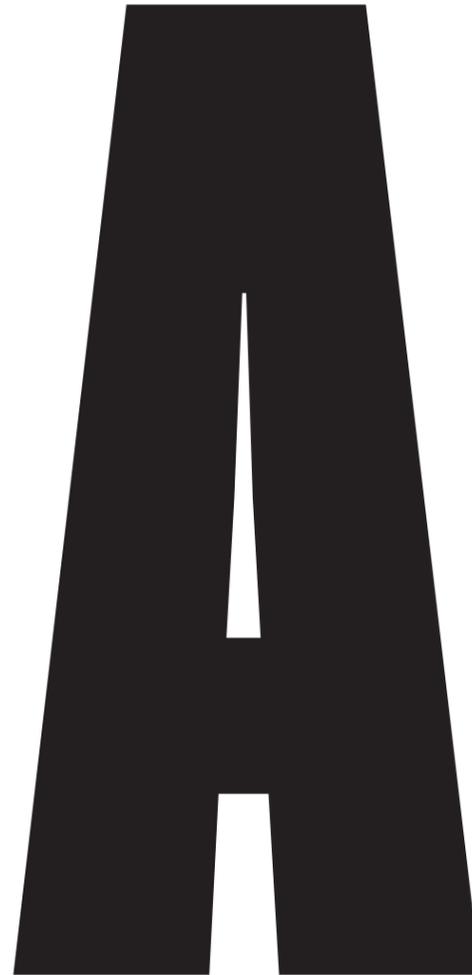
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# People



“Establishing and maintaining a reputation that would attract applicants and other resources became a major preoccupation of institutional leaders.”

**PROFESSOR JULIE REUBEN** (SEE P. 4)



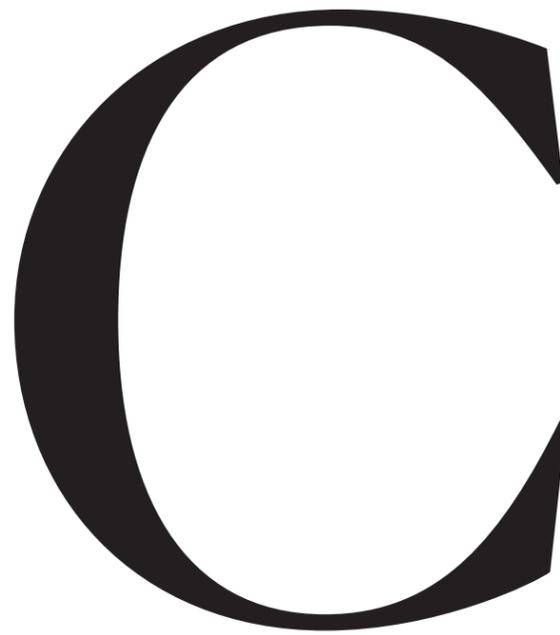
WREN McDONALD

Hypercompetition has nearly broken higher education. Can the field find a way to cooperate?



Story by Andrew Bauld  
Illustrations by Wren McDonald

**Does Anyone Win  
When Colleges  
Compete?**



### COMPETITION IS SUPPOSED TO BE A GOOD THING.

Sit in on any Econ 101 class and you're bound to hear the basic theory that competition is beneficial for consumers because it leads to innovation, better services, and, perhaps most important of all, lower prices.

But tell that to anyone who has gone to college this century.

Costs for both public and private institutions have risen astronomically over the last 50 years according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Yet, over this same period, competition has only increased, with colleges and universities doing everything they can to attract students, including offering enhanced financial aid packages, slashing tuition prices, and constructing more and more elaborate amenities, like lazy rivers and climbing walls.

And in this fight for students, no one is winning. Even with incentives and price cuts, students are still drowning in debt after graduation. Many colleges themselves aren't much better off as they borrow more and more to invest in facilities and technology, hoping to boost enrollment, while at the same time turning to cost-saving strategies, like hiring contingent labor through part-time and non-tenure track faculty. And some schools simply have had to call it quits — 861 institutions closing since 2004, according to the *Hechinger Report*.

For Julie Reuben, a Harvard Graduate School Of Education professor and historian, these decades of excessive competition are a warning. In the pursuit of institutional advantage, she believes colleges have lost sight of their original purpose of creating, preserving, and disseminating knowledge for the good of society.

And she's worried it could bring the whole system down.

#### A History of Competition

Today, much of higher education is predicated on gaining a competitive advantage, with colleges and their leaders focused on raising endowments and defining their distinctive qualities rather than, say, debating what higher education's purpose should be.

Reuben is worried that this trend could threaten the entire higher education system. Already, the undergraduate degree, like the high school degree before it, may be los-

ing its financial value, and more college graduates are now having to turn to a master's degree to compete in the job market. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment in master's-level occupations is projected to grow almost 17% from 2016 to 2026, the fastest of any education level.

"If these trends continue, it will be disastrous for all efforts to use higher education as an instrument of social mobility and a means to greater social equality," Reuben wrote last summer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in her opinion piece called, "Hypercompetition is Harming Higher Ed."

Competition among colleges is certainly not new. From as early as the 19th century, colleges and their students and alums have engaged in some form of "institutional boosterism" Reuben says.

The earliest form of college competition came in the form, naturally, of athletics. But this student-driven school pride was a much more benign version of competition than what would eventually arise as colleges and uni-



"We always say you shouldn't pick a school based on rankings. When I'm out traveling, I like to talk about rankings as picking a top-10 destination to travel. Say the number one destination is Aspen, but you don't like skiing. You're not going to go there."

REBECCA SIMONS



versities began to seek to distinguish themselves as radically different institutions.

"In the 19th century, when colleges and alumni are organizing and doing college boosterism, the colleges were all very similar," says Reuben. "They had a similar curriculum, and they conformed to a cultural understanding of what higher education was."

That all changed in the early 20th century when new reforms encouraged experimentation in higher education. While differentiation within higher education offered many advantages, the stratification of the sector, which began after World War II, undercut some of the benefits.

"During the war, the government relied on universities for research and training," Reuben says. "This ended up funneling large amounts of money to a small number of institutions. By the end of the war, those institutions had better facilities and other advantages that allowed them to distinguish themselves from the rest of the field."

Suddenly, schools wanted become like those "leading" institutions, imitating undergraduate liberal arts programs, creating graduate programs, an encouraging faculty research. That dynamic would remain strong until the 1970s, when an economic downturn forces many schools to shift their focus to vocational programs for undergrads. A clear hierarchy emerged, with elite research universities on the top, selective liberal arts colleges at the next tier, comprehensive universities and colleges below them, and community colleges on the bottom. At the same time, competition between institutions in the top tiers intensified.

"Over time, the dynamic shifted from everyone trying to become like the leading institutions to competition among relatively strong institutions. Establishing and maintaining a reputation that would attract applicants and other resources became a major preoccupation of institutional leaders," Reuben says.

To set themselves apart, colleges borrowed from the playbook of private corporations and sought to establish brand identities. Features common across higher education have become the legal property of institutions. "The first-year college experience," for example, was registered by the University of South Carolina. "Student life" was trademarked by Washington University in St. Louis. Most recently, the Ohio State University successfully trademarked "The."

With the advent of college rankings by *U.S. News & World Report* in the 1980s, competition reached another level. By the 90s, colleges realized they could use incentives like merit aid and other financial aid discounts to attract more students, in turn raising their rankings and their reputation.

“Despite an abundance of research demonstrating that merit aid favors students from upper-income families, most schools abandoned need-only financial-aid policies in order to compete for students with high SATs and GPAs and to achieve high yield rates,” Reuben writes in *The Chronicle* piece.

The use of financial aid to attract students is still strong today. Recently, Princeton University made itself free for families earning under \$100,000. Practices like this are good in that they “make once-exclusive universities financially affordable” for more families, Reuben writes, but adds that these policies don’t address the real problem of rising tuition across the sector, where the price tags of even lesser-known colleges remain inflated just to stay competitive with the perceived value of elite institutions.

Colleges aren’t entirely to blame for all of this. As Wellesley College economist Phillip Levine has written in publications like *The Hechinger Report*, consumers of higher education, specifically students and their parents, are willing to pay more to attend some schools over others, providing those coveted schools with “tremendous market power.”

Was all this inevitable?

According to Reuben, no. Once upon a time, colleges actually tried working together. When the Higher Education Act was first proposed in the 1960s, one of the major debates was whether to send aid directly to institutions to cover expenses (and in turn lower tuition) or to students. Congress chose students, and in doing so, incentivized institutions to compete for students and their financial aid dollars.

Still, many leaders in higher education were against using financial aid for student recruitment. In the 1950s, 23 Northeastern colleges — including the Ivy League and MIT — formed what was called the “Overlap Group” to coordinate scholarships. This meant that a student applying to multiple institutions in the group received comparable financial aid packages. This practice also helped keep tuition costs down and limited resources being diverted from low-income to high-income students.



“We’ve been doing things a certain way for a very long time, but there’s an opportunity to shake things up,” Anderson says.

TRISHA ROSS ANDERSON

In 1989, everything changed. The U.S. Department of Justice launched an investigation into whether the Overlap Group violated antitrust laws. Two years later, they brought a civil suit against MIT and the Ivy League members. The Ivies agreed to stop sharing financial aid information. MIT went to court and lost.

To this day, the Ivy League and others remain worried of being accused of colluding, “and it interferes with what could be healthy collaboration,” Reuben says.

### Enter Admissions

Reuben sees the Overlap Group as a missed opportunity for the sector as a whole to push back against the narrative that higher education is a private good, rather than a public good, furthering a false belief that “competition is the best way to ensure lower prices” of college tuition.

“We’ve definitely seen this era of increased competition hasn’t led to lower prices,” Reuben says. “The situa-



tion with tuition and costs has gotten worse, not better.”

Reuben wishes that schools would be more aggressive in challenging government legislation and lawsuits that seek to paint cooperation among schools as collusion. But more than three decades after the Overlap investigation, a very similar story has played out, this time in college admission offices.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) was founded in 1937 in Virginia. Comprising nearly 30,000 counselors from the secondary and postsecondary level, plus admission and financial aid officers, one of its main purposes is to regulate the recruitment of students.

Included in the many provisions it lays out in its Code of Ethics is that schools cannot offer incentives to students applying early decision and they can’t poach students once they have committed to another college.

In 2019, NACAC removed those rules in response to a Department of Justice investigation into their organization and whether provisions banning incentives or poaching actually violated antitrust laws. By doing so, the NACAC avoided a lawsuit, and the Department of Justice said it had protected families from what it perceived as colleges colluding to take away student choice.

But in doing so, it has opened the door to even more serious ethical questions about how far colleges will be willing to go as they compete for students.

**TIM BUTTERFIELD, ED.M.’20**, is the admissions marketing and communications manager at Grinnell College, a private liberal arts school in Grinnell, Iowa. He’s worked in higher education for nearly a decade and says the NACAC decision has been one of the biggest changes to the field he’s ever seen.

For years, schools couldn’t offer incentives to certain admissions rounds, but now, “we can tell students they can get an automatic scholarship or preferred parking or room lottery” for applying early decision, he says.

It’s impossible to talk about competition without talking about early decision. Early decision (a student applies early and if accepted, the decision is binding) has risen in prominence in the last few decades, so much so that nearly half of the incoming class at many colleges is composed of early decision applicants.

The practice began in the 1950s, when Ivy League admissions officers would essentially hand pick students from secondary feeder schools. In response, smaller New



“Rankings are a tricky thing to talk about. I think whether we like it or not, it’s part of the decision process.”

BILL PRESCOTT

England colleges began offering binding early decision options in order to compete.

Today, early decision, in many ways, makes an already difficult decision for young adults even more stressful. “If you’re considering a top-ranked school or a selective school, early decision is really the only way to go if you want to have a chance,” Butterfield says. Over the last five years at Grinnell, their average early admissions rate is nearly 60%, helping to drive the regular rate of admission to below 15%, and it’s only getting lower every year.

Schools push for early decision for another reason. The more schools a student applies to, the lower a college’s yield rate — the percent of students who choose to enroll after being offered admission. Yield is an important statistic for admission departments, and while many schools are seemingly becoming more and more selective, it’s partly driven by the fact that it’s getting harder for admissions officers to predict where students are actually going to go.

“Part of it is students are applying to more colleges,” says **SARAH FISCHER, ED.M.’11**, assistant vice president of admissions at Grinnell. Fischer says that trend has been happening for the last decade but particularly over the pandemic. With students more easily able to just check the box of applying to colleges with tools like the Common Application, admissions officers don’t know whether they are the first choice or the fifteenth choice for a prospective student.

A higher yield also carries significant weight when it comes to rankings.

The annual rankings published by *U.S. News and World Report* have long been decried as a flawed system that rewards prestige and selectivity over educational quality. But while some elite medical and law schools, including Harvard Medical and Harvard Law, have pulled out of the rankings, very few undergraduate institutions have followed suit.

“Some schools can take a stand against their rankings, and most of them are in a position where their prestige will still be there at least for several years to come without being reinforced by rankings,” Butterfield says. But most institutions without the name power of the most elite don’t have that luxury, especially if they hope to court an international audience, where rankings carry a disproportionate weight amongst families compared to domestic ones.

“Rankings are a tricky thing to talk about,” says **BILL PRESCOTT, ED.M.’20**, an associate director of admissions at Washington University in St. Louis, who says doing away with them isn’t as simple as some people believe.

“I think whether we like it or not, it’s part of the decision process. It’s been interesting to see the shift in law school and medicine rankings, but not every school can afford to drop out of those rankings. And rankings impact other things, like college credit ratings.”

Brandeis University’s director of admissions **REBECCA SIMONS, ED.M.’09**, takes a more measured view when it comes to how the system works.

“We always say you shouldn’t pick a school based on rankings,” Simons says. “When I’m out traveling, I like to talk about rankings as picking a top-10 destination to travel. Say the number one destination is Aspen, but you don’t like skiing. You’re not going to go there.” That same approach applies to picking the right school.

While Simons recognizes that rankings carry a certain prestige that make them “great cocktail fodder” for school leaders and parents, she believes there’s been a real shift about how important the rankings actually are. “I am hopeful they aren’t going to be with us much longer,” she says.

While rankings might be too big to ever completely exercise, many in the field agree they need to change. **TRISHA ROSS ANDERSON, ED.M.’10**, college admissions program director for the Ed School’s Making Caring Common project, says she would like to see a turn “to some alternative ranking systems that looks at things that generally matter to kids and advance equity by sharing important information.” Recently, for example, the Department of Education updated their College Scorecard to help prospective students and families compare a broader and more diverse set of college data, including average debt loads for students, diversity numbers, and post-college earnings.

“We’ve been doing things a certain way for a very long time, but there’s an opportunity to shake things up,” Anderson says.

### Room for Collaboration

There’s another side to this story of competition. First, while colleges are certainly competing against their peer institutions to win over the hearts and minds of prospec-



**“We’ve definitely seen this era of increased competition hasn’t led to lower prices. The situation with tuition and costs has gotten worse, not better.”**

**JULIE REUBEN**

tive students (and the wallets of their parents), Butterfield says there’s a counterweight to this rivalry.

“We’re not hoping any of those competitor schools are going to fail. We need all our peers to be successful and strong to maintain the value of the liberal arts and college experience. When our peers succeed,” he says, “we succeed, too. We just want to be in a slightly better position than the others.”

Speak to most admissions officers, and there’s a clear sense of the abundant collaboration that actually occurs between schools. Grinnell, for example, is part of a cohort called “8 of the Best Colleges,” which includes Claremont McKenna, Colorado College, Connecticut College, Haverford College, Kenyon, Macalester, and Sarah Lawrence. Twice a year, deans and directors of admissions from each school travel together around the country to present to families. Then there are Amherst, Bowdoin, Carleton, Pomona, Swarthmore, and Williams which formed “Six Colleges,” offering shared resources, a website that hosts a series of virtual events, and provides stu-



dents a single form to get admission information about each school.

Smaller schools that are struggling have also thought about ways to join forces beyond just a website. Last year, Ohio-based Otterbein University and Antioch University announced plans to affiliate with each other to create a first-of-its-kind national university system, sharing graduate and adult-learner programs.

While Reuben says she hopes that merging and sharing resources becomes a more popular option among colleges, there’s also a hard truth that not all institutions will survive. But just because they close, it doesn’t mean it has to be an end.

Reuben cites the example of Wheelock College, a private college in Boston that opened in 1888. Wheelock closed in 2018 and merged with Boston University. Reuben says there’s a lesson from that example.

“They really thought about how they could keep the mission alive even if Wheelock itself had to close,” she says. For Reuben, the example also represents the kind of tough conversation she wishes more colleges would have, thinking less about how to differentiate themselves and more about how to serve students.

Many colleges are also trying to shift their thinking when it comes to admissions. The Making Caring Common project has been an influential driver in that process.

Founded to help schools and families raise ethical children, the project added a new lens in 2016 when it released *Turning the Tide*, a report that called for a reshaping of the college admissions process to promote greater ethical engagement among high school students, reduce achievement pressure, and create more equitable opportunities for students traditionally unrepresented in college.

“We did a lot of interviews with parents and kids and learned that a lot of young people were seeing college admissions as a barrier,” says Anderson. Through those interviews, the Making Caring Common group learned that students wanted to give back to their community, but felt they had to get higher SAT scores or take more AP courses in order to get into college.

Ironically, that was not the message most colleges wanted to send, she says. “Although colleges care about scores and grades, they were telling us, we care about students as whole people, and we don’t want a generation that’s hypercompetitive or taking 6 million AP courses and doing nothing else.”



**“We’re not hoping any of those competitor schools are going to fail. We need all our peers to be successful and strong to maintain the value of the liberal arts and college experience. When our peers succeed. We succeed, too.”**

**TIM BUTTERFIELD**

**SARAH FISCHER**



Nearly 200 college admissions leaders endorsed the plan, which offered concrete recommendations on new ways to evaluate students, such as taking into account a student’s home life if they are caring for a sick family member or caring for younger siblings.

“We have to be aware of the impact of our policies that trickle down,” says Prescott. “For so many families, they see this as such a high stakes part of a student’s life. That’s something we have to be mindful of, and advocating for different policies like what Making Caring Common is doing and how we measure success.”

Simon says, “At Brandeis, we did a deep dive with Making Caring Common and talked to our faculty about how they see success from students.” Looking more holistically at how students will be successful both academically and socially on campus has become a real part of the school’s selection process now.

While these shifts are promising, Reuben would like to see even bigger changes.

“I don’t think we want to go back to the first half of the 19th century where most colleges were identical in their curriculum,” she says, but 50 years of competition has come at a high cost. She wishes more schools offered a similarly strong and relevant academic core so that “which institution they went to mattered less” for students and families.

In that world, students could trust that wherever they went, they’d be guaranteed to “get an education to help them understand the world and participate as a democratic citizen,” Reuben says. And that, in turn, might change how colleges view one another.

“I would also hope that in this fantasy world of mine,” she says, “we could shift away from this focus on competing for dominance and survival, and really try to think together about purpose, mission, needs, and the best way to fulfill those things.” □

**Andrew Bauld, Ed.M.’15, is a writer based in New York City. His last piece for Ed. was about the Young Historians Program based in New York City.**

# Students: AI is Part of Your World

Alum helps young people understand how artificial intelligence is changing everything they know

Story by Lory Hough

IT WOULD NOT BE an overstatement to say that artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to change pretty much every job. And students, says **CHARLOTTE DUNGAN, ED.M.'16**, should know this.

"There's a great shift in the future of work and what jobs will be available, and they're disproportionately affecting populations that are the least able to advocate for themselves," says Dungan, the COO of a nonprofit called The AI Education Project. "For example, driving a semi-truck. Those jobs are at risk of automation because right now there are companies that are using self-driving semis in their facilities." In warehouses at big companies like Amazon, people are being replaced with robots. At Target, instead of eight cashiers, you have two staffed by humans and half a dozen self-checkout options.

But automation's impact on jobs isn't the only reason students should be learning more about artificial intelligence, Dungan says. That's where The AI Education Project comes in, with a mission to make sure all students have access to understanding more broadly how the world is being reshaped by this technology, especially in underserved schools and communities across the United States.

"AI is not just about jobs," she says. "We need to understand how to interpret laws and craft policy, and how to advocate as citizens for our rights in the age of algorithms. We need laws that give individuals transparency into how these systems impact their lives, such as how an algorithm determines if someone should receive bail or how a

recommended sentence is calculated in the justice system."

The nonprofit, she says, is trying to "widen the computer science umbrella" to include awareness about the ethical and social impacts of technology.

"And that is driven by AI right now," she says. "Like when computers went from the office to home, everybody was very aware. And when everyone started carrying a *Star Trek* communicator in their pocket, everyone was aware. And we had conversations about what was happening with youth, with these emerging technologies. But it's just as important a revolution in AI of what happens when your news feed is curated or what happens when there's an algorithm that's deciding whether or not you are able to get credit and is taking into account factors like your gender or your zip code to decide on your rates. And you don't have any control over those policies."

Everyone, she says, deserves to be aware of the impacts of AI. For students, this can be done, in part, through curriculum, which the nonprofit provides open source for free to schools. They offer longer, multi-week units that teachers can download online and modify as needed. There are also quick conversation starters for grades 7–12, what they call AI snapshots.

"It's a bell ringer," she says. "Five-minute discussions that you can host in other core classes. We're not assuming that teachers or schools have space to create a whole new course" around artificial intelligence or even computer science. The AI Education Project

JILLIAN CLARKE



Charlotte Dungan

**“Our North Star is to create educational experiences that excite and empower learners everywhere with ai literacy.”**

designed the snapshots to fit into four core courses: math, science, social studies, and English. “If you are a core teacher, you can still incorporate these discussions into your own classroom. So, for example, a math class might be talking about statistics related to artificial intelligence because the backbone of AI is math. What patterns can we see in data? In terms of science, there are amazing innovations that have happened as a result of AI, like how do you use AI plus a human to get better results for breast cancer screening?”

So far, in addition to working with schools to incorporate AI into coursework, the project is partnering with the Boys and Girls Club of America on summer program material and with a few museums that teach programming.

“That’s really exciting,” Dungan says, “because it reaches more students that way.”

Recently, artificial intelligence and education has become a hot topic because of a new language processing bot called ChatGPT. As a *New York Times* story noted, about a month after its debut, ChatGPT had “already sent many educators into a panic. Students are using it to write their assignments, passing off AI-generated essays and problem sets as their own. Teachers and school administrators have been scrambling to catch students using the tool to cheat, and they are fretting about the havoc ChatGPT could wreak on their lesson plans.”

Dungan says ChatGPT is on everyone’s mind “because it’s so accessible to everyone,” but it’s not time to panic. “The debates on

using tools like this are important, but we’ve been here before, notably, when calculators invaded the mathematics classroom.”

In fact, Dungan actually sees an upside to these kinds of bots.

“I may have an unusual perspective, but I think the possibilities for ChatGPT to remove rote work from the classroom and empower deep learning experiences are exciting,” she says. “If anyone can dash off a paper written by AI, perhaps this will push classrooms to revive other ways of communicating knowledge, including project-based learning, Socratic seminars, writing papers with ChatGPT as a starting point where students take on the role of critical editor, and other assessment tools that aren’t so easily hacked,” like video projects and live action play. “The fastest, cheapest way to ensure the work is done by the student is to use pencil and paper instead of typed papers.”

Asked what excites her the most about being involved in this work, Dungan says it’s what education always offers to others.

“Our North Star is to create educational experiences that excite and empower learners everywhere with AI literacy. I think what excites me the most is that when people know about artificial intelligence, they’re able to make better decisions for themselves and for their communities,” she says. “They don’t have to be a programmer to benefit from learning about AI and I think everyone deserves access to that information. I’m excited that I get to work in that space because there’s so much work to do.” □



ELIZABETH MORRIS

QUICK CHAT

# Taking Care of Siblings? Put it on the Common App

Making Caring Common pilots new checklist for the online application form

**RICHARD WEISSBOURD, ED.D.’87, senior lecturer and faculty director of Making Caring Common (MCC), and TRISHA ROSS ANDERSON, ED.M.’10, MCC’s college admissions program director, discuss a new tool they are piloting with the Common App, which will allow college applicants to provide more information about their life circumstances — information like time spent taking care of siblings. Through the Common App, students can apply to multiple colleges and universities at the same time.**

**What is the pilot that you’re working on?**

**RW:** To help children understand the importance of personal mental health from a young age while being able to understand, recognize, and help those in their lives with mental illness. In this story, the mother struggles with depression, causing her to have difficulties managing her home and work life. Her children begin to see a change in their mother and are left to navigate the healthcare system to find her the appropriate resources and care. Further, the story of the daughter/sister Mya falling and scraping her knee requiring medical treatment is meant to help children understand the similarities between physical and mental health.

**TRA:** Basically, there’s this checklist and things like: “I take care of a younger sibling for four more hours per week after school,” or “I support the family income by

working at a paid job for more than four hours per week,” or “I take care of a sick or elderly family member.” All of this is providing some context as the application reader is reviewing your application to better understand you and your life. And we know a lot of this stuff is typically very underreported on college applications. Lots of young people are doing this stuff, but they don’t think that colleges want to know about it. They don’t see how it’s relevant to their college application.

**Where did the idea of doing this come from?**

**TRA:** Part of what we did with Common App is bring a lot of experts to the table. By experts, I mean students, young people, high school counselors, admissions leaders, and academic experts — people that study cognitive and non-cognitive skills and assessment. We had workshops, we had meetings, we really kind of dove in deep into a number of ideas, this being one of them. This particular tool, its origins come from TheDream.US, which is a scholarship provider for Dreamers, and we have revised the tool based on feedback from all those groups that I just mentioned.

**Who is participating in the pilot?**

**TRA:** There are 12 colleges this year: Amherst College, California Institute of Technology, Cornell University, Harvey Mudd College, St. Olaf College, Transylvania University, University of Arizona, Uni-

versity of Dubuque, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, University of Pennsylvania, University of Southern California, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute. We chose these schools in part because they are a really diverse representation of schools across our country. They all do admissions in very, very different ways. And that was very important to us. We want to see how this tool will perform. Is it useful? Is it helpful in setting context and helping you understand your applicants at a wide array of institutions?

We also want to look at things like admission rates. Are we seeing any changes in schools that are using this tool? That is, is there any indication that in any way it’s affecting their admission decisions, compared to prior years?

**How might colleges use what they learn about students who use the checklist?**

**RW:** Colleges wanted to pilot this because they believe it’s important and so I think there’s a lot of interest in it. We still don’t know whether it’s going to lead to an increase in the number of economically diverse kids who are admitted. That’s our hope. We are hoping to do an additional pilot with more schools in the future.

**TRA:** We’re encouraging schools to really use it as part of their context setting. If you’re already looking at certain things to set the context as you read an application, this would be a natural thing to include. The other place that I think that this could make sense is to think about this as you think about a young person’s activities. If you’ve got a young person that’s spending 20 hours a week taking care of a younger sibling, for instance, it’d be very difficult for that person potentially to also participate in typical high school extracurricular activities.



# Game On

Students meet weekly for a board game battle Story by Lory Hough

**THEIR STREET NAME** is Board Games Night.

(And by street, says master's student Sarah Bennett, they mean Appian Way, and by Appian Way, they mean WhatsApp.)

Since the end of August, a group — officially known as HGSE Board Gamers — of mostly master's students and their friends has been meeting every Thursday night on the third floor of Gutman to hang out and play board games. The idea first surfaced over margaritas on Felipe's rooftop in Harvard Square, says master's student Miles Baird.

"It was the second day of the school's orientation, and the LDIT cohort was having an informal meet and greet," he says. "Naturally, with that much nerdiness in one spot, it wasn't long before we brought up having a board game night. Just as Kevin Costner says in *Field of Dreams*, 'If you build it, they will come.' We here at the Ed School live by, 'If you create a WhatsApp group, they will join.'"

Bennett says she was instantly game for helping launch a group with Baird and others, including master's student Kelly Coons, who is the group's liaison to the Office of Student Affairs.

"I really love board games, and I was looking for friends," she jokes. "But, really, playing board games with people is one way to instantly build community."

For Baird, the group was an extension of his pre-Ed School days.

"Board games have been a large part of my life's rhythm for the past few years," he says. "My social circle would meet twice a week at board game cafes, and every other week-

end we would have a large game of Werewolf with between 10 to 20 players. It's something I care about and I wanted to facilitate that sense of community for others at HGSE."

Turns out, other students also wanted that community, with a couple dozen showing up each week to play games, especially newer games like Codenames, Wingspan, Azul, Mysterium, and Anomia.

"A lot has changed in the board gaming scene over the past two decades. What used to be an occasional activity has become something which many identify with and is now the foundation of many mainstream communities," Baird says.

"Growing up, the typical board game for me was Monopoly or Yahtzee. It wasn't until high school that I learned about Euro-style and other games which might have been considered 'fringe,' and now you can find clubs and cafes dedicated to board games all over the world. While I wasn't sure how the club would be received, I realized that even if people don't identify as board gamers, they still might relish a chance to relax with friends, shed some of the week's stress, and learn a new game or two."

Bennett says she favors the game Chameleon, joking that, "It's so fun to lie." Baird also loves Chameleon and another social deduction game called Avalon. "It's just fun trying, and often failing, to read people. I'd say Chameleon and a party

game called Codenames are our club MVPs."

Bennett thinks educators are actually natural board gamers.

"As it turns out, playing board games lights up the sense of camaraderie, competition, and challenge that many educators crave in [their] social lives," she says. "Teachers were actually perfect for this. We didn't have to do much convincing."

Rather than play one game at a time, students bring multiple games every Thursday, making it easier to split off into several large or small clusters. And although the group started out as master's students, Baird says doctoral students and local alums have also joined.

"That's exciting because I feel there aren't enough opportunities to build community across successive HGSE classes," he says.

When asked if students get competitive playing, Baird shoots a glance at Bennett, who says, "One thousand percent."

That begs the question, then, are there any plans to challenge student board gamers at other Harvard graduate schools?

"Absolutely," says Baird. "I've heard the School of Design has their own gaming group, and I'd love to do what we do best and ... teach them a lesson." Bennett adds, "I'm not sure how they've designed it, but I think we need to go over there and educate them on the proper way to have fun." □

**"As it turns out, playing board games lights up the sense of camaraderie, competition, and challenge that many educators crave in [their] social lives. Teachers were actually perfect for this."**



caption to come

# Eco Ed Justice

Alexia Leclercq, Ed.M.'23, is here for the collective good Story by Lory Hough

WHEN ALEXIA LECLERCQ was little, living in Taipei, she remembers being yelled at for playing outside in the acid rain. Later, after her family moved to Singapore, she remembers the city shutting down, sometimes for weeks, because of poor air quality.

At an early age, she realized that pollution and “place” were having a big effect on her health and how she was growing up — and this set off her interest in becoming a social and environmental activist.

“For a lot of people, climate change can feel like an intangible issue, however, seeing the pollution and health consequences and experiencing hurricanes,” she says, “made climate justice and environmental justice a personal and pressing issue.”

It also made clear something that has since been the foundation for all her activism: connection matters.

“Collectivist culture and connection to community and land are so deeply important in creating a just and sustainable world,” she says.

It’s why she brought recycling bins to her middle school in Austin, Texas, where her family later moved, and why she started translating documents for asylum seekers. It’s why she co-founded two nonprofits: the Colorado River Conservancy, a project of PODER (People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources), and Start:Empowerment, designed to better connect climate education and action. It’s why she pushed to

bring clean water to East Austin and have toxic tank farms relocated away from residential neighborhoods in Texas. Last year, the World Wildlife Foundation awarded her their 2022 Conservation Leadership Award, an award that celebrates the accomplishments of young leaders who are pushing the needle for environmental conservation. That same year, she co-authored a piece in *Teen Vogue* about the rise of “eco influencers” who “hoard media attention” away from grassroots organizers.

“I grew up with the belief that we aren’t separate, so every person, animal, or plant you encounter, you treat with the deepest respect. This is in sharp opposition to the colonial-capitalist society we currently live in,” she says. This belief “was really ingrained with storytelling throughout my childhood. I remember my mom telling me about the importance of water and tree spirits. I also grew up with a very collectivist mindset and framework.”

Leclercq brought this collective good focus with her to Appian Way, where she was enrolled this past year in the master’s Educational Leadership, Organizations, and Entrepreneurship Program and in the Identity, Power, and Justice in Education Concentration.

“As a longtime social-environmental justice organizer, I’ve realized the crucial role that political education plays in building and sustaining movements,” she says, explaining her reasons for coming to Harvard. “I seek to develop

my educational leadership skills while learning new methods of implementing liberatory pedagogy. In particular, I’m interested in understanding ways of incorporating Asian and Indigenous ecological knowledge in curricula and researching the relationship between schools, environmental injustices, the fossil fuel industry, and BIPOC students’ learning experiences.”

And despite a full graduate student workload, Leclercq has managed to stay active, including organizing with Harvard Divest to protest fossil fuel recruitment and research on campus. She’s a member of the university’s cross-grad school Climate Leaders Program and has been active in the HGSE Climate Justice Club, where she helped write op-eds “pushing for the education sector to tackle climate change.” At AOCC this year, she won the Kolajo Paul Afolabi award for her commitment to educational justice.

As a student, she has also found a way to “connect” back to her childhood.

“I work as a research assistant at the Haber Lab at the Chan School of Public Health, which is focused on asthma research,” she says. “I’m helping with a research project on the connection between asthma emergency department visits and bad housing conditions and looking at policy implications. I had asthma as a kid and care deeply about the intersection of public health, environmental justice, and housing.” □

“I grew up with the belief that we aren’t separate, so every person, animal, or plant you encounter, you treat with the deepest respect. This is in sharp opposition to the colonial-capitalist society we currently live in.”

Alexia Leclercq

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# Ideas

# B

“Community colleges are the most-underfunded, least-supported institutions that are trying to support the highest-need students.”

**SENIOR LECTURER FRANCESCA PURCELL (SEE P. 22)**

ADAM MAIDA



What happened when a state tried to fix the complex, and often inequitable, maze community college students need to navigate when they try to make the leap to a four-year school?

# *The Trying Transfer*



Story by **Elizabeth Christopher**  
Illustration by **Adam Maida**

# M

**MAX TANG, ED.M.'22**, was 17 years old when he emigrated from China to Los Angeles. His schedule during his junior year of high school was loaded with ELL classes as he focused on improving his English and adjusting to life in the United States. It wasn't until senior year that he learned all that was involved in applying for college.

"My parents never went to college, so they didn't know how to advise me," says Tang. With just a few months before graduation, he made a plan: enroll in a community college and then transfer to a University of California campus to earn a bachelor's degree and, eventually, go on to law school.

One of the long-time missions of community colleges has been to provide an affordable path to four-year institutions and a steppingstone to economic mobility for students who are the first generation in their families to go to college, many of whom come from low-income homes. Yet, of the 80% of community college students who say they plan to transfer to a four-year school, fewer than 15% do, according to the Community College Research Center (CCRC). Also concerning is that studies have shown that entering a community college rather than a four-year institution lowers students' chances of obtaining bachelor's degrees. One reason for this is that the transfer process is famously difficult to navigate, causing many students to burn up precious time and money taking courses from which the credits don't count toward their major or don't transfer at all.

"The process itself is a maze," says Tang, who often had to wait a week to get a 15-minute appointment with a counselor at his community college. He says even then, getting the information he needed was difficult. "Counselors had different levels of familiarity with the transfer process," he says.

Things turned out well for Tang, who largely navigated the transfer process on his own, eventually landing at UCLA, where he earned a bachelor's degree. Word of his transfer spread, and soon he was counseling his peers on how to do the same.





Max Teng



Fran Purcell

The trying transfer process Tang experienced is common at community colleges across the country. In Massachusetts, that's why more than a decade ago, the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education began collaborating with the state's public colleges and universities to find ways to make the transfer process to a four-year institution easier. In 2007, the state created the Commonwealth Transfer Advisory Group (CTAG) to assess the barriers associated with transfer and to recommend fixes. CTAG's work resulted in MassTransfer, the collective name for a host of policies aimed at streamlining the transfer process and reducing the time and cost of transfer for students.

Among the changes the state implemented was to make transparent, via a website, the general education courses (known as the Gen Ed Foundation block) required to earn associate and bachelor's degrees. The state also launched a "course and equivalency" database that specifies which courses at the state's colleges and universities align with those requirements. In addition, A2B (associate to bachelor's) pathways were created to identify courses that both satisfy requirements for an associate degree and count toward the requirements for a bachelor's degree within a particular major.

The question is, did these efforts pay off?

### Not All Students Helped

A new study from researchers at Harvard and Brown universities, in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Department of Higher Education, found that the changes Massachusetts made are helping some students transfer and attain bachelor's degrees — but not all.

The study, "Building Stronger Community College Transfer Pathways: Evidence from Massachusetts," followed 10 cohorts of students who enrolled in an associate degree program at Massachusetts community colleges between 2005 and 2014. While the study indicated improvement

in some areas, it also revealed troubling inequities along economic and racial lines.

The research found that the percentage of students from higher-income families who transferred from a community college to a four-year institution within six years increased steadily (approximately a 7% increase over 10 years). The increase was especially large for female students in this higher income group.

However, the transfer rate for students from low-income families remained stagnant. This revealed a widening gap between higher-income students and those from low-income families, with transfer rates for higher-income students rising to almost 40% by 2014 but remaining below 30% for low-income students. (Researchers classified "higher-income students" as anyone who had not been eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch in the 10th grade.)

The study also found that income was a stronger predictor of transfer success than a student's 10th-grade math MCAS score (the statewide assessment test in Massachusetts). Starting with the 2010 cohort, students from low-income families who had relatively high math scores were less likely to transfer within six years than students from higher-income families with relatively low math MCAS scores. By 2014, this difference was almost 5 percentage points.

Disparities also appeared along racial lines, with smaller percentages of Black and Latinx students transferring to a four-year institution compared to Asian and white students (as much as 3–5 percentage points lower for Black students and 7–10 points lower for Latinx), according to the study.

For students who had made the transfer to a four-year institution, there was an increase in the proportion of those who went on to complete a bachelor's degree, rising from 51% of students in the 2005 cohort to 63% of students in the 2014 cohort. However, transferring students from low-income families earned a bachelor's degree at a rate about 12 percentage points lower than that of higher-income families.

One explanation for this, the report notes, is

**"When it comes to completion, transfer, retention, you're going to see gaps based on income, race, and ethnicity."**

**FRAN PURCELL, SENIOR LECTURER**

that "structural inequalities that result in Black and Latinx children growing up in relatively low-income families and attending relatively under-resourced elementary and primary schools, play a large role in explaining why Black and Latinx students who enroll in the state's community colleges have lower six-year transfer rates and lower bachelor's degree completion rates than do their White peers."

Senior Lecturer Francesca Purcell, who chaired CTAG and is the co-faculty director of the Higher Education concentration at the Ed School, says while she was happy to see some positive news since MassTransfer was adopted, she's "heartbroken to see there's a very significant group of students that we're not helping." Purcell has seen this inequity play out again and again across the country throughout her two decades studying the college transfer process. "When it comes to completion, transfer, retention, you're going to see gaps based on income, race, and ethnicity," she says.

It's a gap that is likely to continue. That's because the proportion of students from low-income families at the state's community colleges more than doubled between 2005 and 2014, rising from 21% to 45%, the report says. Also rising are the numbers of students from racial and ethnic groups that have historically not been served well in American public schools, many of which are under-resourced.

On one hand, these trends are a good thing, says Professor Richard Murnane, lead author of the study, along with Professor John Willett; **JOHN PAPAY, ED.M.'05, ED.D.'11; ANN MANTIL, ED.M.'10, ED.D.'18; PREEYA MBEKEANI, ED.M.'10, ED.D.'20;** and Aubrey McDonough.

"It means that young people who in previous generations would not have gone to college at all are going to community college," Murnane says. "But the bad news is that they are not well prepared either financially or academically."

Nor are community colleges well prepared to support them. "Community colleges are the most-underfunded, least-supported institutions that are trying to support the highest-need stu-

dents," says Purcell. While community colleges do a fairly good job with access, students from low-income families and traditionally marginalized groups aren't getting the help they need to earn bachelor's degrees, she says.

And that's significant because research shows that a four-year college degree is still the surest way to earn more money over one's lifetime. "If we could solve college transfer, we would solve a lot of the equity issues that we are confronted with at a much greater scale," says Purcell.

### How Can We Fix This?

While MassTransfer policies have helped alleviate some of the institutional and technical barriers standing in students' way, more needs to be done to address financial, family, and academic obstacles many students face, says Murnane.

"About 85% of students at Bunker Hill Community College go part time," he says, referring to the largest community college in Massachusetts. Many are balancing two or three jobs, along with family responsibilities such as childcare and eldercare while pursuing a degree. More supports need to be in place for students who are going part time, many of whom are immigrants and the first in their families to go to college, he says.

The report points to several initiatives underway that are aimed at addressing these barriers. One is the creation of co-requisite courses that provide developmental content and support in a credit-bearing course, enabling students to build the skills they need to take on college-level math and English without spending time and money on classes that don't count toward a degree.

Another state-funded effort, says the report, is the Supporting Urgent Community College Equity through Student Services (SUCCESS) program, which provides wraparound services in the form of peer mentors, academic skills workshops, field trips to four-year schools, and targeted academic, career, transfer, and scholarship advising. Purcell says that comprehensive wraparound



John Willett



Dick Murnane

**“The biggest thing is information. Schools should be bombarding students with information.”**  
**ADELA SOLIZ, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY**



Adela Soliz

services that build one-on-one relationships between students and faculty are also needed.

In addition, the transfer process involves a lot of parties that don't necessarily have the same goals, she says. So, an important part of the solution is building trust among them. The state should continue to act as a convener, bringing together faculty and transfer advisers across institutions to share ideas, come up with solutions, and keep the focus on the student experience, she suggests. There is also a role the receiving institution can play in helping community college students see themselves at a four-year institution. “Faculty could meet with students at community college campuses to create an atmosphere of welcoming,” she says.

“The biggest thing is information,” says **ADELA SOLIZ, ED.D.'17**, who is an assistant professor at Vanderbilt University and focuses on policies that affect student success at community colleges. “Schools should be bombarding students with information.” Posters should be plastered all over classrooms, transfer advisers should be visible in the hallways, the cafeteria, and other places students congregate, and counselors should be available not just from nine to five but also in the evenings when many working students take classes, she says. On top of that, the information must be simple and accurate: “Websites are often out of date or very difficult to navigate,” says Soliz.

Technology may have a role to play, too. Max Tang has put his plans for law school on hold to evolve his one-to-one transfer counseling service into a technology company that uses artificial intelligence (AI) and natural language processing (NLP) to streamline the college application and transfer process. Tang says that AI and NLP can do many of the things a counselor can do but can reach more students, more affordably and at all hours. Students can use his platform to search a database of more than 3,000 colleges and universities to find matches based on their profiles. Other features include an AI-powered writing coach and AI-powered interview coach that give students instant feedback based on their facial expressions, gestures, and pronunciation. Tang

plans to release an English-language version of the platform soon.

**Moving Forward**

There has been a lot more sharing of information across states since Purcell was part of CTAG. Organizations such as the Aspen Institute, Interstate Passport, and the Scaling Partners Network, backed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, are working on bringing together institutions across different states so they can learn from one another. Other groups are calling to reform the community college transfer process from one that is seen as chiefly self-service to one that serves all students. CCRC's “guided pathways” strategy involves creating a comprehensive education plan for every community college student in addition to providing advisory structures to ensure students stay on track.

In Massachusetts, both Governor Maura Healey and Senate President Karen Spilka have proposed making community colleges more accessible and affordable to non-traditional students — including free for students older than 25 — to create a pipeline of new talent for employment in well-paying industries, such as health-care, education, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing. Purcell says that an essential step in moving these plans forward is the continued commitment at the state level to evaluative research studies based on longitudinal data like the one conducted by Murnane.

“I'm proud that Massachusetts did this research,” says Purcell, who underscored the need for more. She says that using data to regularly examine policies and their impact on students will focus state and institutions' efforts on finding solutions to help the significant population of students who currently are not benefiting from MassTransfer policies. “For policymakers, having a resource like this is gold,” she says. □

**Elizabeth Christopher is a writer based in Massachusetts. Her last piece for Ed. in the summer 2022 issue focused on supporting teachers**

**Key Findings**

Some of the key findings from the October 2022 study, *Building Stronger Community College Transfer Pathways: Evidence from Massachusetts*, based on following 10 cohorts of high school graduates who entered community colleges in Massachusetts from fall 2005 through fall 2014

**ACROSS THE COUNTRY**

**More than three-quarters of U.S. students**

who enroll in public community colleges intend to transfer to a four-year institution and earn at least a bachelor's degree.

**Fewer than 15%**

of these students achieve this within six years after initially enrolling in a community college.

**IN THE MASSACHUSETTS STUDY**

**68,793 students**

Community colleges in Massachusetts increasingly serve students from low-income families:



The proportion of Black and Latinx students who transferred within six years (4%)

The proportion of white and Asian students who transferred within six years (8.5%)

**12%**

For every cohort studied, the proportion of students from low-income families who earned a bachelor's degree within four years after transferring was about 12 percentage points lower than the proportion of students from higher-income families.

## IMPACT

# Women on a Mission

Female donors are stepping up Story by Cheriese Chambers

FISCAL YEAR 2022 was a record-breaker. Not only was it the Ed School's most successful fundraising year to date — with \$88.23 million in donations — it was a year when alumni, especially female graduates, gave back to the school like never before.

For **LINDA HAMMETT ORY, ED.M.'93**, giving back to the school that changed the trajectory of her life was an easy decision. As a student who once benefitted from financial aid, she made her mark with a \$10 million gift, the largest ever from an alumna. "I really see myself in these students. Even with financial aid, I had to come up with a huge chunk of money and thought I'd be paying off student loans for the rest of my life. I never dreamed I'd be in a position to give back like this. It's truly a privilege," she says. She directed her full gift towards financial aid — an Ed School fundraising priority. We sat down with four alumnae who made transformational gifts in fiscal year 2022 to discuss what inspired them to give back, including **HAMMETT ORY**; **MINDY SICK MUNGER, ED.M.'01, ED.D.'12**; **CHRISTINA CAPODILUPO, ED. M.'02**; and **JENNIFER NGAR WING YU, ED.M.'22**.

## Why was giving back to HGSE important to you?

**MSM:** The faculty and students are an incredible group of people who could choose to do anything with their lives, and they have chosen education as their career. I want to support that choice and help students become teachers with as little debt as possible while driving change in the field more broadly through critical research and in-

novative programs.

**JNWY:** I hope to afford educators the opportunity to further their own important work in education. At HGSE, we are taught from day one to "Learn to Change the World," to take your Harvard education forward to make a positive, tangible impact.

**CC:** HGSE represents the place where my educational journey really started. It was the first time in my academic life when I realized that I had meaningful questions about cultural identities and their role in education and self-concept, and that I could devote future study to learning more.

**LHO:** I want to invest in people who devote their lives to education and ensure that talented people don't have to make the decision not to teach because of debt.

## What do you want your gift to help accomplish?

**CC:** My husband, Harry, and I are passionate about educational access. Having an online master's degree at HGSE — offering the incredible resources of faculty, coursework, and colleagues to those all around the country (and the world) who cannot move to Cambridge — is an extremely exciting prospect.

**LHO:** By removing financial constraints, HGSE can have a more culturally rich student body with openness of thought and dialogue. It's vitally important that we have more diversity in all areas of education — from teaching to lead-

ership — and that teachers reflect the population of the students that they are teaching.

**MSM:** Supporting HGSE in attracting talented people into teaching, providing them with an excellent preparation program, and sharing best practices with the field of education, feels like one of the most powerful ways we can contribute to society.

## How did your time as a student at the Ed School influence you personally?

**LHO:** It changed my life. I met people from all walks of life, and with many different ways of viewing the world. The experience was transformative intellectually and emotionally, and really opened up the world to me.

**JNWY:** The incredibly enriching experience at HGSE inspired and motivated me to sharpen my leadership lens and take my interpretation of leadership to new heights.

**MSM:** I was enthralled to find a passionate group of incredibly smart and driven professionals wanting to improve our system of educating young people. This includes the faculty who taught my courses and my fellow students. As I launched into my own career, HGSE gave me knowledge, skills, relationships, and inspiration to succeed in a complicated and critically important line of work. □

**Cheriese Chambers is the senior director of development communications and donor engagement at the Ed School**



Hammett Ory



Sick Munger



Capodilupo



Ngar Wing Yu

# AirTime

When **BRUNO VILLEGAS MCCUBBIN, ED.M.'23**, first came to the United States, his parents told him they were taking him on a trip to Disneyland. He was 6 years old, and he believed them. Looking back, 20 years later, Villegas McCubbin sees there were clues his family would not be returning to their native Peru, even though they traveled here on tourist visas. His parents left the family's apartment virtually empty.

Villegas McCubbin shares his story — including his reflections on his early struggles learning English at school in Orange County, California, his transition to a gifted and talented program, becoming a DACA recipient, and attending Harvard at age 18 — in one of the opening episodes of a new

A new podcast series provides a window into the complex lives of young immigrants in America

Story by Elizabeth M. Ross

student-led podcast that he now hosts. *Our Moving Stories: Voices of Resilience*, explores how migration has shaped young people's lives, including their sense of identity and how they see the world.

"Oftentimes when you hear narratives about migration, you hear them from what we like to call a 'deficit-based' or 'damage-based' perspective, where a person's story or a person's essence boils down to their trauma, their hardships, the horrible things that people have experienced," explains Villegas McCubbin, a former immigrant rights activist with Harvard's student-run Act on a Dream organization and *Our Moving Stories*. Instead, as the host, he wanted to show that immigrants are "complex people who have experienced hardships but have also experienced moments of joy, moments of happiness, moments of resilience, moments of overcoming adversity."

When Villegas McCubbin approached Professor Carola Suárez-Orozco, the director of the Immigration Initiative at Harvard and one of his seminar instructors, with a proposal to capture the voices of some of his peers in a podcast, she embraced it.

Suárez-Orozco, a clinical psychologist by training, has long championed the sharing of "moving stories" — both physical and emotional — as a tool in the classroom to help children from immigrant homes feel heard and valued. She relished the opportunity to correct some of the misunderstandings she says many



people have about the immigrant experience and to help them "connect and imagine what it is like to go through the process."

If *Our Moving Stories* is a window into the intricate lives of immigrants and their families, it is also a mirror — a welcoming and safe space for students to reflect on their experiences together and to see themselves in — according to **NANCY PALENCIA RAMÍREZ, ED.M.'23**, the editor and sometimes host of the series, with **ARIADNE PACHECO, ED.M.'23**. Palencia Ramírez shares her story, as an undocumented immigrant from Mexico growing up in Texas, and her resulting struggles with anxiety and depression, in the first episode.

"I've had people in my classes talk to me and just say 'I listened to your episode, and I resonated with so many things,' and they are not Mexican," Palencia Ramírez says. "They could see parts of their own immigrant experience, even though it wasn't their direct experience. That has made me really proud of the work that we've done."

Although *Our Moving Stories* has its roots in the Harvard community, and the hope is that it continues after this first crop of students graduates this spring, its producers are also keen to interview immigrants from other places.

"My goal is to provide a diverse look into the different faces of migration," says Villegas McCubbin, "and to do that effectively, I think we're going to have to go beyond HGSE students." □

# No, Pinterest Isn't the Place to Build Lesson Plans

Alum's nonprofit pilots new play-based early ed curriculum in Boston

Story by Lory Hough

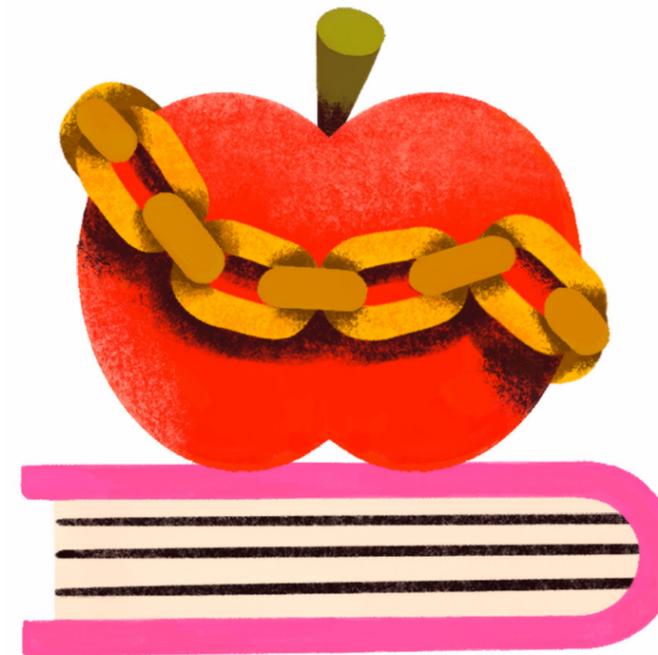


WHEN NEIGHBORHOOD Villages, a nonprofit based in Boston that advocates for early childhood education, first started working with childcare centers, they noticed that it wasn't easy for teachers to find curriculum for their young students that was both play-based and culturally relevant. Teachers often turned to a fun but unlikely curriculum source: Pinterest.

SARAH SIEGEL MUNCEY, ED.M.'05, cofounder of Neighborhood Villages (with Lauren Birchfield Kennedy, a 2009 graduate of Harvard Law School), wasn't surprised that the online site, most known as a place to get ideas for birthday parties and room decorating, became a go-to for early childhood teachers.

"They didn't have anything else," she says. For the most part, curriculum for children 0 to 5 that is both affordable and hits all of the points that Siegel Muncey says are important for children in that age range — play-based, culturally competent, and paired with coaching and materials to maximize the result teachers are looking for — is in short supply. "There are things that exist that people will proudly say are their curriculum, and they are just not curriculum. They're activity suggestions. Teachers desperately want to do right by the children in their classes."

With this in mind, Neighborhood Villages recently began partnering with Boston Public Schools (BPS) and the LEGO Foundation to create a new play-based early education curriculum for toddlers in Boston under age 3. This will expand on curriculum the nonprofit earlier de-



signed with the city's Focus on Early Learning programming for ages 3 to 8. All of the curriculum is aligned with the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care curriculum standards.

The nonprofit will pilot and test the toddler curriculum (with a goal to then expand statewide) through a program they created called The Neighborhood — a network of five Boston-based early education providers, serving about 3,000 people, including 900 children.

Siegel Muncey says as research shows — and as anyone working in the preschool world sees on a daily basis — investing in early childhood learning is critical, for both parents and children.

"Socioeconomically, this lack of investment in childcare infrastructure is hurting everyone from the woman who wants to make partner at our law firm to the woman who doesn't know her schedule at Dunkin Donuts three weeks from now," she says. "The idea that we don't invest in 0 to 5 in a meaningful way, and we pretend that human needs all of a sudden appear when a child turns five, it's not only inhumane and stupid, it's a really dumb way to spend your money."

As the nonprofit states on their website, "until we treat early education and care as a public good, we'll continue to see the same outcome: a system that fails everyone." Asked what's different about the curriculum they are creating, Siegel Muncey says, in part, it was created by educators for educators — and it won't cost centers anything.

"What makes this curriculum especially unique is the process

**"Until we treat early education and care as a public good, we'll continue to see the same outcome: a system that fails everyone."**

by which we are co-constructing it with a very diverse group of toddler teachers, family partners, and early childhood leaders who work in classrooms with toddlers every day," she says. "Additionally, the curriculum will be free and open source, which is a shift in early education, where programs are currently spending thousands of dollars on curricular products that don't even meet their needs."

Siegel Muncey says she's feeling hopeful about what she sees as this next, important phase in the early childhood world, where we've moved from "this is important" to "yes, but how do we do it?"

"Lauren and I used to drive around making the case for early education and talking about brain development. We don't do that anymore," she says. "We can skip

that. Nobody needs to hear that. They're like, yeah, but how do we fix this? And those people asking us are different people. They're business leaders and they're politicians. They're not just early ed advocates sitting around at a conference talking. I think they're seeing a rare unicorn of an issue that is affecting everyone so much that both sides of the aisle are often in agreement about it."

She calls it a moment. "It really is a different moment for childcare and for early education and early brain development and just this whole field. People are taking it seriously and everybody is paying attention," she says. "We really need to know how it all is going to work when it looks good." □

Learn more about the nonprofit and their podcast, *No One is Going to Save Us*, at: [www.neighborhoodvillages.org](http://www.neighborhoodvillages.org)

# Lecturer Alexis Redding, Ed.M.'10, Ed.D.'18

This past winter, as the days in Cambridge were alternating between freezing sub-zero and balmy mid-50s (with little snow in sight), Lecturer Alexis Redding, the faculty co-chair of the higher education concentration, shared with Ed. why she's reading a book about the Harvard-Yale football rivalry, but also so much more.

Redding also talked about the importance of natural light and why one of her upcoming reads isn't a book at all.

## What are you currently reading?

*The Game: Harvard, Yale, and America in 1968* by George Howe Colt.

## What in particular drew you to this book?

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to speak with an alum of Harvard College who participated in the campus takeover of University Hall in 1969. During our conversation, he talked at length about what it was like to be a first-generation student athlete at that time. I was intrigued by his stories and found *The Game* during a subsequent HOLLIS online search. The book is a fascinating account of the tensions on campus in the late 1960s and the lives of students navigating both institutions.

## Looking back, what kind of reader were you as a kid?

I was a "secretly reading by flash-

light long past my bedtime" kind of reader as a kid.

## Did you have a favorite book when you were growing up?

*Free to Be... You and Me* [by Marlo Thomas and the Ms. Foundation], along with the record, of course!

## What's the last interesting or useful thing you read in a book?

I was struck by the thoughtfulness with which Emily Weinstein and Carrie James centered youth voices in the research for their book, *Behind Their Screens: What Teens Are Facing*

(and *Adults Are Missing*). Their description of the Youth Advisory Council that they convened to help make meaning of their findings — along with the impact those insights had on their work — was powerful.

## Is there one particular book you assigned to your students at the Ed School this year that you think all educators should read, and why is that?

I assign *The Lives of Campus Custodians: Insights into Corporatization and Civic Disengagement in the Academy* by Peter Magolda to the students in my Ethnographic Methods for Higher Education Research course. I think everyone working in the field should read it. It is both an incredible example of ethnographic fieldwork and a profound examination of power

and privilege in colleges and in universities.

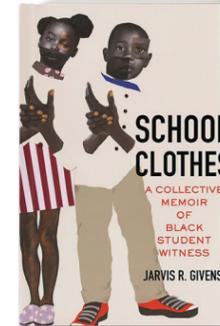
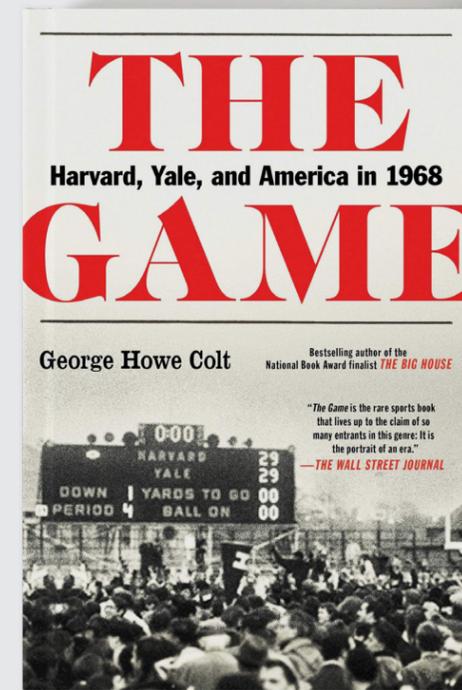
## Favorite place to read.

Anywhere quiet with lots of natural light.

## What books, in addition to the one you're currently reading, are on your nightstand?

*The Last Chairlift* by John Irving, *The Long Game: How to Be a Long-Term Thinker in a Short-Term World* by Dorie Clark, and a stack of travel guides that I'm using to plan my next upcoming adventure.

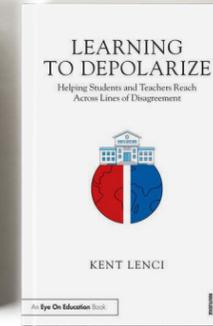
Interested in reading past On My Bookshelf interviews? Go to [gse.harvard.edu/ed/bookshelf](https://gse.harvard.edu/ed/bookshelf)



## School Clothes: A Collective Memoir of Black Student Witness

By Jarvis Givens  
(BEACON PRESS)

*School Clothes* is a collection of more than 100 firsthand accounts from the 19th and 20th centuries of Black students and what they encountered as they were trying to get an education. Givens writes that central to the book is a simple premise: that Black students have a way of seeing school and education in the United States that is distinct and distinguishable. The book reveals, he writes, "a story of educational domination, and simultaneously, one of fugitive learning." Included are the stories of writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison; political leaders like Mary McLeod Bethune and Angela Davis; and of Black students "whose names are largely ignored."



## Learning to Depolarize: Helping Students and Teachers Reach Across Lines of Disagreement

By Kent Lenci, Ed.M.'05  
(ROUTLEDGE)

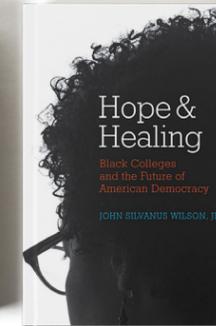
In his new book, *Learning to Depolarize*, Kent Lenci writes that "we have become a polarized society, bound unconditionally to those on our political team and mistrustful and dismissive of the others." He even saw this day-in and day-out during his two decades working with middle schoolers as a teacher, coach, and school leader. For this reason, he writes, students need to learn skills to help them face divisiveness and reach across lines of political divide. The book includes a look at the causes and consequences of political polarization and the role schools should play working with students and "depolarizing America."



## What Does Brown Mean to You?

By Ron Grady, first-year Ph.D. student  
(PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE)

In this, Ron Grady's first children's picture book, readers follow a young, energetic boy named Benny as he wakes up and goes about his day. The story is lyrical and upbeat and celebrates all shades of brown in Benny's world. As readers learn, this includes "the pup sleeping soundly away" and Benny's dad stirring pancakes. It's the best log for Benny to balance on and his grandma's coffee. It's his grandpa's kisses, which create "a lovely moment of bliss." Grady, currently in his first year of the Ph.D. program at the Ed School, not only wrote *What Does Brown Mean to You?*, which *Publisher's Weekly* says "reads like a gentle embrace," but he also illustrated the book.



## Hope and Healing: Black Colleges and the Future of American Democracy

By John Silvanus Wilson Jr., Ed.M.'82, Ed.D.'85  
(HARVARD EDUCATION PRESS)

In *Hope and Healing*, former Morehouse College president John Silvanus Wilson, Jr. examines Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and credits HBCUs for not only surviving, not thriving as important and relevant institutions of higher education. When he talked about the book recently on the Harvard EdCast, Wilson said that while HBCUs have long been viewed through a lens of "deficiency and survival," these institutions actually are preeminent in character — something missing from many institutions nationwide.

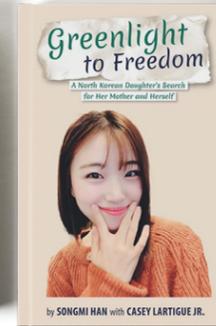
Listen to the EdCast interview recorded in March at [gse.harvard.edu/edcast](https://gse.harvard.edu/edcast)



## When We Thrive, Our World Thrives: Stories of Young People Growing Up with Adversity

By Connie Chung, Ed.M.'99, Ed.M.'07, Ed.D.'13  
(NOTION PRESS)

*When We Thrive, Our World Thrives* highlights the stories of graduates from Dream a Dream, a nonprofit based in India that offers programming to young people from vulnerable backgrounds to help them overcome adversity and develop the kinds of skills they need to thrive. Written by Chung and Vishal Talreja, one of the cofounders of Dream a Dream, the book also weaves in research on positive youth development and what kinds of supports educators and other adults need to give to at-risk youth in order for them to heal and grow.



## Greenlight to Freedom: A North Korean Daughter's Search for Her Mother and Herself

By Casey Lartigue Jr., Ed.'91, co-authored with North Korean refugee Songmi Han  
(FSI PUBLISHING)

*Greenlight to Freedom* is the true story of a young woman's life growing up in North Korea and her escape in 2011 to South Korea after enduring abuse, starvation, surveillance, and other hardships. The book was co-written by Lartigue through his South Korean-based nonprofit, Freedom Speakers International. Lartigue says the idea for the book started when Han, working part-time at the nonprofit, shared stories about growing up in North Korea. Lartigue had published refugee memoirs before and told her "there's a book here."

Read a profile of Lartigue at [gse.harvard.edu/ed](https://gse.harvard.edu/ed)

# Practice



“Quote.”

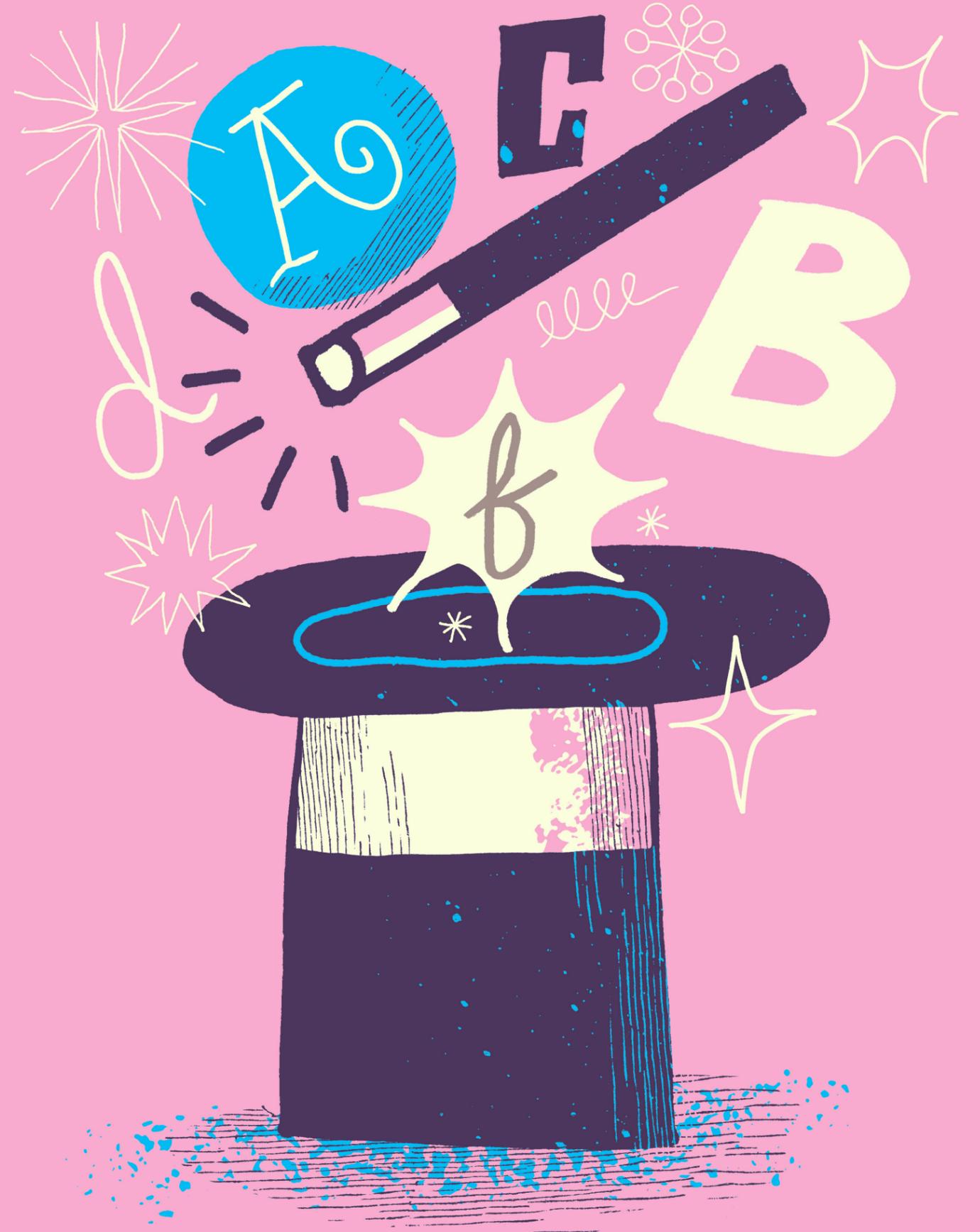
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# The Problem with Grading

When it comes to how we show what students know,  
traditional grading practices deserve a big, fat F

Story by **Lory Hough**  
Illustrations by **Nate Williams**



My son's binder was a mess. Loose papers were falling out, others looked like they had been balled up or stepped on, some more than once. The binder itself was bent in one corner. But he was a seventh-grader and to him, it looked just fine.

Unfortunately, his seventh-grade math teacher didn't agree and deducted points from his grade for being messy. This same teacher also took off points when homework was completed with something other than a pencil or if a student needed a second copy of an assignment. If a student was asked to move their seat during class, she slashed five points. Points were earned back if a parent signed the list of rules, and it was returned in a timely manner.

Being organized and not misbehaving in class are skills students need to figure out, for sure, and I certainly wanted my son to be neater, but factoring these behaviors into grades — especially for middle-schoolers just learning to come into their own — didn't make sense to me.

And so, when I learned, a few years later, that my son's high school was rethinking their grading practice, I decided it was time to dig deeper into what *Grading for Equity* author **JOE FELDMAN, ED.M.'93**, calls "one of the most challenging and emotionally charged conversations in today's schools."

#### Subhead here

I started by asking a question that seems simple on the surface: What is a grade?

Feldman, a former teacher and principal, says that on a really basic level, grades are the way teachers calculate and report student performances. Typically, it's an accumulation of points (0 to 100) with corresponding letters (A through F, minus E). Earn an 89 on a test and

your grade is a B+, for example. Believed to date back to 1785, when Yale President Ezra Stiles gave four grades to his seniors (*optimi*, second *optimi*, *inferiors*, and *peiores*), grades have long been a part of our education system in the United States. In fact, Feldman says, at most school, grades have become "the main criteria in nearly every decision that schools make about students," from whether they get promoted to the next class or held back to which course level a student should be taking, such as honors or AP. It's how many schools rank students and one of the main ways that colleges decide who they'll even consider for admissions.

"Grading is evaluation, putting a value on something," says **DENISE POPE, ED.M.'89**, a senior lecturer at Stanford who runs a project called Challenge Success. She stresses, however, that grades are not the same as assessment, and to really talk about grading, we have to make the distinction between the two terms.

"Assessment is feedback so that students can learn," Pope says. "It's helping them see where they are and helping them move toward a point of greater understanding or mastery. Grading doesn't always do that, but assessment should."

When she hosts professional development workshops to help schools rethink their assessment practices, she likes to point out that the Latin root of assessment is *sari*, which means to sit beside. Assessment is seeing where a student is with their understanding — what they know, what they don't know

#### Extra Credit ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Grading using letter grades to assess students doesn't start on day one, when kids enter kindergarten. At most elementary schools, "progress" is spelled out in a more fine-tuned way. Instead of As and Bs, it might include a numbered scale, with a 4 indicating a student demonstrates skills above grade level and a 1 indicating the student seldom understands the concepts. But what's most useful in elementary report cards is the added information that really drills down on skills: "can mentally add or subtract 10s and 100s" or "takes notes with sources listed correctly." After elementary school, these tangible specifics usually get replaced in middle school with just letter grades and maybe a drop-down menu of generic comments like "demonstrates enthusiasm for subject matter" that teachers can choose to include.

— and then using that to determine what they need. "Sometimes a grade does that," Pope says, "but a lot of times students have no idea what that grade means."

And that's what seems to be at the heart of the debate about grading, and what rubbed me the wrong way when my son was in that math class: Students, teachers, parents, and college admissions officers have no idea what a letter grade — this thing we are saying is really important in a student's school life — is really saying. Does an A mean a student has truly mastered that history lesson? Does the C+ mean the student was "sort of" getting the math they were learning, or did it mean they were an ace at math, but just couldn't keep a neat binder?

#### Subhead here

The confusion starts with consistency, as in, there is none. At most schools, there's no consistency about what is included in a grade or what's left out, even among teachers teaching the same subject in the same school to students in the same grade at the same level. This creates what is often called "grade fog" — we're not sure what the grade means because we're asking that A or that F to communicate too much disparate information.

"It's radically inconsistent from teacher to teacher," says **A.J. STITCH, ED.M.'12**, the founding principal of the Greater Dayton School, a private school in Ohio for kids from low-income backgrounds that doesn't use traditional grades. At the public schools where he's

worked in the past, he says "most teachers I've worked with have different approaches to weighting homework, classwork, quizzes, and tests."

For example, he says, "a student may demonstrate mastery of content on a test, quiz, and classwork, yet still fails a course because the teacher decides to weigh homework 40%, and the student, for one reason or another, struggles in that regard. Obviously, that's inequitable, and it illustrates the variation of weighted grade scales and how it impacts a student's success or failure, regardless of whether they mastered the standards taught in the course. Sadly, I made this mistake myself as a young teacher, and as a principal I've seen too many teachers make this mistake, too."

Jason Merrill, the principal of Melrose High School, where my son goes to school, says this is one of the biggest reasons they started looking at their teaching and learning practices, and why they applied to become one of five schools in the multi-year Rethinking Grading Pilot program sponsored by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

"Your son has eight teachers right now that all have their own way to grade. Completely their own," he says. "The average kid often gives up trying to figure it out. Some teachers count homework, some teachers don't. Some teachers grade homework, some teachers grade it as completion. Some teachers count large tests for a lot more than others. What we want to do is not have 85 different ways to

respond to a fire alarm.”

Feldman says we also don't want to include non-academics in grades — things like messy binders and not coming to class with a pencil, or the one that is commonly factored in: late work.

“A student who writes an A-quality essay but hands it in late gets her writing downgraded to a B, and the student who writes a B-quality essay turned in by the deadline receives a B. There's nothing to distinguish those two B grades, although those students have very different levels of content mastery,” he says.

Traditional grading also invites biases, he says, especially around behavior. “When we include a student's behavior in a grade, we're imposing on all of our students a narrow idea of what a ‘successful’ student is,” Feldman says, and “you start to misrepresent and warp the accuracy.” For example, a student who participates in discussions and always brings their pencil to class earns five points, but they get a C on the test. Adding the five behavior points lifts that C test grade to a B.

Although students and parents are happy the grade is a B and that the student's GPA remains intact, this warping can create longer term problems. “You're telling the student that they're at a B level in content, and they're actually at a C,” Feldman says. “They don't think there's a problem, the counselors don't think there's a problem, and the student goes to the next grade level and gets crushed by the content. They had no idea that they weren't prepared for the rigor of

that class because they kept getting the message that they were getting B's.”

It can be especially confusing for parents, says Christopher Beaver, an assistant principal at Melrose High.

“I knew what my own kids could do skill-based wise, but if I'm a parent and I don't know what my kids can do skill-based because the teachers haven't laid that out for me on a report card, then I can't look at a report card and say, ‘See that. My kid is proficient at this skill or my kid is proficient at that skill,’” he says. “I'm going to focus on something like the GPA because that's all I have. And I'm going to assume, if my kid has a high GPA, that my kid's skillset is at a proficient level. But that is not always the case.”

As a parent, I was confused earlier this year when my son's overall grade in a class he seemed to be understanding well was fairly low. We looked online at the grading portal the district uses and sure enough, he had mostly Bs and As. But then there was that one grade: a 44 on a test he didn't have enough time to finish. That one low test score brought the whole grade down because of another impossible part of how we grade: averaging.

“We have this ridiculous system of averaging things out,” Pope says, “which doesn't make any sense because the goal is to get students to learn material. Same with the case against zero, right? Why would you give a kid a zero? A zero is worse than an F.”

The “case against zero” idea is that when using a 0-to-100-point

### Extra Credit THE PANDEMIC

“What we saw during the pandemic is that people became much more acutely aware of grading practices because grades had to be reassessed in light of remote learning and curriculum being redesigned and assessment being totally turned on its head,” says *Grading for Equity* author Joe Feldman. “That greater need to look at grading has created this much stronger curiosity and sense that that's an aspect of teaching and learning that deserves more attention.”

At Melrose High School, several teachers were reading Feldman's book prior to COVID and knew they had an opportunity to make changes. Once they were fully in the pandemic, they realized there were things that absolutely had to change. “The pandemic provided us with that kind of insight,” says Melanie Acevedo, the district's director of instructional technology and personalized learning. “For educators nationwide, not just here in Melrose, the pandemic brought us forward in a lot of ways, but it also brought us back with a little bit of the work we had been doing — the universal design for learning and personalized learning work, for example. We were probably a few years behind where we were when we went out for the pandemic, which I would expect. We're seeing a bounce back now.”



scale in grading, a student should never receive a zero, even if they didn't turn in an assignment. Sounds odd, given that a zero for not turning in work is how we've long operated, but as author Doug Reeves writes in "The Case Against the Zero" in *Phi Delta Kappan* in 2004, "assigning a zero is disproportionate punishment."

Why? Because mathematically, with a 0 to 100 scale, failing a class is more likely than passing a class. Think about it. Each letter grade is 10 points — an A is 90-100, a B is 80-89, a C is 70-79, and a D is 60-69 — but the scale's one failing grade, an F, spans not 10 points, but 60 (0 to 59). The result is that a zero disproportionately pulls down an average and makes it that much harder to pull a grade up significantly. A student with two 85s, for example, is averaging a B. If that student gets a 0 on one assignment, their average drops to 56, an F. Even if the student gets 85s on the next two assignments, their average still only jumps to a 68. So, four Bs and one zero means the student's overall grade is a D+.

This averaging especially penalizes students who start out a semester slower with lower grades. Even if they figure out the material and fully master content later, averaging won't necessarily reflect what they truly know. In his book, Feldman gives an example of a student who, coming into ninth grade, had never learned to write a persuasive essay. The ninth-grade teacher gives an assignment early in September, revealing this student's writing inexperience.

"The essay gets a D-. But it's

early in September, and you, as the teacher, provide instruction and guided practice with feedback," Feldman writes. The student's writing improves, and their grades goes up with each new assignment. The student eventually learns how to write a great persuasive essay. They are doing A work. However, when the grades are averaged, that early D- drags down the overall grade and though the student mastered persuasive writing, their A drops to a B-.

#### Subhead here

Beyond the problems with how we grade or what a grade means, **ROBIN LOEWALD, ED.M.'19**, an English teacher at Melrose High, also worries about the effect grades have on student mindset, especially for middle- and high-schoolers.

"Grading in general is tough because of the expectations for students with college applications," she says. "There tends to be a lot of stress around grades and the minute difference between a 93 and 94. In truth, it's hard to really delineate the difference between those two numbers in terms of student understanding and mastery of the subject."

Pope focuses her work extensively on the stress students take on trying to chase "good" grades and the extrinsic motivation that takes over. In an op-ed she co-authored in February for *The Hechinger Report* about the furor over ChatGPTs, she wrote that instead of asking how to stop students from cheating using bot programs, we should instead be asking why students are cheat-

#### Extra Credit HOMEWORK

"We actually want students to make mistakes on homework, because if there's any place that you should make mistakes in your learning, you should do it when you're practicing, like on homework." Grading for Equity author Joe Feldman said on the Harvard EdCast in 2019. But if "we include their performance on that homework in the grade, we're telling them 'make a lot of mistakes and we're going to punish you for it,' which is totally confusing and undermines our messaging."

#### Extra Credit COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS

A recent story in *The Hechinger Report* focused on a growing movement by some colleges to "ungrade," meaning they would stop assigning the traditional A through F letter grades to first-year college students (and sometimes, upperclassmen). "The idea," writes Jon Marcus, "is meant to ease the transition to higher education — especially for freshmen who are the first in their families to go to college or who weren't well prepared for college-level work in high school and need more time to master it." Other colleges, like MIT, use something called "ramp-up grading" — first-year students receive only a "pass" (or not pass) for each class during the first semester, no letter grade. The article noted that making big changes like this at the college level isn't easy. "It's how faculty themselves were largely judged as they went through college. Parents, high schools, and university admissions offices put a premium on grade-point averages — an even greater one as many institutions make the SAT and ACT optional. Even car insurance companies give 'good-grades discounts' to student-age drivers."

ing in the first place. Chasing those good grades is part of that answer.

"We have this real system of you need to get the grades and the test scores in order to please your parents, go to college, get the merit scholarship, get a good job — whatever it is," she says. "There's this extrinsic motivation that's tied to grades, which adds to student stress, and in some cases can lead to really unhealthy practices like perfectionism or great anxiety, paralysis. And it could also really turn kids off. 'Well, I got a C so I'm bad at math. I'm not a math person so clearly, I shouldn't try anymore.'"

As Feldman said during an interview in 2019 with the Harvard EdCast, for students, even attempting to follow the range of grading practices each of their six or seven teachers follows can be stressful.

"For the student, it adds to my cognitive load," he says. "I not only have to understand the content and try and perform at high levels of the content, but now I also have to navigate a grading structure that may not be totally transparent, and may be different for every teacher, and particularly for students who are historically underserved and have less education background and fewer resources and understanding of how to navigate those really foreign systems. It places those additional burdens on them, which we shouldn't do."

#### Subhead here

If traditional grades say little about a student's mastery of the material, are often inequitable, and can add more stress, what are better ways

for teachers and schools to capture a student's skills and understanding of the material? And given the long history of using numbers and letter grades, are schools even ready to change?

Back in 2005, **CHESTER FINN JR., M.A.T.'67, ED.D.'70**, then president of the Washington-based Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, told *The Washington Post* that "high schools will keep using them if college admissions offices keep requiring them, which they likely will."

But nearly two decades since Finn made that observation, it's clear that some schools, like my son's, are ready for change and have ideas on how to do that.

At the Greater Dayton School, Stich says their ability to work outside the structure and limitations of a public school gave them the liberty to design whatever grading scale they thought was best for kids. They chose not to use the A to F scale.

"The traditional grading system is not aligned to learning outcomes," he says. "Traditional grading is one-and-done in terms of you've learned the content, or you haven't, and the grade you get is the grade you get. A better grading system allows for multiple attempts of content mastery."

Which is why his school uses only two grades — "mastered" and "in progress," and students have unlimited chances to learn the material and become proficient, he says. Students also learn at their own pace and the school's standards are broken into kid friendly "I can" statements so parents and students know exactly what skills

a student “can” do and which skills they are working on.

A few years ago, Melrose High started allowing students to redo their work if the grade was below a certain number. The idea was that learning shouldn’t be punitive — it was about mastering content, even if that took more than one try.

As Merrill says, “At the end of the day, we want all kids to learn. We don’t want to prove that they don’t know something. We want to be like, you need to do some work to retake this again to show us that you do know it.”

Loewald says the school’s English Department additionally has an extended revision policy around writing assignments, where students can meet with their teachers to edit, revise, and resubmit their writing work. She allows students to revise almost every assignment.

“I think that the process of learning through revision is really helpful and allows there to be less pressure on the initial submission of work,” she says. “Students are graded on rubrics and can use those rubrics to guide their revisions of assignments. The only assignments that I do not allow students to revise are their reading checks since those are things we talk about and reference in the class in which they’re due.”

Merrill says the revision policy is a work in progress — it needs its own revision — because there is currently too much variation in what students can redo. “We are working to build a single, consistent retake policy. If we de-emphasize the weighting for formative assessment and practice materials, such as homework and classwork, then

we can have a retake policy that addresses summative assessments only,” he says.

**CAITLIN REILLY, ED.M.’14**, recently started as a deputy principal at Revere High School, located just north of Boston and part of the state’s Rethinking Grading Pilot. She says the school is moving toward a full competency-based model. Although there’s variation on how competency-based is defined, it generally means that instead of evaluating students as proficient based on the amount of time they spend on a subject — 58 minutes for factoring polynomials or three years taking a foreign language — time allotment is shifted to how well students can define what they actually know about a subject. And those competencies aren’t vague — they’re clearly spelled out by a school.

“For us, competency learning is a matter of equity for students because it makes apparent to all students, what are you working toward?” says Reilly. “Where do you not yet have the skills? What support do you need? And students should be seeing their progress to the standards of the course. Knowing that is incredibly important for all students, versus the hidden game of school when you have this letter grade, and you don’t know where it’s generated from, or you have a test that you got 10 points just for writing your name.”

One of the areas Revere High School is working on with the grant, she says, is rethinking report cards. Their current approach mimics, in some ways, what elementary schools typically do, which is to include comments about student

### Extra Credit BADGES INSTEAD?

Mention “earning a badge” to most people and they think of the scouts, where you collect sew-on patches for learning skills such as fire safety or how to play the bugle. But Harvard professor Danielle Allen and her team at the Democratic Knowledge Project think it’s time a similar “badging” approach be used in schools to replace traditional letter grades. As they spell out in their white paper, *A Call to More Equitable Learning: How Next-Generation Badging Improves Education for All*, badging is a more accurate, equitable way to measure, record, and report K–12 student learning.

What elevates badging from the traditional letter grade system is what’s “behind” the badging, says David Kidd, the project’s chief assessment scientist and a research director at Project Zero.

“The badge itself is just a signifier. It signifies that a competency has been developed with pre-defined definitions,” he says. “Essentially, what we’re trying to do is make sure the badges have credibility that they’re backed by meaning.”

The project is piloting badges in civics and math with partner groups, including the XQ Institute. With math, they’ll “unbundle” algebra I, create a list of important competencies, and then develop related badges. For civics, Allen says, “badges range from things like does a student understand the framework for thinking about rights and responsibilities in our legal system? You can badge that as an area of knowledge. Have they built up the skills, the actual practices and habits that support collaboration across lines of difference? That would be another kind of competency that you can badge.”

— A longer version of this story originally appeared on the Usable Knowledge website on August 25, 2022.

strengths or areas that need work, not just the letter grade.

“Our current report card is a one pager that has letter grades ... but for every class students have, there’s a habits of work box that includes the four habits of work that we assess: active learning, respect, collaboration, and ownership,” she says. For each habit, there’s a scale of proficient, some proficient, or not yet proficient, with clearly defined expectations spelled out so that it’s not just a teacher’s general ‘sense’ of which category to pick.

As I talked to educators about other ways to rethink how we grade, some suggested dropping the lowest grade in a class or not grading work done early in a semester. Many mention not grading homework but instead allowing it to be a place where students can make mistakes, especially when new concepts are being introduced. Others talk about doing away with the 0 to 100 scale. In Melrose, Loewald says the English Department has already shifted to a 1–4 scale.

“A four meaning the student is exceeding expectations, three is meeting, two is approaching, and one is developing,” she says. “It’s much more accurate in terms of assessing student learning to use a smaller scale.”

Feldman says that with any change around such an entrenched topic like grading, “We are learning that you actually have to invest in teacher understanding along with policy development in order to change practice around grading.”

It’s something my son’s school has already jumped on with a core group of administrators and teach-

ers examining current practices and testing out some of the changes they want to make.

“They’ve all set goals for themselves and are participating in regular coaching,” says Melanie Acevedo, the district’s director of instructional technology and personalized learning. “They come to a meeting once a month and talk about what’s working, what’s not working. They are a group that’s trying things out. They’re being the people that are booted on the ground, really experimenting so that we can come back to the bigger faculty and say, here are some things that people have tried. Do you want to try that? Were building this idea from the staff and from the teachers because they’re the ones that know best.”

One of the things Melrose High isn’t doing, at least not yet, is blowing up the entire grading system or even doing away with traditional A to F grades.

Instead, says Merrill, they’ve set a goal so that by next fall they have “a very clear, consistent, transparent grading practice and policy in place for all teachers,” he says, and can answer questions like: How do we assess kids? How do we communicate that? How do kids know where they stand? How do they reflect and retake or do revisions? How do we count homework? Is that grading equitable? “There are so many pieces that go into it,” he says, “but we’re not looking to make any of our kids a trial.”

Luckily, there’s broader interest in “rethinking grading,” as the Massachusetts pilot is called. Sales for Feldman’s *Grading for Equity* book

are robust enough that he’s working on a second, updated edition, and, he says, “I am not any less confident that this is one of the most important levers that schools and districts can use to not only improve student achievement, but also reduce achievement and opportunity disparities.”

Rethinking grading may even keep some teachers in the profession longer.

“We’ve heard, and we have some data, that this work actually increases the likelihood that some teachers would stay in their district,” Feldman says. “We see a real crisis in the in the retention of the teaching force and knowing that there’s a learning opportunity that can engage them more directly with why they went into teaching in the first place, and gets them more excited about teaching, I think is really important.” Teachers don’t want to be the bean counters or police officers they often become when it comes to grading.

“The five participation points every day. The, you turned it in late one day, so you lose 10% or you turned it in two days late so 20%,” he says. “None of us went into teaching to do that.” □

## RESEARCH

# Place Definitely Matters

People shape young brains, but so does the environment

Story by Ryan Nagelhout

NO TWO educational experiences are alike for students. There are too many factors at play to perfectly replicate how a single child learns. But as the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University has explored for more than 15 years, children respond to educational opportunities differently for a wide variety of reasons.

For much of its existence, the center focused on the ways in which early educational development, including the ways that children learn, and the resulting outcomes are shaped by who cares for a child as they grow. Those developmental relationships influence the way young brains form and how children interact with the world the rest of their lives. But in a new working paper released this spring, “Place Matters: The Environment We Create Shapes the Foundations of Healthy Development,” the center has attempted to expand the lens of its research into much broader terrain.

The titular conclusion of Working Paper 16 — that place, not just relationships, matters to the developing child — is not necessarily new. But the framing is key, and as Center on the Developing Child di-

rector Jack Shonkoff says, the simplicity is kind of the point.

“The most powerful science from a public education point of view is when the science tells you something your grandmother could have told you,” Shonkoff says. Of course, *place matters*, but how much it matters and how individual children respond is where things get interesting. He cited an easy example: Even children coming from the same household often won’t respond identically to much of anything, let alone have identical educational outcomes.

“Place always matters, but it matters differently to different parts of the population,” he says. “We’re saying you can’t disregard the broader environment, and you have to look at it closely just like you look at the environment of relationships.”

Shonkoff describes it as a movement beyond the debate of nature vs. nurture: Working Paper 16 declares the answer is a resounding “both.” The relationship between a child and their caregiver is still essential to development and learning but as Lindsey Burghardt, the center’s first chief science officer, says, it’s “just one part of the frame.”

Burghardt explains that the new direction focuses heavily on the concept of exposomics, the collective effect a wide variety of environmental factors has on individuals.

“Exposomics is the kind of cumulative effect, the sum of all of the experiences that we have in our social, built, and natural environments that we have beginning before we’re born,” she says. “Not every environment is the same. And what exposomics tells us is that literally no two environments are the same. And every kid’s environment is as unique as their fingerprint.”

More broadly, where children grow up and what environmental factors they’re exposed to introduces an endless array of factors that can help or hurt their educational opportunities and outcomes in life. Polluted air from nearby highways, lead exposure due to old pipes, and a lack of access to greenspace can all negatively impact child devel-

opment and learning. Conversely, clean air, clean water, and a safe place to play all promote resilience and more positive outcomes. Depending on where children live, grow, play, and learn, they can be disproportionately exposed to those positive and negative factors.

That reframing, and the growing understanding of how climate change can impact the health of children, the paper’s authors say, is a stake in the ground that will serve as the starting point for the center’s future endeavors.

“What this paper represents is following our north star, being led by what science is telling us and recognizing that the frontiers of science are always moving,” Shonkoff says. “We’re moving upstream and we’re going to start to connect those dots to what’s happening outside the family and outside the school. How do things that happen out there in the broader en-

vironment get into the body and affect your brain, which then affects the way you learn and the way you behave?”

“Place Matters” has an explicit focus on the systemic factors that have shaped where people are able to live, among other factors, have resulted in disparities in access to quality education and many other resources. The paper calculates this disparity among races with the Childhood Opportunity Index, a calculation of a variety of factors that impact educational success, put out by diversitydatkids, a Brandeis-based research program. When examining the 100 largest metro areas in the United States, the average Childhood Opportunity Score is 73 for white children and 72 for Asian children, but just 33 for Hispanic children and 24 for Black children.

These stark differences are not predetermined by race, they stress,

but by place. The paper cited that, scientifically, all humans are the same and that there is no biological distinction of race. Working Paper 16 notes that while our environment impacts who we are, who is in certain environments is determined by humans. Humans create racial disparity and place reinforces these impacts because they are human built.

In America, much of that disparity comes from big, systemic issues such as historic redlining and institutional racism. For individual educators, changing those factors impeding learning can seem daunting. But as Burghardt points out, because humans caused these issues, it also means they can be changed for the better if the people making policy acknowledge the impact those environments have on education.

“In a way, it’s an awesome window of opportunity. We made intentional decisions to create these environments, we can make intentional decisions in ways to shape positive environments and positive health,” Burghardt says. “There’s so much opportunity because it is shaped by policy decisions. Which is great because we can do something about it.”

Burghardt notes, however, that educational and medical policy should not simply try to shield children from bad outcomes as much as it should promote positive impacts. The concept of promoting resiliency is far more important than removing all environmental or developmental issues altogether. Stress is an important part of

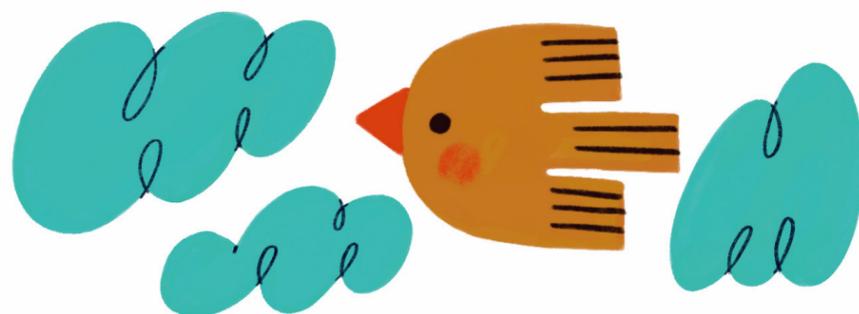
the developmental process, too, but the goal is to introduce as many positive factors as possible to promote good outcomes when that stress arrives.

She relates it to a human’s fight-or-flight response to a tiger chasing them in the jungle. When a person has a baseline of low-stress existence, the temporary danger creates important reactions: an elevated heart rate and the production of stress hormones. They know danger is there and, most likely, run away. But the baseline of safety is key.

“The tiger is not intended to chase you for your whole life,” Burghardt says. “When these stress levels stay high for really long periods of time, that’s where you can get negative effects on your biology.”

Children are born with no defenses for the hidden dangers lurking in their neighborhoods. But “Place Matters” argues that the teachers and other adults in their lives can work to make sure those harmful stressors are few and far between for as many children as possible. Through better policy and an educational philosophy grounded in empathy to their experiences, the proverbial tigers can be kept at bay. □

Ryan Nagelhout is a staff writer in the Office of Communications and Marketing



# Climate Change is Scary for Kids

Tina Grotzer explains the challenge teachers face talking about the environment

Story by Lory Hough



PRINCIPAL RESEARCH SCIENTIST TINA GROTZER

WHEN **TINA GROTZER, ED.M.'85, ED.D.'93**, a principal research scientist at the Ed School, met with her students this past winter during January term (J-term) for her Teaching Climate Change class, one of the things they discussed was a tricky but important question: How can educators support young people as they navigate between anxiety and despair and hope and action when they think about climate change?

Not long after the class finished, Grotzer, a principal research scientist in education, spoke to *Ed.* about why she taught the class, how we got here, and how her students didn't shy away from talking about hard issues.

## What made you want to teach this course?

Climate change is an existential crisis and one of the most difficult challenges facing current and future generations. It leads to so many issues of inequity and injustice. And we are seeing that every day now as people in island nations such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and in seaside villages such as Miskito Village in Nicaragua deal with sea level rise, or Bhutan deals with glacial lake burst. We also see increased health issues due to warming cities, insect population migration, and new viruses and bacteria as permafrost melts. We are looking at mass climate migration. Climate change impacts many of the most vulnerable people on the planet and those who are least responsible for causing it. For a few decades now, I have talked about it as the defining injustice of our

time. Often people need to see concrete consequences before they are willing to turn their attention to a problem. People are finally now beginning to heed the warnings.

## What role should teachers and educators play?

When an issue is so urgent, it can be challenging to take the long view that education requires, but I think we must. We owe it to future generations to help them develop sustainable ways to live in the world. Life on Earth depends upon our making urgent and long-term changes for how we think about the planet and its resources. Besides that, kids are well aware of what is happening to the planet. They need teachers who can support their emotional development as well. So, teachers have a key role to play here. ... Kids are angry, rightfully so, at the generations before them. Teachers also have the challenging and important position of being a bridge between generations.

## Educators need to teach the facts, but with climate change, the facts can be scary.

One of the reasons that community was important for the J-term class is that we didn't shy away from the hard issues. We looked at the many impacts around the world and how challenging the problems are. It can be daunting to look at the images and video of impacts around the world and then to realize that some of these are from years ago. You can't help but ask, "Why aren't we doing more?" At the same time, we need educators to feel empowered to take action, and, very im-



portantly, to help young people take concrete actions — more than just talking about it. We know that taking action can be protective of mental health.

## Is the term "climate anxiety" commonly used?

Yes, and it shows up in different ways. There is a lot of talk in the literature about different forms of stress that people experience: *solastalgia* (emotional or existential stress caused by environmental change), *ecosickness* (ecologically induced illness), or *Anthropocene disorder* (a change in affect as people feel overwhelmed and powerless in the face of the scale of the climate crisis). Most people are familiar with the term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). With climate change, people also talk about pre-traumatic stress disorder because there is a constant anticipation that preoccupies peo-

ple's minds. Other anxiety stems from a sense of loss of possible futures that one might have hoped to live; this is not unlike young people growing up during the Cold War. Some young people question the ethics of bringing children into such an uncertain future. For some people, climate anxiety manifests as a constant background feeling. ... A generation is growing up with climate awareness and anxiety as an aspect of their being.

## Does this anxiety vary by age?

Well, certainly high schoolers who can understand the science and "what if?" scenarios for what might happen are more likely to have a sense of concern. They also have a greater recognition of the counterfactuals — what was the world like, what is it like now, and what might it be like? This is different than the youngest children who may never know a world without

extreme weather and mass disruption. There are some who think that the very youngest children should know about climate change and that the Earth is sick. I would argue that we should emphasize helping the youngest children develop a relationship with earth — to become eco-centric instead of ego-centric, and to empower them to do things to support the health of planet earth.

## How does this affect how we teach the youngest?

We need to be careful about teaching them the direst consequences of climate change if we want them to develop into healthy young people with a sense of connectedness in their world and to avoid toxic stress. Of course, this stance comes with the luxury of living in a part of the world that is not already faced with dramatic impacts, and I am aware that this is a form of privilege that all of us in Cambridge share. The impacts we are already seeing cast this issue in a different light for educators in some parts of the world and create current challenges for the education of young children.

## How can we support young people navigating anxiety/despair and hope/action?

There isn't one answer and our dis-

cussions in class underscore that. One of the most important things teachers can do is to support young people in meaningful action for the planet. In class, we looked at several projects that support learning subjects like math, science, and economics, but that also embed lessons about caring for earth, sustainability, and doing good from an ecological perspective.

## What about looking at solving the problem?

Just focusing on problem-solving can be emotionally challenging. Denying that climate change exists results in disengagement. So, teachers can support learners in balancing meaning and problem-solving, such as thinking about the power of our collective actions and understanding historically imminent and existential challenges that humankind has surmounted. A tricky aspect of the problem space is that we are asking young people to take action despite the inaction of previous generations. Teachers face a balancing act in addressing this issue. Helping young people see that some people were taking action and some cultures do live sustainably, while helping them to understand the human cognitive processes that can lead to inattention and denial, can lead to a better sense of how we got here and how they can address inaction in the future. □

**"Kids are angry, rightfully so, at the generations before them. Teachers also have the challenging and important position of being a bridge between generations."**

# How to Become a Teacher

(in three easy steps over 20 long years)

Story by Megan Perna



IN THE SUMMER I was 22, I was waiting for all of my life to begin: for a fulfilling career to materialize in front of me; for my boyfriend to propose so I could plan my dream wedding; for the subway because I couldn't afford taxis. And by that point, I'd already been waiting *forever* to become a teacher.

Act I opens on a Saturday morning in the basement rec room, a staple of 1980s suburban Americana. An easel covered in chart paper perches on the edge of a large placemat turned small rug upon which a motley assortment of stuffed animals has gathered to listen, to learn, and occasionally to misbehave. At their helm: a bossy but tenderhearted elementary schooler, drawn to the combination of structure and nurturing dispensed more in the classroom than at home. She may seem lonely with no siblings to play school, but in truth, she prefers the toys anyway; they follow a script better than humans. Case in point: the makeshift schoolmarm startles when her father's voice booms from the stairwell where he rarely has the time or curiosity to venture: "You want to be a teacher?! (Incredulous pause, slight head shake, quiet exhale.) Well. You'll change your mind." He retreats before she can ask what he means.

Was the topic revisited since? Maybe, but Act II would wait a full decade to sharpen the point. At the club for Friday lunch, the former schoolmarm and the father celebrate her impending college graduation — with a degree in creative writing, of all things, and poetry in particular, as if to punctuate the impracticality. With staunch support

for his offspring's aptitude and promise, her father had bolstered the romantic choice of major with his own personal mantra: *find your passion, kid, and you will find a way to succeed at it*. The pair now bask in a team victory: the first college degree in the family and with an Ivy League veneer, no less. It was the parent who had been enamored with that cache, perhaps because all college was imagined to be a playground of intellect and frivolity; it's so easy to romanticize the unobtainable. The graduate herself was merely eager to please, and so, each obliging the other, she had won a spot in the Great Eight and he had paid the enormous bill, and the deal had been sealed. In fact, by the time of the lunch, she had secured her first job — as a financial writer quite literally on a downtown Manhattan street called Wall.

Under those circumstances, retrospection and speculation are natural bedfellows: "Do you even remember I enrolled first in a course of study for biochemical engineering?" she queried her father, musing over her *niçoise*. "And here I am now, on the opposite end of the intellectual earth." For the natural question to follow — "I wonder if I'll stay adjacent to finance or find my way back to science" — the father's personal mantra is again a fit-

ting response: *find your passion, kid, and you will find a way to succeed at it*. The surprising portion is the new addendum that follows the refrain she thought she already knew: "Just don't be a teacher. Anything but a teacher." It's hard to be sure what burgeoning career opportunities he might have imagined exist within the poetry-industrial complex, but this sounded as if it were final, and the daughter wouldn't disobey, at least for the next 19 months.

This intense opposition to a career in education — maybe it was pride? The father had been born into an immigrant family in Astoria, Queens, that established a small business repairing home heating systems. It was smelly, dirty, dangerous work, wrestling steam tanks, scooping oily sludge, and crawling around ductwork. Over his parents' panicked resistance at surrendering their firstborn son to a life they could never access, he had insisted upon answering a newspaper ad for entry-level positions on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, based then on a downtown Manhattan street called Wall. (This was before a degree was required for a white-collar career, when a hard worker with a good head for numbers and

strong soft skills could rise in the ranks and build a beautiful life for his young wife and only daughter.) When the family business folded in the wake of his departure, his rejoinder was to ascend to suburbia and never look back. He was intensely attached to his self-image as a modern-day bootstrapper; perhaps his only child's return to union work felt like a step backward in the family station? And after all, this father-daughter duo had just gotten her that fancy degree. In a world where she could be anything, why would she possibly choose to teach? The neighbor kid who went to state school became a teacher.

I imagine there was also fear. A

father would know things an undergraduate could not. For one, how our world views its educators: as employees or servants, nursemaids and nannies, but not leaders. He would have a practical understanding that many teachers earn a smallish salary for long hours, taking side gigs on weekends and summers, juggling childcare and couponing to make it all work. He knew teaching is not a life of luxury, and he was right. Perhaps more saliently, though, he knew how hard work in a thankless role takes a toll. Slingshotting oil isn't the same as grading essays, but when an irate customer comes at you, it's equally demoralizing whether it's an impatient homeowner or an angry par-

ent. I imagine it would be easy to romanticize the future of ease that might be granted by a degree as much as he did college life itself.

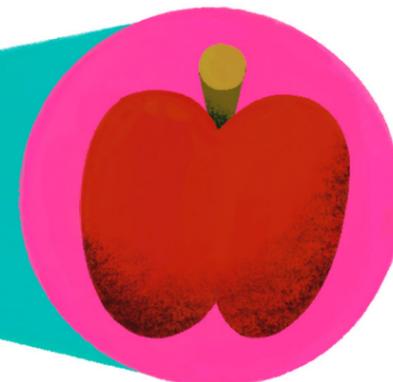
Pride and fear: two defensible reasons that my father would cling to the idea that I might realistically find employment as a *poet*, which is not even a job, rather than enter education, a full-blown career. Being a teacher is like being a cop or a nurse; everyone knows what that means. Being a poet is like being a philosopher or an orator; it hasn't been honest work since the Age of Antiquity. And my hunch is that this is what lurks under all the rest. Our family culture included the type of anxious grandiosity that is often packaged with upward mobility. Being a teacher may have been a bit *too* much like being a cop or a nurse; everyone would not only know what that is, but they'd understand how ordinary we were at our roots.

Nineteen months after the lunch, I finally acquired the right weapon to defend a foray into education: unemployment. Having been laid off from finance, I acquired my first third-grade room — and I never looked back. It happened that teaching matched those first imaginings of its promise: an opportunity to offer equal measures of structure and support to the children who gathered each day

to listen, to learn, and occasionally to misbehave. This was before a master's degree was required for a license, when a hard worker with good instincts for instruction and strong soft skills could rise in the ranks and build a beautiful career in education as a teacher-turned department head-turned edtech executive, requiring very little help with either coupons or childcare.) And 20 years after that, having found my passion and succeeded at it, I earned a spot in the Graduate School of Education at another of the Great Eight; this time, I paid the bill myself, rendered simultaneously proud and wounded and very poor, all by way of the bittersweet charge to go it alone this time.

It was sometime shortly after tuition came due, at yet another Friday lunch at the club, that my father again held forth a surprising addendum. After dispensing a bit of professional wisdom, he conceded abruptly: "You know, kid. I was wrong. I didn't know that education would be your passion and you'd find a way to succeed at it. I sold you short." He stopped short of apologizing, but then I stopped short of responding that he, of all people, probably should have known all along — not only because of his own origin story, but because the schoolmarm is his daughter, after all. □

After nearly two decades in schools, Megan Perna is currently an executive editor of educational assessments and curriculum. As a member of the inaugural class of the Online Master's in Educational Leadership Program, she wrote this essay in Nancy Sommers' J-term writing workshop



# What I Learned About Mentoring Principals

IT'S NOT UNCOMMON for teachers nowadays to have mentors. But mentoring for principals is a rarer — but very necessary — thing, says **PHYLLIS GIMBEL, ED.M.'95**, author of the new book, *Leadership Through Mentoring, The Key to Improving the Confidence and Skill of Principals*. Principals have a huge impact on teacher experience and student achievement yet principal turnover is more common than ever, with 35% staying at their school for less than two years, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. One reason why, says Gimbel, a professor at Bridgewater State University, is that being a principal is more stressful than ever. "Principals need to hit the halls running," she writes, but "many are left to learn on the job. It doesn't take long for new principals to feel overwhelmed by things coming at them from all directions." Gimbel saw this first-hand when she was working in schools, first as a teacher, then as a school administrator, principal, and mentor trainer. Recently, she shared some of the things she learned, working in schools and researching her book, about the role of mentors and why new principals need to be supported more than ever.

**What is mentoring?** The mentoring relationship between two people, typically face to face, endeavors to expand a new principal's professional development.

**Not all states require mentoring of new school principals**

**due to variations in federal and state funding.** It is important to allow state or federal funds to support principal mentoring programs in schools.

**Often, practicing principals do not have time to be trained and then to mentor for one or two years.** Yet, the daily demands on school leaders require clear and consistent feedback. Without a mentor, a new principal is not guaranteed this type of regular assistance.

In my research and in my own practice as a principal, I have learned that **...new school leaders are often left alone, serving in isolation, without much-needed support from colleagues serving in similar roles.** There were times I wanted someone who was not part of my school district to listen and advise me. Maybe I could have had an impact sooner in my tenure had I had a mentor.

**Research has shown that school leaders are second only to teachers when it comes to impacting student achievement.**

**Nowadays, schools are becoming more and more the objects of attention,** from many quarters, from politicians to teachers on the verge of resigning, to parents and guardians made even more anxious and demanding by the uncertainties of the ongoing pandemic, mental health crisis, political and social rifts, and the

desire for racial equity.

**Principals are often occupying what has been named the "complaint window."**

**As a new secondary school teacher, I did not have confidence, especially regarding classroom management and discipline.** My students were diverse and each one of them was unique. How could I be fair, trustworthy, equitable in my actions, and still be an effective teacher? If I had someone who would not be evaluating me and someone I could trust, I would have liked to run some scenarios of how I would handle certain situations. But I could not, so I had to "fly blindly."

**In my research and role as mentor trainer of retired principals, I have found that new principals can benefit from seasoned principals who have retired within the past five years.** Since the demands on principals today is so different from 10 or more years ago, some of the social constructs and state licensing requirements have changed, making it challenging, in my opinion, for those individuals who retired a decade ago to understand the current educational landscape.

**In my work as mentor trainer, some trainees mentioned that the biggest way a mentor can help a mentee is by providing a relationship whose primary goal is to create perspective.**

**Another mentor in training told me that his mentee needed a "culture reset" to re-create a sense of trust among the faculty and the principal.** Through my training of mentors and my research, I have found that the most effective mentors create instructive challenges by helping the new principal understand and frame issues, help develop a new principal's professional vision via dialogue, and help the new principal feel empowered to solve problems themselves.

**A good mentor listens empathically, offers a safe space to vent, to air, to complain and to feel shame.** The role of mentor is supportive and non-evaluative.

**Mentors and mentees should be matched carefully.**

**Time must be allotted for mentors and mentees to meet regularly and time must be allotted for mentors and mentees to meet regularly .**

**If possible, it is better to have a mentor from outside the new principal's school district so that the mentor provides more objective advice.** It is important for the mentor to be trained to listen, ask questions, and not pass judgment so that mutual trust can evolve in the relationship. □

**If you know someone who would make a great teacher, check out our Teaching and Teacher Leadership Program at [gse.harvard.edu/masters/programs/ttl](https://gse.harvard.edu/masters/programs/ttl)**



Phyllis Gimbel

PAST TENSE

TK



Caption TK.

EDITOR LORY HOUGH, AFTER ATTENDING THE PHOTO SHOOT AT PAGU. (SEE THE STORY ON PAGE 20.)

