

Time to reopen the school gates

America's failure to get millions of its children back to school is a national fiasco



THIS WAS a big week for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). The elected board that runs Maryland's biggest school district held its first in-person meeting since it closed its 208 schools more than 11 months ago. No one should accuse its eight members (a couple of whom attended remotely) of taking covid-19 lightly. Montgomery County, where your columnist's three offspring attend (loosely speaking) public school, is on track to be the last of America's 14,000 districts to return pupils to the classroom.

Provided the board does not put the brakes on its latest back-to-school plan, as it has three times previously, Lexington's two sons in elementary school will be back in school—for as little as four days a fortnight—by the beginning of April. His 12-year-old will go back on the same part-time basis three weeks later, by which time he will not have seen a teacher in the flesh for almost 14 months.

A comparison with their British cousins, who have missed half as much school despite enduring a second lockdown, shows how extreme this is. Most European countries fully reopened their schools in September. Only a handful of American states, including Florida and Texas, were even close behind them. And the laggard districts elsewhere are mostly still hanging back, especially in Democrat-run states such as California and Maryland, even as evidence of children's limited potential to transmit the virus has piled up. Nationwide, about 25m American schoolchildren, or half of the total, are either in school part-time or fully on Zoom.

This failure is likely to have dreadful consequences. Lexington's sons have two parents able to work from home and dedicated teachers (Miss W's upbeat karaoke routines and Miss T's coolly relentless maths drills are still going strong nearly a year into the great school shutdown). But the costs in lost teaching-time, social interactions, and the creative sparks that fly in a well-run classroom are obvious and mounting in his household. And they will be weighing even more heavily on less adaptable or fortunate ones. Test results point to rising rates of truancy and plummeting attainment rates in maths and English, especially among poor minorities, who tend to be least able to deal with remote learning and most afraid of returning to school.

Unprecedented as this failure may seem, its dynamics will be familiar to weary school reformers. An education policy that prioritises learning would have made returning children to school its objective, and worked through the impediments to it. (Face masks and open windows, it turns out, do most of that.) But this is not how the fragmented public school system works. The elected worthies who sit on its powerful school boards do not pursue objectives so much as balance competing local interests. This is a recipe for risk aversion and inertia or, as MCPS's wry superintendent, Jack Smith, puts it "not decision-making but mush".

This week's MCPS meeting illustrated the pressures inherent in the rush-making. It opened with a litany of video messages from concerned school users. "Imagine yourselves in a Zoom class wading through a fog of mental illness," beseeched an exhausted-looking Zoom mom. "The teacher I am most concerned about getting sick is my Dad," said a schoolboy. "He might recover or he might not make it." "My husband saw schools operating safely in Somaliland! Why can't we do that here?" asked another mother. Outside the MCPS office, rival crowds of protesters, pro-and and anti-reopening, meanwhile stomped on the icy pavement and honked their car horns. "There is a lot of anxiety on the board," Mr Smith had earlier intimated. "Hundreds or thousands of people are going to have an opinion about you and post it everywhere."

Cutting through these local forces takes unusual leadership or leverage, or both. Maryland's Republican governor, Larry Hogan, has been trying to shame the state's school districts into reopening for weeks, to no effect. By contrast, Bill de Blasio, who as the mayor of New York has rare authority over America's biggest school district, pushed its schools to reopen despite fierce union complaints. With a Republican legislature at his back, Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, was similarly effective in threatening Florida's school boards with financial penalties if they failed to unshutter—a threat Mr Hogan cannot credibly make.

A growing tendency towards single-party rule in the states may make that sort of strong-arming more common. Yet the polarisation driving it generally does not make for good policy. The eagerness of Mr DeSantis and other Republican governors to reopen schools was plainly well-judged. Yet it was part of a broader effort to follow Donald Trump's lead and diminish the pandemic's dangers that was anything but. Hence, for example, Mr DeSantis's petulant sabotaging of local efforts to encourage mask-wearing.

By the same token, excessive caution among Democrats was fuelled by hostility towards Mr Trump. Science, which Democrats cite often but selectively, has been another victim of that stand-off. Its misuse has fostered the false dichotomy aired by many: that teacher health and student welfare are irreconcilable.

While America's decentralised system has in some ways helped it through the pandemic, the sprawling, underperforming, historical accident of an education system has been exposed by it. It is too localised to be efficiently managed, and at the same time increasingly riven by national politics. That is the worst of both worlds, a reality President Joe Biden appeared to accept when he recently rowed back on his former pledge to get the kids back to school. It is not in his power to do so. And much of the system, in Republican or jealous union hands, is opposed to his influence.

Break's over

Meanwhile, millions are left hoping the worthies and hobbyists on their school boards come through. The past year has not been all bad chez Lexington. It has been wonderful to see so much of his offspring as their childhood races away. It has been interesting to observe their lessons. But it is past time the school bell rang. ■

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