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FINXERUNT ISSUE 2: EDUCATION

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Features

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In Latin, Finxerunt means to **imagine** and **create**. And it's been a word that has inspired hundreds of students to take initiative around the world since 2017. As a growing non-profit organization, our mission is to go beyond passive activism by empowering the youth to address socio-economic issues and lead tangible change to build a sustainable future with the philosophy that anyone can make a positive difference regardless of race or gender.

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From Seed to School

Increasing Agricultural Literacy In Students

BY BALSAMINE CHEN



It's a hot summer day and you're sweating bullets as you trek off to the supermarket. As the automatic doors whoosh open, you let out a sigh of relief and breathe in some fresh cold air from the industrial air conditioners. Walking down the produce aisle, you take in the sights of apples and oranges perfectly sectioned off from each other and bags of leafy greens just waiting to be plucked off the shelf. As you pick up a bag of potatoes for tonight's dinner, a sudden thought occurs to you. What do potatoes look like on a farm, anyway? As you look around the spotless produce aisle, you realize that you have no idea what any of these vegetables and fruits look like in their natural habitat. What did those strawberries look like before they were packed into

neat little plastic cartons? And how are those bananas so perfectly yellow and uniform? You also realize that you don't even know what regions these foods came from, or how they were transported to the grocery store. There's a word for it: agricultural illiteracy. According to the American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture, "An agriculturally literate person understands how the agricultural industry works – not just where food comes from, but who grows it, agriculture's effect on the economy, environment, technology, lifestyle and its relationship to livestock." So, agricultural illiteracy is a deficit of this knowledge.



Back in the day, agricultural illiteracy wasn't a big problem: in the 1840s, farmers made up about 69% of the U.S. labor force. But as the farming industry became increasingly mechanized and replaced laborers with technological innovations, more people moved into cities to find work in factories. As a result, farmers made up only 1.3% of the labor force in 2018. This may not seem that important at first glance, but it means that most of us have lost sight of the origins of our food and the sheer amount of resources needed to transport it to our tables. According to a 2011 survey by the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance, "Seventy-two percent of consumers know nothing or very little about farming or ranching" and "86 percent of farmers/ranchers responded that the average consumer has little to no knowledge about modern farming/ranching." If most consumers are so uninformed about this topic, then how are America's youth learning about our food?

Regarding agricultural illiteracy in American students, past research has linked arising misconceptions about food with a lack of education surrounding the matter. A 2011 study done in urban California asked eighteen children from grades four to six to describe the origins of the



ingredients in a cheeseburger. More than half of the participants knew that cheese came from milk and meat patties from "beef animals." However, 28% of the children knew that the bun came from a flour/wheat plant and only 22% knew that pickles came from cucumber bushes. 17 out of the 18 students could trace the origins of their food back to a farm or garden, but "descriptions were lacking." For example, one student said that milk and meat came from farms, but when asked where tomatoes came from, he could only name the store. Perpetuating this misinformation can potentially lead to children developing into misinformed consumers who don't consider the environmental impacts of their purchases; after all, being agriculturally and environmentally conscious about our decisions is crucial when tackling issues like food waste or climate change. According to the USDA, about a third of the food produced in the U.S. is wasted in processing, transportation, and the consumer homes, and in 2010, this equated to "approximately 133 billion pounds and \$161 billion worth of food." Some of this waste is inevitable; produce often gets damaged or spoiled during harvesting, sorting, storage, and transportation—but a lot of it could be prevented. Supermarkets often reject produce if they're an irregular shape or size because they need to maintain picture-perfect produce aisles for customers, so a lot of produce is just discarded from the start because farmers know they won't be sold. They also keep their shelves fully stocked at all times to present an image of abundance and attract customers.

Have you ever seen how grocery store employees refill produce bins before they're even empty? The older produce gets pushed to the bottom and eventually spoils while the top of the bin gets refilled over and over. Furthermore, supermarkets often sell imported foods from commercial farms across the country or from overseas because there is a lack of local produce, and this long transportation process not only increases the chance of spoilage but also uses an intense amount of energy and releases carbon into the atmosphere.

Meanwhile, consumers often buy more than they need, don't store their food correctly, or misinterpret expiration labels (FYI: "best before" dates ensure quality while "use by" dates ensure safety, which is a key difference when deciding whether to throw out your food!) When this food goes to the landfill and rots there, it releases methane, a potent greenhouse gas that greatly contributes to climate change. Furthermore, wasted food also means wasted land, wasted resources, wasted labor, and wasted money that could have been used for other purposes. As consumers, we have a lot of power in our hands because companies cater to us and our needs. We could combat these issues if we educate ourselves and our youth about

food insecurity and raise awareness about unsustainable practices in our homes and our supermarkets. In addition, we have a lot of hungry mouths to feed with the population expected to reach nine billion people by 2050. We need a well-educated public to meet this demand so that we can buy sensibly and vote on agricultural policies that create a sustainable food supply. Another consequence of the disconnect between consumers and farmers is that young people won't be as incentivized to join the agricultural industry in the future. In 2015, the USDA found that there would be a about 57,900 annual job openings in the agricultural industry between 2015 and 2020, but only 35,400 U.S graduates with expertise in that area could fill them. Combined with the 2017 Census of Agriculture report that the average age of a farmer was 57.5 years, these findings cast a bleak future for the farming industry. How can we tackle issues in the food supply chain if we can't attract more workers and thinkers? If we don't start educating our children about our food sources and encouraging innovation now, climate change and an aging farmer population will continue to make our food supply more and more vulnerable. So, how can we educate America's youth about our food?



One solution is to create more school gardens. Trading in a superficial textbook education for a collaborative, hands-on learning environment will encourage students to engage in learning about agriculture. The creation of school gardens can also give them a close-up look at the transformation from seed to plant and a chance to explore the natural world. Studies have even shown that when students engage in school gardens, they have higher grades in science and math and show more willingness to care for living things. School gardens also motivate students to eat healthier because they develop pride in their work and are more appreciative of their food after learning about the amount of work and time needed to grow a single plant. A study done in 2017 by Columbia University reported that when schools “provide frequent, high-quality opportunities for hands-on nutrition learning, students eat up to three times more fruits and vegetables at school lunch – regardless of whether or not that food was grown in the garden.”

The positive effects of school gardens extend to the home, too. In a 2018 study conducted by Cornell University, researchers found that “children whose

schools provided regular school garden lessons had more access to low-fat vegetables and fruit at home than children without that curricula.” The students bring what they learn home and develop healthy eating habits, which is especially important as obesity rates in America increase.

As a 16-year-old high school student living in New York City, I have rarely heard teachers talk about the farming industry or the careers possible in this field. Farmers are just as important as doctors and engineers, for they are the ones who supply our food and keep our nation running.

It is more important than ever to have more young minds innovate and change the agricultural industry so that we can continue to have food for all. Agricultural literacy may not seem that important in this fast-paced, internet-filled world, but we should definitely start going back to our roots.

Girls & Boys...Equal Much?

BY MARGARET KELLY

According to American businessman Donald Bren, "Education is the finest gift an individual can give a young person." However, it seems that for centuries, such an indelible gift was only bestowed upon men. In the United States, it was quite uncommon for women to receive an education until the 18th century. Even then, their academics focused mainly on developing one's domestic skills, like sewing and etiquette techniques. Women fought for countless years to have an education like the one we are given today in

the United States. Although education has made great progress in gender equality, problems of discrimination continue to plague the present education system in America.

I love to learn. History, mathematics, foreign languages; they all fascinate me. I am, and always have been, an active student. I take my academics extremely seriously and always strive to perform to the best of my ability. It was only when I began high school that I truly understood why I had always felt so much pressure when it came to my studies. Even



when I was a child, I found it difficult to be taken seriously in school; teachers would seem to brush aside my opinions, and though my achievements were always celebrated, it felt like my success was an expectation rather than an accomplishment. While I studied and worked for numerous hours to achieve my successes, I quickly discovered that some of the boys in my class seemed to be handed everything on a silver platter. Although I knew I was just as intelligent as them, it always seemed to me that they were more encouraged to express their opinion freely, thus being granted more opportunities to expand upon their intellect. As a child, whenever anyone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I always responded with whatever crazy career I had become obsessed with at the moment. I wanted to be a doctor, then a Rockette, even a dolphin trainer. I never once said that I wanted to be a wife or a mother. It was not because those duties didn't appeal to me, it's just that there were just other things that I craved more to pursue. Most people found amusement in my responses, but as I grew older, and my responses didn't change, I was met with frowns rather than smiles. Why was it only acceptable for me to express my dreams when I was a child? In their eyes, my plans for the future should have been centered around raising a family; it then struck me that this was an idea that had surrounded women for centuries, and it was happening to me now. Women and men are led into different life plans and careers when they are receiving their education, which leads to several problems later on. The pay gap is one of these huge problems that needs immediate fixing. It is simply inexplicable why a woman and man working the exact same job should be paid differently just because of their gender. It is

completely disrespectful to the women of the workforce and disregards their basic human rights. Although the gender pay gap has made positive progress, it is still prevalent in society today. After all, careers seen as "women's jobs" consistently pay less than "men's jobs." This must be seen differently to achieve true equality in pay. That begins in education, when women and men are encouraged into separate lines of work. Instead, it should not matter what gender a person is. Their career and life plan should only be determined based on their desires and dreams in life.

In 18th and 19th century America, female education rose in popularity because it was believed that educated girls would grow to become more efficient wives and raise better sons. However, they were only permitted to attend school in the summers, which severely limited their learning abilities. But by 1830, girls were finally allowed to go to school year-round throughout the country. At the turn of the 20th century, girls in America began to understand that while boys could take many different paths in life, education was a female's greatest tool to achieve success. If a girl received a good education, countless more paths would open in her life. Girls began to deeply value their education, as they knew it was their only way to better themselves as people. In a 2014 analysis published by the American Psychological Association, after looking into data between 1914 and 2011, researchers discovered that girls had been performing better in school than boys for nearly a century. If that's the case, then why do men continue to hold ninety-five percent of CEO positions in S&P Companies? The problem starts at the very beginning of education.

As a female, it is extremely difficult to be taken seriously in a school environment. Since



girls are consistently underestimated at such a young age, many insecurities tend to arise more frequently in them than in boys when it comes to academics and athletics. . The quality of a girl's education also differs from that of a boy's in terms of their environment's social components. Based on the CDC's 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, about 15 percent of females experienced sexual assault in school, and even more assaults go unreported every year. Why? Because girls do not feel as though they will be believed or taken seriously; it is an understandable fear. In most cases, when schools receive a sexual assault complaint, it is often ignored or brushed off. It can be observed that most schools, especially privileged and high-performing schools, simply perpetuate the notion that sexual violence can not and will not happen in their institutions. This is a destructive way to handle sexual violence

because it shows that they value their school's image more than the safety of their students. The solution should be simple: treat boys and girls equally.

However, there has been centuries of not easily forgotten inequality and discrimination. Men have been given the upper hand for countless years. Although women have made great progress, there is still far to go. Change must start at the beginning of a child's education. Girls should be encouraged by the adults in their lives consistently. Even the seemingly pointless things matter, such as not only asking boys to help carry textbooks between classrooms because they are "stronger." Calling girls bossy because they are taking school projects seriously and dismissing their opinions, however small, must stop. Sexual violence should be discussed and prevented in schools as well as creating a safe

space for students to voice their assaults. In history class, teach about the women men wrote out of history. Women like Christine de Pizan, the first professional female writer in France. Or Andree Borrel, who at twenty-two became the first female member of an airborne military unit when she was instructed to drop undercover into Nazi-occupied France to help arm and train the resistance. When reading books for English class, female authors should be considered as potential areas to study. Literary works like *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen or *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank are deeply interesting pieces and can be just as valuable to a high schooler's education as any male authored book. These women all lived extraordinary lives and achieved extraordinary things, therefore deserve to be taught for generations to come. Girls should also be encouraged to explore any career that they deem right for themselves. From medicine to education to politics, there should be no gender gap in these fields. STEM positions are especially difficult for women to achieve in the world today. The STEM field could benefit greatly from becoming more inclusive in gender equality and refusing to tolerate the extreme discrimination that women in STEM face today.

I, more than anything, want the next generation of girls to be equal. I know that this is an extremely difficult goal to achieve. But it starts with our generation now. The only way that gender equality in education will be attained is if the next generation of women are raised knowing that they are just as deserving of an education as men. If they truly understand that they are just as good as men, they will never think of themselves as less. This could mean great things for the world. An education is an extremely valuable human right, and every person deserves to have an

equal quality of schooling, no matter what gender they identify as.



The Killer of Creativity

BY JOSEPHINE KINLAN

We have all heard it, and by we, I mean you, me, and basically any other student in the public school system. “The arts are not a smart career choice; there is no money.”

Subsequently, neglect of the arts is a given in our school systems - right? Wrong. There is much more to the neglect of the arts than the classic argument, “It doesn’t make you money.”

In 2002, the “No Child Left Behind Act” was passed in the United States, which held schools more accountable for the success of their students. It enforced standardized testing in schools as a means of comparison, and utilized student performance to measure the success of the teachers. If schools did not show significant improvement, they were penalized - shut down and reorganized. As a result, teachers were now held at higher educational standards and schools feared penalization in the case that their students did not perform well. Due to the fact that success was not measured off of arts, music, dance, and/or drama class performances, these subjects were pushed aside in many curriculums. Many argue that the need for teaching the arts in our school system is redundant since they are not considered necessary or useful for a student’s future. Indeed, plenty of people can live successful lives without receiving a substantial arts education. But many people can also live successful lives without a substantial English education as well, or math or science; it goes



without saying that generally the lack of enrichment in one subject will not harm your future. The neglect towards arts makes students feel as though such subjects are not worthy of study, time, or discussion. In neglect, students often lose ways to cope with the world around them, as art has been shown to help stimulate. Studies show that participating in art activities can relieve the mental stress that entwines everyday life and responsibilities; some data even show that art increases blood flow to the brain, and that artists are reported as less likely to experience

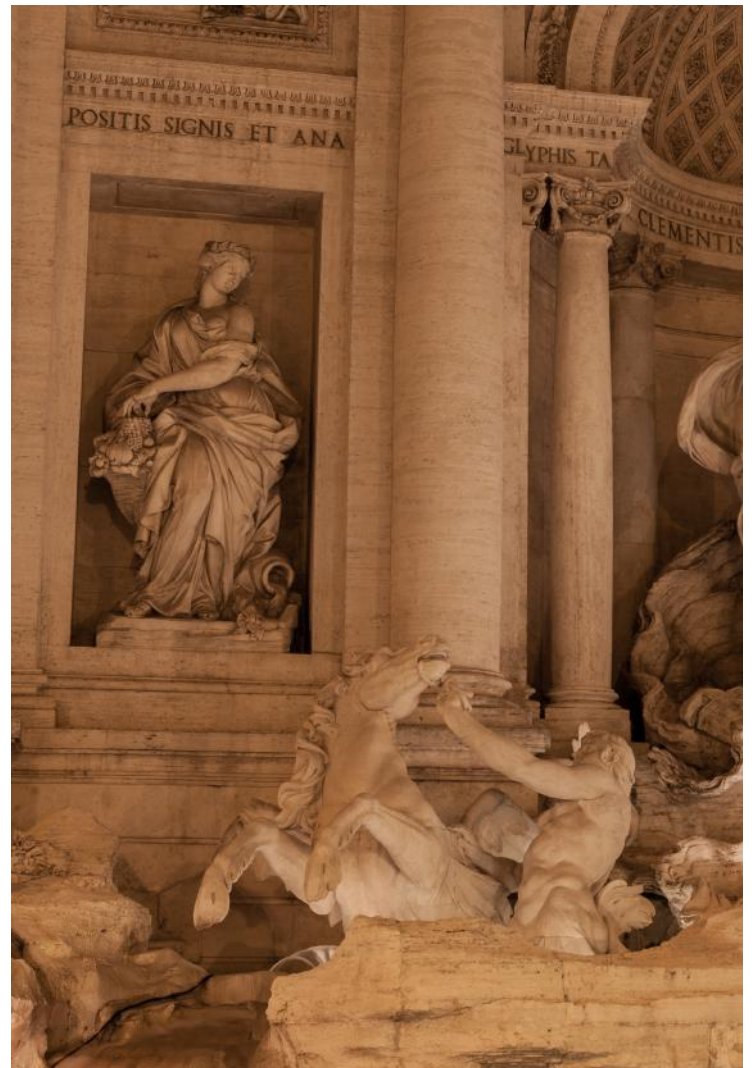
depression and loneliness, among other health benefits and habits. By encouraging students to neglect the arts, they are being encouraged to shut off a world of possible futures, but also, a means of coping with life's future hardships. A common argument for teaching the arts is that it accentuates student success in other classes. In reality, this is partially true: some studies do show a direct causal link between teaching certain arts and the improvement of performance in academic fields, but many studies do not show a strong enough causal relationship in order to be explored in further studies. However, the use of music was linked to stronger performances in spatial-temporal reasoning, and the teaching of drama has been shown to improve verbal skills. The fact that many other studies were inconclusive or small plainly tells us that more digging should be done to come to a proper conclusion. The results of these studies however, are not what is most significant. The fault in the argument that teaching the arts is important for performance in other subjects neglects the value of the arts themselves. As was previously stated, the arts contribute to a complexly rich human experience, playing significant roles in preserving history and

connecting us with our ancestors. Observing and creating art allows us to take part in capturing this essence, to dive deep into the multitude of experiences one can have. Art is personified too, as it is specific to the creator, thus enhancing the sense of identity and individuality in developing students. The stress placed on students to pass a test is just one of the many ways that our education system teaches us that value is derived from being right. Who decided that being right all of the time made you a successful person? Plenty of jobs exist, especially in our visual and technological day in age, that build themselves off of the act of creation - entrepreneurship, design, formatting, writing, and much more. To say that the arts are only significant in education for the improvement of performance in other classes, is just as if one were to say that physical education is only significant for the performance in science or math - it completely neglects the benefits of physical education. There is no intended offense to STEM learning, of course - advancement in STEM fields have, are, and always will be keys to the betterment of our society - but that is much known. What is not known (or rather not understood) is the significance of the arts to



the development of our society and individuals. That is why it should be included in the curriculum - for what it brings to its own table, not the tables of other subjects. Introducing youth to art consistently, ensures that they have a constant opportunity to pursue it in the future. One student may take an interest in the arts at age five if presented with them in elementary school, while another might find them initially boring, but later discover a passion for them in middle or high school. It is the duty of our education systems to nurture these passions, wherever they start. More opportunities means more potential futures, and more discoveries; think of how so many of our great artists, inventors, designers, and even most successful scientists and engineers would have ended up, had it not been for the path they chose. You never know if there is a path on the other side of the door, if the knob is locked. Our education system should be the key to every door. Thus, in order to unlock their talents and passions, students should be exposed to a variety of subjects. For the reasons stated, art could help a student's future become more enjoyable. Enjoyable futures? Who ever heard of such a thing? It seems as though as we get older, life only gets harder and harder - but yes, encouraging the possibility of an enjoyable future is something all school systems should normalize. Educating students in preparation for college and nothing else fails to teach them how to live their own lives after college. When all is said and done, how do they find a basic job, construct a stable household, prioritize their time, and all the while maintain their mental and physical health? People often find (just out of college) that they do not sufficiently know how to organize their time. Everything becomes a big jumble. But the arts can remind people of their humanity, help them organize

themselves in ways that are more beneficial for them in the future. Beyond art's historical significance, creating art provides a multitude of benefits to students, especially those who may feel stressed or pressured by the demand of school. Art has been shown to stimulate parts of the brain that focus on impulse and appetite control, self-esteem, and detecting social rules. It also impacts brain waves and patterns, the nervous system, and can raise serotonin levels. The arts have historically enhanced the experience of human existence, for they are a means of conveying human emotions, experiences, and ideas which is unlike anything else. The flow of music notes, the portrayal of emotion through paint, the anguish in the face of an actor - these are all





things of creation. From the days when man lived in caves and etched images onto stone to the luxurious products of the Renaissance, the visual arts have been an incredible part of maintaining human history and capturing the image of human essence. From the creation of the first ever instruments, constructed from ivory and bone, to the Classical and Romantic eras of flourishing music, to the digital music age of our current time, musical arts have done wonders for our minds, bodies, and experiences. From Shakespeare to cinema to television, the theatrical arts have built an entire world of glamour subtly embedded within all of the screens and stages around us. These cumulative wonders would not exist without the expression of ideas within the human mind, the very thing that the arts gives us grace to do. This is not to say that subjects falling into STEM categories do not allow for freedom of creation, but there is truly something to be said about creation without boundaries, which the arts have and continue to allow for. Subsequently, human history is so enriched by the fervors which have traveled throughout time on canvases and pedestals, in sheet music and in playwrights, or on screens or tapes. The arts are void of any constraints; the horizon of your imagination is limitless! There is so much more to art than still life sketches and a wandering mind; there is a universal message to be conveyed, understood, and interpreted about the experience of being human. The more we embed this message into the normalcy of our education system, the more we will see the value of the arts in our society, and maybe relearn the peace of mind that can come with it. When was the last time you had peace of mind?

Brown v. Board:

America's Educational Milestone Was Not As Promising As It Seemed

BY KILHAH ST FORT & HELENA BARUCH



On September 18th, Americans found themselves dumbstruck over the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. At the age of eighty-seven, the influential Supreme Court Justice died from pancreatic cancer while at home in Washington D.C. A pioneer for

women's rights in America and a trailblazer for gender equality, Ginsburg left behind a legacy of empowerment for all people, progressive reform, and political intersectionality. But now, the U.S. population is facing the ramifications of the death of one

of the most crucial equilibriums and unifiers of the American government.

Supreme Court decisions have an immense impact on American society, especially when its constituency is politically unbalanced and is favoring a particular party. Supreme Court decisions have an immense impact on American society, especially when its constituency is politically unbalanced and is favoring a particular party. While the court's members are intended to hold unbiased authority, the stark politicization of the system has skewed the administrative power. In the past, Supreme Court justices have championed their power with various rulings that have reformed American society; both good and bad. The Supreme Court, particularly, has had impressive potency over the American education system.

Dating back to the late 1890s, the educational implications of Supreme Court power showed its true colors. During the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling in 1896, it was decided

that racially segregated schools were legally permissible and ethical, During the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling in 1896, it was decided that racially segregated schools were legally permissible and ethical, as long as Black and white facilities were “equal.” Nearly half a century later, extreme efforts were made to reverse this blatantly racist and unconstitutional ruling that had exacerbated Black education as well as provoked glaring racial tensions in the United States. From these efforts rose the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka ruling in 1954, where the Supreme Court finally took decisive and unanimous action in this landmark case to criminalize segregation in schools, noting that it was unconstitutional in both the legal and ethical nature of American democracy.

From the 1890s, 1950s, and then to now, the Supreme Court still has a colossal legislative power over America’s education system, particularly with high schools. Landmark cases like Plessy v. Ferguson, Brown v. Board of Education, Tinker V. Des Moines, or Engel v. Vitale have illustrated the court’s robust jurisdiction and relevance with American educational institutions. With a new era of Supreme Court Justices, the fate of our public education system is full of contingencies. What is the fate of the diversity of schools?

at even is the current state of our education system? To truly comprehend the Supreme Court’s complete legislative dominion when confronting American education, it takes a deep analysis of the branch’s prior rulings and current stance.

The Brown v. Board ruling, while it played a significant role in desegregating schools in the U.S. and particularly Southern states from a legal standpoint, it failed to address the circumventions that have been ingrained into state’s school systems because of redlining, school districts and residential segregation, and income.

In one of the America’s most liberal states, New York, racial segregation is vastly prominent in public district schools. In the early 1930s, appraisers drew red lines around the maps of New York City to indicate undesirable, poor, rich, hazardous, or good neighborhoods, jotting notes down like, “colored infiltration a definitely adverse influence on neighborhood desirability.”

As the government systematically segregated and dichotomized New York communities, students and schools faced the consequent ramifications. Most students in New York City, then and now, “are assigned to attend schools based on where they live, which means the amount of funding

those schools receive may drastically impact the quality of educational resources available to a student,” says Next Ed Research. While redlining no longer exists, remnants and racial community boundaries are entrenched into the city’s social network and system.

Much of school segregation in New York has been a result of reinforced school districts, where a home address automatically places a student in that district school. Because of this, many poor Black and brown communities face the burden of a poor and defunded education. Erica Frankenberg, a professor of education and demography, said that, “our findings show that after district secessions, students are increasingly being sorted into different school districts by race.” While school segregation was ruled unconstitutional in Brown v. Board, we still see blatant circumventions of this legislature prevalent in education institutions to this day.

Regardless of district schools, students in New York still confront extensive racism. Out of a whopping 895 spots at the Stuyvesant Highschool in New York City, only seven Black students were accepted, making the Black population at Stuyvesant less than 0.01%, a number that is continuing to decrease. Black and brown students struggle with gaining

the proper resources needed to study and prepare for state-wide tests like the SHSAT. While efforts have been made to mitigate these injustices and constitutional shortcomings, nothing has proved to be fruitful.

Although the state of education may seem bleak, especially with the disparities highlighted by the Coronavirus pandemic, integration is possible. The fight against educational segregation has not stopped and instead taken a new face in the modern age. Experts have concluded the reason schools are still segregated today is due to wealthy white citizens' tendency to monopolize educational resources.

A possible solution proposed is equal funding. Dissenters often argue that schools in low-income communities receive more state funding than schools in higher-income communities. However, David Mosenkis, a data scientist, has refuted this statement. His research showed "At any given poverty level, districts that have a higher proportion of white students get substantially higher funding than districts that have more minority students." Race is still a contributor to funding and in fact, compounds upon the wealth gap. Equal funding would allow for schools with a larger black and brown community to implement the same resources in sports, standardized testing, and

tutoring that primarily white schools have.

In addition to data studies being conducted, today's teens are not standing down. Teens Take Change, a teen advocacy group has made significant strides in bringing attention to the segregation of New York City public schools. Earlier this year, the group organized a conference that allowed students to ask Department of Education (DOE) officials about integration, policies, and education equality. Various topics were discussed that night, but the biggest takeaway was Kenyatte Reid, the DOE's executive director of the Office of Safety and Youth Development, acknowledging the students' frustration and

declaring "we have to have an expedited approach to integrating schools."

Within these past months, COVID-19 has proven to be merely a bump in the road for Teens Take Change. The group has gotten five more allies in the Senate to join them in their fight, held Q&As to further explain their campaign, and has recently, brought to light new data on racial discrimination in NYC high school admissions via a virtual press conference. Similar to the Supreme Court's reign over the education system, the people's unrelenting demand for equal education will persist. In 1954, the will of the people was enough to sway the court. It's only a matter of time when history will repeat.



The Covid-19 Pandemic Is Worsening Education Inequality

By Anthony Mathai



In our comfortable school settings, we all encounter these settings: The best friends choose to sit in proximity to each other in the classroom. Teachers tell students to wrap up their answers on exams. Entire assemblies of children crowd in an auditorium to listen to a guest speaker to discuss prevalent issues pertaining to their age group. Entire colonies of youths crowding the lunch line to get the first seat on the best table. Yet this new COVID-19 era brings us into a new hemisphere, where these familiar settings are but a distant recollection to all. Most schools, areas of civic openness (including public gatherings), and nonessential businesses are closed, leaving parents, guardians, and other caregivers forced to keep their children occupied with work,

including school-related tasks and extracurriculars. “The immense fiscal and emotional costs of this pandemic are like nothing that our school communities have ever confronted,” said former NYDOE Interim Commissioner Tahoe on the unexpected nature of the situation. On weekdays every morning, millions of electronic devices across the country are switched on and ready for the virtual classroom setting, primarily launched through Zoom, Google Meet/Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, etc. While students can still pitch in their voices and show their presence through these platforms, their physical and mental connection with their teacher is rather sparse, as tests become less reliable to assess students’ creativity and inner capacity due to

cheating on tests at home. Furthermore, the introduction of technology is a new anomaly for many American households. Although many classrooms had implemented the use of technology via online learning platforms, there are just, or perhaps more schools that rigorously promote and utilize the traditional classroom setting for student learning. And they are not wrong - proponents of in-person learning suggest that children of all ages learn best when physically present in a classroom, and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) stated that “Children get much more than academics at school. They also learn social and emotional skills at school, get healthy meals and exercise, mental health support and other services that cannot be easily replicated online.” Nevertheless, at the onset of this global crisis, schools across our nation have been deemed defunct. The schools that have greeted students through their front entrance now consist of void classrooms and lunchrooms, but remote learning now offers students a passage to new forms of learning in the comfort of their own homes, in which they don’t wake up just to commute back and forth and encounter no interruptions in the learning process. This might be a blessing in disguise to those who undergo a longer commute time and have readily available access to Wi-Fi and electronic devices in their home. Yet this new COVID-19 era brings us into a new hemisphere, where these familiar settings are but a distant recollection to all. Most schools, areas of civic openness (including public gatherings), and nonessential businesses are closed, leaving parents, guardians, and other caregivers forced to keep their children occupied with work, including school-related tasks and extracurriculars.

The dilemma presented with the above statement is that it applies to a minute portion

of our school population. According to the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) conducted by the BLS, about three-quarters of the high school population have a commute time of 20 minutes or less (the average being 18 minutes). Accordingly, many areas in the U.S supply inadequate to no broadband service to their youth. Although only 6% (19 million) Americans lack access to the internet, the Federal Communications Commission reports that even in areas where broadband is available, a large proportion of Americans still do not subscribe, and in many households, maintaining a stable internet connection has proved to be dubious. Albeit the number of American K-12 who access the internet is substantially increasing due to its broad significance in the midst of COVID-19, access to electronic devices has proved to be another problem. And regardless of whether or not a student can obtain access to an electronic device at home, its reliability in certain scenarios has proved to be ineffective. Families that house many siblings are left at this disadvantage as certain ones may have to sacrifice their educational well-being, leaving them to forgo entire lessons of instruction from their teacher or administrator. Even those pupils who can access lessons on a device, like a phone, per se. Some of these mobile devices are less reliable than the average PC/Laptop due to its lack of efficacy in the most demanding circumstances: for example, a student cannot go to another browser or app without turning off their camera on their class meetings. Doing classwork and homework on a mobile device has proved to be an irksome task as well; from writing entire essays to doing your math homework, the mobile phone is rendered nearly useless in these conditions. Without proper access to a device that is capable of executing the required tasks in the child’s virtual classroom, the student will

putatively experience a slump in their normal standard. Through these authoritative measures, the road to relief and recovery for all of our K-12 clearly encompasses, with absolute certitude, that the federal government plays a substantial part in the well-being of its schools. Although federal funding makes K-12 even more vulnerable in an economic downturn, additional funding has proved to be vital in student education. In late July, Chancellor Betty A. Rosa of New York announced that schools face many challenges in the midst of this crisis, with the hardest hit on “Black and Latino families, children and low-income communities.” With this, Betty declared that “Federal funding is imperative for New York’s schools as they look to reopening, recovering and moving forward safely.”

Conclusively, as schools start to reopen for in-person learning, as the students get back adjusted to the old reality, the nation should put in their best efforts to tackle the online education crisis and relieve the disparity that exists in many parts of our country. Then, and only then, will our schools be able to provide its students with the opportunity and mindset to succeed in their classroom and beyond.

With this assertion, it’s not safe to

surmise our government isn’t doing anything. The need for devices spiraled just a few days into the pandemic because of the unexpected deviation to remote learning. In big cosmopolitan cities like NYC, schools that remained autonomous prior to the pandemic have seen a big spending spree by the education department on devices. Just a month into the pandemic, the education department spent \$269 million on 300,000 iPads with internet plans, or roughly \$897 per device. Even in regions where entire districts experience budget cuts, schools attempt to alleviate them with additional state money. To compensate for other fiscal gaps, the funding provided by the CARES Act provides schools across the country with more than \$13 billion in funding, an average boost of about \$270 per K-12 student. Under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), the federal government allocated relief funds to address the impact of COVID-19 on elementary and secondary schools. Yet, disparity still persists in other poorly funded areas where schools are forced to provide the fiscal compensation to their students, and frequently, attempts to alleviate the educational needs fail.



Racism in America: Starting With Our Education System

BY RAY NOBUHARA

Although modern schools act as if it is bringing up diversity as much as necessary, the truth is that there are still so many ways in which schools bring about racism. For example, since school is mandatory in the United States of America until at least high school, there are students of the minority. On the other hand, teachers of the minority groups only make up about 20% of teachers in public schools. Thus, white people make up the most of teachers. The students feel uncomfortable in this condition because white teachers will not be able to give lectures about diversity as sympathetic as teachers from the minority groups. The students will feel as if they are somehow weird, which affects their mental health.

In most public schools, teachers do not understand the need of teaching diversity. The students from the minority groups will feel more uncomfortable as the year goes on, and feel more so when they are in the upper grades such as high school. It is necessary for the teachers and the education departments to start implementing curriculum about diversity. The modern situations need to be solved. This means that more teachers from the minority groups should be recruited in order to share their life experiences to be sympathized with. Also, the curriculum should



include more about the Black side such as slavery, which is not taught in elementary schools at all. Finally, there is a need to include more books from Black authors and publishers into the curriculum, as there is a lack of those in the modern curriculum.

The number of teachers from minority groups represent how safe the school environment is to the students from the minority groups since students who want to return to the schools become teachers, and only about 20% of all teachers are from the minority groups. This stays the same from generation to generation because the environment for learning does not get warmer. The education curriculum stays the same, meaning that racism did not decrease much since a few decades ago.

However, the schools do not have to be this way. There are easy steps to

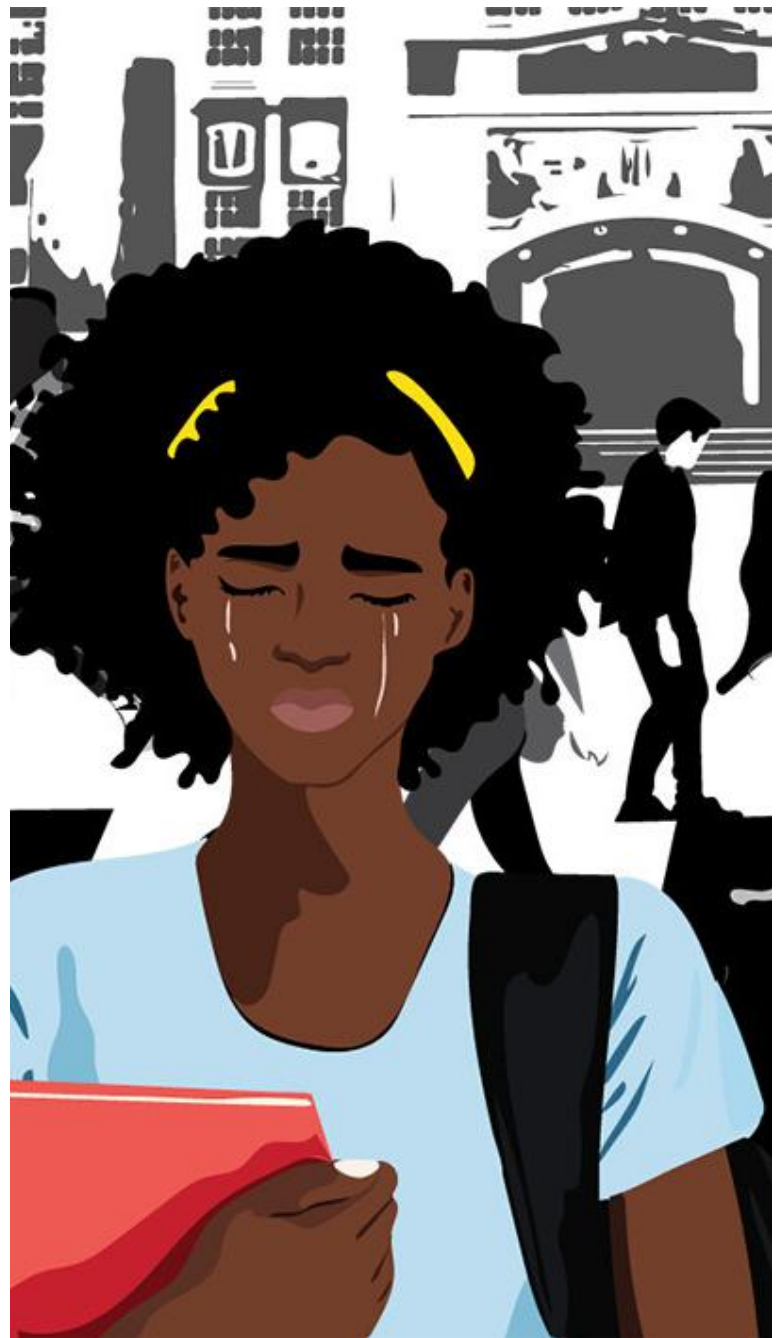
make the job of teaching more attractive to the teachers. For example, there are not many books written about diversity and if there are, the publishers and/or authors are not from the minority groups. In order to allow the Black students to feel that they are not alone, books from Black authors and publishers should be used, even if the books are minor. If school turns out to become a safe environment for the students of the minority groups, they will most likely want to return to a safe place. Thus, they may find the jobs of teaching appealing. The number of teachers from minority groups represent how safe the school environment is to the students from the minority groups, since students who want to return to the schools become teachers, and only about 20% of all teachers are from the minority groups. This stays the same from generation to generation because the environment for learning does not get warmer. The education curriculum stays the same, meaning that racism did not decrease much since a few decades ago.

However, the schools do not have to be this way. There are easy steps to make the job of teaching more attractive to the teachers. For example, there are not many books written about diversity and if there are, the publishers and/or authors are not from the minority groups. In order to allow the Black students to feel that they are not alone, books from Black authors and publishers should be used, even if the books are minor.

To begin with, there is a great difference between the rate of teachers coming from minority groups and the rate of students coming from minority groups. That is while about 50% of students are from the minority groups, only 20% of teachers are from the minority groups. Specifically, 15% of students are Black, while only 7% of teachers are Black. In either cases, the rate of the teachers is about

half of the rate of students. This will make the students feel awkward because people around them, including the teachers, are mostly White, so they will feel as if something is wrong about them.

In addition, even if the White teachers give lectures on diversity, it will be less convincing compared to Black teachers giving the same same lecture. The White teachers have not experienced the racism that Black people have to go under, so the teachers



themselves may be confused about what the people going under the racism may feel. In addition, the teachers may unexpectedly hurt people of the minority because they do not know how the students may feel. The students thus may start to think that they are alone, since they cannot rely on the teachers for help due to the teachers' lack of experiences.

Furthermore, there are not many instances where students read books, which the main character is from a minority group, for school. There are less instances where students read books written by an author of a minority group writing about a main character from a minority group. There is rarely a chance to read a book with the main character from a minority group, and written and published by someone of a minority group. This may be because schools want students to read the top-hit novels. Top-hit and long seller novels are obviously written by White people, especially men, since schools use those books from a few decades ago when there was racism all over the place more often than now.

For example, *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger was taught all over the United States since it was published, the 1950s. In the 1950s, there was not much information on diversity. People were still discriminating against colored people. The Civil Rights Movement was taking place around the time period, so many people were discriminating against each other. Even the most open people were trying to learn about colored people. It is nonsense to keep teaching the same materials as the times in which racism was a major part of people's lives. Moreover, in schools, history is taught in a mislead racist way. For example, in schools, when they teach slavery they would whitewash students into thinking that enslavement is a good thing. Jamestown and Columbus, for instance, are described as heroes in the

textbooks. The textbooks exaggerate sympathy of the enslavers more than the suffering of the slaves. In addition, in schools, they teach Africans as being disadvantaged and not advanced. In reality, Africans are just as advanced as Europeans and Americans only in a different direction in which we are unadvanced in. Europeans and Americans are advanced in technology, such as computers and medicine.

On the other hand, Africans are advanced in survival, such as identifying which wild fruit has poison and which do not. No one is more superior than another, but schools still teach that Caucasian people are more superior than African people. One interesting fact about this is that schools have been teaching in this way since 1903. As stated before, racism was very popular in the early 20th century. In fact, racism was a part of daily lives. We are using the teaching methods from the times of racism.

The first way in which the problem of racism in schools can be reduced is to recruit more Black teachers. In order to do this, it is necessary to make the school environment warmer. If the students only have terrible memories of school and feel as if school was a place to suffer for them, chances are they would not want to come back to school. On the other hand, if the students loved their teachers and have lively memories of school, chances are they would want to come back to school by, for example, becoming a teacher. Also, with a warm school environment, Black teachers may advertise the job to their friends, and it may spread by the way of mouth. In addition to making a warmer school environment, it is necessary to put up advertisements for teaching in Black neighborhoods. The advertisements will allow them to know what jobs are available. The advertisements may allow the Black people to know that there is a



spot for them to enter, and the Black people are safe. The second way in which the problem of racism in schools can be reduced is to start reading less selling books or books from minor authors.

The long-selling top-hit books are mostly from White people. For example, many schools, if not most, read *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. Although the book is not bad at all, it is from a White author and published in the 1950's. In the 1950's, people were rebuilding from the Civil Rights Movement. Not many White people knew much about the Black people, and even the most open-minded White people were still trying to understand what living a Black life looks like. We are reading a book from those racist times, rather than reading new books which are less selling. Those minor books may be as great as or better than the major books. In addition, there would be a larger scope of books, including those written by or published by Black people, to choose from for reading in schools.

The third way in which the problem of racism in schools can be reduced is to start teaching how the Black people felt during some events, rather than focusing on the racist view of the White people. We cannot erase the past, so not teaching about slavery is wrong. It is more wrong to teach the White side of the story, which makes it seem as if slavery is not

wrong at all. In order to not repeat the same mistakes of racism, we must teach how bad the history of slavery is. Educators must teach that Christopher Columbus and the explorers are not as good as taught, and they are the opposite of heroes. In addition, students are taught as if Africans are less advanced and Europeans and Americans are more superior than the Africans. However, we are never taught that Africans are equally as advanced as Europeans and Americans. Africans are more advanced in survival. The educators must start teaching the students true facts rather than biased racist facts.

The education systems are targeting the people of the minority groups since the beginning of their education journey, which mostly means preschool and below. The injustices include the number of teachers, number of authors and publishers, and the curriculum contents. The students of the minority groups will continue to be hurt. Will you continue to hurt the preceding generations? Your actions will determine the future.

Why It's Important That Schools Start Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth

By JESSICA LIN & NUZHAT JANNAT

For many LGBTQ+ individuals, their first battles against inequality begins at school, the very place that should be a second home. In fact, many adolescents who have come to terms with their sexual identity have been scrutinized and discriminated for their differences. While adults might be able to differentiate between opinions from facts, adolescents are more sensitive to negative and highly opinionated remarks from others. These homophobic comments can lead to bullying that can erode one's mental stability.

For every step made toward equality and reform in the LGBTQ+ community, it always seems like a new challenge arises to keep them from continual progress, one of them having to do with subjecting LGBTQ+ youth to poor treatment of their mental health. For instance, students that are transgender, gender non-conforming, or nonbinary face discrimination from their peers due to the gendered nature of a traditional school environment. Other factors that play a role are the lack of information that a

school has when an issue of the sort arises, as well as lack of staff training on handling such situations. Students hear slurs thrown at them in the halls every day and get beat up just for wanting to express their true selves. Without visible concern for LGBTQ+ safety in schools, harassment and bullying often goes ignored. In addition to "fag**t," and "d*ke," transgender students reported hearing slurs like "tranny" or being referred to with dehumanizing terms like "it" or "fe-man." Students have also seen graffiti on lockers and walls, have gotten their property destroyed and written on, and yet their school has still failed to investigate such acts. In an interview with the Human Rights Watch, Ursula P., a 16-year-old transgender girl in Alabama, said, "Every other day people will yell and say negative things to me, like 'You're a guy,' and it just really upsets me. I tell the teachers or counselors and they talk to the kid, but the same thing happens and it doesn't help at all." Such experiences of harassment can increase a student's feeling of dysphoria, as well as cause anxiety and

depression. LGBTQ+ teens are particularly at risk for mental health disorders because they face many difficulties, including bullying, difficulty coming out to friends and family members, hate crimes, lack of support, and fear of stigma and discrimination. They are six times more likely to experience symptoms of depression than cisgender teens.

Friends and family are not the only people that American youth encounter. In fact, faculty, staff, and administration working at an adolescent's school, along with other students are all additional people in the lives of LGBTQ+ youth.

This means that school, perhaps even more than home, can have a strong impact on the mental health of LGBTQ+ adolescents, especially since they are in there for around seven hours. Unfortunately, the influences of school aren't of positive nature.

As of 2020, 21 states and DC address harassment and bullying of students based on sexual orientation and identity using regulations, ethical codes of conduct, policies, etc. Yet,



according to the Trevor National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health 2020, 30% of LGBTQ+ youth were physically threatened and/or harmed against their orientation and 61% of transgender and nonbinary youth reported being prevented or discouraged from using a bathroom that corresponds to their gender identity (school being the most frequent place where bathroom discrimination occurs). Students and staff everywhere should work to create a better environment for LGBTQ+ students so in order to prevent these instances from happening. It's important for students to feel safe in the environment that they are learning in so that they can receive their education effectively.

Although teachers tend to turn their backs to these

situations, they can also end up in these situations themselves. They hear slurs and rash remarks from their staff members and feel forced to hide their identity from their students in fear of the same thing. They also are afraid of standing up for LGBTQ+ students in fear of being outed themselves. LGBTQ+ teachers and staff are afraid of starting and sponsoring GSA's within their schools because of the possible backlash they could face from the school administrators and the parents. In an interview with the Human Rights Watch, Arthur C., a transgender teacher in Texas, stated, "One of the assistant principals said I was morally bankrupt and the other called me a 'shim' [a derogatory contraction of 'she/him'] ... and there was a coach in the cafeteria to let people in. And every morning, he

would say things like, 'Hey, got a fa***t I can borrow,' or 'You need to wear a skirt...' Things like this instill fear and feelings of hostility in an environment for LGBTQ+ staff and teachers. This isn't right, and people should learn to respect one another for who they are.

The LGBTQ+ community has come a long way in their battle with harsh stereotypes and brutal prejudice. When the accusation of homosexual recruitment was spread to instill fear and promote a nationwide anti-LGBTQ+ atmosphere, they fought until gay rights were approved once again. They made it clear that the inability of homosexuals to have their own children would not lead to their need to "recruit" or steal children from heterosexual parents. However, this does not mean that they are equal and free like everyone else. In the height of LGBTQ+ acceptance within the country, the well-being of their youth has taken an unexpected turn for the worst. The fight for equality and acceptance never ends. Simply because there are LGBTQ+ posters plastered around school hallways doesn't mean it's a safe and comfortable space. There are many battles and issues like spiteful comments or assumed pronouns that are not addressed on paper or simply ignored.

Why The U.S. Education System Is Not As Elite As We Think

BY CHYONIKA ROY



The United States of America is viewed worldwide as the land of success, considering that many people immigrate here in pursuit of a better life, a prosperous future, economic stability, or a strong education. Whatever reason it may be, one thing is for certain: they come seeking the American dream. But what we'll soon discover is that the United States is not all it may seem.

According to the several studies conducted by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation in 1990-2016, the United States consistently ranked #27 in education. Other reports put forth by the Pew Research Center have also shown that American students performed #38 in math and #24 in science.

However, it wasn't always like this. It may surprise you to know that the same study that established the U.S as #27 in education also

found that it used be ranked #6 back in 1990. So, what happened?

And what can the United States do to improve their education system and make sure their students perform better? There seem to be issues specific to the United States that may impact how students perform on a massive scale. Although determining what these issues are is a lot more complicated than meets the eye, the ultimate goal is to find a way to compare what other countries are doing differently and investigate how that may lead to influential success on our part.

One contributing factor to student intellectual performance is economic status. There's no doubt that money greatly affects what resources a student may or may not have for educational learning. A majority of allocated school funding comes from local

governments, and not so much on the federal level. More issues now tend to arise with this system because each local government has to rely on its own local taxes such as property taxes. Now this wouldn't be as large a problem if not for the fact that each location in the United States makes a different annual income every year and this impacts how much money school systems and students themselves can get.

For example, in New Jersey, the amount the state pays per student is \$8,801 every year. However, students in Utah only get only \$3,804 per student every year. Even though this data was from 20 years ago, similar trends can be seen today with New York having the highest spending per pupil in 2016 with \$23,091 and with Utah's per-pupil spending being \$6,953 in 2016. This economic disparity has an effect on whether schools would be able to pay for clubs, books, or even damages in the school building that need to be fixed. Your geographical location: should also not be the barrier of having the resources or money to get a quality education.

So, how can we address these issues and how do other countries address it? You may have heard Finland being one of the top countries for education, but they were not always like this. Finland in the last 40 years had been one of the least successful education systems in the world until they changed suit. One major thing they do in regards to funding is do it on the national government level (taxes paid to the national government) and the amount of students and student needs.

Instead of using the more localized government level which relies on property taxes (which differ across regions) and grants. And this is interesting because geography has less influence, as property taxes vary widely location to location. Geography is what we

need to address. And we can see from the data from state to state or from place to place funding varies wildly.

Even though the situations in Finland are different from the US in terms of size, we can learn from overall funding in general terms from state to state would be to make school funding less dependent on geography and make it more dependent on the amount of students you need to serve and what help each student needs. This precedent is interesting because there is this underlying notion that your zip code determines your destiny in many opinion pieces and politicians. So, removing geography in funding might be the first step. But what if your zip code is right next to each other?

We talked about inequality in funding and how that varies across states. But, what if you are students relatively in the same place, or even in the same school? The performance gap between students that are high performing and low performing in the United States is high according to the Economic Cooperation and Development. In 2016, 12% of the students from the United States that took the International Student Assessment Survey had below proficiency levels, while countries such as Vietnam and South Korea had only 5 percent of students score below proficiency. Now, how does this express inequality between students in the US?

Maybe you are asking if these are just US schools underperforming from the other 64 countries in that survey. This is a large deal because it shows the inequality between high and low performing students in varying countries, specifically regarding the inability of the U.S. to adequately catch up to their international peers. We can't let one's failure or mistakes lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Self-Fulfilling prophecy is basically a prediction on how you think you will perform or how others

will perform. And basically causes itself to become based on how people and you yourself behave to become true.

This relates to school because if a student doesn't perform well a student can then feel it is a failure and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy on how they will perform in the future. So taking preventive measures such as free tutoring or an extra help class during school makes sure a student is not left behind, makes sure that a student succeeds, and makes sure that students know they can succeed. A self fulfilling life has real consequences. As failure in systems to make sure that all students are successful and know they are capable of going beyond expectations this self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates on to future generations.

This is seen from a study from the non profit child trends in which says that white parents have higher expectations of their children then black parents when it comes to school. And the thing is it is not necessarily just a racial issue, but you can see it implode into issues that have relations with race. This is due to the fact that ever since certain kids were young children, they did not have equality and this impacts how students perform. And this relates to the performance of children For example, black kids are less likely to do literacy activities with their parents than white kids according to the Department of Education.

And that has to do with a number of other factors in relation to the situation. This leads to thought disparities in retention of material according to the Department of Education.. Helping people when they are struggling effectively like Japan and Singapore helps us not only learn how to improve the US education system. It also shows us how once school is the number one tool towards social equity, if done properly, it will allow students

to help stop perpetuating an issue, a stigma, and help fight through divisors we put in our society. Obviously there is more inequality in the United States regarding urban cities and how their inequality ranges from school to school due to racial makeup of schools, income level; number of other things. This also goes towards the issues of segregation in the United States school systems. They are more specific to the United States, but from learning from other countries, the US can improve their system for their students. Speaking of improvement in inequality, let's discuss teachers.

Minority schools are more likely to have inexperienced teachers, according to a US News article by Lindsey Cook. So, if we have this inequality with teachers, what do we have to learn about this integral part of the school system? Well one, many teachers across many states have been striking for safety in schools amid the coronavirus. A majority of them have been striking due to having to teach in school buildings for online/in-person learning during the day This reminds us that they are essential workers as much as anyone and deserve the utmost respect. But, they don't recess that at least not that in terms of any financial backing or resonance. This is why there were huge teacher strikes in 2018 and 2019 in states like Oklahoma and Texas. What is the point of saying we respect teachers if there is no action? Teachers can't live off anything. This is one of the many obvious ways to improve education and pay teachers well so that they can 100% focus on students. But, this issue is a lot more deeper than that. To explain that we'll have to see what a teacher's life is like elsewhere, let's go back to Finland. Teachers are highly qualified in Finland. It is said to be harder to become a teacher then a lawyer or a doctor.

So, huge amounts of education and



experience are required. It is a profession that is well respected. And, that changes the whole culture of what teachers are because when teachers are well educated, they can teach their students well and have a diverse range with their students. This helps prevent inequality in itself because if teaching is one respected as a lawyer or doctor more, people would want to be this profession or look more into it because they are able to make a decent living and be respected. But, not just that it changes the idea of a standardized curriculum which Finland doesn't have but rather the teachers are responsible for creating it and seeing what is best for the students. This changes the whole game for teachers and students because there is no strict structure with no room. Teachers will improve the curriculum based on students' needs and wants, while also going more in depth into a topic. Treating teachers respectfully, being able to give them experience, and giving them decent living changes what learning is and improves it.

As higher education becomes more necessary and students go into debt and are being sought out by predatory loan companies, facilities instead of paying the professors and long tenure professors pay for advertising, or senior officials. This is from what we compared in the issues of the K-12 education system that are used to make connections to higher education. The U.S can learn from other global education systems on how to improve upon their own academic endeavors. The more we learn about and invest in education, the more success we will achieve. Education is like a step on the moon: one small step for a student, teacher, or staff, one huge step for society.

Rethinking the American Education System: Are We Setting Up Students for Success or College?

BY RIA ANANDJEE

The purpose of education is seemingly obvious: to educate young minds and set them up for success in whatever they pursue. However, a modern-day take on education in America appears to favor the opposite. Our education system has been twisted into a blind pursuit for good grades, admission into the best-ranked universities or obtaining high-paying jobs. These values have been ingrained in our minds since the ripe age of 4 years old, and most students don't even realize that they're not truly learning in a way that benefits them. As the world around us is changing and growing every day, it's imperative that young minds are able to adapt to this new world, work to better society, and inspire action. And for that, we need to completely rethink the American education system.

While the need for educational reform is a multidimensional issue (with change needed in numerous sectors), it is important to pinpoint the problem with the entire system before we can

come out with actual strong ideas to facilitate reform. Currently, our country has pushed us to prioritize the status of our education rather than its true impact. For high school students, graduation requirements are deemed as the most important subject matters that they need to know before they venture out into the real world as adults. If you do well in a class, you are rewarded with an "A" or a "100;" if you do poorly, you receive an "F" or a "65." The school system has pushed students to believe that an "A" means you were successful with the course, and while it may be true that you did learn from it, it also wrongly suggests that if you score below that you weren't seen as intelligent enough. However, that can be untrue in many cases because doing poorly on a test or exam isn't necessarily reflective of what you absorbed from the class. According to the American Psychological Association, grades don't correlate with a student's intelligence. That's why in many

countries such as Finland, schools don't require test-taking. countries such as Finland, schools don't require test-taking.

Clearly, high schools in America also place far too much emphasis on college, and centers courses around that. This narrowed focus on college prep is what's killing high school. Schools' curriculums are centered around tests such as the SAT, AP, and ACT instead of real world applications or what students are actually interested in. Students are told to line up extracurricular activities on their resumes not because they're interested in them, but because it'll "look good for college." This restrictive path, where young adults do what they do not for enjoyment or a learning experience but to get to college takes away from their education. The more focus is placed on college prep, the more students are pushed into a path of life that they may not necessarily like.

In general, all high schools teach science, math, English, history and foreign languages as

graduation requirements. While these courses are important to a certain degree, much of this information is never necessary or useful. In fact, according to a study about knowledge retention from the Journal of Biological Education, students forget about 60% of what they learn in high school before they even go to college. These students are pushed to memorize a great deal of information only to pass tests, and that's why many forget almost all of it immediately after. As a result of this hyperfocus on test-taking and college preparation, programs that stray from those standardized components of education are deemed by society as unnecessary (music, the arts and other creative classes). This was made incredibly

clear when the first classes to be cut during the pandemic were the arts. So if students aren't able to do what they love, are they even enjoying school? The implications of pushing young minds into a box can be severe, not only inhibiting their creativity and innovation, but also harming their mental health.

It's about time that the American public education system also starts teaching students skills they'll truly need and remember in life, such as doing taxes, investing, money management, people management, conflict resolution, etc. These life skills are most important for students beyond high school and college, and can help them when dealing with basic real-world responsibilities.

So in the eloquent words of The State Press, "Why do Americans value the letters on our transcripts more than the thoughts in our head?" Education systems and its administrators must stop teaching impressionable students that success is achieving a status or grade relative to their peers. Prioritizing grades over thoughtful learning/applications of knowledge defeats the whole purpose of education, which would hurt our students in the long run.

Evidently, we need to rethink public education as a whole. What's its purpose? Is it to truly educate them on the matters of the world that will affect them and generations to come, or is it just a step towards a degree, and then a job? We must let students work to their full potential and this starts with changing schools to be more innovative and forward-thinking for our continuously changing world, and students changing needs.



Listen To The Kids: Sex-Ed Is More Important Than You Think

BY MICHELLE SEUCAN

Even though I'm only fifteen, I've already figured out the biggest hypocrisy that connects every adult together. This contradiction of theirs seems to manifest even more than before, almost as if it's some sort of unspoken prerequisite for being an adult. What contradiction am I referring to? Well, I am referring to the contradictory nature of adult expectations. As a teenager, I'm constantly told to act more mature and brace myself for the

travails of adulthood. We're trained to be prepared for real life, to grow up fast in order to keep the cycle of life in motion. You know, the cycle of life that revolves around money, finances, capitalism, the government, and all that. We're expected to handle those matters with abrupt expertise, yet never the one that is the most relevant. That is, the biological cycle of life - sex, an act that is frequently ignored and even ridiculed in some schools. In others, it



is viewed as too much of a taboo subject to even discuss to adolescents. They're too young for sex! But I view the general evolution of adulthood as a package whole: one can't expect us to act mature if our own education refuses to treat us with the same maturity. So denying human nature in an educational curriculum can prove detrimental to one's ability to safely navigate their sexual experiences, and passing the comprehensive sexual education bill is a positive step towards eliminating the stigma surrounding sex and its inevitable role in a teenager's life.

The comprehensive sex-ed bill would mandate medically accurate and age-appropriate sexual education for all public schools (grades 1-12). And no, intercourse will not be taught to elementary schoolers, but rather the introduction of consent and biological/reproductive health instructions (as they progress into middle school). You see, our health education system is so thoroughly flawed in the sense that it reflects poorly on how we operate as a city. In a report called "Birds, Bees, & Bias" published on NYCLU's website, the examination of sex-ed materials presented in schools from 2009-2011 is quite shockingly underwhelming. Many points were made about the lack of accuracy on reproductive anatomy, excessively juvenile dismissals of sex organs (a district even referring to the vagina as a "sperm deposit"), reinforcements of gender stereotypes, sex-shaming undertones, failure to mention thorough methods of contraception, or any concept of consent or rape; there was also a large hetero-centric bias, along with complete ignorance of LGBTQ+ sex.

A different report put together by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) conveys a statistically tangible illustration of these points, thus reinforcing the poor condition of

America's current sexual education. In collaboration with Planned Parenthood, HRC found that many reported LGBTQ+ youth do not have an adult that they feel comfortable consulting with on sexual matters (a survey conducted by the HCR Foundation established that this is the case for about one-third of LGBTQ kids), thus pushing them to seek out misguided information online. The report highlights how only 13 states nationwide require medically accurate health instruction in schools, while as of 2014, only four states (California, Iowa, Colorado, & Washington) have established laws that require an LGBTQ-inclusive sexual education. New York is unfortunately not one of these states. But this could change if the bill is passed, as it should be rightfully so, since a lot of kids my age have demonstrated how they've been affected by a limited, non-inclusive, and in some cases even absent, sexual education. After interviewing students - whether they live in New York or not - from across the city, nation and even the world, I've come to realize that this is as much of a global problem as it is local or national. These are their stories.

Sixteen-year-old Vasco Vidal is a gay trans student activist from Peru. He is the founder of a national organization called "Futuro Presente" (@presenteong), which strives to eliminate homophobia/transphobia in schools by conducting workshops that aim to educate teachers on the LGBTQ+ community. As a gay trans youth himself, Vasco says he hasn't felt represented or respected in his educational curriculums - a problem he hopes to address with his internationally-funded passion project. At age thirteen, he realized he was gay, but didn't know the mechanics of homosexual intercourse because no one cared enough to educate him about it, adults and schools alike. Thus, he turned to the internet and ended up

basing his view of gay sex and relationships off pornographic material, which is notoriously inaccurate, degrading, and dramatically exaggerated for the sake of financial gain. “I used to think that if you wanted to have sex at some point in the day, it didn’t matter that your partner didn’t want to,” elaborates Vasco on his former tainted view of sex. “Pornography made me think that within couples one should always sexually please the other, even if they don’t want to. It made me think that I didn’t have to ask for the other’s consent.” But Vasco’s story is sadly all too familiar, for it happens everywhere, **even on the other side of the world.**

Somewhere in New York City, a rising male senior (who wishes to remain anonymous) has also experienced a taste of what it is like to come of age behind shadows. He is a colleague of mine at the Teen Activist Project (TAP), where NYC students collectively work together to fight for justice and equality in all socioeconomic areas, including advocating for a more diverse and tangible sexual education. This topic especially resonates with my fellow TAP member, considering his frustrating encounter with how the public school system handles sex. “I never saw information about how I was going to have safe sex with another man in all three courses of health that I have ever taken,” says the student. “The only reason I understand how I would have sex with another man is because I used a website on the internet called ‘Scarleteen.’” Not only does he mention how his own school community was unsuccessful in addressing homosexual intercourse, but how they also failed to properly educate the student body on how trans & intersex people, disabled people, and other members of the LGBTQ+ community have sex. “If other students who are in underrepresented minorities are forced to go



online in order to learn how they are supposed to have sex, then its clear as day to see that those students have been failed by the curriculum,” insists my colleague. According to him, the solution is clear: re-work the entire curriculum to cover sex in a way that welcomes all identities, along with updating the material presented to students about sexual health, gender orientation, human biology, and medical terminologies.

But this is not just my TAP colleague’s own belief, for it seems that other students from all across New York share the same sentiment. Jessica Lynne, another rising NYC high school senior, is also particularly passionate about the seriousness of a comprehensive sexual education. As a student at Susan E. Wagner High School in Staten Island, Lynne has not yet taken an official sex -ed class yet, but does have some limited experiences with health/anatomy and Catholic methods of sexual teachings, of which she has described as very black and white and too cut and dry. “We didn’t talk about LGBT+ sex, but that didn’t change the fact that there were LGBT+ people in the classroom,” recalls Lynne about her middle school sex ed. “Sex-ed should have requirements that all schools should have to follow, regardless of if they are public or private. Cutting back on someone’s sexual education because of another person’s more conservative outlook is a dangerous situation.” Although this was a private school experience, Lynne does make a valid point: in its essence, learning about sexual health should not be a political or religious controversy, it is a matter of safety and knowledge. If you don’t normalize student safe sex in all schools, then how will students be knowledgably enough to make the best decisions for their bodies? How will they ever embrace sex as a natural thing?

Now as a high schooler in a public institution, Lynne still feels the same frustration with the non-inclusive nature of academic health/anatomy curriculums. She tells me that even in a public school, various sexual orientations are still not mentioned as prominently as heterosexuality, along with a lack of depth when it comes to addressing harassment and other important topics. “We need more coverage in regards to consent, sexual assault, birth control, abortion, abusive relationships, gender & identity, pronoun use, transmission of STDs, and safety during other sexual acts besides penetration,” declares Lynne. In order to combat these problems, Lynne suggests that all schools recruit specially trained, certified sex-ed instructors to facilitate a healthy and accurately informative learning environment about sex. And Elizabeth Shvartz, co-founder of the English-learning non-profit organization “Bridge To Literacy” (@bridgetoliteracy), feels the same way about this proposal.

Shvartz is a rising junior at Staten Island Technical High School, one of the nine specialized high schools in NYC. Highly regarded as one of the best schools in the country, one would assume that receiving an elite education would go hand-in-hand with a well-rounded curriculum, including all issues pertaining to sexual and reproductive health. However, that doesn’t seem to be the case, according to Shvartz. She says that although her school does cover HIV and how to avoid sexual disease transmission (usage of condoms, contraceptives, etc), the health curriculum is mainly geared towards acknowledging only heterosexual intercourse as opposed to LGBTQ+ sex and sex for those with disabilities. “Sex-ed should be taught by social workers/licensed medical professionals in a way that addresses students of all sexual orientations and gender identities,” says

Shvartz on how school boards can directly address the discrimination in sex-ed. Jackalin Shvidky, another rising junior at Staten Island Tech, also agrees that there seems to be a recurring issue at their school with the lack of inclusivity and necessary details about human anatomy/sex. “A lot of information was left out, and no where in the curriculum was anything about anatomy mentioned,” recounts Shvidky on her experience with sex-ed. “One specific factor that I felt was missing was anything about the hymen and the female sex organs in general. And only straight sex was talked about, which should not be the case at all. Many LGBTQ students are afraid to talk to their parents about their sexualities, and so they resort to the internet to learn because the school system does not cover this.”

Why is this not surprising? After all, only 12% of millennials surveyed in 2015 by the Public Religion Research Institute have taken a health class that even mentioned same-sex relationships. In addition, according to the 2012 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) School Health Profiles, the average percentage of schools that provided comprehensive and inclusive content in their sexual education was merely 26%. Not to mention, the GLSEN 2013 National School Climate Survey has recorded that less than five percent of LGBTQ+ youth have ever taken a health class that shed equal light on the LGBTQ+ community, along with finding in their 2007 survey that queer youth who reportedly received a heavily abstinence-based sexual education (which has been allocated over \$1.8 billion in funding since 1996) were less likely to feel safe in their academic environment and more than three times likely to miss school, be afraid to ask health educators about their sexuality, have lower GPAs, and higher levels of depression compared to their heterosexual



peers. GLSEN's studies have additionally shown that the frequent victimization of queer-identifying students is also more likely to occur in non-inclusive educational settings. So not only does practicing heterocentric teaching methods alienates LGBTQ youth, but it even paves the way for hostile discrimination.

Gaby Diaz-Vendrell is a student at Episcopal High School in Jacksonville, Florida. She is the founder of "40 Years Since," an organization that celebrates medical progression and honors AIDS victims through artistic mediums. Her goal as a community activist is to dismantle the structural restrictions imposed upon student bodies by a narrow-minded education, specifically in matters of sex and health.

At Episcopal, all freshmen are required to take an unofficial health class called "Life Management," where students learn about puberty, birth control, and relationships. It may allegedly claim to prepare kids for real life, but the name is fairly misleading. "It was like listening to a foreign language for an hour and being thrown out to fend for myself," Diaz tells me. "I was left with no resources regarding STD testing, no education revolving around how gay couples have sex, and no reassurance that

I was in a safe space. We did not acknowledge any implications that are associated with domestic violence." From her recollection, the class did not provide the same caliber of health resources to LGBTQ youth that heterosexual students had the privilege of receiving. Diaz felt extremely ostracized from these conversations, especially living as a young bisexual woman in a highly conservative area. This pushed her to take the initiative to educate herself on such matters, but students shouldn't have to turn to the Internet for things like these. Instead, they should feel represented enough to ask comfortable questions about their bodies and sexuality. "That's why LGBTQ+ sex education is so crucial," says Diaz. "It normalizes same-sex relationships and provides critical health information that is necessary to lead a normal life."

Diaz doesn't want anyone to ever feel left out of the conversation; she proposes that in order for the country to make educational progress in the sex-ed department, schools should consider hiring LGBTQ+ instructors to teach health. That way, LGBTQ-identifying students would feel reassured that as soon as they walk into that classroom, they are already accepted for who they are. Not to mention,

their personal testimonies as LGBTQ+ adults can benefit and educate students who are confused about same-sex relationships, both straight and LGBTQ+ alike. “Allowing LGBTQ+ teachers or speakers to teach sexual education will provide LGBTQ+ identifying students endless resources, while simultaneously exposing heterosexual students to the many realities queer youth endure while navigating their sexual identity,” Diaz claims. I agree; this is necessary if we want to eliminate ignorance, for education and exposure will always succeed in opening the mind.

Diaz’s proposal is applicable to many cases, including those that happen to occur thousands of miles away from her own school, such as in California. According to Sacramento native Natalie Nielsen, the political director of GenUp Sacramento, sex-ed in her school is virtually non-existent as it is only a two-week course taught in freshman biology, a class which she says isn’t even mandatory for students. During this two-week course, Nielsen recalls feeling very uncomfortable with the nature of the health curriculum, deeming it educationally unsuitable for those who did not identify as heterosexual. “It left myself and others unprepared and self conscious about LGBTQ+ relationships and sex, whereas my straight peers had their sex-ed experience catered to them,” observed Nielsen. To make matters worse, her conservative sex-ed instructor (a local church pastor) would willingly go against California’s LGBTQ-inclusivity requirement, claiming that there were only two genders and that he did not approve of the school “forcing” him to teach same-sex relationships. She says he also biasedly preached abstinence, even using phrases like “bastard child” when touching upon the sensitive subject of teen pregnancies. **And this was a public school.**

Much like Diaz and Nielsen, California teenager Eva Hecht also describes her high school sex-ed experience as biased, non-inclusive, and heavily heteronormative. And like both of those girls, Hecht also believes that schools should do a better job of providing a quality health education by ensuring sex-ed educators have an unbiased view towards students belonging to groups that are often overlooked by the traditional sex-ed curriculums.

“I live in a conservative area, so it’s within reason for me to believe that the teacher who administered my sexual education is somewhat socially conservative,” states Hecht. “If a teacher does not fully respect the identities of students that don’t conform to cis/heteronormativity, they can’t be trusted to provide those students quality education about themselves.”

As a queer-identifying student, academic sexual inclusivity is something she values and advocates for very passionately. Unfortunately, her own academic institution (University Preparatory High School in Redding) doesn’t share the same values as her. She noticed that “many forms of protection such as dental dams [for oral sex] were completely left out. And the different risk levels for STDs, such as HIV and AIDS, among varying sexualities were not covered at all. There was also no focus on reproductive disorders such as polycystic ovarian syndrome or endometriosis.” This appears to be a strange pattern with Californian schools, even though it makes no sense for them to be against (directly or indirectly) the LGBTQ school-inclusivity legislation. For example, back in 2008, a total of 1,232 queer and straight students from 154 different schools in California partook in the Preventing School Harassment Survey. According to the survey, “LGBTQ-inclusive

curricula were associated with higher reports of safety at the individual and school levels, and lower levels of bullying at the school level.”

What seems to tie all these narratives together are the proposed solutions: implementing a more comprehensive and inclusive sexual education! Despite the hesitation that usually stems from conservative outlooks on sex, sex-ed doesn’t encourage minors to go and have sex, but rather does the opposite. A study published by the American Journal of Public Health found that LGBTQ youth who learned about sex in an inclusive and educationally accurate setting had fewer sexual partners than LGBTQ students from schools that didn’t practice similar inclusivity. This debunks the long-time myth that an abstinence-focused education is more effective than comprehensive sex-ed.

Learning about protection, consent, toxic relationships, and just intercourse in general is more crucial to the adolescent lifestyle than most adults think. The truth of the matter is that these situations occur very often; and in times like these, we must urge officials to reform the education system and mandate all schools to teach about sexual health. To make queer youth feel seen. To offer a safe haven for teenagers who are just now exploring their sexuality and identities. It is a school’s job to educate the generations of tomorrow, and sex should not be an exception to this moral obligation. Sex is not taboo, and for the sake of your children, *I hope you also don’t think that way too.*





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