

Toness Interview Transcript
(Unedited AI-generated)

Alexander Russo / The Grade (00:00.634)

Hi, it's Alexander Russo with The Grade and this is the Education Show. I'm delighted to be here with AP's education reporter, Bianca Vasquez-Tonis, who's just put out an amazing new piece. Bianca, welcome, welcome.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (00:13.57)

Thank you for having me.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (00:15.212)

In case someone doesn't know who you are or where you're from and how you do the great journalism that you do, can you tell us a little bit of your background? I think you were originally a healthcare reporter or maybe international affairs.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (00:30.51)

No, well, I've done everything it feels like. I've written about education off and on since I was a cub reporter in Yakima, Washington. I did do a number of international, since I started my career in Mexico City, working for an English language daily there, which was a blast and wild. And I was in public radio for a long time. I covered...

Alexander Russo / The Grade (00:40.919)

wow.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (01:00.366)

uh, the Indian tech world for a while. They've done a lot of different things, but in the most recent years, um, I've written about education and accountability, uh, uh, both in public radio and in print. And now I'm at the Associated Press where I've been for three years.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (01:20.218)

Great. And geographically, I'm in Brooklyn where so many people are. Where are you geographically?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (01:28.482)

I'm in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (01:30.266)

Excellent. You have just written a story about a family in Atlanta. It came out last week. I hope everyone's been reading it and enjoying it. I certainly did. Can you tell us a little bit about your latest story, just the gist of what you found and what the story's about?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (01:48.59)

Sure, I wrote about a family of four, a mom, three sons, who were at a critical crossroads. were facing eviction. Well, actually, they had been evicted already the year before. And because of that, they were living in another community. And her kids had been eligible to keep attending their schools in Atlanta public schools.

because they were considered homeless and they had this right to keep attending them until the end of the year. So it was her goal to get them back into their schools in Atlanta to be able to send them, to have the right to send them there. So she did everything she could over the summer and even accepted an apartment that

really didn't make her comfortable just so she could keep sending her kids to the same schools to keep them stable.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (02:44.334)

Right, other option would be to move somewhere else that would be easier but wouldn't have the continuity.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (02:51.818)

Exactly. well, she already lived in the other place. You could have just sent them to the local schools. it was her observation that, you know, and she didn't read the studies, right? There are studies that say this, that say that kids who change schools a lot have, you know, worse outcomes, right? But she didn't need anyone to tell her that. She'd observed that in her own life with her own, her older son.

So she was trying to keep them stable so they would know the same adults. She had observed that her older son was able to hide when he changed schools because adults didn't really know him, right? They couldn't diagnose what was going on with them and really work on him and help him. So she wanted to keep them in the same school. She also observed that there weren't as many resources outside of school.

Also in school, right, there not as many teachers, there are not as many social workers, psychologists, that sort of thing. But she also observed that there weren't as many resources in the community, like rental assistance and food pantries.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (04:00.206)

Right, right. Did she or did you use the phrase resource desert? I'd never heard that before. There's schools everywhere, but the amount of resources in the schools and the surrounding community are obviously very different. Every story you work on is a little bit different, and the reaction is a little bit different. You learn things, you have to go left, you have to go right. What was new or different to you about this story?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (04:08.238)

She did.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (04:28.154)

and then what is new or different about the reaction that it's gotten so far.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (04:35.342)

What was new about it? It was new that, I I really struck gold with this family because they were incredibly talkative and open and wanted to share what was going on with them. So I was really, I mean, was privy to a lot, both in person and on the phone and...

And so that's a blessing and a curse to some extent, because you also just sort of don't, it's hard to keep up sometimes because things would change quickly. And also sometimes you're, it's hard to know where the story is going because you're there. weren't assessing it at the end when you know what the result is. You're, you're following every, every turn, every decision, every.

you know, setback, every victory or what seems like a victory, but then turns into I mean, it's just and you're you're it's a roller coaster. It is real life. It is a roller coaster.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (05:48.706)

Yeah, it's real life in some regards, right? How did you decide to write this kind of story next? You've written so many stories. You and your teammates' efforts won Pulitzer recognition a year and a half ago or so. How did

you decide that this was an important story to be told now? And what's the reaction been so far from the people in the story and from the surrounding communities or the readership?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (06:19.96)

We decided probably last year around this time that housing was something we wanted to focus on. But we also knew that Trump was being elected and we didn't know what the world would look like, to be honest, and what the most important story would be.

but we, so we kept following some of the housing things that we were interested in. I think that this is, when one of the reasons that we want to focus on it is that we know a lot about the impact of eviction on people generally, right? We know because of the great work that Matthew Desmond has done and that book evicted and other stories, we know, we know a lot about that, but we don't know that much about.

what actually happens to kids and their learning outcomes or other measures of wellbeing. People haven't written as much about that. We know that it's bad because we hear about it from teachers and principals, but people haven't written about it through the eyes of kids and parents specifically about what's going on with their kids. So that's why we wanted to do it.

As far as the reaction, I've gotten a lot of reaction from teachers and people or former teachers who've said, you know, I had 10 kids like this in the school where used to teach and now I want to become an attorney to work on eviction. Or, you know, this is a thank you for writing about this thing that we can't solve. We see this all the time.

This is, it's incredibly frustrating to teach someone and then have them disappear, right? Because they're going to another school district and see the churn that happens just because of housing instability or have a student who gets to school really late because, or doesn't come to school at all because they're living really far away and they haven't, they're still attending through McKinney-Vento or.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (08:46.572)

Or maybe they don't have McKinney-Vento rights that allow them to keep going to school in their old district, but their parents are driving from really far away to get them to school and sometimes they're just exhausted. So I think parents, or sorry, teachers and educators know about this, but a lot, intimately. But people haven't been writing about it as much as, I think we should.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (09:12.726)

Is there a connection, a line that we can draw in between the previous story about enrollment difficulties, which also included the Atlanta area, as I recall. Is there a line that we can draw between, you've written about enrollment struggles that parents have, especially parents who are on the move. You've written about missing kids, kids who are missing or disengaged or just can't be accounted for.

Can you help me draw a line between your previous stories and this one if there is such a line to be drawn?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (09:45.916)

yeah, there's a big line. So I knew that this problem existed intellectually, right? Just from hearing from teachers over the years, but it wasn't until we did the project looking for kids who've disappeared during the pandemic, did it really penetrate for me just how much housing affected young people's wellbeing and their schooling.

So it wasn't until, so there were two stories I did during that project that brought it home to me and it made me understand it in my inside. One was about a young man who was I think 15 at the time. And he and his mother lived doubled up with his younger sister in a very small apartment with a hostile roommate. And

Alexander Russo / The Grade (10:43.886)
right.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (10:45.198)

Right, he didn't go to school because he wanted to prevent his hostile roommate from locking them out of the house. So to prevent losing at home, he didn't go to summer school, which he needed to do to be able to advance to the next grade, because he'd already missed a lot of school because of housing related stuff. So there was that story that told...

And other stories that we're hearing too, in addition to that, just people moving during the pandemic. And so it seemed that some of the worst scenarios during the pandemic were when the school closed and kids had some sort of disruption at home, right? So both of those things paired together were really devastating for kids. So, and then there was the other story in Atlanta where because of Atlanta's

intense policy framework that it asks people to keep proving their residency in certain areas of Atlanta, where schools are in really high demand. It makes it hard for some people to prove that they live there and even gives principals discretion to ask for even more documentation.

than the standard Atlanta policy. So that is where I also learned a lot about how hard it is for some parents just to stay in that district, to prove that their kids belong in the district. And that's where I met the parent who actually introduced me to Sashita McNair. She herself started off as an advocate for

parents, like many advocates, she was helping people get special education services. But then she became, she had a housing problem and she fell into the situation herself and realized that all these people around her were. So then she started helping people prove their residency and keep their kids in school. And so what started off as, you know, normal sort of run of the mill special education advocacy became.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (13:09.56)
just enrollment advocacy.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (13:12.356)

The piece is so human, so nuanced, so detailed, so messy in some ways, as is real life. It was a delight to read. And it seemed to me, at least, to be a great example of your writing and also of the AP education team approach to covering education. I have my own thoughts about what that means, but I'm curious. How do you use?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (13:40.078)
you

Alexander Russo / The Grade (13:41.548)

see yourself and the team's coverage being different? What makes it different, either intentionally or just because of the way you're wired?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (13:53.868)

I think that I've been given permission and I won't speak for the whole, I mean, the whole team necessarily, but I think that some of we've definitely been given permission to see education as not just things that happen, you know, in schools and to see our work sometimes at looking at intersection of wellbeing and education, children's wellbeing and to look at things that have

Because I, you know, some people might say this isn't really an education story. But I think that we've taken, yeah, we've taken a different approach to that.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (14:39.628)

It's a much more holistic approach. In some ways it isn't an education story in the narrowest sense. And in fact, there's no clear action for a school district to take that I could glean from the latest story. There are lots of actions that mayors could take or elected officials could take. And in some ways it's very timely because it's about affordability and stability. It's an affordability story, right, in some ways?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (15:05.058)

and

Alexander Russo / The Grade (15:07.706)

And that's obviously a timely thing, but it's not narrowly educational. And it's also not frankly culture wars or Trump administration related. It's timeless in that sense. Is that fair?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (15:19.15)

Hmm.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (15:25.934)

Completely. No. And in fact, you know, we there were, you know, she doesn't she doesn't receive SNAP benefits. we are really very timely about, you know, what's going on with the shutdown. The shutdown didn't really affect her very much. No, you're no, you're absolutely right. I wouldn't say that it was. It's definitely not about the culture war or about.

the Trump administration.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (15:57.134)

Right, that's, yeah. When I read your work, this piece especially, I think about Eli Saslow, I hope I'm pronouncing his name correctly, or John Woodrow Fox, Cox, people who write deeply nuanced portraits that don't have a particular, aren't so beat specific. And on one hand, it's lovely to read, on the other hand,

I worry about sort of losing the beat, the beat getting lost in the desire to cover schools in all their messy context. Does that, do you think about that? Do you and your colleagues talk about how to push the edges but still stay in the frame?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (17:00.59)

I think...

Bianca Vazquez Toness (17:07.598)

I mean, I think one story or a few stories doesn't define the rest of my... Yeah, first of all, I'm very flattered when you compare it to Eli Saslow. He's a hero. He does amazing work and I admire it tremendously. But I hear you about losing the...

the beat and that concern.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (17:42.308)

Well, one of the nice things, of course, is as you said, you're not just writing one story, you're a bunch of them and also you're part of a team. And I'm contradicting myself because I'm complimenting the team for not being so focused on what's happening at the US Department of Education. But I'm also saying, please don't go too far away. So I apologize for that. I think it's fascinating and important.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (18:08.142)

No!

Alexander Russo / The Grade (18:09.27)

I hadn't tracked frankly, and I don't actually know the numbers, that eviction, I knew it was an ongoing concern and instability and homelessness obviously. Is there a spike in this? Are you worried about there being a spike when the AI bubble pops? Where is eviction and housing instability now in 2025?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (18:38.834)

I don't have the numbers top it, you know, top of mind, but I suppose the AI bubble could certainly affect it. But no, I'm definitely very concerned that it's going to keep. I think that if you look at hearing rates or hear the number of hearings and how crowded they are, just hearing from Sashida and her visits to the eviction court, it is

Yeah, in certain cities especially, this is a big problem for sure.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (19:14.414)

And you mentioned that Atlanta is gentrifying, which usually pushes some of these things to surge. You mentioned Matt Desmond. I wanted to ask about that connection, Matthew Desmond. I interviewed him a few years ago, and a few years ago there was a bit of coverage connecting housing and schools. The connection is obvious for so many reasons. Did you work with him? Did you read him?

Is he sort of behind the scenes as a thought partner in this piece?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (19:50.902)

I read him. Yes, I read him and I've read a couple of books by him. My colleague, Mariah Balingit, wrote a story based on eviction lab data that we got exclusively. And we've talked to them about their research. So they were definitely informing how we thought about our stories.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (20:15.61)

Tell me a little bit, if you don't mind, we talked a little bit about Eli Saslow's work. Are there other journalists who you admire or seek to emulate, either present day or journalists of the past? Do you have other favorites?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (20:31.424)

I've always admired Catherine Boo a lot.

So yeah, she and Eli Saslow. I am interested in how people live and the impact of poverty on people's lives. And I think that they've done it with a great deal of care and dignity. And that's important to me.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (21:05.156)

I know you're not covering education locally, but you're still in the Boston area. I'm curious what you see or wish you saw in terms of education coverage locally. It's a very expensive part of the world to live in. There's an enormous number of newcomers from all sorts of places in Boston these days. Do you get a chance to look at the coverage? you think there are?

issues related to Boston or New England that are important in your real non-journalist life or in the community around you.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (21:49.118)

I think they've done a very good job writing about...

immigrants attending schools around in this area. I do think, you know, this is from my perspective on, you thinking about housing and enrollment. I think there are some threads there to follow that would be there was a good story a few years ago. I think it was in the Globe about

I think there was a lawsuit in the end about immigrants being kept out of school because of policies. And I think that a lot of these enrollment policies have proliferated around Massachusetts districts. I think there's some stories to be done there. this housing, I mean, eviction is a big problem in Boston and people are going to places to other

less resource districts. Part of why I was interested in this Atlanta story and this housing story is I've seen this happen here where people get pushed out of Boston. it's a great place to be when you don't have a lot of resources. There are a lot of wonderful organizations in Boston that pour resources into kids and the school district has a lot of resources, right? I think that's a place where I would want to be if I

We're a parent and wanted my kid to have access to a lot of great things, but people get pushed out into communities that spend half as much money on kids and don't have those resources.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (23:38.798)

Wow. Wow. I hadn't realized it was quite that stark. Boston, like San Francisco, is a tiny, geographically tiny district surrounded by a lot of other school districts. Is Atlanta similarly set up, or is Atlanta Public Schools a big southern sort of county-wide metro area?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (24:03.714)

Countywide metro area. Atlanta, Atlanta is itself, you know, within Atlanta. And then there's Fulton County public schools and then other huge, pretty big school districts that are countywide. But.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (24:08.794)

Right.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (24:16.708)

Does it make a difference housing-wise or resource-wise when you've got smaller districts like in Boston and San Francisco or larger districts? It sounds like the character in the story you just wrote, there was a resource cliff even with a bigger county kind of setup. Does it make a difference generally speaking or is that something that I don't know and you don't know either?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (24:47.746)

I think it just depends on the county, right? I mean, this, think she moved to one of the poorest counties in this, I mean, one of the poorer counties in the state, right? So I think it just depends on the county and the, it's place specific.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (24:58.618)

Yeah. Right.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (25:10.83)

Well, I'm always so happy to see your work. I'm a big fan of yours, as you know by now. I'm a big fan of the AP education team. I'm so glad that it's surviving and even thriving. I've got my fingers crossed for the Globe education team that you were on for a while. They've been doing some great work. And I hope they name a new person to head it soon.

Mandy McLaren replacement of such a thing as possible. What happens next for you and the Ed team? Are you already working on a new story that you can or cannot tell us about? Is the Ed team doing something interesting or new we should look forward to?

Bianca Vazquez Toness (25:57.074)

I don't think I can speak about it. But yeah, I think that you'll see more schools related coverage.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (26:10.138)

I go back and forth on this topic. feel like the experience you're having is something I've seen other journalists experience before, which is realizing the limits of narrowly school-specific coverage. And then they sort of go deep down a rabbit hole. It could be around housing or food or segregation or any other important topic.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (26:10.188)

I will say that. More school!

Alexander Russo / The Grade (26:38.904)

And then the key, the magic key is keeping that little tether line back to school so that people can read the story and go, this is a school story underneath it all. At least that's what I hope to or love to see, though I'm clearly conflicted by this.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (26:59.916)

No, I think you're great. Well, I think here's the problem, right? If you stay in that world that is a bit more holistic, let's call it, and less divorced, I think that you also lose sight of story ideas and what's happening and the real.

the changing nature of schools, right? So you need to dip back into that well to understand what's going on, what the problems are, or the solutions that people are seeking or the cultural changes that are happening. I think I'd like to go back and forth. I think it's helpful to dip in and out.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (27:42.223)

Ready.

Alexander Russo / The Grade (27:54.272)

as you do. I so look forward to your next story. I so appreciate you talking with me about your work and how you think about and how you do your work. Bianca Vasquez-Tones of the AP Education team. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Bianca Vazquez Toness (28:10.008)

Thank you, Alexander.