

COVID HAS MADE IT CLEAR: WE CAN DO BETTER

Story by **SIMON RODBERG, ED.M.'14**

Education — the raising of children to be functional adults — is different from schools. Both 20,000 years ago and 200 years ago, most humans educated children without the institution of schools — within families, with informal tutors, through apprenticeships. Between 1820 and 2020, schools went from rare, even in the United States, to basically universal. In the past year, for most children, in-person school disappeared. In its absence, we should ask: What was school?

School was a place where large groups of children of similar ages gathered to be taught by a much smaller cohort of unrelated adults. It served four functions: custodial (to keep children safe and meet their basic needs for food, water, and shelter); job readiness (to teach them skills that would allow them to thrive economically); developmental (to prepare them for well-rounded adult life outside the workplace); and democratic (to ensure they could participate in virtuous citizenship). These functions existed before schools, in different forms: children always had to be protected and fed, trained for adult work, taught the ways of their culture, and prepared for citizenship. Schools, uniquely, brought these functions under one roof and hierarchical organization.

Our endless arguments about schools' shortcomings (Why can't Johnny read? Should Janey's sex ed be abstinence-only? Is there enough time for PE, for art, for civics?) are, in large part, arguments about the prioritization and definition of these functions. When we cram so much into one building, with a mere six hours a day and 180 days a year, no wonder not everything fits; when we experience such diversity and constant change in what job readiness and culture mean, no wonder we argue so much about what to teach.

The arguments changed during the pandemic. Mostly, of course, that's because of the overriding debate about reopening. But it's also because our society unbundled how education worked. For well-to-do people, it worked well. My son has learned English and social studies, remotely, from his public school teachers. He's also done science outdoors with a local nonprofit and physical education with his flag football team. He's practiced math on Khan Academy and drawn along with Mo Willems on YouTube. I don't see any signs of learning loss; in fact, I think he's likely learned more — except in his socialization! — not being at a physical school.

That's due to parents who could work from home, pay for tutors, and find resources to supplement remote schooling. The pandemic exacerbated inequality, but it's worth noting, even pre-pandemic, how much education well-to-do parents ensured for their children outside of school. From learning apps to tutors to afterschool programs to summer camps to high school internships, the education of well-off children was not contained to those six hours a day, and it didn't stop during school vacations. (Well-off people can also afford child care that matches work schedules.) More money and more time leads to more fulfillment of those four functions for the children of privilege, because the privileged don't need to rely on school alone to meet their needs. Working class children learn outside of school, too; learning is an unstoppable activity of young humans. But their out-of-school learning usually isn't systematized by adults to grow their capital in the wider society.

As a wider society, we should unbundle and remix what we provide to children. Community resources for custodial care that

meets parents' needs; tutoring for job-readiness functions such as literacy and math; arts, exercise, and health education programs that match family values and desires; and in-person interactions with teachers and peers for practice in democratic habits such as collaboration and debate — these are forms that will better meet the functions we wanted school to serve. Everything that matters is not going to be delivered in a 1:25 ratio, in a single place, by employees reporting up through a single structure. Healthy communities don't work like that; they include multiple actors fitted to multiple niches.

Post-pandemic equity will require public investment in child care centers, in community organizations, and in tutoring at a massive scale. Some of that money can come from schools' current budgets if we simultaneously reduce what we ask schools to accomplish. But equity will also require, simply, more. Healthy communities don't work when some children, through parental resources, can get their needs met through a wide variety of educational experiences, and other children are left to the limitations of a single institution that is overwhelmed by multiple priorities, despite the hard work of its educators, and meeting none of them well. For public education, we can do better than school.

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