

Experience & Example

Midway through the 2019-20 school year, more than half of all public school students were affected when schools began closing in attempts to stop the virus from spreading.¹ When schools reopened with only online learning, phones and screens replaced teachers as conduits of information. Students fell behind, and teachers, too, found preparations for online learning more difficult and time-consuming. What became painfully apparent to many families during the pandemic is the difference between human beings teaching the young and computer screens displaying content with automated directives for students to learn from. Hundreds of teachers died from Covid, and remaining teachers were often needed to give care both at home and at schools.² Caught in the crossfire of political accusations and plain burn-out led to massive numbers of teachers retiring and/or leaving the workforce.³ With large teacher shortages across the nation in 2021 and even into 2023, the attempt to create partnership between parents and teachers was an admirable one, and one every teacher I know welcomes. Parents, some who had not been fully engaged in public school policies, now wanted more oversight and much more say, particularly in deciding age-appropriate reading materials for their children and teaching about race and history. Much like the excess of social problems that police officers are expected just to handle—for many years unresolved social issues have shown up in classrooms for teachers “just to handle”—in addition, that is, to the actual job of teaching. In this regard, ABC’s comedy *Abbot Elementary* is spot on. Later, and when first returning to school, elementary students reported feeling happy to be going back and mentioned “seeing my friends, seeing my teacher, being on the bus, and everyone smiles.”⁴ Elsewhere, as in Colorado, acute behavioral health problems were reported in young people 12 and over. A doctor suggests these children might have been in a “kind of survival mode,” wherein disruption to school, sports, seeing their peers, and other activities” have all created a kind of “low level trauma.”⁵ Parental concerns kept escalating so that a school board meeting on *Saturday Night Live* hardly seemed satire—so real-life was a scene of “parents,” one by one disregarding everything but voicing their over-the-top frustrations—which were not even remotely related to the topics for discussion at the board meeting. And yet all were bottled up fears and social anxieties that members of the audience could recognize.⁶

When learning losses due to remote schooling and its long-term impact were eventually reported, parents and communities became more alarmed. According to the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), or the Nation’s Report Card, 4th and 8th grade reading and math scores hit record lows in 2022 and nationwide, average learning delays were at least 12 weeks behind.⁷ The gap in standardized test scores was larger than researchers had ever seen, and largely attributed to school closures and the shift to remote learning.⁸ But the results were complex because “scores differed in states that kept schools open (Texas and Florida) and schools that closed them (California),”⁹ and it had a “disproportionate impact on historically marginalized communities,” such as low-income students, students of color, and students who might be the first in their families to go to college.¹⁰ Studies show “the longer that a district stayed closed, the worse the learning loss was,”¹¹ particularly for Black and Hispanic students in urban area schools. One economist maintains, “You’re going to see a lifelong effect for the students and the communities in which they live, really a lifelong loss to their economic well-being and livelihood.”¹² Recent studies found “new results line up with findings from individual countries reporting deep and persistent academic setbacks, especially in math. In the U.S. math scores fell by more than ever, and reading scores dropped to 1992 levels.”¹³ “In efforts to get students back on their feet,” Congress passed three stimulus bills since 2020 “that gave nearly \$200 billion to the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund (ESSER).”¹⁴ In a move that seemed remarkably fair-minded, funds are distributed depending on the number of low-income students in each state to help school districts address “the pandemic’s impact on students, teachers and families.”¹⁵ In December, 2022, “about a quarter of the \$184 billion in pandemic aid designated for schools ... [had] gone toward facilities and construction.”¹⁶ In many school districts, “facility renovations were long overdue, which pressured districts with steep learning loss and crumbling structure/maintenance needs to make difficult choices.”¹⁷ Expanded classroom space, improved indoor air flow, and new buses all are needed, but parents, officials, and others questioned if the money should be spent on buildings rather than learning loss.

“In 2021, the federal government gave school districts the third and final installment of pandemic aid money, \$122 billion, with a requirement to spend at least 20 percent of those funds on helping students recover academically.”¹⁸ The strategies most in demand are those that address pandemic learning loss: summer enrichment programs, after-school learning, and tutoring—all programs for students who got behind or with special needs—programs that are invaluable because they provide one-on-one human assistance directly to students.¹⁹ Although U.S. math scores remain low, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona attributes relative success to President Biden’s investments in education because the billions of dollars in pandemic relief were distributed to schools based on the number of low-income students in each state.²⁰ Alec MacGillis reported in *The New Yorker* and *ProPublica* on persistent concerns about the long-term impact of learning loss for over a year when many students had been alone at home. From 2019 to 2022, Richmond, Virginia’s grade-schoolers “lost the equivalent of a year-and-a-half in math and reading instruction. The city’s Black and Hispanic students make up roughly 85 percent of public school enrollment and faced the greatest fallout.”²¹ **Richmond public schools officials wanted much of Virginia’s current \$3 billion surplus to support adding small group tutoring and more days to the school year.** To counter the days schools had been closed, MacGillis examined Fairfax Church Elementary in Richmond, Virginia, which was one of the schools that used funds from the federal government dedicated to education to add twenty days to the school year in late July and included small group tutors as “part of its pilot program to combat pandemic learning loss.”²³ Only two of 55 Richmond public schools adopted the pilot program, which, however, worked well, and third graders did, in fact, improve in math. “The extra month in class has already inspired Kimora Arrington to choose her future career—a school teacher.”²⁴ Although he acknowledges “there is no one-size-fits-all approach on how to best spend the federal funding.”²⁵ Thomas Toch, director of FutureEd, an independent education think tank at Georgetown University, supports Richmond’s pilot program. Toch says the evidence suggests “that more learning time, whether it’s in the form of extended school days or school years, intensive tutoring, or summer schooling, does...make a difference in student achievement.”²⁶

This experience would have far-reaching effects and help us to question if replacing human connections with digital ones is really that promised panacea for a better education. Individualized tutoring can be very helpful, which is why many schools have writing labs and math labs. In his recent Ted Talk, Sal Khan claims artificial intelligence can transform education in the classroom. He envisions “a new era in education—one where every student has access to an AI-powered personal tutor and every teacher has an AI teaching assistant.”²⁷ Khan’s new AI tutor might be welcome in disadvantaged areas of the world, including those students in the U.S. whose test scores, have fallen behind at this time due to the pandemic and might be further encouraged by the natural-sounding text from Khan’s AI tutor, called Khanmigo.²⁸ But no one seems to have questioned if our *students* want individualized tutoring *from a machine*. Students have often expressed they want tutoring from other human beings, not more screen time. Khanmigo substitutes yet another layer of technology for that human concern, with its team of business innovators eager to discover a “new” value proposition, particularly one that customers such as schools may not yet “even know they need.”²⁹ The pandemic seems to have brought to the fore a need for parents to decide for themselves whether or not they want their children’s education founded in more advertisements on behalf of layered technological “innovations,” or founded in multiple studies and human experience that will enrich the thinking and character children bring to the table as young adults. To teach students about food sources, some teachers take classes to visit a farm because they want the young to know that despite industrialized farming, food does not come from super markets or fast food restaurants. Teachers want students to know food comes from the earth and a long process of human toil and slow growth. So too, a next generation of young people need *first-hand* experience to realize that thinking, wondering, guessing, making mistakes—sometimes again and again—and then further revising to improve one’s work does not come from a box, ChatGPT, or even-tech-handmaidens such as Siri and Alexa. Rather these are skills and experiences that come from repeatedly practicing and then figuring things out *with their own minds*.

Patrick Kelly, a social studies teacher in South Carolina, was disappointed—though not surprised—to learn “eighth grade U.S. history and civics test scores [also] dropped last year, to their lowest levels ever recorded by the Department of Education....About 40 percent of eighth graders scored below basic in history, and a third of them scored below basic in civics.”³⁰ Kelly explains that the social sciences in the United States have been marginalized due to Title I funding requirements that focus on frequent reading and math assessments as well as due to the current emphasis on STEM classes to prepare students for jobs in technology. Kelly argues that a “collective knowledge of our shared history and a collective knowledge of our institutions and political processes” will help students to better respond to the difficult, current polarization in the nation and also help to sustain “the democratic framework” of our society.³¹ Like Kelly, many now advocate for increasing civic and history classes to strengthen a democratic society and find value in more holistic approaches to education. Ruhhi Bose makes an intriguing argument that is also related to Kelly’s argument about marginalizing the social sciences. Bose states that in his native India, “gendering of subjects is a very real phenomenon,”³² and the only subjects deemed “valuable” to study are science and commerce. Furthermore, “the more authoritarian states become, the less tolerant they will be of humanities and social sciences.”³³ Contrast this with studies that the Humanities and Social Sciences, i.e., the very classes that have often been eliminated in favor of STEM programs in the US, *improve* education, particularly when they *complement* other programs—rather than substitute for them. For example, at the Appalachian Police Officers Development Program (APDP) in West Virginia (see 1b), students are trained for the challenges of a changing career in policing while they also complete a liberal arts program in college. Students learn not just how to do the job, but also to rigorously question and therefore better understand those social situations in which they are likely to find themselves and may be expected to “just handle.” Nearby state agencies are eager to recruit these graduates, who are said to be “excellent, well-trained, and helping shape the future of the profession.”³⁴ A reason why education based on person to person experience is more effective than online is that it demands students acquire and use critical thinking skills—such as asking “why?” and realizing that questions can be answered in many different ways, after which students work to understand the context or back story for another person’s thinking.

Students learn how to distinguish claims that are developed with carefully thought out reasons and supported with When students draw a conclusion, deciding for him or herself what to think, it is based on the quality of the mental work that student has engaged in. This work builds confidence in a student developing his or her own capacity to think for one’s self, rather than being “happy” with a five star award from a machine. In this regard, I see the pandemic as having something of a positive effect on education because we realized in a way we had not before that person-to-person teaching is superior to online education. Some would add, “*especially* for the young.” But college students also benefit from interacting with each other in classrooms and having the advantage of getting help from teachers and tutors. They learn not only from stretching their own mental capacities, but also benefit from their empirical experiences with fellow human beings. Students gain a sense of their own study, work, and life habits by forming friendships with other students they initially thought they disliked. They enjoy seeing their ideas tested and responded to with respect from others—though not always in agreement with them. To their credit, however, and unlike most in the current Congress—students were *always* able to find some areas of consensus with which to expand their thinking even further. At the end of 2022, ABC’s Dr. Phil held a kind of town hall meeting for parents and medical experts to vent their concerns over school closures. Former director of the CDC, Dr. Robert Redfield, accepted the agency is “culpable for mistakes.” Some felt schools should have been last to close. Others felt there should have been a national response, not 50 different state responses.³⁵ Perhaps. But we did not respond as one, but rather as fifty different states with responses that ended up splintering along predictable political divides in ways that are not always indicative of remaining open-minded. In his 2023 State of the Union speech, President Biden stated, “In 2021, teachers made less than 77 cents on the dollar compared with other college graduates.”...in some states less than \$50,000.³⁶ Until early 2023, early childhood teachers in North Carolina made \$12 per hour. Elaine Zukerman of the NC Early Education Coalition commented, “Retention is so bad in childcare that her own son had six different teachers last year.”³⁷ This, in a state that frequently has billions in surplus tax dollars! It is short-sighted to assume money in itself buys quality, but salaries paid to teachers do indicate the value a society places on them.

In an effort to close the digital divide in North Carolina, Gov. Roy Cooper has established the nation’s first Office of Digital Equity and Literacy.³⁸ The imbalance in educational outcomes at the K-12 levels is primarily a matter of tax revenues—some schools are in high-income areas and some are in ghettos and barrios. We do not seem to care enough that public schools provide an equal and quality basic education for all students, even those in poor neighborhoods, though many of them will be the future residents in our communities. Caring and wanting to make a difference informed the decision of Deion Sanders to coach at Jackson State in Jackson, Mississippi. Jon Wertheim writes that Sanders “sparked concern among Power 5 programs that HBCUs are an alternative for young (predominantly black) players, skeptical of the usual football factories.”³⁹ Jackson State is a school whose entire budget is \$4 million compared to at least a \$60 million budget at Ohio State. But Sanders will tell you, “I’m not into politics; I’m into people.”⁴⁰ Sanders feels, “‘I had my turn. Now I’m helping someone else.’ When asked what first struck him when he stepped onto the Jackson State campus, Coach Sanders, answered, ‘A need.’”⁴¹ His comment recalls that of Chef Andrés stepping up to the plate when he first saw inaction after Hurricane Katrina, and then others followed his example. What has now replaced \$2.4 million on the next three years to build a new practice field at Jackson State.⁴² Because 75% of those he deals with are African-American kids, Sanders is in the unusual position of having to explain the “benefit” to an “African American kid of leaving the inner city and [then] coming back to the inner city. “I got to prepare that young man and I gotta equip him with the tools to fight for life”⁴³ When asked the kind of player he wants, Sanders replies, “Smart, tough, fast, disciplined with character ... I want you to be ... that same person when nobody’s lookin’. That’s character.”⁴⁴ This opportunity to be guided in developing life skills is the quality education Sanders offers these young people—over and above his football coaching.

And when Jon Wertheim asks just how he will do that, Sanders answers, “I mean, when you talk about I’m here, that you gonna treat me with respect—and I’m gonna respect you. But I’m gonna show you and tell you and teach you what to do and what not to do. So, if I tell you that oven is hot, don’t touch it, because I’ve already touched it. I’m tellin’ you it’s hot because of experience.”⁴⁵ During the year ahead, protection of transgender students, sports for girls, and age-appropriate reading all are likely to be discussed at school board meetings. Parents have both the right and responsibility to raise children in accord with the values they want passed on to their children. This is not meant to imply a politicization of parenting—as some groups use for campaigning—but rather simply stating the self-evident role of parenting that has long been recognized historically. Puberty can be awkward and confusing for many young people, and most parents do not want additional stress to further complicate their young ones at that time. However, there is likely little in school libraries that students have not already found online! We might even say that the Internet cancels much of childhood for young people with early access to it. Based on figures from the Williams Institute at UCLA’s School of Law, where “sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy” are researched, the number of transgender individuals is relatively small. A recent paper by Jody Herman, the paper’s lead author, estimates “1.4% or some 300,000 youth between 13 and 17 identify as transgender.”⁴⁶ The study was not peer-reviewed, but Jae Sevelius, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, who was not involved in the study, called it “the best population estimate yet.”⁴⁷ It is possible that what adds to the fervor of people’s views on this subject is related to recent data from the CDC on teen girls: “Mental health has continued to worsen—with particularly stark increases in widespread reports of harmful experiences among teen girls—nearly 1 in 3 (30%) seriously considered attempting suicide” [which is] up nearly 60% from a decade ago.”⁴⁸ Parents often see sports as a healthy way to have young people grow and also stay out of trouble, and so may feel strongly about wanting to preserve this “safe space” for their daughters as well as a place to enjoy and develop their athletic potentials.

Public schools are shared spaces, and parents need to reach consensus on what they want in their communities, including *how to treat* those whose views differ from their own. The transgender child also needs a safe space. But catapulting the issue into one of political rights often becomes another way to label people, foment disagreement, etc.? As with many difficult issues, there simply may be no one-size-fits-all solution. We make each other guilty by lining up along political divisions even *before* having a chance to be our best selves. An alternative for adults might be to address each situation as an individual case among the student and others involved so that community standards are upheld, but those who are not a majority are treated with the same respect, love, and tolerance we want for all children. Then, as resolutions in individual cases are reached, we might begin to hear about “best practices.” It is encouraging that today’s college and high school students often respond to matters of gender differences with acceptance and simple kindness. Two examples of successful teaching strategies concerning the way colleges handled student activism in response to the Israeli-Hamas War demonstrate excellent resources for helping young people think through the many challenges that confront them. Harvard, Cornell, Tulane, and Columbia University in NY are just a few of the campuses where students have been speaking out in protest of the war in the Mideast. At Dartmouth College, President Sian Beilock “urged the faculty to make this a teachable moment.”⁴⁹ Turning a volatile situation into a teachable moment where students can have their beliefs heard—but also challenged—likely helped keep protests at Dartmouth “decent and civil.”⁵⁰ Ezzedine Fishere, a senior lecturer in Middle Eastern Studies and a former Egyptian diplomat, joined with Bernard Avishai, a half-time visiting professor and American-Israeli journalist, to organize “campus forums about the crisis [that] served as a kind of pressure valve for the students [who identified and the 2,000 who watched online] to vent, lament, and ask tough questions.” Fishere says he teaches a “method of learning and thinking, identifying biases” that helps students to have “more meaningful conversations with others.” One of his students, Samantha Lofman, comments that it’s “really valuable to think through why you believe what you believe and...find the weak points and see where things maybe should change.”⁵²

At Columbia’s New York City campus, however, Bill Whitaker noticed the pain in students on each side of the issue and remarked, “What I hear are two sides talking past each other.”⁵³ The above responses at the different campuses illustrates a difference between using critical thinking to examine one’s own thought processes or—in its absence—students using accusations and foul language to express their very real fears, pain, and frustrations. When student protests of the Israeli-Hamas War were spreading, Wesleyan University President Michael S. Roth offered students a way to respond to such conflicts by having conversations across our differences rather than more police management of campuses. He explains: “You only learn from talking to people who don’t share your point of view. You’re not going to learn a lot from talking to somebody who agrees with you.”⁵⁴ Roth’s book, *Safe Enough Spaces*, is about knowing how to talk across our differences in order to help prevent violence: “You don’t want the place to be too safe because then you never encounter anything really disturbing. But you don’t want the place to be so unsafe that you’re too afraid to really learn.”⁵⁵ Rather, Roth says, “You want to find a middle ground where people can listen to ideas, even offensive ideas, and find out why someone else holds those ideas and maybe, in the end, learn from them.”⁵⁶ We can hope parents, educators, and school district officials will remember that young people are looking for examples of balanced critical thinking in the ways adults respond to differences in their communities—rather than name-calling, labeling, and shouting matches. After all, shouting, name-calling, and political bullying only *duplicate* what many students already see online and in other places around them. There is hope that new parent-teacher partnerships will provide examples, for both children and young adults, of the critical thinking we say we want our young people to use because students need to see more adults model that critical thinking. They need to find at least one Atticus Finch, such as the role played by Gregory Peck in 1960’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Harper Lee’s character says to his daughter Scout, “Don’t judge a man until you’ve got inside his skin and walked around in it.”⁵⁷ If students do not find such a role model who emulates critical and compassionate thinking, then they will surely not consider it worth learning. Nor will many who were educated in critical thinking use it to make their own decisions, especially because too much of what they see on the national stage are people who refuse to compromise on differences—instead shifting blame to one or another group that is depicted as an enemy in need of being defeated. Regardless of party affiliation, a nation might decide there is benefit to all in society, children and young adults, receiving basic education that is equal in quality, in order to prepare the young to be positive adults within that same society to which they will eventually become contributors.

Take, for example, the now infamous Leandro case in North Carolina that has dragged on for 30 years! Legislators, led by Sen. Phil Berger, Sr. (R-Rockingham) and NC House Speaker Tim Moore (R-Cleveland), have repeatedly failed to recognize and comply with unfavorable court rulings, arguing the state constitution grants legislators, “sole power over appropriating money.”⁵⁸ In what raises questions about the checks and balance on powers in government, they seem not bound, even when the State Supreme Court has ruled otherwise three times (Hoke County Board of Education v. State, 1997, 2004, 2022)⁵⁹ As a result, some 30 years later, young people involved in the case and from poorer regions in North Carolina have left school and are now adults who have been short-changed, in the same way that students fell behind during the pandemic. This, in its wake with frequent, billion dollar surpluses. Today, one of the children, Robb Leandro, is an attorney specializing in health care. His insights are critical to any post-pandemic thinking about a “new normal” in education: 1. Social inequities blur young people’s right to an equal quality of education. 2. “Our criminal justice system would be a lot less busy if...all of its young citizens had access to sound basic education.” 3. The benefits to society cross party lines: “One thing we should be able to agree on whether you are liberal or conservative is that kids deserve at least a sound basic education and society will be better for it when we start providing it.”⁶⁰ Mike Mason, who is an impressive example of success in our society, agrees. A former Captain in the Marines, Mason also worked at the FBI, and also was an executive at a Fortune 500 Company. Today, Mason is a bus driver.⁶¹ He answered an ad during the post-Covid, ongoing shortage for school bus drivers, and his attitude is one we might all respect: Mason says, “I think in our society we need to get next to the idea that there are no unimportant jobs. I mean, what could be more important than the attention we pay to our education system?”⁶²