



"We worked so hard and didn't make a difference. You know, we should have stayed in school."

By Anya Kamenetz

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Three years since everything shut down. The Discourse on pandemic school closures in the United States is less a can of worms than a pit of snakes. Either you have no regard for teachers' lives, or you have no regard for suicidal children. You're a white supremacist, mask-rejecting vaccine conspiracy theorist, or a Fascist who deserves a new Nuremberg trial for confining children at home.

But reporting a book, and getting to know sources over months and years, can provide space to admit nuance in a way that doesn't always happen in a one-off conversation, and never on Twitter. And what I'm starting to hear is that as teachers and others who supported prolonged school closures grapple with the impacts on their students or the children in their lives, the story may be shifting.

When I first spoke with Debby Rosenthal Harris in the fall of 2020, she was putting in up to 12 hours a day to translate her kindergarten class— typically, she said, a "cozy", "tactile," "hands-on" year—into an online format, while also helping her students' families with everything from diapers to rental assistance to the fear of ICE raids. A veteran teacher, originally from Guatemala, she teaches in the bilingual program at Buena Vista Horace Mann, an elementary school in San Francisco's Mission District. The children it serves are overwhelmingly from immigrant families and living close to the bone; the school is the first in the United States to house a homeless shelter on-site.

Harris introduced me to a mother of three whose husband left at the beginning of the pandemic, who was selling odds and ends on the street to survive. Another single mother I spoke to in the spring of 2021 commuted an hour each way on the bus with her daughter in tow to clean hotel rooms while the little girl “attended” Harris’s kindergarten class on a cell phone.

Harris loved working remotely; it allowed her the flexibility to fly out and stay with her sister when her brother-in-law died suddenly. And she was genuinely worried for her own safety. “You know, it’s kindergarten,” she told me in late 2020. “It’s dirty and physical and loving and touching. And kids don’t wash their hands. The minute you, like, kneel down next to them to try to sound something out, they sneeze right in your face.” Citing concerns like these, the San Francisco teacher union fought reopening, leading to some of the longest closures in the country.

That’s why when I spoke to Debby again recently, I was startled to hear her say:

“We worked so hard and didn’t make a difference. You know, we should have stayed in school.” Maybe not keep schools open the whole pandemic, she clarified, but “go back pretty quickly,” the way European countries started to as early as April 2020.

While recognizing that decisionmakers were working in a haze of uncertainty and fear, Rosenthal Harris said one thing was obvious.

“I think that we realized right away that we’re dealing with populations of kids that couldn’t have been sustained otherwise. It wasn’t sustainable for them to be home and learning with parents that were really stressing out about a million different things. School is supposed to be the safe place, right? We were supposed to be there for them. We sort of dropped the ball in that regard.”

It’s hard to know how many are becoming willing to allow statements like this, either publicly or privately. It’s especially hard to make space for this conversation in such a polarized environment. But I’m hearing a real need for both mourning what’s lost, and reckoning with what teachers, school leaders, politicians, and parents could have done differently to protect both children and adults.

Melinda Macht-Greenberg is a child and adolescent psychologist in Massachusetts, a region that kept classrooms closed longer than most. She consults with schools and is on faculty at Tufts University.

“I speak a lot with teachers,” she says. “Many teachers, individual teachers, don’t necessarily think they needed to be out of school as long as they did.” She consulted from the beginning of the pandemic with summer camps and with preschools that were setting up outdoor classrooms. From her point of view, “By the end of the summer 2020 going into fall, we knew that there were ways to bring kids back together safely.”

But, she says, “fear led to rigidity,” and to a failure to act, and now we are all dealing with the consequences. “The extent of the difficulty related to such high levels of chronic unmitigated stress, social isolation and the lack of robust asynchronous remote learning for so many people, is taking a toll biologically, physiologically, psychologically,” she says. “If we don’t actively do something we are taking a chance of lasting results on every level for a generation. And I’m not just speaking in hyperbole— I see it every day.”

While many kids are doing well, she says, “the scale of kids that are struggling is so much greater than we’ve seen before.”

Vanessa Steinkamp teaches high school students. She relocated from Illinois to Texas just before the pandemic. And, she was fully supportive of shutdowns in the spring of 2020. “Nobody was against the initial closures. Like, nobody,” she says.

But soon enough, “You started to see this is going to be really bad for kids. What about the kids in abusive homes? Those struggling with gender identities? The kids with special needs, who get occupational therapy, physical therapy. What are those kids doing? All these other pieces are not being discussed because the conversations were being so polarized.”

In the fall of 2020, she and her own children headed back to the classroom, with masks on, while her nephew and friends' kids back in Illinois remained at home. "They laughed at Texas being a bunch of rubes and idiots," she says. "As a teacher you could not even advocate for students' rights without being labeled in political camps." Today, she says her children and many of her students are thriving academically and socially; the kids she knows back in Illinois, not so much. She feels bewildered and betrayed by the way the politics of school reopening fell out.

"The right wingers were like, we can educate kids! and the left was like, no, they can stay home, they're safer..."

I can't believe people flipped on this bedrock of the community. Schools used to be the center of the community and all of a sudden it's been devalued due to adult fear. That's something that I still grapple with." Texas is now pushing to expand private school vouchers. "School vouchers, if they get passed, Democrats need to own this."

Jose Luis Vilson is also grappling with the polarization wrought by the pandemic, from a different side. He taught in Washington Heights, in New York City, where he had students who lost family members to COVID in the spring of 2020. From his point of view, teachers in New York felt "pushed" back into the classroom that fall for hybrid learning, "forcing" them into a facsimile of normalcy. They, as well as many of their students, especially Black and Brown students in the hardest-hit neighborhoods, did not feel safe to return then. He says the message should have been, "Your life matters more than learning."

But as for cities like Los Angeles, where closures dragged on for a year, he said, "You can't just keep schools closed and not say anything. You've got to keep people updated."

In his view, the aperture of the debate over school reopening was artificially narrowed by people with a well-funded agenda. "There was a considerable amount of wealth behind the plethora of anti-vax-slash-open schools haphazardly campaign," he says. "Without reckoning with that element, it's hard to say both sides of that debate have a point."

He would like to have heard more from people who said, "'We can keep schools open, but here's a way to do it more thoughtfully.' That didn't have as much voice as the side that was featured in Vogue. "

(I interviewed one of the mothers featured in that Vogue piece more than once myself, Daniela Jampel; a lifelong Democrat, she supported vaccination and other COVID precautions. But at the same time, there absolutely was right-wing dark money behind the public push for quick school reopening.)

And yes, Vilson sees the same impacts that Harris, Macht-Greenberg, and Steinkamp do. He left the classroom and is doing doctoral research on teachers of color. When he visits schools, and in his own son's school, the classrooms and hallways are emptier. Teachers and school leaders feel intensified pressure to restore learning loss, with fewer resources due to declining enrollment. More students need mental health care they're not getting. He sees the loss to the system from families who are choosing homeschooling. Equity gaps for Black and Brown students are bigger than before.

Accountability has two parts: how do we compensate those who were wronged? And how do we avoid doing something like this again? And there is one answer to both questions.

In the new book *A Minor Revolution*, Drexel law professor Adam Benforado argues for reorienting our entire legal and political structure — courts, elections, policymaking — around children's rights. He presents evidence that through measures like lowering the voting age, giving children a voice in family court proceedings, and applying "child impact assessments" to policy, we would both make the country as a whole better. These measures could also make up for what we took from children over the past three years.

Compensation for children should start quite literally, with paying them. Reinstating the lapsed child tax credit, so that a mother can read to her daughter after school instead of squatting next to stacks of old shoes on Valencia Street in San Francisco. Paid leave, and childcare subsidies, so older siblings don't have to stay home with younger ones instead of joining a sports team. Adequately funding mental health services for children and adolescents, so an 8 year old whose dad died can find a Spanish-speaking therapist before he loses another whole school year to grief.

It also means taking care of the people who take care of children. In order to make students' lives better, we must give teachers like Debby the resources they need, including time off when they need it, so they don't quit mid-semester.

And it's only by inscribing children's best interests into the law, that we can hope that in the heat of the next emergency, they won't be forgotten again.

The people I spoke with said that three years in, with Americans still dying from COVID every day, might be too soon for this conversation. But eventually, they would like a public reconsideration of what happened and why. Macht-Greenberg and Vilson said we're missing an opportunity to reimagine what school could be; how it could meet students where they are and take care of them holistically.

Steinkamp compares the situation with COVID, kids and schools to something she teaches her US government students about. "You may think this is extreme, but this is an analogy I'll give. Executive order 9066. Japanese internment. Another time of heightened fear, not really buttressed by the data." It took almost 50 years, but President Reagan signed a public apology that came with \$20,000 in cash to each survivor or their families.

Vilson sees the whole situation differently, but he also talked about the verdict of history, invoking the push for reparations from slavery. He thinks the powers that be are too impatient to close the books. "I hear a lot about moving beyond, and not trying to work through together. Taking full responsibility together is hard. It's played out through history again and again."