

TPWKY

This is Exactly Right.

Vanessa

Hi I'm Vanessa, I am a 7th grade language arts teacher at a middle school just outside of Seattle. We have over 800 students. About 80% of our students are on free or reduced lunch which in the education field is how we indicate low income status. Also about 70% of students are English language learners. The first reported case for us was in late January but we really didn't start feeling the impact of the virus until the first death was reported on February, I think, 29th. That was in the northern part of our county. Seattle public schools announced that they'd be closing for two weeks around that time and we assumed we'd be following suit. What actually happened though was that school closed officially for six weeks on March 16th per the governor's order. We got the official announcement about an hour before school let out on the 12th. That was really horrible. We worry about our kids during breaks, especially when you work in a lower income neighborhood because poverty leads to a lot of things that impact the way our kids come to school and the things they face at home.

First we were told by the state not to do distance learning with new material unless we can make it completely equitable. Because of the way our community is it was really impossible to make that equitable at the time. And so before we could really start doing anything we had to make sure kids had their Chromebooks, we had to make sure they worked, we had to get Chromebooks to the elementary students, and we had to figure out how to get our low income families internet because that's part of distance learning and a lot of our kids didn't have it. Now that school's been closed to the end of the year, the state has changed its guidance and we're required to teach new material and issue pass or incomplete grades instead of the A through F, but they're still required to do the material.

I think everyone's feeling, but maybe our kids more so, is that our students are struggling beyond just the academics. The district was working to get meals provided and figure out the tech situation. As a teacher I was contacting families making sure they have enough to eat, enough money to get by, if they had computers or internet. If they needed help with any of these things, I'd refer them to community organizations to help with food, rent, utilities. We have a no eviction rule placed in now but of course people are worried about back rent when that ends. Some of our families have undocumented family members and don't qualify for some of the aid so we're working again with community partners to get those families what they need when they need it.

Figuring out the best format to deliver instruction has been really, really difficult because it's so important to make those personal connections and keep those relationships going to keep kids motivated to learn. And it's hard to do that through a computer screen or through email. Honestly some days I answer more questions about mental health than I do assignments. Our families are also terribly impacted, many are out of work or working essential, low-paying jobs. They're worried about rent, and food, and utilities. They're really worried about kids falling behind in school. Luckily we are a very connected community and we help each other out and we've got some fantastic community organizations that are really, really working with us as schools and moving mountains to help our families and help our students through this time. I feel lucky to have landed in such a fantastic, close, loving community during this time.

Natalia Quintana

Oh no, I think I can hear my parents in the background. It's fine. Hi, I'm Natalia Quintana, I'm 16 and a junior in high school. Before this pandemic began, my life was busy but simple. Monday through Friday I had school followed by rehearsals for my musical, getting home late and doing my work, going to bed at some ungodly hour, then waking up early in the morning to do it all over again. It was fun. Stressful, yes, but fun. I was planning for my college applications, studying for the SAT, and making sure my grades were as high as I could get 'em. I first heard about SARS-CoV-2 at the end of January when the situation in Wuhan, China started to be all over the news. Then my school and other schools in the area started talking about the possibility of closing for a week or two. That was worrying. I loved school and didn't know what an online version of that would be like.

But at the start of March it became my reality as the pandemic was officially a pandemic. My school got shut down and case numbers in my city began to rise at a rapid pace. When my school was shut down my anxiety was fueled. We've now moved to online classes and I've been struggling. I'm usually a very engaged student but online it's harder to do everything. I find myself less attentive, I can't ask for help. If I do the whole class knows and my anxiety won't let that happen. So I can only listen to so many lectures and look at a computer for so long before my mind becomes mush. I just can't seem to drum up the passion for school I used to have. My days now go like this: I wake up early and get ready for school, move into my dad's office and sit in the same chair for four hours. Then I have the rest of the day to do my homework or anything else.

Even though I have time to do things like exploring new hobbies or exercising, I get these waves of anxiety and depression where all I can do is lay in bed and cry. I've always struggled with anxiety and occasionally depression, but I was doing better before all this. I worry about my mental health worsening, nothing is certain. My school has yet to say if we can or can't return to school this year but it doesn't look like we will. I don't even know if I'll go to school in the fall. When I think about college, I don't know what I see. I had a plan. I'd visit colleges over spring break and then I'd get back and study. But needless to say, my trip got canceled. This pandemic has also made me question my plan to study out of state. Should I stay close to home? What if my family gets sick? I want to be there to take care of them.

Beyond the educational part of school, I'm isolated. I talk to my friends as often as I can but we're all working really hard and it's not like we have much to talk about. For my friends who are seniors, I may not see them again for years. Their graduation has been canceled and their prom has also been. For me it's just junior prom, I'll have another one, but it's not for seniors. So I set up an online prom with my friends. It went well enough. It was only a bit of a mess but that didn't stop me from at least trying to connect with my friends because I know that life won't be the same for a while. I don't know how I'm going to cope but right now all I want is to get through this year, I'll stress about the other stuff then. Everyone I talk to about school has said the same thing: they just wanna go back. But we know why we can't and we're willing to give up a lot.

Anonymous

I'm currently in my second year of teaching science at a high school in regional Victoria, Australia. Overall like many regional areas, we struggle with keeping up with our metropolitan counterparts in literacy, numeracy, and curricular concerns. Even in my classes there can be as much as a 10 year gap in ability levels which poses its own challenges. Enter COVID-19. Now coronavirus was something that we were aware of since the beginning of our school year which for us was late January. However it felt distant and foreign, overshadowed by the domestic bushfire crises that were still raging on. Now COVID-19 continued to grow in its influence locally as gyms and shops closed, cafes were only allowing takeaway food and coffees, and all of the students' activities outside of school were shut down. But schools were kept open. Large gatherings were banned, sports events, assemblies, and school camps were canceled but school continued business as usual. The stance of the government was that students' education should not be disrupted.

Unfortunately by this point, education was already being disrupted. Students were gradually staying at home as their parents felt uneasy about sending them out. We finished school abruptly four days early to allow teachers to prepare for the next term of remote learning. I along with many other teachers spent most of our extended break planning out online lessons along with producing hard-copy version and resources for families without computer and internet access. We're now stepping into our second week of remote learning and my role as a teacher has shifted dramatically. I'm still waiting to hear back from over 50% of my students. Our state government is in the process of rolling out laptops to students who need them and providing access to WiFi, however this will take the next few weeks to make sure all families are readily equipped for remote learning and can get online. I've done my best so far to make videos encouraging students to engage with online learning and I've set online classroom check-ins for our platforms but I'm still figuring out the best way to approach this.

Remote learning does provide an opportunity for students to grow in their resilience and to figure out how they best learn, and I guess it gives teachers a chance to develop skills in diversifying content and making sure it's actually clear for our students. There are plenty of students who will really benefit from the independence that remote learning provides. Without the distraction of a classroom, students will be able to get through so much more. However for some students who are already struggling with face-to-face lessons, they won't have the constant encouragement and support that teachers can provide. Online interactions are clunky and difficult, especially if you can't even get online. So the gaps in our classrooms have the potential to grow enormously with some students getting left behind and that is a serious concern for so many teachers. We're putting in as much effort as we can to make these lessons valuable for students as they're stuck at home but there's only so much that we can do.

The COVID-19 pandemic is sweeping through every aspect of society, exposing many vulnerabilities in its wake, one of which is the concerning lack of scientific and health literacy among the general population. I guess if we're lucky it'll make us reassess how we approach education as a whole. If anything, this pandemic has given me a strong answer to the question I often get in class: why do we even need to know this?

TPWKY

(This Podcast Will Kill You intro theme)

Erin Welsh

Thank you so, so much to the providers or those firsthand accounts, they were fantastic and we really, really appreciate you taking the time to send in your stories.

Erin Allmann Updyke

We love them so much. Thank you to every single person who has sent in a story, we absolutely love hearing from you, we wish that we could put every single firsthand in these episodes.

Erin Welsh

We do. Hi, I'm Erin Welsh.

Erin Allmann Updyke

And I'm Erin Allmann Updyke.

Erin Welsh

And this is This Podcast Will Kill You.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Oh my gosh, welcome to the 10th episode! I'm shocked.

Erin Welsh

(laughs)

Erin Allmann Updyke

The 10th episode of our Anatomy of a Pandemic series.

Erin Welsh

Yes.

Erin Allmann Updyke

This week we are again outside of our wheelhouse, talking about education and the impact that the pandemic has had on how learning takes place, the inequalities that have been so starkly revealed through these massive school closures, and what the future may hold for the public school system in the U.S.

Erin Welsh

And because this is such a massive topic already, we're mostly restricting our discussion to the impact that this pandemic is having on schools in the U.S. But I do think that a lot of the larger issues that we discuss in this interview can be pretty broadly relevant as well.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah, definitely. But before we get to that interview, we do have a few pieces of business. First of all, we said already thank you to everyone who has been sending in your firsthand accounts, if you would like to share your story about what you've been going through during this pandemic, you can find the link on our website under COVID-19 FIRSTHANDS to submit a Google Form to send us your story. Also on our website you'll find alcohol-free episodes of all of our episodes so you can use those as you wish. And, Erin?

Erin Welsh

And we have a affiliate page on bookshop.org, you've heard us talking about it before on this podcast. If you haven't, google Bookshop, it's a really cool website. And one final piece of business. It is-

Erin Allmann Updyke

It's quarantini time.

Erin Welsh

Quarantini time. (laughs) We are drinking Quarantini 10.

Erin Allmann Updyke

We're so creative with these titles.

Erin Welsh

I know, I know. It's about as bad as Hepatitis A, B, C, D, E.

Erin Allmann Updyke

I know. Actually that's a really good comparison. (laughs)

Erin Welsh

But I finally can understand and empathize and I'm like, oh I feel bad for criticizing them. (laughs)

Erin Allmann Updyke

That's really funny.

Erin Welsh

Okay so what is in Quarantini 10, you may ask?

Erin Allmann Updyke

I do ask.

Erin Welsh

And I will tell you that it is guava simple syrup, which sounds very complicated but it's actually not, I promise. You can make just by... If you have guava frozen pulp, so like Goya brand frozen pulp, they have a ton of different fruits.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Don't we all. We just all have freezers full of fruit pulp, Erin.

Erin Welsh

I had some from when we made the dancing plague quarantini, Boogie Fever.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Right. Boogie Fever.

Erin Welsh: Yeah cause we used guava juice and so I had guava pulp from then. And so anyway I was like, what am I supposed to do with this leftover hunk of guava? And so I made guava simple syrup. So you just make 2:1 simple syrup, so like two cups of sugar, one cup of water, and then you do whatever quantity that produces, you do equal amounts guava pulp in that. Anyway, it's delicious.

Erin Allmann Updyke: It sounds fantastic.

Erin Welsh: It's really good. So it's not just guava simple syrup, it also has lemon juice, vodka, and grapefruit club soda.

Erin Allmann Updyke: Yum!

Erin Welsh: It's pretty tasty. Yeah.

Erin Allmann Updyke: This is probably our fanciest of these COVID quarantinis, it feels like.

Erin Welsh: But I mean genuinely I had all of these things, so like, I don't know.

Erin Allmann Updyke: It's still a pandemic quarantine.

Erin Welsh: Yeah. You could also just use whatever simple syrup you want to make out of a fruit juice, so there you go.

Erin Allmann Updyke: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, there you go.

Erin Welsh: Yeah. And we will post the recipe to the quarantine and the nonalcoholic placeboreta on our website thispodcastwillkillyou.com.

Erin Allmann Updyke: Yes. All right, so.

Erin Welsh: All right.

Erin Allmann Updyke: Let's get into this episode, shall we?

Erin Welsh: Let's do it.

Erin Allmann Updyke: This is the second time in the series that we've ventured outside the public health arena that we're most comfortable in to talk about the impact of COVID-19 on other aspects of life and society. Just like we talked about in our economics episode, in this current pandemic we're seeing how public health and disease intersect with basically every single aspect of our lives.

Erin Welsh: Yeah.

Erin Allmann Updyke: And education and schooling is one of those aspects that has really felt the massive impact of this pandemic.

Erin Welsh: But again, even though we really wanna ask and learn about the effects of COVID-19 on public schools, we, Erin and I, don't have the expertise to answer those questions or to even begin.

Erin Allmann Updyke

No. Sure don't. Nope. (laughs)

Erin Welsh

But do you know who does? Journalist Jennifer Berkshire and Education Historian Dr. Jack Schneider, hosts of the Have You Heard podcast, which is an awesome, awesome podcast on educational policy and politics. And we were fortunate enough to pick their brains on some of the biggest issues facing public schools today during this COVID-19 pandemic and also kind of exploring the historical context of these issues. It was such an interesting and enlightening interview.

Erin Allmann Updyke

It was so fun.

Erin Welsh

It was so good. Okay so we will let them introduce themselves right after this break.

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(transition theme)

Jack Schneider

My name is Jack Schneider, I'm an Assistant Professor of Education at UMass Lowell, I live in Somerville, Massachusetts with my wife and daughter. My wife is a teacher who has been moved into the world of online instruction for the last several weeks. My daughter is a student, a 4th grader who has been moved into the strange, hybrid world of homeschooling and online schooling and we are all doing our best to make sense of the world right now. I also co host the education policy podcast Have Your Heard with somebody who does more work on it than I do.

Jennifer Berkshire

And I'm Jennifer Berkshire. I am a writer, I write about education. I worked for half a dozen years for one of the teachers unions in Massachusetts editing a statewide newspaper and as a result of that I got to visit all kinds of urban schools and became what some people would call obsessed with the issue. So I started a podcast, Jack and I are also coauthors of a books that's gonna be coming out this fall called 'A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door'. That's a pretty great title. So that's my story.

Erin Allmann Updyke

That's a very great title. (laughs)

Erin Welsh

It's excellent. (laughs)

Erin Allmann Updyke

Awesome. Okay so thank you guys again for joining us. So one of the things that we wanted to ask you about sort of to start off with was kind of the historical precedence of what we are seeing right now in terms of these massive school closures. Have we ever seen anything like this before? Maybe during the 1918 Influenza pandemic or other epidemics that have happened since then?

Jack Schneider

Yeah so in 1918, you're absolutely right, schools were closed all across America, in fact they were closed across the world. And these closures ranged from a few weeks to a few months, maybe even longer, records aren't great. And there was really no uniformity there, that's largely because school boards and local authorities were the ones who made the determination to close schools. One question that I had when Jennifer and I were researching this for one of our shows was did it work? And interestingly, scholars studied how 43 cities across the U.S. responded to the so-called Spanish Flu and found that the cities that acted early to adopt non-pharmaceutical interventions like school closures actually had a lower peak mortality and lower overall morbidity.

Erin Welsh

That's fascinating and it also makes sense. And so I wanna shift a little bit to talking about the role of schools and how the role of schools now is much bigger than just a place to learn, just a place to become educated. So over the past 50 years this has changed substantially and so now schools provide many services that go beyond just simply education. So can you talk a little bit about what some of those services are and also can you address a little bit how this pandemic is revealing this, the role of schools being more than just this place to learn.

Jennifer Berkshire

So you guys probably recall that in the sort of agonizing days leading up to these mass school closures, you had all these big urban districts grappling with what to do about the fact that so many of their students rely on schools to eat, basically. Right? We kept seeing the figure 22 million students tossed around and it's probably even higher than that but this is the number of kids who consume most of their calories at school. This is something that makes the U.S. really different from other industrial countries that have more robust welfare programs. And basically what happened is that in the Johnson administration we made a pretty dramatic turn away from that path and that instead of going more towards sort of northern European welfare state, we did something really different. We went all in for trying to solve poverty through the schools. And that's made our, to the extent that we have welfare programs that are in and around the schools, it made them more palatable for people who maybe don't approve of welfare programs otherwise.

But it's put schools in this very weird position where they are essentially playing the role of the safety net. And so when suddenly something happens like a pandemic and we have to close schools down in mass, we're left with this sort of social disaster where kids who rely on schools for food and counseling and all sorts of other services, no longer have access to them.

Jack Schneider

It's also important to think about the process of school and how schooling is really about far more than content delivery. So Jennifer was just talking about how, particularly for disadvantaged students, access to basic necessities like food and medical services which many students receive through the schools or language instruction which many students and their parents receive through the schools. In addition to these things, all students are getting a whole lot more from school than just basic instruction in core content areas. And I think that when school works, there's so much happening there that we really take for granted that we're beginning to recognize more now. I overheard a student say that right now school for her is being passed through a sieve with all of the enjoyable parts filtered out. And if we think about an ordinary school day now compared with what young people are getting in the online hybrid homeschooling environment, we can think about all of these questions that we might ask about schools that ordinarily we don't.

Like do kids feel cared for? Are they happy? Are they motivated? Are they trying? Do they have time to play or be creative? Are they getting instruction in the arts? Are they developing healthy relationships? Are they being exposed to people who are different from themselves? Schools, as I like to argue and Jennifer likes to make fun of me for, are much more like ecosystems than they are like car engines. And I think in this present crisis, seeing all of the ways that the many things schools do for young people have been pared back may enhance our appreciation for those things once we're able to return.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah. Wow, that's a really nice analogy, that filtering through a sieve, that's very sad.

Erin Welsh

Yeah.

Erin Allmann Updyke

So I think one thing that we're noticing with this pandemic is of course that schools, like you said, are not able to play this same role that they were previously. And because of that, a lot of the inequalities in education that have been present for a long time have really been heightened and I think people are becoming more kind of acutely aware of them. So could you talk about some of the inequalities that we see in education today and what those historical roots are? Maybe give us a few examples?

Jack Schneider

I think the biggest inequities are outside of school. You know, today's schools aren't equal but they're certainly more equal than at any other time in American history. So if you were to walk into a quote unquote "low-achieving school" you would find a lot of great teachers and a pretty typical-looking school. And so for me that raises this question and that question is what's going on? And what's going on is that outside of school, kids experience highly unequal realities and that's what shapes the achievement gap primarily. And the roots of it are, as we are beginning to discuss in our society given the work of some left-leaning economists, the roots of it are in capital. Who has access to wealth? Who has been able to build wealth across generations?

And I think a lot of people assume that wealth gets translated directly into learning because people maybe buy better schools for their kids or buy tutoring for their kids, and that really isn't the effect. The effect is that wealth enables the kinds of activities that young people benefit from. So a classic example of this would be having a parent at home paying a lot of attention to that child in the early years, and that's a privilege that not everybody has. Right? A lot of parents simply have to go right back to work immediately and many families that do go back to work have the privilege of if they can't be with their kids, of sending their kids to a high quality daycare program where their kids are going to end up getting the kind of preparation that's going to enable them to succeed on day one in school.

Another example is having a college-educated parent at home who's essentially setting a standard without saying a word about college. And because of things like this, we don't tend to see huge rates of intergenerational mobility because these are the kinds of privileges that people are able to pass down to their kids because they essentially have social and economic advantage. And the roots of this are the story of American history.

Jennifer Berkshire

So I just wanted to talk a little bit about one particular divide that we are seeing a lot of and hearing a lot about and that's the digital divide. There's this huge shift underway to, they call it 'remote learning', they call it 'distance learning'. One of the reasons they're calling it that instead of 'online learning' is because you have so many kids both rural and urban who lack access to reliable internet. Now why is that? That's because we still don't treat internet access like a utility. So if you're in a rural area... I just interviewed somebody, not only do they not have reliable internet access but it's a part of Michigan that doesn't have good cell service either. And so they're really kind of in a bind, right? The library is still giving off a signal so kids have the option of going there and sitting at a picnic table but that's not particularly safe given the times.

So here we see this inequity that's playing out in a very visible way where your ability to... Do you have a device that's dedicated just to your schoolwork? Is internet always on at your house? That's gonna be a really different situation than a household that gets access to the internet through a phone with a limited data plan. And now as you see unemployment beginning to rise exponentially, those expensive cable bills and data plans, those are the first things that cash-strapped families are gonna give up. And so it's not just that we have this digital divide, it's that it's gonna get worse.

Erin Welsh

Mm-hmm. Yeah. So a lot of the discussion that we'll have today and that we've had so far focuses generally on the United States. But can you talk a little bit about whether there are other countries where there are similar inequalities or where these inequalities are being revealed by this current pandemic?

Jennifer Berkshire

So the short answer to your question is that if we're talking about industrialized countries, the answer is really no, right? That other countries have robust welfare policies, schools aren't the only place where students have access to food. They treat internet as a utility, right. And what infuriates me as someone who makes my living as a freelancer, reading all these stories about countries like Germany and Canada that have figured out ways to cushion the blow for their citizens as the bottom has dropped out of the economy, right. If you're a Canadian you can apply for help and you get it the next day. Yesterday I read a story in the Times about creative people in Berlin, photographers and writers and musicians who, you know, like Berlin has made a billion dollars worth of help available to them. And so we have countries who are prioritizing, trying to keep people from flailing. So that already, things look really, really different. The same level of inequality isn't being exposed because it doesn't exist and they don't rely on their schools as the sole vehicle for overcoming poverty.

Jack Schneider

In education, a favorite comparison that people like to make and this is a comparison that paints the U.S. in negative light is with Finland. Finland has been the darling of the educational reform community for a decade and essentially the argument is that the U.S. should be more like Finland, look at the results that they get. We should adopt some of the practices that Finland has adopted in its educational system. And there is increasingly a group of people who point instead to what happens outside of the schools in Finland, where not only are the elements of the social safety net that Jennifer pointed out earlier in place, but they also have universal healthcare, universal access to higher education, universal paternity and maternity leave. And so to the points I was making earlier about some of the out of school variables that end up shaping young people's long-term school success.

If you live in a country like Finland and you know that if you succeed in school that college will be paid for, if you live in a country where one or both parents are able to stay at home with you for the first year or two of your life, if you live in a country where you know that you always are going to have access to a meal, you are simply going to have a different kind of life outlook and a different set of educational outcomes than if you live in a country like the United States where we tend to talk more about equal opportunity than we do to act to create the kinds of systems and structures that would ensure it.

Erin Welsh

Mm-hmm.

Erin Allmann Updyke

I really wish you could have seen my enthusiastic nodding during that whole...

Erin Welsh

As someone who lived in Finland for a postdoc, I can definitely attest to the amazing social services and social support network that was there. Even the short time I experienced it, it was a very interesting experience. So yeah, I appreciate that comparison. (laughs)

Erin Allmann Updyke

(laughs) So one of the clear inequalities that we're seeing both in the media and that you kind of touched upon already, Jennifer, is in the switch to distance learning. So can we talk a little more in detail about who all is being left out in this switch to distance learning? Is it only the kids without access to internet or is it broader than that?

Jennifer Berkshire

It's much broader than that and you know I actually teach one class online at the college level, I teach in the Journalism program at Boston College. And my students are primarily seniors, they have all their ducks in a row, they know exactly what they're doing. And even with them I noticed right away that I lost about a quarter of them. That they just, once we shifted online, they drifted away, they're reeling. And I think man if my students are having that level... If the transition to online is that challenging for them, what's it like for students who have all sorts of other hurdles to navigate? And that's really exactly what you're seeing. There's the issue of internet that I talked about before, there's this whole issue of space, right? That like if you're fortunate enough to have your own room and your own device where you can do your homework, that's another thing.

There's the content that's being offered. If the stuff that you're being offered engaging? And that's where you see big splits between districts that are really well resourced and districts that are just having to spend all their time figuring out just how to get Chromebooks and hotspots to kids. So those are some of the big inequities that we're seeing. And then finally like the issue of special education is just huge right now. I spent last year working at a special education school in Massachusetts where the student to staff ratio is almost 1:1. That's a reflection of just the intense needs these kids have.

And when I think about how students like this will fare in the world of online learning, I mean there is just no... That can't be done through a screen no matter how devoted the teacher is, like there is no substitute. Zoom is not gonna make up for that immediate presence of a counselor, for extremely skilled speech pathologists. And so you see school districts grappling with that, you see parents of special needs kids agonizing over that and you hear frankly I would say more conservative advocates of remote learning being all too dismissive of the rest of us worrying about that.

Jack Schneider

If you look at the educational research on distance learning and online learning, it fairly consistently indicates that it is more successful with older and more experienced students. And why is that? Because they know how school works, they have the basic moves down, and they're highly motivated. So I teach at a university where we offer several online graduate programs and generally they're pretty good because our students meet the above criteria. But for younger students and for less experienced students and particularly for students from vulnerable populations, students who need additional support to thrive in school, online education is a bad idea. It doesn't give them the kinds of supports they need, it doesn't engage them in the way that we know that those populations need to be engaged, they are simply a bad fit for learning in the online environment.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah.

Erin Welsh

Do you think that this pandemic will make policymakers and politicians see the economic value of schools and how fundamentally important schools and public schools are to the economy overall? Or do you think that this might lead to a further decrease in funding to public schools, ultimately resulting, hopefully not, but in a dismantling of the entire public school system? And then sort of more broadly, how do you think that our definition of 'school' might change after this pandemic? It's a lot of questions there. (laughs)

Jack Schneider

Yeah well I'll focus primarily on the last one for recency bias reasons and say that for the past 20 years we have had an accountability system in this country that measures schools by primarily standardized test score results in two subject areas: math and English, in grades 3-8 as well as one year of high school. At the high school level they look at graduation rates and increasingly across the states they are looking at student attendance rates. This is such an impoverished way of trying to understand school quality that I have sort of shouted myself hoarse over the past 10 years about the damage that this does. It does damage to schools in that schools are incentivized to narrow their missions and particularly schools serving the least advantaged who by virtue of the fact that they are serving the least advantaged, are less likely to have high standardized test scores. Those are the schools that are most incentivized to narrow their missions.

Moreover these kinds of narrow metrics pit schools against each other in a way that makes some schools look good and other schools look bad even if they're all doing a stellar job. And this undermines the work of public education, it denigrates the work of teachers, it demoralizes students and communities, and I think the present pandemic is beginning to show us a little bit more about what schools actually do. Like my kid is really happy when she goes to school and that sure isn't measured in the accountability system but I can see it with my eyes right now, I can see she's dragging in a way that she doesn't when she goes to school. And that's particularly powerful for me because when I was a kid, this is like what I dreamed of. Like just give me an unannounced, unanticipated several month break from school where I can just stay home. And that's not what she wants.

She wants to go to school, she misses her teacher with whom she's established a real connection. Like it's a highlight of her day to just see her teacher. Measure that, right? It's a highlight of her day when she gets to connect with her classmates with whom she's built real bonds. And I'll say that this is a diverse school and her class is a diverse class and so the fact that she is connected with them is something that's not only meaningful socially for her, I think it's meaningful politically for our community and for America. Measure that, right? These are the sorts of things that I think many parents and community members may be experiencing as they're seeing their kids in terms of their social and emotional outcomes right now, in terms of their engagement, in terms of the things they're learning.

Right, like I can't deliver music instruction to my daughter the way she was getting in school. I wish I could, I can deliver art instruction but the fact is that she doesn't really wanna learn painting and drawing from me, she wants it from her teacher, she has a different relationship with her teacher. So I think that one of the things that may come out of this is a broader definition of school, a definition that aligns more with the kind of implicit definition that we all operate under and that I think we often aren't really cognizant of because we've become so habituated to the accountability regime and the kind of narrow metrics associated with it.

Jennifer Berkshire

So there are actually two distinct issues here. One is what is the impact going to be on kids that closing schools has? Like the months of lost time. But then there is this bigger issue of what's gonna happen as the bottom falls out of the economy. We saw just yesterday the governor of Hawaii announced 20% pay cuts for teachers. The dip in state coffers is gonna be like nothing we've seen before. We've gotten used to hearing politicians say that money doesn't matter when it comes to schools, it's a refrain we hear regularly from our Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. But this isn't true, there is now a mountain of evidence of just how much money matters and just how much kids especially, the most vulnerable, were hurt when states whacked at their budgets during the Great Recession. Now we're looking at something that's gonna be worse. And so when we talk about the impact that this time is going to have on kids, we need to make sure that we're thinking about this next stretch when we're dealing with all of this budget fallout because that's when you're going to hear people start to say, you know, 'There's a way we can do this much more cheaply, we can just move it all online.' And when we hear that we need to remember that we've just seen what that looks like and just how many kids are left out of that equation.

Erin Welsh

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah. Absolutely.

Erin Welsh

Do you feel like before this pandemic happened, what was sort of the trajectory of the way that the public school system was going? Was it sort of gonna be better funded or was it going to be sort of bolstered or do you think that it was already at risk of continuous budget cuts? I know it's always one of the first places that gets sort of slashed but what were we seeing before the pandemic in terms of trends?

Jennifer Berkshire

Things were actually motoring along quite nicely, Jack and I are in a state, Massachusetts, that made a big leap forward because of years of grassroots activism from parents and teachers. We basically shamed the legislature into passing what was called the Student Opportunity Act and it was a massive investment into schools to narrow the funding gap between wealthy districts and poorer districts. And similar things happened all over the country, you guys probably remember the Red for Ed movement and the scenes of all those teachers marching on their state capitals. Well they made a lot of progress in terms of demanding raises but also more funding for schools. And now all of that is really in jeopardy. The state budget stuff is just a complete question mark, people don't even know how to run the numbers, they've never seen anything like this. So actually we were seeing a lot of progress and now all of that is in doubt and I think the next phase looks pretty bleak.

Jack Schneider

At the same time there was another trajectory which Jennifer and I spent a lot of time researching for the book that we have finally completed. And that is a decades-old effort to unmake public education and one of the key policy aims that is the product of these decades of ambition is to move students out of brick and mortar classrooms and online because you can really ratchet up the size of classes, you can reduce the number of teachers, you no longer have to pay for building upkeep, you can really reduce people's expectations with regard to what school is. And so while earlier I was talking about how this experience will give people a fuller sense of what schools do, it also is opening the door to a very slippery slope.

We have now done exactly what these advocates for dismantling public education have long wanted to do. We have shifted students out of expensive, teacher-heavy brick and mortar schools and into a less expensive online environment where, by the way, it's harder to unionize teachers, it is easier to quote unquote "personalize" education which allows people to pursue a number of aims which might be in contradiction with the public good. And that may get normalized. So while it may be that this is an opportunity for people to reflect on all the things that they get out of school and all of the value that school adds to our society, it also may be an opportunity to normalize something that otherwise might have come as a real shock to people.

Erin Welsh	That's kind of terrifying to think that that could be one of the trajectories that this is going.
Erin Allmann Updyke	Very terrifying.
Erin Welsh	I mean I just don't see how it would be feasible to have kids at home. Maybe it's just an overall shift from work to home but there's so much that is lost I think in that transition, as you went into in detail. And that was just horrible to think about.
Erin Allmann Updyke	Yeah, I really honestly can't even imagine how much every other aspect of our society would have to shift for that to even be possible.
Jack Schneider	Well they've got centers where they can, I mean, you can go visit one of these places. They're essentially warehouses for children where they've got an adult who is not a licensed teacher and is therefore much less expensive to hire who monitors the students while they sit in from of their computer terminals all day long, this has already happened. They're not doing it at home and they simply need to scale up the capacity for these warehouses in order to meet the needs of desperate parents who right now may be willing to send their kids to one of these facilities because they're just overwhelmed at home. So yeah, it's terrifying.
Erin Allmann Updyke	Yeah.
Erin Welsh	With those warehouses and these places where their kids have done more of a distant learning or remote learning for a while, do we see that it works well? Like how does that work in terms of comparison? And I know that it's difficult to measure sort of the, as you mentioned, what these progress points are or how do you measure the quality of education, but what have we learned from those about how well they work?
Jennifer Berkshire	Go ahead, Jack.
Jack Schneider	(laughs) I was gonna let you take it Jennifer cause it's so fun to be able to say it. They are abysmal in terms of their results. Obviously we aren't measuring the full range of things that we ought to measure with regard to school quality, but with regard to simply the basics like are schools helping students reach the basic milestone of graduation? Their numbers tend to be pretty bad with regard to how much students are learning and this is through the very crude measure of standardized test scores, they also tend to do pretty bad. So even advocates of charter schooling or voucher programs, other efforts to create an alternative to the existing public education system, even they will say, 'Well online schools, online charters, virtual charters, those are a separate issue, don't associate us with them.'
Erin Allmann Updyke	Wondering if you could maybe talk a little bit about what kinds of effects we might see when schools reopen for students who are students right now. How are we going to recover when, as you mentioned when we talk about all these inequalities, some kids are going to have continued to learn during this pandemic and others will have likely fallen a lot further behind. How are we gonna be able to catch up so that this pandemic doesn't just further deepen that divide?

Jennifer Berkshire

So this is actually a huge issue and you see it playing out in urban districts where they're trying to decide how can they even go about teaching new material when they know that a substantial chunk of the students that they are responsible for don't have access to reliable internet, right? And so they're not participating in that assignment off the bat. And so we know that like, Jack was describing to me earlier today all the stuff that he and his daughter are doing. So she'll come back to school really not having missed a beat. So then the question is well then what do you do about all of that? And that's gonna be fought out among policy experts, there's already a pretty intense debate happening. You have some folks who are very wedded to the kind of accountability regime that Jack was describing earlier, saying the most important thing we can do is test those kids the minute they get back to school because they are going to need all sorts of remediation.

Now some of that remediation is backed by research right, that kids who work in small groups with tutors can make up for a lot, that's great. But we also wanna make sure that we don't fall into the trap that Jack was describing which is that you punish the same kids who through no fault of their own were the ones who fell behind. Right so if you had good fortune to attend school in a well-resourced district, you have access to high speed broadband at home, you have a quiet space to learn, you have parents who are dedicated to your enrichment, and so you then go back to school not having missed a step and so your reward is that you don't have to be remediated, right. You can see how unfair that is that you're being punished if you're a student who fell behind. And so I think we are gonna see a debate about how to handle this. Some people are saying, 'Well those kids who fell behind, they're gonna need to repeat a grade.' That's controversial, the research isn't there, so this is gonna be a big debate.

Erin Welsh

Yeah, absolutely.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah. Wow.

Erin Welsh

So we've been trying to in these interviews often end up being sort of a very bleak outlook for the state of the world today and the state of the world in the future, so we try to end by asking what positive changes do you hope to see come out of this or do you expect to see come out of this? What is the ideal impact on education?

Erin Allmann Updyke

Is there a silver lining that we can find? (laughs)

Jennifer Berkshire

So we talked a little bit about the change in people's attitudes towards public education as a result of this, that teachers and the role that schools play has risen. And I have a silver lining that's maybe a little bit wonky but I think we have put such stock in the idea that our schools are gonna be the thing that fixes all sorts of societal problems, that they're the thing that's gonna lift kids out of poverty, we're relying on them right now not just to provide food to kids but in some places, somehow they're gonna fix the fact that cities lack affordable, reliable internet access. I think that we may finally have a wake-up call that we've been asking our schools to do things that they cannot possibly do. And that somebody else, some other government entity, some other social force is going to have to step up because the schools can't do it all. And I think that that would actually be a silver lining because those unrealistic expectations are a big part of why people are perpetually so disappointed in our schools.

Jack Schneider

I've got a different kind of silver lining but it is equally contingent on how people respond, and that is that students may really welcome the return to school. They may be very excited to get back to a normal routine and to get out of their houses and away from their families and to have an opportunity to play with their friends and to see teachers they trust and other adults that they trust in the school, to run around at gym, to play music, to engage in art projects. And I think if we capture that opportunity, if we allow educators the freedom to use student excitement to generate some really positive momentum for the rest of the year if we go back this year or for the beginning of the year next year.

It could be a really powerful experience for students in terms of the way they perceive school. School is in fact a great gift that we give to young people, we do a lot to make it seem like it's a punishment rather than a gift. But maybe the silver lining here is that we can all see schooling for what it is which is this incredible opportunity that we afford to all young people in this country regardless of their background. And if we treat it that way it can be a really powerful and transformative experience.

TPWKY

(transition theme)

Erin Welsh

That was such a wonderful interview, I feel like I learned so much honestly.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Oh my gosh, so much.

Erin Welsh

Thank you again to Jennifer and Jack for taking the time to chat with us about the impacts of this pandemic on schooling, we really appreciate it.

Erin Allmann Updyke

I also want to say that we had to shut down our video stream while we were recording this interview because it was making too much of a lag in the audio and I'm really bummed about it because I was enthusiastically nodding along during this whole interview and I was doing it alone and they didn't get to see my enthusiastic nodding, so.

Erin Welsh

I know! I mean honestly I was just so enthralled by the interview. Genuinely it was fascinating.

Erin Allmann Updyke

It was so great.

Erin Welsh

It would have been even greater had the video not been so laggy.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah. Distance learning problems, you know? (laughs)

Erin Welsh

(laughs) There you go. I also want to give a huge thank you to my big sister Carrie who has a background in educational policy and history. So she helped us develop and kind of workshop some of these questions which was super helpful. And so now we've got Bloodmobile aka my brother Dan's music and we've got Carrie's input on questions so I feel like this episode kind of turned into a Welsh family flavor, Welsh family endeavor.

Erin Allmann Updyke

I love it. (laughs)

Erin Welsh

(laughs) That was fun.

Erin Allmann Updyke

That's fantastic.

Erin Welsh

Okay Erin, what did we learn in this episode?

Erin Allmann Updyke

What didn't we learn? Number one. We learned that this isn't the first time there have been massive school closures to try and stop the spread of a pandemic. During the 1918 Influenza pandemic, schools across the U.S. were closed but there wasn't a lot of uniformity in when they were closed or how long they stayed closed, it was mostly up to local school districts. And so this variation in when schools were closed during that 1918 pandemic and how long they stayed closed allows us to test, retrospectively, whether school closures actually did any good on slowing the spread of infection. And it turns out they do!

Erin Welsh

(laughs)

Erin Allmann Updyke

In the interview Jack mentioned a study that looked at how cities in the U.S. adopted different non-pharmaceutical interventions like school closures and they found that where schools were closed and public gatherings were banned, there was a significant reduction in excess death and total mortality. So because we're the Erins, we did a little more digging on this. (laughs)

Erin Welsh

(laughs)

Erin Allmann Updyke

And we found another study that looked at the effects of school closure and reopening during the 2009 swine flu outbreak in Alberta, Canada. So there the end of the school year was during the first wave of the pandemic, so they didn't close specifically for the pandemic but they closed and then there was a drop in influenza transmission in school-aged kids, especially during that first wave. And then the reopening of schools in the late summer contributed to the huge peak in the second wave and might even have started that second wave. So that's pretty interesting.

Erin Welsh

Yeah.

Erin Allmann Updyke

The bottom line, and I think this is especially important to remember as we've seen these protests across the U.S., is that these closures might feel extreme but they work, they save lives.

Erin Welsh

Yeah, yeah. And I know that we're probably preaching to the choir here but if somebody around you or somebody you know needs a little convincing, maybe that knowledge will be helpful.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah, we'll show 'em the data. Cause we'll link to that study.

Erin Welsh

We will link to those studies, yes. Okay, number two. For decades the U.S. has largely invested in its social welfare programs through public schools and public schools alone. And we're pretty much the only industrialized country that relies on schools to reduce poverty. And the result of this is that public schools in the U.S. play a much bigger role than just as a place to learn. There are millions and millions of kids who depend on schools for food or counseling or other services, and so when a pandemic like this leads to these massive school closures, those kids no longer have access to those services because there's no social safety net outside of schools. And so when we talk about the achievement gap in education in the U.S., most of that comes from inequities outside of schools. Schools in the U.S. are actually more equal now than they have ever been in the past but outside of schools is where kids experience these unequal realities that contribute to their ability to succeed in school. And these inequities are so deeply entrenched in our history that these gaps, educational and otherwise, just continue to grow.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Oof. That's a sad learning point, that's so true.

Erin Welsh

It's sad but real.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Yeah. Number three. Distance learning can work but for very specific populations. So older kids seem to do better with remote or distance learning because they're able to work independently and maybe keep to a schedule. But for many other groups, distance learning just doesn't work. And these groups include younger kids, of course kids without access to high-speed WiFi or a device that allows them to get on the internet, and kids with special needs, among others. What this pandemic has shown us is that there really isn't an adequate substitute for that in-person learning experience. And as you heard in our firsthand accounts, both teachers and students are very keenly aware of this right now.

Erin Welsh

Yeah, absolutely. Number four. The future of public schools in the U.S. might be in serious danger. I get all the depressing learning points.

Erin Allmann Updyke

It's terrifying. I know, I know. Wah.

Erin Welsh

(laughs) Wah. Funding for public schools is often hit hard and early by federal and state budget cuts during economic crises as we saw during the 2008 Great Recession. And there have already been pay cuts for public school teachers during this current pandemic.

Erin Allmann Updyke

That's absolutely infuriating.

Erin Welsh

Absolutely.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Like oof.

Erin Welsh

None of this bodes well for the future. Before this pandemic, a lot of progress had been made in terms of funding for public schools and now all of that progress is in serious jeopardy. And one thing we need to be watchful for is politicians or policymakers looking at this shift to distance learning as a test run for the restructuring of public schools and as justification for budget reductions and fewer brick and mortar schools. We really need to pay attention during this pandemic to make sure we don't head down a slippery slope of reduced expectations for schools because at the end of that slope is the dismantling of the entire public school system. Heavy.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Good gracious. That is heavy. That kind of brings us to our fifth point which is actually a silver lining, maybe a little bit, of these school closures. I think that this pandemic is making so many people more aware of the incredibly important and very diverse role that public schools play in the lives of students and families. So we can use this time to reevaluate how we think of schools as more than just places for educational content delivery, and also how to better measure their performance or impact. As parents, as students, as anyone who has ever benefited from the public school system - I am definitely a product of the public school system.

Erin Welsh

Same here.

Erin Allmann Updyke

Still am in a public school.

Erin Welsh

(laughs)

Erin Allmann Updyke

Let's keep this appreciation party going so that we protect schools and, who knows, maybe we even increase their funding? What a thought.

Erin Welsh	What a thought.
Erin Allmann Updyke	Can one dream?
Erin Welsh	Oh gosh, yeah.
Erin Allmann Updyke	We can dream.
Erin Welsh	We can dream. Thanks one more time to Jennifer and Jack for taking the time to talk education with us.
Erin Allmann Updyke	Yeah.
Erin Welsh	And listeners out there, you should definitely check out their amazing podcast called Have You Heard. They do such a good job with it and I highly recommend it even as someone without any background in educational policy or anything like that. And they even have a couple of episodes currently out, number 85 and 86 I think, to be exact, that discuss the impact of COVID-19 on schools. So if you're looking for more information, more in-depth information, you know where to find it. And we will link to their podcast on our website under the post for this episode as well as on our social media posts about the episode.
Erin Allmann Updyke	We will also post the links to those papers that we found that discuss the impact of school closures on slowing the spread of influenza, as always.
Erin Welsh	As always. And in the interview there was a little bit of a discussion about Finland and comparison of the education system within Finland and the U.S., and on that note I want to shoutout a book called 'The Nordic Theory of Everything' by Anu Partanen. So she's a Finnish journalist and in this book she makes some really interesting comparisons between the U.S. and Nordic countries in terms of social welfare programs and other aspects of life including schools. It's an interesting read. It's a pretty also kind of pop non-fiction, I would call it, so it's pretty accessible.
Erin Allmann Updyke	We will also post links to some resources for educators and parents that we've found. And if there are any links or any resources that you have found particularly helpful, please send them our way and we'll post those as well.
Erin Welsh	Yeah. Thanks again to my big sister Carrie for all the help with this episode and also thank you to Bloodmobile for providing the music for this episode and all of our episodes.
Erin Allmann Updyke	And thank you to you, listeners, for listening to this podcast. We hope that you're enjoying it and all of this COVID content even though it's depressing.
Erin Welsh	Yes, thank you. Thanks for sticking by through these depressing episodes. (laughs)
Erin Allmann Updyke	Yeah.
Erin Welsh	Okay well until next time, wash your hands.
Erin Allmann Updyke	You filthy animals.